Chapter III

The Living Past in the Poetry of A.K. Ramanujan

Memory opens up endless possibilities for poetry. It is a thumbscrew that a poet turns to his or her advantage. Most of the poems are memory poems. Perpetuating past events and experiences across time and space, he makes them timeless and space-free. Full of vibrant visuals and radiant symbols, he empowers his art through memory. M. K. Naik aptly remarks: “On the personal plane, this insistent preoccupation with the past produces a poetry in which memory plays a vigorous, creative role” (“A. K. Ramanujan and the Search for Roots” 14). Nissim Ezekiel has high praise for A.K.Ramanujan. He says that ‘A. K. Ramanujan’s poems has the flavour of a modern classic’ and adds, “The standards for Indo-English poetry today are set by A. K. Ramanujan. His poems function like precision instruments. Even the titles are meticulously imaginative, not merely utilitarian” (“Two Poets: A. K Ramanujan and Keki N. Daruwalla” 153). In The Striders (1966) and Relations (1977) the poems seem to have, as stated by Bruce King, grown out of the expatriate poet’s Indian experiences and sensibility with all its memories of family, local places, images, beliefs and history” (Three Indian Poets 115). Despite A. K. Ramanujan’s spell in the U. S. A. his mind always feels drawn towards the country of his birth, India. This chapter is devoted to A. K. Ramanujan finding anchorage in his native roots. The members of his family flash before his mind’s eye and the Indian customs and conventions get branded on his memory and leave their marks in the poems under study.

Scholar after scholar on A.K.Ramanujan’s works has referred to the remarkable aspect of A.K.Ramanujan’s poetry. To quote Premila Paul:

A. K. Ramanujan’s poetry deals with both individual and racial memory. 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 A. K. Ramanujan’s poetry in a way belittles its significance. It is not an object observed or experience analyzed. 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 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 human-relatedness (“Roots that Roam: Relationships in A. K. Ramanujan’s Poetry” 70)

A. K. Ramanujan claims that his mind is a storehouse of innumerable trivial things like nursery rhymes on Tipu Sultan or Jack and Jill or the cosmetic use of gold during the golden age of Guptas but it is an irony that memory plays hide and seek game with him when it comes to the matter of remembering a face from a sea of faces and the words thrown at random at him or by him. And he comes to the conclusion:

    Memory,
    in a crowd of memories, seems
    to have no place
    at all for unforgettable things.

(“On Memory,” TCPAKR 21)

This poem is a reminiscent of Lynd’s essay on “Forgetfulness.”

In the poem “A Lapse of Memory,” the poet in a humorous vein says how people make an amnesiac use of memory, for example, a liar ever claims that he never utters lies. So does a healthy man that he suffers from sickness. The poet compares amnesia to a tree which, when struck by lightning, sheds off all its leaves.

The past impressions get lost in the present and the poet gropes in oblivion for the mother and the other members of the family who are now no more. But shockingly, the mind remembers:

    …the smell of woman’s perfume
    in a childhood latrine, a peanut seller’s
racusous cry, or three obscene lines
mating white and black lizards
in schoolbook Sanskrit. Or a slant
of rain on the sunshine and the papaya tree.
(“A Lapse of Memory,” TCAKR 76)

A. K. Ramanujan uses the self as the centre for a poem, and his memories have a local habitation in Tamil Brahmin society. His topics are specific and situations are particular. His memories, pleasant or bitter, are long cherished. Many of his poems show the poet’s assured identity within the family. At the same time when he talks about the members of his family, he underplays his emotions thus avoiding sentimentality. In an interview, A. K. Ramanujan says, “Indians are writing poetry about what they know, about their experiences. They are not imitating British poetry” (Times of India 13).

The family is usually the central metaphor that explores the hinterland of memory and knocks out his experience into disturbingly vivid forms. A. K. Ramanujan’s poetry shows how an Indian poet in English derives his strength from going back to his roots -- his childhood memories. As Parthasarathy says, “The family, for A. K. Ramanujan, is in fact one of the central metaphors with which he thinks” (Ten Twentieth Century Indian Poets 95).

To quote Shirish Chindhade:

Ramanujan is basically a poet of memories. Of all the memories the ones that are anchored to his familial, personal past make his poetry very redolent with the characteristic native element of the Indian experience. In fact, his alienation finds a consolatory transformation in his vivid, subtle and innumerable remembrances. All his poetic collections are full of poems inspired by the remote personal past, reminding the poet of umpteen incidents, relations, situations and experiences that are ineluctably associated with his family in relation to his own self (“Living Among Relations Binds The Feet: A. K. Ramanujan” 63).

There are luminous evocations of his family life in the following poems, for example, “Small-scale Reflections on a Great House,” “Obituary,” “Of Mothers, among Other Things,” “Love Poem for a Wife I,” and “Looking for a Cousin on a Swing.” The satirical tone, the
critical stance, the ironic mode and the objective stand readers perceive in his poems are the result of the freedom A. K. Ramanujan enjoys, living away from home.

A. K. Ramanujan mainly depends on sharply etched and crystallized images for effectively communicating his tragic vision of the family. The mastery that he exhibits over language and linguistic skills coupled with his eye for minute details bring before readers scultuersque word-pictures. To achieve the desired effect, he does not hesitate to make use of the slang, the colloquial and the cliché also.

In “Small-scale Reflections on a Great House,” the poet has a nostalgic peep into his past and family. A large traditional Hindu joint-family gets projected in the poem. So great is the absorbing quality of the Great house that things come in everyday to lose themselves among other things lost long ago: “nothing / that ever comes into this house / goes out”(TCPAKR 96). As Chirantan Kulshrestha says, “each of the things ‘lost long ago’ revives in the speaker’s memory an event which is recounted in terms of its haunting pathos and a near-absurd complexity” (“The Self in A. K. Ramanujan’s Poetry” 114). The poem catalogues things that come into the house from outside to stay forever: “wandering cows,” “library books,” “neighbor’s dishes,” “sons-in-law” and “daughters-in-law.” There is a mingling of pathos and humour with an ironic tinge in the visual picture of “sons-in-law” who forget their mothers/ but stay to check/ accounts or teach arithmetic to nieces” (TCPAKR 96). They do not teach nephews! There is an exposure of the pretence of the shy girls hiding themselves beneath the windows with holes in them and feasting their eyes with a sight to dream of, not to tell:

lame wandering cows from nowhere
have been known to be tethered,
………………………………
given a name, encouraged
   to get pregnant in the broad daylight
   of the street under the elders’
supervision, the girls hiding behind windows with holes in them.

(“Small-scale Reflection on a Great House,” *TCPAKR* 96)

To quote Sharma:

Neither the family relationships nor his own past or the past tradition or culture of India offer him any trustworthy clue to a viable and rewarding culture system in a wider cultural context. As a matter of fact, the Indian cultures as well as the poet’s personal relationships are reviewed in the light of the American culture and milieu through which he tries to recognize things in their true perspective to arrive at the truth of ultimate reality of human existence (“Impact of American Milieu and Quest for Reality in A. K. Ramanujan’s Poetry” 185).

“Nothing stays out.” Anything that goes out, for example, letters redirected, ideas turned as rumors, bawdy songs of beggars, widowed daughters, run-away sons in the form of grand–children and a nephew brought home dead. There is a pathetic picture of a traditional South Indian middle class Brahmin family to which daughters return as widows. Paucity of finance stands in the way of getting a suitable husband for the daughter. Hence their marriage to short-lived idiots. There is a moving picture of an orthodox Brahmin family with grand children left behind by the run-away sons.

Nothing stays out: daughters get married to short-lived idiots; sons who run away come back in grandchildren who recite Sanskrit to approving old men, or bring betelnuts for visiting uncles ……………………………………………………………
or to bring Ganges water in a copper pot for the last of the dying ancestors’ rattle in the throat.

(“Small-scale Reflection on a Great House,” *TCPAKR* 98)

The juxtaposition of “Small” and “Great” in the title is richly meaningful. The “House” is great but the people are, indeed, small. Is not the “Great house” really great in
accommodating everything and everybody that comes by? The all-embracing “Great House” throws its door open to good-for-nothing run-away sons and to the hapless daughters rendered widows on account of their marriage to short-lived idiots. The “Great House” keeps the door open to a nephew; a warrior brought home dead, getting killed not in the victorious battle but half -gnawed by foxes. Indeed, after death, even if it were to occur, as far away as the Sahara, or somewhere in the North, one depends upon the Great House for the performance of obsequies. The thorn of irony does not fail to prick the readers, though the poem charms them with its dose of humour throughout.

As stated by Dwivedi:

The poem “Small-scale Reflection on a Great House” tells us about the wonderful assimilative and digestive powers of the house, which absorbs not only good things but also bad things. On the one hand, it is very warm to guests, sons-in-law, wives coming from poor houses, daughters married to short-lived idiots, sons returning in grandchildren, nephews killed in war on the borders; on the other, it tethers others’ cow, matures; unread library books’ in two weeks, does not return neighbours’ dishes brought up with the greasy sweets (“Theme and Form in A. K. Ramanujan’s Poetry” 86).

The traditional Hindu Joint-Family is great because of its tremendous capacity to absorb the shocks and knocks in the careers of her children and because of shelter and sustenance offered to her children in times of despair and dire need. The poet loses his calm a little and seems to feel that the Hindu Joint Family disintegrated because of the ever-increasing demands made on it by unscrupulous persons like unfeeling sons-in-law lacking in filial affection, short-lived idiots rendering daughters widows and run-away sons leaving their children to be taken care of by others.

