CHAPTER IV

A.K. RAMANUJAN: THE SELF AND THE FAMILY
Ramanujan’s second volume *Relations* contains a sizable number of poems about familial themes. No doubt, *The Striders* carries some poems about one’s relatives. It is only in *Relations* and *Second Sight* that the familial themes are further dwelt upon with an added subtlety. Ramanujan uses an excerpt from an ancient Tamil poem as an epigraph to the volume, *Relations*. It emphasizes that one’s ties with one’s relations cannot be avoided. Parthasarathy rightly observes that the chief concern of Ramanujan’s poetry seems to be the family which “is the one unchanging event around which his life revolves.”¹ To a large extent, one’s familial experiences have a close bearing on the development and making of one’s self. Ramanujan’s familial poems depict his delightful and ironic reflections on the oddities and eccentricities of a group of relations. In these poems, Ramanujan seems to write from his own personal experience by following up a private insight. The uniqueness of the private insight emphasizes that “the impulse to preserve is at the bottom of his poetry.”²

For Ramanujan, relatives do not strike, for the most part, as beneficent, lovable, genial, and good-
humoured. They strike him as alienated selves known for their petty jealousies, stultifying meannesses, and avarice. Most of all, he delineates the father as a rigid and authoritarian figure who forces the young ones to conform to conventions which deprive them of their instinctive longings and freedom. All the relatives, except the mother and the father, are shown to be (rather) independent atomic entities than a well-knit group of affectionate members. A poem like "History" exposes how in the house of a dead aunt, the mob of relatives are not a group of sad and sobbing ones pained by the tragedy. They are on a grabbing spree. It is strange that the daughters, alienated from their mother after their marriage, resort to robbing their dead mother's person of all her valuables. Instead of occasioning grief, the death of the mother unravels a story of the daughters' predatory instincts.

The speaker of a number of Ramanujan's familial poems suffers from an incapacity to share things warmly with others. As such, love eludes him and he stands aloof. According to him, his wife's effort to understand him is superficial and fitful. The speaker, as a son, has no reverence for the father. In fact, there
is a touch of farcicality about the portrait of the father-persona. Of course, the persistent complaining about the father mellows the father in him. The comical and deflating vein redeems the otherwise serious postures one may be forced to adopt in opposing or rebelling against the repetitious fatuity of the various familial roles. "Obituary", on the face of it, looks like a mere exercise in studied jesting about a weakling father. A cold and detached vein camouflages a deliberate indifferent attitude. Yet, by ironic contrast, the son has dutifully performed every funeral rite and has taken up every responsibility his father passed on to him.

Ramanujan does not luxuriate in projecting his agent-self as a paragon of perfection. He only aims at drawing his agent-self as a Marginal Man. His critical renderings of the glorious versions of the mythological, mystical and cultural heritage of India have revealed him to be an unsentimental lover of the native values. He turns out to be a critic of Indian life in so far as it attaches itself to superstitions and out-dated values. He presents his own vision of life in the detached, ironic fashion of an outsider looking back at his erst-
while home. He thus keeps in touch with his cultural heritage while engaging himself in a quest for identity.

In "Convention of Despair," by an exaggerated account of the gory details of the punishment that awaits the sinner, as the Hindu concept of Hell construes it, the persona reveals a core of rationalist apprehension:

... I cannot unlearn

conventions of despair.
They have their pride.
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. ³

The familial poems of Ramanujan should not be viewed merely as exercises in the explication of attitudes and views about different relatives. They reveal a whole range of feelings like awe, respect, admiration, wonder, excitement, and at the same time underline the studied aloofness and occasional flashes of puckish fun
arising out of the ritualistic actions and tendencies of the behaviour of the elders. In themselves, the elders are rendered a little ridiculous. Memory is the principal source of creative energy of Ramanujan. Harold Bloom observes, "Remembering is, in poetry, always the major mode of cognition." However, the mode of remembering with certain dominances and subduals, exaggerations and a thousand ways of caricature, enacts for us the manner in which the individual sensibilities and sensitivities are shaped by the exact natures of the receiving subject and the influencing object. Though poets have succeeded in discovering only partial aspects of their integral self, they have been nevertheless pursuing the implications of the proclivities of their self. We find Ramanujan's poems mirroring his various and often conflicting views as a son, as a father, as a husband, and as a grandfather. For the most part, Ramanujan explores his native roots in terms of his reactions and responses to closely interlinked networks of relationships.

