CHAPTER III
RELIGION

Ezekiel’s metropolitan sensibility is evidenced in his rational and secular approach to his ethnicity. He presents his Jewish ethnicity in a highly ironic and secular tone. The fundamental concepts of Judaism are satirized, even ridiculed by Ezekiel in his poetry. Ezekiel neither accepts religion nor rejects it completely. His poetry is the negotiating place between these two choices. In a letter to Prof. Delmar Bogner at New Paltz, New York, Ezekiel admits: “I was brought up in a mildly orthodox Jewish home which gradually became liberal Jewish. I attended the liberal Jewish synagogue in Bombay until I abandoned religion altogether soon after leaving school” (qtd. in Sahane 254).

Ezekiel’s parents Moses and Diana were broad minded Jews who preferred to shorten their prayers and sometimes even said them in English rather than in Hebrew. The Ezekiel’s maintained a distance from many of the social transactions taking place at the synagogue. They would go to the synagogue but not fraternize too much. Nissim, however, was never very strict about his visits to the synagogue. Ezekiel initiated his journey as a theist, moved towards atheism and finally came back to religion again. Religion is a recurring theme in many of his poems but as a matter of fact, he never played the role of a preacher or propagandist.

To begin with, Ezekiel was a strong theist along orthodox Jewish lines who even entertained thoughts of becoming a rabbi. He himself declared in “Background Casually”:

At home on Friday nights the prayers
Were said. My morals had declined.
I heard of Yoga and of Zen.
Could I, perhaps, be a rabbi- saint?

(CP 179)
These convictions were shaken to the foundation when at the age of eighteen he met a rationalist who provided him some nineteenth century anti-religious literature. Ezekiel rapidly became a non-believer. He joined the Rationalist Association of India and like Shelley wrote a paper on the dissemination of atheism among students.

The drastic development finds an interesting parallel in the life of Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche who was a pious and devout Christian till his late teens, discovering that he had no intellectual basis for his beliefs, he then gravitated from atheism to agnosticism. His convictions took a further turn when in 1967, in New York, under the influence of LSD cult which was then at its height, Ezekiel took some LSD and DMT. He had visions of Christ, Krishna and various prophets and these remarkable visions swept aside his rationalism once and for all. He became convinced that the world was a mystical, metaphysical and a cosmic reality, that God existed and every human being has a destiny. V.A. Sahane gives an interesting account of Ezekiel’s ‘newly-acquired religious stance’ in the following lines:

The poet has achieved a new faith ‘in a process that can perform such miracles’. In April 1967 Nissim Ezekiel had his first LSD trip, which he would like to describe as the voyage of discovery—this happened during his second visit to the United States. He explained to me an aspect of this experience in a letter: “I came out of that with my ‘philosophy’ turned inside out in eight hours, and became a Believer: in God, religion, the metaphysical nature of the Universe and life, ESP, etc.’ This entirely new change in Ezekiel’s mode of thought and values is a basic shift from his earlier rationalist atheist phase reflected in his early poetry. (25)

However, as the final position is slightly removed from the initial one, the evolution is not perfectly cyclic.

After this LSD trip, Ezekiel realized the significance of religion and could accept the attributes of Jewish religious conviction and Hindu philosophy. He moved towards God but his firm faith in humanity and his concern for human beings did not allow him to believe in God who is altogether separate from human bodies. He spoke of the concept of human friendly, kind God. He did not treat God as an aristocrat or
an arbiter as these are negative traits and he could not associate God, the symbol of virtues, with any negative trait. It was, no doubt, the impact of his Jewish origin and the philosophy originated by Jewish religion that he insists upon humanism. It is only to a humanized God that the poet could offer his friendly prayer in unmeditative conversational tone. He makes it clear in ‘Latter Day Psalms’ when he appropriates his concept of God:

I worship the God who regards
the prayer of the destitute,
who hears the groanings of the
prisoner, and of those who are appointed to death.
I wax old as garment;
as a vesture I am changed
In this I accept the condition of humanity.

(\textit{CP 259})

The first part reflects the humanism of Jewish philosophy: Ezekiel also makes fun of meditation. The following lines display the same feelings:

Time is ripe for Saibaba.
Time is ripe for Muktananda.
Let father go to Rajneesh Ashram.
Let mother go to Gita classes.
What we need is meditation.
Need to find our roots, Sir.
All of us are sick, Sir.

(“\textit{from Songs for Nandu Bhende},” \textit{CP 243})

Ezekiel does not confine his attention to God alone but allows it to spread out of his traditional paraphernalia like sacred literature, rituals, holy men and organized
literature, none of which escapes unscathed from his hands. According to Ezekiel, sacred literature fails to hold us though we turn to it when beaten by the world:

Terrible to us, who beaten by the world,
Turn homewards to the scriptures.
And then we turn again to seductive world.
This too is assigned. But the outcome is unpredictable, habits win or women, cash or praise by princes, indolence or dreams, and compromises with lucid lies of men.
So we lose the parable again, and are accused again at home.

("Scriptures,” CP 50)

One cannot be a stranger to God, if one is a reader of Ezekiel, but not even Ezekiel’s most thorough reader can confidently say what his God is exactly like. At moments as in “A Time to Change,” He appears to be a Judaeo-Christian Lord; more often, He is just ‘God’. He does not seem to be omnipotent but his existence never seems to be in serious doubt. Even in “An Atheist Speaks” His existence is not denied. It is only said that:

He
made Hitler and Stalin.

He
made the Inquisition.

He
made the Holocaust.

It’s all quite plain.

If you look into a mirror,
it’s the Devil reflected
and God remote.

(\textit{CP} 287-8)

At the same time, He can be addressed as in “Morning Prayer” with all seriousness:

\begin{quote}
God grant me privacy,
Secretive as the mole,
Inaccessibility,
But only of the soul.
\end{quote}

(\textit{CP} 122)

“Latter-Day Psalms” represents the summit of Ezekiel’s spiritual speculations though he has said times without number that he is not a religious poet in the accepted sense of the term. In a letter to V.A. Sahane, he wrote:

\begin{quote}
I am not a religious or even a moral person in any conventional sense. Yet, I have always felt myself to be religious and moral in some sense. The gap between these two statements is the existential sphere of my poetry. (33)
\end{quote}

Ezekiel’s sensibility, on the whole, is now involved in a clash with moribund values and hollow religious beliefs which belong to both Hindu and Christian religions. He completely rejects these aspects of faith which, according to him, impede man’s progress or even make living unbearable. After the death of his parents and separation from wife and children, Ezekiel had plenty of time to spend on reading scriptures, thinking deeply on various aspects of life, its mysteries and beliefs. Being unable to shape up these explorations of the spiritual aspects of life, he feels disillusioned. He himself confesses in ‘Theological’:

\begin{quote}
Lord, I am tired
of being wrong.
\
I’ve stripped off a hundred veils
\end{quote}
and still there are more
that cover your Creation.
Why are you so elusive?

(*CP 156*)

The word ‘prayer’ recurs in quite a few poems of Ezekiel. In his early poetry the word ‘prayer’ is frequently used to show a feeling of genuine spiritual commitment, though this is very often modified by a kind of subtle scepticism and soothing irony. Sahane gives an interesting account of this aspect of Ezekiel’s poetry in the following passage:

Ezekiel post-1967 poems are marked by a strain of what may be described as aesthetically-inclined philosophical humanism. On the one hand he is conscious of his own mask, but at the same time he aims at stripping off a ‘hundred veils’ of creation and the creator. His theological position has to be stated in purely humanistic terms. In this philosophical system aimed at restructuring man’s relationship with God, Society and Nature, Ezekiel expresses his own inner response: ‘Lord, I am tired of being wrong’. This feeling of metaphysical exhaustion alternates with a realization that God’s truth is too important and great for man and, therefore, it cannot be brought within the narrow framework of utilitarian objective. (23-24)

Despite his best efforts to achieve and realize God, he finally realized that his quest was an impossible one. This realization turned Ezekiel into a sceptic and he gave up his attempts to realize God. He started focusing on the ethical, humanistic facets of life and on his poetry. His vision is now humanistic and is in constant conflict with the traditional theistic beliefs and values. Bruce King comments, “He had become a sceptical seeker following various methods, reading about the world’s religions and philosophies and find comfort and an acceptable belief for his restless mind and increasingly disillusioned self” (*Three Indian Poets* 50).

Ezekiel’s sensibility differentiates between right and wrong looking at things in the light of human needs. He sympathizes with the poor and also recognizes the
need for social equality. His vision is more secular than spiritual. Talking about the
spiritual aspect, he is non-sectarian as he does not ascribe to any one faith
dogmatically, but believes in all. His main motive is to find meaning in life and, thus,
relate it through his poetry. When Dr. Frank Birbal asked about his religious beliefs,
Ezekiel said:

I don’t think I have ever sat down to completely define my attitude to
Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity or any others set of beliefs. Although
people who are critical may apply the word ‘cynicism’ to me. I think
scepticism would be more accurate (Selected Prose 161-162).

Ezekiel’s theme is religious but the way of dealing with it is different. Sometimes his
attitude towards religion and God appears to flout all traditional views related to God
and religion.

