CHAPTER - 3

A.K. RAMANUJAN

Attipat Krishnaswamy (A.K.) Ramanujan is among the foremost Indian poets writing in English. He has made substantial contribution to the growth and development of Indo-English poetry and literature. He is an Indian-American expatriate who has left an indelible imprint on the literary scene in India and the United States of America. As an expatriate writer, Ramanujan is different from the likes of V.S. Naipaul and Salman Rushdie who are rootless but look at India as exotic whereas he finds his roots in the native ethos and tradition. His rootedness in Indian culture and involvement with American culture enabled him to amalgamate the critical rational outlook of the West with the cultural and spiritual heritage of the East. At once an expatriate and a post colonial poet, he has deftly turned the expatriate condition and post-colonial situation to his advantage and brings the image of India alive in his poetry.

Apart from being a major Indian poet in English, Ramanujan has been a teacher of Dravadian studies and Linguistics, South Asian Languages and Civilization and Anthropology at the University of Chicago, U.S.A. Thus he is one of the very few poets who has made a great mark in academic field as well. Ramanujan has also made a significant contribution to Indian literature by his translations of Tamil and Kaññada literary texts into English. It is his special gift to the reading public in the multilingual India and beyond. As a multifarious genius-poet, linguist, folklorist, translator and literary theorist – Ramanujan is one of the world’s intellectual giants who act as a bridge between the East and the West.

Born of Tamil parents in Kannada-speaking Mysore in 1929, Ramanujan was exposed to three languages – Tamil, Kannada and English at home. His father was a noted scholar and a mathematician who played a vital role in moulding the career of his son. He did his graduation honours and Master’s in English Literature from Mysore. He taught English Literature at Quinone, Belgaum and Baroda for eight years. He was a fellow of Deccan College, Poona, in 1958-59 and a Fulbright scholar at Indiana University in 1963. He married a Syrian Christian who familiarized him with Malayalam and Kerala culture. Language acquisition came naturally and he was well equipped to
think, feel and express in different languages. Ramanujan, like T.S. Eliot, toyed with the idea of becoming a Buddhist and even went to Sri Lanka in 1963 with this end in view. The influence of Buddhism on him remained all through his life which gets reflected in his poetry. He joined the University of Chicago as an Assistant Professor of Linguistics, Tamil and Dravadian Languages and later on became a full-fledged professor in the same department. Ramanujan lived in Chicago for over three decades till he left for his heavenly abode in 1993.

As a writer with multilingual and multicultural background, Ramanujan attained quick success in Western Academia. His intellectual position was determined by his multiple interests in Anglo-American New Criticism in the 1950s, French Structuralism, Russian Formalism, and German Critical Theory in the 1960s and 1970s and some aspects of French Deconstruction and American and Indian Feminisms in 1980s. His critical approach is multidimensional is evidenced from the fact that in his explication of poems he adopts the formalist literary critical method as well as the contextual concerns of ethnography, history and folklore studies. In his explanations of social codes, he depends on social theory, linguistics, poetics, and cross-cultural studies. Ramanujan occupies a unique position in Indian letters by effecting a synthesis of his varied interests as a scholar in Dravadian languages, linguistics, cultures and as a translator of classical Tamil and medieval Kannada poetry by virtue of his superb felicity in English language. He was only known as an Indian English poet or an expatriate Indian English poet, to be more precise, before the terms "postcolonial" and "postcolonialism" came in vogue in the 1980s. As a trilingual writer, translator and folklorist, Ramanujan has assimilated the cultures of India, his native land and that of America, the land of his migration, and successfully brought alive the indigenous transition and culture in his works. As a truly multicultural writer, he transcended the limitations of an expatriate writer:

His poetry is born out of the dialectical interplay between his Indian and American experience on the one hand, and that between his sense of his own self and all experience on the other. Its substance is both Indian and Western. Starting from the centre of his sense of self and his Indian experience, his poetry executes circles comprehending ever-wider realities, yet maintaining a perfectly taut connection between its constant,
and continuously evolving central vision and the expanding scene before it.... (Dulai 51)

As a multicultural writer, Ramanujan, despite his migration to the U.S.A., and with his roots in India, is equally involved with both the cultures. For him the American environment constitutes the "exterior" and the Indian the "interior". They are "two lobes" of his brain. The shaping influences from Indian culture, coupled with the Western influences, have contributed to the complexity of Ramanujan's poetic genius. "His Indianness is a part of his past, with which he is inextricably linked as he changes and develops" (King 8). His part is a part of continuity, not conflict. Like his biological past, the poet's cultural past continues to live in the present as he himself states: "Just as our biological past lives in the physical body, our social and cultural past lives in the many cultural bodies we inherit—our languages, arts, religions and life-cycle 'rites'" (Ramanujan, Collected Essays 449-50).

The complex genius of Ramanujan successfully brought together the Indian and the Western sensibilities and fully synthesized the diverse cultures and ethos. Here in lies the real intellectual strength of Ramanujan which in literary terms may be termed as a mark of his masculinity.

A writer's preferences, attitudes, ideas and ideals may be explicit in his essays and interviews or implicit in his creative writings. Same is true of Ramanujan as he gives expression to his personal neurosis and existential predicament as he strives to arrive at a definition of Indianness in relation to the Western ethos in his work. A perusal of his writings shows that the creative and the critical aspects of his genius are not at variance with each other. In fact, they constitute the essence of his poetical creed. As an intellectual par excellence, Ramanujan succeeds in telling the world what is truly "Oriental" about India in his authoritative treatment of Indology and correcting the Western notions about the "Orient" and the ancient India. Before Ramanujan appeared on the Western scene, Indian scholars in the U.S. were merely native informants. But our poet blazed a new trail on Indological studies: "At a time when the American Indological establishment regarded native Indian scholars merely as sources of information about languages and texts, like the raw fibers that were taken from India to be processed in British mills, but seldom as scholars who might have their own ideas about how to
process those texts. Ramanujan taught them all how to weave a theory, a folktale, a poem, a book...” (Ramanujan, *Collected Essays* 4). Further, Ramanujan’s work facilitated a comprehension of the scholarship on ancient India by means of different paradigms that he used.

As an intellectual scholar, Ramanujan had no political agenda in his discourse on Indian thought. Unlike the other postcolonial scholars like Edward Said, he steered clear of literary politicking and his contempt for politics is well known. However, he does say that the discourse on the Orient has become controversial while making a passing reference to Said. Like postcoloniality, Orientalism in the Western discourse has been political in orientation. As an Indologist, Ramanujan proved superior to the champions of both the discourses – Occident and Orient – as he was more objective in his approach and more deeply involved than other scholars. Said appears to correct the Western notion of the Oriental but he mentions only Buddhism in his writings. He does not deal with Hinduism or Jainism which form the major strands of Indian culture and literature. Ramanujan, it must be acknowledged here, goes beyond Said and corrects not only the Western notions but also the limited understanding of Orientalism on the part of Said. As such, it is difficult to put Ramanujan’s writings only in the straitjacket of postcoloniality. Myth and history, language and landscape, self and the other – all very important ingredients of postcolonial studies – are found in ample measure in Ramanujan’s oeuvre. His major writings representing people and their society authentically can be taken as resistance to the former colonizer. His poetry gives an authentic representation of indigenous tradition, and native culture in artistic terms. His five volumes of poetry – *The Striders* (1966), *Relations* (1971), *Selected Poems* (1976), *Second Sight* (1986) and the *Collected Poems of Ramanujan* bear testimony to his postcoloniality. However, Ramanujan is more than a postcolonial writer as he contains with in himself both the Eastern and the Western sensibilities while functioning in an alien environment. This shows Ramanujan’s intellectual robustness, objective and penetrative vision, and emotional vigour – the hallmarks of a great scholar with a masculine mind.

Ramanujan’s views on culture, Indianness and Western metaphysis are scattered in his poetry and other writings which provide us an insight into his personality and poetic universe. In his famous piece, “Parables and Common Places,” he dwells in detail,
for the first time on culture and the related issues. He begins his essay with the premise that cultural encounters "lead to definition, redefinition, a dialogue with the other where each returns to itself reflected, refracted, even alienated and thereby redefined" (Ramanujan, *Collected Essays* 142). He asserts that there is no uniform pattern and degree of cultural interaction as it varies from culture to culture in accordance with its capacity for "coping with containing, appropriating and domesticating the bizarre, often terrifying alien" (Ramanujan, *Collected Essays* 138). With regard to Indian culture, Ramanujan underlines its terribly perplexing plurality as also its attendant constraints in his important essay "Classics Lost and Found": "Indian tradition is not a single street or one way street but consists of many connected streets and neighbourhoods .... India does not have one past but many pasts" (Ramanujan, *Collected Essays* 187).

Ramanujan further observes that like other cultural constructs, the past changes as one attends to it because "In a culture like the Indian, the past does not pass. It keeps on providing paradigms and ironies for the present..." (Ramanujan, *Collected Essays* 188). His interpretation of modernity which has echoes of Eliot shows a postcolonial bias about it: ".... modernity, itself a new attitude to history and tradition, with a new kind of pride in the past, also discovers and includes the Indian past, through new techniques of discovery and through a juxtaposition of 'the pastness of the past' and its 'presence'" (189).

Likewise, in another essay, "Where Mirrors are Windows," Ramanujan shows his intellectual independence by resisting and questioning the "monism" and even "cultural imperialism" of proponents of a single "pan-Indian Sanskritic Great Tradition" and asserts:

Cultural traditions in India are indissolubly plural and often conflicting.... What we call Brahminism, Bhakti traditions, Buddhism, Jainism, Tantra, tribal traditions and folklore and lastly, modernity itself, are the most important of these systems. They are responses to previous and surrounding traditions; they invert, subvert and convert their neighbours.

(8)

Ramanujan discovers two organising principles among these systems of culture – sensitivity and reflexivity of various sorts – both of which constantly generate new forms out of the old ones. He dives still deeper into their mutual correspondences: "Where
cultures (like the Indian) are stratified yet interconnected, where the different communities communicate but do not commune, the texts of one stratum tend to reflect on those of another; encompassment, mimicry, criticism and conflict and other such relations are expressed by such reflexivities" (9).

In this another landmark essay, “Is There an Indian Way of Thinking? – An Informal Essay,” Ramanujan explicates Indian culture vis-a-vis Western culture. His insightful observations on two cultural complexes betray his profound understanding of the two world views and in the process expresses his attitude to the totality of cultural existence. Masculinity, in its ultimate analysis, is also an attitude towards life, society and culture related issues. Ramanujan has this to say on the two culture complexes: “In cultures like India’s the context–sensitive kind of rule is the preferred formulation. While the Western tradition is context–free, based on a promise of universalization.... In ‘traditional’ cultures like India where context–sensitivity rules and binds, the dream is to be free of context” (41-42).

As an intellectual giant with a firm grasp of Indian cultural tradition, Ramanujan searches categories within categories, be it religion, or social structure or literary conventions or Indian aesthetics itself. He regards ‘modernisation’ in India as a movement from “the context–sensitive to the context-free” and finds that in cross-cultural interactions, the two diametrically opposed cultures invariably cross fees. In one of his well-known observations, Ramanujan underscores the ingredients of culture: “Just as our biological past lives in the physical body, our social and cultural past lives in the many cultural bodies we inherit – our languages, arts, religious and life-cycle rites” (184).

Thus a sense of continuity, past and present, tradition and modernity acting on each other are central to Ramanujan’s vision and verse. His poems like “A Poem on Particulars” reveal his awareness that the past and the present constantly impinge on each other and reminding us of Eliot’s famous essay, “Tradition and Individual Talent”. In “History,” the poet shows change as a perspective. The speaker as an adult remembers his childhood. The poem takes the reader into the midst of an action. History becomes a reality of the present. Similarly “Small-scale Reflections on a Great House” brings history close to the present – the house is a past, a memory, a tradition.
Ramanujan is a complex genius with a unique ability to contain within himself the binaries, explaining the East to the West and the West to the East with perfect equanimity even as cultural reversal and displacement result in “the binary opposition, the Western intellectual’s longing for all that is not West, ... the so-called non-West’s turn toward the West” (8). He could bring together, if not synthesize, the Indian and the Western sensibilities. Despite its rootedness in Indian cultural traditions, the poetry of Ramanujan can be read on its own as English language poetry with modern themes and forms. He achieves a rare blending of the ancient and the modern, the Indian and the American idioms. As in T. S. Eliot, in Ramanujan as well, there is continuity from tradition to modernity, continuity between his poetry, translation and scholarship.

