CHAPTER V

A.K. RAMANUJAN : THE SELF AND THE
ARCHETYPES OF HINDU CULTURE
Ramanujan is not orthodox in his approach to religious matters. He has a pronouncedly secular, sceptical frame of mind. He has produced a group of ironical poems on some of the major Hindu philosophical beliefs. He also shows them as hollow intellectual referents in the actual context of practical violence, marital infidelity, and morbid passivity. In exposing the relative limitations of such doctrines and concepts as 'Karma' and 'Maya,' the poet has disabused his self of the negative effects of subscribing to such abstract and impractical influences. This liberation from the heritage of beliefs is itself a mark of self-discovery. Ramanujan creates a fictive world which dramatizes the individual reactions of the personae to the constricting influence of religious beliefs, dogmas and taboos.

"Conventions of Despair" depicts the consciousness of the speaker caught between the contrary pulls of conventional morality and urgent claims of his own instinctual self. The speaker is on a wild spree of indulging in a variety of amusements. Casting himself as an iconoclast, he wants to break away from traditional ties, morality
and ethics. Soon he grows apologetic and wants to share the attitudes of the Marginal Man while trying to fall in line with the average Hindu concepts of reincarnation and of Hell. This leaves us in doubt whether he is pooh-poohing the Hindu belief by his exaggerated and comical description of the punishment meted out to a sinner or is simply giving vent to his despair resulting from contrition for having flouted the prescriptions of a 'Sanathanist.'

I must seek and will find

my particular hell only in my hindu mind:
must translate and turn
till I blister and roast

for certain lives to come, 'eye-deep',
in those Boiling Crates of Oil; weep
iron tears for winning what I should have lost;

see Them with lidless eyes
saw precisely in two equal parts
(one of the sixty-four arts
they learn in That Place)
a once-beloved head
at the naked parting of her hair.¹

What proclaims him rebellious troubles his conscience when it comes to a mere visualization of his teen-age
granddaughter being the target of the crow-foot eyes of "the pimps of ideal Tomorrow." (33) All the phanta-smagoric torture of punishment in hell sends him back to his actual existence with all the "archaic despair" at the centre of his heart:

No, no, give me back my archaic despair:

It's not obsolete yet to live
in this many-lived lair
of fears, this flesh.

(The Striders, 33)

"A Hindu to his Body" exemplifies the Hindu Advaita philosophy in poetic terms. In his request to his body to keep him on, the persona suggests the possibility of his body becoming the sap of trees. We may note that Ramanujan adopts the spelling 'Hindu' in this poem unlike in his three "Hindoo" poems of ironical and satirical intent. In these three "Hindoo" poems, he portrays in vivid detail the typical Hindu attitudes towards irritations, inconveniences, embarrassments and problems of daily life. The poem, "THE HINDOO : the Only Risk," depicts the temptations of flesh and blood, the hunger of prurient desires, the maddening anger that wife and children excite in a man which can be overcome by a
passionate cultivation of a calm of mind: The 'Hindoo' is supposed to be other worldly and hence generally averse to mundane things. The counsel of peace of the religion is supposed to restrain him from resorting to violence. In trying circumstances, compulsions of living overstep the cool confines of philosophy. An average Hindu views this world as an illusion (Maya). Worldly possessions are seen as unreal. These concepts are exploited for their ironic and parodic possibilities by Ramanujan in the poem. In spite of his friend's suicide, the speaker keeps his cool. He eats thrice a day as usual and exercises great caution:

... Not to be caught
dead at sea, battle, riot, adultery or hate

The extreme caution to ensure his self-preservation and peace is stretched to such an uncommon limit that the speaker almost appears to be a monster of self-restraint. Instead of the much-ordained placidity of temper, the average Hindu becomes a ridiculous contradiction in terms and is forced to behave unlike what becomes his age. The old persona is forced to put up with the presumptuous impudence of children;
... yes,
to keep it cool when strangers' children hiss
as if they knew what none could know or guess.

(Relations, 34)

Such an existence of extreme prohibitions renders the
exercise of instinctual freedom impossible. The practice
of such abnormal restraint argues heartlessness:

At the bottom of all this bottomless
enterprise to keep simple the heart's given beat,
the only risk is heartlessness.