Ezekiel wanted to find meaning in life through humanness. He expressed his
wish in “A Poem of Dedication” and it is for “a human balance, humanly
/acquired....” (CP 40). Ezekiel’s religious concern is less metaphysical or
transcendental and more humanistic in approach. It can be contemplative because of
his brooding nature. His religious feelings assert love for all human beings, love,
which is the very essence of almost all religions. He develops a thoroughly sceptical
attitude towards religion. His poetry depicts a struggle or conflict between the values
of humanism and religion. He had never denied the very existence of God but had
always felt that ‘He’ had neglected man and not treated him fairly. Ezekiel is certainly
not an atheist because he affirms God’s existence. But at the same time he questions
His judgments and His laws. Ezekiel’s poetry displays his contradictory sensibility.
He wants humans to find sources of their own happiness. This is what he affirms in
the poem “Transmutation”:

....but be

Asserted in the common dance. Participate

Entirely, make an end of separation.
A change of heart requires this transmutation
Sense explosions, agitations
Of the mind and marrow, merge
Into a wider, warmer meaning.
Holiness reveals itself in everything.

(CP 56)

Earlier Ezekiel had been more religious than worldly with deep scriptural craving and had relied on God for protection from evil. In “Psalm 151,” he had looked to God for support in times of crisis:

Deliver me from evil, Lord,
Rouse me to essential good,
Change the drink for me, O Lord,
Lead me from the wailing wood.

(CP 73)

There was complete reversal of his belief, as wisdom came with age and experience and Ezekiel’s attitude towards God and religion changed. He realized the futility of prayer in “Prayer”:

I have known
Prayer as nothingness, and prayer
As all but nothingness,
But prayer as All I have not known.

(CP 100)

Ezekiel is now frustrated with religion and this makes him turn to rationalism and logic. His experience of life now tells him that man generally suffers because of his ignorance. The biggest misconception is that man feels that religion fills a void in his life and thus lends him strength but the real fact is other way round. Religion has very
little sympathy for man and even God too remains aloof from man’s problems. So, it would be better for man to wake up to the true reality and stop depending on religion for seeking guidance. This is what P.R. Kher had to say, “According to Ezekiel, philosophy, morality and religion must always have humanitarian considerations to tackle the philosophic, moral or religious problem of the laity” (155).

Battered by the death of his parents and the desertions of his wife, he started reading English translations of the Vedic hymns. Then after reading hymns, he used to switch off the lights and used to ponder over the mysteries of life. At that time he decided to write a collection of poems called “Hymns in Darkness,” reflecting his own state of darkness and gloom. Another reason for writing it is to state the truth of the present conditions of society and religion too. He had, by now, recognized that there is nothing holy or pure about the atmosphere which is totally vitiated and impure. So, he decided to sing hymns in praise of ‘darkness’ or the ‘fallen’ spirit of man which today is evident everywhere. Such a man has no desire for illumination and prefers dark to light. His hymns are also satire on the moral and religious values of modern man who values Mammon more than God. Ezekiel dedicates his ‘hymns’ to ‘darkness’ in a manner opposite to the Vedic “shlokas” or hymns which were dedicated to light. Ezekiel’s worldly vision is in constant conflict with the spiritual vision of the Vedic hymn writers who were inclined towards goodness, purity, justice and simplicity. Ezekiel’s hymns are situated more on the physical plane rather than the spiritual. His protagonist is a man who is immersed in physical and worldly pleasures and one who is cut off from the rest of the society. “The title of the collection gives the foretaste of the entire piece which is full of paradox and irony as also dhvani or suggestion. Hymns, in the general parlance, are songs of glorification and adoration, addressed to God or the gods, chanted in a worshipful mood. The hymns form a part of sacred literature and are viewed with reverence. Since the hymns are addressed to divinities, they cannot be characterised ‘hymns in darkness’; they are, to all intents and purposes, joyous, luminous and illuminating.” (qtd. in Srivastava 141) The poet has provided us hymns of a peculiar kind, quite unheard of before. There is no god or goddess addressed in the poem. There is an unnamed figure “you” and in all probability it is the species called modern man. The phrase “in
darkness” refers to the despondent and gloomy mood of the poems created by the grim spectacle that it unfolds a dark, pessimistic view of man and what he has made of himself today. K.G. Srivastava offers comments on Ezekiel’s Hymns in Darkness saying, “The poem is a testament of Ezekiel’s humanist/pragmatic world view tinged with Nihilism which denies old values of moral conduct but tends towards the assertion of life” (149).

Ezekiel’s persona is a vain and shallow person of no social worth and prefers “darkness” to light. He projects his conflicting views as:

The darkness has its secrets
which light does not know.
It’s a kind of perfection,
while every light
distorts the truth .

(“Hymns in Darkness,” CP 223)

All the religions of the world consider light as pure, but Ezekiel blames light for revealing things in a wrong way. Ezekiel’s contention, thus, goes totally against the religious beliefs. Darkness has always filled man with fear whereas light brings hope and joy in his mind.

Ezekiel’s protagonist is an atheist who disbelieves in prophesies and revelations. He is always busy in his own self and in satisfying his desires. He is in reality a non-hero as he doesn’t possess a sacrificing spirit. There is a world of difference between him and the Vedic heroes like Rama and Krishna who were actual heroes because they wished to serve humanity. Ezekiel clearly reveals the inherent hypocrisy and self-deception of modern man. He may be in possession of some truths but for each truth he has falsehood to accompany it. He has no patience to listen to others. Srivastava opines that, “he(modern man) views others with suspicion and looks at them with the eye in centre of his forehead recalling to our mind the image of Lord Shiva who had burnt Kamadeva to ashes through his third eye, the eye in the
centre of his forehead”:

He speaks with his own voice. He listens
with the third ear. He sees
with the eye
in the centre of his forehead.

(“Hymns in Darkness,” CP 218)

Ezekiel cannot restrain himself from ridiculing this villainous persona; he mocks him for his own faithlessness and hypocrisy. The poet is aware of the fact that those persons who do not have faith in themselves cannot find it elsewhere too. Moreover, Ezekiel’s ‘hymns’ do not praise virtue, goodness and sacrifice. He also avoids mention of good, holy things and so his ‘hymns’ are but a mockery of the term. The qualities shown in his ‘hymns’ are not worth imitating. They depict only sordid qualities of life and are thus not apt to be designated as ‘hymns’ or ‘sacred songs’. On this lack of spirituality of Ezekiel, Bruce King comments, “The sceptical ironic attitude towards the divine finds expression in “Hymns in Darkness” poems partly derived from the elliptical profundities of the Vedic hymns and formally from the stanzaic shapes of their English translators” (Modern Indian Poetry in English 104).

In the fifth stanza of “Hymns in Darkness,” the poet becomes very sad about the state in which modern man has landed himself. Man has lost faith in his own powers and has found it in the form of total faithlessness (i.e. scepticism) which is his only faith:

Whose the voice of truth
that spoke through the imperfect words?
He has lost faith in himself
and found faith at last.

(CP 219)

Ezekiel depicts the spiritual morass in which humanity has sunk today through the picture of a rainy day, of a spot near an open-gutter on glowing tarred road where street-walkers bargain with their customers. This type of picturisation could not be
compared with the Vedic environment. This ‘Kal-Yuga’ hero of Ezekiel lives in a kind of environment which is unhealthy and chaotic:

There’s only this:

a tarred road
under a mild sun
after rain,
glowing;
wet, green leaves
patterned flat
on the pavement
around dog shit;
one ragged slipper
near an open gutter,
three cows
pecking away at it.

(‘Hymns in Darkness,’ CP 220)

Prem P. Kapoor comments thus: “Hymns in Darkness” are the songs of the troubled, alienated modern spirit. The very title of this series of poems indicates their theme. The poet’s irony targets glaring disparities of life. The ancient Sanskrit hymns are the yearnings of man’s spirit to attain something higher than mundane existence. But Ezekiel’s hymns are those that has inverted almost everything enshrined in the ancient hymns” (116).

Ezekiel ‘Kal-Yuga’ man fits no definite category, he is man without faith, full of self-love and vanity but as and when faced with necessity, he turns to God:

Self-love, vanity throws a sickly light on his gods.
His house is built on rock.
It shakes in the wind.
All around it the land is laid waste.

(“Hymns in Darkness,” CP 221)

Ezekiel’s world is far away from the sacred atmosphere and theme of Vedic hymns. In the words of Prem P. Kapoor, “Ezekiel finds modern life as barren. He wanders in a vast desert alone and friendless” (117).

Ezekiel’s practical view is, on the whole, contradiction of the theistic view as portrayed in Vedic literature. Ezekiel ‘Kal-Yuga’ man is more concerned about gratification of his sensual pleasure than his spirit and purity. “The poet holds religion to be the greatest enemy of mankind. God has been described here as ‘the absentee landlord,’ belief in whose forms creates all rifts and divisions in families, castes, communities, clubs and political parties. It is religion that keeps down and suppresses the young by not allowing them to express themselves freely and frankly. This is the conviction of the modern man who feels that he is rotting and losing all his vigour and originality under the tyranny of religion” (qtd. in Srivastava 147) Ezekiel shows his grudge towards God for being too strict:

The Enemy is God
as the Unchanging One.

...............  
The absentee landlord,
the official of all officials.
The oppressor who worships God
and oppressed who worship God
are victims of Enemy.
They rot in families, in castes,
in communities, in clubs,
in political parties.
The conflicting sensibility of Ezekiel’s poet-persona negates the worth of religion. Prem P. Kapoor makes comment on “Hymns in Darkness”:

“Hymns in darkness” is disturbing series of poems. These poems cannot be dismissed lightly as many of Ezekiel’s poems can be. One vignette of modern life follows another, each darker and gloomier than the previous one, each an outcome of a profound self-searching and deep-rumination of life. (118)

Ezekiel’s vision in the poem “Hymns in Darkness” is negative and anti-spiritual. His ‘Kal-Yuga’ hero is a paradoxical man and is in total contrast to the Vedic hero, who is a real hero, in the proper sense of the word. This is the conviction of the modern man who feels that he is rotting and losing all his vigour and originality under the tyranny of religion.