To quote Premila Paul:

Though individual family members are mentioned in it, it is ‘family’ as an institution that is glorified in “Small-scale Reflection on a Great House.” The carefully worked out imprecision of the poem, images extended, crowded yet telling details and some even unnecessary, deft repetitions and deliberate digressions suggest that 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 lot in the family institution ("Roots that Roam: Relationships in A. K. Ramanujan’s Poetry" 73).

A. K. Ramanujan has nothing edifying to say about his father. The poem “Obituary” registers no filial piety on the part of the son. There is neither a lamentation over the loss nor an affectionate reference in the recollection of the memory of his father.

To quote Akshya Kumar:

If nostalgia for family becomes a metaphor of Indianness, its reconstructions as an inescapable genetic code that imprisons the poet’s free growth, becomes a metaphor of post-modern (or post-family) Chicago culture. In poems such as “Obituary,” “On the Very Possible Jaundice to an Unborn Daughter,” “Heredity,” “Warning,” “Drafts” etc family is recalled in ways that challenge the very sanctity of family as a social institution. The traditional elegiac obituary becomes a double voiced discourse in which the dead father, the centre of authority in an Indian family, is a target both of intimate love and intellectual derision thus ("Parody as Subterfuge: Cultural Politics of A. K. Ramanujan’s Poetry" 13).

This poem of memory and reflection begins in a flippant tone. Dusty papers on a table, debts to be repaid, daughters to be married, a bed-wetting grandson and an old decaying house are the legacy left behind by the dead father:

Father, when he passed on
left dust
on a table full of papers
left debts and daughters
a bed-wetting grand-son
named by the toss
of a coin after him
a house that leaned
slowly through our growing
years on a bent coconut
tree in the yard

("Obituary," TCPAKR 111)

As remarked by Kalaitthasam:

The repetition of the hard consonant ‘t’ in ‘dust’, ‘debts’ and ‘daughters’ and in the twice-repeated ‘left’ suggests, by their sound, the harshness of
experience confronting the son. There is a hint at the poverty of the father and at the curse of the middle class Brahmin family in incurring debts for the marriage of the daughters. There is an evocation of the family tradition of eternizing the memory of the elders in naming the child after the grand-father (54).

What other things did the father leave behind? He also left his ashes and two coins with which his eyes were closed and several spinal discs charred but not fully burnt. The unburnt eye coins and the half-burnt spinal discs show the horror of death the son feels and the legacy of responsibility the son faces in his father’s death. The obsequies to be performed flash before the poet’s mind:

… for sons
to pick gingerly
and throw as the priest
said, facing east
where three rivers met
near the railway station;

(“Obituary,” TCPAKR 111)

Here is a vivid recollection of the Hindu convention of collecting the bits of the bones of the dead and getting them immersed in sacred rivers on the second day after the cremation.

Though an obituary note is published in the daily, no head stone is erected. In a mocking tone, he says, if a head stone were there, it would, in addition to father’s full name and the date of his birth and death, include in parentheses:

everything he didn’t quite
manage to do himself,
like his caesarian birth
in a Brahmin ghetto
and his death by heart-
failure in the fruit market.

(“Obituary,” TCPAKR 112)

The seriousness of the father’s death gets evaporated the way in which the city newspaper reporting the news is later sold “to street hawkers / who sell it in turn / to the small groceries” (“Obituary,” TCPAKR 112). The poet continues to write in a tone that borders on
banality. The poet finds the news of his father’s death in the paper cone from the grocer’s shop. Look at the blending of levity and seriousness.

The concluding lines register a sudden shift in tone and save the poem from falling into flippancy:

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

(“Obituary,” TCAKR 112)

The crisp expression “a changed mother” is poignant in its appeal bringing before the mind’s eye the picture of a widow in a Hindu society. Made ugly with the tonsure of her head and denial of simple pleasures, she is considered a bad omen. She is no longer the honoured member of the house. But the situation of the son is very different. He is only aware of the “more than/ one annual ritual” (“Obituary,” TCAKR 112) he will have to perform gingerly as the priest will instruct him. Away in America, he wonders: Will the rituals bring the dead back to life? / Will they offer consolation to the mother?

The anguish-charged expression “changed mother” leads A. K. Ramanujan to say what opinion he has formed of his mother. He has a pleasant word for the mother. The poem “Of Mothers among Other Things” is a fond recollection of the affectionate and loving care only a mother is capable of demonstrating towards her children. Though abroad in the U. S. A., A. K. Ramanujan recalls his mother in a nostalgic vision. The poem presents the mother during youth, middle age and old age.

The opening lines of the poem paint a charming picture of the mother in her youth:

I smell upon this twisted
blackbone tree the silk and white
petal of my mother’s youth.
From her ear-rings three diamonds
Splash a handful of needles,

(“Of Mothers among Other Things,” TCAKR 61)
The lines express all the happy reminiscences about the mother. Then follows the picture of the mother in her middle age – the mother running back “from rain to the crying cradles” (TCPAKR 61). The self-negating mother has no time for her but to care for the baby crying in the cradle: “and I see my mother run back/ from rain to the crying cradles” (TCPAKR 61). These lines express the motherly instinct in her that hurries her up to hug and caress the baby or lull the baby to sleep.

With the passage of time, the rain of years of misfortune leaves her withered and wrinkled in her old age. The rain, as in Farewell to Arms, is a symbol of sorrow. Her hands are like “a wet eagle’s / two black pink-crinkled feet” (TCPAKR 61) and she has one finger lost “in a garden-trap/ set for mouse” (TCPAKR 61). Old age leaves her thin and lean and her sari hangs loose round her body like a broken feather from the wings of a wounded bird: “Her sarees/ do not cling: they hang, loose/ feather of a onetime wing” (TCPAKR 61).

To quote Dwivedi:

Many of the poems have their origin in ‘recollected personal emotion’ and deal with the poet’s memory of his relatives and surroundings. “Of Mothers, among Other Things” is such a poem. As A. K. Ramanujan has stated in his epigraph poem, a fine rendering from the classical Tamil, the most ‘binding’ of human relations is mother. The poet could never free himself, perhaps nobody can, from the acute sense of loss and agony connected with the sweet memory of the mother. The thought of the mother is full and continuous in the poem. The last three stanzas are compared to ‘a wet eagle’s/ two black pink-crinkled feet’ and her saris hanging loose on her body to a ‘loose/ feather of a onetime wing’ (“The Poetry of A. K. Ramanujan” 13).

The poet feels choked with emotion to visualize the feeble mother’s frail structure picking a grain of rice from the kitchen floor:

My cold parchment tongue licks back  
in the mouth when I see her four  
still sensible fingers slowly flex  
to pick a grain of rice from the Kitchen floor.  
(“Of Mothers among other things,” TCPAKR 61)

Don’t readers feel a lump in the throat? The mother going about her duty slowly because of age and infirmity is captured in the repetition of sibilants ‘S’ in the penultimate line.
To quote K. Satchidanandan:

In “Of Mother, among Other Things” however the mask becomes almost transparent as the poet smells “the silk and white petal” of his mother’s youth on a twisted blackbone tree that leads him to the image of the mother running back from rain to crying cradles. The poem ends with the agony the poet suffers each time his mother’s ‘four sensible fingers slowly flex to pick a grain of rice from the kitchen floor’ (“Against the Grain: The Role of Memory in A. K. Ramanujan’s Poetry” 29)

The poem has a pointed reference to the poet’s mother in particular but has an extended appeal to all the mothers. To quote S. K. Desai: “In ‘Of Mother, Among Other Things,’ the poet is not speaking especially of his mother but of the mothers in general….” (“Mixing Memory and Desire: Small-scale Reflection on the Poetry A. K. Ramanujan” 112).

In the poem titled “Ecology” A. K. Ramanujan talks about his mother in a reminiscent mood. “Ecology” is a disturbing poem born out of A. K. Ramanujan’s disturbed memory. This poem speaks of the Champak trees in the garden of the poet’s ancestral house and how the flowers of these trees affected the health of his mother. Just as A. K. Ramanujan’s poem “History,” is personal history, “Ecology” too is personal ecology, if there is any at all.

Going straight to the point, the poet begins the poem with the following lines: “The day after the first rain,/ for years, I would come home / in a rage” (TCPAKR 124). So it had been happening for years, until the poet migrated to the U. S. A. Once the rainy season started he would be filled with ‘rage’ and rush for home. The reason for this rage is given only in the third stanza. The second stanza merely makes a reference to the Champak trees and makes a vague, intriguing statement: “our three Red Champak trees / had done it again” (TCPAKR 124). Only the third stanza reveals, continuing with the thread of the previous stanza, how the flowers of the trees gave “her first blinding migraine / of the season” (TCPAKR 124). Whenever the Champak trees blossomed, they caused migraine to the poet’s mother, a severe blinding migraine, which would be repeated for the entire season, as long as the blossoms remained. It was the yellow pollen of the flowers, which were responsible for
this. And there was no way of getting rid of them, though it appears that people in the house had tired. The walls were not adequate to keep the pollen out. Here the poet indulges in humorous description of the walls.

… our black-pillared house whose walls has ears and eyes,

scales, smells, bone-creaks, nightly visiting voices, and were porous like us,

(“Ecology,” TCPAKR 124)

Therefore the mother had to endure her ailment, which she did in her own admirably stoic way. She tried to minimize her headache by putting wet pack on her forehead.