Like the culture plurality of India, Ramanujan underlines the “vast variety of Indian literature, oral and written, over the centuries, in hundreds of languages and dialects” (Ramanujan, Collected Essays 8). His assertive intellect is seen when he, for the first time, questions the motto of the official Indian literary academy, the Sahitya Academy: “Indian literature is one but written in many languages, saying, “I, for one would prefer the plurals ‘Indian literatures’ and would wonder if something would remain the same if it is written in several languages, knowing as I do that even in the same language ‘a change of style is a change of subject,’ as Wallace Stevens would say” (8). Ramanujan further explains the term “Indian literatures” in his essay entitled “Where Mirrors are Windows”: “Various bodies of literary, religious, sastric, or ideological materials, as they come into being at different periods, become part of the vocabulary of Indian literatures, Hindu, Buddhist and Jaina texts, especially legends, stereotypes, beliefs and the commonly known controversies among them” (18).

In another noteworthy essay, “Some thoughts on Non-Western Classics” which deals with multiple existence of Indian classics like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata in oral and written traditions, in “classical” and “folk” modes, Ramanujan has the guts to discount Western classics like the Iliad and maintains that only “the Bible in its hundreds of translations and myriad uses is comparable to the Indian classics” (118).

Ramanujan, thus, asserted the relevance and importance of regional and folk literature, that too, in America, at a time when Indian literature meant Sanskrit and Sanskrit meant Greek and Latin. He questioned the American anthropologists like Robert
Redfield and Milton Singer for coining terms like “Great Tradition” – involving the ancient pan-Indian Sanskrit texts, and “Little Tradition” – seen as local, mostly oral, and carried by the illiterate and stressed the need for “texts” of a culture in preference to “fieldwork”. So apart from highlighting the multilingual and multi-cultural aspects of India Ramanujan extensively explored the multiplicity of Indian literature. For the first time he argued that not only written but also the oral texts are an integral part of great body of literature called Indian literatures.

Thus, A.K. Ramanujan as a theorist, a practising poet and a critic has no parallel in recent times. Sadly, as a writer, he has not received the kind of recognition that he deserves. A close scrutiny of his oeuvre reveals that variety of his reading and complexity of his creative genius. Continuity is a term which aptly applies to his works, for he exemplifies the extension of the cultural past into the present, not only at the specific Indian level but also the universal. In this lies his intellectual strength and originality as a poet, critic and theorist. As far as Ramanujan’s intellectual strength or masculinity is concerned, it is enough to say that it calls for great intellectual courage, conviction and independent critical thinking to question the established stereotypes, especially in literature sphere – like his questioning the distinction between “Great Sanskrit Tradition” and “Little Tradition”. It is a proof of his scholarly strength that he did not allow himself to be overwhelmed by the Western notions of superiority over the Eastern ethos of culture and literature or the centrality of the Western worldview. Ramanujan’s views be they on Indian literature, culture, modernity, orientalism or Western thought have an unmistakable stamp of his penetrating peep into the heart of things, profound understanding and above all, lucid exposition of the subject matter, however abstruse it may be. This kind of interrogation of set beliefs and literary stereotypes requires mental strength and conviction which in case of Ramanujan may befittingly be ascribed to his masculinity – intellectual and scholarly.

Ramanujan has emerged as one of the most talented poets in Indian English poetry. As a poet, he shows a deep rooted Indian sensibility with an analytical intellect, sharpened by a long sojourn in the West. In spite of his constant exposure to American beliefs and culture he has consistently written about India-not as an obsession, but as a source of inspiration. Indian myth and history, has people and customs, her rich cultural
and spiritual heritage, form the dominant themes of his poetry. His poetry is intense, down-to-earth and socially relevant. He has been gifted with a broad-spectrum poetic sensibility which encompasses intense personal poems, childhood memories, religious experience, philosophy, history and a wide variety of human situations. But above all, he is an authentic Indian voice despite the fact that he spent about three decades in the West. Highlighting this aspect, Rama Nair writes:

The Indian ethos pervades Ramanujan’s poems, and it is in the Indian ethos that the poet, ‘realizes’ himself. The reality of the poet’s predicament is the reality of a universal predicament – the quest for an individual identity. Therein lies the applicability and universality of Ramanujan’s theme, for psychological realism is being authentic to one’s evolving self. (38-39)

As already stated, the most distinguishing feature of Ramanujan’s poetry is its autochthonousness. He rather frequently resorts to native themes and traditions in his poems. His poems, apart from three Hindu poems, like “Conventions of Despair”, “A River”, “Some Indian Uses of History on a Rainy Day”, “Old Indian Belief”, “Prayers to Lord Murugan”, Of Mothers, among other things”, “Love Poem for a Wife, 1”, “Love Poem for a Wife, 2”, “Small-Scale Reflections on a Great House” and many more poems have a direct bearing on Indian ways of living, life and philosophy.

The Hindoo poems are essentially Indian in background and treatment and take us to the core of the Hindu philosophy, to the Gita. These poems unravel a deep ironic stance and irony is explicit even in the use of ‘oo’ instead of ‘u’ in the word Hindu. The poem titled “The Hindoo: The only Risk” takes a dig at some Hindus. The Hindu whose knowledge about his self and the world is incomplete, biased and selfish becomes the target of Ramanujan’s irony. The personae, who is well versed in the Gita, and who is likely to retain his calm and composed self, feels it at risk to retain his calm and heart’s simple beat at neighbour’s striptease or a friend’s suicide. What is more: he also does not take the risk of handling kitchen knife for he may be tempted to maim himself or his wife or the child for this or that. But he never takes any risk in terms of losing or getting “three square meals” a day. His interest lies in everything, even in the dead street-dog. He wants to involve himself in everything but he is afraid of death: for he does not want to be
caught “dead at sea, battle, riot, adultery or hate” (Ramanujan, *Collected Poems* 90). What the poet exposes is the persona’s selfishness and heartlessness. Similarly in the second Hindu poem, “The Hindoo: he reads his Gita and is calm at all events”, is a superb case of irony. The sacred scripture of the Hindus, the Gita, teaches one to have control over one’s senses. It also teaches one to be more human and compassionate. It brings one closer to calmness. It does not make one non-chalant to human suffering and misery. The personae in the poem has read the Gita, but has lost the spirit of wisdom:

... I do not marvel
when I see good and evil: I just walk on
over the iridescence
of horsepiss after rain. Knives, bombs, scandal,
and cowdung fall on women in wedding lace:

I say nothing, I take care not to gloat. (Ramanujan, *Collected Poems* 79)

Again, the persona has no envy in watching lovers kiss, but he cannot afford to miss it. He also looks at wounds “calmly”, when the wounds demand care and sympathy. The concluding image lets loose the ironic intent: “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” (Ramanujan, *Collected Poems* 79)

In the poem titled “The Hindoo: he doesn’t hurt a fly or a spider either”, the poet-persona not only mocks at the Hindu theology embracing the concept of birth and re-birth but he ridicules his own beliefs and attitudes as well. Nevertheless, he is unable to break free of the shackles of age-old ideas, which seem to have a firm grip over his analytical mind. The poet confesses:

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

Why, I cannot hurt a spider
either, nor even a black widow,

for who can tell Who’s Who?
Can you? May be it’s once again my
great swinging grandmother,
and that other (playing at
patience centered in his web)
my one true ancestor. (Ramanujan, *Collected Poems* 62)

Ramanujan’s self-enquiry and self-parody are also revealed:
And who can say I do not bear
as I do his name, the spirit

Of Great Grandfather, that still man,
untimely witness, timeless eye,

perpetual outsider,
watching as only husbands will

a suspense of nets vibrate
under wife and enemy

with every move of hand or thigh:
watching, watching, like some

spider-lover a pair
of his Borneo Specimens mate
in murder, make love with hate,
or simply stalk a local fly. (Ramanujan, *Collected Poems* 62)

One can mark in this longish quote that the spirit of Great Grandfather characteristically “still” while watching, and a suspended envy vibrating in him as in a husband are contradictory elements in the Hindu tradition. In the poem, the persona characterizes his grandmother in the image of a female spider having killed the poor lover in the act of love. The poem is woven with animal and love imagery and the persona
seems to be unsparing in his ironic comment on grandfather’s coolness, timeless eye, unattached watching, envy at distance, while for him the fact remains that he inherits his true ancestor’s patience, stillness and lasting impression in love. The persona of the poem, or Ramanujan for that matter, is different from the ancestor only in his self-interrogation and self-discovery implying a husband’s envy or suspicion. The poet cannot estrange or deny a part of himself firmly rooted in a biological ancestry, however paradoxical and inconsistent that patriarchy may in effects be, for a simple reason that the past lineage is not fully controllable or explainable by a present self, wise and self-enquiring. In other words, one can revise consciously a cultural construct, but one cannot discard at will a biological fact. An idea is implicit here of the permanence and re-birth of the souls, which is not spared ironic treatment. Nevertheless, the poet has complicated the attitude of gentleness towards a fly or a block woman as a problem of value without sufficient explanation. In such spaces, he comes to the view as an ambivalent observer of the cultural behaviour.

“A Hindu to His Body” reveals another interesting angle of Ramanujan’s vision, that is, the body is not to be disparaged in a mystical, bodiless yearning for the soul. It is the body, on the contrary, which is more natural, more dependable and more precious in acts of human love, sacrifice, sex, envy, doubt, memory and faith. Ramanujan does not confirm his belief in the Hindu tenet of reincarnation, which comes revealing in the poems analysed above. This attitude of his is not to be just related to the Western influence of existentialism, for his sensibility seeped in traditions’ dissent may also be anchored to Indian materialist philosophers like the Lokayats, Charvakas and Buddhists. In “A Hindu to His Body” the poet addresses the body thus: “Dear pursuing presence, / dear body: you brought me/ curled in womb and memory” (Ramanujan, Collected Poems 40).

Here the body is regarded almost as a mysterious presence which does not die but transforms into other forms. Interestingly, this is a contradictory position the poet maintains here, being aware that the traditional Hindu holds steadfast to the belief of immortality of soul while believing in the body’s dissolution into the elements in the wake of death. An alienated mind, a cultural outsider cannot engage in such abstruse thoughts as are often spoken and heard in Indian culture.
Ramanujan’s ‘Hindoo Poems’ not only mirror his self-mockery but also reveal his deep-rooted contempt at the apparent notion of detachment. Beneath the surface, satire and the irreverent tone of these poems, one can hear the poet’s cry of despair at the decline of his religion. However, his satire is not drawn towards Hinduism or the sacred scripture, but against those Hindus who read or know the contents of the scripture but miss its spirit. Ramanujan seems to convey that half-knowledge would never make an individual wise and that one must follow the Gita not by its letter but by its essence and spirit. That Ramanujan has the guts and gumption to raise such issues concerning religion & its misinterpretation only shows his independent and masculine intellect. He finds it impossible to adopt a non-chalant attitude towards both virtue and vice and be immune to joys and sorrows alike. M.K. Naik says in this connection:

Is the poet trying to suggest here that in spite of all his traditional training as a ‘sthitaprajna’ (the man of tranquil wisdom) he is profoundly disturbed when he finds that in life sometimes elemental innocence become a sacrificial victim, and realizes that this strange law of life is more ancient than most ancient of religious systems? (17)

Ramanujan is opposed to hypocrisy of the Indian mind on account of his great concern for the true Indian values. In “Prayers to Lord Murugan” the poet laments the dichotomy between the inner culture and the outer manifestations: “Our blood is brown / our collars white”, both in contrast to the Red God:

Lord of the sixth sense,
give us back
our five senses.
..............
Deliver us O presence
from proxies
and absences

from sanskrit and the mythologies
of night and the several
roundtable mornings
of London and return
the future to what
it was. (Ramanujan, *Collected Poems* 116-17)

Ramanujan rejects the abstract and the spiritual in preference to the realities of the Indian life. He wants to highlight the real India free from old myths, abstraction of dead languages and highfalutin talk about political gatherings like the Round Table Conference in London. The poet also addresses Murugan as “Lord headlines”. This expression has double connotations – namely, the lines of destiny imprinted on the forehead and sexually the headlines of newspapers. He prays to the lord to help him in interpreting “the small print”. He is also begged to return “our five senses”, for we have lost our capacity to utilize these senses. The ‘Lord of Solution’ is pleaded to enable us to ‘dissolve’ in such a way that we do not get drowned and lost. Not only that, the poet wants us to snap off the shackles of the age-old myths and senseless rituals as well as the newly – conceived westernized ideas. He wants the future to portray a revival of the simple joys of the past. Thus the poem embodies the core of Ramanujan’s religious experience. Making an overall assessment of the poem, S. K. Desai remarks:

In the framework of the existentialist ontology within which Ramanujan’s poetry has existence and being, there is no God, no faith, no hope, no transcendence, and no political and social action. In ‘Prayers to Lord Murugan’, for example there is neither Bhakti nor faith, there is only irony and existential angst. (19)

The concluding section of the poem hardly depicts Ramanujan in a religious light as he declares outrightly:

Lord of the lost travellers,
find us. Hunt us
down.

