Chapter II

Early Poetry

The early stage of the poetic career of A.K. Ramanujan is composed with two different poetry collections namely *The Striders* (1966) and *Relations* (1971). Both the collections were published after his departure to the United States in 1959. Right from the beginning of his poetic career, thus, Ramanujan has remained a diasporic poet with his dislocated existence and alienation. However, the poet has not mentioned his diasporic existence as exile or himself as an expatriate. As he remarks, “An exile is a person who has been thrown out of his country. I’m not one. I have come to this country voluntarily . . . I don’t even call myself an expatriate, because I’ve done a lot of work on India since coming to this country” (Interview Two, 52). From his own perspective, then, Ramanujan is entirely a diasporic poet longing for his culture, tradition and family in an alien location and has remained the same till to his death in 1993. As Pramod Kumar Nayar says, “Diasporic writing, especially in the age of globalisation, is a consciousness rising genre, where political issues of cultural citizenship…and global inequality run alongside themes of nostalgia, imaginative construction of the homeland, and identity”, Ramanujan’s poetry in that sense is not a mere alteration (191). The process of consciousness rising, as the best known aim of identity politics, is raised out of the poet’s articulation of experiences of the past as means to drape his sense of displacement and alienation. Through such articulations, from Foucauldian terminology, the poet has sought to be engaged with the “technologies of the self” as a means of self-determination and self-fashioning to resist the structures of both sorts of dominations- sociological and psychological
"Technologies of the" (19). His renovation of past experiences paves the way for negotiation in the dialectical relations between “positioning” (Hall 237, Sachez 39) and “positionality”, identification and subjective identity as a diaspora (Sachez 38).

Right from the publication of his first poetry collection, the poet is found to be incorporating all the major themes of diasporic writing as his self-conscious attempt for engaging with identity politics to renovate his lost identity as well as to create a novel one. In his early poetry, his longing for the memories of the past and his lost identity seems to be the main concern of the poet.

It can easily be assumed that dislocation for a diasporic individual itself triggers his re-location in a new location distanced from his homeland. In other words, this move is marked with the sense of “de-territorialization” to “re-territorialization” manifesting possibilities of self-fashioning and creating novel identities even within the ambit of territorial or geo-political dominance (Nayar, 193). However, in re-location, the sense of dislocation is not completely lost or curtained; rather, it becomes more pulsating and politically motivated, as an individual memorizes his/her home and cultural identity. Spatially speaking, the individual enters into a liminal or in-between space with fractured identity which Homi K. Bhabha names as the “third space” (211). It is the space where Stuart Hall’s categorization of the second type of cultural identity is vindicated vis-à-vis the mutual re-productivity and dynamism apparent in between the dialectics like social identification and personal identity. This liminality of diasporic existence is clearly explored by the title of the first volume of poetry of Ramanujan namely *The Striders*. The ‘Strider’ is a type of water insect that does not sink into water but floats and roams always. For the poet, as the title poem of
the volume explores, the ‘strider’ itself is the metaphorical expression of the floating existence that the poet has to maintain in the diasporic location as a displaced individual. The struggle of ‘striders’ to “perch . . . on the ripple skin / of a stream” is akin to the poet’s struggle to capture the root as a dislocated individual in the dynamic context of life (4, 7-8). However, the ability of the water bug to exist both on water and land provides a prophetic dimension to its existence. This amphibious existence, which actually belongs to nowhere, is the symbolical revelation of the liminality of existence and possibilities of what Hall says as “unstable points of identification” that the water bug-like diasporic poets have to maintain as a diaspora (237). They live in the river-like dynamic context of life having the spiritual and material dimensions.