To quote Dwivedi:

“Ecology” deals with the change of season and atmosphere and therewith the flowering of the three Red Champak trees, giving the poet’s mother ‘her first blinding migraine/ of the season’ and rendering the poet furious. The poet actually wants to cut down those trees, but his mother does not permit him to do so. After all, the trees were the source of supplying sweet-smelling flowers to her gods and her daughters and her daughters’ daughter, but for cousins they also necessitated ‘a dower of migraines in season’ (“Second Sight: Indianness of A. K. Ramanujan’s Poetry” 48).

Of course, she would never permit the trees to be cut, though that would have been a permanent remedy. How could one think of cutting a flowering tree? The trees were as old as she was. She had grown with them, learned to live with them and developed a bond with them. “…. Seeded, / she said, by a passing bird’s / providential droppings” (TCPAKR 124).

The word ‘providential’ is significant. It was not merely accidental or incidental that the seeds dropped there. Providence intended that the trees must grow in her garden to give baskets of flowers every year for “… her gods and daughter / and daughter’s daughter …” (TCPAKR 124). This throws light on the belief which is typical of the Hindu community that it is good for one to subordinate the individual will to the Providential Will, because, there is,
to follow a Shakespearean maxim: “There’s Providence in the fall of a sparrow” (*Hamlet Act I, Scene IX*).

How generous of the trees! They grew in the garden of their own accord and were supplying to the family members with plenty of flowers to be offered to gods and also to be worn by the daughters. They (the trees) would continue to supply blossoms even to future generations. Only, there was one problem. The pollen gave migraine to the mother, which was a hereditary factor. Perhaps, her mother or someone in the line has had it. Hence she is sure that this seasonal migraine will be passed on to the future generation. Even after knowing this, the mother will not have the trees cut, because, in her reckoning, this migraine was too negligible a price for what the trees generously gave.

As remarked by Rajagopalachary and Ravinder:

> In “Ecology” the poet gives an account of three Red Champak trees. When they bloom into flowers, they cause allergy to his mother. The poet wants to cut down those trees but his mother refuses on the ground that they are seeded by passing birds to give her gods and her daughters and grand children basketful of annual flowers. A conflict between the two generations is presented in the sentimental attachment of mother to the “flowering tree” and the poet’s detached clinical attitude to it (“Kinship with Nature in A. K. Ramanujan’s Poetry” 112).

The poem is titled fittingly “Ecology.” In the words spoken by the mother not cut down the Three Red Champak Trees is heard the voice of an environmentalist. As remarked by Kalamani, “Man has to have great veneration for nature for its own sake. In fact, every other species like him also has a right to exist” (“Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*- An Eco-Critical Approach” n.p.).

One cannot but admire this self-effacing woman. She might not have been made to be aware of the menace of tree-cutting. She might not have learnt science. Yet, her admiration for Nature, her love for all living creatures, and her gratitude to Nature’s bounty made her ecology-conscious. She was appalled at the idea of the tree being cut. In addition, the
thought of her daughters, grand-daughters and descendents getting flowers in plenty every year made her oblivious to her suffering.

The poem titled “Drafts” is a ‘rough draft’. It is itself copy of the last events. The application of DNA makes a study of the constituent of a gene from poet’s grandfather to the poet’s son. It is at work from grandfather to the poet’s son and his wife – grandfather’s violins music, epilepsies in uncle’s, mother’s migraines, daughter’s passion for bitter gourd and Dostoevsky, mother’s almond eyes mix with poet’s wife’s ancestral hazel, the poet’s son’s green flecks are all the replica of one another. There is a suggestion of a well-knit family structure. Thus there is an evocation of vision and memory of the family from father to grandson.

The DNA leaves copies in me and mine
of grandfather’s violins, and programmes
of much older music;

the epilepsies go to an uncle
to fill him with hymns and twitches,
bypassing me for now;

mother’s migraines translate, I guess,
into allergies, a fear of black cats,
and a daughter’s passion

for bitter gourd and Dostoevsky;
mother’s almond eyes mix with my wife’s
ancestral hazel

to give my son green flecks in a painter’s eye,
but the troubled look is all his own.

(“Drafts,” TCPAKR 158)

The title of the poem in plural is suggestive of that every member and not the original one. Thus the poem “Drafts” gives the picture of the family genealogy tracing the original from the father to grandson in the family gene.

The poetic piece “Son to Father to Son” is a dream poem about the poet’s father, his sister and his son. The poet cannot but remember how he gets scared and screams, when he
dreams of his father with his hanging bee-hive like beard and his father’s talon like toe’s moving towards the son. Nor can he forget his dream of his sister swinging high on the creaky swings. Nor can he forget his son darting an arrow at his daughter falling into the hands of hungry men. And the poet dreams of the ceiling falling over the son’s fallen dead with the eye shut. The poet wakes up from his dream and watches his son accusing him.

I too dream of father,
    his beard z hanging hive,

I scream at the hair
    on his hands

Sister swinging high
    on the creaky swings,

I wake with a round
    shadow for my head,
    the ceiling a falling
    omen. A son’s tall body
    stands target at the door

accuse my ceiling?

(“Son to Father to Son,” TCPAKR 155)

To quote Shirish Chindhade:

Ramanujan always displays a profound sense of integrity in personal relationships that concentrate in 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 (“Living Among Relations Binds the Feet: A. K. Ramanujan” 84).

The poet’s identification with the past and family gets reflected in the poem “Still Another for Mother.” The poet is, perhaps, a silent spectator of a street brawl between the old English pair on Hyde Park Street in North America. The poet’s mind goes backward in a similar incident involving his own parents. He was not sure whether they fought or not fought but the incident remains shut up in his mind revealing itself.
something opened
in the past and I heard something shut
in the future, quietly,
like the heavy door
of my mother’s black-pillared, nineteenth-century
silent house, given on her marriage day
to my father, for a dowry.

(“Still Another for Mother,” TCPAKR 16)

The readers get a picture of his own mother as she looked then. She had thick glass on, was large, buxom and wearing chintz and eating mints. This followed the portrait of the house – a black-pillared, nineteenth century house, given on her mother’s marriage day to his father for a dowry. As remarked by Shirish Chindhade:

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 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 (“Living Among Relations Binds the Feet: A. K. Ramanujan” 67).

A. K. Ramanujan’s father resembles to a certain extent Nissim Ezekiel’s father. In the poem “Night of the Scorpion” Nissim Ezekiel speaks of his father as ‘a skeptic rationalist.’ The two terms “trying every curse and blessings” bring out the bundle of opposites in Nissim Ezekiel’s father as evidenced by his father’s trying both medicine and mantras to alleviate the effect of the scorpion bite. A. K. Ramanujan’s father also is a compound of contradictions. A. K. Ramanujan admits that he felt troubled by his father’s holding together both astronomy and astrology: “I looked for consistency in him, a consistency he didn’t seem to care about, or even think about” (“Is There an Indian Way of Thinking” An Informal Essay” 36).
A. K. Ramanujan’s father felt his son not mathematically minded and literally took him by the hand in the Registrar’s office and changed his major from Science to English. He could not object but simply kept quiet and thus he yielded to his father’s change of options in the course of his study (Collected Essays 16).

There are moments of clash of interest between father and son. A. K. Ramanujan could not help giving in. To quote Surya Nath Pandey:

In a typically jocular vein he [A. K. Ramanujan] talks about his father’s peculiar way of bathing – “… in brothers’ anecdotes of how noisily / father bathed/ slapping soap on his back; …?” (“Love Poem for a Wife 1,” TCPAKR 65) and also of his knack of riddles and proverbs - “sky-man in a man-hole / … fat man full of proverbs / the language of lean years…” (“Astronomer,” TCPAKR 134). Conceding that everyman is a bathroom singer, this is obviously an unsophisticated way of taking bath, but Ramanujan imitates his father in Chicago apartment – “slap soap on my back / like father / and think / in proverbs” (“Extended Family,” TCPAKR 169) (“Correcting a Critical Fallacy: A Closer Reading of A. K. Ramanujan’s Three Early Poems” 84).

A. K. Ramanujan himself fails a victim to an unsophisticated way of having bath and imitates his father in Chicago apartment but there are differences between them. The father considers the habit of using an unwashed and spotted towel to cleanse oneself as loathsome and unthinkable but the son in his usual way continues with his old habits.

like me
I wipe myself dry
with an unwashed
Sears Turkish towel

(“Extended Family,” TCPAKR 169)

That A. K. Ramanujan has no soft word for his father is in evidence in a number of poems. There are the crises of identity in A. K. Ramanujan. A. K. Ramanujan cannot be called the chip of the old block. He is no exact facsimile of his father’s personality. It extends itself to the other members of the family. So does he speak of his wife who becomes the faraway stranger.
The poem “History” unfolds an untold story of the poet’s petite little aunt. She turns out to be a sheep in wolf’s clothing. So far she has been taken for a sweet looking woman but the day the poet’s great aunt died showed her true nature. The poet was shocked to see his little dark aunt looking for something under the dead body of the great aunt. Her two daughters, one dark and one fair unknown to each to other were busy removing the diamond, ear-rings, anklets, the hair pins, the toe-rings. These incidents the poet’s mother narrated.

Thereafter the little aunt’s face acquired some special expression.

her two
daughters, one dark one fair,
unknown each to 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
.............................................

