CHAPTER III

THE CULTURAL QUESTION
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While in Parthasarathy, language seems to be the basis of the tension, in A.K. Ramanujan language is an unambiguous vehicle for his poetic utterance. While Parthasarathy at times appears to doubt the efficacy of words in structuring intimate personal experience, A.K. Ramanujan does not seem to entertain such doubts. In both, however, there is an urgent desire for the repossession of the past— appearing more compulsive in Ramanujan. In the words of Sivaramakrishna, 'It is this quest for a relevant past— one of the invariables of any kind of modernity— conducted in terms of his personal emotions and attitudes that gives unique depth and density to Ramanujan's Poetry."

In a situation where the spurious or the elitist trends could pass off for genuine poetry, it is often the bi-lingual poet who comes through best. Mirza (further) remarks:

> The true poets among Indo-Anglians seem to be those who write in English as well as in their own language. They are poets in their own right who have something


significant to say, and know how to say it, both in English and their native tongue. They are not out to 'sell' their poetry through a skilful manipulation of words and the employment of sophisticated techniques.

Authenticity of tone and conscious eschewal of gimmickry for its own sake are the distinguishing marks of poets who have something genuine to say. The qualities are found embodied in the poetry, for example, of Parthasarathy, Arun Kolatkar and A.K. Ramanujan. Ramanujan had already made his mark in Kannada poetry before he was recognised as a force in Indo-Anglian Poetry. About Ramanujan's contribution to Kannada poetry, S.K. Desai writes:

A new sophistication has entered modern Kannada poetry with A.K. Ramanujan's experimentations with the possibilities of language and structure. In his poems, which are highly sensitive constructs, one comes across a kind of lucidity and transparency which was never there in Kannada poetry, except probably in the vachanas of Basaveshwara. He has the unique capacity to see things in an oddly new way, without sentimentality, without emotion even, with his cool, but tenuous, intellect almost always playing with the object of his expe-

\[3\] Mirsa, pp. 152-153.
rience in a manner which is poetic ... A trained linguist that he is, Ramanujan has made us self-conscious about words, their sound and structure, along with the form and structure of a poem.4

The characteristics of Ramanujan's Kannada poetry, as summed up by Desai, also apply to much of his English poetry. However, the success of Ramanujan's poetry has been analysed by different hands and different reasons are given as contributing to it. In Taqi Ali Mirza's opinion, Ramanujan's success 'lies in his not disowning his Indian inheritance, and not falling a prey to what has been called a feeling of alienation, despite his long sojourn abroad'.5 Emmannel Narendra Lall thinks that Ramanujan finds 'his objective correlative in the family around him and then shapes his experience into poems that become neat vignettes on family relationships in India.6 If it is possible to categorise the poems as those dealing with family relationships and those that do not, it may be found that there is almost an equal proportion between the two. In Selected Poems, at any rate, there are about fourteen poems dealing with family relationships while the


6 Lall, op.cit., p.43-44.
others are eighteen, clearly outnumbering the first category.
It is therefore not entirely correct to say that Ramanujan's
forte is family relationships. Nevertheless, Narendra Lall
himself modifies his statement when he observes that Ramanujan's
poems are raised from the level of mere social documentation
of Hindu joint family by his 'poetic sensibility, particularly
the way he repossesses the scene which his memory is able to
evoke, and the manner in which he translates this experience'.
He believes that the purpose behind his description of family
relationships is 'to get the reader to focus on the persona's
feeling of alienation'.
K. Raghavendra Rao also believes that
Ramanujan is alienated—alienated, in fact, in more than one
sense. He also thinks that this situation of 'mounting alienations
leads to reverse romanticism' in him, which is character-
rised by 'a certain desperate need to sustain an integrated
personality against a chaos of alienations'.

In other words, Ramanujan attempts to make a cultural
reconstruct in his poems out of the tradition native to him.

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7Lall, p. 121.
8Lall, op.cit., p. 47
9K. Raghavendra Rao, "Reverse Romanticism: Ramanujan's
'The Striders'" Aspects, pp. 120-121.
10Ibid., p. 121.
It means then that he has to develop an idiom not only within the linguistic-cultural frame, but also within the frame of dual poetics. Inheriting a system of poetics in which strong emotional expression, abstraction,\textsuperscript{11} hyperbole, moral and ethical attitudinizing are the fabric of poetry,\textsuperscript{12} Ramanujan has to struggle to evolve a poetic mode counter to his native sensibility which does not validate empirical representation without a derivative metaphysical speculation.

