

Chapter IV

Negotiating Familial Relationship

Family is the basic social unit consisting of parents and their children, and considered as a group, whether dwelling together or not. In human context, a family is a group of people affiliated by consanguinity, affinity or co-residence. The Members of the family may include a spouse, parent, brother and sister, and son and daughter. Similarly, the extended family may include grandparent, aunt, uncle, cousin, nephew and niece or sibling-in-law. In most societies the family is the principle institution for the socialization of children. Various anthropologists generally classify family organization as matrifocal, conjugal, a nuclear or extended family in which parents and children co-reside with other members. These members normally spend time together and care for each other thus develop a bond of attachment.

Family is used metaphorically to create more inclusive categories such as community, nationhood, global village and humanism. Genealogy is a field which aims to trace family lineages through history. All human cultures have norms that exclude certain close relatives from the categories of persons who are suitable or permissible sexual or marriage partners and those who are a taboo. Family is also an important economic unit studied in family economics.

A.K.Ramanujan's poetry is family-oriented. In his poetry, 'family' is the central metaphor for 'society' at large. This highly personal connection is barely visible to the reader. A metaphor is traditionally taken to be the most fundamental form of figurative language. Terence Hawkes defines figurative language as 'language which doesn't mean what it says' and adds further, "Figurative language deliberately interferes with the system of literal usage. The interference takes the form of transference, or 'carrying over', with the aim of achieving a wider, 'special' or more precise meaning" (2). It may be said that the metaphor of family realizes Ramanujan's personal responses to the world. The chief use of metaphor is to expand reality. Ramanujan extends the metaphor to expand the reality of family as a unit of society.

The family is the most important component of social organization. There is no known society in which the family does not comprise an integral part of the social structure. Family patterns of behaviour are related to the norms of the society and a family tends to uphold the normative patterns of that society. There is a mutual interaction and supportive relationship in this respect between the family and society. However, great variations in the internal organization of an individual family unit may develop. There are differences in family organization even in the same society between different social strata. Nevertheless, the family performs different functions in the maintenance of the social structure. It provides population replacement and acts as an agent of socialization. The family may be regarded as an institution interrelated with other social institutions or a relatively autonomous social system, itself made up of interacting elements. For many of us, the family constitutes our first experience of social life as for others. It is the most enduring and permanent social group. In his poetry, Ramanujan is concerned with family life within the context of a wider social structure. The family, which is fully functional as a social institution, tends to be extended vertically to include three or more generations and horizontally to include collateral relations. Consequent upon industrialization and urbanization the 'extended' multi generation families living under one roof are less common and the 'nuclear' family of husband, wife and their children has cropped up. In Ramanujan's poetry, we come across his reflections on his 'nuclear' family and also the 'extended' family he remembers as he transacts with the past.

Ramanujan's nuclear family consists of him, his wife and their children. The institution of marriage is central to the idea of the family in most societies. It formalizes and regularizes the relationships between family members. For both men and women, the emotional security and mutual warmth is necessary. In a marital relationship Ramanujan, however, talks of uncertainties. The social structure remains hierarchical and this is reflected in family structure which is patriarchal with a dominant role of the male partner. Marriage is not considered as a partnership of equals; rather it is

viewed as a contract with a strict definition of masculine and feminine roles, together with an equally strict allocation of male and female tasks. As per social norms a good marriage is supposed to be one in which both spouses carry out their obligations. Typically, the activities of a wife are defined strictly in terms of the husband's convenience and pleasure. Relationship between marriage partners, as revealed in Ramanujan's poems, is not a 'joint' relationship which means 'togetherness' in all aspects of living, but a 'segregated' relationship, which seems to be the inevitable consequence of male indifference. The children are mostly regarded as a near essential ingredient of a full marriage relationship. It is the family that undertakes the socialization of the child during his long period of dependency. In the family setting, a child first learns to handle some of the different types of personal relationships that he will find later in the wider society. The family, as an agent of social control, teaches the child the boundary of social behaviour. It introduces him to the acceptable ideas of right and wrong. The parents prepare their children, by means of training and instruction, for life in society. With the passage of time, they tend to regard parenthood as a means of emotional gratification.

The poem "Ecology" depicts the flowering of the three Red Champak trees, offering the poet's mother "her first blinding migraine/ of the season" and rendering him quite angry. The poet wants to cut them down, but the mother does not permit him. After all, the trees are the source of sweet-smelling flowers to her gods and goddesses. Even her daughters and grand daughters enjoy themselves in collecting them, but for her cousins they create troubles, as they have to bring "a dower of migraines in season" (*CP* 125). Of course, the season referred to here is the rainy season. Two poems on the poet's visit to a zoo—"In the Zoo" and "Zoo Gardens Revisited" throws light on scavenger birds and adjutant storks. The storks are found in three shades- a faded black, a grey and a dirty white. The descriptions of these birds are scattered with some striking images; for instance, the faded black stork is like "Madras lawyers", and the dirty white stork is like "grand -mother's maggoty

curds” (*CP* 128). The flapping birds in the air are like “father into the rain” with his baggy, broken umbrellas, while circling ones are like “father’s magic carpet story” (*CP* 129). Ramanujan recollects Indian cities and his parents even when he is in the midst of animals in a zoo. The poem “In a Zoo”, mentions cities like Calcutta and Madurai, and the madras lawyers, and the members of his family like grand mother, father and mother.

