CHAPTER V
Ramanujan shows in his poetry a historical sensibility which is sharp and acute. He is interested in the history of his family (of which he gives us glimpses in the poem “Small scale Reflection on a Great House”) and in the equally elaborate poem entitle “History”. But he is also interested in the history of his country even though he has been living for the last many years in a foreign country. His interest in his country’s history is powerfully projected in several poems. His awareness of the tragedy of his country which he describes as the ancient chaos of a country, finds expression in such poem as “Compensation” and “The Last of the Princess”. He links his familial experience with his historical consciousness in poems like “Conventions of Despair” and even more so in a much later poem, “Prayers to Lord Murugan”. With his tragic vision, Ramanujan is able to evoke the recurring pattern of historical tragedy and individual suffering, thus turning, so to speak, the “poetry of reverie” into the “poetry of immediacy”. He perceives in the anxiety of the individual,
the anxiety of his people long subjected to misery and slavery, an anxiety, which can find no metaphor to end it. It will not be wrong to say that Ramanujan's poetry does not portray the nostalgia of an individual, for things and times past but the collective nostalgia of a whole nation which looks back, often with an attitude of love-hate (that is, mingled love and hatred) to the past, feeling at once drawn towards it and repelled by it.

While commenting on Ramanujan's historical sensibility Vinay Dharvadhar has very rightly said:

Ramanujan's poetic treatment of historical themes parallels and foreshadows his treatment of contemporary society and the individual self. We can interpret his social and personal poetry coherently if we assume that the human drama which constitutes the central dynamic of the past also serves as the mechanism that keeps the present day world constantly in motion. This drama comes sharply into focus if we rearrange the social and personal poems hypothetically within a series of connective circles, in which the outer most periphery contains representation of various environments that lie on the edge of the poet's experience, while the innermost periphery brings together poems about the things that are closest to him. If we move inwards from the outer circle, we first encounter Ramanujan's
more impersonal social poems, which often enact a drama evolving nameless character-types, whom he perceives or imagines at a distance (i.e., “If eyes can see” in the Black Hen). In the second circle, we come across more personal poems about the extended family, which contains not only uncles, aunts, and cousins, but also dead grand parents and great grand parents as well as unborn grandchildren and great grand children’s, all clustered synchronically and diachronically around the poet his parents, and his siblings (e.g., “The Hindoo : he doesn’t Hurt a fly or a spider either” and “Real Estate” in Relations). “In the third zone, nested inside the sprawling extended family, we find representation of the ongoing every day drama of the nuclear family, where the main characters are a husband, a wife, a daughter, and a son, (e.g., “Routine day sonnet” in “Relations” and “Moulting” in “Second Sight”). In the fourth, still smaller, and more intimate circle located inside the nuclear family, we discover poems about love and marriage, in which the primary play revolves around a man and a women a pair of lovers, or a husband and a wife (e.g., the love poems to a wife in “Relations” and “Second Sight” and the series on love in “The Black Hen”). In the fifth and smallest circle, which is compressed almost to a point, we come face to face with the poet by himself, as the individual who experiences everything, confronts
himself more closely than anything else, and serves as the subjective centre while gives all the concentric zones of experience their basic structure and meaning (e.g., “Conventions of Despair” and “One Reads” in “The Striders” and “Pain: trying to find a metaphor” in “The Black Hen”)

Family is one of the central metaphors in Ramanujan’s poetry, but the family itself is viewed in its historical context. While Ezekiel is a poet who lives in India and is committed to the Indian environment, Ramanujan living in the U.S.A. for the last over fifteen years looks across an alien culture and a vast ocean, to find his roots in Indian myth and tradition that is why his separation from his immediate India environment has been a blessing. In his case apparent “alienation from the immediate environment has meant”, continuity which an older ideal i.e. with Indian historical tradition. There is always the “presence of the past” in the poetry: he is not of those who hope for a future, without organically remembering the past, “who are guilty of the folly”, of trying to build history out of an unhistorical present. His personal and familial conflicts and frustrations are constantly related to the Indian intellectual and social environment, both present and past. In this way, the individual and the particular is
generalised and universalised and his poetry ceases to be the “anthropological oddity” of the unthinking scoffers.

Again to put in the words of Vinay Dharwadkar:

“If we provisionally arrange the poems in such a sequence for interpretive purpose, we notice the extended family and the immediate family, together with the institution of marriage that stands at their common core, define a composite domestic sphere. From the reader’s standpoint, this sphere resembles the “Interior Landscape” of classical Tamil poetry in broad outline, and mediates any relationship between an individual and the larger social world. The importance of the domestic sphere as a mediating factor may indicate why family life serves as a primary theme in many of Ramanujan’s early poems, and as the main metaphor for society even in his latter works. It may also suggest why the composite spheres of the family turns out to be a part of society that can potentially contain the whole, the web of domestic relations can function as the means to mapping and interpreting social relations can function as the means to mapping and interpreting social relations in general. It may further explain why even his more intimate poems about marriage, parenthood, love, and himself cannot be merely autobiographical or confessional: like the poems or public themes that can be placed in

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the outer circle of experience, they seem to be part of a poetic vision
in which self and society can be related to each other only through the
networks of home and family\textsuperscript{2}.