(Relations, 34)

The speaker of the dramatic monologue "THE HINDOO;
he doesn't Hurt a Fly or a Spider either" attempts to
explain his reticent character. He is, in fact, urged
on by an impulse for self-exoneration from the charge of
cowardice. He puts on the mask of affected humility.
Adopting a lively and racy tone of gossip, he explains a
wide variety of elements that compose the stuff of day-
to-day life. The vulgar is made to radiate the signi-
ficant. He professes his characteristic non-violent
attitude in a tone of self-dramatization and self-
exoneration. He clears his own conduct in accordance with the home-spun version of the concept of incarnation. He sets down to explain his gentle behaviour towards household insects like a spider, a fly, a black widow. His pacifist attitude partakes of puckish humour as he treats of such lowly and dirty creatures as possible reincarnations of his grandmother and grandfather. He rails at the Hindu theory of rebirth and pacifism. He watches a spider stalking a local fly with unconcern. So is the illicit love of his grandmother and her fisher-man lover, as he recounts it in a light and detached tone. He employs the colloquial idiom to present his own philosophic resignation, acquiescence in fate, and detachment.

It's time I told you why I'm so gentle, do not hurt a fly.

Why, I cannot hurt a spider either, not even a black widow,

for who can tell Who's Who?
Can you?

(Relations, 6)

"THE HINDOO: he reads his GITA and is calm at all events" shows the speaker affecting the same pose of stoic
serenity in the face of trivial, serious, and terrible things of life. Though he feels that he is an object to be devoured by some sinister force, he stands apart—cool and detached. In all facile ease, he seems to overcome the tensions, violent passions, and existential dilemmas. The images of the poem seem to be disjointed and yet they work up into a thematic unity of love, marriage and progeny. The phenomenon of transitoriness evokes certain impressions and feelings in the mind of the perceiver. The speaker remains unperturbed at the sight of iridescent horsepiss after rain. The violence of knives and bombs and scandalous talk does not provoke him:

I say nothing, I take care not to gloat.

(Relations, 23)

He can view love-making between humans as unemotionally as he can visualize the amorous affair between houseflies. He feels choked by the air of heavy violence, as he feels stifled by the repressive authority of scriptural teaching:

Yet when I meet on a little boy’s face
the prehistoric yellow eyes of a goat
I choke, for ancient hands are at my throat.

(Relations, 23)
All these three 'Hindoo' poems make use of the archaic spelling of the mid nineteenth century and constitute a modernist parody of the popular image of a Hindu who typifies a set of abstract virtues which are impracticable in everyday life. The orthodox and dogmatic religious restrictions of Hinduism tighten their grip on the necessary freedom of behaviour and ways of life in the changed twentieth century of intercontinental mobility. They exert adverse pressure on the Hindu's powers of adaptability to cope with the forces of rapid change, disorder, and violence at the heart of modern existence.

The mythic consciousness of the poet invariably gives him an ironic vision to project contemporary reality. The myth of the androgynous god, Siva, recurs in Ramanujan's poetry. What with the idiosyncracies and the rooted egoistic assertiveness, the modern couple can ill afford to catch a glimpse of the idealistic spirit of mutuality expected of them. The syriac wife of the protagonist of "Love Poem for a Wife." emerges as a static figure. Her passive silence becomes more and more articulate every time the speaker tries to strike a chord of mutual understanding. To underscore their essential estrangement, the concept of the indivisible divine pair is cited in suggestive contrast. The speaker
likens the moment of togetherness with his wife in his dream to the mythological archetype of an ideal couple:

... happy for once at such loss of face, whole in the ambivalence of being halfwoman half-man contained in a common body, androgynous as a god balancing stillness in the middle of a duel to make it dance:

(Relations, 28-29)