Ramanujan always displays a profound sense of integrity in personal relationships that concentrate on the family. “Son to Father to Son” spells morbid fears. The father’s beard looks like a hanging hive, the hair on his hands makes the son scream in sleep, sister is seen swinging high on creaky swings, a window is full of bees, father’s toes look like talons moving towards the son, and then there is the bizarre vision of the son-

Skewered
by a bamboo arrow
in a jungle trap;
or a daughter lowered
like a match
into a sulphur mine
of hungry men. (*CP* 155)

Further, the son is seen shot dead, “eyes shut, laid out”. Such morbid fears are also mentioned in “Fear” (*CP* 132-133). Perhaps these are instances of Ramanujan’s rare irony. The deep, morbid, irrational fears perhaps are indicative of the deep attachment the speaker feels with various persons.

In “Drafts” the DNA is seen working in various traits from the grandfather to the grandsons and even to the wife: grandfather’s violin music, epilepsies in uncle, mother’s migraine, fear of black cats, daughter’s passions, all seem replicas of one another, suggesting a very intimately knit family structure.

The poems dealing with the familial motif explore and analyse the various relationships in a joint Hindu family. In a traditional family the constituent members are lineal descendents as well as collaterals within three,

and at times even four degrees of relationship. Economic help, refuge in situations of crisis, the upbringing of children are some of the benefits offered by the joint family. The family is for Ramanujan, one of the central metaphors with which he thinks (Parthasarathy 195).

Ramanujan himself has defined and acknowledged the ineluctable rootedness of the family. The idea of the family as an anchorage is comprehensively expressed in “Small-Scale Reflections on a Great House” in *Relations*. It is a greatly receptive, assimilative house and “nothing/that ever comes into this house/goes out”, including all sorts of curious things, persons and incidents, library books, neighbour’s dishes, photographs, servants, inherited epilepsies, sons-in-law. This is not enough, there is a boomerang effect too. Anything that goes out will return back—undelivered letters, widowed daughters, run-away sons and even a nephew returning as a war casualty.

It is easy to read wider implications in the poem, the Great House actually being a national, cultural receptacle. M.K. Naik thinks that “the poet also appears to view favourably the great absorbing power of traditional culture. “Small-Scale Reflections on a Great House” stresses this aspect of it by making the familial motif a symbol of the larger theme of the Hindu heritage. The poem describes a large, traditional Hindu joint family, a great house. It is equally clear that the ‘great house’ in the poem may with justice stand for the ancient house of Hinduism. A house which has its motto of *Vasudhaiwa Kutumbakam* has absorbed from time to time numerous cults, cultures and races to create one of the greatest examples of synthesis in all human history” (19-20).

Relations within the family are not just simple and direct blood connections but speculative, complex and distant too as in “on the very possible jaundice by My unborn daughter” in *The Striders*. The reference to jaundice is misleading. It only signifies the yellow tinge of the rays of the sun presented as the image of the sunflower and of the daffodils flapping in grandma’s hands. The pigment emanates “from the sulphur mines of the sun”.

The father sits basking in it- a typical Indian scene. An unbreakable link in the family lineage is thus suggested directly, stretching up/down to the unborn daughter.

In *Second Sight*, “Extended Family” opens with a description of his grandfather whom Ramanujan imitates in point of bathing before the village crowd. Then it proceeds to describe other members of the family, and the poet informs us that he resembles his father in slapping soap on his back and in thinking in Sanskrit proverbs. He wipes himself dry with a Turkish towel. He hears the faint morning song like his mother. He plays shy like his little daughter, and holds his “peepe” like his small son. He plays garden hose in and out the bath tub. Like his grandson, he looks up unborn at himself, and like his great-great grandson he is still contained in the wombs of futurity. The poem ends on a note of hope for the extension of his family.

my future
dependent
on several
people
yet
to come. (*CP* 170)

In a way, the poem combines past, present and future in its simple seeming yet subtle texture and thus squeezes time and universe, as though, into a ball.

“Breaded Fish” is a poem about Ramanujan’s experience as a child and describes his desire to eat roasted fish. His mother had prepared some breaded fish for him. He took one piece into his mouth but he pushed the breaded fish because he found himself unable to eat it. The reason behind it was the memory of a half-naked, dead woman lying on the beach. The dead body was partially covered with a piece of cloth about a yard in length. It has then occurred to him that the woman’s dead body had been breaded by “the grained indifference of sand” (*CP* 7). The sight of that dead body was being eaten by the fish.

This poem is based upon an actual personal experience of the poet when he was a boy. Only in twelve lines Ramanujan shows certain human feelings, an awful picture of a dead woman, a picture of the sea-beach with its sand and the picture of a snake on a heath. Apart from the pictures Ramanujan shows how his mother trying to force the young led to eat the breaded fish which he is resisting. Through “Breaded Fish” Ramanujan shows that a strong desire in a human being may be frustrated by a recollection of something horrifying or grim.

Opened in my eyes: a dark half-naked
length of woman, dead
on the beach in a yard of cloth. (*CP* 7)

In “Relations”, the poet speaks about his daughter and about his daughter’s daughter who is yet unborn. He compares the face of his unborn grand-daughter to a mantis which is the name of an insect which seems to be very pious because it holds its forelegs in such a way that it seems to be praying like a person who holds his hands in an attitude of prayer when standing in a temple before the statue of a deity.

