CHAPTER II
FAMILY

There is nothing sacred or sacrosanct in the poetic universe of Ezekiel and Ramanujan. As poets of metropolitan sensibility, they remain detached and unemotional even while remembering their family. Both these poets have written a number of family poems but not even a single poem celebrates or revers family values or relations. Without reservation, family relations are re-invoked with parodic intentions, in Ramanujan’s poetry, thus revealing his complex cultural bearings and metropolitan sensibility. He employs all strategies including subversion, parody, irony and caricature to mock and scoff at his family relations. Instead of romanticizing family, he views it as an institution which spawns violence, greed or hatred. Family is both cherished and loathed. The poet-persona in “The Opposable Thumb” describes how his grandmother’s four fingers were chopped off by her husband’s “knifing” temper (TCP 6). Conflicts, quarrels and all sorts of violent acts characterize the poet-persona’s family in Ramanujan’s poetry.

But now, after sudden jail
and long exile,
fruitbats in his family tree,
marriage of his heart’s
little bird
to a clawing cat,
cigarette burns
on children’s most private parts,
and the daily caw
at the window
of quarrelling carrion birds,

(“He too Was a Light Sleeper Once,” TCP 162)
The nauseating and disgusting way in which poet-persona’s aunts ‘disrobe’ their mother of her golden and diamond ornaments immediately after her death blemishes and stigmatizes the institution of family:

her two
daughters, one dark one fair,
unknown each to the other
alternatively 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-string
they didn’t know she wore
her napkins on
to the great disgust
of the orthodox widows
who washed her body
at the end

(“History,” TCP 108)

The dehumanized act of the poet-persona’s aunts puts a question mark on the very basics of the institution of family.

Despite all these negatives associated with the institution of family, Ramanujan’s memories are anchored to his familial past without any “haunting sense
of loss” (K. Raghvendra Rao, “Reverse Romanticism” 64). Ramanujan’s family poems are, in fact, “double-voiced” (Kumar 74) discourses dominated by ambivalent and complex feelings. Family becomes a “matter of pride and denigration” (Kumar 197) in the same breath. He both constructs and deconstructs family history as is evident in “The Hindoo: he doesn’t hurt a fly or spider either.” While reconstructing his family history, he mocks at his “true ancestor,” who happens to be “that other,” “the fisherman lover who waylaid” his “great swinging grandmother” on the “ropes in the Madras harbour” and “took her often from behind/imprinting on her face and body (not to speak of family tree or gossip column) lasting impressions of his net” (TCP 62). The explicit details of the sexual act of his ‘ancestors’ certainly reveals the poet-persona’s parodic intentions to subvert the much–acclaimed notion of the family tree, “for who can tell Who’s Who?” (TCP 62). Das rightly observes that “behind the search for family connections there lies the ground swell for diving deep in order to discover the roots.” (28) Family trees are, in fact, “topsy/turvy trees/ with their roots in heaven and branches in earth.” In another poem “Looking for the Centre” Ramanujan tries to discover his roots and finding it is not easy, he tries to extricate himself from this “bondage” (Das 28). He says:

Suddenly, connections severed
as in a lobotomy, unburdened
of history, I lose
my bearings, a circus zilla spun
at the end of her rope, dizzy,
terrified,
and happy.

(TCP 185)

Ramanujan’s desire for search of family roots and his ‘bondage’ with the same sums up the complex nature of family and relations as is also revealed in epigraph of his collection Relations:
Like a hunted deer
on the wide white
salt land,
a flayed hide
turned inside out,
one may run,
escape.
But living
among relations
binds the feet.

(TCP 56)

The epigraph “defines and communicates the poet’s ambivalent attitude towards the family which now creates, now binds, building a domestic sphere from where there is no escape” (Kothari 162). Though the self in Ramanujan’s poems is a construct of the family, it is constricted and bounded by family relations – dead, alive or unborn. The poet-persona discovers in his self the peculiar traits of his entire family right from ‘dead’ grandfather to an unborn great great-grandson. The poet draws the “lineage of his self in terms of various eccentricities he inherits from the dead and the unborn in his extended family” (Kumar 71). In “Extended Family” (TCP 169-170) the poet-persona tells that he has inherited the trait of bathing “before the village crow” from his grandfather and the habit of bathing noisily from his father. Like his mother, he hears “faint morning song” through “three clear strings” that make a Japanese music next door. In moments of regression he plays “shy” with “hand over crotch” like his daughter and holds his “peepee” to play “garden hose” in and out of the bathtub like his little son. His self is dependent on the ‘unborn’ family members as well:

I am not yet
may never be
Kumar rightly remarks that the “self in Ramanujan constantly beleaguers under the burden of its inescapable foregrounding in the family tree” (107). The psychological and physiological disorders of the poet-persona are the ‘gifts’ of the genetic code of his family. Migraines, toothaches, epilepsies and even accidents are passed on to progenies by the ancestors in Ramanujan’s poetry. In “Saturdays,” he holds his mother responsible for the pain in his fingers:

The two fingers you learned to pop
on your sixth birthday
crook and ache now,
like mother’s on her sixtieth.