Ramanujan's delineation of the mother-figure is strikingly sympathetic. The mother-figure appears as a tragic victim of floods in "A River." The poet draws attention to the pathetic tragedy of the loss of human
life and property caused by the flooding river while at the same time he takes exception to the tendency of the old poets going into raptures at the sight of a flooded river. The poem thus contraposes the indifference of the traditional singers of river's glory and grandeur with the stark fact of its destructive ferocity. In "Snakes," the mother-persona is a picture of orthodox piety. The persona of "A Lapse of Memory" gropes for the mother even in the extreme condition of amnesia:

an amnesiac may break into hives

but recognize nothing present
to his concave eye groping only
for mother and absences.\(^5\)

"Of Mothers, among other things" represents the observer's mother through the stages of youth, motherhood, and old age. Made up of disparate images, the poem revolves round the tree symbolism. The son-figure, as an observer, is simply fascinated by the silken whiteness of the mother-figure in the prime of her beauty. This purely aesthetic image of the young mother gains in dimension when the loving mother is
shown to be rushing in rain to take care of her crying children. "Of Mothers, among other things" is yet another of Ramanujan's poems in which there is a coalescence of bird and tree imagery in the depiction of the mother's changing appearance, thrift, and sure-sightedness. The interlinking of nature, human nature, and family history is a marked feature of this poem:

My cold parchment tongue licks bark
in the mouth when I see her four
still sensible fingers slowly flex
to pick a grain of rice from the kitchen floor.

(Relations, 5)

Lakshmi Raghunandan thinks that the act of picking a grain of rice is a part of a purificatory observance in an orthodox Hindu family. This interpretation is not borne out in the dramatic context of the poem. The main movement of the poem is to evoke the picture of a beautiful mother who settles down to her role as a preserving, protecting family elder. The tree in the poem becomes a metaphor of the vortex of varied emotions and responses roused in the mind of the speaker. Upon the twisted blackbone tree, the observer perceives only the silk and white petal of his mother's youth. Later on, the tree
appears to produce an image of "tasselled light" in rags to complement the image of a handful of needle-like rays splashed from the ear-rings of the mother. Soon the tree image acquires an integral quality consonant with the perceiving speaker's mode of examination and in terms of an image of sensation of licking "bark/in the mouth." The speaker writes on the parchment of the tongue as it were an intimate family history. Thus the tree imagery attributes to the suggestion of an inwardness and intimacy, even a bitter intimacy, which is implied in the richly evocative portrayal of the mother here. But as a contrast, the husband-persona of "Love Poem for a Wife.1" "Love Poem for a Wife.2" is alienated from his wife who is about to become a mother. His attempt to explore his bond with his wife flounders on the rock of their unshared childhood. They are estranged because of the unresolved temperamental contradictions.

In Ramanujan all the sensuous renderings of reminiscences combine in order to give us a substantial picture of his real self. The picture of the old mother, in "Of Mothers, among other things," when she is reduced to a skeletal frame on which sarees no longer cling but hang loose, is very striking. Commenting on the last stanza of the poem, Nagarajan aptly says, "the metaphors in the first
two lines emphasise the futility of the poet's language to express the rough, bitter taste of the memory and the last two lines provide an irresistible 'objective correlative' of the emotion.  

In several of Ramanujan's poems, time acts as both a destroyer and a preserver. In "Still Another for Mother," the poet depicts how the mother's image haunts the persona in his alien surroundings. The persona in some of Ramanujan's poems is also aware of the cruelty and cold-heartedness of a step-mother. In "Any Cow's Horn Can Do It," the sadistic step mother seems to be enjoying the violence done to the adopted daughter with a keen relish:

She'll grow cold remembering
what is not forgotten;
getting belted by father

mother's mouth
working red over betel leaf
and betelnut, the clove ground
into the nutmegs of satisfaction

(Relations, 37)
By and large, the mother-persona commands the poet's admiration and haunts him even though he is abroad. In "Ecology," the son-persona is drawn as totally opposed to his mother's sentimental attachment to a trio of Champak trees. Yet he wants to save her from migraine. He recalls her with all the warmth of the old-world aura in the poem "Still Another for Mother."

The speaker of the poem is eager to dissolve his alien identity and assert his emotional identity with his mother. He exercises his faculty of emotional empathy. An alien woman whom he comes across on Hyde Park street resembles his friend's mother. He, too, slowly ceases to be an alien self abroad and melts back into his native identity:

And that woman
beside the wreckage van
on Hyde Park street: she will not let me rest
as I slowly cease to be the town's brown stranger and guest.

(The Striders, 13)

He explores her identity in terms of her dress, gestures, and behaviour and her strained relations with her husband. In spite of the distance in space from his own mother
and sharp differences in points of dress and physical appearance, the speaker discovers through this situation his intense love for his own mother. By absorbing the alien lady into the intimate affections of his heart, he has at once naturalized himself and the alien lady. The poetic enactment of this scene sends the speaker back into the distant past, to the recollection of his mother's heritage:

something opened
in the past and I heard something shut
in the future, quietly,

like the heavy door
of my mother's black-pillared
nineteenth-century
silent house, given on her marriage day
to my father, for a dowry.