My daughter’s daughter’s unborn face
floats to the surface: It has the natural
piety of the praying mantis
after a kill, its own or a butterfly. (*CP* 102)

Ramanujan recalls his “ancestral crocodiles and tortoises”, the ancestors who seem to him to have borne a resemblance to such ugly creatures as crocodiles and tortoises. He speaks about her daughter in a more or less detached manner but refers to her pets and describes the behaviour of the pets rather than that of the daughter.

In “Snakes”, the poet tells about snakes and says that he is reminded of snakes not when he walks through the woods but when he walks through row of books stocked in a library. He thinks of a basketful of cobras which were brought into his house by the snakeman at behest of his mother who fed the snakes with milk and watched them suck the milk from the saucer. He says

that his mother belongs to the category of Hindu woman who never kills a snake and instead offers milk as a kind of religious ceremony. On the other hand, the poet fears from the snake. The poem holds a mastery over words and imagination and presents the real facts. We are afraid of snakes in real life and tremble with fear even when we read about them.

A basketful of ritual cobras
Comes into the tame little house,
their brown-wheat glisten ringed with ripples. (*CP 4*)

When we read “Still Life”, we feel inclined to think that the woman in the poem was Ramanujan’s close relative and his interest in her was not sexual but familial. “Still Life” is an unusual kind of poem and does not make sense. In this poem, the poet feels some interest in the woman who had lunch with him. During the lunch he had only a casual kind of conversation with her but later, looking at the table and seeing the remains of the food on the dishes from which she had been eating, he felt that she had left on the various items of the food the very shape of her bite. In real life, it is impossible to bear the shape of eater’s bite on the sandwich and other food items. It is only a poetic fancy. The poet only imagines in poetry. These factors show that poet has some interest in the woman, sexual interest of course.

But I suddenly wanted
to look again
and I saw the half-eaten
sandwich,
bread,
lettuce and salami,
all carrying the shape
of her bite. (*CP 12*)

“Self-Portrait” is a puzzling poem. In this poem the poet sees in a mirror a stranger’s reflection despite himself. He finds something of everybody in his personality and he finds in his personality something of his ancestors and more particularly of his father. From reading the lines of the

poem it appears that Ramanujan wants to say that every person belongs to another in some trait. Law of heredity is present in the poem. Heredity means some characters or traits of our ancestors like our father, mother, grand-father, grand-mother and so on comes in us. In the similar way, the poet wants to convey that he resembles everyone, more especially his father.

“Routine Day Sonnet” describes the routine day of the poet but the poem has a surprise ending because the whole mood of the poem is opposite to what the poet has to say in the closing three lines of the poem. The routine day for the poet means nothing common at the office, followed by walk in the evening with his daughter and a bed-time story to send the same daughter to sleep. Then during night the poet sees a dream about the Eskimos living in the Arctic regions and travelling by a bullock –cart instead of the usual dog-cart. Then the poet is awakened by his wife’s cry. He hears his wife saying that she hates him because he is a sex-crazy lustful man.

It is an important fact to be noted that Ramanujan is pulled by his mother and mother land again and again. In his “Looking for the Centre” he tries to discover his roots and finding it not easy, he tries to extricate himself from this bondage and on this moment he says:

Suddenly, connections severed
as in a lobotomy, unburdened
of history, I lose
my bearings, a circus zilla spun
at the end of her rope, dizzy
terrified
and happy. And my watchers
watch, cool as fires
in a mirror. (*CP* 185)

This poem proves that his family connections helped him to discover his roots. He remembers his family members one by one while settled in America. He also remembers his birth place, India. We can note that the

country of his birth haunts his mind endlessly. His poem “Waterfalls in a Bank” depicts his past:

As I transact with the past as with another
country with its own customs, currency,
stock exchange, always
at a loss when I count my change: water-
falls of dying children...(CP 189)

The poems commemorating the poet’s mother need to be considered together in order to understand the poet’s attachment to the past and to the family. “Still Another for Mother” from *The Striders* describes a brief flashback where the poet witnesses a tiff between an aged American couple on Hyde park Street in North America. Here, the sensibility brought to interpret the experience is Indian, not American. The poet is instantly reminded of a similar incident involving his own parents:

Perhaps they had fought.
Worst still, perhaps they had not fought.
Something opened
in the past and I heard something shut
in the future, quietly...(CP 15-16)

“Of Mothers among Other Things” from *Relations* contains Ramanujan’s recollections of his mother. It is the most touching poems bringing out the poet’s enduring relationship with his mother. The pitiable condition of an aged mother is impressively presented with the deft touch of an imagistic painter.

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 one time wing. (CP 61)

The poet's nostalgic memory, dried up like a "twisted backbone tree" recalls the rosy picture of his mother in her youth, active and caring for her children.

from her earrings three diamonds
 splash a handful of needles
 and I see my mother run back
 from rain to the crying cradles. (*CP* 61)

The rain broke the tree-tasselled light into rays. The rain may suggest the changing fortunes of life. The effect of age enfeebled his mother who looked like a lean wet eagle. Her fingers become disabled and too weak to pick up a grain of rice from the kitchen floor. This pitiable condition affects the poet so much that he feels his tongue dried up as a parchment tasting of bark in his mouth.