The way Ezekiel’s persona recreates the holy psalms in terms of jingles and jokes in his “Latter-Day Psalms” (CP 252-262) clearly reveals his modern subversive and skeptic outlook. The use of non-serious, non-sensical nursery-rhymes like ‘Baa-baa black sheep’ in the recreation of psalms is blatantly irreligious. The psalms are parodied in modern humanistic and existential terms. Ezekiel in an interview with P. Bayappa Reddy admits:

I am sure my Jewish background has something to do with my life, ideas, career etc. but cannot define that something easily. One day I may do so. (qtd. in Mohanty 108)

Ezekiel need not define precisely in concrete terms what his Jewish background has done to him. His poetry is a direct revelation of such influence. There is no doubt that Ezekiel’s spiritual quest stems from and is moulded by his Jewish consciousness and the Bible. Ezekiel’s Psalms are a series of poems commenting on the Old Testament.

Ezekiel speaks of the genesis of the poem “Latter- Day Psalms”: ("Hymns in Darkness,” CP 222)
The idea is an accident. In response to an invitation, I travel to that poetry festival in Rotterdam, mentioned earlier, taking no books with me, so as to give myself a chance to see and hear. I arrive at my hotel and am immediately struck by the total silence of the place. We are accustomed to noise in India. I need something to read. The only thing to read in hotel room is Gideon Bible... I read something from Old Testament. I turn to Job... still plenty of time for dinner and I read the first psalm. I realized suddenly that I had never accepted the Psalms, and this crystallized into an answer to the first one. Within ten minutes, I had written the first Latter-Day Psalm and formed an idea of writing ten. I completed nine Latter-Day Psalms in Rotterdam (June ‘78). The tenth is a commentary on the other nine, written in modern English (qtd. in Raj Rao 246).

Ezekiel did not attest the Psalms of the Old Testament primarily because his Jewish consciousness which insisted on the Bible-centred ethical monotheism did not accept the concern for God being the first cause. In an interview with Ranjit Hoskote, Ezekiel explains the role played by his Jewish background in his writings:

There was a long phase in my life when I thought I had ceased to be Jewish. When I shower some knowledgeable friends some of the poems written during an early part of the phase, they read them and said, “How Jewish!” I didn’t know what they meant then, but I do now. (qtd. in Mohanty 109)

The modifier “Latter-Day” in the title underlines the irrelevance of Biblical Psalms to contemporary consciousness which is pathetically concerned with the immediate and the real and as such these old Psalms need to be retouched and appropriated so that a compromise formula could be evolved to seek God. He does not negate the Psalms of Bible but his approach is sceptic. He does it not because he stands against these established religious thoughts but because he does not adhere to an established system of thought or religion. From a strictly religious angle such a proposition is highly blasphemous and amounts to insulting God. The latter day psalmist is obviously more rational, pragmatic and conscious of the metaphoric weakness of the liturgical piece. A.N. Dwivedi comments on “Latter-Day Psalms” as
he says, “The title piece ‘Latter-Day Psalms’ is especially marked for its modernity vis-à-vis its religiosity. Against the highly devotional attitude of the age-old worshippers the poet’s sceptical temperament comes out vividly” (“Modernity in Nissim Ezekiel’s Poetry,” 115). The first nine psalms correspond to 9 of 150 Old Testament Psalms, corresponding to the numbers 1, 3, 8, 23, 60, 78, 95, 102 and 127 and re-modelled them. His response to the familiar psalms ranges from the gentlest ironic twist to outright fury, but the challenge is always there, questioning what is conventional, orthodox and habitual. Ezekiel’s re-modelled psalms, turn into a fierce quarrel with orthodox, institutional religion. The Latter-Day Psalms are distinctly different in their tonality from most of Ezekiel’s other poems, as they progress in an audible crescendo from gentle mockery through a flat denial and on to a furious and bitter quarrel with the orthodox conception of God.

Ezekiel blames ‘God’ for all sorts of tragedies which have befallen men. According to Ezekiel, God purposefully neglected the Jews, during the ‘Holocaust’. God had sworn to protect the Jews eternally if they obeyed him, but their faithfulness was not paid back in the correct way by God, because ‘He’ did not protect them when they needed Him most. This was the main reason of his conflict with Bible and its teachings. Ezekiel contends that the original Psalms of Bible are not at all applicable to the present times and tries to modify them. Ezekiel feels that there is no need to show respect to God because He did not fulfil the expectation of his chosen people. Ezekiel modified the original Psalm by adding a word or phrase there and omitting one or two there, coming up with new meanings. He declared that God had always given warning to man to be observant of his duties towards ‘Him’, but, on the other hand God failed in His obligations to man. Thus, “Latter-Day Psalms” is in direct conflict with the religious feelings embodied in the Biblical Psalms. When this idea of writing Psalms came in his mind, he was in Germany—the very place where ‘Holocaust’ was planned against the Jews—and hence he decided to take this chance to lodge his complaint against God and Biblical teachings. He expresses his anguish and grief, from time to time, which lends credibility to his claims against God.

Psalms of Bible were meant to please God and, therefore, seek God’s
blessings but Ezekiel’s “Latter-Day Psalms” have no such high objectives, but, on the contrary, these psalms put God to ridicule. Ezekiel’s attitude to God is worldly, sceptic and humanistic rather than spiritual. He does not worship God like the Biblical Psalmist; at the same time, he puts a question mark on the superstitious and supernatural concepts represented in the Psalm. As religion enjoins blind faith, Ezekiel’s attitude seems to be contrary and conflicting.

The comparison of Ezekiel’s first Psalm with its Biblical counterpart is imperative to underscore the quality of adaptation which informs this group of poems. Here in this psalm, the psalmist cautions man not to be in the company of sinners. He declares that the almighty would punish the sinners and reward the righteous. Psalm 1st begins thus:

Blessed is the man that walketh
not in the counsel of the
ungodly, nor standeth in the
way of sinners, nor sitteth in
the seat of the scornful. But
his delight is in the law of
the Lord doth he meditate
day and night.

(“The Psalms” Web)

According to B.N. Prasad, “These old religious doctrines and mythical patterns have seeped into our consciousness, and our responses to them are often mechanical along conventional lines. They cannot be wished away because they are associated with our innermost modes of thought and feelings. Ezekiel has reinterpret the psalms for the modern man.” (127)

The first “Latter-Day Psalm” verbally objectifies the humanistic outlook:

Blessed is the man that walketh
not in the counsel of the conventional, and is at home with sin as with a wife. He shall listen patiently to the scornful, and understand the sources of their scorn.
He does not meditate day and night on anything; his delight is in action.

The ungodly are in the same condition, no more like the chaff which the wind driveth away than the godly.

.........therefore
the way of the ungodly shall never perish on the earth.

(\textit{CP 253-253})

Biblical Psalmist is confident of God’s justice and has full trust in God and His ways. But Ezekiel does not display any kind of humility or morality. He underlines humanistic point of view and shows sympathy for those who make mistakes. He is more concerned about the needs of man than the dictates of dignity. His humanistic view is in constant clash with the religious one. Ezekiel does not believe in the meditation of God and asks man not to waste time in meditating. Ezekiel focuses on the physical pleasures and enjoyment, and not on the spiritual and abstract. Ezekiel
realizes that religion is nothing but ‘opium of masses’, which does them no good. The outrageous analogy “at home with/sin as with a wife” affirms the world of experience. It argues that the enjoyment of sin is a means towards tolerance, understanding and salvation. The poet advocates involvement in life, and admixture of both good and evil is not to be frightened by confrontation with “the ungodly”. Almost voicing the Gandhian Philosophy of ‘hate the sin not the sinner’, he is willing to sympathise with the depraved by acquainting himself with their miserable situation. The plan to defy the accepted religious values has a humane logic behind it. Mishra rightly observes that, “The utilitarian mind of the modern man cannot afford the luxury of an outright submission even to the ‘Law of the Lord’ ” (138).

Ezekiel’s second Psalm is modelled after third psalm with reverberating echoes of Hinduism in its catholic approach. In the third Biblical psalm, the psalmist presents God as ‘Protector’ who will always protect him from the ones that trouble him. ‘God’ is like a shield for the believers against their enemies. Biblical psalm three starts thus:

But thou O Lord art a shield for me my glory and lifter up of mine head. I cried unto the Lord with my voice and he heard me out of his holy hill. Selah.
I laid me down and slept; I awakened for the Lord sustained me.
Arise O Lord, save me O my God: for thou hast smitten all my enemies upon the cheek bone; thou hast broken the teeth of the ungodly.

In the opening verse, the psalmist prays to God for saving the faithful and annihilating the ‘ungodly.’ In “Latter-Day Psalms,” Ezekiel is more tolerant, more
permissive and broad-minded than the Biblical Psalmist. He reaches to the whole of mankind and not to those who belong to a particular church. He even takes side of the ungodly and the sinners. In religion, the concept of heaven and hell is based on the common difference between good and bad. He was never in favour of hating the world for its sinners. His approach was quite saintly as he believed in ‘Hate the sin, not the sinner’. 

Lord, few are there that trouble me, fewer still that rise up against me. Be thou a shield for them as for me.

.......... 

Save us from ourselves.
I laid me down and slept;
I awaked, for the Lord sustained me. Let every man, woman and child, sleep and awaken, sustained by thee.
How can I breathe freely if thou breakest the teeth of the ungodly?

........................

Thy blessings is upon all the people of the world.