In such a flux or amphibious existence, the only way to have an identity through the sense of belonging corresponding to primordial identity or in relation to what have been lost is the poetics of return. The poetics of return involves the extensive use of memories of the original country, culture and home where home itself becomes “a mythic place of desire” or a “place of no return” (Brah 192). As the home is always constructed out of memories and imagination, Promod Nayar regards this home as “less a reality than an idealization of how it really is” (192). In the first period of Ramanujan’s poetic career, there are dozens of poems which are grouped as memory poems manifesting the significance of Nayar’s discussion of “temporal move” or “analepsis” narratives in case of a diaspora as discussed in the introduction (188). In all these poems what is noticeable is the vicissitude of the poet’s memory when he recalls his home, family and past relations as means of negotiating the tension between his “positioning” (Hall 237, Sachez 39) and “positionality” as a
diaspora (Sachez 38). In such circumstances, the memory of his personal relations seems more pulsating than memories of other substantial things of the context of living. In “Snakes” of *The Striders*, the poet articulates his fear for snakes in terms of his memory of family members:

A basketful of ritual cobras

comes into the tame little house

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

Mother gives them milk

in saucers.

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

Sister ties her braids

with a knot of tassel. (22-23, 27-28, 35-36)

This movement from the objective world to the subjective self or vice-versa is always typical to Ramanujan’s poems, which, in turn, disclose apparent contingencies in the poetics of return or what Nayar has termed as the “analeptic” narrative strategy (189). Even the clash in between the two spaces of belonging is never ceased into a compromising recovery or invention of primordial or novel identity respectively. Here the poet’s strategic manipulation of thoughts is clearly evident to us when he goes for presenting the objective world in terms of his personal memory. In ‘The Opposable
Thumb’, the poet strategically relates two seemingly different incidents of the past with his ‘granny’s’ telling of a mythological story. Whereas for A.V. Mehrotra “absence gives high definition to what is absent” in case of the diasporas, for Ramanujan, absent acquires high definition than what is real (138). In “Breaded Fish”, the poet “could / neither sit nor eat, as a hood / of memory like a coil on a heath / opened in my eyes” (4-7). Here the memory of “a dark half-naked / length of woman” becomes more powerful than his real appetite (7-8). In ‘A leaky Tap After a Sister’s Wedding’, the taping of a woodpecker was misjudged by the poet as the making of ornaments by a silversmith living “nextdoor” for his sister who was “ripe for a husband” (6). But when he returns back to reality, he recognizes the real fact:

That was no silversmith nextdoor

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

it is a single summer woodpecker

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

at the tree

behind the kitchen. (21, 23, 25-26)

Like most of the diasporic poets, the past events in present themselves are like woodpeckers that dig or tap into the past in search of the desired root and belonging. Foucauldian notions of subject as a dynamic agent and a form capable of transcendence or transformation are clearly vindicated by the poet’s vicissitude of
memory in terms of past and present, subjective and the objective world. Interestingly that vicissitude is evidently related with the notion of transformation vis-à-vis questions of lost identity and belonging in relation to present only; the dichotomous roles of memory in such cases are marked with the power of prohibiting oneself for future transformation by transforming him/her into the primordial identity. Hence memory, if on the one hand, operates as a shield to transformation, on the other hand, it also opens up new possibilities to be negotiated with primordial identity. In diasporic writings, such nostalgic yearning for the past takes the form of the poetics of return through which a writer seeks to re-territorialize his/her displaced existence. Regarding the relation between the past and memory in his poems, Bruce King clearly remarks, “There is little nostalgia in Ramanujan’s poetry but the past exists in memory and cannot be ignored; it is part of oneself, that which has made a person what he or she is” (Three Indian Poets 77). In most of the early poems of Ramanujan, the productive space created by memory in-between past and present, subjective and the objective world is the hallmark of identity politics that the poet has been negotiating in his early poetry.