(TCP 150)

Similarly in, “Tooth,” the toothache of the poet-persona reminds him of similar pain of his mother just before her death:

The large tooth in my left jaw
aches: it’s mother again
complaining of the large tooth
in her left jaw
the week before she died

(TCP 259)
It is really interesting to note that it is not only the size of the tooth but also the pain that he inherits from his mother. In “Ecology” it is her strong passion for the Champak trees which the poet-persona ridicules because the tree may “to give her gods and her daughters’ daughters basketfuls / of annual flower” but it also gives “one line of cousins,/ a dower of migraines in season” (TCP 124-125). In “On the Very Possible Jaundice of an Unborn Daughter,” (TCP 14) Ramanujan’s apprehensions of his unborn daughter contracting “those singing yellows/ in the whites of her eyes?” a symptom of jaundice, are related to his father’s habit of sitting “with the sunflower at the window/deep in the yellow of a revolving chair” and his grandmother’s fascination of daffodils. The epilepsies of the grandfather are transmitted through the DNA code to the poet-persona’s uncle: “epilepsies go to an uncle/ to fill him with hymns and twitches” (“Drafts,” TCP 158). His mother’s migraines are translated into “allergies” and “a fear of black cats” in the later generations. To quote Kumar: “The descent through disease is almost uninterrupted. They lend a distinct family stamp on the individual self of the poet-persona, even though they may be utterly undesirable.”(68)

The poet-persona in Ramanujan’s poetry remembers his father in an ironic and detached tone. There is hardly any trace of emotional tinge in the way he presents the anonymity of his father though he was a Professor of Mathematics in Mysore University. In “Obituary,” he tells that there is not even an ordinary epitaph mentioning his date of birth and death. He got only “two lines” of obituary in a “Madras newspaper/ sold by the kilo” and that too, not its front page but its “inside column” (“Obituary,” TCP 111-112). The “sardonic sarcasm” (Shinde 109) explicit in the portrayal of his father is further reinforced by the legacy of “dust” and “debts” bequeathed to the poet-persona by his father:

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

(“Obituary,” TCP 111)

The way his funeral is described leaves hardly any scope of any tender feelings for him: “Being the burning type, / he burned properly/ at the cremation” (“Obituary,” TCP 111). The associative meaning of “burning type” clearly brings before the reader’s mind the bitter, envious and mercurial temperament of his father. Even the ashes of his dead father do not escape his satiric and sardonic treatment:

left his eye coins
in the ashes that didn’t
look one bit different,
several spinal discs ,rough,
some burned to coal…

(“Obituary,” TCP 111)

It is obvious from the ironical details that he the poet-persona doesn’t have much regard for his father. It should not come as a surprise, because “Ramanujan experienced a typical love-hate relation with his father” (Banerjee 3). Kumar, in his, overzealous attempt to read Ramanujan’s poems from a purely post colonial stance, concludes wrongly that the poem under reference is actually “an obituary on the demise of colonialism in India” (80) and not on the death of an actual person.

Though the image of father in “Obituary” is that of an effete and weak person, but in “Son to Father to Son” the poet-persona presents him as the centre of fear and terror. The little child dreams of and screams at his father’s hairy “hands/ as they hold me close/ to ask me why” (“Son to Father to Son,” TCP 155). The child in a fit of terror is speechless:

I could not tell him,
his toes were talons,
curving long
and slow
towards my sleep.

(“Son to Father to Son,” TCP 155)

The comparison of father’s beard to a “hanging hive” where reside the stinging bees and his toes to the claws of a bird of prey indicates that the child perceives his father as cruel and fearful. Kumar rightly observes that “the talons, as claws of vultures could be seen as archetypal symbols of fear and dread” (35). Similarly “A Wobby Top” also presents the father-son relation as still and stale. “The stillness that the spin induces” in the top given to the son by his father “stands for the stalemate” (Kumar 34). The poet persona is also resentful of his father because his self is always constricted and intruded upon by his father. His identity is an appendage to his father, thus denying him unique identity he so fervently desires:

I resemble everyone
but myself, and sometime see
in shop-windows
despite the well-known laws
of optics,
the portrait of a stranger,
date unknown,
often signed in a corner
by my father.

(“Self Portrait,” TCP 23)

Ramanujan’s was amazed and puzzled by his father’s “living at two worlds at once” (Banerjee 4) who was a Professor of Mathematics and a Sanskrit scholar, an astrologer and an astronomer at the same time. He was, indeed, a man of contradictions “who could read the Gita religiously having bathed and painted on his forehead the red and white feet of Vishnu, and later talk appreciatively about Bertrand
Russell and even Ingersoll” (Kumar, 12). He used to tease his father by asking him: “Now that Plato and Neptune have been found, how can your seven planet astrology work?” (qtd. Banerjee 4) He makes fun of these contradictions inherent in his father’s personality: “Sky-man in a manhole/ with astronomy for dream/ astrology for nightmare” (“Astronomer,” TCP 134). Banerjee makes a psychoanalytic analysis of the poem when he equates the father with the super-ego with which the ego of the poet is at tussle. He also states that “from social point of view, the father stands for the tradition that the son radically looks at in course of revisiting” (Banerjee 4). The critic simply forgets that the main purpose of the poet is neither to present the tussle of the superego with the ego nor the tradition represented by the father. The motive of the poet is simply to present the contradictions inherent in the personality of the father.

Ezekiel’s memories about his father are no different characterized as they are by ironical humour and disarming frankness. He does admit his father’s love for him but it is tinged with gentle irony and humour. In first of his “Poster Poems,” he pays homage to his father in a tone which reminds us of Ramanujan’s obituary to his father.

My father talked too loudly
and too much,
but just before he died
his voice became soft and sad
as though whispering secrets
He drew me close to him
and spoke his truths to me.
I felt the breath of his love
but could not hear a word.