Lord of answers,
cure us at once
of prayers. (Ramanujan, *Collected Poems* 117)
Ramanujan finds ritual prayers meaningless in a spiritually bankrupt modern world.

Another aspect of A.K. Ramanujan’s poetry which comes as an off-shoot of his faith in the Hindu philosophy is his intense love for animals and his ability to perceive the divine presence of God in all creatures, great or small. Ramesh K. Srivastava quite emphatically states:

In contrast to the growing dehumanisation among all kinds of people Ramanujan’s own attitude towards human beings and animals is healthy probably because of his faith in Hinduism.... It is this Hindu belief in the existence of God in every living being, big or small, that creates in Ramanujan a healthy attitude towards all creatures of God, including dogs, snakes and lizards who, in certain respects are better than human beings. (61-62)

Ramanujan is not only a great poet but a greater human being too. His sensitivity is not only restricted to his own brethren, that is human beings, but his humanity and generosity also encompass the animal world. If Ramanujan is deeply pained at the deplorable condition of our so-called civilized society, he is also touched to the core by the woeful condition of the mute creatures. The poem “Zoo Garden Revisited” shows how deeply the poet is perturbed at the thoughtless and heartless people who inflict cruelties on the caged animals, fish for fun and sadistic entertainment. They have absolutely no qualms about lighting the tail feathers of the ostriches with their cigarette lighters or offering bananas with concealed needles to innocent monkeys. The poet’s heart flows with what Shakespeare had phrased as “the milk of human kindness as the sight of the animals reminds him of all that is ugly and disturbing: “Now animals remind me only of animals, / orangutans of only orangutans and of tuberculosis in the Delhi zoo” (Ramanujan, Collected Poems 153)

As a true animal lover, the poet invokes upon the gods of the Hindu religion to take pity on these helpless victims of (in) human torture and save them from the tyranny of man. He reminds the people of their close association with animals, as they have been often incarnated as animals to save mankind.
Apart from the deterioration of social conditions causing serious concern to the poet, the falling standards in human values also cause an upheaval in Ramanujan’s mind. The short poem “Everything” which is part of a larger poem entitled “Excerpts from a Father’s wisdom” makes no bones about the fact that there has been a steady erosion of values from our society as the poet says:

Everything seems naked these days.
Trees, the women who seem to come right through nylon sarees,
redbrick buildings with only collars of cement,
paperback books sold without jackets:
even qualities
walk nude like dogs and cows. (Ramanujan, *Collected Poems* 42)

Likewise, in “Still Another View of Grace” the poet gives a subtle description of unconditional surrender to passion before the strength will. The poet-persona is in a dilemma in making a choice between the Eastern concept of chastity and the Western concept of free love. Though a citizen of America, he does not accept its culture. He still clings to tradition he has inherited. In the beginning the poet was determined not to waver in his own principles:

I burned and burned. But one day I turned
and caught the thought
by the screams of her hair and said: ‘Beware.
Do not follow a gentleman’s morals

with that absurd determined air. (45)

Here, “thought” is personified as woman of easy virtue. The “thought” is the thought of illicit love. The poet tried his hardest to keep his carnal desires at bay but was unable to withstand the glare of feminine charm. He succumbs to his temptation and the poem ends with the collapse of his self-imposed morality:

.... But there She stood

upon that dusty road on a nightlit april mind
and gave me a look. Commandments crumbled

68
in my father's past. Her tumbled hair suddenly known
as silk in my angry hand, I shook a little

and took her, behind the laws of my land. (45)

The poem has a distinct confessional tone and the poet laments the loss of moral norms.

The degeneration of human values and dehumanization of society is vividly delineated in a number of poems and the poet acknowledges that slowly people are getting immune to it. The poet feels that we are no longer disturbed by the woes of people or the dwindling value of virtues but we seem to take these in our stride as a part of our life as reflected in his piece “Elements of Composition”. The poet admits that he is moved by the pathetic condition of the lepers of Madurai but his sympathy is short lived as he moves on with his own life again:

I pass through them
as they pass through me
taking and leaving

affections, seeds, skeletons. (122)

In their struggle for survival, the lepers can remember an alms giver for barely a moment as they must pass onto the next one in an attempt to collect alms. The poet too is filled with pity at some particular scene or incident or he may be moved to tears at the miserable plight of some creature but it does not remain etched in his memory for long. If the lepers criticized for being ungrateful or the poet is chided for being insensitive to human misery, it is because of the innumerability of problems in society, which has hardened one’s sensibility. Life has become so complicated and human miseries are so intense that any incident, pleasant or unpleasant, hardly leaves an indelible mark; rather one is forced to move on with one’s life. To quote Ramesh K. Srivastava: “A poet’s inspiration comes from tragic happenings in life from which as Shelley felt, ‘our sweetest songs’ originate, but their very abundance makes them counter-productive since they harden his sensitivity and make him less responsive” (52).
The desensitization of society owing to predominance of materialistic values, disintegration of social life and hectic pace of life form an important aspect of Ramanujan’s poetry.

Another significant dimension of Ramanujan’s poetry is the dilemma faced by the poet in the face of conflict between his inherited and acquired values: “... his poetry is born out of the dialectical interplay between his Indian and American experience, and that between his sense of self and all experience on the other” (151). The simultaneity of two sets of experiences – the one, Indian serving as the backdrop, the other, American serving as the frontier – gives his poetry a rare sophistication, enviable richness, and complexity. The quaint way in which he looks at experience makes Ramanujan a poet of excellence and rare achievement.

The sense of wonder in looking at and into things, and situations of living constitute is the crux of Ramanujan’s sensibility and vision. It impels him to go to the “thin-stemmed / bubble-eyed water bugs” and

See them perch
on dry capillary legs
weightless
on the ripple skin
of a stream. (Ramanujan, Collected Poems 3)

The superficial and precise description of the water bug is striking. But it is its activity in the following lines which gives an extra-ordinary dimension to the striders:

No, not only prophets
walk on water. This bug sits
on a landslide of lights
and drowns eye-
deep
into its tiny strip
of sky. (3)

The ease with which the water bug exists both on land and water gives it a luminous effect bringing it almost close to a ‘prophet’. The poet, thus, succeeds in evoking a spiritual concreteness through the image of an ordinary amphibian.
Likewise “A River”, “Snakes”, “Breaded Fish” are other important poems of his slim but elegant first collection the striders wherein the poet is preoccupied with the precise pictures of objects and synchronicity of his literary sensibilities is seen. In “A River” the poet draws reader’s attention to the river ‘Vaikai’ which flows through Madurai, the ancient city of Tamil culture. It represents the eternal flow of culture, the culture of his father. Madurai, the city of temples, symbolized the spiritual culture of man. To the poets who sang of cities and temples, spiritual attainment was considered the highest mark of civilization. Madurai represented the religious nature of the Indian ethos. The temple is a graphic image for it represents a paradigm of Indian culture. But now,

every summer
a river dries to a trickle
in the sand,
baring the sand-ribs,
straw and women’s hair
clogging the water gates
at the rusty bars
under the bridges with patches
of repair all over them,
the wet stones glistening like sleepy
crocodiles, the dry ones
shaven water-buffaloes lounging in the sun.

(Ramanujan, Collected Poems 38)

The drying of the river metaphorically suggests the present sterility of the poet’s culture. Modernisation results in disintegration. The once stable values now give way under the onslaught of Westernization. The very imagery in the poem reveals the stagnation of the poet’s culture. The father’s values which the son has inherited crumble under the force of his acquired Western values. However, the poet is not willing to accept Western values whole sale. He seems to be against blind Westernization and as such he is against the Western concept of masculinity as well. In the poem, Ramanujan’s artistic secret is seen in his ability to combine the visual and the conceptual. The images created by him are basically visual but underneath these patterns of images one can discern their
beauty and their modern consciousness. The poet's Indian sensibility projects the river in its two extreme stages—one, when it is dry and the other, when it is in spate. Such a word painting is possible only by a poet who has an eye for the minutest detail even of an ordinary phenomenon. The dryness of the river is juxtaposed with its swolleness during floods which is an exciting prospect as it induces one to be poetic about only once.

Ramanujan's human concern forces him to deride poets, the old and the new, who "sang only of the floods", "of cities and temples" while

... no one spoke
in verse
of the pregnant woman
drowned, with perhaps twins in her,
kicking at blank walls.
Even before birth. (39)

Thus, the poem is about the reality of the river and relations between the present and the past.

Ramanujan believes that poetry has no value without direct relevance to life. He thinks that a woman can become a good poet only when she depicts her suffering in concrete terms making each individual feel and see her own suffering and degradation. "The opposable Thumb" reveals how women are ill-treated by their husbands. The heartlessness and cruelty of men is suggested in the poet's reference to the granny's four fingers lost to her husband's "knifing temper": "Just one finger left of five, a real thumb, / no longer usual casual or opposable after her husband's knifing temper one Sunday morning half a century ago" (6).

In "Breaded Fish", the poet is invited to eat the breaded fish, but the appearance of the fish at once reminds him of the death of a poor woman "on the beach in a yard of cloth, / dry, rolled by the ebb, breaded / by the grained indifference of sand" (7).

The "grained indifference" of society towards the wretched woman is here transferred to that of sand. Again, the pathetic plight of woman is suggested in "Still Another for Mother". This depicts the strained relations between man and wife in an incident where the poet sees a woman with a man who abruptly turns around, leaves her,
and walks straight on without looking back. The poet wonders why the man left her so callously: “Perhaps they had fought. / Worse still, perhaps they had not fought” (15).

If the sudden abandonment of the woman by her husband is the result of an earlier quarrel, there is at least some pretext to justify the act. But what is worse is sometimes there may not be any reason at all behind such cruel acts of callousness and hatred. The old mother in “Of Mothers, among other things” presents the picture of a specter with her sarees hanging loose on her lean and lanky body.

Ramanujan goes to point out the discrimination of the society against daughters. In “Entries for a Catalogue of Fears” the poet refers to the fears of a middle-aged father about daughters growing in age. Instead of cursing the “the men in line / behind my daughter” (86), the parents impose all kinds of do’s and don’ts on daughters and look for “all sorts of proof for the presence of the past”:

- they’ll serve a sentence
- without any term
- and know it only dimly
- long afterwards
- through borrowed words
- and wrong analyses. (89)

Ramanujan also exposes the absurdity of punishing the daughters without any rhyme or reason and trying to justify their actions with wrong analyses. Instead of creating a healthy atmosphere for the nourishment of women, the society suppresses their freedom in the name of tradition. Similarly in “When It Happens” describes the cruel necessity of secret abortion of a window’s pregnancy under the compulsions of convention and respectability. Brothers would “wrench it out from its root in the belly / hook it out with a coat-hanger, / flush it in the bath room with draino” (95). But the irony is that this incident must be kept and the woman must erase it from her memory according to social standards. Thus Ramanujan as a man and as a poet is acutely conscious of the problems of discrimination, oppression, suppression and exploitation of women in a tradition bound society like ours. His heart goes out for the so-called fair sex who continue to be treated, in some respects, most unfairly. Only a man with sensitive heart and strong or masculine strength or courage can speak against injustice and ill-
treatment meted out to almost one half of a society. And Ramanujan emerges such a man in his poetry which flows with passion and compassion for the depressed, degraded and downtrodden. As stated elsewhere masculinity and femininity are, at one level, positive manifestations of humanism which stands for the welfare and well-being of the entire humanity. Ramanujan emerges as a true humanist whose heart goes for the poor, exploited, discriminated lot of society and therein lies his masculinity. In the poem “One Reads” the poet, reveals the hypocritical charity of the rich and their moral degeneration as they throw a counterfeit piece at the beggar.