However, such an effort to renovate the lost identity or to discard the anxiety of shared identity, what Stuart Hall discusses under the heading of his first type of cultural identity, means neither any essentialist view of identity nor singularity of cultural identity in the poet’s part. In one of the often quoted statements, Ramanujan unequivocally affirms his notion of “a double self” apparent within his self (Singer xiii). The poet remarks, “English and my disciplines (linguistics and anthropology) give me my outer forms . . . and my first thirty years in India, my frequent visits and
field trips, my professional preoccupations with Kannada and Tamil, and folklore give me my substance, my “inner” forms, images and symbols” (qtd in Parthasarathy 95-96). The totality of the poet’s self, hence, is the amalgamation of what are home-grown and what are extraterrestrial to him. In one sense, the ‘Strider’, which is the central metaphor of the floating existence of the poet in the diasporic location, is the outcome of the hybrid identity that persists right from the childhood of the poet. This “double self” (Singer xiii) can also be said as the result of the double consciousness or the “split-consciousness of being Indian and American” (Nayar 197). On the other hand, according to the poet’s, no one is free from the affect of things like the context of living, material or non-material things “like space and time or caste”; as because all things are substantial and “there is a continuity, a constant flow . . . of substance from context to object, from non-self to self” (Ramanujan, “Is There an”, 46). In this sense, the poet is against all sorts of postmodernist views of identity as he negates the idealist approach towards identity and obtains a postpositivist realist one. Through assorted substantial things of the context of living of the past and of the present, the poet, in the first period of his poetic career, shows an impression to overcome the sense of loss and alienation that always persist within him.

In almost all the poems of his early period, memory operates as a conduit among various substantial things of different time and space. Even, there are some poems in that period, where the poet marks a total departure from the present to the past through memory to reinstate what he has lost in present as a diaspora. In his “Still Life”, the poet is engaged with the impressionistic detail of a particular moment of past, which is still in his mind. For King, the poem denotes the meaning of “still
living in memory” in present (Three Indian Poets 79). In “Still Another for Mother”, the poet demonstrates how some incidents of present can trigger off an assortment of relative incidents of the past potted in the mind of the poet. The poet finds a woman “beside the wreckage van / on Hyde Park street” (2-3) and who is like “some friend’s mother” (6). Even in some reminiscent moment, as the poet says in the same poem, memory confines the poet within the past without rendering any opportunity to enter into the future:

something opened

in the past and I heard something shut

in the future, quietly. (34-36)

But the shutting of the door to future is again compared with “the heavy door” of his “mother’s black-pillared, nineteenth century / silent house” (37-39). In “Lines to a Granny”, likewise the other poems of this group, the poet memorises the fairytale told by his “granny”- who is now “waited in death” (22). For the poet, what we call as alienation is simply the psychological effect of physical distance or “de-territorialization” caused by the change of space and time (Nayar 193). It is memory which fills up the crack in between the past and the present maintaining the continuity of tradition and culture. In some other poems like “On the Very Possible Jaundice of an Unborn Daughter”, the poet stresses with conviction that the demands of tradition is sustained over generations by behaviour, attitudes, or the likes and dislikes of family members. In the poem, both tradition and its continuity are presented through
different colours. The poet’s father “sits with the sunflower at the window” (5) and “. . . daffodil too flaps all morning / in grandma’s hands” (13-14). Hence he asks:

how can my daughter
help those singing yellows
in the whites of her eyes? (14-16)

The jaundice is the colour celebrated by the grandmother and inherited by the grandchild. It is this continuity of tradition, culture, or personal relations in terms of taste and attitude that, binds past and present in any space or location alien to home. The substantial elements of tradition and culture available in various locations in present or in the memory of the past are termed as “unforgettable things” by the poet in the poem “On Memory” (30). And all these “unforgettable things” (ibid) ultimately constitute the collective memory/consciousness of the poet rendering new opportunities for the poet to be engaged with the Foucauldian concept of “technologies of the self” (“Technologies of the” 19). As, analysing memory as a skillful investigator, he says himself in the poem “On Memory” -

Memory

in the crowd of memories, seems
to have no place

104
at all for unforgettable things. (27-30)

Within the ambit of those memorable things, the static and mechanical memories do not have any place at all as such memory always hinders inner continuity of the self confining the poet only within the past. And interestingly what the poet urges is not the total confinement but productive negotiation in-between past and present or home and displaced existence. In the poem “A Hindu to His Body”, the poet explicitly declares that, instead of his “alien mind” (16), he was brought to the world by the body “curled in womb and memory” (3). Internally demarcated by the body and mind, his existence is thoroughly tempered by the fear of total psychological dislocation from the past. Hence the poet requests the body to be with him always so as he can able to memorise all the serious and mundane events of his life and history to counter the sense of total dislocation. The collective memory/consciousness of the poet constituted by the mentioned memorable thing of the past restricts his sense of alienation inculcating the tactics of identity politics as strategic maneuvers against social or diasporic identification and “positioning” (Hall 237, Sachez 39).