(The Striders, 14)

The speaker of "Ecology", by his temperament and attitude, illustrates the generation gap between the young son and the aged mother. The mother's attachment to the three Red Champak trees is orthodox and sentimental. She is of the firm belief that it is divinely ordained that the trees should bear flowers for her
worship of the gods and also to adorn the tresses of her daughters and grand daughters. The son's impatience to root out the trees is realistic and rational as he wants to protect his mother from further attacks of migraine. The son's return home after a long time does not mean any happy reunion but brings about an encounter with the mother because of her stubborn and zealous attachment to the trees. If at all the son shares something with his mother, it is her raging temper. This apart, the poem tries to place in perspective age-old beliefs, rituals and rites of passage and shows their relevance to the contemporary situation in terms of the projection of disparate viewpoints.

In this poem, as C. Subba Rao suggests, "In one single imaginative grasp, Ramanujan manages to suggest nature, human nature, family history, and the current concerns about the need to preserve the environment for the future." The mother would not let her son cut down the tree because the tree is itself a giver and preserver as well as a migraine-causing agent as the modern scientific legend would have it:

    almost as old as her, seeded,
    she said, by a passing bird's providential droppings
to give her gods and her daughters
and daughters' daughters basketfuls
of annual flower

and for one line of cousins
a dower of migraines in season.

If migraine is one ecological aspect evoked in the poem, there is from the mother's viewpoint of sacramental operation of things in the universe, the tree which is intimately connected with family ritual and with a line of succession of daughters and granddaughters indicating the future of mankind. The poem depicts the mother as a preserver and an ensurer of a sacred handing down from generation to generation. Ramanujan's poems show the mother within the confines of intimate family circles and rituals. In Ezekiel's poem "Entertainment," the mother plays the role also of a bread winner. The poem "Entertainment" depicts the pathetic plight of a poor Indian mother sunk in the morass of poverty. More imbued with a spirit of tragic irony than "Entertainment," Louis MacNeice's "Prayer Before Birth" gives utterance to the prayer of an unborn babe in which he sees human existence infested with a number of horrors, sorrows, and corruption.
I fear that human race may with
tall walls wall me,

with strong drugs dope me, with
wise lines lure me,
on black racks rack me, in blood-baths roll me.  

As against Nissim Ezekiel's portrayal of the
pathetic efforts of poverty on a mother, Louis MacNeice
gives the picture of a terror-stricken babe who prays
to God to protect him from the existential cruelties of
a fragmented and bloody world. But Ramanujan's poem
"Alien" shows his gift for subtle and deep irony. He
exposes the cruel and violent world which compels a
pregnant woman to perform somersaults to earn her
livelihood. The foetal mass in the mother's womb is

ignorant yet of barbed wire
and dotted lines,

*(Second Sight, 42)*

Yet the contortions of birth and the quest of identity
are finely captured in the following lines:

as her body shapes under water
a fish with gills into a baby
with a face
The last two lines remind us of the self-conscious J. Alfred Prufrock's reductive love song which turns out to be a severe self-dissection to cover up his diffidence. He and his lady acquaintances are chained to a monotonous round of social existence. In keeping up a face to come to his own, Prufrock goes on rehearsing a plurality of roles:

There will be time, there will be time
To prepare a face to meet the faces
that you meet. 10

Ramanujan delineates the father-figure from the view-point of a typically rebellious and assertive son who sees himself pitted against an authoritarian, conservative, and orthodox father. The son's remarks are almost always cast in the tone of mocking and ironical jibing of one who feels oppressed and neglected. He also feels deprived of the due share of his freedom under the over-shadowing, and even a stand-offish, paternal authority. He misses the warm affection of an
indulgent father. He naturally feels alienated from his father. Perhaps that is why poems on the father-figure are less in number than those in which the mother-figure either dominates or plays a significant role. The poet-persona in turn becomes a liberal and sensitive father-persona who goes to the extent of depicting his role in terms of burlesque and caricature. This duality represents a strong contrast between the severely detached, ironical attitude as a son and the self-exonerating and self-idealizing strain as a father. As Ramanujan adopts a persistently mocking tone of deflating irony in dealing with the paternal persona, it is reasonable to gather that his alienation started at home itself. A deep-rooted and unyielding desire for living according to his inner impulses asserts itself once the paternal influence is absent.

The father-figure in "Snakes" is a solitary and selfish person. Unlike any other son, the son-persona does not enjoy the protecting care of the father in the presence of ritual cobras hired by him. The son screams in spite of the presence of his parents. In "Entries for a Catalogue of Fears," the dramatic persona con-
fronts various fears. One source of fear is the father himself. Though the son is thirty-nine years old, he is still haunted by the father-figure who causes in him deep fears:

Add now, at thirty-nine, to the old old fear of depths and heights, of father in the bedroom.