(CP 208)

Similarly in “Night of the Scorpion,” (CP 130-131) he speaks of his father’s rational response when his mother is stung by the scorpion. As against the ritualistic and
faith-healing villagers stands his “sceptic, rational” father who combines “curse and blessing” with every kind of “powder, mixture, herb and hybrid”:

My father, sceptic, rationalist,
trying every curse and blessing,
powder, mixture, herb and hybrid.
He even poured a little paraffin
upon the bitten toe and put a match to it.

(“Night of the Scorpion,” CP 131)

His father was not an orthodox Jew; he was liberal and progressive in his approach towards his orthodox religion. This turn in his religions approach is also viewed with gentle irony when he says that his father “had drifted into the liberal/creed but without much conviction, taking us all with him” (“Jewish Wedding in Bombay,” CP 235).

As a result of these negative images of his father, the poet-persona does not want to don the role of father as that would entail parental duties and responsibilities:

I’ll love my children
without end,
and do them infinite harm
staying on the roof,
a peeping – tom ghost
looking for all sorts of proof
for the presence of the past:
they’ll serve a sentence
without any term
and know it only dimly
long afterwards
through borrowed words
and wrong analyses.

(“Entries for a Catalogue of Fears,” TCP 89)
He is mortally afraid of “the men in line/ behind my daughter” as every traditional father would be. He also does not want to bequeath a closed totalitarian syntax and a set vocabulary to chart to his children to chart their life. He does not want to have children because he does not want to beat his daughter with a cowhide, if he finds his daughter in a hotel lobby with a boyfriend. This kind of experience of being beaten openly with the tacit approval of the mother is too shocking to be forgotten:

She’ll grow cold remembering
what is not forgotten:
getting belted by father
standing on the doorstep
with the long strip of cowhide
and the family idiom
the day he caught her in the hotel lobby
mother’s mouth
working red over betel leaf
and betelnut, the clove ground
into the nutmegs of satisfaction
seeing a disobedient daughter
brought to her senses.

(“Any Cow’s Horn Can Do It,” *TCP* 93)

It is but natural for a father to lose his sleep if the grown-up daughter comes home late at night after enjoying a date with a boyfriend. The poet-persona would not like to have children because he does not want to lose his peaceful sleep over their love-escapades the way his father-in-law did because his daughter came late after an “innocent date”:

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,” TCP 66)

He is also not sure of the kind of legacy he would bequeath to his children. So the best option is not to give birth to children. If they still wish to be born, it is at their own risk and responsibility:

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

(“Excerpts from a Father’s Wisdom,” TCP 42)

The latest trend of the young people to develop live-in relationship abdicating all kinds of family duties, and responsibilities exemplifies Ramanujan’s metropolitan sensibility as portrayed in the poems under reference. Shinde rightly observes that “the family, as an agent of social control, teaches the child the limits of tolerated behaviour. It introduces him to acceptable ideas of right and wrong. The parents prepare their children, by means of training and instruction, for life in society” (107). One of the fears the poet-persona describes in “Entries for a Catalogue of Fears” concerns the safety of his grown-up daughter in the permissive and violent city atmosphere:

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

(TCP 86)
The poet-persona’s relationship with his children is problematic, tentative and full of apprehensions. He is very apprehensive about the future of his ‘unborn’ daughter who is always a living presence in his life. Unborn daughter preoccupies his mind even though he posts letters to his wife:

Dear Woman, you remind me again
in unlikely places like post offices
where I lick
your stamps, that I must remember
you’re not my Daughter, unborn maybe
but always
present:

(“Love Poem for a Wife and Her Trees,” TCP 181)

The poet-persona fears that she will, in all probability, inherit the pre-occupation of his ancestors with things yellow in the form of jaundice. The cats rescuing themselves from “the sulphur mines of the sun/ into the shadows of our house,” father sitting “with the sunflower at the windows/deep in the yellow of a revolving chair” and the “daffodils that flaps all morning in grandma’s hands” (14) make him apprehensive about the possibility of his ‘unborn’ daughter contracting jaundice. He asks: “how can my daughter/help those singing yellows in the whites of her eyes?” (14). Though the apprehension is unreal and fear- fetched, it does reveal, though in an indirect way, his unwillingness to assume the responsibilities of being a father who is traditionally “perceived as a colonial master who supervises his progenies as naive natives to be civilized and taught language and syntax (‘sentence’) that would imprison them perennially” (Kumar 85). Instead of being a stern father, the poet-persona’s relationship with his daughter is marked by affection and playfulness. In “Routine Day Sonnet,” he appears as a loving father who has harmonious relationship with his daughter whom he takes out in a leisurely walk to mark his perfectly ordinary day:
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.

(TCP 68)

The same kind of playfulness is evident in Ezekiel’s treatment of his children. Though he curses himself in “Case-Study” (124-125) for having “spoilt them too with just that extra doll/or discipline which drove them/to the wall,” his behaviour and approach is characterized by gentle humour and playfulness as is evident in “For Kalpana” and “For Elkana”. In “For Kalpana,” Ezekiel details the worries of parents about the health of the children:

Though in “Case Study” he accepts his role as a stern father but at the same time he would give them full freedom and choice to grow:

There is no hierarchal relationship between the two as is evidenced by the playful manner in which he accepts his daughter’s love affair with a man much older than her. Instead of reacting like a traditional father, he takes it in a very sporting way. He is very comfortable with his eighteen-year-old daughter’s conscious decision to accept a seventy-year-old man as her lover. He cites his own obsession of looking “at all the women /I’ve ever loved/have stayed eighteen/ forever” (“LOVE 4: what he said, to his daughter,”). He even cites the example of Pierre Bonnard, a French familiar and graphic artist;

Pierre Bonnard
always painted his wife
as thirty six
getting in and out
of bathtubs, sleek
naked on diamond
squares of blue tile
till she was seventy
three.