'The striders' is an example of what Ramanujan attempts to do and achieves in his poetry. The American water-bug is represented by deft references to its thin stemmed body bubble-eyes and dry capillary legs. But the observation itself occasions a comparison with prophets. The association is apparently superficial since, as Raghavendra Rao observes, 'it conceals a vast net work of empirical and metaphysical connections between a still-life painting and a cosmos invoked in terms of Christianity and non-Christian nature'.\textsuperscript{13} What appears to be a miracle in prophets—walking on water—comes naturally to the

\textsuperscript{11}Cf. Krishna Chaitanya, A New History of Sanskrit Literature (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1962), p. 54. Poetic creativity soon becomes mature enough to make bold use of abstractions—when poetic creation reaches this level, we are dealing with a mature sensibility'.

\textsuperscript{12}See e.g. P.V.Kane, History of Sanskrit Poetics (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1961), p. 346 ff.

striders, hence, the poet seems to suggest, signs need not be taken as omens—a very deflating kind of conclusion. This ironic mode is basic to Ramanujan's thinking and he applies it to the immediate as well as remembered situations to arrive at the truth. W.B. Yeats' 'The long-legged Fly, in contrast achieves a different effect. The movement of the fly upon the stream (in Yeats) becomes symbolic and is compared with the movement of the mind of a haughty conqueror, a respected rake and a sculptor-seer by turns skimming over the stream of silence. Yeats perceives beyond the immediate while Ramanujan brings the abstract down to the literal. In Ramanujan's poem, the water-bug sits on a 'land-slide of lights' and drowns 'into its tiny strip of sky'. Limited as the vision of the insect is, it yet drowns into it 'eye-deep' as if it were its universe. So do the prophets, by inference. The irony in this poem, working backwards, is obviously devastating. The conjunctive 'And' with which the poem begins, and the verb 'search' following it, set a tone of detachment and analytical spirit which condition most of the poems of Ramanujan.

By the 'dextrous use of the language to express in poetic terms certain memories that have sunk in his mind', the poet

evokes pictures which are marvels of close observation. 'Breaded Fish' and 'Still Life' are two such vignettes which function as word-pictures. Though what Raghavendra Rao says of 'Breaded Fish' --- that it 'honestly confesses to a reluctance to face up to experience except as poetry'.\(^{15}\) is by and large tenable, the poem within limits may be said to have succeeded well. The crucial expression in the poem is 'a hood of memory' which suggests exasperation and fear. The poem comes out alive by this strategy, though the description of experience does not apparently lead to any profundity of vision. The poem in fact leads to certain nagging questions which it does not answer: who the woman was whose body was 'breaded by the gained indifference of sand', whether it was homicide and why the body, if noticed earlier, was not removed from a public place. A willingness to answer these, and other related, questions — or, at least, to think about them gives a satisfying experience of the poem.\(^{16}\) In a similar manner, the poem 'Still Life' also demands an active participation by the reader. The word 'bite' with its nuances brings the poem to a focus, depending on the opinion whether the woman is the persona's wife or lover and whether there has been a quarrel between the two.

The coexistence of different cultural imaginings is typified in the poem 'A River'. The central point around which

\(^{15}\) Raghavendra Rao, p. 123.

\(^{16}\) Cf. eg. P.V.Kane, Op.cit., p. 351. 'It has to be remembered that even the reader of the best poetry must have a modicum of imagination and culture in order to enjoy aesthetically the poet's outpourings...'
the whole poem turns— that poets find romance only in a river in floods is not strikingly novel. The first few lines of the poem introduce Madurai and the poets whose limited vision is the cause of the poet's anger, followed by the somewhat bland antiromantic description of the river, Vaigai. Then the clinical examination of the situation begins with a slash the poet makes with a line of poetic lance:

The poets sang only of the floods

Some knowledge about these poets and their poems would doubtless enrich the appreciation of the poem. The answers, however, lie in a different cultural and linguistic tradition. Yet, the initial suspicion aroused by the line that the poets are guilty of narrowness of vision and callous to human suffering is buttressed by the next few lines which describe the havoc caused by the rising water, which carries off

three village houses,
one pregnant woman
and a couple of cows
named Gopi and Brinda, as usual