(Relations, 30)

In the poem, "Still Another View of Grace," the father-figure is drawn as a symbol of authority. Though conditioned by a set of cultural values and paternal authority, the Brahmin-son yields to the charms of a low-caste woman. We find the natural self asserting itself over the acquired cultural self. The son-persona takes the woman behind the laws of his land:

.... But there She stood

upon that dusty road on a nightlit april mind and gave me a look. Commandments crumbled in my father's past.

(The Striders, 43)
Certain physical features and mannerisms of the father-persona come in for unconcealed ridicule in some poems. In "Love Poem for a Wife.1," the father-persona of the speaker is referred to in terms of his awkward mannerism of slapping soap on his back while bathing. The same mannerism of bathing noisily is passed on to the son-persona as an inherited trait in the poem "Extended Family."

Yet like grandfather
I bathe before the village crow

....

slap soap on my back
like father.

(Second Sight, 63)

In the less textured and somewhat more colloquial poem, "Love Poem for a Wife.1," the persona's father-in-law is mentioned in a tone of genial ridicule as one who "will acknowledge the wickedness/of no reminiscence."(10) At this stage, the poet introduces a tone of fantasy and tongue-in-cheek amusement:

.... Probably
only the Egyptians had it right:
their kings had sisters for queens
         to continue the incests
         of childhood into marriage.
         Or we should do as well-meaning
         hindus did,

         betroth us before birth,
         forestalling separate horoscopes
         and mothers' first periods,
         and wed us in the oral cradle
         and carry marriage back into
         the namelessness of childhoods.

         (Relations, 11)

As an Indian living in the United States and married to
a Syriac Christian, Ramanujan here shows the complex
nature of the quest for the usable past even in the
context of marriages in the various ethnic traditions.

            We have a wholesale deflationary and biting
ironic poem about the paternal figure in "Obituary."
The poem, which should have been a poem of elegiac
memory, is out and out critical of the dead father. This
is contrary to the universal injunction, Nil Nisi Bonum.
The speaker recreates the eccentricities of the father
through the very enactments of funeral rites and the
mutations of his organs like eye balls, spinal discs in
the funeral pyre. The entire poem does not contain even a trace of grief for the dead father. The ineffectiveness of the father is matched only by the irreverence of his sons who do not even think of erecting a decent memorial in his honour. The biting sarcasm of the son's observation is seen when he coolly and casually says:

Father, when he passed on,
left dust
on a table full of papers,
left debts and daughters,
a bedwetting grandson
named by the toss
of a coin after him.

(Relations, 55)

Thus the father survives in name—literally in name—decided by the toss of a coin. The ancestral house, the only remnant of inheritance, precariously leans against a bent coconut tree, indicating how Ramanujan visualizes the insubstantiality of inheritance. This is ironic in a poet who forges a deliberate poetic link with his native roots.

The father's eyes, "coins," were intact even after burning and happen to be the mock-treasure that
the sons are heir to. The rough spinal discs have to be picked gingerly and thrown into the confluence of the rivers for sacred immersion. In this irreverent and light-hearted obituary, the son-persona says that he has to shoulder the burden of a changed mother and an annual ritual. Desai observes, "In 'Obituary' the poet speaks of father's death in a manner which is anything but 'Indian'.... The tone is comic, ironic, non-romantic, modern, and there is nothing Hindu about it."

It is true that the poem does not reflect an orthodox traditional response. But it fairly captures the spirit of the reaction of the modern English-educated Indian to the demise of his father. His knowledge of the Hindu funeral rites is subtly brought out in the poem in verse rhythms mimetic of those funeral details. The economic and social implications of a father's death in an Indian middle-class family are also emphasized in the poem.

In the poem, "In the Zoo," the father and the mother are shown as pathetic and ridiculous figures stricken with poverty. The poem partakes of metaphysical wit in bringing heterogeneous worlds of animals and humans together. The father's use of his baggy umbrella to set out in rain is deduced from the noisy
and heavy take-off of the adjutant storks into air by flapping their wings. The father cannot even get the umbrella repaired, let alone buying a new one. As though in a fit of retributive justice, the sins of the father do visit upon the fault-finding son when he takes his turn as a father. To avoid becoming the target of blame, the father resorts to warning the unborn sons well in advance:

Poverty is not easy to bear.
The body is not easy to wear.
So beware, I say to my children unborn, lest they choose to be born.

(The Striders, 40)

In the throes of actual fathering, he portrays himself in terms of self-directed irony. As a father, his psyche is tension-ridden. Though he has boldly revealed the illicit love affair of his grandmother with a fisherman ("THE HINDOO: he doesn't Hurt a Fly or a Spider either"), his own lustful escapade with a low-caste woman ("Still Another View of Grace"), and his stark failure in establishing loving rapport with his own wife ("Love Poem for a Wife.1" and "Love Poem for a Wife.2"), he becomes so scared of his own daughter's security
that he dreams of her being chased by lewd men. The speaker in "Entries for a Catalogue of Fears" is worried in a dream that

sudden knives and urchin laughter
in the redlight alley,
add now
the men in line
behind my daughter.