Ramanujan’s sharp eye enables him to expose the hypocrisy and sterility in the religious sphere as well. Rather, his ironic mode achieves its height in “Prayers to Lord Murugan”. The timely obviousness of Ramanujan’s dig at the modern man’s sudden withdrawal from the spiritual centre is penetrating and fascinating. His regret over the loss of faith is explicit very much in the opening section.

O where are the cockscombs and where
the beaks glinting with new knives
at crossroads

when will orange banners burn
among blue trumpet flowers and the shade
of trees

waiting for lightnings? (113)

The lightning is no longer accepted as a divine revelation. The prayer is no longer an instrument of human good. It has lost its devotional content. It is devoid of sincerity. It is no longer a human of the heart. Its canvas has been utterly reduced to manifest individual selfishness. Ramanujan rightly highlights this incurable degeneration when he writes:

Lord of headlines,
help us read
the small print.
Lord of the sixth sense,
give us back
our five sense

Lord of the lost travellers,
find us. Hunt us
down.

Lord of answers
cure us at once
of prayers. (116-17)

Prayer, which is redemptive, has become a disease and an instrument of uneasiness. That is why the modern man, divorced from the spiritual centre, from the centre of faith can articulate such prayers to get rid of them. Living in such a world of vacancy, emptiness and corruption or infection, the poet interrogates his own sense of helplessness. The concluding part of the poem may make some believe that Ramanujan does not believe in prayer or Lord Murugan. However, it is no so as the concluding prayer is a deliberate play of irony. Further, it is not a question of belief or faith at all, what is important is the discovery of the degeneration that has corrupted the modern mind.

Apart from Indian myth, history, culture, heritage, folklore, the family, for Ramanujan, is one of the central metaphors with which he thinks. The idea of family is strengthened by Ramanujan's own choice of the title for his second volume of poems relations in 1971. He delineates his family life almost untiringly and the family relations always haunt the poet. There are many good poems like "Of Mothers, among other things", "Love Poem for a Wife, 1", "Love Poem for a Wife, 2" and "Small-scale Reflections on a Great House", which owe their origin to the recollected personal emotions. These poems deal with the memory of his relations and ambiguous freedom that life away from them confers. They are also significant from the point of view of discourse on masculinity in his poetry, as attitude towards women, womanhood or motherhood forms an important part of any discussion on masculinity or feminism.
Even a cursory reading of Ramanujan’s poetry shows that he explores the obsessive memories of childhood with analytic intelligence of the West. Obviously, there is a recurrent search for roots in his poetry which takes the form of memories of childhood and maturity as they have been distanced by his stay abroad. The terror felt at the sight of wriggling snakes and the shock received when he saw the corpse of a scantily clad woman on the beach are but a few examples. His family relations poems were mainly written while the poet was in America.

His renewal of roots and the sense of loss are most poignantly connected with the reminiscences of the mother. In “Of Mothers, among other things”, one of the most nostalgic poems of his childhood, the poet fondly recalls the image of his mother as she flits about the house doing her household chores. Bowed down with the pressure of domestic work, she has hardly any time to cater to her looks or even care for herself. The poet describes touchingly her uncared for physical appearance thus:

... her hands are a wet eagle’s
  two black pink-crinkled feet,
  one talon crippled in a garden
  trap set for a mouse. Her sarees
  do not cling: they hang, loose
  feather of a onetime wing. (Ramanujan, Collected Poems 61)

The activities of his mother have been indelibly and vividly imprinted on his memory. That is why, even years later and being thousands of miles away from home, he can graphically see the happenings of yesteryears before his mind’s eye. The poet remembers his mother’s unerring care for the “crying cradles”, stitching ragged clothes with deft fingers, her devotion to her work unmindful of the rains and the fluttering loose saris and also keeping the floor of the kitchen spotlessly clean. The poet writes thus:

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. (61)
It is a soft, soothing poem which encompasses the mother’s youth and presents the archetypal image of the mother as a symbol of patience, endurance and self-sacrifice. She loses her individuality and identity in the repressed atmosphere of familial and domestic duties.

The poems “Love Poem for a Wife, 1” and “Love Poem for a Wife, 2” are intensely personal in nature and concern conjugal relationship. The poet regrets those years of childhood he spent away from his wife. He feels that this estrangement during the childhood has alienated him somewhat from her:

Really what keeps us apart
at the end of years is unshared
childhood. You cannot, for instance,
meet my father. He is some years
dead. Neither can I meet yours;
he has lately lost his temper
and mellowed. (65)

The poet cannot forget the fact that it is because of the precious period of childhood which unfortunately remained “unshared” that he is a stranger to certain domains of his wife’s past. He expresses his resentment when he says:

Only two weeks ago, in Chicago,
you and brother James started
one of your old drag-out fights
about where the bathroom was
in the backyard,

north or south of the well
next to the jack fruit tree
in your father’s father’s house
in Allepey. Sister-in-Law
and I were blank cut-outs
fitted to our respective
slots in a room. (66)
We can, thus, see that for Ramanujan, shared experiences in childhood become a prerequisite for a meaningful and complete emotional attachment in adult life. He is so much obsessed with the idea of a shared past that he shuns any negative feelings towards incestuous relationships even. So, he further writes:

Only the Egyptians had it right:
their kings had sisters for queens
to continue the incest
of childhood into marriage. (67)

And in his desire for absolute emotional fulfillment, he readily accepts the engagement of children even before birth:

Or should we do as well-meaning hindus did,
betroth us before birth,
forestalling separate horoscopes
and mother's first periods
and wed us in the oral cradle
and carry marriage back into
the namelessness of childhoods. (67)

The poet wishes to overcome the emotional gulf of alienation that is present between him and his wife but he remains disappointed and dissatisfied till the end. The poem has an exceptional authenticity in tone and feeling.

In “Love Poem for a Wife, 2”, “however, there is a shift from the previous theme and the tone becomes considerably tenderer. His poetic sensibility is aided by the use of logic. Instead of lamenting his “unshared childhood” with his wife, he tries to take a peep into his wife’s past. He does not feel like an alienated stranger any more. On the contrary, he makes a conscious effort to empathise with his wife’s sentiment regarding her part:

... rubberplant
and peppervine,
frocks with print patterns
copied locally
from the dotted
butterfly,
grandmother wearing white
day and night in a village

full of the colour scheme
of Kraits and gartersnakes.... (83)

And the subsequent lines prove that the poet’s conscious efforts had borne fruit:

I dreamed one day
that face my own yet hers,
with my own nowhere
to be found; lost; cut
loose like my dragnet
past.
I woke up and groped,
turned on the realism

on the ceiling light,
found half a mirror
in the mountain cabin.... (84)

He admires his wife fondly and there is no streak of macho consciousness. Rather
his description tends to be romantic:
my wife’s face still fast
asleep, blessed as by
butterfly, snake, shiprope,
and grandmother’s other
children
by my only love’s only
insatiable envy. (85)

We find that after the earlier feeling of disillusionment in the previous poem,
there is a quality of repose, having attained a sense of reconciliation. Here, the memory of
the past and the reality of the present are harmoniously synchronised. His love poetry is exceptionally potent despite the fact the poet always keeps his emotions in check. The two dominant strains of love-union and separation, attachment and alienation are embodied in his love poems. He can definitely be regarded as a love poet as K. Venkata Reddy writes:

> With his extensive experience of life and sharp and modern sensibility, he deals with love in diverse strands. Like Sarojini Naidu, he gives an evidence of having traversed a vast expanse of love experience and offers us a fresh and firsthand account of it. He starts with a statement of the true nature of love, moves through its different aspects – longing frustration and despair, infatuation, promiscuity and sensuality, and arrives at the secure and sure haven of wifely love. (91)

As in Relations (1971), the poems in the Striders (1966), too, embody Indian experience and sensibility with all its memories of family, local places, images, beliefs and history. But his attitude to “Memories, mostly of life seen through the eyes of a sensitive and observant boy growing up in a traditional middle class Southern Hindu Brahmin family, recollected during his long sojourn abroad, in the United States of America...” (88) is modern, skeptic, rational and realistic. Poems like “Snakes”, “Breaded Fish”, “Looking for a cousin on a swing”, “Small-scale reflections on a Great House” etc. treat of memory and the relationship between past, present and various emotions, especially anxiety, fear, sexuality and nostalgia. In “Snakes”, Ramanujan is reminded of those wriggling creatures in mundane situations and he discovers a similarity between snakes and his sister’s plaits: “... the weave of her knee-long braid has scales, / their gleaming held by a score of clean new pins. / I look till I see her hair again” (Ramanujan, Collected Poems 5)

The poet seems to suffer from a subconscious fear of snakes which is traceable to an incident when “a basketful of ritual cobras” had come to his house:

> their brown-wheat glisten ringed with ripples.
> They lick the room with their bodies, curves uncurling, writing a sibilant alphabet of panic on my floor. (4)
Likewise, the suppressed memory of a half-naked dead woman on a sea beach is pushed on the surface when the poet is served a dish of breaded fish in the poem entitled “Breaded Fish”. He was unable to concentrate on the delicacy before him as his mind raced back to the time when he had seen:

- a dark half-naked
- length of woman, dead
- on the beach in yard of cloth,
- dry, rolled by the ebb, breaded
- by the grained indifference of sand. (7)

As the incident flashed before his mind, he was greatly disturbed as he mentally rushed “for the shore, my heart beating in my mouth” (7).

“Looking for a cousin on a Swing” shows the way in which childhood experiences assume a different shape in later life. The poem deals with a trivial incident of sharing a swing with a girl cousin and afterwards climbing a blossoming tree with her. The pleasant experience shared by the close proximity of a premature four or five year old girl and a slightly older boy of six or seven years was completely innocent then:

- When she was four or five
- she sat on a village swing
- and her cousin, six or seven,
- sat himself against her;
- with every lunge of the swing
- she felt him
- in the lunging pits
- of her feeling;

and afterwards
we climbed a tree.... (19)

Having described the experience of innocent fun, Ramanujan now shifts the scene from the village of the past to the city of the present in which the same little girl, having now blossomed into a mature young woman, is on the lookout for companions to gratify her passion:
Now she looks for the swing
in cities with fifteen suburbs
and tries to be innocent
about it. (19)

The poet portrays here how sin and corruption have seeped through the years of innocence, leaving their tainted imprint on the pristine experiences of life. Like Eliot, Ramanujan too feels that a world of innocence has been lost irretrievably.

In this poem, memory plays a special creative role. It is not mere recollection of an event. It is a childhood experience viewed, analysed and assessed from an adult perspective. The poem deals with the first intimations of sexuality by means of the deft use of the swing image. The cousin’s initiation from innocence to awareness of the libidinous self is presented with deliberate dubiousness. The poem abounds in images of erotic suggestion, so much so that even a sneeze could mean an explosion of passion at the slightest provocation.

In “A Wobbly Top” Ramanujan tries to capture the dynamic, sustaining relationship between the father and the son. The wobbly top gift from the father is dear to the son. The top stands for the memory of the father. Like the top, the memory of the father moves within the poet so fast that it appears still, it does away with scars. The top as a gift illustrates the vastness of the relationship that exists between the father and the son. The poem thus, begins with the image of the father, but concludes with the vastness of a relationship to which the son is exposed.