The misery is heightened by the matter-of-fact telling off ('three', 'one', 'a couple of') of the things washed away by the river. Ironically, the woman—a human being—remains anonymous.

while animals are identified. But perhaps even the animals are not identified either, because they bear very common names or because the river ordinarily carried off such cows also. The woman, like her faceless twins and the pair of cows, remains so much of flotsam. The lines

The new poets still quoted
the old poets ¹⁹
highlight the crass short-sightedness of the poets. And again, these lines could be properly understood from the knowledge of a specific linguistic-cultural setting. Even so, the poem can be understood solely by what it says. Keki N. Daruwalla's poem "The Ghaghra in Spate" attempts to describe what Ramanujan complains the poets have not done. Daru Walla does not become poetic about the floods, he does not 'rave or curse', but describes vividly the 'Twenty minutes of a nightmare spin' and how 'fear turns phantasmal' when the river 'under a red moon in menses' is 'a red weal/across the spine of the land' ²⁰. In a tone that is plainly matter-of-fact and unsparingly unsentimental, Daruwalla describes human suffering with more social awareness and less bitterness and scorn. Satyanarain Singh thinks that A.K. Ramanujan's 'A River' is a

¹⁹ Selected Poems, p. 15.

²⁰ Contemporary Indian Poetry in English, ed Saleem pearadina (Delhi: Macmillan, 1972), pp 73-74.
dig at those to whom poetry is no more than a form of self-indulgence. Paul Verghese believes that 'the success of this poem depends on the unobtrusive irony, the casual and detached tone of the poet and the structure of antithetical balances in the poem'. Apart from it, the poem is also a reminder to the poets of the need for social concern, since poetic effusion cannot remain indifferent to human suffering.

The creative fecundity of the mean or ugly is contrasted with the sterility of beauty in the poem 'which Reminds Me' Even a 'mangy palace dog' can fill with child, while a 'whole royal harem' may remain barren. Beautiful people of the world may not multiply beauty, but the ugly ones certainly help in creating a new beauty. There is, then, no surprise if a 'measly-looking man' who is definitely not likeable, going to such an awful place as the bank after visiting a dentist - a very incongruous setting-suffering from cold, sitting at the window of a local bus, suddenly makes a poem. All the things associated with the man are unromantic or repulsive. He seems to be the most unlikely candidate to create an enduring or beautiful thing like a poem, yet the author has known him do it. By a terse reference to the 'thrown-away seed of the folktale tree' the author perhaps suggests that sterility results when anything


leses touch with the ordinariness of life and that creation of permanence is possible only in the ephemera of the world.

The poem 'Anxiety' attempts to define the condition of anxiety which has become a major symptom of modern existence. To do so, the poet contrasts this with fear, hope and gaiety. By a series of negations, the poet gropes at an understanding of the anxiety state. Fear is probably a unified, whole emotion; it has no ramifications. But anxiety is different; also, it has 'naked roots and secret twigs'. 'Naked roots' suggests rawness and hurt which are usually the causes of anxiety. Unclear, indefinable fears are the results - the 'secret twigs' of this condition. Anxiety is unlike the rising loop of hope, it has loose ends and the man is tied into knots at the top of it. Happiness is wakeful while anxiety is drowsy, thick and 'fibred as pitch'. Anxiety is as primeval as the elements:

Flames have only lungs. Water is all eyes.
The earth has bone for muscle. And the air is a flock of invisible pigeons.23

These lines try to define the neurotic condition called anxiety. Lungs burn, eyes are filled with tears, limbs stiffen rendering one incapable of action. And the neurotic

23 Selected Poems, p. 11.
suspects the very air around him. It is a vicious condition, as it breeds more anxiety. There is 'no metaphor to end it' through anxiety. The poem is an example of how words, used precisely, can clarify a turgid concept and bring it almost within the reach of understanding. The dextrous verbal strategies employed by the poet contribute a great deal to the success of the poem. It is an example of how truth can be explored through words.