(Relations, 30)

As we have already noted, the son-figure makes the father-persona bear the brunt of his critical and sarcastic attack. He decries his father's jealous and protective attitude. Sylvia Plath's treatment of the father-figure in "Daddy" shows derisive sarcasm which veils the solicitous affection of a daughter. In Ramanujan, it looks as though the authorial self is visualized as an indulgent father spoiling his children:

I'll love my children
without end,
and do them infinite harm
staying on the roof,
M.K. Naik points out that there is a comparative neglect of critical attention to the theme of love in Ramanujan: "Owing to Ramanujan's obvious preoccupation with motifs of ancestral heritage and memory, his few love poems have not received the attention they deserve." The wry ironic temperament of Ramanujan has given rise to a few reductive love poems. Premarital love between two adults gets at best only a couple of poems. "Still Life" is one such poem about adult love. As one goes through these love poems, one gets a doubt whether the persona is temperamentally incapable of empathising with the lady love or is slow in recognizing the love of his lady friend. The self of the persona is revealed in its structure of responses and reactions to the experience of the most basic of all human passions.

In "Still Life," the poet probes one of the nuances of the life he has observed. The persona in the poem is, at first, seen to be casual and indifferent to
the visit and departure of a lady. In the exploration of his relationship with the lady, the persona suddenly discovers the stamp of her "bite" expressive of her mute passion. The persona's response to the "shape" of her bite is indeed the result of a sudden stirring in him ending his detachment. "Breaded Fish" is a typical Ramanujan poem concerning itself with memory and ambiguous, changing relationship of the past to the present. As Bruce King rightly observes, the poem conveys a sense of "the continuity of memories with their varied associations." The poet-persona refers to the rather violent act of breaded fish being thrust into his mouth by the woman. A visualization of this scene opens in the speaker's mind a picture of a hood of memory. In yet another fine love poem "A Poor Man's Riches 2," the protagonist describes how he realizes the sensuous beauty of a woman in the act of love. The backdrop of nature is scrupulously drained of any trace of romantic suggestion of beauty and idealism. On the other hand, dogwood, elms, haiku butterflies are seen as intrinsically puny and dull selves. Though the background is the dreary world of commerce and economic determinism, the natural impulse of love-making and its fulfilment are realized:
Yet in April, between the lines of classified ads, it's spring.

butterflies sleep in the ear of a ruined Budha,

and we steal kisses, committing grand larceny under the boiler pipes
and I discover

at last how a woman is made
as she laughs and makes a man of me.

(Second Sight, 34)

Even the subdued reference to the Budha goes to add to the intensity of the reality of physical passion. The sacred and the sensual are sharply juxtaposed in the manner of Metaphysical love poetry. Instead of seeking bliss through the Enlightened Path, the couple violates the religious law and is initiated into the mysteries of fleshly delights.

One remarkable feature of Ramanujan's exploration of the wife-husband relationship is the unusual frankness with which he exposes the deep divide at the root of mutuality. In "Routine Day Sonnet," the speaker
goes through the routine of daily activities in and out of the domestic circle. The contented tenor of his day's life ends with his dream-laden sleep. But he wakes up with a start to hear his wife pouring out her bitterness. Instead of love and affection, only hatred is mutual:

.... But I wake with a start to hear my wife cry her heart out as if from a greater in hell: she hates me, I hate her, I'm a filthy rat and a satyr.

(Relations, 12)

No attempt is made here to explain the antagonism at the psychological level by way of a complex and sophisticated argument as found in Kamala Das's unilateral hatred of the male partner expressed, say, in "The Old Playhouse." "Some People" evokes a seance-like reminiscence of the dead wife of the persona against the bustle of the crowded city life. The surge of human crowd does not matter much to the solitary widower whose mind is haunted by the memory of his dear dead wife. The social self of the persona feels the busy city life as a separate otherness whereas the individual self of the widower conjures
up a vision of the living presence of his wife in her bridal dress though she died six weeks ago.

"Love Poem for a Wife.1" is followed by "Love Poem for a Wife.2" and "Love Poem for a Wife and Her Trees." These three love poems embody an intense quest for establishing the persona's own identity as a husband. The areas of mutuality and demarcations of individuality have been perpetually vexatious in the husband-and-wife relationship. In the Indian mythology, the mythical formula of the androgynous form, Ardhanareeswara, symbolizes the identity and complementarity of husband and wife. Rationally viewed, this ideal does not obtain in a society with growing incompatibilities of temper.

The very title "Love Poem for a Wife.1" sounds strange. It precludes any possible romantic rhapsody. This reductive love poem is an ironic exposition of the dramatic speaker's alienation and distance from his wife. This dramatic monologue explores the possible areas of shared experience between himself and his wife. He begins with a direct declaration of the stumbling block:
Really what keeps us apart
at the end of years is unshared
childhood.