Vinay Dharwadkar further says:

"But even while the domestic sphere emerges as the
central ‘metonymic metaphor, for society and as the principal stage
for the drama of contemporary society, it remains deeply ambiguous.
On the one hand poems like “Still Another for Mother” in “The
Striders” Love poems for a wife I” in “Relations” and “Son to Father
to Son” and looking and finding” in “Second Sight” suggest that the
domain of marriage and kinship is theatre of unresolvable conflicts,
betrayals, and ironic reversals. On the other hand, poems like “Love
Poem for a Wife II” and “Entries for a catalogue of .... .... ....” in
“Relation”, “Extended family” and “Highway Stripper” in Second
Sight and “August” “Not knowing” and “contraries” in the Black Hen”
depict the individual’s responses to family situations as a series of
mixed feeling. Ramanujan’s domestic poetry thus appears to articulate
a skeptical vision of marriage and family over a period of three
decades undermining the centrality of the domestic sphere itself. Late
poems like “Bosnia”, “Shadows” and “A Report” then translate this
vision metonymically into an ironic and tragic vision of society and
history\textsuperscript{3}.\n
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Form personal experience the poet constantly passes on to a depiction of shared or collective experience. He seeks comfort in a communal past; he constantly goes back to India’s common heritage of myth and tradition. The pathos of the life of the educated Indian today, torn by opposing pulls and acquires a tragic dimension as it is viewed against India’s tragic past, and her equally tragic present. He is actually alive to the decadent social milieu of contemporary India. His poetry reflects the predicament of one who, while intellectually convinced of the need for relating himself to history through tradition is exposed to a milieu – the contemporary Indian one- in which the main modes of the continuity of tradition- myth, literature, family- are largely sterile. There is, in short, an actually unerring perception of near complete demythicised reality of the present – a perception which cripples creativity as in “Prayers to Lord Murugan”:

We eat legends and leavings
remember the ivory, the apes,
the peacocks we sent in the Bible
to soloman, the medicine for smallpox
the similes
for muslim : wavering snake skins,
a cloud of steam.

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

Ramanujan is chiefly concerned with memory and the way it finalises or falsifies human contacts in a changing world. Ramanujan can not be termed as a conventionalist or an advocate of modernization and westernization. He is the product of both and his poetic outputs mirrors and a personality aware of change celebrating its verve, vigour and variety. In the poetic cosmos of Ramanujan memories are seldom as pleasant as the shared past of family relation “Breaded Fish” reminds memories of a half, naked woman dead on a beach. While the memory is not explicated, it appears to be a symbolic relationship between the affectionate gesture of a women especially preparing the fish for him and the dead woman “breaded/by the grained indifference of sand”. The companionship of death and as indifferent cosmos is brought to mind by the dead fish. “Love Poem
"for a Wife" critique of how an unshared childhood separates a devoted couple and "still life" is an embodiment of love as an abiding presence. These romantic poems are notable for their grandeur and deep emotion, and clear perception.

"Snakes" deals with the snakes of his south Indian childhood. They not only made him perplexed but are associated with family. They are "like some terrible aunt". As his sister braids her hair he imagines snakes. Fear haunts him until he actually steps on and kills a snake.

Now

frogs can hop upon this sausage rope,
flies in the sun will mob the look in his eyes
and I can walk through the woods.

The poetic feeling of this poem is better expressed in the world of Bruce King:

"The poem presents an image, a complex of feelings, distilled memories and events which are not elaborated or commented upon. But as it begins in the present 'now' of museums of book stacks which contrasts with rural India and family life, the poem celebrates the liberation from the fears of the past, "ghosts" from which Ramanujan now feels safe"."
In “still another for mother” the poet seems to be an observer of a scene in London between an aged man and woman. Although he does not know exactly what has taken place between them:

Some thing opened
in the past I heard something shut
in the future, quietly
like the heavy door,
of my mother’s black-pillared, nineteenth century silent house, given on the marriage day
to my father, for a dowry.

The conflict between man and woman crystallized on his family’s past and perhaps on his own future. The “heavy door” of the “black pillared”, “silent house” adds to the sense of marriage as a shutting in of deadly private quarrels. In his interview with Rama Jha the poet says that his writing gets its nourishment from his Indian culture, which is the backbone of his creativity. The poet expresses his philosophical views thus:

“you can not entirely live in the past, neither can you entirely in the present, because we are not like that we are both these things. The past never passes—either the individual past or historical
past or cultural past. It is with us, it is what gives us the richness of—what you call it—the richness of understanding. And the richness of expression.”