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

(“History,” TCPAKR 108)

The attribute “little” in the phrase assumes added significance because the word does not talk about the physical feature of the aunt’s stature but the small mindedness of the aunt.

The importance of memory in A. K. Ramanujan’s poetry is reiterated by critic after critic. Bruce King observes that, “The use of private experience, and specially the inner world of memories and the continuities and discontinuities with the past can be seen as the basis of many of A. K. Ramanujan’s poems” (219). Referring to the vigorous and creative role of memory in A. K. Ramanujan’s verse M. K. Naik comments: “It is not emotion recollected in
tranquility but recollection emotionalized in un-tranquil moments…. This memory is fruitfully creative when it attempts an almost total recall of sensuous childhood impressions of fear, sorrow or death” (201).

What has A. K. Ramanujan to say about his wife? He has no flattering word for the wife. The poem “Love Poem for a Wife I” expresses the poet’s need for an identity that is lovable in his relationship with his wife. Though entitled “Love Poem for a Wife I,” the poem begins in a jarring note and states the poet’s melancholic brooding over “unshared childhood”:

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.

(“Love Poem for a Wife I,” TCPAKR 65)

The poet and his wife cannot share each other’s experiences because they cannot know each other’s parents. The poet’s inability to have empathetic identification with his wife is due to the absence of common childhood memories between them.

It is a pity they are not free from envy at the recapitulation of each other’s past and the sense of alienation becomes all the more alarming:

In the traverse midnight gossip
of cousins’ reunions among
brandy fumes, cashews and the Absences
of grandparents, you suddenly grow
nostalgic for my past and I
envy you your village dog-hide
and the mythology
of the seven crazy aunts.

(“Love Poem for a Wife I,” TCPAKR 65)
They look at each others’ indulgences envioully – she of his being in the company of cousins sharing brandy and cashew-nuts and gossiping all midnight in the absence of elders and he of her village dog-rides and the wonderful story of her crazy aunts. The string of personal pronouns and possessives ‘your’ and ‘my’ reinforces the futility of any effort to enter into another’s past with a view to understanding his or her personality.

In a reminiscent mood, the poet talks of her eagerness to know his boyhood from the family album and of his father’s bathing habits from the members of his family and of her delight to see the wedding photo of his parents.

There follows the poet’s unabashed articulation of his wife’s shady past – her coming home late after spending a time with a Muslim friend and the pretended innocence of his wife and her father:

he will acknowledge the wickedness
of no reminiscence; no, not
the burning end of the Cigarette
in the balcony, pacing
to and fro, as you came to the gate
late after what you thought
was an innocent
date with a nice Muslim friend
who only hinted at touches.

(“Love Poem for a Wife 1,” TCPAKR 66)

The lines reveal, in a confessional vein, the brutally frank admission of the failure of the poet’s marriage. They account for his inability to find emotional fulfillment.

The coming together of the relatives of both husband and wife does not pave the way for the development of harmony and understanding. Rather it aggravates the problem. The arrival of the wife’s brother, James and the manner brother and sister quarrel and hotly discuss the location of a bathroom in her grandfather’s house in Alleppey, much to the chagrin of the people around, only widen the cracks:

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,

(“Love Poem for a Wife 1,” TCPAKR 66)

But the husband, a stranger utterly unacquainted with their past, is reduced to the position of a passive spectator. In agony and isolation, because he is isolated from his wife, he cries his heart out:

… Sisters-in-law
and I were blank cut-outs
fitted to our respective
slots in a room

really no where as the two of you
got down to the floor to draw
blue –prints of a house from memory

(“Love Poem for a Wife 1,” TCPAKR 66- 67)

As the anguish and the agony arising out of this emotional aridity is excruciating, the poet comes out with a wild crazy suggestion. They may follow the example of the Egyptian Pharaohs who married their own sisters and shared each other’s childhood experiences:

… Probably
only the Egyptian had it right:
their Kings had sisters for queens
to continue the incest’s
of childhood into a marriage.

(“Love Poem for a Wife 1,” TCPAKR 67)

This absurd, atrocious suggestion would outrage anyone. K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar bemoans this shocking suggestion: “It is rather sad that the spirit of consecration could by slow stages decline to almost cynical desecration in a foreign climate” (“The New Poets” 677).

The poet comes out with another alternative. They may follow the ancient Hindu custom of child-marriage when children are betrothed even before their birth:
Or we should do as well- meaning Hindu 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 nameless of childhoods.

(“Love Poem for a Wife 1,” TCPAKR 67)

Indeed, such a practice would have saved the trouble of casting horoscopes!

The absence of a possessive adjective ‘my’ instead of an indefinite article ‘a’ before ‘wife’ in the title smacks of lack of warmth and empathetic identification in the poet’s relation with his wife. The repeated use of “my” and “you” adds to the poignancy of the situation bordering on estranged relationship. The emotional and cultural hiatus staring at him because of an ultra-modern wife is well brought out in the “You – me drag out fight” between husband and wife.

In “Love Poem for a Wife 2” records the unhappy reminiscences of his relationship with wife who is always wavering and vacillating like picking up quarrels in all places known and unknown making nights sleepless and days restless. To his mind nurtured in Brahminic tradition she is half woman and half man symbolic of Lord Arthnareeswarar.

of being halfwoman half-
man contained in a common
body, 
androgynous as a god

(“Love Poem for a Wife 2,” TCPAKR 84)

Ironically, the poem is titled “Love Poem for a Wife 2.” Had the poet any love for his wife is anybody’s guess.

The poem “Love Poem for a Wife and Her Trees” in quick succession with other two poems “Love Poem for a Wife 1” and “Love Poem for a Wife 2” establishes that the poet has no soft word for his wife but calls her dear woman. He is not proud of his genealogy or his family tree because he has nothing softening to say about his wife or about his son. She lacks
not only wifely devotion but also motherly love and sisterly affection: “you’re not Mother… / you’re not my Daughter…” (TCPAKR 180-181). His mother died long ago but her memory still lives on unlike his wife, his mother was close to her children.

The lines “I forget at night and remember at dawn / you’re not me but Another, the faraway / stranger who’s nearby,” (TCPAKR 182) are poignantly powerful as they drive home the meaning that in his relationship with her, she is wife at night but during day time she ceases to be so but another. The term ‘Another’ is richly ambiguous. Does it mean another woman or another’s wife? The poem ends with his ability to change the roles and at the same time he can play roles at once.

… I can play son,
father, brother, macho lover, gaping tourist, and clumsy husband.

(“Love Poem for a Wife and Her Trees,” TCPAKR 183)

A. K. Ramanujan has no word of praise for his cousin. The poem “Looking for a Cousin on a Swing” records a remembered experience of the woman-persona’s childhood incident. It is about a boy (the poet) of six or seven years and a girl (the poet’s cousin) of four or five years. They are cousins, probably living together in an ancestral house. They enjoy the childhood pastime of sitting on a swing and enjoying its movement:

When she was four or five
she sat on a village swing
and her cousin, six or seven,
sat himself against her;

(“Looking for a Cousin on a Swing,” TCPAKR 19)

To quote Madhavi Sondkar:

“Looking for a Cousin on a Swing” is a lyric poem. The poem preserves the poet’s childhood memory of a cousin who was his play-fellow when they were children. They would sit together on a swing and move rapidly, experiencing the innocent physical touch. They also used to climb a tree with dense foliage. The girl, grown up and probably married is unable to forget the pleasure of the swing. She looks for the swing in the cities with fifteen suburbs where she has settled after marriage. She longs for the same physical touch, physical
pleasure. The childhood innocence no doubt is lost and maturity has stepped in…. The mood of nostalgia is evident throughout the poem (Perspectives on Indian English Poetry 112)

In the swing, the boy sits against the girl, and they come into physical contact with each other. The girl feels the arousal of innocent sexual feelings:

with every lunge of the swing
she felt him
in the lunging pits
of her feeling;

(“Looking for a Cousin on a Swing,” TCPAKR 19)

The boy and the girl climb the tree afterwards. The tree is not very tall but full of leaves. They are all innocent about what they do under a leafy cover:

and afterwards
we claimed a tree, she said,

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

and we were very innocent
about it.

(“Looking for a Cousin on a Swing,” TCPAKR 19)

Kalaithasan raises the question: “Does the tree serve as a substitute gratification for their half-formed sexual stirrings? Is the Miltonic pair brought into focus to indicate their fall, thereby suggesting the vague sexual stirrings?” (Family Portraits in A. K. Ramanujan’s Poetry 23).

Now, the girl, the poet’s cousin, has grown into a woman. The first thrill and excitement, got out of contact with the opposite sex, has had its impact on her. Now she looks for the swing in the city but she tries to be innocent:

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

(“Looking for a Cousin on a Swing,” TCPAKR 19)

She looks for a similar experience but looking innocent all the time. The verb ‘tries’ brings out her pretence to be innocent.
The intriguing ambiguity in the concluding lines of the poem cannot be missed:

not only on the crotch of a tree
that looked as if it would burst
under every leaf
into a brood of scarlet figs

if someone suddenly sneezed.

(“Looking for a Cousin on a Swing,” TCPAKR 19)

Do not the lines suggest her hankering to be fertilized as suggested by the “brood of scarlet figs”? She has a protruding front – a bulging belly, like the “folk of a tree” and it seems she will burst out with “a brood of scarlet figs” even at the least shock as sight as “suddenly sneezed.”