(Relations, 9)

The husband-persona coolly analyses the reasons for their
estrangement. His own father was dead long ago and his
father-in-law lost his temper and is now mellowed. These
facts can neither be helped nor gainsaid. Getting to
know each other's early life can help the husband and the
wife to come closer together. Gossip at the time of drink­
ing, "albums of family rumours"(9) and brothers' anecdotes
are the usual sources of ascertaining one's past. But
these tend towards exaggeration. Yet there are some
encouraging signs towards a positive direction:

In the transverse midnight gossip
of cousins' reunions ...

. . . . . . . . 

. . . You suddenly grow
nostalgic for my past and I
envy you your village dog-ride.

(Relations, 9)
This seems to be a starting point of genuine interest about each other:

You begin to recognize me as I pass from ghost to real and back again in the albums of family rumours.

(Relations, 9)

The wife ransacks every possible source for reconstructing the specific identity of her husband. But her search, based on second-hand information, makes out a pretty and formulated estimate of her husband:

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

(Relations, 10)

Thus, as a husband, he gets defined and his self receives a caricatured and stylised image. The wife is content with a hearsay identity of her husband. While resenting her judgement of him based on second-hand information, the husband does the same thing precisely with his wife
and her relatives. He gathers that his father-in-law blotted out sweet reminiscences of his daughter after he lost his temper with her over her flirtation with a Muslim friend one evening. Her efforts of understanding of the husband are only half-hearted and superficial. The wife continues her love affair with her Muslim friend in her heart ("an innocent/date with a nice Muslim friend") (10) in spite of the paternal wrath and against the sanction of marital morality. She wagers her heirlooms and her husband's money to ascertain the truth of the location of the bathroom or the well and the jackfruit tree. In this she is the modern feminine counterpart of Dharma Raja of the Mahabharata, representing essentially mock-heroic attributes:

... you wagered heirlooms and husband's earnings on what the Uncle in Kuwait would say about the Bathroom and the Well, and the dying, by now dead, tree next to it.

(Relations, 11)
She wishes to perpetuate the features of the Alleppey home in her husband's house to be built at New York. So the nice Muslim friend of young days becomes the uncle in Kuwait and references to the bathroom and a near-by well next to the jackfruit tree acquire the status of capitalization even in the context of her married state. The husband-persona refers to adulterous possibilities and thus he sees as it were the validity of the Hindu custom of child marriages:

Or we should do as well-meaning hindus did,

betroth us before birth,
forestalling separate horoscopes
and mothers' first periods,
and wed us in the oral cradle
and carry marriage back into
the namelessness of childhoods.

(Relations, 11)

This insurance against extra-marital offences has all the halo of the traditional wisdom meant to ward off the tragedies of little understanding and less love. Elizabeth Reuben aptly observes, "reductive detachment is at the very centre of his (Ramanujan's) poems."14
As though in exercise of his thorough-going honesty, the husband-persona continues his exploration of the causes of estrangement in his "Love Poem for a Wife.2." What redeems these two poems from being mere analyses of utter estrangement is the genuine desire of the husband to know his wife. "Love Poem for a Wife.1" is mostly psychological in nature. The two poems show a frank awareness of the cutting edges of reality quite disconcerting to the husband-persona himself. With an aching sense of evading fulfilment, Kamala Das shows the wife-persona in "A Man is a Season" sadly disappointed in her husband. She complains that he forced her to search for genuine love in man after man. She feels jilted and frustrated that she is condemned to sing solo. She expresses the frustration of her desire for genuine love in terms of a lost wayfarer and a blind and deaf wife. To retain the precious core of his integrity, the man-persona in Ezekiel's "To a Certain Lady" is prepared to concede certain trivial demands of the woman.

In Ramanujan's "Love Poem for a Wife.2," the husband-persona externalizes the sense of alienation in his relationship with his wife. To explore the inner topography of his wife's mind, he ranges over the landscape with its characteristic fauna and flora.
Concern with one's identity as indicated by the 'face' provides the key to the recognition of one's self. The wife and the husband share factors that divide, estrange, and alienate them from each other. The husband-persona discovers the various nuances of his wife's changing moods without lighting on a predictable pattern of her behaviour. He imports a streak of ironic humour to tone down the harshness of the unavailing fixities, rigid attitudes, and differences that sharpen the alienation. All these culminate in the image of singed relationships:

After a night of rage that lasted days, quarrels in a forest, waterfalls, exchanges, marriage, exploration of bays and places we had never known we would ever know, my wife's always changing syriac face.