(TCP 227)
Kumar rightly observes that “such playfulness in relations seems to be the only feasible working principle among Ramanujan’s family relations” (85).

The poet-persona’s perspective on husband-wife relationship brings into sharp focus the emotional estrangement and distrust, acrimony and discord, disharmony and disappointment in the marital relations. The chilling account of emotional, temperamental and familial differences between the marriage partners underlines the essential strangeness in the sacred institution of marriage, which according to Hindu beliefs, is the union of two souls. Contrary to this, the poet-persona presents the marriage partners as total strangers living under one roof. It shall not be out of place to mention here that Ramanujan’s Tamil Brahmin background could not be in complete harmony with the Syrian Christian background of his wife which ultimately led to their divorce. For the poet persona, adult marriage generally leads to disaster because it is “at best a contractual or arranged relationship between two evolved individuals with totally different cultural histories” (Kumar 81). With the growing of age, self or identity becomes fixated, thus making it difficult to adjust with a ‘stranger’ in adult marriage. “Love Poem for a Wife, I” is a loveless poem, reminding one of Eliot’s “Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” The flat tone of the poem underlines the strangeness between the partners in the adult marriage: “Really what keeps us apart/ at the end of years/ is unshared childhood” (“Love Poem for a Wife, I,” TCP 65). Thus, they do not even know their family members:

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.

(TCP 65)
The poet persona and his wife try to bridge this gap through family anecdotes, rumours and photo albums. The poet persona and his wife’s sister-in-law are perpetual outsiders in the exclusive world of memories shared by his wife and her brother. They are mere “blank cut outs” in their [wife and brother] “old drag-out fights/about where the bathroom was/in the backyard” of his wife’s ancestral house in Allepey (TCP 66). The passionate relationship between his wife and her brother is based on their shared childhood. The poet persona “is so thoroughly disgusted with the hypocrisy of adult marriage” (Kumar 81) that he would prefer to “continue the incests/of childhood into marriage” (TCP 67). He, thus, approves the Egyptian practice of marriage within the family so as to obviate the trauma of the adult marriage resulting in mutual apathy between husband and wife. So intense is his hostility to the hypocrisy of adult marriage that he even endorses the Hindu practice of child marriage:

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

(TCP 67)

The retrogressive suggestion of betrothal even before the birth of children is a way out of adult marriage, which the poet-persona abhors so intensely for its sterile and forced nature of relationships. Bruce emphasizes the impossibility of this suggestion when he observes that “it would appear that the only way to overcome difference and changes that come with time is to wed people before they have separate horoscopes, indeed even before their mothers have had their first periods. This is as impossible as in ‘A Poem on Particulars’ tracing all the trees that have gone into the lineage of a ‘single orange’.” (Three Indian Poets 85). Paul also observes that “the tone shows a longing for the impossible, for the presence of about people and places, and a desire
to replenish emotional springs with new relationships” (73). Commenting on the concluding note of the poem, Kulshrestha observes: “The poem ends with a problematic uncertainty with which it begins, implying that the speaker longing to enter another life by trying to share its past is fraught with bitterness and disillusionment.

The ironic twist with which the poem concludes seems to confirm the statis underlying and relationship as also the persisting acrimony and suspicion that have been responsible for the speaker’s own emotional aridity” (115). The distinct cultural past of the poet-persona’s post is narrated once again with “such an enviable passion that any possibility of emotional union with her [his wife] appears remote and distant” (Kumar 82). She is so engrossed with the mythos, history and natural beautifulness of Kerala, the region she belongs to, that she has no time or inclination to the passionate overtones of the poet-persona. Constant quarrels in the family are the natural by-products of the cultural differences between husband and wife and are routine affairs:

After a night of rage
that lasted days,
quarrels in a forest,
waterfalls, exchanges, marriage,
exploration of bays
and places

(“Love Poem for a Wife, 2,” TCP 83)

The disruption of marital harmony as a consequence of cultural differences makes it different for the poet-persona to have known “my wife’s always/changing syriac face” like the “emerald / wilderness of Kerala.”(TCP 83). Her quarrelsome and difficult nature is clearly hinted at when he compares her face to the “pouting” face of a “difficult” child. The poet-persona laments the loss of his distinct identity in the presence of his wife:

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

(“Love Song for a Wife, 2,” TCP 84)

It is only during sex that there is a semblance of union resulting in perfect happiness for some time:

happy for once
at such loss of face,
whole in the ambivalence
of being half woman half-
man contained in a common body,
androgynous as a god
balancing stillness in the middle
Of a duel to make it dance:

(“Love Song for a Wife, 2,” TCP 84-85)

The sweetness of momentary union evaporates in the morning when the poet regains his unique identity:

soon to be myself, a man
unhappy in the morning
to be himself again,
the poet still there,
a drying
net on the mountain,
in the morning, in the waking
my wife’s face still fast
asleep, blessed as by
butterfly, snake, shiprope,
and grandmother’s other
children,
by my only love’s only
insatiable envy.