Death is the subject of the poem 'Epitaph on a Street dog'. The poem relates how the living suck life from love which is the life-giving principle. Even a street dog is capable of such love and stands as a symbol of martyrdom in motherhood. The first six lines use an out-of-the-way rhyme scheme, while the next four lines employ half-rhymes. The first lines therefore move with certainty, and pass on to the unsureness of half-rhymes, suggesting the two stages of mating and breeding. The last two lines are not rhymed, but the internal rhyme in the last line echoes the inevitability and finality of the dog's fate.

According to K. Raghavendra Rao, the poem 'A Hindu to his Body' succeeds in fusing the subjective and objective time. He observes that in this poem 'memory is no longer mere
memory, a loss in time, but it becomes a structure cotermino-
nus with the present and the continuous and even with the
future unknown. There is nevertheless subtle irony at
the very beginning of the poem, leading on to a tender desire,
embedded in which there is also an indirect admonition. In
Hindu belief, the soul is a permanent principle, the body
being a transient housing used by the soul in its progression.
A true Hindu would be interested only in the upward progres-
sion of his soul leading to redemption, but not in the body
which the discards at the proper time as worn-out clothes are
discarded. Ramanujan inverts this when he says:

Dear pursuing presence,
dear body:
you brought me
do not leave me
behind

He proceeds to trace the progression of the body after decay:
when it has become one with the elements and become the sap
in the trees, he expresses a desire to 'feel the weight of
honey-hives' and the 'burlap-weave of weaver birds' in the

branches. Life with its 'garrulous face' and 'alien mind' may not have achieved anything, but the body, after death, can do something useful. It is a dig at the futile other-worldliness of men who neglect the here and now.

In the poem 'Still Another View of Grace', there is 'an acute sense of sin and a wry portrayal of human fallibility— Sexual lust— battles against prudery, respectability, worldly wisdom, piety'. An unusually successful poem, it depicts powerfully human weakness and the shaky nature of moral stances. Like a latter-day Maugham, he searches the heart of saint and finds a sinner there. The language tends to be overly metaphorical, reflecting the gusto with which the persona in the poem rejects the street-walker in the first instance, and later abruptly succumbs to her. The whole poem is deftly handled with rhymes, half-rhymes and alliteration, though superficially they appear causal, not deliberate. Not only are there full rhymes like 'burned', 'turned'; 'caught', 'thought'; 'priest', 'beast', 'crumbled' 'tumbled' and so on, but also half-rhymes ('sons', 'sin', 'brahmin', 'hymns'), alliteration ('husband', 'houseful') and assonance ('bone', 'roam'). Its technical achievement alone is of a high order.

but what it seeks to portray—the inherent human weakness which shows in spite of good breeding—also is sufficiently important. What Somerset Maugham has done in his story 'Rain', Ramanujan has done in this poem in a few lines and has made his point equally powerful. As H.M. Williams says, A.K. Ramanujan 'sees clearly, and to a great extent accepts, man as he is, a limited, self-contradictory and often weak, deluded creature. This is the root of his anti-romanticism which resembles T.S. Eliot's Christian pessimism, though for Ramanujan it probably has Hindu (Saivite?) sources.'

Outwardly, the poem 'It does not follow, But when in the Street' sounds optimistic. It begins with the hopes of a prisoner about to be released from jail. Forgetting his physical discomfort ('the eczema on my feet'), he feels exhilarated and one with the elements ('I walk on air/I walk on water'). Partly his mood and partly the spring season are the causes of his euphoria. He hopes for a better future, but the twist lies in the title 'It does not follow—' which reduces the hopes of the prisoner to mere day-dreaming. 'Poona Train Window' offers a contrast to the last lines of Philip Larkin's 'Whitsun Weddings'. Larkin, as the train

27 H.M. Williams, opcit, p. 121.
moves, notices that

An odeon went past, a cooling tower
And someone running up to bowl

while Ramanujan observes

Three women with baskets
on their heads, climbing
slowly against the slope
of a hill, one of them
lop-sided, balancing
between the slope and
the basket on the head
a late pregnancy

Each poem is an authentic record of observed facts, demonstrating the powers of description of each poet. But where Larkin, however obliquely, tries to pontificate on marriages, Ramanujan takes a no-nonsense attitude by narrating the facts and leaving them at that, allowing the reader to piece together the puzzle he has set.