Similarly, in “Obituary” the poet presents a very much realistic picture of his father who had no control over his Brahminical birth and over his death in the fruit market due to heart attack. The way the death of his father is depicted amounts to charging the dead father of the liabilities thus:

Father, when he passed on,
left dust
on a table full of papers,
left debts and daughters,
a bedwetting grandson. (111)
The poet seems to resent the observance of age old rituals and customs like throwing his father’s remains after cremation at the confluence of the three holy rivers. But soon this charge is transformed into an affectionate, less sentimentalised allegiance due to the father and in a matter-of-fact tone he concludes:

And he left us
a changed mother
and more than
one annual ritual. (112)

The only achievement of his father, the poet opines, has been getting a few obituary lines in a daily published from Madras. But even this achievement is deflated by commercial attitude of the consumer market where the street hawkers sell newspapers to grocers who prepare cones with which they wrap salt, coriander and jaggery for the buyers. The consumer market never values individual emotions and sentiments. Such emotions remain dear to the ones who have been affected by the death or absence of the father.

Another important poem entitled “History” is a remarkable example of a childhood incident leaving an indelible impression on the mind and which is interpreted in a new light with the attainment of maturity. The poem opens thus:

History,
which usually
changes sometimes
during a single conversation. (107)

He remembers vividly the scene and activities on the day his great-aunt passed away:

I was there by one of those
chances children never miss,
looking for a green ball
I never lost. I saw her
laid out. (107)
He also recalls the image of his "little dark aunt" who seemed to be frantically searching for something. The real significance of her apparently casual activity dawned on him years later only when his mother revealed his aunt's real purpose:

her two
daughters, one dark and one fair,
unknown each to the other
alternately picked their mother's body clean
before it was cold
or the eyes were shut,
of diamond ear-rings,
bangles, anklets, the pin
in her hair,
the toe-rings from her wedding
the previous century,
all except the gold
in her teeth and the silver g-string. (108)

The poet reveals his mother's revelation that no sooner did the old woman breathe her last than her own daughters, unmoved by the tragic 'event, began to remove the ornaments from her body and at last:

and the dark
stone face of my little aunt
acquired some expression
at last. (108)

Thus, it is an important poem which is an ironical reflection on the complexities of human relationships. Moreover, the poem also shows how the past can acquire an entirely different meaning when interpreted in the present context. Ramanujan, in his characteristic reportorial, unbiased manner, brings to focus the selfishness of the "petite little aunt" and two of great aunt's daughters, one dark, one fair, who "alternately, picked up their mother's body clean... all except the gold / in her teeth and the silver g-string". For the poet, the concept of history undergoes a sea-change and it is no longer grand and romantic. For the poet, family's rituals constitute history and shape the concept of history
that is grounded in the selfishness of the members of the family. The self of the poet depicts almost every member of the family but remains unaffected by the incident, without failing to record the change in the little aunt’s expression.

The poem “Small-Scale Reflections on a Great House” records the poet’s attitude to the Indian joint family system tinged with irony. He underlines the wonderful assimilative and digestive powers of the ancestral home, not only good things but also the unworthy actions. And not only that, anything that goes out of this house also comes back. This absorption signifies resilience unique to Indian joint family despite the limitations of the system:

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. (96)

Things that come into the house are used, consumed and become a part of the household. They do not go away. The gain or loss of things happens in the boundary of the great house. It is a world in itself. In a humorous manner, Ramanujan shows the kleptomaniac propensity of the members of the house who have no scruples about keeping things belonging to other people:

Neighbors’ dishes brought up with the greasy sweets they made all night the day before yesterday for the wedding anniversary of a god, never leave the house they enter, like the servants, the phonographs, the epilepsies in the blood. (96)

The ancestral house is seen as a symbol of the past about which the poet does not harbour any feelings of pride or sentiment. The idea that is reiterated in the poem is that
the house has an infinite capacity not only to contain things and people but ever new ideas lose their identity as they enter its threshold:

And ideas behave like rumours,

once casually mentioned somewhere

they come back to the door as prodigies

born to prodigal fathers.... (98)

However, Ramanujan also understands the forces of social change that have already set in through a globalization of culture. He hints at the remnants of past passing from the older generations to the new in terms of religious sites and social habits in Indian families.

The items that have access into the house include the living and non-living. The entry of “lame wandering cows”, “servants”, “sons-in-law”, “wives”, “library books”, ‘sweet dishes’ from neighbourhood, ‘phonographs’ or hereditary diseases through marriage like epilepsies are to stay permanently under the same roof. But the tinge of irony reveals a critical point of view the narrator. That is why the cows are “lame”. The way the arrangement is monitored to let the cow be pregnant signifies a vulgarity about the whole process of maternity perpetuated in the joint family under the dominance and supervision of the elders. In this house the young girls learn to accept their role as future mothers in a cryptic manner “behind windows with holes in them”. The library books are borrowed and not read and the fines multiply in the ledgers of the library. The books, the papers and records of the past century become a breeding ground for the silver fish. Neighbours celebrate wedding anniversary of “god” with pomp, not as a pious religious rite but for impressing others with an exhibition of sweet dishes prepared through sleepless nights. Sons-in-law forget. Their mothers and prefer to stay with their wives in this great house of their fathers / mother-in-law as parasites. And daughters-in-law, who come, subjugate themselves to the order of the family as the “hanging banana leaves” yield to the hazards of monsoon. It is a point of no return for these women who leave their own houses, their past and their freedom.

Ramanujan describes how things that go out also come back, but in a changed manner. Those who go out of the house for greater opportunities come back disillusioned
with more liabilities to the house. The return of the native is not a home coming for jubilation but like the Indian cotton processed as muslin at Manchester to be sold in India at a high price. Return of things no doubt suggests a centripetal force of the Indian homes but there is nothing much positive to be happy about it. The poet adds a lot of instances. The letters mailed also comeback as the addressee is not found at the other end. Ideas, too, that evolve in this house to be mentioned casually “somewhere” comeback as rumours. The closed system of family runs itself unaffected by intrusion or expulsion. The ideals of the new generation are more or less a repetition of the old. Ideas return like prodigies to prodigal fathers. The daughters, who go away from this house after marriage, too, come back. The span of their marital life is short-lived. They return as widows or deserted by the idiot husbands. The sons who go away return in some cases being reborn as grandchildren. The fatherless children grow under the roof with grandparents who encourage them to recite Sanskrit verses and the old rhythm of life continues. The young brings the holy Ganges water to be given to the dying old who is hardly able to gulp through the rattling throat. The rite is an ancient one and connects the old with the new, the myth with the here and now.

The poem ends with the description of the dead body of a nephew killed in war whose dead body

- was brought back in plane
- and train and military truck
- even before the telegram reached,
- on a perfectly good

chatty afternoon. (99)

There is a casual jibe at the inefficiency of the Indian postal services. Also, there seems to be an air of idle complacency about the house and the post office which store everything and detest any form of change. The stratification of Indian family and the presence of old rites and habits are reflected adequately by Ramanujan. The greatness of the great house is ultimately questioned. The reflections, however, are not done in small scale in the poem.

Regarding Ramanujan’s reminisces of childhood memories, Taqi Ali Mirza says:
The strong nostalgic note which is such a prominent feature of much of Ramanujan's poetry, does not portray the nostalgia of an individual for times and things past. It is the nostalgia of a whole people who look back, often in an attitude of love hate, to the past, at once drawn towards and repelled by it. (155)

In sum, in “Small-Scale Reflections on a Great House” though individual family members are mentioned in it, it is ‘family’ as an institution that is glorified. The carefully worked out imprecision of the poem, images extended, crowded yet telling details and some even unnecessary, deft repetitions and deliberate digressions suggest the ever enlarging family, the composition of which is as vague as the relationships. The relationships, however vague and distant they may be, are important, and therefore each person is sure of his or her respective slot in the family institution. Every component / person could lose his or her individual identity or make up for the lack of it and take on the familial identity. The poem gives a long catalogue of such possibilities.

Such a great house could also stand for the ancient house of Hindu heritage that absorbs from time to time various elements, but attempts to make of them a beautiful synthesis. It also could stand for the poet’s own store house of memory, retaining, nurturing and designating anything / any one that strays into it. The poem lists the ordinary, day-to-day events in the Great House in a semi-humorous manner, only to end the list with two out of the ordinary occurrences that envelope the Great House in gloom. The poem is also a tribute to the great tradition of a large joint family. But it is, more than anything else, concerned with the crowded memories that will never leave the poet, relationships that he would never let go, the ones that make up a family and sustain him wherever he may be.

“Conventions of Despair” shows how the poet is bound to remain a downright conventional Indian. Ramanujan does not decry what is considered Western culture. Nor does he blindly venerate everything that is considered Indian. But still it is impossible for him to adopt modern ways of coming to terms with despair:

But, sorry, I cannot unlearn
conventions of despair.
They have their pride.

88
I must seek and will find

my particular hell only in my Hindu mind.

(Ramanujan, *Collected Poems* 34)

The poet is conscious of the roots and beliefs, deeply embedded in him. He is determined to retain them at all costs. The modern prescriptions for dealing with despair have no appeal to him. For him, there is a greater sense of tranquility in being his own individual self than in adopting an alien culture which might mean the hardening of his sensibilities and dehumanisation. The inherent culture of a person is known only by the way he or she comes to terms with grief. In such circumstances only the inbuilt safety guards and the survival strategies picked up in the formative years alone may come to rescue. The poem is conspicuous by its Indianness and suggests a recipe to overcome sense of agony and frustration of modern life.

In many a poem, Ramanujan makes use of myths, legends, tales from Indian epics not only to endorse and affirm his instinctive access to the rich cultural heritage of his native land but also to ascertain their contemporary relevance. In spite of material progress, scientific inventions, myths remain central to a culture. In myths the poet discovers the continuity of his own self, in so far as they offer an intuitive awareness of the reality, in the present. But in Ramanujan the myths often act as background to sharpen the edges of his memory and irony. "A Minor Sacrifice", for instance, begins with the familiar tale from the epic and is followed by an incident chosen from day-to-day life. Both the tales in the narrative are conclusive and independent of each other. But Ramanujan establishes a connection, harping on the perpetual tension between the scientific temper and god-fearing, karma-adhering attitude. The poem does not resolve the tension but the manner in which the poem comes to an end suggests that killing or sacrificing insects or animals is an act of abominable sin. The poem shows clear and deep influence of Buddhism and Hinduism on Ramanujan.

Ramanujan's mythology poems – Mythologies I, II and III are somewhat different from "A Minor Sacrifice" in terms of use of irony. In the first, "Mythologies I", Krishna and Putana myth is revoked. Kansa, the notorious king and uncle of Krishna, sends Putana to feed the baby Krishna from her poison-coated nipple to kill him. But the divine
baby could envision the heinous conspiracy and brought an end to her life. The poet’s depiction is precise and remarkable:

The Child took her breast
in his mouth and sucked it right out of her chest.
Her carcass stretched from north to south.

She changed, undone by grace,
from deadly mother to happy demon,
found life in death. (221)

To be killed by god is to realize salvation. So the demon is at once “happy” to be dead to experience a new life, purged off all demonic qualities. The poet’s prayer is, therefore, significant. This life has infused all poison into the poet’s self. He is willing to be resurrected, to begin a new life, ensconced in salvation. This is the most honest and sincere prayer which for every Hindu is prayable.

In “Mythologies II”, the poet invokes the myth of the Lord Vishnu who tarnished the tyrannical king Hiranya Kashyapu, the atheist father of Prahlad, the devotee of Lord Vishnu. Lord Vishnu, in order to prove his omnipresence and to protect his devotee and his faith, appeared from the concrete pillar of the palace, in a half man-half-lion shape and tore off the king, keeping him on his knees at the threshold. The myth is followed by the poet’s honest prayer:

... connoisseur of the negatives and assassin
of certitudes, slay now my faith in doubt.
End my commerce with bat and night—
owl. Adjust my single eye, rainbow bubble,
so I too may see all things double. (226)

Here, the poet’s prayer to enable him to have a ‘double vision and to do away with his doubt’ epitomizes his faith in Vishnu and alludes his maturing vision with which he can see the inner and the outer side of things real. By juxtaposition of the mythical with the real, the poet’s assertion of their interdependence reinvigorates his faith wherein lie his roots.
In “Mythologies III” the poet dramatizes a situation in which wife warns her husband to keep himself off from her at the time of worshipping Shiva. She also advises him not to touch her thrice for that would amount to losing her forever. The husband could never believe her, for his only interest lies in her body: “... and all he could think of was her round breast, / her musk, her darling navel and the rest” (228).