(Relations, 27)

Though not reared in the sylvan pomp of Eve's Eden, his wife's childhood is spent against the background of
"chameleon/emerald/wilderness of Kerala." (27) She used to wear frocks "with print patterns/copied locally/from the dotted/butterfly." (27) These geographical images perhaps denote the fickle-mindedness of his wife. The scene of her adolescent days shifts to Aden, in Arabia. It is the exact opposite of Kerala. Bloody violence and betrayal are in the very air and the climate is characterized by fluctuations of heat and cold. In his married life, the husband is at a loss to reckon his identity in terms of her face and his own face which are supposed to give a clue to a sense of authentic identity. Ramanujan makes use of the image of the face to refer to identity or to reckon its loss in a number of poems such as "Self-Portrait," "Love Poem for a Wife.2," and "History."

In the quest for identity, duality and change are seen to be the phenomena reckoned with and experienced by the individual quester. This is what the image of changes of face in the "Love Poem for a Wife.2" indicates. As an expatriate, Ramanujan constantly has recourse to the roots either in the form of the usable past he draws upon or in the form of an ironic rediscovery of the present moorings in terms of mythic
parallelism as indicated by the image of androgynous god invoked in the "Love Poem for a Wife.2." While exploring the clash between the alien world represented by his syriac wife and the Hindu world from which he draws his moorings, Ramanujan shows a typical pattern in his poems: Concern with history and memory constituting the two facets of the quest:

a wife's always clear face
now dark with unspent
panic, with no third eye, only a dent,
the mark marriage leaves on a small forehead
with ancestors in Syria.

(Second Sight, 44)

In Ramanujan's fine dramatic lyric "Love Poem for a Wife and Her Trees," the dramatic speaker goes on an imaginative excursion to examine the possibilities of his wife in different potential roles. The wife is visualized as Mother, Daughter and Another and she is thus split into the possible functions she might take up in a series of probable roles. The dramatic speaker is a Dravidian in his ways of perception and his reactions. The wife survives as a presence through domestic articles like "tinkling (in) glass-/ bead curtains.(76)"
By the very visualization of the impossible prospect of her being his Daughter, he puts on the role of a jealous father-King. He would perhaps overdo the protective role as a father saving her from the dangers of the world, the phantom son-in-law, and her own mad desires. In fact, he tyrannizes over her, confines her to enclosed safety and would throw away the keys of his metallized masculine care into an alligator moat.

The technique of incorporating the legendary elements in this poem is analogous to Anne Sexton's in "Transformations" wherein fables and legends are treated with mock-seriousness. The residuum of reality obtains after the imaginative elements of the legends vapour away:

... I must remember
you're not my Daughter, unborn maybe
but always

present: lest I, like your nightmare father-king, try to save you from the world, that Grisly Beard,

that phantom son-in-law, save you even from your own heart's madness, save you from all things
messy and fertile, from all images
but mine; lock you deep in my male
and royal coffers,

impregnable wombs of metal, and throw away
the key in the alligator moat.
Out of touch,

deprived of traffic, now an ant-world.

(Second Sight, 77)

The safety measures make her still more lonely and reduce
her to the condition of the spinal cord resembling the
inverted tree and forming the stem of all her senses.
In effect, the nervous system of the wife becomes
"that second tree/with the root at the top."(78)

The tree-image pervades the consciousness of the
speaker so much that he illustrates the feeling that
his wife is "the faraway/stranger who's nearby"(78)
like a tree in his garden grafted from a parent tree on
the Blue Mountain:

sighted once

up close in my telescope, seasoned and alive
with leaf, bud, monkeys, birds, pendant bats, parasites.

(Second Sight, 78)

Thus the wife, like the tree appears "exotic"

... who inhabits my space
but migrates
to Panamas of another
childhood.

(Second Sight, 78)

Though she seems to complement him as his other half,
she also tends to usurp him totally and annihilate his
individuality:

... one half of me, often
occupying all,

yet ever ready to call a taxi
and go away; foreign body
with a mind

that knows what I'll never know.

(Second Sight, 78-79)
In between the act of remembrance and the act of knowledge, there is something mysterious about the wife. She is the symbol of the proliferating family tree. Thus she plucks the one red apple from the tree which in its mother root also reveals the same spirit of proliferation. This image of proliferation enables the dramatic speaker to imaginatively range over a whole gamut of roles:

Yet I know you'll play at Jewish mama,
sob-sister, daughter who needs help
with arithmetic,

even the sexpot nextdoor, topless tree spirit on a temple frieze,
or plain Indian wife

.......

at the village well, so I can play son,
father, brother, macho lover, gaping tourist, and clumsy husband.

(Second Sight, 79)

The truth about their essential roles dawns on the speaker's mind. The poem dwells so much on roles that can be played that it underscores the fact of unstable identity. The poem re-enacts the totality of the individual experiences in terms of imaginative possi-
bilities which at once seem to bring the couple together in understanding and sympathy and also show them wide apart. The whole poem is not so much an evocation of a flesh and blood wife in her essential role as one delving into the holes of the protagonist's own memory—historical, social, and even personal.