(“Love Song for a Wife, 2,” TCP 85)

The contrast between the “unhappy husband” and the “blessed” wife underscores the essential cultural differences between the two. Banerjee rightly observes that the poet-persona feels the “pangs of separation” every time “the differences of their pasts force themselves on him.” (111). “Love Poem for a Wife and her Trees,” like the Love Poems 1 & 2 discussed above, is also about “the exploration of the differences between the couple” (King, Three Indian Poets 111) and their failed attempts to appropriate each other. The poet-persona compares her to an exotic plant of his garden which “inhabits my space/but migrates/ to Panamas of another/childhood” (“Love Poem for a Wife and Her Trees,” TCP 182). The ‘unshared childhood’ and cultural gap between the two remain the constant pricking thorns in their marital relationships. The essential difference between the two evaporates in the heat of physical union at night but comes back with forced intensity with the dawning of day:

I forget at night and remember at dawn
you’re not me but Another, the faraway
stranger who’s nearby,

(“Love Poem for a Wife and Her Trees,” TCP 182)

Despite all her efforts to play “mama,” “sob-sister,” “daughter who needs help with arithmetic,” “even the sexpot next door” or even the “plain Indian wife,” his wife remains a perpetual stranger and an essential outsider because her “family trees are not in line with his own” (Dwivedi, “Second Sight: Indianness A.K. Ramanujan’s Poetry” 46). Banerjee also observes that “the wife’s tree is quite disparate from the
husband’s though the two have some similarity which symbolizes the tension between the different pasts of the husband and the wife” (112). The space between husband and wife is filled with mutual acrimony and hatred:

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

(“Routine Day Sonnet,” TCP 68)

Such is the intensity of bitterness that “the day’s bought flowers” are “crushed into a wife’s night/of grouses” (“Eyes, Ears, Noses and a Thing about Touch,” TCP 77). Of all the relations portrayed in Ramanujan’s poetry, portrayal of relationship with mother shines by contrast. Though Ramanujan stops short of either glorifying or deifying his mother, there is warmth and sincerity of feelings and emotions towards her. The emotional attachment with mother actually “happens out of the long period of breast feeding and child rearing” (Banerjee 4). The pull of the umbilical cord develops a very strong attachment between mother and son. The cord is a kind of “hanger that engenders in him (poet-persona) a sense of belongingness and attachment right form the embryonic stage onwards” (Kumar 74):

A foetus in an acrobat’s womb,
ignorant yet of barbed wire
and dotted lines
hanger-on in terror of the fall
while the mother-world turns somersaults,
whirling on the single bar,

(“Alien,” TCP 149)
The foetus develops into a baby “will a face/getting ready to make faces” and hands that will feel the “powder touch of monarch butterflies” (“Alien,” TCP 149). His mother was an “orthodox brahman woman of her time, limited by custom in the scope of her movement and control in this way a typical housewife” (Dimmord, Edward C. Jr., and Krishna Ramanujan XV). In “Of Mothers, Among other things,” (TCP 61) he poet-persona shows how her radiant youth was wasted in performing the mundane chores of domesticity, reducing her to a scrawny being. The mother is compared to a tree but the tree is all “twisted” and dried up. Her “silk and white petal of youth” brings to the reader’s imagination the image of a beautiful flower. The poem, thus, begins with his mother’s beautiful associations with different objects of nature. “From her ear-rings three diamonds /splash a handful of needles” of bright sunrays. The poem which starts in “intense beauty” (Daruwalla 20) ends in realisation of pain of loss of youth and beauty in the whirlwind of dull, drab and routine household chores:

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

(“Of Mothers, among other things,” TCP 61)

His mother loses her youth and beauty amidst her humdrum daily chores of domesticity – looking after babies, sewing and stitching, scrubbing the floor etc. The image of his self-sacrificing mother is so indelibly imprinted in his mind that he can vividly see his mother performing her daily chores:

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

(“Of Mothers, among other things,” TCP 61)

Thus the poet presents the “archetypal image of mother as a symbol of patience, endurance and self-sacrifice” (Ghosh 23) with tight control over emotions as is typical of the poet-persona’s metropolitan sensibility. She is presented neither as a goddess or a heavenly figure as is done by Sri Aurobindo:

August !Dearest !whom no thought can trace
Name, murmuring out of birth’s infinity
Mother ! Like heaven’s great face is thy sweet face

(“To his Mother,” 14)

The poet-persona’s unsentimental attitude even towards his mother is visible in another poem “Still Another for Mother.” The sight of “that woman/beside the wreckage van/on Hyde Park Street” stirs his memories about his own mother and upsets his recently acquired equipoise in a foreign land: “she will not let me rest/as I slowly cease to be the town’s brown stranger and guest” (TCP 15). This lady was accompanied by a “handsome/short limbed man” whom the poet-persona identifies to be her son who, for some inexplicable reason, leaves her in a huff. The poet-persona moves on casually pretending to ignore the incident but the “mother-son duo” kept on haunting his thoughts (Ghosh 155). The mother was still there looking in the direction her son had gone:

And she just stood
there, looking at his walking on, me
looking at her looking on. She wanted them
not to be absent perhaps on the scene
if he once so much as even thought
of looking back.

(TCP 15)
The poet-persona tries to imagine what might have happened between the two: “Perhaps they had fought/worse still, perhaps they had not fought” (TCP 15). Though the poet-persona just wants to be “non chalant” (Ghosh 156) about the whole incident, he admits that the whole incident stirred some recollections of the past:

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 country silent house, given on her marriage day
to my father, for a dowry.