"Some Relations" is a poem which portrays a medley of animals like turtles, kitten and mantis supposed to be caught in human situations and predicaments. The daughter of the speaker keeps pet turtles in a jar of water. The tiny strip of water in the jar mimics all the paraphernalia of the ocean. Yet the pet turtles feel alienated from their natural habitat. The domestic kitten are yet to recover from the process of birth. Removed from its natural habitat of green fields, a mantis is seen to have strayed into the Madurai temple. It is transfixed in its natural prayer posture on a yellow can of DDT which is a pesticide, a typical product of human
intelligence. As a contrast to this highly ironic prayer posture, the statue of Siva, Lord of Creation and Destruction, seems arrested in the posture of His Cosmic Dance. He seems to be too much absorbed in dance to get rid of scorpions in his armpits and to save his leg from being broken either by time or by some passing Muslim vandal. In Arun Kolatkar's "Jejuri," a sceptic undertakes an irreverent journey to a temple complex around the presiding God, Khandoba. The sacred gods are housed in ruined temples and their mythical and legendary glory, desecrated and defiled. The ruined temple houses both the God and the stray animals in such profane togetherness that it ceases to be a place of worship. In another section of the poem, "The Temple Rat," we have a mocking reference to the temple rat running over the trident of Malhari Martand, and while scurrying over, stops on the mighty shoulder of the warrior god.

Ramanujan's "Some Relations" seems to consist of amusing, satirical, and ironical pieces which collect into a unity focusing on the persona's apprehension of his future:

My daughter's daughter's unborn face
floats to the surface; it has the natural
The poem "Some Relations" in a sense anticipates the animal poems like "Zoo Gardens Revisited". Whereas, in "Zoo Gardens Revisited," Lord Vishnu's animal incarnations are referred to and his belly is conceived of as a zoo preserving life as Noah's ark does, in "Some Relations" the speaker's finger grows a lizard face and the face of his unborn granddaughter which floats to the surface has the natural piety of a praying mantis "after a kill." All over the speaker are the underbellies of the ancestral crocodiles and tortoises. At the heart of this conception of a veritable zoo garden image is perhaps the deeply inlaid archetypal picture emerging from the collective unconscious: that of the human through a variety of animal incarnations. While the Hindu concept of the incarnation traces a history of progressive evolution, the poet's conception of these images reveals man's regressive
journey. Ramanujan here exploits his rootedness in the Hindu myth for an ironic dwelling upon the complexity and mire of human existence.

Ramanujan says in one of his essays "Classics Lost and Found" that all that Sanskrit represented had become "a crippling and not an enabling presence." The future, according to him, "needed a new past," a re-interpretation of the past in the light of the forms, memories and legends, pseudo-scientific attributes and such other phenomena which have brought about a dislocation between the inner culture and the outer forms it takes. "Prayers to Lord Murugan" brings to a focus Ramanujan's use of diverse strands like a keen historical sense, dual awareness of myth and the aridity and hypocrisy of contemporary life. He calls in question the mythical glorification of Murugan, the Dravidian god of fertility, joy, beauty, war, and love in the de-mythicized context of modern existence. Popular belief represents him as a six-faced god with twelve hands. Nevertheless, his form is very much human and his functions of love, war, fertility, joy, beauty are more idolized in tradition than are seen to be effective as correctives to a host of ills in practical life. The ideal virtues of god are only deflated and devitalized in this predatory world of degraded values. Modern man's
bond with nature is severed. He has lost the faculty of
intuitive glimpse of the divine. The stark fact of
diminution of the higher faculties has an unsettling
effect on his consciousness. The modern world of science
questions mythical truths and exposes the hypocritical
nature of the response to the heroic. Discontinuity with
the values of the past has urged the modern poet to place
traditional values against the background of the con­
temporary reality and value systems.

The dramatic speaker of "Prayers to Lord Murugan"
employs a deflating tone of realistic awareness which
scrutinizes the worthwhileness of the mythical and tribal
culture in the context of highly secular and devitalized
contemporary existence. Instead of the customary petition
imploring the favour of the glorified god, the speaker
makes a radical prayer climaxing in a pregnant and
cryptic request:

Lord of answers,
cure us at once of
prayers.

(Relations, 62)

"Prayers to Lord Murugan" reminds us of Ezekiel's "Hymns
in Darkness" and presents a desacralized perspective.
He finds the mythologized world of "proxies and
absences" (61) acting on his sensitive consciousness so that he constantly returns to the realities of modern existence disabused of the notions of alluring mythical solutions. In Ramanujan there obtains a mythic imagination which works out an outfit for the expression of the modern predicament. The modern predicament is so dressed in the significant fragments of the primordial core of the original myths that the grand is reversed as small, the significant treated as trivial, the mysterious tested on the touchstone of the real. Ramanujan’s attempt at identifying himself with the human community at large and its collective formulae leaves him with a feeling of alienation and a deep sense of dissatisfaction.