When the wife utters “Om, Om” and is devotionally offering her prayers to Lord Shiva, the husband who is selfish, who does not understand what devotion could mean, is busy in touching her. Her ritualistic gesture was misconstrued by the husband as her willingness to be engaged in sexual act. But, as pointed by her earlier, she is engaged in communion with Lord Shiva: “She saw him then, unborn, form of forms, the Rider, / His white Bull chewing cud in her backyard” (228).

In the poem, the poet simply juxtaposes two individuals to show the difference between them – the one devotional, the other physical, the one is for the spirit, the other for the body or matter. By mere juxtaposition, the poet shows the superiority of the one over the other. In masculine terms, the wife’s true and total devotion to Lord Shiva may be regarded as a proof her spiritual masculinity or strength which the poet opines is far more superior to the husband’s purely physical or carnal virility or masculinity which manifests itself in common parlance.

It is evident from the above discussion that A.K. Ramanujan often comes through as a poet steeped in his cultural milieu despite his long stay abroad. His comments on certain outmoded customs and traditional beliefs are caustic but it should not be construed as a rejection of his Hindu background. On the contrary, it is a mark of his intellectual strength reflected in his poetry that he is not a blind believer of the East or the blind follower of the West. Despite his long-long stay in the United States he could never think of forsaking his religious, heritage to be a modernist or embrace another faith. His poetry reveals poet’s persistent inclination with his Indian past-both familial and racial. The past or the memory constitutes a major theme in his poetry. Thus, despite being a modernist in essence, Ramanujan roots are too deep to be amputated. It is true that he is exposed to a different cultural environment for a long period of time but nevertheless, his links with his motherland are too strong to be severed. And memory becomes a vital factor in keeping alive his relationship with India, within and without. It is more than a
psychological prop or support. It is the very emotional base and creative spring board. To refer to memory as a major theme in his poetry is to belittle its significance. It is not an object observed or experience analysed. Memory is the poet, his poetry is his memory, he writes on and of his memory. The act of remembering is not a dull cud chewing of the past: it brings alive all in his past that is usable. It is not a kind of sentimental nostalgia that hampers progress and refuses to see any good in the here and the now. It is an active lingering to leap forward with vigour. An active memory helps to establish rootedness. The awareness and assurance of rootedness in turn establishes emotional stability and enables him to integrate the past and the present, the immediate and the remote, all that is within and without, the Western work-orientedness and the Indian humanrelatedness. Most of his work in the U.S. is related to his roots in Indian-Dravidian Linguistics, anthropology and translation of Indian literary texts. His primary agenda is not to interpret or promote his exotic "Hindu India" to an alien audience. It is a simple act of being true to himself and his relatedness from which he derives sustenance. It is also an act of homage to his Indian heritage. Every poem bears testimony to the presence of the past, the vital relationship with people, with family, culture, language and country.

The core of human relatedness is man-woman relations. In the context of the extended joint family system in India as delineated by Ramanujan, it encompasses wife, children, parents, grandparents, aunts, cousins et al. In Ramanujan's poetry, familial relations constitute an important theme so much so that his second volume of poems published in 1971 is titled Relations. In Relations, Ramanujan focuses on his individual relationships and their lasting effect on his poetic consciousness. In poem after poem, he recreates his psyche, rejuvenates his nostalgia for the best time of childhood and feels the presence of his wife, parents, grandparents and he transports himself to his ancestral home and recurring pattern of human relations. A discerning reader can see in his writings a possibility that an artist as an individual is capable of restructuring a personal (read Indian) past and nourishing the same as insulated from the ideological oppositions that affect the time and space in which his text is written. While recreating the Indian settings both rural and urban, he seems to be unaffected by the objects and images of his American surroundings because the life he captures looks so original and just not a memory game. His exile in Chicago only strengthened his sense of the Indian past: his
disturbingly vivid and agile poetic articulations both in English and Kannada are deeply rooted in the myth, folklore, history, culture & ethos of his native soil. While recreating the human situations and details of human life the image of family appears as a key image. It helps the reader understand and appreciate the meaning of such poems. The family for him is, in fact, one of the central metaphors with which he thinks and a complex web of human relations, especially man-woman relations, is the essence of family.

Ramanujan explores man-woman relations from multiple perspectives and gives due emphasis to women in his poetry. But he is unique in the subtle handling of his subject. He paints not only the archetypal image of woman-woman as the epitome of endurance; woman busy in household chores, woman as the embodiment of self-sacrifice, woman as an epitome of love and compassion – but also there is a realistic portrayal of the modern woman whose roots are grounded in the present day culture. Many of his poems are personal in nature. As he takes a peep into his past, a flood of memories come rushing to him. In these recollections of the poet we get a glimpse of his attitude towards and association with women at various levels.

Mother is the first woman one comes into contact with who plays a pivotal role in one’s life. Ramanujan too has several reminiscences of his mother which he vividly portrays. In the poem entitled “Of Mothers”, among other things, he gives a pen picture of his mother. Always alert to her numerous duties, she is a model of selfless service and self-abnegation. She has no spare time for herself. She has neither the time nor the inclination to pamper herself a little. Youth and beauty are sacrificed at the altar of homely duties and responsibilities. Beautification, being an incentive to vanity, holds no temptation for the mother. Her careless attitude towards her own self is revealed in the following lines:

... her hands are a wet eagle’s
two black pink-crinkled feet,

one talon crippled in a garden—
trap set for a mouse. Her sarees
do not cling: they hang, loose

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feather of a onetime wing. (Ramanujan, *Collected Poems* 61)

The poet laments the loss of his mother’s youth. Bowed down with the pressure of domestic work, she has no time to look after herself or cater to her looks. She has hands full with sewing, tending to the needs of the babies crying in cradles, keeping the house immaculately clean. Amidst her humdrum jobs throughout the day, she loses her individual identity. The poet, thus, presents the archetypal image of the mother as a symbol of patience, endurance, self-sacrifice and self-abnegation. The plight of a widow in India is reflected in “Obituary” where in the poet does not recall his father’s death in a tear-soaked way but dwells on the practical difficulties his family had to face and mother suffer:

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And he left us
a changed mother
and more than
one annual ritual. (112)
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Another feature to be noted in Ramanujan’s poetry is his apparently unsentimental attitude on the subject of his mother. In the poem entitled “Still Another for Mother”, a sudden encounter with an unknown lady unconsciously reminds him of his own mother and he identifies the young man with his own self. He tried to move on casually pretending to be unmoved by the sight before him but for some inexplicable reason, the mother-son due arrested his attention. The mother found it difficult to go away from the spot as long as even glimpse of her son could be seen. The poet also watched her intently:

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And she just stood
there, looking at his walking on, me
looking at her looking on. She wanted then
not to be absent perhaps on the scene
if he once so much as even thought
of looking back. (16)
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This incident aroused poet’s curiosity so much that he tried to imagine what might have taken place between them: “Perhaps they had fought / Worse still, perhaps they had
not fought” (16). The poet tried to be non-chalant about the entire episode but he admits that the sight aroused certain recollections in him: “Something opened in the past...” (16). Thus, despite his pragmatic approach to life, a woman’s faint resemblance to his mother jolts him a little, stirs certain memories within his which he finds difficult to suppress.

However, Ramanujan’s approach to love or his attitude towards women is not romantic but realistic. Like a typical modern poet, he is consciously anti-romantic. He does not go overboard in the glorification of love nor does he invest his beloved with a luminous halo. Before the advent of the modern age, poets, by and large, were emotionally overwhelmed while writing on the theme of love. Ramanujan also deals with the theme of love in his poems but, here too he has a firm grip over his emotions. In his love poems to his wife, he takes a realistic view of things. A superficial reading of the poem “Love Poem for a Wife, 1” convinces the reader that Ramanujan is consciously anti-romantic. But on a deeper analysis, one finds that it reflects the intensity of the poet’s feelings. He resents the fact that he had no part to play in his wife’s childhood and feels that their unshared past has alienated them from each other. He is, probably, threatened by a sense of emotional insecurity as he writes: “Really what keeps as apart / at the end of years is unshared / childhood” (65).

But there is a discernible streak of tenderness in the poem, “Love Poem for a Wife, 2. Here, the poet seems to have come to terms with the fact that he cannot relive the past with his wife and shuns aside his feelings of resentment. So with a renewed enthusiasm, he takes an interest in everything associated with his wife’s childhood. He shares her feelings with her as she goes down the memory lane recalling bits and pieces from the tale of childhood. He listens to her intently as she rattles on:

... rubber plant
and pepper vine,
frocks with print patterns
copied locally
from the dotted butterfly,
grandmother wearing white
day and night in a village
full of the color schemes
of kraits and garter snakes. (83)

One can almost feel the poet-persona warming up to the tender glow of love in his fond reminiscences of his wife who was fast asleep:
my wife's face still fast
asleep, blessed as by
butterfly, snake shiprope,
and grandmother's other
children,
by my only love's only
insatiable envy. (85)

In conjugal love there is no streak of a machoism or male dominance as is found in the West. His love poetry betrays a typical Indian attitude of reconciliation and acceptance on the part of both the poet and his wife.

Pragmatism appears to be a prominent feature of Ramanujan's poetry, especially when he deals with the subject of women. For instance, in "Routine Day Sonnet", he makes no attempt to present a facade of conjugal bliss. In the earlier part of the poem, he enumerates a number of things which form an inseparable part of his daily routine and have no novelty about them. Perhaps, the relationship with his wife has also reached a state of stale familiarity. It is this mundanity which results in emotional unfulfilment and alienation. He, thus, writes towards the conclusion of the poem:

But I wake with a start
to hear my wife cry her heart

out as if from a crator
in hell: she hates me, I hate her,
I'm a filthy rat and a satyr. (68)

A.K. Ramanujan's down to earth treatment of marriage bordering on mundane realism reminds us of Nissim Ezekiel's poem named "Marriage" wherein in the opening stanza the poet paints the idyllic picture of marriage which ultimately leads to boredom.
and bitter sweet relationship. To the lovers, marriage is an eternal union which was already fixed in heaven and merely solemnised on the earth. Both the poets believe in the actualities of living rather than dwelling in the world of dreams. Ramanujan makes no attempt to steer clear of the basic tenets of modernity in his poetry.

Ramanujan talks of sensual fulfilment in his poem ‘Still Another View of Grace’. The first part of the poem deals with the poet’s inner struggle to keep all temptations at bay. He was determined not to malign his clean image of a gentleman by any licentious behaviour: “‘Beware. / Do not follow a gentleman’s morals / With that absurd determined air’ (45).

His self-imposed code of morality soon begins to crumble and before long, he makes an absolute surrender at the altar of physical gratification:

Commandments crumbled
in my father’s past. Her tumbled hair suddenly known
as silk in my angry hand, I shook a little
and took her, behind the laws of my land. (45)

Morality norms wavered before the irresistible attraction of a woman and ended up in gratification of physical desires. Ramanujan’s admittance of the fact that a man can be swept off his feet, even to the extent of compromising his moral standards, in the face of feminine charm is a realistic portraiture of human relationship. The poem “Still Another View of Grace” is significant from another point of view in so far as it shows that the poet persona finds fulfilment beyond the threshold of marriage, proving that modern poetry is not divorced from the actual conditions prevailing in society. Here the archetypal image of the woman, as a torch bearer of idealism, receives a severe blow yet the poet unambiguously acknowledges the power of woman, even if it be at sensual level.