(TCP 16)

He feels so much emotionally attached to his mother that “despite, his pragmatic approach to life, a woman’s faint resemblance to his mother jolts him a little, stirring certain memories within him which he probably finds difficult to repress” (Ghosh 156). Commenting on the craftsmanship of the poem, Daruwalla succinctly observes that “a casual parting, opening and closing of doors on people’s lives, ancient dowers all these get freely woven on Ramanujan’s loom of reflection and get turned into an intricate poem” (Daruwalla 20).

In a related poem “Farewells,” (7-8 ) there is no exubration of emotions or sentiments when the son goes away from his mother. Separation from mother is a special kind of farewell which is so different from all other kinds of farewells which the poet-persona describes as “farewells without” i.e. farewells which are just formulaic without any touch of deep sentiments or feelings. First, there is “usual farewell drama” (Kumar 77) at the railway stations, when “standing/at the window of your friend,” one waits for the delayed train to come on the platform. Then there is “that recurring farewell/ to the lady president/ of the co-operative society” when she is presented a silver medal without the inscription of her name ironically suggesting thereby that these kinds of mementos are in bulk supply. Then there is the “farewell/
of the dying patriarch /among all his clan.” But of all these catalogue of farewells, mother’s farewell is unique since it involves sentiments “which flow without verbalization, without tears even” (Kumar 77). Writing in America, the poet-persona fondly lapses into nostalgia brooding on his mother who lives alone separated from her son: “Mother’s farewell had no words/ no tears, only a long look/ that moved on your body from top to toe.” She bids her son farewell “with the advice that you should /not forget your oil bath every Tuesday/when you go to America.” Kumar observes that the poet-persona as the departing son acknowledges the sincerity of mother’s emotions; he also “ridicules her for being too fastidious on things like ‘oil bath/every Tuesday’ ” (77). Quite the contrary, mother’s advice regarding the adherence to traditional customs reveals her strong desire that her son should not disregard, nay discard, the traditional Indian way of life while living in America. Kumar wrongly observes that “the humour of mother advising her expatriate son observing daily rituals cannot be missed” (77). Quite the contrary, the poet-persona accords highest regard to motherhood as is evidenced by his rejection of his guru because he taught his disciples, not to “forgive the woman/her malice” and deny “woman her/freedom” (“The Guru,” TCP 251). These Taliban-like teachings of the guru offended his feelings of love and respect for motherhood and so “in a fine fitting gesture and ironic response” (Baral 27), the poet-persona “left the guru to clean his own shoe/for I remembered I was a man born of woman” (“The Guru,” TCP 251).

Despite the highest regard and deepest love for his mother, the poet-persona nowhere idealises her. Rather, he views her as an ordinary human being with her innate weaknesses, faults, superstitions and beliefs. The poet-persona’s mother is allergic to the pollen fragrance of the Champak flowers and she has to suffer the blinding migraine caused by the flowering of three red Champak trees in the yard of his house every year. The poet-persona bursts into rage on seeing the flowering champak trees:

The day after the first rain,

for years, I would come home

in a rage,
for I could see from a mile away
our three Red Champak trees
had done it again
had burst into flower and given Mother
her first blinding migraine
of the season.

(“Ecology,” TCP 124)

The “street long heavy hung/yellow pollen” enters through the porous door to cause the allergic ache. The poet-persona’s sane suggestion to cut down the Champak trees is stubbornly vetoed by his mother. Because of her religious superstitions and beliefs, she would not let the poet-persona cut down a “flowering tree” with which she has a life-long association. Equally strong is her belief that the tree was seeded by God’s grace:

but Mother, flashing her temper
like her mother’s twisted silver,
grandchildren’s knickers
wet as the cold peck on her head,
would not let us cut down
a flowering tree
almost as old as her, seeded,
she said, by a passing bird’s
providential droppings
………..
of annual flower

(“Ecology,” TCP 124-125)

The poet-persona also tells us how his mother offered milk to snakes in saucers to propitiate gods:
Mother gives them milk
in saucers. She watches them suck
and bare the black-line design
etched on the brass of the saucer.

(“Snakes,” TCP 4)

Though the relationship with mother is characterized by warmth and affection, it is also punctured with cynicism and irony. She is presented as a stern teacher since motherhood does not mean loving the child, it is also disciplining them by exposing them to bitter experiences in life: “Mothers smear bitter neem/ paste on their nipples/to wean greedy babies” (“A Taste,” TCP 257). Intelligent mothers “gave them an inexplicable taste for bitter gourd/later in the life.” Kumar rightly observes that mother in Ramanujan’s poetry is a “giver of both sweet milk and bitter neem,” she is a remembrance recuperative as well as painful (79).

Though the fond remembrances of his grandmother are characterized by “a prominent streak of sentimentalism in his otherwise detached sensibility” (Ghosh 80), he, at the same time, consciously subverts and undercuts his sentimental feelings for her by his mocking irreverence. The word ‘grandmother’ is traditionally associated with feelings of love and affection. It conjures up an image of a skilful teller of tales of princes and princesses, fairies and castles of battles won, and lost. The poet-persona’s ‘granny’ as he fondly calls her is no different in “Lines to a Granny,” (TCP 17) He remembers his childhood days when the granny used to enchant the children by telling them enchanting stories including the one about ‘The Sleeping Beauty’ who was awakened from her hundred-year sleep by a prince who surmounted all impediments to reach the castle. The granny is so deft in the art of telling stories that the story retained its appeal and freshness even after it had been told hundred times. So the poet-persona as a child implores his granny to tell the same story about the wandering prince once again:

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

(TCP 17)

The poet-persona continues the tale in the same dream like vein:

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

(TCP 17)

Towards the end, the poet-persona quizzically asks his granny whether it was merely a figment of imagination or an experience based on truth:

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 is no tale, but truth?