As stated by Kalaithasan:

The whole poem is couched in Freudian images and Biblical suggestions: ‘swing,’ ‘lunge,’ ‘pits,’ ‘figs,’ ‘crotch,’ ‘scarlet,’ and ‘sneezed.’ The term ‘swing’ is a multi-levelled symbol. Apart from its literal meaning of moving from one direction to another, it carries a Freudian suggestion of going from one to another. That’s why she looks for a swing in cities. She goes on hunting for companions of lust. She is always ready to give herself to anyone who asks for her. ‘Swing’ also denotes a shift from the past innocence of childhood to the present sophisticated knowledge searching for sexual adventures. ‘Shift’ also stands for the shift of the locale from the village to the city suggesting a movement from innocent rusticity to city’s falsity (Family Portraits in A. K. Ramanujan’s Poetry 12).

“Lunge” is a term in fencing. It means a sudden thrust or a forward lunge. It also carries sexual overtones. With every sudden movement of the swing, the girl feels the boy in the lunging pits of feeling, thereby implying the arousal of innocent sexual feelings. “Pit” is an erotic image. It stands for the middle part in a woman.

The use of the fig tree brings to our mind the image of the first man and woman, Adam and Eve and how they covered their genitals, thereby indicating their passing through sexual awareness from the state of innocence. The “crotch” of the tree stands for the crotch of the woman.
To quote Kalaithasan:

The brood of scarlet flowers refers to the eggs produced by the ovary and the seeds of the fig tree. The image of the tree looking as if it would burst under every leaf into a brood of scarlet figs only suggests her search for plurality of sex adventures to get herself fertilized. “Sneezing” is euphuism for touching the genitals in certain Hindu communities (Family Portraits in A. K. Ramanujan’s Poetry 12).

A. K. Ramanujan has no good word for his cousins. The cousin in the poem under study looks for the swing in cities with fifteen suburbs and tries to be innocent. She is a sexually over passionate woman. She might sexually explode since infantile sexual stirrings remain unfulfilled.

“Looking for a Cousin on a Swing” is about Indian ethos and about Indian family system where children grow up amidst misdirected impulses in the absence of a good knowledge about sex. These memories recalled in the discussion of the poems are, according to M. K. Naik, “mostly of life seen through the eyes of a sensitive and observant boy growing up in a traditional middle class southern Hindu Brahmin family” (“A. K Ramanujan and the Search for Roots” 14). A. K. Ramanujan’s poetry is Indian in sensibility and content but English in language. It is rooted in and stems from the Indian environment.

A. K. Ramanujan is critical of an Indian scenario. Not only does he come down upon, for example, the father, the wife, the aunt but also upon the Indian poetic scenario. He does not glorify the river “Vaikai” but registers the havoc caused by the river in times of flood. He does not spare even his poetic fraternity for their callous indifference to the loss of human life, property and cattle wealth. The poet does not feel hesitant to turn the callipers of criticism on the Tamil poets who feel inspired to write about the flood in river in colorful language and are insensitive the destructive aspect of the river. Even the dry river with no flood is considered utterly unsuitable for the poetic treatment by the Tamil poets though the
flood in the river sends him into rapture to write in eulogistic terms about the river in flood. The river in flood is an elegy for the poet A. K. Ramanujan but a eulogy for the Tamil poets.

A. K. Ramanujan was an inheritor of the beliefs and behaviour of an orthodox Vaishnavite Brahmin family. Perhaps he remained unaffected by what he saw around him in the U. S. A. He knew that he had to perform his daily rites and rituals and strictly follow the Vedic injunctions. The life expected of a Brahmin is one of self-control and sacrifice which is opposed to the hedonistic self-indulgence and luxuriance of American culture. Hence his longing for Indian culture, his chewing the cud of the irredeemable bygone past. Whatever he did or wherever he went he could never overcome his early experiences or indelible impressions. His sensibility was peculiar. He reacted strongly even to trivial experiences and carried them in his memory for a long time. Many of his poems speak proudly and precisely of his personal pleasures and pains and the ancestral and traditional values he has inherited.

“Conventions of Despair” is slightly different from his other memory poems in the sense that it deals with the racial memories firmly embedded in the depth of A. K. Ramanujan’s mind through strict upbringing. In fact, personal memory converted into racial memory is the substance of the poem. Though the title “Conventions of Despair” is somewhat ambiguous, the poem, on the whole, has a single unequivocal meaning. Perhaps, the poet refers to the conventions, which cause despair in an emigrant like him. The divided heritage, native and foreign, A. K. Ramanujan has dealt with so subtly and suggestively in this poem. The poem effectively presents the conflict between the conventions of tradition and the sophistication of modernity.

The poem opens with a crude joking reference to the western way of life; and the first part of the poem appears to be essentially a statement of despair and disillusionment. It begins with an ironic utterance of the speaker: “Yes, I know all that. I should be modern. / Marry again. See strippers at the Tease, / Touch Africa. Go to the movies” (TCPAKR 34).
The word ‘modern’ is charged with mild satire and irony. It is modern to talk about the apartheid in Africa without lifting a finger against it. It is modern to go to the movies. It is also modern to subject an insect to vivisection in the name of scientific experiment. The cruelty is forgotten once the name of science is invoked. It is again modern to join those who are engaged in raising their voice in support of banning nuclear tests. One who fails to do so has the danger of becoming an outsider. The result of all this is psychological problems. Consulting a psychiatrist has become a routine in the United States. But most of the people do not realize that it is the price they pay for indiscriminately surrendering to the so called modern way of life. And it is an attempt to escape from inner tension and conflict, and to regain their mental balance they helplessly resort to drinking. The poet makes use of ironic contrast between the glorious Indian tradition and the sordid American culture.

The poet is not prepared to take to this kind of life. For generations his family had been living a life of piety, simplicity and frugality. “But, sorry, I cannot unlearn/ conventions of despair. / They have their pride” (TCPAKR 34). He cannot indulge in the activities of the Marginal Man of modern times. A. K. Ramanujan’s faith is rooted and grounded in Karma poetry. In one sense “Conventions of Despair” may refer to Karma.

As a Hindu, he has learnt that for every act, there is a result. As you sow, so you reap. One cannot avoid reaping the fruits of what one has sown. Good deeds done are rewarded with happiness. Bad deeds result in suffering. Evil deeds are penalized in hell, where one is roasted alive or “boiled in crates of oil” or “made to shed iron tears.” For a Hindu one’s deeds will lead to atonement or expiation in many births to come. If one goes to bed with “dark-queens” even in one’s dream, one has to go to bed, in hell, with “frog-eyed dragons.”

But all such belief is gone now. The poet thinks of children born and brought up in the United States. They take to the hedonistic way of life right from the beginning. It is difficult to make them imbibe the conventional Hindu way of life. The poet is shocked and pained to
visualize “and see a grandchild bare/ her teen-age flesh to the pimps/ of ideal Tomorrow’s
crowfoot eyes” (TCPAKR 35). Man- Woman relationship has become much worse. It is just a
one-time affair.

The poet is not for such a kind of life. He would rather be an alien, an outsider:

No, no, give me back my archaic despair:

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

(“Conventions of Despair,” TCPAKR 35)

The vehemence with which the poet utters ‘No, no’ is remarkable. Living with consciousness
of after- life and all the fears and inhibitions created by it is better, more consoling than
yielding to the lure of flesh and luxuriant materialism. In him, the racial memory and
traditional culture are indelibly etched.

It is worth noting here that the South Indian Brahmins are noted for their strict
adherence to rites and rituals in spite of social changes and even upheavals. It must be said to
their credit that they have been meticulously safeguarding these rites and rituals for millennia
by handing them over from one generation to the next. In spite of all the changes brought
about by education, urban life, industrialization, constraints of time and a cramped lifestyle,
they find time and means to squeeze these rituals into their way of life even while living
amidst exotic practices in countries. In this respect they may be likened to the Jews who are
noted for observing their rituals amidst untold privations.

A. K. Ramanujan was an admirer of T. S. Eliot and W. H. Auden. The impact of these
two great modern poets on A. K. Ramanujan is discernible here. Eliot in his “Waste Land”
makes use of ironic contrast between the glorious past and the dirty present. W. H. Auden in
his “The Shield of Achilles” contrasts the beauty of life with the horror of life. Following the
tradition of Eliot and Auden, A. K. Ramanujan suggests the vast gulf that exists between
India and the West and their respective cultures.
The poem “A River” by A. K. Ramanujan is a retrospective photoflash bringing before our mind’s eye the picture of the river in flood. The poem recalls A. K. Ramanujan’s memory of his visit to Madurai once at the time of the flood in the river, Vaikai, and also registers his criticism of the Tamil poets for their indifferent attitude to the havoc caused by the river in spate.

To the Tamil Poets, the river in summer is too dry and uninspiring. It is just a trickle. The water runs to a short didance and then gets dried up. The water-flow is checked here and there by the sand-ribs, straw and women’s hair clogging the water-gates. The wet stones are not fully sub-merged under water. The river in summer is not a fit subject matter to Tamil poets for poetical treatment:

```
every summer
a river dries to a trickle
in the sand
baring the sand-ribs
straw and women’s hair
clogging the Watergates
---
the wet stones glistening like sleepy
crocodiles, the dry ones
shaven water-buffaloes lounging in the sun.
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(“A River,” TCPAKR 38)

A.K. Ramanujan recaptures, with photographic fidelity, the cries of the people in times of the flood:

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People everywhere talked
of the inches rising,
of the precise number of cobbled steps
run over by the water, rising
on the bathing places,
and the way it carried off three village houses,
one pregnant woman
and a couple of cows
named Gopi and Brinda, as usual.
```

(“A River,” TCPAKR 38)
The flood in the river is an exciting occasion for the Tamil poet. It sends him into rapture. The Tamil poets sing only of the flood. The new poets also blindly follow the old poets in glorifying the flood in the river. But, they are not moved by the destruction caused by the flood or the dryness of the river. A. K. Ramanujan comes down heavily upon the old poets and the new poets for their unfeeling attitude to the tragedy caused by the river:

The new poets still quoted
the old poets, but no one spoke
in verse
of the pregnant woman
drowned, with perhaps twins in her,
kicking at blank walls
even before birth.