The poet through this poem describes about the silk and white petal of his mother's youth. The mother is gently and kindly portrayed as an image of patience, suffering and sacrifice. He remembers her as a hard-working house-keeper and a very affectionate woman. The feeling of softness and inherent pathos culminates in the stanza:

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. (*CP* 61)

He remembers her diamond ear-rings radiating rays of light. He remembers his mother running back from rain to the crying babies in their cradles. The poet recalls his mother's old age, having lost a finger as a consequence of an accident which makes the poet uneasy and uncomfortable. He recalls her four bending fingers to pick a grain of rice from the kitchen floor. S. Nagarajan says that "the metaphors in the first two lines emphasize the futility of the poet's language to express the rough, bitter taste of the memory, and the last two lines provide an irresistible objective correlative of the emotion" (19).

Pathos is contained, in an artful way, in the single word “still” firmly emphasizing the duality of decline and resistance to it. Earlier, the mother’s sari is described as hanging loose like “feather of a onetime wing”. The image of the feather is an obvious reminder of a bird, attributing a birdlike weakness and a birdlike transient character to the existence of the mother. Her hands are compared with

a wet eagle’s
two black pink-crinkled feet
one talon crippled. (*CP* 61)

The image of the eagle in a professed manner does not seem to go well with the fleeting, delicate, weak personality. The eagle being a powerful, huge bird of prey, the sense of violence also seems to strike a note of disharmony as it clashes with the affectionate, protective nature of mother.

After telling us about the filling of ‘a scratch on the wall’ with the drops of colour until the water becomes as dark as wine in the poem “Kmn04 in grandfather’s Shaving Glass”, the poet proceeds to draw near the eastern window and sketches a life-giving tree, which is bare and unleafy because of cold December and two-faced like the Roman god Janus. He visualizes that Heaven is perhaps differently made and timed, and that it is full of ‘greens’ and leaves. But his own sketch of the Christmas tree is bereft of these ‘greens’ and leaves:

And I am limed
on branches bare and roots,
with that latest
hatch of birth-bewildered
parrots. (*CP* 32)

At the end of the poem, Ramanujan identifies the Christmas tree with human life, and he no longer distinguishes leaf from parrot or branch from root, nor “that tree/from you or me” (*CP* 33). Here and there, the poem has become allusive referring to an Alexandrian geometrician called Euclid or to the Roman god Janus. And the expression ‘where I come from’ alludes to

Heaven. In linking the Christmas tree to human life, the poet is quite convincing and impressive.

“Love Poem for a Wife, 2” shows the mature aspect of love with a mellowed expression. The family relationship is explored upto the root level tracing back his wife’s Keralite origin to dense green forest habitation filled with rubber plants, pepper vines, and her granny wearing white in a rural dwelling- “full of the colour schemes of Kraits and garter snakes”(CP 83). The scene shifts to crater township Aden, where her ancestors had spent precarious days among stabbing Arabs “betrayed and whipped yet happy” (CP 83).

The poet employs dream technique in which he identifies himself with his wife physically

I dreamed one day
that face my own, yet hers
with my own nowhere
to be found; lost; cut
loose like my dragnet
past. (CP 84)

He thinks of his situation like that of androgynous God Nataraja balancing stillness in the middle of dynamic dance. The poet finds himself in a similar state balancing himself between diverse backgrounds of his own and his wife, the present and the past.

Coming back to reality and world of wakefulness he finds his wife sleeping calmly undisturbed by her past.

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. (CP 85)

A blessing indeed indicating a similar approach for the poet when love transcends differences and affords calm composure.

In “Entries for a Catalogue of Fears” the poet finds himself unable to distinguish between even fear and hope. At the age of thirty-nine, he finds that to his old fear of depths and heights, and of the presence of his father in the bedroom, have been added the new fear of being attacked suddenly by a man armed with a knife and the fear of some fellows chasing his daughter. He says that no one would hear his cries for help. At the age of sixty having one glass eye the poet can talk occasionally of God and he can also see the operations of *Karma* when he witnesses the fall of a sparrow from the branch of a tree where it was sitting, and when he reads about the numerous deaths taking place in Burma. After that the poet says that at the age of seventy he foresees himself as an almost helpless man who has lost all his sexual vigour and realizes that he is not yet dead. In the end he says that he would continue to love his children till the very end, and he would also not fail to look for the presence of the past in his life. But his children would convict him of some fault and would sentence him to endless imprisonment.

In “Elements of Composition”, what remains striking is Ramanujan’s capacity for absorption. The self at the centre critically examines, explores its possible dimension to identify its true nature. By way of cataloguing and juxtaposing two distinct levels of the self—one diasporic and the other native, Ramanujan harps on the kind of amalgamation that has gone into the making of his personality. He once admitted:

“English and my disciplines give me my ‘outer forms—linguistic, metrical, logical and other such way of shaping experience; and my thirty years in India, my frequent visits and field trips, my personal and professional preoccupations with Kannada, Tamil, the classics and folklore give me my substance, my ‘inner’ forms, images and symbols. They are continuous with each other, and I no longer can tell what comes from where” (Cited by Parthasarathy; 96).