"Fear," "Middle Age," "Connect!" show a modern world citizen coming to grips with the ugly facts of modern war and its impact on the human psyche. In such a lurid world, the personae want to achieve for themselves a sense of peace which enables them to transcend the bitterness of conflict, hatred, jealousy, and envy. Life in Chicago is rocked by eruptions of sudden violence. Leisure is rendered impossible. All these are expressed in "Take Care." Racial hatred darkens the image of the human;
In Chicago,
do not walk slow.
Find no time
to stand and stare.
Down there, blacks look black.
And whites, they look blacker.

*(Relations, 48)*

Even as far back as in 1963, Ramanujan leaned towards Buddhism as a way of peace for his yearning self. As Bruce King observes, "Although raised in a family where modern Western thought and Brahminism were practised side by side, he rebelled against Hinduism.... In 1963 he travelled to Sri Lanka planning to become a Buddhist. Buddhism remains an influence and he practises Buddhist meditation." 4

*Second Sight* contains a few poems which specifically explore the inner realms of the poet's psyche under the influence of his dual response to native culture and expatriate existence. "Elements of Composition" narrates a series of seemingly disjointed observations. The eclectic sensibility of the narrator is at work amalgamating a whole range of native and foreign influences which compose an underlying truth about human existence. The dramatic speaker is capable of perceiving "the constancy
of things," (11) The composition and birth of a caterpillar into a chattering self is alluded to in the beginning to illustrate his own biological self. His uncle's shadow finger-play casting shapes of rajahs and cats on the wall resolves into his fingers again. His sister's face bore signs of panic an hour before her wedding. Despite their poverty, the lepers round the Madurai temple constitute a whole family against the background of static pictures of lion faces, crabs and stone goddesses of dance. In a typical act of composition-decomposition-recomposition which the speaker performs, he sees things falling into a seeming pattern around him and within him in the storehouse of archaeological and mythic memory.

I pass through them
as they pass through me

The poem conveys a certain vision of life as the timeless cuts across the temporal. Time is shadowy and substantial, playful and serious, life-dissolving and life-enhancing. After delineating a mosaic of pictures of the caterpillar's chattering self, the mimed figures cast on the wall by finger-manipulation, the uncertainty bedevilling an emigree, the whole beggar families in the shadows of the statues of
the Madurai temple, the Platonic Idea of the missing other Half, the persona feels that even as he adds, he dissolves into his fundamental elements. The passing evanescence, seeming to form some sensible and identifiable pattern, again decomposes into disjointed fragments.

and even as I add,
I lose, decompose
into my elements,

into other names and forms,
past, and passing, tenses without time,

caterpillar on a leaf, eating,
being eaten.

(Second Sight, 13)

While visualizing a series of perceptions of different scenes, Ramanujan reduces himself into a bodily self vaguely aware of the tantalizing sensations and ideational possibilities arising from different sources. In trying to arrive at a viable attitude towards life and embodying it in his creative work, Ramanujan recreates his intimate and sensitive reactions to some minor or major events in his life and the world around him. In
the ensuing conflicts and tensions, his individuality defines itself in the immediate environment of the family, social life in India, and his expatriate existence. In the process of the encounter of the individual self with the family, cultural institutions and so on, which are inseparably intertwined with it, the fashioning of the self obtains. As a consequence, an epiphany of identity is manifested in Ramanujan’s poetry. Where his range is delineated by social mores, ideological systems as they are seen from an expatriate point of view, a cultural artifact is shaped out of the interaction. "Looking and Finding," "Looking for the Centre," "Chicago Zen" derive their dominant thrust from the quest of the individual speaker for peace. The quest for calm and peace of one’s agitated self darts forth in multiple directions each of which individually seems to hold the promise of stabilizing the centre of one’s being.