(“A River,” TCPAKR 39)

The sensibility of the Tamil poet is too dried up to feel for the drowned woman.

Nowhere does A. K. Ramanujan tell us the name of the river either in the title or in the body of the poem. The use of the indefinite article in the title “A River” means that it is a river like any other river. The adverbial of location in the initial position “In Madurai” makes the readers think of Madurai and the river flowing through it. Within a space of three lines, he brings into focus the historic past and the literary history of Madurai. In an aesthetic construct of sound and symbol, he creates an image of the city of Madurai with the river Vaikai having on its banks Madurai, the capital of the Pandya Kingdom and the centre of literary academies:

In Madurai,
City of temples and poets
who sang of cities and temples:

(“A River,” TCPAKR 38)

A. K. Ramanujan describes the river in summer. The dryness of the river is conveyed by the choice of diction and the use of imagery. The word “trickle” refers not to a river but to a
small, irregular stream. In summer, there is no flow of water. This is heightened by the use of non-action verbs (finite and non-finite) such as “dries,” “clogging” and “lounging.” Again, the use of a large number of sibilants ‘s’ suggests the slow, unhurried movement of the river. The images “sand-ribs,” “women’s hair” and “straw” clogging the water gates imply there is no flow of water. The “wet stones” and “dry” stones indicate shallow water. The dryness of the river has something to do with the sterility and unproductivity of much of contemporary Tamil poetry. The Tamil poets do not sing of the river in summer. They do not realize how much people suffer in summer because of scarcity of water.

There is a connection between the experience felt in times of flood and the expressions used to describe it. The panic felt by the people is captured in the following lines:

People everywhere talked
of the inches rising,
of the precise number of cobbled steps
run over by the water, rising
on the bathing places,
and the way it carried off three village houses,
one pregnant woman
and a couple of cows
named Gopi and Brinda, as usual.

(“A River,” TCPAKR 38)

In times of flood, the water runs fast. This is brought out by the use of the action verbs, for example, “rise,” “rising,” “runs,” “carried away” and “carried off.” These verbs of motion capture the movement of the river. The tragic vision of A. K. Ramanujan is revealed in the images used and the repetitive images employed. His poetry is image-oriented. The images of the three village houses carried off by the river, the image of one pregnant woman getting drained in the river and the image of a couple of cows carried away by the water heighten the sense of tragedy. To quote Kalaithasan:

The twice-repeated image of the “pregnant woman” strikes sympathetic vibrations in the minds of the readers. It is always tragic to hear of a human
being carried off by water. It is more tragic to hear of a pregnant woman carried away by water. It is equally most tragic to hear of the dumb creatures being carried away by water (Family Portraits in A. K. Ramanujan’s Poetry 23).

A. K. Ramanujan has an eye for the particular physiognomy of the object. He has an insight into the characteristic features of an object or a person described. The readers get a pathetic picture of the pregnant woman drowned with, perhaps, twins in her. The word “kicking” is highly significant. It suggests an advanced stage of pregnancy. As stated by Kalaithasan, The children are yet to be born. It is a pity that they die before they are born. The woman is struggling for life in the water. The children are also struggling for life in water -- amniotic fluid to be born. The expression “blank walls” indicates that they die without seeing the world.

The whole poem is a photographic expose. The images -- three village houses, one pregnant woman and a couple of cows -- are like patterns in a kaleidoscope. The poem reads like a newspaper report. It describes what happened, when it happened and where it happened. The whole poem is a social document.

To quote Kalaithasan:

With the carrying away of the three village houses, the slum-dwellers living on the banks of the river are rendered homeless. With the drowning of the pregnant woman, they are left starving because there is nobody to prepare food at home. With a couple of cows being carried away by water, they are deprived of their source of income (Family Portraits in A. K. Ramanujan’s Poetry 26)

The ironic tone at the poem cannot be missed. Poets sing of cities and temples. It is an irony, as pointed out by M.K Naik, that they do not sing of men (“A. K. Ramanujan and the Search for Roots” 15). Kalaithasan infers: “Women in India are worshipped as goddesses but it is a pity that none comes forwarded to save the people. Again, in India cows are considered as
objects of worship. It is an irony that people are silent spectators” (Family Portraits in A. K. Ramanujan’s Poetry 29).

The Indianness of the poem is easily discernible. The landscape is Indian. The poem talks about an Indian river -- the Vaikai in Tamil Nadu. The scene is India. Water buffaloes lounging in the sun in shallow water in a pond of a river is a common sight. Wet stones glisten like sleepy crocodiles because they are constantly used by women to beat or wash their clothes. This smacks of an Indian practice. The syntax is Indian. This can be seen in certain constructions imitating the Indian mode and grammatical peculiarities as in the deletion of articles, for example, “In Madurai /city of temples and poets” and in the omission of conjunctions, for example, “with no moles in their bodies/ with different coloured diapers”. Proper names are touchingly Indian, for example, Madurai, Gopi and Brinda. The Indian flavour of the poem adds to the Indianness in the poem.

A. K. Ramanujan always draws upon his own experience and the kind of life around him and does not depend upon borrowed, second-hand, plagiaristic material. This is in evidence in “A River.” That in his choice of themes, a Post – Independence Indian poet in English is breaking away from the presentation of an idealized landscape is true of A.K. Ramanujan.

To quote Sumana:

The poet narrates the poem through the mouth of a visitor to make it objective. The greatness of the poem lies in the fact that the traditional praise for river has been contrasted with what is actually experienced by the people during the floods. Apart from presenting the grim realities of a river in spate, Ramanujan hints at the sterility of new Tamil poets who ‘still quoted the old poets’. However, the images in the poem, particularly ‘sleepy crocodiles,’ ‘shaven water-buffaloes,’ ‘pregnant woman’ and ‘identical twins’ are full of significant suggestions for the future (“A Realistic Look at A. K. Ramanujan’s ‘A River’” 4).
Indeed, A. K. Ramanujan strikes the readers as one who is passionately nostalgic drawing frequently from his memories of childhood. Memories of the unpleasant experiences and scenes do come to the fore in some of the poems purging the poet’s mind of unwanted memories. They act as therapeutic and cathartic agents unburdening the mind of the poet. As L. T. Arasu observes, “How an incident triggers the mind of the poet to recall an incident that happened long ago is found in his much – anthologized poem “Breaded Fish,” which is considered to be one of the fine lyrics in A. K. Ramanujan’s first collection of poems *The Striders*(1966)” (“Memory as the Axis of Poetry: A Study of A. K. Ramanujan’s ‘Breaded Fish’ and ‘Snakes’” 62).

The poet in the poem “Breaded Fish” gives no longer a descriptive picture of a breaded fish but a speaking picture of a dark dead woman. An occurrence in the life of the A. K. Ramanujan gets symbolically articulated in the poem “Breaded Fish.” A. K. Ramanujan’s wife with all care for her husband prepares a fried fish suitable to his palate but the fish reminds him of a unpleasant incident encountered in his life. Once he saw a half naked dark dead woman lying dead on the beach. The wife even thrust a bit of a fish into his mouth but the poet finds that he can neither sit nor eat because the shape of the breaded fish looks like the dead body of the woman.

Specially for me, she had some breaded fish; even thrust a blunt-headed smelt into my mouth;

and looked hurt when I could neither sit nor eat, as a hood of memory like a coil on a heath

opened in my eyes: 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. I headed
for the shore, my heart beating in my mouth.

(“Breaded Fish,” TCPAKR 7)

Though it is a narrative poem, it carries psychological overtones. In both the poems “Breaded Fish” and “Snakes” the poet in a flashback recalls the memory of a dead woman in “Breaded Fish” and the memory of his sister’s plait of hair in the poem “Snakes.” They are typical memory poems because the very sight of the fish and the snake triggers off his memory.

A. K. Ramanujan is an image-oriented poet. The poem “Snakes” abounds in imagery. One image succeeds another with astonishing and bewildering rapidity. The poet recalls an incident when the snake charmer lets a basket full of ritual cobras. Paul Verghese writes, “The description of the snake reveals great skill in the use of images that are highly concentrated in their effect. The images have vividness, even their abstractness. The repeated sibilant s’s echo the hisses of the snakes” (Problems of Indian Creative Writer in English 36)

A basketful of ritual cobras
comes into the tame little house,
their brown-wheat glisten ringed with ripples.
They click the room with their bodies, curves
uncurling, writhing a sibilant alphabet of panic
on my floor…

(“Snakes,” TCPAKR 4)

The poet’s mother is courageous. A pious Hindu woman that she is, she offers milk to the snakes. The poet’s father too is not afraid of snake, but he is not interested in the mother’s ritual. A snake charmer puts around his neck a snake or two. This strikes terror in the mind of the boy A. K. Ramanujan who watches them.