What an honest acknowledgement of the assimilation and absorption of the two cultures—one, eastern and the other western or basically American—within the self. This results in the formation of a “self” of the poet which acquires a distinctive identity. Ramanujan’s poems are inevitably the product of this distinctive identity so that the poet convincingly declares:

I pass through them
as they pass through me. (*CP* 122)

This poem therefore sums up the essence of the poetic self, and resolves the problems of a dichotomous identity which apparently traverses through the words of his poetry.

“The Last of the Princess” exhibits Ramanujan’s sharp and acute historical sensibility. The poem combines familial experience with a historical consciousness. It is a pathetic poem on the fall of the Moghul Empire, throwing light on the poverty and suffering of the royal family that falls on evil days. The poem begins from that period of tory when Aurangzeb had died and the Moghul Empire had lost all its glory. Its slow decay and disintegration is compared to a patient suffering from Tuberculosis and slowly heading to a final end. One admires the poet’s use of language to list the various causes that had led to the fall:

... this dynasty
falling in slow motion from Aurangzeb’s time;
some of bone T.B.,
others of a London fog that went to their heads,
some of current trends, imported wine and women. (*CP* 105)

Ramanujan’s poetic sensibility projects the cunning policies employed by the English to bewilder and confuse the Moghuls. He also mentions the intrigues of the English to which some members of the royal family became victims by importing wine and women.

The last of the princes who survived, a reference to Bahadur Shah Zafar, suffered from poverty and illness. However, he remained a true patriot

who did not yield to the British cruelty. His pathetic suffering is truly portrayed by Ramanujan as follows:

he lives on, to cough
remember and sneeze, a balance of phlegm
and bile, alternating loose bowels and hard
sheep's pellets. (*CP* 105)

The extreme poverty to which the family is driven is further touchingly depicted:

Two girls, Honey and Bunny, go to school
on half fees. Wife, heirloom pearl in her nose-ring,
pregnant again. His first son, trainee in telegraphy,
has telegraphed thrice already for money. (*CP* 105)

Thus, by throwing light on individual suffering the poem actually highlights the anxiety and suffering of a people who have been for long subjected to misery and trouble.

“Love Poem for a Wife and Her Trees” from *Second Sight* Ramanujan imaginatively perceives three generations of woman-mother, wife and daughter in linear progression. His family has its ‘roots in heaven/and branches in the earth’. The poem is in four parts and it is an intricate argument, cleverly organized and precisely articulated.

Part I begins with the poet addressing the wife and distinguishing her from mother, a fact which the wife at any rate will not let him forget though he cannot always remember. The Mother is:

Certified dead but living on, close
to her children, tinkling in glass-bead curtains,
peacock patterns shivering in three cities. (*CP* 180)

The description of the glass-beads shivering is, of course, absolutely spot on, and anyone from the South at any rate will have no difficulty in relating to it. The difference between wife and mother is particularly noted

On panic's zenith, on the unattended
Ferris wheel rickety in the wind,
lest I collapse. (*CP* 180)

Collapsing into sonhood would mean destroying age-old Dravidian relationships, destroying

the intricate
 diagrams of Dravidian kinship
 where triangles
 marry only circles descended
 from other triangles and circles
 in the notebooks
 of anthropologists sitting
 on family trees, those topsy
 turvy trees
 with their roots in heaven
 and branches in the earth. (*CP* 180)

The reference to anthropologists, family trees and Dravidian kinship provides the ‘inner form’ to the triplet stanzas of the poem which are the English ‘outer forms’.

Part II is focused on the wife and her role as daughter of somebody, to the protagonist’s role play as son of a mother. The woman, the protagonist says, reminds him that she is not his daughter. The possessive nature of the relationship between husband and wife is evoked in this section where the protagonist talks of the husband looking at her:

deep in my male
 and royal coffers,
 impregnable wombs of metal, and throw away the
 key in the alligator moat. (*CP* 181)

Together they would go “out of touch” of the world. The poem evokes the image of the woman pressing her face against a fortieth storey window:

in the safe custody of an antiseptic
 bubble, your spinal cord
 will wither-
 that stem of all senses, that second tree

with the root at the top, branches branching in limb
and lung,
down to toe, hangnail, and fingertip. (*CP* 181)

The precision of the imagery, through the lack of sentimentality, though not the absence of sentiment, characterize Ramanujan's best work and surely these lines from the poem meet the desired standards.

Similarly, Part III continues to explore the sense of sameness and difference in the couple-“you are not me but Another”. Ramanujan can carry on an extended metaphorical exploration, a modern equivalent of the old fashioned Homeric or Miltonic simile. The ‘another’ is

the faraway
stranger who's nearby,
like the Blue Mountain tree in the cuttings
of my garden graft, or its original,
sighted once
up close in my telescope, seasoned and alive
with leaf, bud, monkeys, birds, pendant
bats, parasites,
patch of blue scilla lilies in its shade;
exotic who inhabits my space
but migrates
to Panamas of another
childhood; one half of me, often
occupying all,
yet ever ready to call a taxi
and go away...(*CP* 182)

There is much more in this vein but the point is firmly reinforced that nearness and distance, intimacy and rejection are the binary oppositions which imply one another. Each term in the opposition has its negation. The poem is about the multi-dimensional relationship of husband and wife and so part IV clinches it as follows:

Yet I know you'll play at Jewish mama,
 sob- sister, daughter who needs help
 with arithmetic,
 even the sexpot nextdoor, topless
 tree spirit on a temple frieze,
 or plain Indian wife
 at the village well, so I can play son,
 father, brother , macholover, gaping
 tourist, and clumsy husband. (CP 183)

Infact, the ideal marital relationship would be the one in which along with 'togetherness', each one has right to 'singleness', as illustrated in D.H. Lawrence's novels *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*. But in Ramanujan's poems, the wife is not allowed to be 'Another'. She is not allowed to have separate identity of her own. The husband expects the wife to be, forever, merely an appendage to him. It is obvious that Ramanujan has used the word 'Love' in the titles of these poems ironically. Love includes not only physical attraction and satisfaction, but also, mutual respect, mutual communication and a strong desire to protect one another without any corresponding wish to manipulate or mould (Comfort 88).

By any standards Ramanujan has written a classic love poem of metaphysical dimensions in which he carries through the twin ideas of relationship in terms of trees, stems, branches, twigs and so forth. This is love poetry which has a terrible beauty, inclusive, passionate and yet complex.

In "Love Poem for Wife, 1" and "Love Poem for Wife, 2" Ramanujan illustrates the ambivalent nature of his own self, the self of the wife and of the relationship between these two selves of the husband and wife. The poem 1 begins with the difference between the husband and wife through the image of the unshared childhood, and progresses through patterning of differences. They cannot share each other's past. While seeing the family album, he is surprised to see his father in a turban/mother standing on her bare/splayed feet, silver rings/on her second toes,' and concludes, to his displeasure, that his

present self is a sentence from his father's diary. He envies her past, her village dog-ride and the mythological stories of 'the seven crazy aunts'. He does not like to be reminded of the night when her father paced to and fro in the balcony anxiously smoking cigarettes and waiting for his daughter who had gone out on a date with a Muslim friend 'who only hinted at touches'. He is angry when she quarrels with her brother James over the location of a bathroom in her grand-father's house in Alleppey. He tries to bring about a hypothetical solution to this problem of ambivalence. The solution has been accidentally, experimentally presented, so that the irony used reserves a double edge, first at his own self and then at the superstition-ridden practice of the childhood marriage in the Hindu families.

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

The dominant mood here, is one of bitterness, disagreement and failure of expectation. The poet's artful irony discloses that there is the possibility of sharing childhood in child-marriage, but that does not secure agreement of relationship between husband and wife in later years. The poet watches his wife curiously and is drawn towards her. He wishes to overcome his sense of alienation from his wife, but emotional and cultural gaps yawn before him, and the tension does not diffuse. The poem ends with the problematic uncertainty with which it begins, implying that the speaker's longing to enter another life by trying to share its past is fraught with bitterness and disillusionment. The ironic twist with which the poem concludes seems to confirm the static underlying relationship as also the persisting acrimony and suspicion that have been responsible for the speaker's own emotional

aridity (Kulshrestha 115). Similarly in ‘Poem 2’ the poet depicts the lean, lovely face of the wife and shows the difference between himself and his wife who were always a ‘changing syriac face’ (CP 83). In spite of her anger, the poet has no hesitation to lose his face in her to become ‘androgynous as a god’ (CP 84), and to become happy. Ramanujan, in the course of reflecting the different strands of his relationship, touches on other individuals of the family, and on social rituals and institutions too. The self comes, out of the centre but circuits to relate itself to other points and finally returns to its original position at the centre where he pursues to explain the problems experienced while circuiting through the other points on the external boundary.

In poem “Lines to a Granny”, the poet describes about his grandmother. The poem is addressed to ‘granny’, and the poet provokes her to tell him again in the dark the tale of ‘the meandering prince’ on his prancing that steed. The prince will come and break with sesame words ‘the cobweb curtained door’ and wake the sentinel, the bawdy cook; and the parrot in the cage will shout his name. Before the poet resorts to bitter irony about the real situation of his granny, he once again requests her thus:

Let him, dear granny,
 shape the darkness
 and take again
 the princess
 whose breath would hardly strain
 the spider’s design. (CP 17)

Clearly, the ‘granny’ is a wonderful narrator of magical tales that keep the children thrilled.

The cold ironic reportorial tone in “Small-scale reflections on a Great House” reveals the strange fascinating powers of a house with a joint family. The dialectical nature of the house of which the poet reporter is an inseparable part, sufficiently proves the poet’s relationship with the house. The house has been given a personality as though it were a member of the family whose

merit lies in its complete sense of possessiveness. It seems that Ramanujan makes use of a prediction as he begins the poem:

Sometimes I think that nothing
that ever comes into this house
goes out. (*CP* 96)

Even if the body of Ramanujan has gone out of this house, the spirit of the self has never gone out. Indirectly, by depicting the possessive nature of the house, the poet is alluding to his own inability to dispossess the house.

In “History” 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 ‘alternatively’ 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 has undergone a sea-change and it is no longer grand and romantic. For the self, 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.