Direct reference to the word ‘self’ occurs in different contexts in such different poems as "Love Poem for a Wife.1,” "Elements of Composition,” "Pleasure.” In the dramatic monologue, "Love Poem for a Wife.1,” the speaker does not indulge in a lyrical rapture of praise of marital love and its idealization. The poem dramatizes the persona’s evaluation of his own self
in terms of the past. The wife abstracts an idea of the persona's personality not directly, but through gossip and reportage:

and reduce the entire career
of my recent unique self
to the compulsion of some high
sentence in His Smilesian diary.

(Relations, 10)

In a poem "One, Two, Maybe Three Arguments Against Suicide," the dramatic speaker rejects renunciation of the world as a way out of the sorrow of life. He derides a saint who is advised against committing suicide.

The allusion in the poem to the mythological episode of the three-eyed Siva burning the God of Love illustrates the need for the annihilation of bodily desire. This allusion underscores the point that, when viewed as a mere conception, desire, because it is bodiless as the myth projects it, is endless and all-pervasive:

All symbol, no limbs, a nobody all soul,
0 Kama, only you can have no use
for the Kamasutra.

Ashes have no posture.

(Relations, 16)

The poem "Saturdays" presents an introvert's consciousness whose experiences are a blend of his looking backward and forward. The speaker describes a number of ominous events which occur only on Saturdays. Saturday is, according to the Hindu belief, named after Sani, the god of ill omen. "Saturdays" reminds us of Nissim Ezekiel's "The Room" in which the speaker's feeling of his essential isolation, alienation and insecurity is exposed. He feels imprisoned in his room and also feels overcome by the emptiness of having to look at nothing. Only obstacles reflect the view within. As if, to shake off such a static condition, the persona resolves to do something novel in the persistently dull and unchanging room. His mind is thick with the expectation that

Yet some events are to happen here
not of moods only but of visions.6

Ramanujan's "Saturdays" appropriates the image of the room to the bodily self. It is a metaphoric localization of a philosophical concept that human body is
composed of five senses. Though the five senses give him the sense of his being, man's self is imaged here as transcending the five senses. The extra dimension is supplied by a concatenation of desires and fears. There is a spontaneous identification with the phenomenon of death, and there is a conscious attempt at establishing identity in terms of ageing towards death. The dramatic persona recalls in his consciousness different lands wherein fatal ends befell his intimate relatives like mother and brother. He ranges over different lands like Paris, Bombay, Chicago where certain sad things happened mysteriously enough on Saturdays. One becomes a stranger to oneself as one ages:

Enter a five-cornered room.
See yourself as another,
an older face in the sage blue chair.

(Second Sight, 43)

There follows a recounting of a series of events which illustrate a feel of this terrible awareness. In old age, the human organs lose their functional efficiency leading to decay and the death of the person. The speaker reminisces how death stalks around taking
a toll of a Dutch elm against a redbrick wall, his mother on account of kidney failure in a hospital ward, his brother out of heart failure in a hotel room. His wife's face being dark with unspent panic, has only a dent instead of a third eye. The Saturdays to come are "ominous."

Characteristic of an introvert, the persona looks back and forth:

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\begin{align*}
dim \text{ is the Saturday gone} \\
\text{but iridescent} \\
is \text{ the Saturday to come:}
\end{align*}
\]

(Second Sight, 44)

The prospect of Death makes the persona in "Death and the Good Citizen" assess critically the possibilities of recycling one's refuse to fertility. Being "biodegradable," he returns to nature. He could leave his eyes in the eye bank. His heart, transplanted to a stranger, will carry on his "struggle to be naturalized." But this kind of being useful and purposeful is reversed and prevented by the Hindu who insists on burning his dead body to ashes. Even the Western mode of burial in a steel trap reduces him to mere "grin and bone" of his original bodily self. There is here a subtle deriding of the Hindu practice and a projection of identity of the bodily parts from an
expatriate angle. In the poems "Elements of Composition" and "Death and the Good Citizen," the treatment of the relationships between the past and the present and of death offers perspectives which project the self as self-observant and also imbibing and reflecting on the lessons of modern technological advance. In the first place, a sense of fragmentation is suggested by viewing the self as decomposed into various bodily parts. These parts are visualized as responding to the phenomenon of transmigration, a feat of medical bio-technology, from the worn-out, dead bodily frame to a divine frame:

Hearts,

with your kind of temper,
may even take, make connection
with alien veins, and continue
Your struggle to be naturalized;
beat, and learn to miss a beat
in a foreign body.