One may recall that Ramanujan married Daisy Jacob, a Syriac Christian, and the impetus for his alienation poems might have been provided by his own efforts at establishing mutuality with her. The family is the embryonic society which helps shape individual identities more sharply. William Walsh observes:

the true theatre of Ramanujan's poetic experience is the family. The family provides a full dramatis personae, a scene, time past, present and to come, intimate personal history, the rut of current fears and future anxieties, shelter and feelings of every kind. In Ramanujan's Hindu family, characters who for us have dimmed and faded bristle with presence.
If father and mother are regarded as of paramount importance in the determination of one's proclivities, the other members also have their specific roles to play in moulding the sensibilities of the observant members. In his familial poems, Ramanujan describes how the institution of the Hindu joint family has survived. It serves as an abundant source of fun, merriment, and overflows with occurrences which combine to form the integral picture of family life. R. Parthasarathy quotes some lines from each of "Of mothers, among other things," "Still Another view of Grace," "Love Poem for a Wife.1," "History," "Looking for a Cousin on a Swing," "Obituary," "It does not follow, but when in the street," "Entries for a Catalogue of Fears" and then comments that these lines form "a sort of commentary on the Hindu family with its telescopic relationships." 16 In "Small-scale Reflections on a Great House," we find the joint family house devouring a multitude of people and things and erasing their past and absorbing them in its capacious fold. In effect, the house has become a giant absorber and preserver. Parthasarathy says: "The poem lays bare, unsentimentally, the matrix of Hindu family relationships...."
The family is, for Ramanujan, one of the central metaphors with which he thinks. As is the case with the other familial poems, the authorial self is withdrawn for the most part from the dramatic action unfolded throughout the poem. The self comments explicitly in the spirit of an objective outsider.

For Ramanujan the 'Great House' is emblematic of human yearning for protective roofing and of a sense of belonging despite the shattering experiences and tragedies that occur in the outside world. The events and men of Ramanujan's "Great House" have their symbolic ceaseless reincarnations:

Sometimes I think that nothing that ever comes into this house goes out. Things come in every day to lose themselves among other things lost long ago among other things lost long ago.

(Relations, 40)

The bustle of the house increases with grandchildren, appearing as reincarnations, as it were, of missing
sons, reciting Sanskrit to approving old men. The children listen to visiting uncles who have a knack of indulging in anecdotage. The "House" is seen as symbolizing the past, memory or tradition. In this role which the house plays even death does not shake one out of one’s complacency. It is referred to in the same non-serious vein in which the non-receipt of telegram intimating death is mentioned. The picture of the house thus adds up to the image of a self-centredness. For one thing, the poem is remarkable for investing the joint family home with a personality of its own. Behind the variety of the observed phenomena, we can discern the unique self of the speaker who, in a fit of creativity, delineates an assortment of people and things vividly. The house performs a magical trick of recompensing its loss, showing the tenacity for preservation. It absorbs and makes everything its own. For quite another reason, too, the poem is remarkable. The recurrent influx of men, women, and things reveals an iterative quality about it which has a comical and farcical dimension.

This rather solitary figure of a joint family fakes the roles of grandfather, father, mother. He
feigns the gestural eccentricities and typical activities of people in real life to achieve authenticity.

In the poem "Extended Family," the speaker ventriloquises the roles of daughter, son, grandson, and great-grandson, though he is single. He omits any reference to the wife-figure. The intimate relationships covered are wide-ranging and they are the stuff out of which one's living memory is composed. The speaker lives and enacts various roles with such an intensity that the self defines its identity in relation to the other in a variety of family relationships having an essential thread of continuity.

The action of the whole poem "Extended Family" is transacted through a bachelor's reverie in the unfamiliar, expatriate environment. He mimics his grandfather in bathing but in an entirely different setting altogether. He uses chlorine water instead of the water from the sacred Ganges of his native country and bathes in the light shed by the Chicago bulb which is "a cousin of the Vedic sun." He partakes of his father's singular habits of slapping on his back while bathing and thinking in proverbs. In spite of the
clatter of the kitchen, he listens to a morning song like his mother though here the song has a Japanese touch:

Yet like grandfather
I bathe before the village crow

the dry chlorine water
my only Ganges

the naked Chicago bulb
a cousin of the Vedic sun

Slap soap on my back
like father

and think
in proverbs

like mother
I hear faint morning song

(though here it sounds Japanese)

(Second Sight, 63)
All these contrasts emphasize, by some sort of ironic intellection, the emotional bond which the speaker has with his ancestors. One characteristic quality of the poem is that the poet's self visualizes here, though unpredictably, an unbroken chain of continuity between the past, and the present. The idea is that the past in some shape carves out the future. At the same time, there is also in the poem a sense of the self as cheated because the heritage from the past necessarily carries with it failure, a sense of defeat, and even a sense of fear and guilt. The poem, thus, arrives at a fashioning of the self within a dialectic involving a process of generation from time past to the time future.
REFERENCES