The snakeman wreathes their writhing
round his neck
for father’s smiling
money. But I scream.

(“Snakes,” TCPAKR 5)
This incident has a reverberation in the poet’s mind. The sight haunts the poet wherever he be whether he walks through the woods or museum or in a library. The golden coloured spine of books reminds him of snakes. Even his sister’s knee-long braids with score of clean new pins arouses fear. The snake reminds the readers of the snake in Emily Dickinson. Emily Dickinson is a bit scared of trampling over a snake. So is A. K. Ramanujan. Unaware of its presence, he even tramples over it and reduces it. The green coloured stalk and the golden coloured spines of body remind him of snakes.

The click shod heel suddenly strikes
and slushes on a snake; I see him turn,
the green white of his belly
measured by bluish nodes, a water-bleached lotus stalk
plucked by a landsman hand. Yet panic rushes
my body to my feet…

(“Snakes,” TCPAKR 5)

As stated by Pandey:

In the poem “Snakes” the poet recalls experiences of his early childhood, which reveal his alienation from his ancestral world of parents, aunt and sister. He remembers how he felt terrified at the sight of ‘a basketful of ritual cobras; brought to his house for which his father paid money and his mother offered milk (“Indianness in A. K. Ramanujan’s Poetry” 113).

The poems “Breaded Fish” and “Snakes” are fine examples of A. K. Ramanujan’s masterly handling of imagery, his keen memory of childhood experiences and his ability to draw haunting pen-portraits.

In the poem ‘Still Life” there is a veiled suggestion of the poet’s romance with a woman and their sharing lunch. The lunch being over she left while he was absorbed in reading but when he suddenly wanted to look again, he found slights bitten pieces of items like bread, lettuce and salami. She left and there is no physical presence of her but there is an unforgettable memory of the woman. She becomes a still life in the sense that she is alive in his memory. The memory in his heart bears her long after she is no more seen. It is a Wordsworthian touch: “The music in my heart I bore/ long after its heard no more.”

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When she left me after lunch, I read for a while. 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.

(“Still Life,” TCPAKR 12)

Though A. K. Ramanujan is faraway in the States, the bare leafless tree outside his window in USA reminds him of the tree in India. He establishes philosophical identification with the tree and feels what follows:

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

(“Christmas,” TCPAKR 33)

As pointed out by Kurup, “the poet asserts the oneness of all life on earth – human, animal and vegetable” (“The Self on the Poetry of A. K. Ramanujan” 201). A. K. Ramanujan’s stress on identity between human and nature is in evidence in this poem. The Hindu concept of tree as a god finds its echo in the poem. In no way can he extricate himself from root meaning God.

The poet pays warm tributes to his granny. Often a stay about the encounter between the princes assumes propositions of very revealing family history as in “Lines to a Granny” in The Striders. The family chronicle of memory registers incident both casual and significant in Nature. The allegorical stories narrated by the mother have only a ring of truth about them for practical guidance for life on the earth.
But tell me now: was it for some irony
you have waited in death
to let me learn again what once you learnt in youth,
that this no late, but truth?
(“Lines to a Granny,” TCPAKR 17)

The ten lined poem “Smalltown, South India” makes a visual impact upon the reader.
The small town with its temple employees is, perhaps, the priest having bare hairy chest,
street cows loitering about the temple looking for the fruit from the pilgrims and buffaloes
trying to shake off their flies sitting on their backs. The presence of flies creates the picture of
the streets around the temple being strewn with peals of banana and other fruits.

I return from the wide open spaces.
Temple employees have whiskered nipples.
The streetcows have trapezium faces.
Buffaloes shake off flies with a twitch of ripples.

I sink to the seabed in a barrel.
water-layers salt and pickle the sun.
Toes mildew green, trees are porous coral:
ambush of city shark and wifely dolphin.

I bed down with long finless slipper fish.
The ceiling has weeds, the sleep is brackish.
(“Smalltown, South India,” TCPAKR 100)

In the poem titled “No Man is an Island” the entire Island in the shape of promontory
sticking out into the sea reminds the poet of an alligator on the sandy beach foaming in the
mouth and the sea birds picking its teeth for yellow crabs and jelly-fish. Bountiful Nature has
plenty of yellow crabs and jelly fish to feed the sea birds but man deprives the sea birds of
their food by catching them for his consumption. This fact is brought out by a man buying
tooth picks to extricate the fleshy particles stuck in the cavity.

The entire island:
an alligator
sleeping in a mask of stone
A grin of land
even on good days; on bad,
the ocean foams in that mouth.
Certain small sea-birds are said to pick its teeth for yellow crabs and jelly-fish.

but this man, I know, buys dental floss.

(“No Man Is an Inland,” TCPAKR 28)

As remarked by Lakshmi Raghunandan, “The anti-climax of the last two lines, ‘But this man/ I know buys dental floss’ project the absurdity of man’s existence” (“A. K. Ramanujan” 150).

There are poems with the projection of A. K. Ramanujan’s inheritance in Hindu religion. The poem “A Hindu to His Body” is an address to the poet’s body. The body takes a number of rebirths as indicated in the opening lines: “Dear pursuing presence, / dear body” (TCPAKR 40). As remarked by Rajagopalchary and Ravinder, “The poet pleads with the body in a passionate tone” (“Kinship with Nature in A. K. Ramanujan’s Poetry” 110). In fact, Hinduism does not regard the human body as something to be proud of and pursued but this poem strikes a deviant note from the Hindu doctrine of rebirth. He only longs for a permanent company of the dear body. This is well brought out in the concluding lines of the poem.

let me go with you and feel the weight of honey-hives in my branching and the burlap weave of weaver-birds in my hair.

(“A Hindu to His Body,” TCPAKR 40)

This attachment to the body contrary to the doctrine of Hindu renunciation is glorified in “One, Two, May be Three, Argument against Suicide” (Relations 71). It is a Hindu belief that the man who commits suicide will never go to the other world but wander about the world as a ghost in his same body for the sin of suicide committed.

… a mere odourless soul, a see-through man-shaped hole in the air, a late lamenting ghost looking in vain for an empty seat

(“One, Two, Maybe Three, Arguments against Suicide,” Relations 71)
The thought content of the poem “THE HINDOOO: he reads his GITA and is calm at all
events” encapsulates the very essence of Gitasaram [Bhagavat Gita]. Nothing belongs to man.
Nothing he brings her when he is born. Nothing he leaves behind when he dies. He needs not
to be proud of his earthly positions. Nor can he lament the loss of earthly belongings. The
poem recommends equipoise of the human mind at all times. The poet in the poem does not
marvel good and evil existing side by side.

… I just walk
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.
(“THE HINDOOO: he reads his GITA and is calm at all events,” TCAKR 79)

He is not sexually excited to watch the love pair or to see house flies closeted in coitus.
Nothing moves him. In his identification with Gita he reminds unexcited or disinterested but
the sight of a little boy about to be sacrificed moves him. He feels as if he were going to be
strangled to death.

I’ve learned to watch lovers without envy
as I’d watch in a bazaar lens
houseflies rub legs or kiss. I look at wounds calmly.

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.

(TCAKR 79)

The poem “THE HINDOOO: he doesn’t hurt a fly or a spider either” is a manifestation
of Hindu religion. The Hindu law as enshrined in the Gita enjoins upon man the necessity of
maintaining mental equipoise in times of despair and delight. He is expected not to hurt a fly
or a spider either not even to harm a black-robed widow and he should remain unperturbed
even when his wife is sexually assaulted by another.
the fisherman lover who waylaid her
on the ropes in the Madras harbor,

took her often from behind
imprinting on her face and body
……………………………………
last impressions of his net:
till one day, spider-

fashion, she clamped down and bit
him while still inside her…

(TCPAKR 62)

As stated by Shirish Chindhade, the poem “THE HINDOO: he doesn’t hurt a fly or a
spider either” is an etiological investigation into one’s own past, finally coming upon the
reason of the assumed, forced gentleness” (“Living Among Relations Binds the Feet: A. K. Ramanujan” 73). What about the poet’s reaction? Does he adhere to what is enjoined
upon him by the ancestral values of Hindu religion. A. P. Vithal remarks, “A. K. Ramanujan
is very much conscious of the family tradition – that each member of the generation is a link
in the long chain, suggesting an upward curve of intelligence. The Great grandfather, in “The
Hindoo: he doesn’t Hurt a Fly or a Spider either” looks down with ‘timeless eyes’; grand
father’s death serves the purpose of a family re-union” (“Family in Ramanujan and Parthasarathy” 35). The experiences the poet narrates are A. K. Ramanujan’s involvement in
the Hindu familial past and familial memories.

To quote Surendran:

The three poems “A Hindu to His Body,” “THE HINDOOO: he reads his
GITA and is calm at all events,” “THE HINDOO: he doesn’t hurt a fly or a
spider either” employ parallel frames. Basically all these poems bring to light
the fact that the self cannot fully adjust with the inner life which is known for
its variety and depth (“The Craftmanship of A. K. Ramanujan” 164)

In the poem “Still Another View of Grace” the poet speaks of his burning in
sensuality at the sight of a streetwalker inspite of his being a bred Brahmin among the singers
of shivering hymns. The inherited value of orthodox Hindu religion makes the poet “shudder
to the bone at hungers that roam the street / beyond the constable’s beat” (*TCPAKR* 45). Outwardly, he shouts at her not to follow him but to find a husband for herself. But the lure of flesh strong upon him lets him down and he falls a prey to the sexy seductive charm of the woman.