The impression of the memories of his relationships with the people he was intimated with is so impressive that never ceases in his memory. Regarding such impressions, the poet has said plainly in the poem “A Rather Foolish Sentiment: said to a girl sometime ago”:

... into the dark I can carry
only the passing touch

of people whom I once touched

in passing when they let me

pass. (2, 9-12)

But what is interesting in his dealing with the past is that, like the dynamic context of living, the past itself is prolific and epiphanic in nature for the poet. Like a genealogist, Ramanujan conceives that past itself is dealt with mutability rather than constancy. He believes in the Foucauldian concept of “Herkunft” as discussed earlier by “following the complex course of descent” (“Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” 81) and also by accepting body as the “stigmata of past experiences” (ibid 83). For the poet, past has the power to exercise varied types of dominations over the subject inculcating previously determined subject positions. In order to rescue oneself from such dominations, one needs to be engaged with the “technologies of the self” to look at the past with novel self-inspiring perspective and viewpoint (Foucault, “technologies of the” 19). This paradoxical attitude towards past is the consequence of the double vision that a diaspora has to negotiate in an alien location both with the intention to renovate what has been lost as a diaspora and also to afford new meanings to those experiences of the past to rescue oneself from various “technologies of domination” (ibid). In the poem “Looking for a Cousin on a Swing”, the poet shows how the incidents of the past can be changed into new meanings depending on perspectives. For King, the poem shows how “... the interpretation of what has
happened in the past has changed in the light of new experience and knowledge. Yet the present can be seen as implicit in the past which helped shape the present” (Three Indian Poets 81). It is the reciprocity between both the contexts of living that constitutes the totality of the poet’s self or the collective consciousness of the poet. It is the reason why in some other poems like “Instead of a Farewell”, the poet can never say “farewell” to the people with whom he was once intimated (12). So he questions:

how can I say farewell
when farewells are made
only for people who say
and only for people
who go away? (12-16)

The present incorporating various incidents and co-incidents brings the traces of past experiences which the poet memorises as a diaspora. Those traces are bequeathed with new meanings and insight in present when the poet puts his introspective sight into those traces. In consequences of that internal commerce between past and present along with his “analeptic” and “proleptic” narrative visions, the space that the poet inhabits is internally converted into a stimulating liminal space of high reflexivity and creativity (Nayar 189). It is the space which Bhabha considers as a highly ambivalent productive space that transcends all sorts of fixities of cultural identity and national
boundary. In order to elicit the notion of multiplicity of human selves and identity, Ramanujan gives the reference of the American Squire dance in the poem “Instead of a Farewell” where one constantly changes partners in dance. The analogy reveals the poet’s awareness of existence of a third person within his body as he says:

To meet and say farewell

to this part of me

that turns and returns

with a different partners. (1-4)

Like the changing partners in a squire dance, the poet “turns and returns / with a different partners” leaving the impression of liminality of existence (3-4). The title adequately addresses that changing part of the poet and of the partner which neither goes away nor stays with him. This same notion of the multiplicity of selves and identity is manifestly revealed in his one of the most anthologized poems namely “Self-Portrait”, where the poet notoriously plays with his own sense of identity. Here the poet shows how fractured identity of a diasporic poet in trans-cultural locations floats and roams like a ‘strider’ for the sake of belonging. The poet begins the poem with the paradoxical statement as “I resemble everyone / but myself” (1-2). As Stuart Hall points out in his seminal essay “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” that cultural identity in diasporic existence “undergoes constant transformation”, the poet’s self also undergoes same sorts of transformations that he does not resemble with his own mirrored image (431). He finds “in shop windows, despite the well-known laws / of
optics, the portrait of a stranger / date unknown” (3-7). Throughout the poem, the poet is not endeavoured to rediscover the root of his identity; rather, like a genealogist, he finds only discontinuities and multiplicities of identity. Interestingly, as a genealogist does not negate the notion of foundation, the poet also finds the signature of his father at the very corner of the mirror. That desired sense of foundation is always seen to be achieved by the poet through his use of family as the central metaphor in most of the poems written during the early period. That objective is intensely executed by the poem “Conventions of Despair”, where the poet’s negations of all sorts of pacifism, displacement, and alienation, ironically prefer his “hindu mind” as a stimulating space of belonging:

. . . 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. (12-16)

It is this mentioned ‘hindu mind’ that inherently fosters the sense of anxieties corresponding to various “technologies of domination” (Foucault, “Technologies of the” 19) which is metaphorically termed as “conventions of despair” (13). To ascertain his sense of identity depending on that foundation as a diaspora, the only
way available to the poet is the act of translation, as he says in the same poem: “must translate and turn / till I blister and roast / for certain lives to come” (17-19). Hence the poet rejects both the modern and the mentioned “hell” of his ‘hindu mind’ (16) and seeks back his “archaic despair” (39)-

... give me back my archaic despair:

It’s not obsolete yet to live

in this many-lived lair

of fears, this flesh. (39-42)

However, the poet has not emphasised his concept of “archaic despair” in the poem or in somewhere else; it can be assumed that this despair is merely existential corresponding to its relation with the question of existence or identity (39). Ramanujan accepts it as a perpetual trepidation of his mind. The poet says in the poem “Anxiety” that “Anxiety / can find no metaphor to end it” (13-14). Those endless anxieties may have an end only with death. In the poem “Towards Simplicity”, the poet discloses the fact that death is the simplification of all types of internal complexities of life. In most of the early poems of Ramanujan, that anxiety is the serious outcome of the internal tension between his paradoxical cravings for foundation and for what Svetlana Boym terms as “diasporic intimacy (251).
This clash involving those inherited values of the cultural past and his experience of the present is also explicit in the poem “Still Another View of Grace”, where the poet’s present lust is constrained by his Brahmin values. In both the poems, the poet maintains an ironical distance from his inherited values which have alienated him from the context of living in present. With his memories, the poet not only regulates his existence as a diaspora, but also manipulates his sense of loss within the ambit of the same. In the poem “Case History”, the poet tries to cope with those aspects of the past which in reality threaten the present. The poetic persona of the poem, like a genealogist, memorises the ‘case history’ of his life and at the same time focusing on discontinuities of the ‘case history’ illustrates how he goes away from that history as he grows up. The traces of the future evident in the present make the past more inscrutable to the poet. Hence he concludes the poem with the comment:

But now he has glass in his fist

and several rows

of futures that could not reach any past. (17-19)

His growth as an individual has distanced him from the past and thereby enlarges the storehouse of his memory. Within the domain of trans-cultural existence, when that expansion of experience and memory has equally threatened the inner essence of the self, the need of that foundation is again renovated as a shield. Expressing the opposite dimension of the “Case History”, the poet, in the poem “The Fall”, remarks how important the fall into the past for a diasporic poet is. He says:
Falling

I think of a man falling,

a plummet in a parachute

that will take half his life to sprout and take root. (1-4)