No doubt, an expatriate enjoys two different lives—the one within the one without. Because of the present mobility conventional notions of exile have taken on a new shape. Ramanujan too is not different from other Indians living abroad:

“I did not mean by regionalism, provincialism, nor did I mean by it just the devotion to a particular region. What I was saying was the particularity of the experience. Even when you are cosmopolitan, you ultimately have to know something quite deeply.”

In the poetic universe of Ramanujan the metaphorical use of experience, inner world of memories and the continuities and the discontinuities with the past constitute the crust of his philosophy. His effort is not meant for philosophizing and moralising on things like in Ezekiel’s early work. He does not have Daruwalla’s keen insight of virulent world in which fulfillment is destined to tragic failure; they too do not have Mahapatra’s metaphysical meditations on the relationship between the world of creativity and the world of realising the self.
R. Parthasarthy says, “Raja Rao and Ramanujan, connect the past they carry with them with the present as it exists now, and their work grows out of this tension”. The core of the essential self remains as an intuitive world, but this is amended by changed circumstances and decisions. The essential self develops, evolves changes; it grows from seeds in the past to wards a future which unknowable is already being formed.

Ramachandra Sharma makes a very perceptive observation when he writes on Ramanujan's way of making a poem:

“There is no nostalgia in Ramanujan’s going back to his childhood and is juxtaposing an image of the Indian past with one from the immediate and insistent west. No attempt at comparative evaluation of one against the other, either. Just his wonderment in ‘connecting’ and holding them together as he focuses his eye on them. Abjuring large gestures and rhetoric in any of his utterances, he leaves the poem to speak for itself in the mind of the reader and from a gestalt. Ramanujan's themes are inevitably influenced by the pressing predicament he faces. His poetry in the process becomes the arena where the need for relating oneself to history through tradition confronts the reality and immediacy of the contemporary milieu. The face-to-face encounter often results in a combination of the sensibility
peculiar to the Indian spirit and the sharply ironic and skeptical perception of the harsh realities of life.

Ramanujan’s poem, “On More After Reading Homer” is inspired by that great Greek author, Homer, who wrote two monumental epics, the “Iliad” and the “Odyssey”. It is woven around the prophetic figure of Cassandra, the daughter of Priam (King of Troy). She was condemned by Apollo to prophesy truthfully and yet not be believed. She was no doubt the prophet of disaster, and the poet gives a modern ironical twist to the ancient Greek legend obviously, modern “City faces” are tarnished with the rising smoke of corruption and lustfulness, and the skeptics of our day won’t believe the prophecy of Cassandra about the destruction of the prevailing ways of city life with its deep-rooted malady of corruption and immorality. The poet then starts musing:

I wonder if in Chicago too
love indifference and hate
in some devious way relate
at all to deaths by five.

The siege of troy, according to him, will be re-enacted in modern cities, which are totally engulfed in “love indifference and
hate” relationship. The image of ‘cats’ purring at all times “at all sorts of occult things” adds to mysterious and dubious ways of city-life.

“Some Indian uses of history on a Rainy day” presents three pictures, each disclosing the gulf between the present and the past. In Madras on a rainy day in 1965, head clerks from city banks jostle with coolies for “the single seat/in the seventh bus” and tell each other how old king Harsha made ten thousand monks stand in a queue. “too give them/and the single visiting chinaman/a hundred piece of gold/a pearl, and a length of cloth”. And then they miss the other bus, “the eight/and begin to walk, for king Harsha’s monk had nothing but their own two feet”. The ancient Indian monks are presented as amenable to discipline and are rewarded by a generous and able king. The modern Indian head clerks—the degenerate descendants of those ancient intellectuals—only handle other people’s money in the banks and are an indisciplined lot in a generally disciplined society. The second picture is that of Fulbright Indians gazing agape in Egypt at “Pyramidful/of mummies swathed in millennia/of Calicut muslin”. The ironic implication here is that these modern (and mostly westernized Indians) who are amazed at Egyptian antiquities hardly know that their own land had an even more illustrious past. They are perhaps hardly aware of the fact that the
Calicut muslin in which the wonderful mummies have been swathed actually came from their own country. The third is a vignette of an Indian Professor of Sanskrit in Berlin in 1935. He feels like a "lost ... ... turbaned child", in that alien city, until the sudden sight of the "swastika" on the arm of his neighbor in a bus (obviously a Nazi) makes him feel at home. The evident suggestion here is the implied contrast between the ancient Hindu mark of good luck (the Swastika) and its adoption in a vastly different spirit by the Nazis under Hitler in modern Germany. Despite the historical links between German and Sanskrit, a Professor of Sanskrit in Berlin in 1935 feels absolutely lost and is unable to understand the simplest 'signs on door, hut, and shop', until he

Suddenly comes home
in English, gesture and Sanskrit
assimilating
the swastika
on the neighbour's arm ... ... ...