But
you know my tribe, incarnate
unbelievers in bodies,
they'll speak proverbs, contest
my will, against such degradation.
Hidebound, even worms cannot
have me; they'll cremate
me in Sanskrit and sandalwood,
have me sterilized
to a scatter of ash.

(Second Sight, 26)
This kind of a conception combined with the imagery of growth, grafting and decay points in the direction of a view of the self from a typical expatriate perspective coupled with an anthropological imagination. In poems like these, we find Ramanujan a literary anthropologist.

In spite of the knowledge that bodily pleasures are ephemeral, the human craving for them is a given. In "Pleasure," the perceiving observer projects his own reading of the statue-object, Gomateswar, being bathed in a ritual pouring of water and honey. The natural self of the Jain monk manifests itself in a craving for sensual enjoyment. The poem offers a parodic reading of sensual enjoyment verging on orgasm in the phase-wise libatory pourings of water and honey and the consequent tattooing of a swarm of red fire ants all over the body of the statue. Long celibacy has only resulted in repressed desire now bursting forth. Enforced continence has only increased his hunger for enjoyment:

.... self touching self,
all philosophy slimed

by its own saliva,
cool Ganges turning
sensual on him,
smeared his own private
untouchable Jaina
body with honey
thick and slow as pitch,

(Second Sight, 30)

Ramanujan appropriates a moment of religious consecration conducted through a series of rites to ironically expose the rigidity of religious injunctions.

In the poem "Fear," the speaker takes a look at war-torn world and his own terror-stricken mind. It is a dialogue of the self with the world and the fear-wrought mind. From the fear about domestic subjects like ritual snakes and the phantasmal fears they cause, the speaker's vision expands and registers in considerable detail the scene of terrible destruction caused during the Second World War. The World War raised doubts about the future of the human race. The holocaust is tragically at variance with the cultural values, especially the sanctity of life, sought to be promoted by the Buddha. The destructive element of modern warfare has remained a nightmare in the psyche of the modern man. The fear-ridden psyche is universal reminding us of the "wound museums/of Hiroshima!" (Second Sight, 22).
Turning the searchlight of scrutiny and self-analysis on his hybrid consciousness derived from native Hindu roots and the empirical approach of an expatriate, Ramanujan exposes the sadistic cruelty of humans towards animals and birds. Visitors to the zoo set fire to the feathers of ostriches and feed the dying race of ring-tailed monkeys with bananas in which needles are placed. As the animal race is faced with the gloomy prospect of harassment and extinction, the poet invokes Lord Vishnu to preserve specimens of animals in the zoo garden ark of his belly, illustrating a trait of his mythic imagination.

Ramanujan's sensitive awareness of the past is tempered with his judicious understanding of the present. He presents the effects on his consciousness of the befouled atmosphere in the human world. In "Middle Age," the speaker reacts to a horrible scene of destruction and human misery. Spurred on to probe deeper life's apparent disarray and the predicament of existence, the speaker discovers that in spite of the sophisticated development of scientific civilization, man's fate is overwhelmingly under the influence of the irrational and inhuman forces.

Man's heart is riven between the polar pulls of scientific culture and desecrated religion. Ironically
enough, religious institutions, wrecked and beyond purpo-
sive existence, can only come to the rescue of "worms":

Half a heart working, the other half
waiting for an attack from behind
the railing,

all my computers housed in one left lobe,
the leftover right a temple flagstone
with the temple gone,

Keeping safe a nest of purple
immortal worms from the local
one-eyed raucous crows

and imported Mexican toucans.

(Second Sight, 61)

The poet includes in the poem such disparate experiences
as sympathetic or compassionate feelings for the victims
of war, violence, and famine, the rift between scientific
advancement and desecrated religion, the dimunitive
function of reason and the irrational faith in witch-
craft and fortune-telling. Man is not able to transcend
primitive superstition and is thus caught in a siege of
contraries:
even I, wedded to doubt
and only married to a woman,
yield, resist,

but inch towards the gypsy tents
of witchcraft, casting horoscopes
at nightfall,

and manage to think the zodiac
circulates my blood, that I'm Pisces,
fish out of water,

and my love a motherly Cancer.