(CP 253-254)

The third “Latter-Day Psalm” parodies eighth psalm. Biblical psalmist praises God being the creator of man. Psalmist is very humble and thanks God for making man next to angels in nobility. According to the psalmist, God is the starting point of
everything in this world and no one can exist without ‘Him’ in this world. In contrast to anthropocentric vision of Ezekiel, the psalmist portrays the theocentric vision:

Who has set up thy glory above the heavens out of the mouth of babes and sucklings hast thou ordained strength. When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers the moon and the stars…………..

……………………………………….

All sheep and oxen, yea and beast of field

O Lord, our Lord how excellent is thy name is all the earth.

Ezekiel changes the Biblical words to give his own meaning according to his experiences and tries to make it more practical. The poet advocates tolerance and understanding, he advocates involvement with life and does not favour detachment; he considers that man should face both evil and good boldly and should not be afraid of conflict with the evil. The psalms affirm the importance of action without involvement which is the teaching of Bhagwat Gita also. Ezekiel’s appropriation betrays a direct criticism of modern life and civilization which has wrought great havoc on natural habitat. Ezekiel criticizes God and expresses his doubts about religion. Ezekiel does not show his gratefulness to Him in any way. His tone is mocking as he contends:

Out of the mouth of babes and
sucklings hast thou ordained
strength. So I shall listen
to them. Also, to adults.
………………………………………

The moon and the stars are not
enough for you to be unmindful
of man.
For thou hast made him both higher and lower than the angels, whose existence is not certain.

-----------------------------------------------

What have we done with the dominion thou hast given us?

(CP 254-255)

Ezekiel’s attitude is reflected in his arrogant way of talking. The fourth section of the “Latter-Day Psalms” is an adaptation of the familiar 23rd psalm of Bible. This is the Psalm of David who asserts that the Lord is his shepherd. He describes God’s benevolence to him in making him lie down in green pastures and leading him beside still waters, symbols of a prosperous and peaceful life. God restores his soul and leads him in the paths of righteousness. God provides him with sustenance in spite of his enemies and he is sure that goodness and mercy shall follow him all the days of his life:

The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not wait.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restores my soul.

He leadeth me in the parts of righteousness for his name’s sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me,

Ezekiel in his “Latter-Day Psalms” is not at all willing to be convinced that
under His care, he can experience perfection and peace. As to green pastures he wishes to be led from idleness to work which could be shepherding one’s own self. The inquisitive spirit of Ezekiel questions the faith of David about God being the protector of all creatures. He shows his ingratitude and his irreligious attitude towards God saying:

Is the Lord my shepherd?
Shall I not want?
I lie down in green pastures, beside the still waters. Lead me away from these into thy work.
When my soul is restored,
I walk the path of self-righteousness.
I do fear evil: thy rod and thy staff do comfort me.

……………………
I do not need a cup that runneth over.
I shall not expect goodness and mercy all the days of my life, even if I dwell in the house of the Lord.

(CP 255)
The ardent wish to follow the path of self-righteousness bespeaks Ezekiel’s faith in human dignity which he never puts on stake. The poet-persona takes nothing for granted for ever, not even the assets that accrue to the faithful by the Lord’s grace. According to Ezekiel, faith alone is not sufficient and unless and until man works, he will starve. In this section also, like the previous one, he is attacking the very foundations of religion which preaches us that only God can save us from evil. It is not like that he does not believe in existence of God. He only loves life and wants to get rid of its misconceptions so that it can be more satisfying and free of fear.

The fifth latter-day psalm alludes to the 60th Biblical psalm. In this psalm the psalmist is in depressed mood because God has been displeased with his peoples. Psalmists says, “O God thou hast cast us of, thou has scattered us thou hast been/displeased/ O turn thyself to us again/………../Give us help from trouble: for vain is the help of man/ Through God we shall do valiantly for he/it is that shall tread down our enemies” .Psalmist is hopeful that he will succeed in obtaining God’s help against his enemies. Whereas Ezekiel’s psalm starts with fragmentation of a well-knit community throughout the world. The gripping anxiety transforms itself into an impelling urge “Where shall/ we live in peace with our /neighbours?” The indiscriminate genocide of the Jews in the Nazi Germany is alarmingly imprinted in the poet’s psyche:

Vain is the help of man,
and vain everything else.
Did none pray who was ca-
ught in the Holocaust?
It is nowhere said by king
David that God is on the
side of the big battalions,
Philistia triumphs because of thee,
or, by an irony, over thee.

(CP 256)
The breaking up of the word ‘caught’ in the two line “ca-ught” indicates a choked voice to reminisce the wholesale loss of lives. Ezekiel is totally disillusioned with God and blames Him for each and every misfortune. Engaging himself in a friendly conversation as it were, Ezekiel alludes to the psalm of David which never sang that he sides with the strong and oppressive. The poet charges him with encouraging uncultured people who ironically falsify the very values dear to his heart. The Psalmist says “Though God, we will do valiantly for it is He who shall tread down our enemies”. The poet is at his wit’s end to see that his enemies are equally enthusiastic much less discouraged because God seems to be disinclined to tread them down. He shows his discontentment at God’s injustice towards the Jews despite their faithfulness. He scattered them all over the world. Ezekiel questions the very institution of prayers. Without prayers, no religion is complete and Ezekiel is thus opposing the very tenets of religion.

The next latter day Psalm is derived from 78th Biblical Psalm. In this psalm, the psalmist tells us of how Jews suffered by disobeying God and leaving the path of virtue. He is trying to terrorize people never to go against God and always obey him. In this psalm, the psalmist discussed in detail the punishment inflicted by God saying, “They kept not the covenant of God and refused to walk in his law/........ The wrath of God came down upon them and slew the fattest of them and smote down the chosen men of Israel/........ the fire consumed their young men and their maidens were not given to marriage”.

Ezekiel puts up the question:

How long are we to rely.

On those marvellous things

in ancient Egypt? Tell me of the

marvellous things in Nazi Germany

Even with manna in our mouth,

…………………………

It is not a pretty story,
and somewhat confusing. Perhaps the story-teller is to blame; perhaps it is neither God’s fault nor that of his chosen people …………………

Yet, for this, the fire consumed our young men, for this our maidens were not given in marriage.

(CP 257)

The employment of the adjective ‘marvellous’ twice in the above passage suggests Ezekiel’s impatience with the talk of all miraculous and charismatic activities associated with Christ. Its use in two different contents, “ancient Egypt” and “Nazi Germany” underlines the contrast between the two situations and immensely adds to the ironic effect. The recent happening in human history, particularly during the interwar years the poet feels, underscore the typical human depravity for power and prestige. He finds fault with the psalmist who was unmindful of human vulnerability to obey God’s command. The poet-persona finds fault with the miraculous tales and does not place any trust in God’s justice. According to M.K. Naik, “Ezekiel “Latter- Day Psalms” parody the originals in a spirit of disbelief and disillusion” (79).

It is against this background that Ezekiel’s seventh psalm opens up with a strong case for reviewing the Book of Psalms afresh. It is designed after the 95th Biblical psalm which begins thus:

O, come let us sing unto the Lord:
Let’s make a joyful noise to the rock of
our salvation.

............................

In his hand are the deep places of the earth

the strength of the hills is his

also.

............................

O, come let us worship and lie down

Let us kneel before the Lord our maker.

For he is our God;

And we are the people of his pasture and sheep of

his hand.

In this psalm, the psalmist shows his due respect to God and wants to sing in praise of him. But Ezekiel, in his Latter-Day Psalm, finds fault with God and His ways. His attitude towards God is insulting. The psalms after psalms glorify macrocosm, its flora and fauna created by Lord and hammer on the consciousness that, ‘Lord is my shepherd’ who owns green pastures. Ezekiel toys with the literal meaning of these words to ridicule the original content impregnated with deep symbolic undertones. The ambiguous associations of sheep are exploited in the following passage which reads like a nursery rhyme to deflate the psalmist’s chauvinistic self-righteousness. Equating psalms to nonsense verse smacks of an erratic secular thinking even to a common man with no religious credentials. The poet feels sorry for the misplaced religious zeal of the forefathers in singing the glory of God:

Come, let us make a joyful no-
ise unto him with psalms.

And a different noise with

Latter-Day Psalms.

The sea is his, we may drown
in it. He formed the dry land,
On which many millions thirst
to no end.
We are the people of his pa-
ture, we are the sheep
of his hand. Baa Baa Black
Sheep.
I don’t mind singing, though,
thanksgiving and all that.

…………………………………………..

To tempt God and seek to
prove him is sheer folly.
If that’s what our fathers
did, I’m sorry for them.

(CP 258)
The eighth psalm is extensively based on the psalm 102 where the afflicted
devotee complains before the Lord of his temporal existence. He is deeply anguished
because God has stopped blessing him. He compares himself with other creatures of
the universe:

I am like a pelican of the wilderness
I am like an owl of the desert
I am away
and am like a sparrow alone on the housetop

For I have eaten ashes like bread
and mingled my drink with weeping.
because of tine indignation and me down
thy wrath for thou hast lifted me
up and cast me down

……………………………………

but thou art the same and thy
year have no end. The children of thy
servants
shall continue and their seed shall
be established before thee.

The poet - persona worships the “God who regards/the prayer of the destitute,/who hears the groanings of the/prisoner, and of those who are/ appointed to death”(CP 259)The poet’s concerns are totally humanistic whereas psalmist’s
concerns are spiritual. The poet shows no desire to get God’s favour.