Here “a man falling / a plummet in a parachute” in the line number 2 and 3 clearly indicates the digging into the past of a man against the floating existence as a diaspora. Like in the poem “A Hindu to His Body”, here as a genealogist, the poet again reveals a split between the body and the self where his body is shown as “stigmata of past experiences” (Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” 76). The poet is seen to be repeating the same belief when he says in “The Fall” that the body does not have any identity without root. The sense of root and belonging gives a man the sense of ecstasy. In the poem, using of the word “feet” symbolically implies to get connected with the root in diasporic location (50). Here “feet” also means the sense of belonging for a man maintaining the floating existence in such a location (ibid). In the last poem of The Striders namely “A Poem on Particular”, the poet hence tries to make a negotiation among those philosophies that he revealed so far in all the above poems. With the metaphors of tree and fruit, the poet shows how one tree achieves its future “from forgotten roots” of other trees (36). Although, “Tree / had poured its / future / from forgotten roots”, still it creates buds which are always “Fall-minded” (33-36). Whereas every tree achieves particularities from root, the entire history of the tree-family is not apparent in one tree. The genealogical notion of discontinuities of history is explicitly revealed to us when the poet empathically remarks in the same
poem that “you can sometimes count / every orange / on a tree / but never / all the
trees / in a single / orange” (46-52). The particulars are recovered as parts of the
whole but the whole cannot be counted in particulars. This whole can be seen as the
collective consciousness of the poet in which all the particulars are seen as integral
parts. Without that collective consciousness, one cannot be intimated with another in
spite of same foundation, as one cannot count “all the trees / in a single / orange” (50-
52). Throughout The Striders, the poet’s desire for the root is in apparent tension with
his craving for transcendence or novel identities as a diaspora. However, the
destination of his collective consciousness is not the larger community at large to
which the poet actually belongs as a Brahmin Hindu. The larger community sentiment
in his poetry is always replaced by the family as the central metaphor, standing for the
society at large. The composite sphere of the family stands as the mirror image of the
whole, whereas his domestic relations are alternate to the social relations. In such
situations, as Milton J. Esman says, alienated individuals always “begin to sense an
emptiness in their identity that precipitates a search for “roots”” (112, emphasis
original). His second volume of poetry namely Relations (1971) is the culmination of
that experience focusing the reciprocal relationship between the self and the family
members as well as the self and the society at large.

However, throughout the Relations and other poems of his early period,
Ramanujan seems to be skeptical relating to the influence of family relations on his
self and identity. Through his typical ironical tone, the poet tries to be imparting the
message that he has acquired his desired root by incorporating the memory of his
family relations and thereby trapped within them. All sorts of relations, on the one
hand, provide him the sense of belongingness against his floating existence as a diaspora and reversely, on the other hand, have captivated the poet confining the self within a narrow boundary. Such confinement is always a hindrance towards transcendence and novel identities inevitable in diasporic location. In his epigraph to the second volume of poetry which is translated from a Classical Tamil Anthology, 1st -3rd century A.D., the poet explicitly says:

Like a hunted deer

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

one may run,

escape.

But living

among relations

binds the feet. (1, 6-10)

The poet like a genealogist does not like to have any imposed identity which will be an impediment towards liberalization of the self. From the Foucauldian perspective, the poet urges to be an active agent rather than a “docile” (“Docile Bodies” 182) body to be engaged with “technologies of the self” on behalf of self-fashioning and multiplicity of identity (Foucault, “Technologies of the” 19). The self with such inherent technologies hunts for liberalization from all sorts of “technologies of
dominations” and other impediments also (ibid). In the poem ‘A Hindu To His Body’ of The Striders, the split between the body and the self leads the poet to consider his inherited Brahmanism and past relations as his roots, which, in turn, renders “technologies of domination” and the sense of imposed identity as Stuart Hall discusses in the first type of cultural identity (ibid). In all the three ‘Hindoo poems’, hence, the poet is seen to be extremely skeptical and ironical towards his inherited religion and culture as domains of “technologies of domination” (ibid). In “THE HINDOO: he does not hurt a fly or a spider either”, the poet does not do so “for who can tell who’s who?” (5); a fly or a spider may be his “great swinging grandmother” or “true ancestor” (7, 10). In “THE HINDOO: he reads his GITA and is calm at all events”, as “a passive believer in karma”, the poetic persona of the poet becomes unruffled in all the events as the Gita instructs one to be more human and compassionate (King, Three Indian Poets 86). He can throw away his sexuality even when he watches “houseflies rub legs or kiss” in the poem “THE HINDOO: he reads his GITA and is calm at all events” (11). The whole poem is a criticism towards those Hindus who read the Gita but overlook its factual spirit. Such kinds of half-knowledge about self and the world are also castigated in the last poem of the group namely “The Hindu: the only risk.” The poetic persona considers it as a ‘risk’ to retain “the heart’s simple given beat / through a neighbour’s striptease or a friend’s suicide” (1-2). The persona, who is well versed in the Gita, considers it as a risk to take “Always and everywhere / to eat three square meals at regular hours” (6-7) or to pay interest in “the dead street-dog” (8). The persona seems to be solemn in all those mundane events which are not measured as religious attitudes by Hinduism. Such “tentativeness of religious temper” (Mohanty 49) is also evident in “Entries for a Catalogue of Fears”, where the poet wants to “grow /charitable one day” but utters the
name of god and speculates karma when he becomes sixty (29-30). Nevertheless what is ironical here is that the poet does so as a consequence of his fear of death. In all these four poems dealing with Hinduism, the poet has criticized all superficial religious attitudes, half-knowledge and selfishness which are often explicit among many of the Hindus.