However, Ramanujan seems to imbibe the notion of inherent goodness of woman. The poet insinuates at an extra-marital affair in “The Hindoo: He doesn’t hurt a fly or a spider either”, and takes a dig at the woman who tries to derive the joy of sexual fulfilment outside wedlock due to dissatisfaction with her conjugal life. The poet, here, propounds the concept of the new liberated woman who instead of living for others, lives for herself and at her own terms. However, the joy of this forbidden pleasure does not last.
long and the woman’s conscience is finally awakened: “... one day, spider- / fashion, she clamped down and bit / him while still inside her” (62).

It seems the wife feels the scruples of her conscience and regards herself as a failure in holding the sanctity of marriage, she spurns her lover brusquely and terminates the relationship on her own. The poet, perhaps, hints at the fact that a woman’s conscience may lie dormant for some time but is awakened sooner or later, implying therein the inherent fidelity or sense of commitment and thus proving moral superiority of woman vis-a-vis man.

As already stated, even though Ramanujan’s concept of womanhood is circumscribed by Hindu philosophy, his approach to man or woman is realistic and psychological. If a man perceives a woman as an object of his passion, a woman too seeks physical gratification. The only difference, perhaps, is that while a man openly admits his desire for sexual gratification, a woman, more often than not, pretends to be disinterested. She also forcefully tries to keep all carnal desires in check. In a humorous vein, the poet describes in “Mythologies 3” how a newly-wed bride pretends to be disinterested or indifferent to a physical relationship with her husband. She considers herself an ardent devotee of Lord Shiva and spurns any kind of union with a mortal being. She threatens her husband with dire consequences if he dared touch her when she says:

‘Keep off when I worship Siva.
Touch me three times, and you’ll never
see me again’, said Akka to her new groom
Who couldn’t believe his ears. (228)

Her whole body reverberates with the intonation of “Om”. But her husband, being a typical man, does not regard her spiritual being and craves for physical relationship:

Om, Om!

she seemed to intone in bed with every breath
and all he could think of was her round breast,
her musk, her darling navel and the rest. (228)

The young bride, despite her initial pretence of reluctance and reservations shoves aside her self-imposed celibacy and proceeded to enjoy the fruits of conjugal bliss. Now,
she beheld the divine image of Siva in her earthly husband. She also felt that the vehicle of Siva, Nandi, the celestial bull and the ordinary bull grazing in her house were one and the same. All differences were resolved and there was a merger of the body with the spirit: “She saw Him then, unborn, form of forms, the Rider, / His white bull chewing cud in her backyard” (228).

Ramanujan, it seems, has a deep knowledge of woman in love. Love, they say, is blind. Ramanujan too thinks that as far as women are concerned, love definitely does not take recourse to any logic. In the poem “Love 1: what she said”, a young lady is so smitten by the charms of her lover that the stubbornly refuses to see the darker aspects of his personality. In the very first stanza, she admits that her green-eyed lover does not possess a heart of gold:

- His eyes are moss-green
- His blood is cold
- His heart is a piece
- of lead. (219)

The love-lorn lady’s subsequent findings about her lover are more alarming, rather shocking. Surprisingly enough, the rapacious behaviour of the lover does not disturb the lady in the least:

- His face is razor-lean.
- His liver is on hold.
- He raped his niece.
- She’s dead. (219)

The lover commits one of the most abominable misdeeds of raping a woman and causing her death. Yet the besotted young woman turns a blind eye to all his faults, so smitten is she by the charms of his love. She feels fully gratified even if he so much as casts a look at her:

- Yet I grow lean.
- His heart is gold
- to my greed. My eyes
- are fed
- when he turns his head. (219)
The lady is so much captivated by her lover that his ignoble tendencies and sinful background do not shy away her from him.

Ramanujan is well aware of the female psyche that a woman is never comfortable with the idea of getting old. In fact, one of the best compliments that can be paid to a woman is that she looks younger than her actual age. Keeping this feminine infirmity in mind probably, the poet has composed the poem entitled “Love 4: what he said to his daughter”, Wherein he mentions that a woman does not like to cross the threshold of eighteen years. In the first stanza, the poet persona is taken aback that his teenaged daughter should fall in love with a seventy year old man:

I love him, she said
at eighteen.
But he’s seventy,

I said,... (227)

The poet at sixty three comes to conclusion that women like to remain young forever:

that all the women

I’ve ever loved
have stayed eighteen
forever. (228)

He goes on to give the example of Pierre Bennard, who always portrayed his, wife as a woman of thirty-six years in his paintings. She remained thirty-six years old for over a period of three decades:

Pierre Bennard
always painted his wife
as thirty six
getting in and out
of bathtubs, sleek,
naked on diamond

100
squares of blue tile
till she was seventy
three. (228)

The age of wife not only remained static but her beauty and glamour too did not diminish in his portraits which must have satisfied her vanity. But the fact of the matter is all grow old, some gracefully, many grudgingly. Yet the saying that a man is as old as he thinks and a woman is as old as she looks is quite meaningful.

Dwelling on the positive side of feminine psyche, Ramanujan portrays woman as tender hearted and sensitive being. In the poem “Any Cow’s Horn Can Do It”, the poet takes a peep into a woman’s heart and reveals her sensitivity. Here, he does not talk of a particular woman or a female relative but of women in general. A woman is naturally blessed with the gift of empathy. So, she is easily affected by the happenings around her. Moreover, she is gifted with sharp memory as well. The store house of her mind in invariably preserves the minutest details of everyday incidents as shown in this poem. The opening lines depict how a woman is deeply pained by the death of a cousin. She cannot suppress her sorrow within herself and gives vent to it by weeping loudly.

Mention any cousin’s death
in the walled red-fort city:
she’ll weep aloud with no thought
of neighbours. (93)

Here sensitivity is so intense that a sudden recollection of an embarrassing experience of her girlhood days is enough to make her blush as she relives the incident once again:

Any reminder
of her youth’s market places
crawling with feeling hands, eyes
groping for the hidden hooks
that hold together little girls
and she will glow green fire
from all nine walls of a woman’s
The lady also remembers the day she had been taken to task by her parents when she was caught by her father in the lobby of a hotel. This incident and the subsequent reprimand is too deeply embedded in her memory or subconscious mind to be forgotten. Even after having matured into womanhood the lady shudders to think of this unpleasant experience:

She'll grow cold remembering
what is not forgotten:
getting belted by father
standing on a doorstep
with a long strip of cowhide
and the family idiom
the day he caught her
in the hotel lobby. (93)

Apart from being sensitive, a woman’s heart is tender and empathetic so as to feel the pain and sufferings of others. Menfolk are generally lacking in these attributes as emotions, compassion, patience, sensitivity and tenderness as they are construed to be feminine traits whereas aggression, war, violence are identified with masculinity.

However, Ramanujan makes a controversial observation in “Any Cow’s Horn Can Do It” that a woman is immune to anything that is not tangible, her inherent tenderness and naturally empathetic nature notwithstanding. According to the poet a woman is not easily stirred emotionally by any piece of creative writing. The poet opines that a woman remains unmoved by the emotions expressed in a poem or characters and incidents described in it unless she can identify herself with them:

Poem’s aren’t even words
enough to rankle, infect
or make the smallest incisions
unless wife, girl friend or sister—

and I’m not talking of strangers
or the unborn—
somehow are made to think it's all about their shame in the market, or an elegy on the death of a far-off cousin. (94)

On what grounds the poet thinks that poems cannot move a woman is not known but it does betray his typical male mentality which regards women intellectually inferior.

As a man Ramanujan may have some stereotyped notions about the intellectual potential of a woman but he is fully aware of the vulnerability, victimization and vicissitudes a woman faces in a traditional society like ours and discrimination and humiliation she is subjected to. Her role and contribution to social development are also underestimated. In the poem “The Difference”, the poet gives a vivid account of how women work shoulder to shoulder with men to produce finished works of day. The beads of perspiration are not only visible on the men’s faces but the women also slog equally hard while making picture-perfect clay models of men, women, toys and animals.

In many of his poems like a feminist, he espouses the cause of woman and speaks against discrimination, domination and exploitation. In poem “The Guru” he resents the unrelenting attitude of the society at large, women in general and stands for the grant of equal rights to women as men:

Forgive the weasal his tooth
forgive the tiger his claw

but do not forgive the woman
her malice or the man his envy. (251)

He cannot stand any longer the humiliation of a woman and parochial preaching of “The Guru”. So, finally he leaves the service of his master and recalls and asserts his own bonding with a woman: “for I remembered I was a man born of woman” (251).

Ramanujan tries to put in proper perspective the role and character of the forgetful king Dushyanta who left Shakuntala to fend for herself after wedding her secretly in the sacred precincts of a hermitage. He cannot even imagine that a husband can be so cruel
and callous towards his wife. He feels that the husbands of today are far more sensitive and better than the so called idealistic ones of the past who are still held in great reverence. Giving his own example he writes:

as I wait for my wife and watch the traffic
in seaside market places and catch

my breath at the flat-metal beauty of whole pomfret,
round staring eyes and scales of silver

in the fisherman's pulsing basket,
and will not ask, for I know I cannot,

which, if any, in its deadwhite belly
has an uncooked signet ring and a forest
legend of wandering king and waiting
innocent, complete with fawn under tree

and inverse images in the water
of a stream that runs as if it doesn't. (126)

The poet's educated mentality and modern outlook cannot sing paens of praise of a king who seems to take a woman for granted. He also questions the writers and poets who since time immemorial have eulogized and glorified such a man who deserves to be admonished. Thus, Ramanujan is definitely aware of the fact that women have been hapless victims of the atrocities committed by men down the ages. In "The Opposable Thumb", the poet mentions the grandmother who is bereft of fingers which is a standing testimony of her husband's uncontrollable temper. The poet rues the fact that the women down the ages have always been dominated by their male counterparts. Rather, they have been helpless and hapless victims of male chauvinism.

A major portion of Ramanujan’s poetry is based on recollections of the past and women occupy a pre-eminent position in his reminiscences. He makes a detailed analysis of the varied roles played by women. His poems mention a string of relationships

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revolving round women. If his poetry reflects the image of mother and wife, the portraits of a sister and girl cousins too fit into their own slots. In more than one poem, the poet cherishes the companionship shared with his sister. One gets a glimpse of his intimacy with his sister when he writes:

My sister and I have always wished a tree
could strike or at least, writhe
like that other snake
we saw
under the beak
of the crow. (10)

Ramanujan's intimacy with his reminds us of a similar close bond that Wordsworth shared with his sister. His poems reveal the pre-eminent role played by his sister in his childhood.

Ramanujan seems to have a comprehensive understanding of the Indian psyche. He is well aware of the fact that in most Indian households, unmarried sisters are a responsibility to be fulfilled. So he writes in "Obituary":

Father, when he passed on,
left dust
on a table full of papers,
left debts and daughters. (11).

These lines betray a typical Indian mentality which places "debts" and "daughters" on the same plane and hints at the unpleasant reality that both are regarded as burden to be off-loaded at the earliest. Thus, his sister's company is not only a source of happiness and joy but it also enjoins upon him a sense of duty and responsibility. It is evident that in spite of Ramanujan's modernity, the influence of Indian culture and society remains deeply embedded. The fact that a sister's marriage is of prime concern and overrides all other considerations is a reflection of typical Indian mindset.

While dealing with the theme of women, Ramanujan takes care to include the subject of daughters also in his poetry. In "Routine Day sonnet", the poet appears quite the doting father as he meticulously mentions the daily activities he enjoys with his daughter:
A walk before dark
with my daughter to mark
another cross on the papaya tree;
dinner, coffee, bedtime story

In another poem, “On the Very Possible Jaundice of an Unborn Daughter” the poet causally visualizes the colour of his daughter’s eyes with the help of natural imagery: “… how can my daughter / help those singing yellows / in the whites of her eyes” (14).

Likewise in “Extended Family”, the poet declares similarity between his temperament and that of his daughter: “like my little daughter / I play shy” (170).