The penultimate “Latter-Day Psalm” re-reads Psalm 127 which reflects his
utter devotion and faith in God. The original psalm reads as follows:

Unless the Lord builds the house,
They labour in vain who built it
It is vain for you to rise up early
To sit up late
To eat the bread of sorrows;

Unlike the psalmist, Ezekiel has no illusion about God’s mercy. He has a
sceptical point of view and argues like a common man that doing something is
infinitely better than being allergic to work culture. As a humanist, he opines that no
labour, however apparently unrewarding, is entirely wasted. Ezekiel achieves
humorous effect in his poetry by employing several strategies. He further appropriates
the later part of the psalm to suit the contemporary Indian context of family planning;
Except the Lord build the house- and not even always then-
they labour in vain that build it. Yet, it is better to build 
than to abstain from building,
And no labour is altogether in vain 
It is not vain to rise 
up early, to sit up late, 
to eat bread of sorrow. 
Children are as arrows in 
the hands of a mighty man, 
but not every man is mighty. 
Lo, children are a heritage 
of the Lord, but a quiver 
full of them is not ess-
ential for happiness.

(CP 260)

The tenth part of “Latter Day Psalm” titled “Concluding Latter-Day Psalms” is a comment on the previous nine as well as on the 150 Old Testament Psalms. In the last psalm, he is trying to summarize the psalms but this summarization highlights his humanity. While the last Biblical Psalm i.e. Psalm 150 enjoins upon the reading to “Praise the Lord” for His mighty acts, Ezekiel’s dismisses its contents as “All that fuss about faith”. He finds the make-believe world of ritualistic verbosity and high sounding declarations unbearably trying and deplorable.
How boring and pathetic, but also how elemental, how spiritual the language, how fiery and human in the folly of its feelings!
The images are beautiful words and colorful fish: they fly, they swim in my Jewish consciousness.

Now, I am through with the Psalms, they are part of my flesh.

(CP 261)

Despite questioning the sincerity of the psalmist’s feelings, he admires them because they are human creations, destined to be flawed and incomplete. Commenting on the poetic virtues of the psalms, he admires also their lyrical quality and the richness of images and avers that: “they swim in my Jewish consciousness”. After the completion of the poem “Latter-Day Psalms” Ezekiel honestly admits in an interview with Dharkers in 1979:

I think the problem of identity is important in all literary and cultural activity. I don’t believe it’s possible to be a universal man without some specific roots which are strengthened, accepted or revolted against………of late I’ve found myself more deliberately turning to Jewish sources and themes as though some inner movement has required it. (qtd. in Mishra 147)

Ezekiel’s non-conformist response to psalms ingrained in the catholicity of human love, however lacks spiritual ambience but its empirical character makes it more thought provoking. Bruce King observes:
“The ‘Latter-Day Psalms’ demolish claims by those in authority to know the good from the bad, to be just or to represent the divine. The Latter Day psalm reflect Ezekiel’s struggle with his own Jewish heritage and end with an ironic “Jamini Roy” conclusion in which the art of psalms provides a model of his own work. (Three Indian Poets 58)

It is the very rage and the intensity of the quarrel with God which are Jewish voiceprints of Ezekiel’s “Latter Day Psalms.” The subversive voice is loud and clear, but this form of subversion, angry and rebellious as it is, does not, in fact, turn away from Jewish tradition.

Ezekiel’s poetry is the poetry of the here–and–now, of the worldly sorrows and pleasures. Reflecting the role of a poet as prophet, Ezekiel undertakes the role of poet as healer. Though Ezekiel’s “Latter – Day Psalms” is against the dictates of the institutionalized religion, they are at the same time, inspired by passionate religiosity and, thus, offers an alternative mode of worship:

Belief will not save you,
nor unbelief.
All you have
Is the sense of reality,
Unfathomable
as it yields its secrets
Slowly
one
By
one

(“Poster Poems XVI,” CP 225)

For him, the comics are more important than the holy scriptures because they contain more wisdom and practicality
May you read

wisdom books

in the spirit of comics,

and the comics

in the spirit of wisdom books.

(“Blessings 1,” CP 280)

Ezekiel’s “The Egoist’s Prayers” has an overt echo of Gita where the universal egoist in the poet comically engages himself in a dialogue with God. His situation reminds one of Arjuna, “the warrior, who seeks Lord Krishna’s advice in the moments of intense personal crisis on the battlefield” (Mishra 112). Ezekiel does not conceive God as an awesome supernatural reality, rather speaks to him informally like a friend. Ezekiel’s approach to religion has always been unconventional and ironic despite his avowed acceptance of Judaism in the later years. The poet presents his case before his silent Lord. The very first prayer mockingly accepts suffering as the inescapable human predicament. Instead of bowing before Him, he prefers to speak and complain against ‘God’. Ezekiel could not bear his misfortune and blames for it:

Kick me around
a bit more, O Lord.

I see at last
there’s no other way
for me to learn
your simplest truths.

(CP 212)

In the next prayer, the poet-persona is reminding God of his duties. He feels that God is strict and rude, and punishes man unfairly. He says that no one is perfect and whatever flaws are there in him, should be excused because they are a part of human nature:
From this Human way of Life
Who can rescue Man
If not his Maker?
Do thy duty, Lord.

(CP 212)

Being a humanist, Ezekiel blames God for man’s short-comings and problems. He feels that religion plays negative role in the life of man, burdening him with guilt instead of cheering him up and strengthening him. He makes fun of Gita’s famous doctrine of dis-interested action, the poet-persona craves God’s indulgence over his inability to suppress entirely his basic pleasures. He tries to underline the idea that without any reward, action is not at all possible:

No, Lord
not the fruit of action
is my motive.
But do you really mind
half a bite of it?
It tastes so sweet,
and I’m so hungry.

(CP 212)

Mishra observes that “The inherent contrast between God’s and man’s choices is the burden of the fourth prayer where the irreverent devotee is willing to oblige his creature only if their wills coincide” (113). He is not able to understand why God needs his help for carrying out his actions:

Do not choose me, O Lord,
to carry out the purposes.
I’m quite worthy, of course,
but I have my own purposes.
You have plenty of volunteers
to choose from, Lord.
Why pick on me, the selfish one?
O well, if you insist,
I'll do your will.
Please try to make it coincide with mine.

(CP 213)

In the fifth prayer, the poet-persona ridicules the Biblical concept of transcending all material concerns. He is not at all concerned about what religion teaches against materiality, he wants God to spare his greed:

Let me be, O Lord,
The Camel of the Higher Income Group
who passes smoothly through
the eye of that needle.

(CP 213)

In the last prayer, the poet-persona is talking with God as if he is known to him, in a confident way asking him to:

Confiscate my passport, Lord,
I don’t want to go abroad.
Let me find my song
where I belong.

(CP 213)
Prem P. Kapoor comments on ‘Egoist’s Prayers’: “The seven poems under the common title “Egoist’s Prayer” show that the poet had kept life under close observation. Very often the religious and ethical teaching are at variance with the reality of life” (115).

As a Tamil-Kannada Brahmin rooted in traditional values of Hinduism and living in a metropolitan city of America, Ramanujan displays a unique blend of agnosticism and faithfulness, devotion and secularism in his religion-oriented poems. His poetry is, in fact, a complex play between the dialectics of Hinduism and modernism. His is a non-devotional, critical and ambivalent perspective on Hindu religion. Akshay Kumar rightly argues that Ramanujan “shares the space of not two, but three mutually contesting frames, one the inherited…space of religion, another the equally possessive native space of Tamil and Kannada-region, and yet another the acquired and affiliative post modernist space of Chicago” (45). Though he does not question the Hindus’ incarnate belief in the immortality of soul, yet he believes in the concept of ‘deathless’ body – a concept that runs contrary to his inherited religious beliefs. According to the Hindu view of life, death is the cessation of body which dissolves into the elements of which it is composed. The earthly element returns and dissolves into the earth, the watery elements return into water, the fiery elements return into the fire, the airy elements return into the air and the senses disappear into the sky. This concept of Panchtatva (five elements) of composition of body and their subsequent dissolution is a cardinal Hindu view of life and body. This view of impermanence of body is countered by Ramanujan when he asserts that body assumes different forms after death and continues its existence in different forms. Thus, the poet gives new meaning to the Hindu concept of body. He would not like to decompose after his death; he would rather extend his life-span by the donation of his body organs and transplantation of the same to the other needy beings. By donating his, “Eyes in an eye bank,/ to blink some day for a stranger’s brain” and his heart for heart transplantation to make “connection/with alien veins” (“Death and Good Citizen”, TCP 135), he is giving a continued life-span to body even after death. The ‘biogradable’ concept of nature and body unsettles the Hindu way of cremating the dead bodies:
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.

(TCP 136).

The Christian way of burning the dead is also disapproved for it, too, keeps the poet-
persona out of nature:

My tissue will never graft,
will never know newsprint,
never grow in a culture ,
or be mould and compost
for jasmine, eggplant
and the unearthly perfection
of municipal oranges.

(TCP 136)

Even the human waste fertilises the grass to be grazed by the cows and the
rhinos; it also makes oranges “plump and glow, till/they are a preternatural/ orange”
(TCP 135). So this endless cycle of nature goes on and the poet- persona, too, would
prefer to be part of nature rather than be cremated or entombed in a purposeless way.
“Butcher’s Tao” (TCP 254) is also a poem about the “post-death disposal of body parts into various forms” (Kumar 23). After the dismantling of the dead bull’s body into its various parts, they are made into different usable commodities such as comb, shoes or saddle. The two horns of the bull go into making of “combs / sandals for the pedestrian/ peasant” and its “thong and head” are used as “kettledrums” by the people to drive away evil spirits or announce invitations of weddings or making clarion call to participate in battles:

...thong and dead

for kettledrums to scare away
eclipses from the sun,
ghosts from processions,
or summon cities
to banquets, friends and enemies to battle,

(TCP 254)

Bull’s blood is used to cure children afflicted with polio and also to safeguard the village against the entry of evil spirits or disease:

the blood in the bucket

ready for sprinkling

on children with polio

and village borders.