'The Last of the Princes' reminds one of Tagore's short story The Babus of Mayanjore. While Tagore's sympathy for the impoverished princes may be justified, Ramanujan's cannot, as many of the erstwhile princes have become success-


29 Selected Poems, p. 29.
ful businessmen. For that reason, perhaps, the poem does not come out alive and the pathetic note in the poem seems imposed and insincere, since the thematic concern is trivial.

According to R. Parthasarathy, in the poem 'Prayers to Lord Murugan', Ramanujan examines 'a tradition gone to seed and invokes its relevance to our own times'. The prayer is not strictly a prayer, its tone, as Parthasarathy noted, being bantering. The first four sections of the poem adopt a mock-serious tone which sharpens to a devastating irony in the fifth. The first and second sections reflect the frenzied mood of the carnival:

Lord of new arrivals
lovers and rivals:
arrive
but suddenly the tone degrades – perhaps due to excessive employment of bantering–to the trete and inconsequential:

unlike other gods
you found work
for every face,
and made
eyes at only one
woman

30 "How it Strikes a Contemporary", The Literary Criterion, 12, Nos. 2–3 (1976), 196.

31 Selected Poems, p. 51.

32 Ibid., p. 51–52.
The third and fourth sections once again pick up the tone of Saivite carnival madness, and the fifth comes as a culmination, as a critique of the pretentious facets of life in India:

Rajahs stand in photographs
over nine-foot silken tigresses
that sycophants have shot.

The whole yogic and tantric cults come in for severe ridicule:

Ever - rehearsing astronauts,
we purify and return
our urine
to the circling body
and burn our faeces
for fuel to reach the moon
through the sky behind
the navel.

and nothing better can be expected of a people who 'eat legends and leavings' (p.53). The following six sections mock one aspect or the other of Indian life. The sixth section describes the typical modern mentality in a half - mocking, half-serious tone:

Master of red bloodstains
our blood is brown;

33 Selected Poems, p. 53.

34 Ibid., p.53-54.
our collars white\textsuperscript{35} while section seven suddenly turns serious, as the poet explores deeper realities of life:

Lord
of faces,
find us the face
we lost early
this morning\textsuperscript{36}

The tone from now on is neither mock-serious nor ironic; it acquires a desperate note in its search for consistency in a world of hypocrisy. Acute awareness of and earnest solicitude for the human situation, expressed as rhetoric of personal involvement, could easily have degenerated into a high falutin' moral stance, but is prevented from falling into a banal indictment by a radical yet controlled use of paradox:

Deliver us O presence
from proxies
and absences
from sanskrit and the mythologies
of night and the several
roundtable mornings
of London and return
the future to what

\textsuperscript{35} Selected Poems, p. 54.

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., p. 14.
it was

Sensation-mongering (Lord of headlines/help us read/the small print, p 55), negation or repudiation of life (Lord of the sixth sense, give us back/our five senses) and incorrigible zealotry (Lord of solutions/teach us to dissolve/ and not to drown) receive unmistakable diatribe. Trading rumours, a necessary adjunct to an effete existence, also occasions a reproof: many of the so-called religious and secular practices and beliefs can be reached only through books which few read and fewer still correctly understand — books, that is, which only enjoy the status of rumours. To be saved from these is to have a new birth as humans, not as cogs in a meaningless, senseless chain of being:

Lord of the last - born
give us
birth

That this is not an ordinary poem of prayer, but a lyric expression of the poet's anguish for the quality of life that has degenerated into quiescence, passivity and become enervated and spineless by the fascination exerted by the age-old theory of fate is evident:

37 Selected Poems, p. 55.

38 Ibid., p. 56.
Lord of answers, 
cure us at once 
of prayers

Balagangadharu Tilak, a Telugu poet, has a similar prayer:

O lord
save my land
from sanctimonious men
and virtuous wives
from the honourable pillars of society
and man-eaters
from reasonless snakes of kindness
that spit double - morals with their forked tongues
from myriad deities and their priests
from sealots and miracle-makers
and from scores of Right Reverend gurus

Both are poems that express exasperation at the sham and factitious nature of the existing social order and show how the traditional supplication can be altered to suit the changed context, and how it is divorced from realities. Tilak, heir to humanistic ideas and idiom, voices his concern in a more impassioned manner than Ramanujan does with his urban and aseptic attitude. Without rhetorical flashes or verbal pyrotechnics, Ramanujan achieves in the poem a concentration of effect as powerful as it is forthright. Creative impetuosity and an effusive tone are perhaps weaknesses in this poem, as

39 Selected Poems, p. 56.
in the others of his. Yet, after an initial looseness, the form settles down to a taut three-line stanza which tenaciously carries the thought to the inexorable end. The poem is richly structured, with thought and word in perfect balance with each other. Control, an important ingredient of any successful poem, is manifest throughout.