(TCP 17)

The soft feelings for the granny are countered by the irreverent note implicit in the way he compares her heavy frame to the body of an elephant: “Said my granny, rolling her elephant leg/ like a log in a ruined mill” (“The Opposable Thumb,” TCP 6). He has no emotional concern for her withered body rather he compares it to a “ruined mill”. Similarly, she is compared to a lizard when she enlightens the children on the subject of scorpions:
Grandmother then, tut-tutting like a lizard, tells us how a pregnant scorpion will look for a warm secret place, say, a little girls’ underwear or a little boy’s jockstrap, and then will burst her back to let loose in her death a host of baby scorpions

(“A Minor Sacrifice,” TCP 144)

One would certainly not remember one’s grandmother by associating her with elephants or lizards. Even the way he tells the reader how his grandmother’s four fingers were knifed by his grandfather when he lost his temper reveals his unemotional and matter-of-fact approach:

Said my granny, rolling her elephant leg like a log in a ruined mill:

‘One two three four five
five princes in a forest
each one different like the fingers on a hand’,
and we always looked to find on her paw just one finger left of five: a real thumb,
no longer usual, casual or opposable after her husband’s knifing temper one Sunday morning half a century ago

(“The Opposable Thumb,” TCP 6)

The causal, off-handed and repertorial tone in presenting what must have been his granny’s most violent loss indicates the total lack of emotional relationships in a metropolitan culture.
The relationship with sister and female cousin is characterized by subversion of traditional kinship since it is overtly incestous. The poet-persona in “Love Poem for a Wife I” had articulated his ideal of continuing the “incest of childhood/into marriage” (*TCP* 67) without any moral hiccups. In “Snakes,” his sister’s neatly braided plaits bring’ to his mind the images of glistening snakes:

Sister ties her braids
with a knot of tassel.
But the weave of her knee-long braid has scales,
their gleaming held by a score of clean new pins.
I look till I see her hair again.

(*TCP* 5)

Kumar rightly observes that the “braids remind the persona of glossy snakes that crowd his unconscious as archetypal images of deadly sensuality and surreptious sexual motives” (86). His sister’s wedding is an occasion for the poet-persona to remember his close intimacy with her:

It is a single summer woodpecker
peck – peck – Peck – Pecking away
at that tree
behind the kitchen.
My sister and I have always wished a tree
could shriek or at least writhe
like that other snake
we saw
under the beak
of the crow.

(*TCP* 9-10)
To quote Kumar:

Woodpecker could be seen as sister’s husband pecking furiously the sisteras
tree, which the brother as lover (of her [sic] sister) cannot bear. The sudden
use of capital ‘P’ for peck implies the usage of the wordpeck in a specific
context. The woodpecker’s peck attains sexual connotations. Crow is another
metaphor for the would-be brother-in-law holding her sister as a help less
snake in his beak (86).

Equally strong are the incestuous feelings between the poet-persona and his
female cousin. These feelings are “hidden under a cover” (Daruwalla 22) during
carthood:

When she was four or five
she sat on a village swing
and her cousin, six or seven,
sat himself against her;
with every lunge of the swing
she felt him
in the lunging pits
of her feeling;
and afterwards
we climbed a tree, she said,
not very tall, but full of leaves
like those of a figtree,
and we were very innocent
about it.

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

This “childhood experience is not a mere recollection but it is viewed,
analysed and assessed from an adult perspective” (Kumar 89). The movement is from
innocence to experience and village to city.
Now she looks for the swing
in cities with fifteen suburbs
and tries to be innocent
about it

(TCP 19)

Bruce King rightly observes that “not only the desire for the other sex has changed in context with adulthood, but the interpretation of what happened in the past has also changed in the light of new experience and knowledge (Three Indian Poets 69).

Sons-in-law are treated with utter disdain and disregard. They are described as stupid persons: “daughters/ get married to short-lived idiots (“Small Scale Reflections on a Great House,” TCP 98). Similarly in “Second Sight” when the poet persona is asked about the sixth sense the Hindus are supposed to possess, he starts fumbling like “the night blind/ son-in-law groping/in every room for his wife”(TCP 191).Kumar asserts that the image of the ‘night blind son-in-law comes from a Kannada folktale in which the night blind son of an old widow manages to marry ‘ a nice girl from a good family’ (106). The story is all about the cleverness with which he keeps his night-blindness a secret from his in-laws. The poem loses[sic] its sting if the story is not read along with it as its possible co(n)text”(106).