(TCP 254)

Even after death, the bull remains an integral part of the community.

The same theme of “meaningful posterity” (Kumar 23) of the dead runs through “A Meditation” wherein the poet – persona views himself to be “black walnut
tree” which crashes one day exposing its roots in the sky. But even after its ‘death’, it does not lose its usefulness. Its ‘bones’ (wood) are used to make a table and a chair and its pulp is used to make paper:

The carpenter worked with his hand saw, smoothed it with sand paper, polished it with bees’ wax, made a butcher block table and a butcher block chair. The paper factory ground up the bark and the leaves into a pulp, patted it, bleached it, and turned out rolls, of paper with a logo in a watermark.

(TCP 239- 240)

While writing poetry, the poet is conscious of the fact that he is actually writing not on the “breathless” paper but on his head and torso. The paper, the table and the chair are, in fact, “breathless/real bodies” (TCP 240).

The complex ambivalent attitude of the poet-persona towards the Hindu belief of asceticism is also clear from his “deep reverence for the body” (Baral 41). He does not belittle the significance of soul but he is not ready to renounce body’s claims for the sake of “mystical, bodiless yearning for the soul” (Baral 27). For him, body is the medium through which we enjoy everything this life has to offer, be it love, jealousy, agony, sex or envy. The earnestness with which he addresses the body as “dear body” and “dear pursuing presence” which brought the poet-persona in this world runs counter to the traditional Hindu belief in asceticism. He celebrates body thus:

Gave me fingers to clutch at grace, at malice; and ruffle
someone else’s hair; to fold a man’s shadow back on his world; to hold in the dark of the eye through a winter and a fear the poise, the shape of a breast; a pear’s silence, in the calyx and the noise of a childish fist.

(“A Hindu to His Body”, TCP 40)

On the other hand, “the four-fold Hindu scheme of one’s metier (calling or duty) namely Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksha views Moksha as the culmination and desirable ideal of human life. Moksha is basically liberation of the soul from the cycle of bodily births and the ultimate unification with the Brahma, “the highest and absolute truth” (Chindhade 71). On the contrary, the poet-persona yearns for a company of the dear body:

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

(TCP 40)

This kind of “tension between the claims of death and life, between an impossible eternity and an actual transience” (Kumar 25), is the hallmark of the poet-persona’s metropolitan sensibility.

It, therefore, does not come as a surprise if we find the poet-persona sanctifying the claims of the body against the principle of absolute asceticism propounded by Hinduism as essential to the salvation of soul. Lord Shiva’s body smeared with ash symbolises asceticism but the poet-persona complains in “A
Devotee’s Complaint” (*TCP* 237) that if Lord Shiva’s touch dries out the human in the body, it is hardly of any human use. The devotee wants to enjoy life; he does not want to negate it:

> If Siva touches you –
> when you cut your finger
> in the kitchen
> not blood but ash spills
> from your cut as it did
> for that ascetic
> who dried out for Siva.

(*TCP* 237)

For the devotee, blood symbolises a throbbing life and he would like the blood, not ash, to run through his body. He wants to remain a devotee of Shiva but would not like to renounce the sensuous enjoyment of life. He satirises those who abandon the pleasures of body to seek the blessings of the soul. The denial of sensual pleasures for the sake of spirit is satirised in the poem “Pleasure” (*TCP* 139-40). The poem shows how a Jain monk is ripped apart by the natural demand of the body and the vow of long celibacy. The “naked Jaina monk” is ravaged by “spring fever” caused by the “vigour/ of long celibacy” (*TCP* 139). He is now consumed by the lust of “mango bud” which symbolises a beautiful virgin, and all his philosophy of treating sensual pleasures as a sin seems to have been ripped apart by his passion:

> lusting now as never before
> for the reek and sight
> of a mango bud, now tight, now
> loosening into petal,
> stamen, and butterfly,
> his several mouths
thirsting for breast,
buttocks, smells of finger,
long hair, short hair.

(TCP 139)

The denial of natural carnal desires results in a kind of perverted pleasure. To such a monk the “cool Ganges” turns sensual smearing his private parts and he stands on “an anthill of red fire ants” to enjoy “pleasure – in – pain”. The poem is a “forceful dig at the forced celibacy which lands one in great misery and sadistic pleasure”. Ramanujan certainly does not approve the “orthodox religious ideal of abnegation of sensual pleasure” (Kumar 53). Baral rightly observes that the “poet’s insistence on the body’s virtue is foremost in both the senses of its fertility and fallibility” (Baral 36). Ramanujan’s satire is directed towards those who profess indifference to body and sex in the name of Hindu faith. In “Waterfalls in a Bank”, the poet satirically exposes the hypocrisy of a “paralytic Sadhu” and his kind by describing his pissing of suppressed semen at the sight of “two red flowers, on the oleander bush” (TCP 190). Ramanujan’s passionate plea for the body is also evidenced in “One, Two, may be Three Arguments Against Suicide” which contains an allusion to the burning of Kamadevaby Lord Shiva. Kamadeva is the god of love, the Indian Cupid; Deva means heavenly and Kama means “desire” or “longing” especially as in sensual or sexual love. One of the principal myths regarding Kama is that of his burning by Shiva. It is said that a demon named Taraksura was humiliating Indra and other gods who were helpless because Taraksura had got a boon that he could not be killed except by Shiva’s son. But the problem was that Shiva was in deep meditation. So a stratagem was devised according to which Parvati was to woo Shiva and Kamadeva was to break his meditation by arousing his bodily desire:

After he awakens Shiva with a flower arrow, Shiva... opens the third eye, which incinerates Madana (Kama) instantaneously and he is turned into ash. However, Shiva observes Parvati and asks her how he can help her. She enjoins him to resuscitate Madana and Shiva agrees to let Madana live but in a disembodied form, hence Kamadeva is also called Ananga (an= without :anga
= body) bodiless or ‘Atanu’ (a= without; tan = body). The spirit of love embodied by Kama is now disembodied across the cosmos; it affects Shiva whose union with Parvati is consummated. Their son Kartikeya goes on to defeat Taraka.

(“Kamadeva,” Web)

The everlasting conflict between the claims of spirit espoused by ‘wise callous Hindus’ and the claims of body espoused by the love god forms the focus of the poet, who parodies the bodiless soul and celebrates “desire, the body’s noble sacrifice for love’s sake” (Baral 32). In other words, the poets “cryptic ironic disparagement of the Gita as against the Kamasutra (written by Vatsayana), and in extension, of the ascetic god Shiva as against the love – god Kama” (Baral 32) becomes all the more clear from the following lines:

Desire, bodiless, is endless.

Remember what the wise callous hindus said when the love – god burned: keep your cool, make for love’s sake no noble gesture.

All symbol, no limbs, a nobody all soul,

O Kama, only you can have no use for the kamasutra.

Ashes have no posture.

(TCP 72)

The whole myth of Kama’s incineration is “squeezed into an ironic telescoping” (Baral 32). The poem laments the loss of Kama but also the disparaging attitude of ‘wise-callous hindus’ towards body, desire and love. Lall points out that “in the poem Ramanujan’s ironic voice is audible in the advice which the wise Hindus gave Kama: ‘make for love’s sake’ no noble gesture.” (51) In this context the adjective noble should be taken to mean morally ideal because that is what Ramanujan is attempting to ridicule. As against Shiva’s asceticism, Ramanujan would side with Kama’s
espousal of the cause of the body, love and desire. He suggests that when there was Shiva, there was Kama also. He undercuts the deep reverence of the Hindus for “nobody all soul”. In fact, both the gods are anti-thetical principles of the same culture but Ramanujan would not sacrifice body for the cause of the soul. Body is compared to a lair where reside six enemies in the form of animals – sex, wrath, greed, temptation, pride and jealousy. But still he would not belittle the claims of the body. In “Conventions of Despair”, he concludes:

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

   *(TCP 35)*

As a “Bred Brahmin” *(TCP 45)* he has inherited the anti-body philosophy of Hinduism but his morals and scruples fall to the ground when he sees a beautiful woman. In “Still Another View of Grace”, he describes his impulsive surrender to the ‘beast in the mind’ – the passions. But he carries his “past with him as an inner world of memories and laws which erupt into the present, transformed into anxieties, fears and new insights” *(Bruce, Three Indian Poets 73)*. These conventions of fear refuse to be subdued:

   I shudder to the bone at hungers that roam the street
   beyond the constable’s beat. But there She stood
   upon that dusty road on a nightlit april mind
   and gave me a look.

   *(TCP 45)*

At this stage, the passion of lust becomes so strong that all his acquired Hindu morality crumbles under the weight of temptation:

   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.

*(TCP 45)*

In another poem, “Real Estate”, the poet-persona caricatures his architect cousin who calculates “stress and strain on wood/and steel, on liver and lower brain” *(TCP 91)*. He is parodied as a “perfectionist, humanist and rationalist in orientation and motivation against nature which includes the indiscipline of creative processes” *(Baral 33)*. The “indisciplined” poet, on the other hand, remains committed to the “natural chemistry of the body, which for him is always a living miracle, though he would not mystify it in the manner of a mystic” *(Baral 33)*.

Actually, the poet-persona views body as a medium through which the bliss of the soul can be attained. In “Mythologies 3” *(TCP 228)*, a newly wedded bride pretends to be indifferent to the physical advances of her husband. She says:

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

*(TCP 228)*.

She considers herself to be devotee of Shiva and so, to her, any union with a mortal being is a sin. But the initial reservation evaporates and she soon succumbs to enjoy the conjugal bliss:

She fled his hand as she would a spider,
and cones of her eyes gave the world a new birth:
She saw Him then, unborn, form of forms, the Rider,
His white Bull chewing cud in her backyard.