The poems describing familial relationships seem to offer certain problems: they may be looked upon as representing the poet's desire for the repossesson of his Indian past, which has become acute by his prolonged stay in a foreign country; or they may be supposed to reflect his nostalgia for lost childhood, resulting from feelings of alienation; or they may be thought of as depicting some kind of Wordsworthian hæspængæny for the deprivation of innocence or golden age. Nevertheless, it is safe to assume that for the poet the family is an objective correlative to express his immediate concerns in an exciting and pungent way. It does also offer him a new field of subject matter for poetic treatment and allow him the luxury of a deceptively casual and caustic manner. As Taqi Ali Mirza points out: 'Ramanujan does not rely solely on a clever manipulation of the image for effective communication and --- his social concerns have a much broader base than the limited circle of the family'.40 It does not, however, mean that there

are no poems which do not carry the burden of some alluded meaning.

The poem 'Snakes' may be taken as an example, for it is, perhaps, not burdened with residues of meaning clinging to it. By pure verbal sparkle and a surfeit of metaphors the poem describes through the process of association, the impressions that surface in the memory of the poet. It is for how it describes these impressions that the poem has reason to exist. The snakes

lick the room with their bodies, curves uncurling, writing a sibilant alphabet of panic on my floor. 41

While relating the return of the persona from a play, the poet uses sound effects to great advantage:

a clockwork clicking in the silence within my walking.

The clickshod heel suddenly strikes and slushes on a snake. 42

The repetition of the 'cl' sound and the 'ing' sound echo the rather stiff rhythmical walk of the persona on the road. As he steps on the snake, the hard 'cl' sound suddenly changes

41 Selected Poems, p. 2.
42 Ibid., p. 3.
to soft 'sl'. The last line of the poem is a dubious statement, though it is a brash affirmation. It is presumptuous to think that one can fearlessly walk through woods, if a snake is accidentally killed. Yet, in the first flush of the knowledge of the snake's death, the persona feels exhilarated which is natural.

Casual irony marks the poem 'Looking for a Cousin on a Swing' which really describes the primeval fall. Hankering after a swinging life of ease and pleasure is not only the characteristic of modern age, it has its roots in the original sin ('like those of a fig-tree', p8). The cousin need not be really the poet's cousin, she may be Anywoman, Everyman's cousin. 'Self-portrait' is a miniature which, by dextrous use of paradox, states a genetic truth in a piquant way. Together with 'Obituary', the poem shows the not-too-reverent attitude the poet has for his father. 'Obituary' is a vivid description of the funeral rites observed in brahmin families. His father's family background is tellingly brought out in the expression 'brahmin ghetto' (p50) which telescopes two cultural situations into a vital meaning. 'Conventions of Despair' contrasts the desperation of modern living with the despondency of a Hindu mind. So long as man exists 'in this many - lived lair/of fears, this flesh,"43 he cannot be free from despair.

43 Selected Poems, p.
The difference between the attitudes of the so-called modern and orthodox man is that in them one set of fears is substituted with another set of equally object fears. If an orthodox Hindu has to live in fear of the desperate thought of punishment in Hell and 'translate' his life into a semblance of spiritual freedom in relation to this belief, the modern man has to live in fear of others' opinion of himself, or lose his mental balance which lands him on the couch of a psychiatrist's consulting room. Whatever a man believes in, conformity or karma, there is no escape from fear, from despair. It seems foolish then to exchange one group of fears for another, and so the poet makes an impassioned appeal for 'archaic despair' to be returned to him.