Ignorant of the racist atrocities of the Nazis based on their claims to be an Aryan people, he suddenly sentimentalizes a swastika.

"Small town, South India" describes about a small town in South India, where one is to come across the wide-open spaces,
temple-employees during their work, a number of street-cows and buffaloes. The town is situated on the seabed, with saltish waters stretching far and wide. Here toes grow green and trees turn coral. Living in such a town infested with “city shark and wifely dolphin” the poet can’t have a sound sleep “the sleep is brackish”. This short poem is definitely packed with accurate detail and suggestive lines.

“The Last of the Princes” another poem in the “Relations” exhibits Ramanujan’s sharp and acute historical Sensibility: the poem combines familial experience with a historical consciousness. It is a pathetic poem on the fall of the Moghul Empire throwing light on the poverty and suffering of the royal family that falls on evil days. The poem begins from that period of history when Aurangazeb had died and the Moghul Empire had lost all its glory. Its slow decay and disintegration is compared to a patient suffering from T. B. and slowly heading to a final end. One admires the poet’s use of language to list the various causes that had led to the fall:

... ... ... this dynasty
falling in slow motion from Aurangazeb’s time:
some of bone T. B.
others of a London fog that went to their heads
some of current trends, imported wine and women ... ...
Ramanujan’s poetic sensibility projects the cunning policies employed by the English to bewilder and confuse the Moghuls. He also mentions the intrigues of the English to which some members of the royal family became victims by importing wine and women.

The last of the princess who survived, a reference to Bahadur Shah Zafar, suffered from poverty and illness. However, he remained a true patriot who did not yield to the British cruelty. His pathetic suffering is portrayed by Ramanujan as follows:

... ... he lives on, to cough
remember and sneeze, a balance of phlegm
and bile, alternating loose bowels and hard sheep’s pellets.

The extreme poverty to which the family is driven is touchingly depicted in the following lives:

Two girls, Honey and Bunny, go to school
on half fees wife, heir loom pearl in her nose-ring
pregnant again. His first son, trainee in telegraphy,
has telegraphed thrice already for money.

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

These few chosen poems, thus illustrate Ramanujan’s unique style not only to juxtapose disparate elements, but also to fuse outer forms and inner thoughts into a magnificent whole. E. N. Lall says, “Ramanujan’s poetry in the expression of a poetic sensibility in which the Indian subjectivity coalesces with the western objectivity”¹⁰ to establish harmony and clarity.

“Old Indian Belief” highlights one of the old Indian beliefs that no ant “can stand the smell of a live cobra”. Hence the ants leave their anthill built so assiduously by them on the sudden approach of a snake. But the same ants can pick the flesh off the dead snakes and bleach them completely with the timely assistance of rain and sun natural chemistry. Later, their skeletons become a target of horror for a school girl on picnic or an object of curiosity for the local museum-collector.

The way the past changes as memories are given a new significance through additional knowledge is the theme of “History”. Here, relations are shown to be rather different from the idealized
community or the close-knit secure clan suggested by some poets who write nostalgically of their childhood and family. History is shown to be a construction based on perspective, knowledge and attitude at various times. In the words of Bruce King:

The title "History" is incorporated into the poem itself, which creates a feeling of being in the midst of the action, since the poem is not set off by the framing of title. As we read the poem the speaker's adult information changes what he remembers from childhood.

The poem allows the readers entry into a scene not ordinarily witnessed by outsiders. Here, the narrator is both eyewitness and reporter. The first section of the poems recounts an incident that occurred on the day the persona's great-aunt died. As a child, he remembers the scene in death-room:

I was there by one of those
chances children never miss,
looking for a green ball
I never lost. I saw her
laid out, face incurious
eyes yet unshut,
between glass curio bureaus
under a naked cobweb bulb
next to a yellow dim window,
and my little dark aunt was there
nose eyes and knee-bend cut
fresh from stone for a Parvati statue-booking for something, half
her body under the cat,
may be a rolling pin
her little son had brought for play
from under the kitchen mob
of cooking and washing relatives.

The eyewitness account breaks off at this point because as a child he had not attached significance to the scene he had come upon, but it prepares us for what is to follow. The narrative shifts to a faithful reportage of what his another told him about his grand-aunt’s two daughter’s,

One dark, one fair,
unknown each to the other
alternately picked their mother’s body clean
before it was cold
or the eyes were shut,
of diamond ear-rings,
bangles, anklets, the pin
in her hair,
the toe-rings from her wedding
the previous century
all except the gold
in her teeth and the silver g-string
they didn’t know she wore
her napkins on
to the great disgust
of the orthodox windows
who washed her body
at the end .... ....

the ‘petite little aunt’ with a ‘stone face’ appears different
when the speaker learns that she was one of the daughters who at
funeral of his ‘great aunt’ robbed her corpse. They took her earnings,
hairpins, bangles, anklets, toe rings and everything. Instead of the little
aunt, as the young boy imagined at the time, looking for something
under the cot of her dead mother, she was stealing jewellery. To put in
the words of King, Bruce again, “such an anecdote need not be
autobiographical; it may be a story told to Ramanujan which fits into
his way of regarding history and change”12. In this poem Ramanujan
combines the serious and trivial and describes scenes that only the insider can have knowledge of. He draws on an Indian experience but treats it with an objectivity and detachment, which is western.