*(TCP 228)*
She attains the spiritual illumination through the physical gratification. Now “she beheld the divine image of Shiva in her earthly husband. She also felt that the vehicle of Shiva, Nandi, the celestial bull and the ordinary bull grazing in her house were one and the same. All differences were resolved and there was a merge of the body and the spirit” (Ghosh 177). Basically body and soul are not contraries and the negation of one leads to the other as is asserted by Whitman: “Lack one lacks both and the unseen is proved by the seen.” Ramanujan, too, believes in the equality of both body and spirit like Whitman who states in *Song of Myself*:

I believe in you my soul, the other I am must not abase itself to you

And you must not be abased by the other.

Similarly, Ramanujan’s stance regarding body and soul reminds us of Yeats who asserts in “Crazy Jane Talks to the Bishop” that “Nothing can be sole or whole/that has not been rent.” Actually both soul (sole) and hole (body) attain fulfilment in sexuality.

The comic intention of the poet-persona in mocking at the Hindu percept of non-indulgence and non-violence becomes clear in his use of ‘oo’ spelling in Hindoo instead of ‘u’. Gita preaches us the “equanimity and equipoise” of the mind (Chindhade 73). In other words, it enjoins upon us to be disinterested in worldly affairs. Joy or sorrow, good or evil have no meaning for a devout Hindu. But his disinterestedness takes the form of withdrawal, indifference or detachment from good or bad, pious or impious, virtue or sin for the poet persona whose preferred response is of studied silence and willed carelessness in the atmosphere of violence:

I just walk
over the iridescence
of horse piss after rain. Knives, bombs, scandal,
and cowdung fall on women in wedding lace;..
I say nothing, I take care not to gloat.

(“THE HINDOO: he reads his GITA and is calm
at all events,” *TCP* 79)
He indulges in self-parody when he says that he has mastered the art of “watching lovers without envy” and “looking at wounds calmly”. Such an act of attaining disinterestedness results in the denial of emotional spontaneity which is more fundamental in human nature. The ideal of attaining complete disinterestedness is hard to attain:

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.

*(TCP 79)*

Baral observes that the poet-persona is subjected to “double shock in the recognition of sex in innocent childhood and in feeling the ‘ancient hands’ out to strangle such a confession” (25). But M.K. Naik poses a question:

Is the poet trying to suggest here that inspite of all his training as a sthirprajna (the man of tranquil wisdom) he is profoundly disturbed when he finds that in life sometimes elemental innocence becomes a sacrificial victim, and realises that this strange law of life is more ancient than the most ancient of religious systems? (qtd in Chindhade 57)

Obviously, the answer is ‘yes’. However hard a person may try to attain complete non-attachment or non-indulgence, it is well nigh impossible to strangle the elemental emotional upsurge at the sight of certain scenes or situations. The poem brings forth the diverse pulls of disinterestedness and involvement in the ‘Hindoo’ mind of the poet persona.

The poet persona mocks at another famous doctrine of canonical Hinduism – the doctrine of non-violence, because for him, it is a sign of cowardice and weakness. In a mood of self interrogation, he delves deep into his past family history and ‘Hindoo’ cultural make-up to find out the reason of his assumed ‘calmness’ which he considers to be a sign of weakness. The poet persona cannot “hurt a fly” or “a spider,” not “even a black widow” because he inherits the spirit of a Hindu. (*THE
HINDOO: he doesn’t hurt a fly or a spider either,” TCP 62). While digging into his family history, he finds that his great grandmother was having an adulterous relationship with a fisherman. The wronged great grandfather did not feel perturbed but remained “still”. It will be appropriate to quote Ghosh who observes that “Unlike Shakespeare’s Othello, who strangled his wife for being supposedly unchaste, the truly wronged husband here does not retaliate in any manner” (33). The poet-persona attributes his ‘non-violence’ to the “impotency and cowardice” (AK 56) of his great grandfather who did just nothing when he found his wife with the “fisherman lover who waylaid her/ on the ropes in the Madras harbour” (TCP 62). The poet-persona equates the lofty principle of non-violence with inaction or some basic weakness in character. The poet as a descendant of his “still” and mute grandfather bears not only “his name” but also “his spirit”:

And who can say I do not bear,
as I do his name, the spirit
of Great Grandfather, that still man,
untimely witness, timeless eye,
perpetual outsider,
watching as only husbands will
a suspense of nets vibrate
under wife and enemy
with every move of hand or thigh:
watching, watching, like some –

(TCP 63)

The poet-persona critiques the ascetic frame of Hinduism because it chokes the natural urges of man. Ghosh rightly observes that “struggling to maintain a cool facade at the sight of a woman’s humiliation, or not being affected by a friend’s suicide or resisting the temptation to pick up the kitchen knife to hurt oneself or carve up wife and child cannot be regarded as an attempt towards true freedom of soul”
The poet-persona is of the view that though life is a “bottomless enterprise”, yet it needs to be lived fully and we should not allow ourselves to be drowned in the sea of cold morality:

Just to keep the heart’s simple given beat
trough a neighbour’s striptease or a friend’s suicide.
To keep one’s hand away from the kitchen knife
through that returning weekly need
to maim oneself or carve up wife
and child.

(“THE HINDOO: the only risk,” TCP 90)

The Hindu habit of exercising self control through fasting is mocked at when the poet-persona advises us: “Always and everywhere, to eat/three square meals at regular intervals.” Similarly, we should not refrain from facing the ugly and the repulsive, the dirty and murky realities of life because it can hardly be taken as a sign of equanimity:

Always and everywhere, to eat
three square meals at regular hours; suppress
that itch to take a peek at the dead street-dog before the scavengers come. Not to be caught
dead at sea, battle, riot, adultery or hate
nor between the rollers of a giant lathe.

( TCP 90)

Kumar rightly observes that “the ascetic moral frame, if stretched to its extremes, can breed in an element of ‘heartlessness’ in an orthodox Hindu” (56).

Ramanujan’s metropolitan sensibility is also evidenced in his complex attitude to the prophets, gods and goddesses. At times, he is dismissive of the divine, but we also find him offering prayers to Lord Murugan. His mocking attitude verging on
irreverence is clearly evidenced in “The Striders” wherein he deflates the supernatural powers of the prophets by contrasting them with the tiny water-bugs which sit on the surface of the water the way prophets are supposed to do in the show of their miraculous powers:

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

(“The Striders,” TCP 3)

The reference could very well be to Lord Vishnu who is said to recline and rest on Sheeshnag in Ksheera Sagar (The Ocean of Milk). The same note of irreverence is visible in “A Devotee’s Complaint” (TCP 237), where he talks of foul temper of two Hindu goddesses, Lakshmi (goddess of wealth) and Saraswati (goddess of knowledge):

Try to curry favour
with Lakshmi
you lose an eye – tooth.
Saraswati, she slaps you hard
and where her fingers touch
your cheek, you’ve no hair
So you’ve to shave close
or bear her four-finger mark
on your face.
The poet-persona does not spare Lord Shiva also whose Tandava-Nritya, symbolising cosmic cycle of death and destruction, is mocked at:

...the three eyed
whirlwind of arms, dancing on
a single leg though he can dance
on many.

(“Compensations,” TCP 110)

The representation of Hindu gods and goddesses with many eyes, and faces as against “two – handed, two – legged normal us” (“Compensations” TCP 110) is also mocked at in a number of poems. For example, he takes a dig at “many arm pits of Shiva” which became the breeding place of scorpions. Lord Shiva the creator, the preserver and the destroyer is satirised because he himself is shown to be the victim of destroying power of an aggressor:

One leg in the air
broken by time
or a passing Muslim
from Ghazni

The same pattern of invocation and deflation of the divine is also evident in “Prayers to Lord Murugan”. The prayers are in fact, “anti-prayers” (qtd. in Kumar 38) to Lord Murugan, the Dravidian god of fertility, joy, youth, beauty, war and love. He is represented as a six faced god with twelve hands. The poet invokes Lord Murugan to arrive with “cockfight and banner-dance”, the traditional ceremonies associated with Murugan prayers:

Lord of new arrivals
lovers and rivals:
arrive
at once with cockfight and banner-
dance till on this and the next three
hills

(“Prayers to Lord Murugan,” TCP 113)

The sceptic persona sees in him not only the exuberance of the lovers but also the rivalness of the rivals. In the next prayer, the poet expresses his sense of bewilderment at the six faces of Lord Murugan. Each face of the god represents a different aspect of divinity and each arm representing a different mood is given different name:

Twelve etched arrowheads
for eyes and six unforeseen
faces, and you were not
embarrassed.
Unlike other gods
you found work
for every face,
and made
eyes at only one
woman.

(TCP 113-114)

The poet wonders how the god with twelve hands and six faces could make love to only one woman when he, with his only one face and two eyes finds it difficult to do so. This kind of playfulness in deflating the superhuman attributes of the divine reminds one of Tenaliram, the court jester. Kumar finds an interesting parallel in one of the stories attributed to Tenaliram wherein “a goddess with her thousand faces” appears before a Brahmin boy who asks her: “O Mother, we mortals have enough
trouble wiping our noses when we catch a cold though we have two hands and only one nose. If you, with your thousand, should catch a cold, how would you manage with just two hands for all those thousand running noses” (Kumar 107). This kind of playful subversion is evident in the kind and nature of the prayer he offers to Lord Murugan. His prayers are, in fact, serious and playful at the same time. He prays to Lord Murugan to preserve the only human face:

Lord of faces,
finds us the face
we lost early
this morning.