'The Hindoos he doesn't Hurt a Fly or a Spider either' bears a thematic resemblance to 'Vamsavriksha' a Kannada novel with which Ramanujan might have been familiar. This poem pricks the bubble of pride in family geneologies by indicating that 'great swinging grand mothers' can often confuse branches in family trees, especially when Great Grand fathers remain nonviolent while watching the proceedings - like 'some spider-lover' -- because they are Hindus who religiously follow non-violence at all times. All talk about purity of stock is only a vain boast, particularly when one's progenitors have fishermen for lovers.
The two love poems 'Love Poem for a Wife 1' and 'Love Poem for a Wife 2' are cast, as Narendra Lall noted, in two different moulds. Both are monologues by the poet-persona, but the first is addressed to the wife and the second to the reader. Though a man and wife share a common present and future, the first poem suggests that some friction is caused in their relationship because they do not share a common past. The kinship marriages of the Egyptians or the pre-natal ones of the Hindus might prevent this misunderstanding, as in that case they would share a common past too. Since these two types of marriages have proved to be failures, the present one with its love-hate relationship has to go on interminably. The second love poem also explores the theme of different pasts, but, unlike the first, it is a tender and delicate poem. After listing out the things associated with the younger days of his wife, the poet abruptly moves on to the present when he appears to have lost his separate identity. Merged in the identity of his wife, the poet realises that he is now elevated to the level of Siva ('androgyrous as a god', p 35), though the morning might show them again as two different persons. The feeling of half-man and half-woman that the poet experiences indicates the measure of love the

poet bears to his wife and by deft, imperceptible touches lays bare the tenderness of the poet's heart.

Structural unity and expressive form, blended with impressive casualness, accord a peculiar effect to the poem 'Small-scale Reflections on a Great House'. Its surface mimetic is that of a Hindu joint family, but the poem embodies politics, history and reminiscence. Superficially, it is a document on the Hindu joint family, but in fact the poem represents a larger joint family, the Great House being an objective correlative for India. The poem functions at both levels.

Sometimes I think that nothing that ever comes into this house goes out. For the rest, the descriptions apply to a whole race closely bound together by shared beliefs and customs. This strategy affords a flexibility of tone which is simultaneously sympathetic and ironic. Without deep involvement such a tone is not possible and any artificiality would have debased it to a puerile clap-trap of nationalistic accolades.

In the poem 'Of mothers, among other things', the poet recalls the petal of his mother's youth and contrasts it with

Selected poems, p. 40.
her decrepit old age. He compares her hands to a 'wet
eagle's pink crinkled feet' (p 22) and describes how she
uses her four still sensible fingers' to pick a grain of
rice from the kitchen floor. By making the description
graphic, the poet brings out the arduousness of the task:

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

The 'f' sounds in the stanza reflect the handicap faced by
the woman and it also makes a slight concession to sentiment
which, though represented by a few expert strokes, leaves
behind a bitter impression about the woman's fate.

The quality of man-wife relationship in modern times
is depicted in the poem 'Routine Day Sonnet'. The man lives
in a world of desire, notices only a 'red' lorry and a sailor
with chest tattoo. The bedtime story he narrates to his dau-
ghter ('dog, bone and shadow') mirrors his nature of running
after shadows. Their love-hate relationship is evoked by the
line 'A bullock cart in an Eskimo dream' which suggests lust
and hatred. The line probably has sexual undertones implying
incompetence and frigidity.

46Selected Poems, p. 22,
In the poem 'Entries for Catalogue of Fears', the poet attempts to adjust a lifetime of double vision (p.37) to a precise focus with the help of 'a whole skin listening/ and a seeing ear'. As one grows old, fears multiply but after a time one hammers out a working arrangement by a belief in the primacy of fatalism. Flawless though it is, the past becomes frightful and burdensome and in order to free his children of this fear, he watches over them causing 'infinite harm' to their psyche. In future, they too would become heirs to fears which they try to analyse with borrowed words. The poem is a wry statement about the ever-present quality of fears. 'History', likewise, portrays greed which is present in every heart and does not make concessions to death or respect for mothers.

Unshackled by social milieu, Ramanujan attains a certain measure of freedom not only to poke fun at the inverted values in human life but also to find out what is still valid in his past. Even the strong note of nostalgia in his poems, as Mirza said, represents the collective nostalgia of a whole people and he is attempting at the portrayal of shared experience rather than an individual one.