… 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.
(“Still Another View of Grace,” *TCPAKR* 45)

This incident underlines the fact that outwardly he poses to be an orthodox Brahmin. But in a heat of romantic moment the ancestral moral codes laid down by the tradition-bound Hindu religion breaks down. The poem registers, in the words of Paul Vergheese, “a conflict of attitudes in the poet’s mind resolved through an involuntary submission to passion” (“Indian Poetry in English Today” 95). The repetition of the words “burned and burned” smacks of intensity of passion for lust. Though brought up on the lap of time-honoured tradition and culture, he cannot help resisting the indecent advances made by the woman in the street. In his surrender to the sexual advances of woman there is a betrayal of adhering to the moral code of conduct cherished by his father in the past. The flesh wins; the spirit fails. The poem only proves that a man’s boastful strength of morality is due to want of opportunity.

To quote Gajendra Kumar:

In the poem, “Still another View of Grace” the poet encounters a prostitute in the street and in spite of his Brahmanical upbringing his defences fail and he comes into the trap of temptation. By a subtle and soothing interaction of the abstract and concrete nouns, and through the simple description of a particular experience Ramanujan suggests the common human predicament. The woman who appears here is a prostitute who walks the street and she is also a thought, a thought which flashes in the poet’s mind. An enchanting glance from her shakes his determination and his anger down as her hair tumbles into his hand (“The Poetic Cosmos of A. K. Ramanujan” 22).
In the poem “Death and Good Citizen” A. K. Ramanujan expresses his identification with his roots though wedded to a lady not belonging to his culture. The desire to die in one’s own native land is ingrained in every Indian in general but in the family of A. K. Ramanujan in particular. Elsewhere in the poem “Small-scale Reflection On a Great House” the poet A. K. Ramanujan remembers one of the mishappenings called an incident on the border and the dead body brought back in plane and train and military truck to be cremated in his own native land. An equally tragic incident the poet recalls how a nephew of his got killed in the faraway Sahara and the body was brought back in a deformed stage for cremation in his native country.

Hearts,
   with your kind of temper,
   many even take, make connection
with alien veins, and continue
   your struggle to be naturalized:
   ..............................................
in a foreign body.
   But
you know my tribe, incarnate
unbelievers in bodies,
they’ll speak proverbs, contest
   my will, against such degradation.
Hidebound, even worms cannot
   have me; they’ll cremate
me in Sanskrit and sandalwood,
   have me sterilized
to a scatter of ash.

(“Death and Good Citizen,” TCPAKR 136)

The three past incidents narrated here drive home the point that it is a death wish or a wishful longing of any Indian to be cremated in his own native soil according to the obsequies to be observed in Hindu religion.

As stated by Niranjan Mohanty:

In “Death and the Good Citizen” one observes how intelligently Ramanujan juxtaposes two sets of imagery drawn from two cultures – eastern and western – in relation to the funeral ceremony. Ramanujan is critical of the Hindu ritual
as well as the American way of cremating the dead. He writes with a penchant (“Chicago and AKR” 40).

Though outwardly A. K. Ramanujan poses to be sophisticated Western educated man, inwardly he feels gravitated to his Hindu roots. He entertains the hope to die in his own native soil and to be cremated in the sandalwood to the chanting of Sanskrit mantras. But contrary to his wish he had his end in America.

The poem “Some Indian Uses of History on a Rainy Day” brings into focus Madras, Egypt and Germany in the poet’s act of juxtaposing the past and the present. As stated by S. Nagarajan, “the poem “Some Indian Uses of History on a Rainy Day,” which keeps on shifting scene from Madras to Egypt and to Berlin almost in a cinematic fashion, forcefully satirises the visiting Professor of Sanskrit” (“A. K. Ramanujan” 20). The first section contrasts the bleak present of India as represented by Madras and the glorious past witnessed during the regime of King Harshwardhana. The second section draws a contrast between craze for studies abroad as represented by Fulbright scholar from India and their shock and surprise to see the mummies covered in Calicut muslin in Egyptian pyramids. The third section focuses on the Indian Professor of Sanskrit getting himself lost in the German street wonders at the sight of the Swastika².

Madras, 1965, and rain.

………………………………..

they tell each other how
Old King Harsha’s men
beat soft songs
to stand a crowd of ten
thousand monks
in a queue, to give them

² Its name comes from the Sanskrit word svasti (sv = well;asti = is), meaning good fortune, luck and well-being. The whole poem talks about the grandeur and greatness of Ancient India in glowing terms.
Fullbright Indians, tiepins of ivory,  
colour cameras for eyes, stand every July  
in Egypt among camels,

amazed at pyramidfuls  
of mummies swathed in millennia  
of Calicut muslin.

… Professor of Sanskrit  
on cultural exchange;  
  passing through; lost  
suddenly comes home

in English, gesture, and Sanskrit,  
assimilating  
  the swastika  
on the neighbour’s arm  
in that roaring bus from a grey  
nowhere to a green.  
("Some Indian Uses of History on a Rainy Day," TCPAKR 74-75)

The whole poem talks about the grandeur and greatness of Ancient India in glowing terms.

The poem “Routine Day Sonnet” is a tag attached to sonnet about the routine day. This sonnet is as it is and not as it ought to be. It does not observe the acceptable rhyme scheme. It projects the usual day in the life of the protagonist. For him it is a perfectly ordinary day at the office. He comes out, a lorry passes him by, and a sailor crosses him. Before darkness sets in, he goes for a walk with his daughter. He sees another person cross the wayside papaya tree. He reaches home. He has his dinner, coffee and bed time story of dog, bone and shadow. He goes to bed but all on a sudden he wakes up with a start to hear his wife wield a scorpion tongue calling him sexy, crazy and filthy and a loveless husband. The poem is a reflection of a day in his own life. It reveals that he has not been blessed with a happy married life but he is married to a quarrelsome wife. He had a dream in which he saw an Eskimo going by a bullock cart, drawn not by dogs but by bulls.
For me a perfectly ordinary
day at the office, only a red lorry
past the window at two;
a sailor with a chest tattoo.

A walk before dark
with my daughter to mark
another cross on the papaya tree;
dinner, coffee, bedtime story

of dog, bone and shadow. A bullock cart
in an Eskimo dream. But I wake with a start
to hear my wife cry her heart

out as if from a carter
in hell: she hates me, I hate her,
I’m a filthy rat and a satyr.

(“Routine Day Sonnet,” TCPAKR 68)

It is a memory poem and he narrates how his conjugal life suffers a jolt.

As Stated by Dwivedi:

The two dominant strains of love – union and separation, attachment and alienation – and alienation – are marvelously depicted in them. Hatred is the occasional feature of love, and this is what we find in “Routine Day Sonnet”: ‘she hates me, I hate her / I’m a filthy rat and satyr’ (TCPAKR 68). True love is not to be found in the traffic of flesh, but in the concord of the souls. If a man cherishes the former sort of love, he is sure to be fear-ridden, say at the age of seventy, for his dwindling physical strength and for his utter futility in the face… (“Theme and Form in A. K. Ramanujan’s Poetry” 87-88).

A. K. Ramanujan’s eye for physiognomy is in evidence in the poem “Poona Train Window,” when he describes what he sees all along the railway track when a train passes by or crosses an incoming train or an outgoing train. His power of keen observation is revealed when he sees through the window in his compartment, a man defecating between two rocks, number of children travelling in the other train and the three women with baskets on their head climbing slowly on the slope of the hill and so on.

I look out the window

See a man defecating
between two rocks, and a crow.
The blinding noise
and the afterhush
of one train passing
another, rise and fall
of hills in two seats
of windows, faces, a rush
of whole children, white
hair in a red turban.

Three women with baskets
on their heads, climbing
slowly against the slope
of a hill…

("Poona Train Window," TCPAKR 80)

As Chellappan says, "The journey of the Indian becomes a continuum in which the perceiving of mind is bent on reading the Indian landscape as a foreigner and phrase like ‘a such of whole children’… supply the characteristic Indian essence to the poem ("Encounter and Synthesis in the Poetry of A. K. Ramanujan" 97) .

In A. K. Ramanujan’s poetry the present is rooted in a past which itself changes by being looked at through the eyes of the present. He may consciously echo the ideas and phrases of others but at the same time his poems derive their strength from his own life – what he sees, experiences, feels including what he is told and what he reads. While A. K. Ramanujan uses memories of South India as his subject, his concern is rather with how the past shaped him than as nostalgia for a lost paradise. Often his tone is ironic since the past returns in the form of fears, anxieties and other psychological effects. India is the starting point from which he has developed and which has influenced him, it is not necessarily where he wishes to return. It can be said that past always haunts his poetry and for that reason he relates his personal and familial conflicts and frustrations to the Indian intellectual environment, both present and past. The nostalgic note does not portray the nostalgia of an individual for times and things past. It is rather the collective 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 (Satendra Kumar 46).

The preceding pages bring before the minds of the readers the members of A. K. Ramanujan. With his keen power of observation the poet makes a scrutiny of how the characters strike him. Not only does he give the readers the portraits of the members of his family but also he never fails to record the sense of alienation felt by him in a sophisticated American atmosphere because of the pulls he felt from the Hindu religion to which he belonged. There also follow a number of episodes, incidents and his marriage to syrian Christian which have their impact on A. K. Ramanujan. The images he has made use of enrich the meanings of his experiences – personal, familial, social – both at home and abroad.