Ramanujan debunks attempts to give grandeur to rituals, tradition, ceremonies, death, or history. In “Obituary” his father’s death and cremation leaves nothing to the family except ‘debts and daughters’, ‘a changed mother’ and annual rituals to perform. The speaker mentions briefly, ironically and vaguely the human interest and grief of the ‘changed mother’ instead he devotes attention to incongruities connected with finding a memorial of his father’s in a newspaper obituary:

But someone told me
he got two lines,
in an inside column
of a Madras newspaper
sod by the kilo
exactly four weeks later
to street hawkers
who sell it turn
to the small groceries
where I buy salt
coriander
and jiggery
in newspaper cones
that I usually read
for fun and, lately
in the hope of finding
these obituary lines.

This is another example of how continuity takes unexpected, parodic forms through the petty transactions of life, absurd coincidences, the undignified recycling of the material world. Ramanujan’s distancing himself from such a past is paradoxically converted into the ironic (that which says the opposite of what it appears to says) by the extreme under statement of personal feeling and by our awareness that wit and unstable ironies are ways of displacing and controlling emotion. Ramanujan uses a cool impersonality to avoid sentimentality; but something is felt under the surface of the poem. The poem is both not much more than those ‘two lines’ and an attempt to compensate for the lack of a more significant obituary.

As a matter of fact, Ramanujan’s poetry thrives on memory, remembered life. A man’s family is an unchanging event
around which his life resolves: 'its tiny, histories, personal and seemingly insignificant, reflect a concern with the importance of the past, albeit a personal family past'. The epigraph from a Tamil anthology indicates this:

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.

Most of the poems in the first two volumes have their origin in recollected personal emotion and they deal with the poet's memory, of his relations and the ambiguous freedom that life away from them confers. One comes across a great deal of evocation of family life in his poetry. For the sake of convenience and also in an attempt to re-capture his experience as embodied in his poetry. The following memorable lines are worth quoting:
Sometimes I think that nothing
that ever comes into this house
goes out. Things comes in everyday
to lose themselves among other things
lost long, ago among
other things lost long ago .......

"Small-scale Reflection on a Great House" is
Ramanujan's version of Yeats's theme of great houses as monuments
of a society's history and culture. The 'Small-scale' reduces both the
grandeur of such claims and the object of the reflections. Whereas
Yeats's 'Meditations in Time of civil War' dignifies 'Ancestral
House' and 'My House' Ramanujan's tone is casual, off-hand, coolly
ironic. The past is less a source of value and pride than simply a
collection of the chaos of various times. Commenting on this poem
King, Bruce writes:

Culture or tradition seems arbitrary, casual, a clutter of
what (like the cow) wanders through and is taken over and used
because it happens to be there. The house is seen as past, as memory,
as tradition, as origin, and different views are offered of it. As it is
self-centered, its relation to the outside world is filled with ironies.
What leaves it always returns but now more expensive and possibly
returned from the wrong address (changed and costly with foreign
tastes but without real knowledge of the outside world). When new
ideas come to the house they are transformed to ideas the people in
the house already hold.\footnote{\textsuperscript{13}}

The poem ends with the final irony of the dead bodies of
relatives in military service returning to the house from significant
places of the world’s attention by long, complicated routes ("in
plane/and train and military truck") without disturbing either the
house’s complacency the notorious slowness of the Indian telegraphic
services (‘Even before the telegrams reached/on a perfectly
good/chatty afternoon’). The house and the post office belong to a
mentality of coziness and indifficiency, which absorbs everything
without appearing to change. This might be contrasted with
Ramanujan’s Chicago poems. Again to quote Bruce King:

The ironies of ‘small-scale Reflections on a Great House’
may somewhat distract attention from this being another of
Ramanujan’s poems concerning continuity. Continuity may take
absurd forms but it is there, the example of the great house could be
used to illustrate the opening sentence of a recent Ramanujan essay:
Just as our biological past lives in the physical body, our social and
cultural past lives in the many cultural bodies we inherited—our languages, arts, religions, and life-cycle rites. In the poem, everything ‘lost long ago’ revives in the speaker’s memory and with a touch of nostalgia and pathos, is recorded. Thus we get a list of catalogue of things that come into the house from outside to stay for ever and the things that go out but return inevitably: ‘wandering cows’, ‘library books’, ‘neighbour’s dishes’, ‘the servants’, ‘the phonographs’, ‘the epilepsies in the blood’, ‘sons-in-law’, ‘daughters-in-law’, ‘letters’, ‘ideas’, ‘beggar song’, ‘widowed daughter’s’, ‘grand children’, ‘nephew killed in the war’. This is undoubtedly the perfect picture of a joint-Hindu family. Similarly in ‘Love poem for a wife-I’, the speaker’s harking back to the wife’s ‘unshared childhood’ springs from his need to overcome the alienation that keeps them ‘apart/at the end of years’. The poet knows that to enter into somebody’s life (including one’s wife) is well neigh impossible. Thus ironically concludes:

Probably
only the Egyptians had it right;
their kings had sisters for queens
to continue the insects
of childhood into marriage
or we should do as well-meaning
Hindus did
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 childhood.

In “Of Mothers, among other things” his mother’s picking a grain of rice from the kitchen floor, is gratefully remembered. Examples can be multiplied. To his list, a number of poems evoking a sense of family relationship such as “Real Estate”, “Still Another for Mother”, “The opposable thumbs”, “A leaky tap after a sister’s wedding”, “On the very possible Jaundice of an unborn daughter” and “Looking for a cousin on a swing” could be added. These poems reveals an assured identity of the poet within the family, which he very much needs after he has settled down in Chicago, in the United states of America-Parthasarathy has rightly suggested, “has given a focus to his Indian experience so that the poems emerge as a sort of microcosm of his family history. They are in effect, a microcosm of the Hindu family which has enormously contributed to the stability and psychological health of the
society for centuries and ensured the continuity of a rich traditional culture”\textsuperscript{15}.

In modern India, instead of belief, action, feeling, knowledge, achievements there are false memories (photographs of rajas standing over tigers that others have shot), legends (‘the peacock we sent in the Bible/to Solomon’), false medicines and pseudo-science-instead of scientists learning how to recycle waste in a space ship, a leading politician advocates recycling fluids by drinking one’s own urine. There is a dislocation between the inner culture and the outer forms it pretends to take (‘Our blood is brown/our collars white’-both colours contrast to the Red God).

Lord of the sixth sense
given us back
our five senses .... ....
Deliver us O presence
From proxies
and absences
from Sanskrit and the mythologies
of night and the several
round table mornings
of London .... ....\textsuperscript{16}.
The rejection of the mind or sixth sense for the normal, empiric five, looks forward to Ramanujan’s poem ‘Second Sight’ where the speaker wants to regain his ‘first’ and only, ‘Sight’. Here there is the rejection of the abstract, the spiritual, the substitute of ideas for an actual immediate reality. India has become an abstraction of dead languages, old myths, of political gatherings, of international meetings (such as Gandhi’s Round Table Conference in London) of pasts created by idealized or politicized notions of India and Indian ness. King, Bruce has rightly suggested:

In contrast to all the talk about India, the speaker, with the irony often found in Indian medieval devotional poets, asks for the specific, particular, real world of ‘Six new pigs in a slum’. This might seem a proper, if irritable, response to the superficialities of those who speak of returning to Indian religion and traditions; but it may also be ironic since the speaker not only wants to return to the innocence a time when a litter of pigs was good fortune, but he also asks to return to ‘a slum’.

There are two poems on the poet’s visit to a Zoo- “In the Zoo” and “Zoo Gardens Revisited”. The first poem throws light on scavenger birds and adjutant storks. The storks are found in three shades-a faded black, a gray, and a dirty white. The descriptions of
these birds are interspersed with some striking images; for instance, the faded black stork is like “Madras lawyer” and the dirty white stork is like “grandmother’s maggoty cards”. The flapping birds in the air are like “father into the rain” with his baggy, broken umbrellas, while clicking ones are like “Father’s Magic Carpet Story”.

In “Death and Good Citizens”. One observes how intelligently Ramanujan juxtaposes two sets of imagery drawn from two cultures-eastern and western-in relation to the funeral ceremony. Ramanujan is critical of the Hindu ritual as well as the American way of cremating the dead. He writes with a penchant:

Or abroad
they’ll lay me out in a funeral parlour, embalm me in pesticide,
bury me in a steel trap, lock me out of nature
till I’m oxidized by left over air, withered by my own vapours into grin and bone.

The poet tends to become a bit ironical and humorous here.

We find a reference to ‘Chicago’ along with its gardens and Zoos, its streets and banks, its centres of learning and meditations,
its transparent waterfall and its foggy surroundings, its traffic and its planes, its debts and electricians. Poems like "The Watchers", "Saturdays" (Somewhat wordy and verbose), "Looking and Finding", "Looking for the Centre", "Chicago Zen" and "Waterfalls in a Bank" directly alludes to this attractive city. Of these poems, "Chicago Zen" affords a good deal of pleasure and profit to the reader. It asks the initiate to clear his house, especially his living room, and to cherish his children. The blinding traffic light in one of the city streets of America sends the poet rapidly into vision and ruminations:

You fall into a vision of forest fires,

enter a frothing Himalayan river ... ... ...