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 because of heart attack. The way in which the death of his father is depicted amounts to charging the dead father of the liabilities, such as ‘debts’ and ‘daughters’ and a house ‘leaned’ on a ‘bent coconut tree’, he left behind. But soon this charge is transformed into an affectionate, less sentimentalized allegiance due to the father who left behind “a changed mother” and more “than one annual ritual” (*CP* 112). Getting a few obituary lines in a daily published from Madras is a signaling achievement, but this achievement is deflated by matter-of-fact attitude of the consumer market where the street hawkers sell newspapers to the grocers who prepare cones with which they wrap salt, coriander and a jiggery 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. The poet comes back to the centre of his own self to perpetuate the legacy of rituals in the absence of the father. As V.S. Naipaul writes in his *The Enigma of Arrival*:

We were immemorially people of the country side, far from the courts of prices, living according to rituals we didn't always understand and yet were unwilling to dishonour because that would cut us off from the past, the sacred earth, the gods (351).

The poem "Obituary" recalls and reflects on the death of poet's father and ironically comments on the rituals and ceremonies associated with the dead. Reflectively the poem is a remembrance of the father who is dead and gone. Its outer ironic form however does not diminish its essential introspective seriousness and poignancy. It is a kind of elegy where the poet in mock ironic tone talks about the legacy that the poor father has left behind. When poet's father died he left behind him a dusty table full of papers and some debts to be paid. He also left behind him a number of daughters and an infant grandson who had been named after him by the toss of a coin. The poet also wants to tell about the house left behind by his father who leaned on a coconut tree growing in the compound, while the coconut tree itself was a leaning one and not growing straight upwards. The house of the poet reminds us of the leaning tower of Pisa in Italy. In the last of the poem, the poet says that his father's death had produced a deep effect upon his mother who was now a completely changed woman. It became necessary for the survivors to perform several rituals or ceremonies in the course of every year. But the essential concern of the poet is brought out in the poetic fusion of the personal and the impersonal. A sense of universality is achieved in linking tradition and concern. By singing the father's poverty and the mother's grief over the loss of her husband the poet affirms his real love for the departed father.

In his second volume *Relations*, Ramanujan largely speaks at length on his personal contacts, family members and blood relations. It unmistakably brings out his acute sense of a hoary past and Indian history. When it first

appeared, it summoned a mixed reaction from its readers and reviewers. Many of the poems in *Relations* have their origin in recollected personal emotion and deal with the poet's memory of his relatives and surroundings. Prof. Iyengar saw it as "an even mature achievement, and is something of a bridge spanning childhood and age, and India and America" (672). Prof. Nagarajan opined that the promise of the first book has not been fulfilled in the second and that the poems in it "suffer to some extent from this intellectual thinness" (20).

Ramanujan's poetry of the past provides ample proof of the fact that his thematic strategy is exactly the right one for a poet in his situation, one is not sure that during the three decades and more that he wrote poetry he fully exploited the opportunities his material offered him. Hence, it is difficult to agree with R. Parthasarathy when he says that "Ramanujan's repossession, through his poetry, of the past of his family and of his sense of himself as a distillation of the part is to me a signal achievement" (193). S. Nagarajan seems to be nearer the point when he observes that "almost all the poems" in *Relations* "suffer to some extent from ...intellectual thinness" (20). But it is not so much a case of intellectual thinness as of an inability or disinclination to have a bold, all-out confrontation with experience, opting instead for sporadic skirmishes, minor engagements and hit and run tactics. For instance, Ramanujan's poetry of familial memory gives us much that is of human interest but remains, on the whole, severely restricted mostly to the social plane of experience alone, seldom attempting higher or more subtle evocations. The child's discovery of the existence of wonders is an elemental theme, to confine it to the variegated colours in the grandfather's shaving glass alone is to reduce it to woefully minor proportions. And the irony of how adult experience sometimes changes the import of a childhood memory in "History" is equally circumscribed in scope, because the theme can certainly take the weight of a much more significant and complex human situation.

As Ramanujan was alive to sharp some difference between the enriching culture and tradition of India and the West, his sense of nostalgia got intensified with passing years. The readers are driven to juxtapose the Spiritual

community-oriented, tolerant value system of India and the materialistic, individualistic, racist, power-hungry exploitative system of the west (Kirpal 5). The myth of the white man's superiority probably becomes meaningless. And hence, the poet goes back with renewed spirit and vigour to his people and his country. Therefore, a major theme of Ramanujan's poetry has been his obsession with the familial and racial past and memory plays a vital and creative role. The family, for Ramanujan, is "one of the central metaphors with which he thinks", says the noted Indo Anglian poet R. Parthasarathy (95).

Ramanujan presents a realistic picture of imagination in his poems. "A Wobbly Top" is an imaginative poetic piece describing a top gifted to the poet by his father. On the other hand, "Routine day Sonnet" recounts the ordinariness of a perfectly routine day for the poet. On this ordinary day, nothing spectacular happens, and the poet undergoes the experiences of everyday chores. He watches "a red lorry" passing the window at two; or sees a sailor "with a chest tattoo" across it. In the evening, he takes a walk with his daughter, to be followed by dinner, coffee, and bedtime story of dog, bone and ghost. Then he sees a bullock cart in his dream. But suddenly he wakes up with a start when he hears the rough, volcanic voice of his wife. The wife cries her heart out as if from a crater/in hell; and the husband realizes that she hates him and he hates her. This poem deals with day-to-day life of the poet.