(Second Sight, 62)

The poetic sensibility at work here illustrates what
Stephen Spender describes as the characteristic of the
modern spirit. The modern spirit, according to Spender,
consists in a "pressure of disparate outer things seeking
to realize themselves as inner significance." 

In "The Difference," the speaker's sceptical
outlook makes a playful reversal of the creative roles
of God and man. The craftsmen and the craftswomen of
the idol-making unit turn out "gleaming god(s)." They
seem to breathe life into the moulded types in the
manner of the creator himself. They pour eight molten
metals through a hole in the head of the idol in the
making. The popular Hindu belief is that the soul escapes through the hole in the head. By a process which is an ironic inversion, the craftsmen, infuse life into the idol god. The dramatic persona assigns the role of creator of gods to the traditional craftsmen. Out of the left-overs, they make toys of animals, musical instruments, and scenes representing domestic life.

The dramatic speaker, in his mental vision, sees the self-sacrificing role of Bali in the mythological account which projects the all-pervasive cosmic form of the Lord paradoxically adumbrated in diminutive shape. Even after conjuring up for himself such a cosmic vision of Lord Vishnu, the secular speaker is unable to visualize the look of the old God in order to fashion a new toy god for his children. After giving an ironical description of the processes of making idol-gods, the speaker realizes the sober truth that his individual self is finite.

.... But today, out of the blue, when Vishnu came to mind, the Dark One you know who began as a dwarf and rose in the world to measure
heaven and earth with his paces,

but I know I've no way at all of telling
the look,
if any, on his face, or of catching
the rumoured beat of his extraordinary heart.

(Second Sight, 67-68)

The self in Ramanujan defines itself through interactions with the personal, familial, social, historical, philosophical, theological, anthropological selves. Ramanujan focuses on a number of human problems and predicaments and analyses a number of configurations of psychic reactions. The poem "Connect!" links disparate aspects of knowledge such as "red eclipses...golden bough."(73) But unlike E.M. Forster's plea for connecting the prose and the passion of life for attaining a wholeness or a unity of vision, "Connect!" shows the truth in fragments and leads to the idea that life is not a mystery but a process following a hidden, natural pattern. This idea is arrived at after a progressive journey into obscurity of thought:

But my watchers are silent as if they knew my truth is in fragments.
If they could, I guess
they would say, only the first thought
is clear, the second is dim,
the third is ignorant

and it takes a lot of character
not to call it mystery.

(Second Sight, 73)

After much thought and speculation, what is found is that
the paradoxical phenomenon of growth and decay is at the
heart of the life-cycle:

... and search

the mango grove unfolding leaf and twig
for the zebra-striped caterpillar
in the middle of it,

(Second Sight, 73)

Bruce King observes about Ramanujan's art thus: "Memory
contains and links this wild, unpredictable pool of
images, and inside us there is another, calm self, unrootted in a particular environment, unaffected by the
flux of reality, which watches, calmly, knowingly, and
judges simply by being uncommitted, objective." In
"Waterfalls in a Bank," the persona observes thus:
As I transact with the past as with another
country with its own customs, currency,
stock exchange, always
at a loss when I count my change.

(Second Sight, 86)

From the altitudes of thought-planes, he dashes
down to the reality of his being an ordinary mortal subject
to the limitations of the five senses. He searches within
him, in vain, for the faculty of second sight which a Hindu
is believed to be endowed with. Locked up in a dark tunnel,

I fumble in my nine
pockets like the night-blind

son-in-law groping
in every room for his wife,

and strike a light to regain
at once my first, and only,

sight.

(Second Sight, 89)

All the varied experiences of his selves only lead him to
the conclusion that the human search for vital and durable
truths are fated to become futile.
or was it me
moulting, shedding
vestiges,
old investments,
rushing forever
towards a perfect
coupling
with naked nothing
in a world
without places?

(Second Sight, 60)

W.B. Yeats is perhaps right when he wrote at the very end of his life, "Man can embody truth but he cannot know it."
REFERENCES


8 Bruce King, *Three Indian Poets*, p.102.