In a swift transition of thought, he starts envisioning Lake Michigan in the winds, a lobster louse on the windowpane, and the Indies and yet remains "perfectly same". For his, it is not easy to reach his country, means or a jet or a boot, or hashish (an intoxicant), or moonshot, or slim circus girls or the guitar. Even the valid passport or the invalid transmigration can't take him to his country, ... ... ... a task that can be accomplished by answering ordinary, black telephones and questions put by walls and small children and by attending to "all calls of nature". The fourth and last part of the poem cautions him to be 'Watchful' about his steps down. Very neatly, the
poet has tried to mingle tradition with modernity herein, for Chicago can’t be “forest fives” nor “a frothing Himalayan river”.

The scene also shifts more and more to America, though that is a simplification of a poetic process. For the scene or rather the setting of Ramanujan’s poems has always been the mind. “A Poor Man’s Riches I”, for instance, deals with as mundane a subject (for Ramanujan, that is) as immigration. The touch is again light. He does not make heavy weather of it. Here’s a poet short of time rushing from one subject to the next. Just a mention of the brown ‘aliens’ is apparently enough “to change the colours/of poverty under the sweating/boiler pipes”.

Another poem “Aline” talks of ‘A foetus in an acrobat’s womb/ignorant yet of barbed wire/and dotted lines’ and ends with “a paper world in search of identity card”.

“Looking and hiding” is a prose poem full of topical allusions, especially in the fifth paragraph, which runs thus.

Having no clear conscience, he looks for one in the morning news:

Assam then, Punjab now, finds him guilty of an early breakfast of two whole poached eggs.
Obviously the earlier insurgency in Assam and Nagaland and the present violent militancy in the Punjab have been alluded to in this quoted passage.

Another poem which is concerned with historical sensibility is “A Minor Sacrifice” in five parts. It brings to the fore the story of Raja Parikshit and his son Janmejaya. The myth relates to the killing of a snake by King Parikshit in a forest in order to “garland a sage’s neck/with the cold dead things”, which promptly earns the sage’s curse “an early death by snakebite”. The king’s son Janmejaya, does all possible to forestall his father’s eventual death, and he-

\[
\begin{align*}
&\ldots\ldots\ldots\text{Performs a sacrifice}\\
&\text{a magic rite}\\
&\text{that draws every snake from everywhere,}\\
&\text{till snake of every stripe}\\
&\text{begins to fall}\\
&\text{through the blazing air}\\
&\text{into his alter fires.}
\end{align*}
\]

So miraculous is the power of his “magic rite” that all kinds of Nagas (snakes) come hurtling and fall headlong into his sacrifice (Yajya), but one poisonous snake known as Takshak remains stuck to the leg of Lord Indra’s throne and somehow survives, that
Takshak ultimately bites the king who dies resigned to his lot. After introducing the legendary story of Raja Parikshit, the poet tells us about the killing of a poisonous scorpion by his uncle with the ivory dragonhead of his walking stick in order to save his loved son Gopu. His uncle shows the children the ripe, yellow poison-bead of the scorpion just behind its sting. Meanwhile, his grand mother also arrives there and she starts telling them that a pregnant scorpion generally hides in a warm secret place and that it bursts its back to bear a number of baby scorpions and thereafter it dies instantly. The uncle then informs them that the baby scorpions are quite red at birth but later they change their colour and grow gray with their growth. That very afternoon, the superstitious Shivanna proposes to the boy-poet to get rid of the world of scorpions of all colours and kinds by the powers of witchcraft and black arts. The scorpions, according to him, will come rushing at their bidding into the bole of the sighing neem tree if a minor sacrifice is performed when the sun is in Scorpio (the eighth sign of Zodiac which operates during the month of October and November). First, they will have to feed and satisfy “the twelve-handed god of Scorpions” who demands “one hundred live grasshoppers/caught on a new moon Tuesday”. Secondly, they will have to acquire “three Jars” to put the grasshoppers in. With these
arrangements, the children go out on a catching spice, and by evening they are able to catch ninety-nine of them, but the hundredth eludes them for sometime. Suddenly Gopu pounces in the dark and completes the tally. Immediately the boys come back to their homes and clean their hands in bathrooms. They do not eat anything or sleep well that night. The supervision of the Jars falls to Gopu’s lot who keeps them safe under his bed and dreams dreadfully all night. Next morning, all the boys go to see Shivanna, the planner of the whole scheme, and carry the jars on their backs, but to their shock and amazement they are informed by his mother that

he is in the hospital
taken sick with some strange
twitching disease.