But I wake with a start
to hear my wife cry her heart
out as if from a crater
in hell; she hates me, I hate her,
I'm a fiethy rat and a satyr. (*CP* 12)

"Real Estate" brings out a contrast of attitudes between the poet and his cousin. The possessive cousin knows buildings and their shape and gender; he also knows the glass used and its quality, with all its "apparent transparency" (*CP* 91). He is a great humanist who-

Calculates
 stress and strain on wood
 and steel, on liver and lower brain. (*CP* 91)

He is immensely helpful to the needy and the wounded. Yet he fails to calculate correctly about the “mushrooms after rain” and about the “reeking/crotches of rotting timber/bought years ago”. The real contrast comes out in the last four lines:

Only we, our uncle’s nephews, know
 Windows without walls
 or the kinds of grass that grow
 in the twinkle of an uncle’s eye. (*CP* 92)

The suggestion here is that the uncle is not realistic and matter-of-fact as his nephews are, and that he is highly dreamy and visionary by nature.

Through the poem “History” and “Obituary” the poet wants to convey about the cultures and ceremonies of Hindu family and also about our Indian society. In “History” the poet throws a good deal of light on human nature through his family. Ramanujan’s family is true of every family, not only in India but everywhere else. Greed is a universal weakness and we are all selfish and money-minded whether we are high or low in social-status. Through this poem, the poet wants to convey that unlimited desire creates unhappiness in our life. By reading this poem every reader feels ashamed of himself. The poem thus opens

which usually
 changes slowly
 changes sometimes
 during a single conversation. (*CP* 107)

Conversation takes place between the poet and his mother who has explained to him what really had taken on his grand-aunt’s death. This poem tells about the basic greed of all human beings. Human greed shows itself even when someone close to us has just died and his or her dead body still lies before us, waiting to be buried or cremated.

of diamond ear-rings,
 bangles, anklets, the pin
 in her hair,
 the toe-rings from her wedding
 the previous century,
 all except the gold. (*CP* 108)

The poet describes when his grand-aunt's dead body still lay on the floor, waiting to be cremated and her eyes still unclosed her relatives even her daughters had shown leaning nature to grab everything. Her relatives did not feel guilty even to remove the ornaments from the dead woman's body. They went further on to rob the dead body which had just been laid out to be washed before the cremation.

These few chosen poems, thus illustrate Ramanujan's unique style not only to juxtapose disparate elements but also to fuse outer forms and inner thoughts into a magnificent whole. To conclude, we can say that Ramanujan's poetry is the expression of a poetic sensibility in which the Indian subjectivity coalesces with the western objectivity (Lall 51).

To conclude we can say that family is a system in which nothing human is alien and even oblivion has its function. The family is a tissue of relationships and conventions. Through his poems on his relatives and family members Ramanujan shows the social status, rituals, customs, ceremonies and day to day life moments. He throws light on Hindu ladies who always think about their family well-being and believing in various gods and goddesses. The poet through his poems throws light on the greedy nature of human being that he can destroy his belongings. Family is the basic social unit consisting of parents and their children. Family performs different functions in the maintenance of the social structure. Ramanujan's poetry is family-oriented. His poetry is about nuclear family and also the extended family he remembers as he transacts with the past. He displays a profound sense of integrity in personal relationships that concentrate on the family. His poems deal with the familial motif, explore and analyse various relationships in a joint Hindu

family. Through his poems he presents the daily routine of all his family members like bathing before the village crow and hearing the faint morning song. Law of heredity is present in his poem which means that some characters or traits of the ancestors like father, mother, grand-father, grand-mother and so on manifests the successors. He wants to convey about the cultures and ceremonies of Hindu family and also about the Indian society. He throws light on the conditions of women in Hindu society. Man is the supreme power over women and she does nothing without his permission. He throws a light on human nature through his family. His family epitomises every family, not only in India but everywhere else. He wants to convey that unlimited desire creates unhappiness in life.

Works Cited

- Comfort, Alex. *Sex in Society*. Harmondsworth: Penguin. 196, 88. Print.
- Hawkes, Terence. *Metaphor*. London: Methiuen. 1972, 2. Print.
- Kirpal, Viney. *The Third World Novel of Expatriation*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1989. Print.
- Kulshrestha, C. "The Self in Ramanujan's Poetry." *The Indian Journal of English Studies*, 18 (1978-79): 115. Print.
- Lall, Emmannel N. *The Poetry of Encounter*. New Delhi: Sterling. 1983. Print.
- Nagarajan, S. "A.K. Ramanujan. *Contemporary Indian Poetry in English*." ed. Saleem Peeradina, Delhi: Macmillan Co. of India, 1977, 19-21. Print.
- Naik, M.K. "A.K. Ramanujan and the Search for Roots." *Dimensions of Indian English Literature*. New Delhi: Sterling Pub. 1985, 19-20. Print.
- Naipaul, V.S. *The Enigma of Arrival*. New York: Vintage Books. 1987. Print.
- Parthasarathy, R, ed. *Ten Twentieth Century Indian Poets*. New Delhi: Oxford UP, 1976. Print.
- . "How It Strikes a Contemporary: The Poetry of A.K. Ramanujan." *The Literary Criterion*, 12.2-3 (1976): 195. Print.
- Iyengar Srinivasa, K.R. *Indian Writing in English*. 1962; New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd; 1984, 672. Print.