Apart from discussing varied role of women as mother, sister and daughter, Ramanujan also talks about the members of the extended family. Thus, the role and behaviour of aunts, girl cousins and grandmothers also come under his scrutiny. In “History”, Ramanujan delineates an interesting anecdote which sheds light into the inner recesses of a woman’s mind. The poem begins with the description of a somber incident— the death of his great aunt – and how her two daughters instead of mourning their mother’s demise vied with each other in secretly removing the ornaments from her body:

her two
daughters, one dark one fair,
unknown each to the other
alternately picked their mother’s body clean
before it was cold
or the eyes were shut,
of diamond earrings,
bangles, anklets, the pin
in her hair,
the toe-rings from her wedding
the previous century,
all except the gold
in her teeth and the silver g-string
they didn’t know she wore. (108)

The poet finally remarks sarcastically:

and the dark
stone face of my little aunt
acquired some expression
at last. (108)

The poem provides us a peep into a woman’s fondness for jewellery which takes an unpleasant turn here, changing an almost insatiable thirst for gold. As greed raises its ugly head, a mother’s bereavement loses its pain and sorrow. Such is the human (read woman) nature.

Notwithstanding his long stay abroad, Ramanujan remained rooted in his native culture. To him the word ‘family’ has a broader significance, i.e. the orbit of siblings not limited to one’s own brothers and sisters but it includes a wide gamut of cousins as well. His poem “Looking for a cousin on a Swing” is one such piece that paints a picture of an enjoyable experience of sharing a swing with a girl cousin during childhood. The swinging delights experienced by the cousins were too deeply imprinted to be erased. It was an innocent fun filled experience and the close proximity of a girl did not kindle any carnal instinct. According to the poet it was one of those rare untainted experiences in life wherein the little boy and girl are looked upon as playmates and nothing else because of their age and innocence:

When she was four or five
she sat on a village swing
and her cousin, six or seven,
sat himself against her;
with every lunge of the swing
she felt him
in the lunging pits
of her feeling;
and afterwards
we climbed a tree, she said,

not very tall, but full of leaves
like those of a fig tree,

and we were very innocent
about it. (19)

So, what started as a pleasurable experience in the swing was followed by another enjoyable activity of climbing a tree. But, the poet says, as the little girl matured into a young woman, she seemed to have lost the innocence of her childhood. Betraying a typical male psyche, the poet makes an oblique reference to her falling standards of morality as she stepped into adulthood, shutting the door of childhood behind her:

Now she looks for the swing
in cities with fifteen suburbs
and tries to be innocent
about it. (19)

But what about the boy? Does he continue to retain his innocence in his adulthood? It only shows that typical stereotyped and male-chauvinistic ideas full of prejudice and bias are too deeply entrenched in male mind which even education and wide exposure may fail to change. Same seems the case here.

The orbit of family in Indian context also includes grandmother – a word when mentioned conjures up an image of unbounded love and affection – an affable old woman with an unending reservoir of fascinating tales. Understanding the psyche of little children who huddle together at a grandmother’s knees perhaps prompted Ramanujan to write the poem “Lines to a Granny”. In the poem the grandmother patiently answers all questions pertaining to the tale of the sleeping princess who was awakened from her hundred years slumber by a prince who braved all odds to reach the forgotten castle. An age old story retains its freshness of appeal because of the grandmother’s deftness in the art of storytelling. The poem begins with the child’s enthusiastic queries about the story of “The Sleeping Beauty” thus:

Granny,
tell me again in the dark
about the wandering price;
and his steed, with a neem leaf mark
upon his brow, will prance
again to splash his noonday image
in the sleep of these pools. (17)

The child had heard the story so often from the grandmother but wants to hear it all over again. And the story is told and retold by grandmothers down the ages but its timeless appeal remains intact. Sadly, there are no children pestering the grandmother for stories today. So she does not need to constantly replenish her stock of tales for inquisitive listeners. However, her priority in life remains the same – the desire to see her loved ones happy and prospering. Here the poet seems to acknowledge the important role a grandmother plays in the life of a man as her stories instill values in childhood that shape and mould personality during the adulthood.

Ramanujan was deeply rooted in Indian culture and heritage. Gods and goddesses occupy important place in our mythology. So Ramanujan focuses not only on the women of the material world but also deals with those ethereal female deities dwelling in the celestial world. A number of poems mention the goddesses of Hindu mythology. In the poem “A Devotee’s Complaint”, the poet talks of Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and Saraswati, the goddess of knowledge. He firmly believes that one should not incur the wrath of these goddesses but seek their blessings for peace. Progress and prosperity in life:

Try to curry favour
with Lakshmi,
you lose an eye-tooth.

Saraswati, she slaps you hard
and where her fingers touch
your cheek, you have no hair

so you have to shave close
or bear her four-finger mark
on your face. (237)

Apart from goddesses, Ramanujan also treats of she-demons in his poems, thus shedding light on both the aspects of womanhood – the benevolent and the baneful. Since, Ramanujan is a poet of realism, he not only draws the reader's attention to both sides of a woman's nature – the better and the bitter. In “Mythologies 1”, Putana, the female demon or the ‘Rakshasi’, offered her poisoned breast to the baby Krishna in an attempt to kill the lord. People were deceived by her fake overtures of love and affection and her honey-sweet tongue did not betray the evil within her:

The breast she offered was full
of poison and milk.

Flashing eyes suddenly dull,
her voice was silk. (221)

However, the all-knowing and merciful lord Krishna took pity on this wicked demon and killed her as a means of saving her. Thus, finally, the demon, bereft of her guise as a beautiful woman, found her redemption in death, thanks to the mercifulness of lord Krishna as a child. The devilish woman not only failed in her evil mission but she was redeemed by the grace of the celestial child who brought about her salvation in death.

The charismatic feat performed by lord Krishna as a child shows his masculinity which in Indian philosophy implies the positive power, mental as well as physical, to ameliorate the lives of the people. Thus lord Krishna a child proves himself to be an epitome of masculinity.

A.K. Ramanujan, the poet with a detached sensibility, appears to have made not only a comprehensive study of womanhood as a whole but also an in-depth analysis of the secret recesses of a woman’s heart. A careful study of his poetry shows that in his treatment of women he adopts consciously unromantic attitude and realistic approach. Though a streak of fondness may be discernible in a few poems but, by and large, he does not fashion his thoughts in the romantic mould. If on one hand he views woman as an instrument of gratification of senses, rather than as a companion for a life time, on the other, a la G.B. Shaw he regards woman as an agent of the Life Force – a power working
upon the minds and hearts of individuals seeking to raise them to a higher level of life. The poet regards woman as an instrument required for the continuation of procreation. He also acknowledges the powerful role played by women in shaping the personality of a man. As a realist and rationalist he portrays both the angel-like as well wicked aspects of a woman’s nature. If he exposes the greed, malice and jealousy of a woman’s nature, he also shows them as an epitome of patience, endurance, sacrifice and self-abnegation. Ramanujan provides us a penetrating peep into a woman’s mind. With almost a clinical precision, the poet pens down quite accurate characteristics of a woman’s heart. Yet he holds woman in great reverence in the tradition of Indian culture. In his treatment of women, tradition and modernity coalesce.

Despite being steeped in his culture, Ramanujan is modernist in essence. His comments on many traditional beliefs are caustic but this should not lead the reader to imagine that he rejects his Hindu or Tamil Brahmnnical heritage. His long sojourn abroad perhaps explains his persistent inclination with his Indian past – both familial and racial. His poetry exemplifies how an Indian poet writing in English language can derive strength from retracing his steps to his roots. In poem after poem, he recalls the memories of his childhood and his experiences of life in India. In his poems, one can discern an enlightened looking at things in a dispassionate manner. Nevertheless, there is no attempt to disown the richness of past experience. Rather, in poems like “Conventions of Despair”, the poet makes it clear that he cannot step into the shoes of modernity whole heartedly at the cost of his roots.

Ramanujan’s intellectual strength lies in his ability to look at tradition unbiased and not follow modernity blindly. He remained loyal to the ideas which entered into the psyche during his formative years India. At the sometime he did not adopt the Western motifs of modernity such as urge to seek an outlet for sexual fantasies, the need for entertainment through silver screen etc. His individuality is seen in his assertion of identity in terms of his Hindu cultural heritage in an alien environment.

The alienation from his native soil does not sever the poet’s bond of continuity with his older ideals. So he rejects modern sensibility and declares finally:

No, no give me back my archaic despair:
It's not obsolete yet to live
in this many-lived lair
of fears, this flesh. (34)

Ramanujan as a modernist is not afraid of raising his voice against flaws and discrepancies in our societal system as reflected in the poem “The Guru”. Here, he makes no bones about his disdain or self-proclaimed godmen who seem to claim the sole responsibility of enlightening the ignorant people but are themselves parochial, biased, anti-woman and self-aggrandizing:

Forgive the weasel his tooth
forgive the tiger his claw

but do not forgive the woman
her malice or the man his envy

said the guru, as he moved on
to ask me to clean his shoe,
bake his bread and wash his clothes. (251)

The pseudo guru makes pretense of being kind and compassionate as he preaches to show concern for animals. But, in reality, he is completely bereft of the milk of human kindness:

Give the dog his bone, the parrot
his seed, the pet snake his mouse

but do not give woman her freedom
nor the man his mid-day meal till he begs

said the guru, as he went on. (251)

The poet, unable to compromise with the hypocritical nature of the guru revolts against him and finally leaves him for good. He cannot stand the latter's irreverent attitude and derogatory remarks against women. So he sarcastically but succinctly announces:
I gave the dog his bone, the parrot
his seed, the pet snake his mouse,
forgave the weasel his tooth,
forgave the tiger his claw,
and left the guru to clean his own shoe
for I remembered I was a man born of a woman. (251)

Thus, despite being highly critical of many aspects of his Hindu culture deeply steeped in tradition, A.K. Ramanujan is certainly not blind to some of its stable virtues and values like belief in the oneness of all creation be it human, animal or plant life:

For a moment, I no
longer know
leaf from parrot
or branch from root
nor, for that matter,
that tree
from you and me. (32)

Acceptance of the essential oneness of all living beings is the culmination of intellectual enlightenment and strength. Herein lies Ramanujan’s masculinity. A close study of his poetry reveals the poet’s strictly impartial mind to perceive things in proper perspective. His irreverent attitude to some of the traditional beliefs shows his ability to transcend the traditional outlook and his rational approach to life and things testifies to his modernity. As he does not accept unquestioningly whatever his culture offers, nor does he aspire to be a modernist by rejecting his cultural roots. In his essay entitled “What is Indian in Indo-English Poetry”, Ezekiel highlights the blending of Indian and European cultural elements in Ramanujan.

Ironically the symbols of modernity and masculinity are equated in the West with having no qualms with regard to re-marriage or disregarding the age-old tenets of morality. The poet’s strong cultural roots and intellect prevents him from easily falling a prey to the Western allurements. He overcomes such temptations and charms and asserts
his individuality and identity in the face of tide of modernism and Westernization which seem to sweep the entire globe nowadays. Finally, he decides to work out his salvation treading on the path of his own cultural traditions.

An in depth reading of Ramanujan's poetry reveals that he is deeply rooted in his cultural traditions. As such he realizes that the only way to come to terms with the onslaught of modernity is to accept the philosophical concept of Karma in Hinduism—which is the epitome of masculinity. Ramanujan's masculinity is also seen in his imbibing the best features of his native culture and the detached outlook resulting from his exposure to the Western milieu. His poetic self presents a unique amalgam of the traditional and the modern. If his sensibility is rooted in the Indian heritage, his vision is definitely that of a modernist. His intellectual and poetic strength lies in his remarkable ability to maintain an appreciable balance between tradition and modernity. He has adopted a dispassionate and balanced attitude in his writings. He does not allow emotions to overwhelm his intellect. Following the path of golden mean he paints an analytical picture of two cultures he has been intimately associated with. As a sagacious and wise writer he refuses to be drawn to either extreme of the cultural spectrum. Straddling between cultures, the title image of the striders in his very first volume of poetry pictures his own precarious poise. Yet his strength or masculinity lies in making the best use of the neither-here-nor-there strider-like situation and producing a poetry which despite his rootedness in Indian cultural traditions can be read on its own. Thus he achieves a rare blending of the ancient and the modern with the Indian and the American idioms. In spite of his being subjected to the onslaughts of various influences both Western and Indian, Ramanujan has kept his originality intact. Therein lies his masculinity.
Works Cited