Later on, the mischievous Shivanna is reported dead, and on his death the poet’s uncle informs all the children that on Tuesday Shivanna “clawed and kicked the air” like some bug on its back.

The poem has a subtitle, and it is “remembering the dead in My Lai”. The sub-title suitably associates the senseless killingness of grasshoppers by Shivanna and Co. with the massacres of Mai Lai rendering thousands of Vietnamese maimed and dead. The American
soldiers were at the back of purposeless killing Vietnamese. In a review of “Second sight”, Elizabeth Reuben comments that this poem in particular is “terse with understatement” and that it narrates “a story of childish cruelty and retribution worthy of that ugly Biblical incident of Elisha and the bears”\(^{18}\). The poem as a whole is immersed in a superstitious atmosphere, and conveys a clear-cut message to readers— that humanity should love all creatures, big or small, and should not kill them violently out of blind belief.

In “The Black Hen”, we find miscellaneous themes. “Foundling in the Yukon” one of Ramanujan’s striking poems, enlarges the scope of mapping the mutual interdependencies of the body. Nature, culture and time until they cover an immense span of human and natural history\(^{19}\). The poem revolves round an actual incident in the Yukon Territory in the northern Canada, one of the coldest inhabited regions on earth, where a group of miners discovered some seeds, which must have been in deep-freeze hibernation for at least ten thousand years, “took root/within forty-eight hours/and sprouted/a candelabra of eight small leaves”. The saplings that emerged from the seeds—

\[\text{drank up sun}\]
and unfurled early
and the crocuses of March
as if long deep
burial had made them hasty
for birth and season for names
genes, for passing on ..... ....
these new aborigines bidding
their time
for the miner’s night light
to bring them their dawn
These infants compact with age
Older than the oldest
Things alive, having skipped
A millions falls
And the registry of tree-rings
Suddenly younger
By an accident of flowering
Than all their timely descendents

This is certainly a poem based on natural observation.

Another series of other poems in “The Black Hen” draws out the implications of this conception, bringing us closer to a social
world embedded in history. “At Zero”, for example, unearths clocks and their peculiar combination of rhythmic movement and ceric stillness-inside every kind of object and being on earth. Inanimate, dead or still living, these range surreally from clock towers. Airplanes poised for take-off, and spinning potters wheels to Brahmin widows, pulsing doves, and the scortumes of dead bulls. In contrast, “August” experiments with the notion that the annual calendar, which is constructed empirically and rationally, can be recast as the cyclical chronology of the anniversaries of the births, deaths, quarrels, marriages and divorces in the history of one ‘extended family’. This is an objective measure of time, which can be replaced by and become indistinguishable from a completely subjective accounting of days, months and years.

The poem, “Fog”, adopts an unusually austere style to contemplate the nature of movement and change, as they appear simultaneously in the body, the natural world, the world of objects made by human beings, and the human mind. “Sonnet” reworks some of the ideas and images of “Fog” to created a more personal reflection on temporality, emphasizing the aspects of time that are neither remote and objective, nor fixed and abstract. Both “Fog” and “Sonnet” suggest that time is woven into the very fabric of the body that is
intermeshed with the co-extensive webs call ‘nature’ and ‘culture’. Temporality, therefore, manifests itself in human consciousness in several domains simultaneously, the daily bodily experience of morning and night, in the clockwork rhythm of personal relationship and external seasons, and in the mind’s foreknowledge of death.

“Bosnia”, which is probably the last complete poem Ramanujan wrote, questions war, death, tragedy and contemporary history from a position of empathy with human subjects and victims whether through the feelings of guilt and horror or of compassion and tenderness. Such an engagement with history arises from an interest in the concrete particulars of character, action and situation in the past and the present, and specifically in their warm-blooded human origins and meanings.

King, Bruce’s remark about Ramanujan’s historical sensibility is worth quoting:

Looking back at “The Striders” and “Relations”, I am struck by how much Ramanujan remained emotionally part of India and how insistent he was to distance himself from any form of the “Hindoo”. “There is a Tamil and Indian nationalists not far below the surface and as with many nation alists, the perspective has been created. By going outside the culture and looking at it from abroad.”
In his essay ‘Classic Lost and Found’ Ramanujan refers to the origins of his ‘Prayers to Lord Murugan’:

My poem, too, talks about some Indian attitudes to the Indian past, with which I was somewhat despondently preoccupied at the time. I had felt that Sanskrit itself and all that is represented had become an absence, at best a crippling and not an enabling presence, that the future needed a new past. Many things have changed since then and so have I. But the mood, the relation to what the God Murugan means, is a real one, and I hope it speaks not only for me.
References


2. Ibid, pp XXXI – XXXII.

3. Ibid, p XXXII.


5. Ibid, p 214.

6. Ibid, p 214


12. Ibid, pp 75 – 76.


17. King Bruce “Three Indian Poets” (Oxford University Press Delhi), p 79.