Similarly, Ezekiel in his poems about marriage talks about both the positive and negative aspects of this age-old institution. He does believe marriage and family to be the bedrock of stability and happiness despite his public image of a philanderer. He says:

Traditionally and historically, the family has always been an important part of every society. In every family there are specific problems that may come up as the family grows and develops-quarrels between brothers and sisters, for example. Sometimes these problems may be marginal and may be dropped. But I can’t see any alternative to family life. If you have a family, when you die there are at least people to come to your funeral. The Indian traditional attitude, where a family holds together despite all the odds is sounder than the
Western approach to family, although even in the West, they are going back today to the concept of the family. It’s true that sometimes the family may seem like a superficial phenomenon, but I wouldn’t endorse Western individualism of the extreme kind either. I know it for a fact that in the US, attitudes towards the family are rapidly changing. (Rao 174)

Despite his stated views about family being the source of love and affection, it is also full of turbulence, discords and discontents. It is, therefore, not storage that married life is a “sweet disaster.” It is like a “lake falsely calm/and mountain steep” (“Commitment,” CP 121). Marriage does bring sweetness and joy as is clear in the following lines which celebrates its early phase.

A quiet woman
Stands by me
While the seasons
Come and go
Flow phoenix love
And constant be
While the turtle’s
Voice is heard
For we are young
And we are wed,
Smell of myrrh
Spikenard
Saffron, calamus, cinnamon, frankincense
Aloes. Breasts like roes. And such eyes!

(“To a Certain Lady,” CP 28)

But then the ‘honey’ becomes poison and ‘moon’ becomes clouded by sameness of experience, temperamental differences, mutual discords and quarrels:
Then, absences and quarrels, indifference
Sucking like a leech upon the flesh,
Crude acceptance of the need for one another,
Tasteless encounters in the dark, daily
Companionship with neither love nor hate
By an image are redeemed,
By a mode of love expanding to a way of life,
In high gentleness and power from the perfect will
Enduring all and coming through at last
From a not-this not-that to the final goal.

(“To a Certain Lady,” CP 29)

He has a hearty laugh at the usual demands of his wife and then makes up with her and that is the beauty of family life:

Lady, don’t nag.
If you want that expensive lipstick
Buy it, for God’s sake-not mine-
I mean, really, why should I approve of it?
And that goes for dresses, hats, shoes,
Slips, knickers and brassieres,
So long as they’re not on the instalment plan
I’m not trying to be funny, dear.
O.K. I don’t love you!
There’s no need to sulk,
Let’s have some tea instead.
Of course I didn’t mean it,
Sometimes I like to be alone, that’s all.

(“To a Certain Lady,” CP 29)
Ezekiel’s blending of seriousness and humour in presenting his marital discord takes the bitterness out of it:

During our first serious marriage quarrel she said Why did you take my virginity from me? I would gladly have returned it, but not one of the books I had read instructed me how.

(“Jewish Wedding in Bombay,” CP 235)

What actually keeps marriage intact in the face of “intricate and nerve wracking (sic) domestic game” (Chacko 50) is the common denominator of mutual faith and understanding:

Between the acts of wedded love
A quarter passion flows,
Which keeps the nuptial pattern firm
As passion comes and goes.
And in the soil of wedded love
Rears a white rose.

(qtd. in Chacko 50)

Chacko rightly observed that “the white rose spreads the fragrance of marital understanding and accommodation” in the otherwise thorny soil of domestic life. (Chacko 51). Physical love and marriage ebbs and flows but the feelings of mutual trust and faith which form the “quieter passion” endure.

Earthly love, o earthly love,
Be active when you will.
But let the quieter passion come
To every love till
The nuptial pattern is secure.
And I am still.

(qtd. in Chacko 51)

Ezekiel, thus, has problematic and tentative relationship with his wife who is the source of both peace and disquiet, harmony and discord. It is the fusion of the contraries that keeps husband-wife relationship strong and intact.

Ezekiel portrays his mother with a feeling that is unemotional and detached. Her traditional ways and beliefs are caricaturized with an intellectual distance. Chacko rightly observes that “refusing to be sentimental, he [Ezekiel] portrays her with a feeling that negates all emotional flamboyance.” (52). The much-quoted ending of “Night of the Scorpion” does not convey “the poets’ admiration of his mother’s statement of love” (Chacko 53); it is rather a stinging comment on mother’s sentimental foolishness: “My mother only said/Thank God the scorpion picked on me/and spared my children” (CP 130). The poet-persona’s objective description of the scene of his mother’s agony and the reportorial tone of the poem reveals his unsentimental attitude to her concern for the children and her blind faith in God. In “A Daughter’s Illness” also, “the poet distances himself from his memory in such a manner, and comments on them so clearly, cutting at the roots of sentimentality, that the subjective element of memory merges in the objective” (Chacko 53).

If your mother
were alive now, my wife said,
who had never take her advice.
she would suggest
half a dozen remedies
Coriander, coconut milk, ginger leaves
boiled or crushed even
kept beneath the girl’s pillow
white she slept, and your mother
prayed in Hebrew, Marathi and English
for our girl’s liberation
from the Evil Eye
If your mother were
alive now
she would do it all with love
which is the only
true healer, my wife said,
echoing without faith
my mother’s faith

But in ironic contrast to the intensity of his and her professed love towards the mother, the guilt of thanklessness states them in the face, exposing their hypocrisy, when,

Looking on
a smiling photograph
stayed undusted
(qtd. in Chacko 54).

Though the poem speak of his mother’s love for her grand-children, it, at the same time, is a playful dig at her blind faith in black magic and the healing power of love, which according to her, is “true healer.”

Thus, the family poems of Ezekiel and Ramanujan do not present it to be an institution free from its faults and drawbacks. The response of both these poets towards family is double-edged and ironic. Family relations are invoked and re-invoked with mocking delight. Even such revered relations as those of father and mother are treated in a manner and tone unheard of in Indian English Poetry.
WORKS CITED