(TCP 116)

Kumar rightly observes that “only gods can afford the luxury of having six faces while the poet struggles to save his one and only face. His plea for the preservation of his only human face may be taken as a hearty laugh at the multi-faced god, but it also is a naughty dig at the unfaithful and dishonest worshipper” (59). In another prayer, he invokes the help of the god in his fight against a fruit-fly. The mock- heroic tone of the prayer is too clear to be missed even by a casual reader. He does not “want god to be in the headlines, at the same time he does not want god to be absolutely absent” (Kumar 59). He invokes the blessings of the “Lord of headlines” to help him read “the small print” (TCP 116). For the poet-persona, the practice of praying to god to tackle every kind of problem or to grant material possession needs to be done away with: “Lord of answers/cure us at once/ of prayer” (TCP 117). The “poet does never think in terms of abandoning religion altogether, but he does not want to live in the world of the absent or non-material perpetually” (60). His dismissive attitude of the divine is also very much clear in “The Difference” wherein the poet-persona plays with language to play with the gods. The village community of men and women shape metallic icons of the gods and the poet persona goes on to describe the process of making icons of gods. The playful tone is loud and clear:
When they bake the pot of the inchoate god
it makes faces,
exchanging metal for wax, an eye
for an eye, changing its state
as it cools,
when they take a knife to it and hack it
in two to discover the gleaming god.
They leave in
the core of the clay for the heavier gods,
or else they’ll fall on their faces

(“The Differences,” TCP 171)

It is only with the leftovers that these artisans make “horses, toys/life scenes of
women/ pounding rice with lifted pestles” (TCP 171). But for the poet- persona, the
order of preference is reverse. For him, toys come first and the divine last:

But I, a community of one,
mould
myself both clay and metal,
body shake and lips; do my dancers first,
jet bombers
and tiny TajMahals for tourists
these days, and then come through pestles
women,
and horses to the gods who will bake
only if time permits, and if there’s metal left
and desire,
or if my children’s quarrels need new gods
for playthings.

(TCP 172).

The icons of the gods and goddesses are nothing more than the playthings of
the children. Thus the poet-persona shows his irreverence for the divine by
juxtaposing his metropolitan consumerist attitude with the reverence of the gods and
goddesses by the village artisans. The poet persona as an artisan expresses his
inability to mould the image of Lord Vishnu because he knows how He overcame the
whole world in just three steps by transforming himself from a vaman (dwarf) into a
giant-sized divine being. The poet-persona mocks at the myth of the giant-sized
Vishnu when he says that he could “fashion / his (Vishnu’s) big toe” only with the left
over clay. The sceptic poet-persona deflates the myth of Vishnu:

but I know I’ve no way at all of telling
the look,
if any, on his face, or of catching
the rumoured beat of his extraordinary heart

(TCP 173)

Thus, the divine is no more than a rumour in Ramanujan’s poetic universe.

The poet-persona also demolishes various myths and superstitions of and
about the Hindus. A generalized view in the ‘Orientalist’ western society is that every
Hindoo is endowed with the Third Eye—the eye of the spirituality which is given
higher place than the normal two eyes of a human being. Standing in a queue in a
Departmental Store in Chicago, the poet persona feels very uneasy when questioned
about the spiritual eye by an American:

‘You are a Hindoo, aren’t you?
You must have second sight.’

(“Second Sight,” TCP 191)
The poet fumbles “in his nine pockets” like the “night blind/son-in-law groping / in every room for his wife.” Kumar observes that the poem loses “its sting if the story” is not read along with the Kannada folktale in which the night blind son of an old widow somehow manages to marry a girl from a good family (106). The poet-persona’s imagery of the night blind son has sensuous connotations which undercut the image of the spiritual ‘Hindoo’. The assertion of the supremacy of material and the physical as against the abstract and the spiritual is made all the more clear towards the end of the poem:

and strike a light to regain
at once my first, and only,
sight.

(TCP 191)

Ramanujan’s” primary agenda is not to interpret or promote his exotic “Hindoo India” to an alien audience” (Paul 71). He, in fact, satirically exposes those “pseudo-saints crowding the modern day spiritual bazaar” who market India as a land where spirituality flows unbound and unchecked. The guru advises his disciples to “forget the weasel his tooth” or the tiger “his claw” but not to forgive the “woman her malice” or the man “his envy” (TCP 251). The poet-persona exposes the anti-feminist stance of the Hindu pseudo-saint who treats woman as less than an animal. For him, his disciples are no more than servants. He asks the poet-persona as devotee to “clean his shoe/ bake his bread/ and wash his clothes”. Hinduism preaches vegetarianism but the guru in the present case “orders his breakfast” of eggs. The ironical stance of the poet-persona towards his unholy guru is clear when he inverts his orders:

I gave the dog his bone, the parrot
his seed, the pet snake his mouse,
forgave the weasel his tooth,
forgave the tiger his claw,
and left the guru to clean his own shoe
for I remembered I was a man born of woman.

(“The Guru,” TCP 251)

The sheer grandeur of the Hindu myths, legends and fables attracts the poet as a native but “the archetypal hold of mythology on the religious mindset and the enticement of post modernism inherent in the Chicago milieu generate a unique poetic mix in which nothing remains insular or unmixed” (Kumar 57). In “No Amnesiac King,” the poet recounts and undercuts the legend of King Dushyant who had married Shakuntla in a forest. The king had given a ring to Shakuntla as a token of their love but the ring fell into a river and was swallowed by a fish. The king was under a curse and, therefore, could not recognize Shakuntla when she came to his court in a state of expectancy. It so happened then the fish was caught by a fisherman and brought to the royal cook who cut the belly of the fish and found a ring there. When the ring was shown to the king, he immediately recollected his marriage with Shakuntla. He recovered at “one stroke all lost memory” to “make up for the years drained in cocktail glasses/ among dry women and pickled men” (TCP 126). But the poet does undercut the grand legend because he knows that “one is no amnesiac / king, whatever mother say or child believe” (TCP 126). The poet, in a sudden transition, inverts the legend and says that he cannot have the luxury of forgetting his wife and asking the fisherman in the “seaside market place” which fish had “an uncooked signet ring and a forest legend of a wandering king” in its “dead white belly” (TCP 126-127). The poet suggests that he, as a commoner is far better than King Dushyant because he does not know, forget or miss his wife’s company even for a day. Thus, “the old legend has been embued (sic) with a modernistic touch, and Ramanujan is well known for his modernistic touches and ironical attitudes” (Dwivedi 51). The same is true of his treatment of Pootna myth in “Mythologies I “ which tells us how a fierce she – demon tried to kill Lord Krishna when he was a baby. It is said that Pootna dressed herself as an attractive woman and offered her breast to the baby Krishan. Though she was able to deceive the people of Gokul with her shining beauty and ‘silken’ voice but the all – knowing Lord could not be deceived. Though the baby Lord took her breast and sucked the very life breath out of her. The merciful Lord forgave her and redeemed the devilish woman in her death:
The Child took her breast
in his mouth and sucked it right out of her chest.
Her carcass stretched from north to south.
She changed, undone by grace,
from deadly mother to happy demon,
found life in death.

(TCP 221)

The complex character of his metropolitan sensibility is evidenced by the seemingly
contradictory combination of “poison and milk” and “terror with a baby face”,
“deadly woman” and “happy demon.” The irony is that the Lord is identified with
‘Terror’ and it is to this ‘Terror’ that he prays to cleanse him of his evil:

O Terror with a baby face,
suck me dry. Drink my venom.
Renew my breath.

(TCP 221)

In “Mythologies 2”, Ramanujan recounts the age-old tale of the wicked demon-king
Hiranyakshyapu who had ensured immortality for himself by seeking a boon from
Brahma:

not to be slain by demon, god, or by
beast, not by day nor by night,
by no manufactured weapon, not out
of doors nor inside, not in the sky
nor on earth,

(TCP 226)
To kill the demon king, Lord Vishnu took the shape of Narsimha (half-man, half lion) and not to upset the boon of Brahma, kills him on the threshold ("not out of door nor inside") with his nails ("by no manufactured weapon") on his lap ("not in the sky/nor on earth") at twilight ("not by day or by night"). The poet-persona prays to the Lord not to grant him immortality but to grant him release from uncertainty, doubt and ignorance:

...slay now my faith in doubt.

End my commerce with bat and night -

owl. Adjust my single eye, rainbow bubble,

so I too may see all things double.

(TCP 226)

The poet seeks neither immortality nor worldly pleasures. He wants his ordinary vision to "see all things double", i.e. to comprehend the complexity and ambivalence of things. Thus, the poet neither tries to demolish the myths with his rationality nor does he want to remain a blind, ignorant and submissive conservative. This is so because, "Ramanujan’s poetry does neither valorize nor rationalise any of the constructs of either canonical dharma or high modernism or "loud nativism, it is more a poetry of negotiations between these opposite cultural pulls" (Kumar 57). These diverse pulls in the Hindu mind of the poet-persona is clear in his complex and ambivalent attitude to religion which is best summed up in "Conventions of Despair" when the poet-persona declares:

But, sorry, I cannot unlearn

conventions of despair.

They have their pride.

I must seek and will find

my particular hell only in my hindu mind:

(TCP 34)
He knows fully well that Hinduism is full of “conventions of despair” but there is no escape from these conventions; he has to seek his “particular hell” in his ‘hindu mind’. He deflate, inverts, parodies, satirises or dismisses various tenets of Hinduism but he cannot break free from their hold because he is, to use Baral’s phrase, an “ambivalent Hindu” (43). He is a ‘Hindoo’, a ‘Hindu’, and a ‘hindu’—all combined in one and that is an ample evidence of metropolitan sensibility of his poetry.
WORKS CITED