However, such criticisms on superficiality of religious attitudes can be considered as cultural predicament of a person who has been brought up in a location where identity is chiefly determined by religious and cultural attitudes and is now living in a trans-cultural location of cultural fusion as a diaspora. Those traditional religious attitudes now seem exceedingly superficial when the poet judges them by detaching him from all those cultural and religious attitudes as a diaspora. Hence A.K. Mehrotra considers “the inadequacy of mask and the necessity of having them” is the major theme of Ramanujan’s poetry (35). This mask is also the chief domain of identity politics in his poetry. For Mehrotra, there are various instances in his poems where the mask is seen identical with the face. Wearing the constantly changeable masks in the trans-cultural location, the poet is active in search of his original face that he lost during his transformations as a diaspora in the dynamic context of living. But when the mask seems not identical with the face that he bears as “a stigmata of past experience”, the poet seems to be ironical and anxious (Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” 83). It is the reason why the poet emphasises the epiphanic nature of past experiences rather than their truthful memorization. In most of his, however, when the mask is not supportive to the requirements of the context of living, anxieties are again provoked in the form of irony or lamentation. In poems like
“Prayer to Lord Murugan”, the poet explicitly shows how sudden withdrawal from a traditional society to a modern one aggravates stipulated anxiety and weariness in the mind of the poet. The poem can also be said as a fretful lamentation of a modern poet over fragmentation apparent in a modern world devoid of traditional values and order. Remembering the ancient Dravidian god of fertility, the poet has criticized the prevailing spiritual barrenness of the modern world. Such duel attitudes towards the past as products of the split-consciousness of a diaspora are typical in the early poems of Ramanujan, where the poet has paradoxically revealed him both as a scavenger and a castigating of the ancestral foundation and other inherited values. All the mentioned ‘Hindoo poems’ are examples of such paradoxical attitudes of the poet.

Regarding the therapeutic use of past experiences to overcome crisis of identity, Milton J. Esman says that in the diasporic location, “quests for roots involve . . . a romantic association with the old country and the culture and lifestyles that their grandparents had left behind” (112). In Relations such a romanticizing account of the homeland and incorporation of the inherited values of ancestor are evident in most of the poems, although, with respect to the pursuit of the lost selfhood, Ramanujan is not as unambiguous as Esman says. Like The Striders, in this volume also the poet has recognized the significance of memory to retrieve his lost selfhood. In “A Lapse of Memory”, the poet compares “the amnesiac / use of memory” (3-4) with “the liar’s / use of truth” (1-2) and with the “well man’s use / of illness” (2-3), as “the amnesiac / use of memory” does not make any sense to the user; rather, it incites only absence. In such a case, amnesia is definitely a curse to a person living in the diasporic location. An ‘amnesiac’ will be a stranded man in a world of objects without any proper sense.
of self and identity. For the poet, lapse of memory means the lapse of identity - the sense of belonging. Hence, for the poet, the past can be the remedy for the lapse of identity as well as the storehouse of imposed identity also. Living in the diasporic location, as Sengupta says, “he is not at home in his new surroundings and at the same time is skeptical of the Indian mores which had been inculcated into him in his childhood” (83). Resulting out from that kind of duel nature of the past, the poet often seems to be ambivalent towards his approaches to the past. It is the reason why memory is often converted into epiphany as the poet romanticizes his relations and past experiences for the sake of remedial effect. In “A Wobbly top”, every scar on the wobbly top given by his father “now describes / a perfect circle within other scars’ / perfect concentric circles” (4-6). In “Some Indian Uses of History on a Rainy Day”, the poet, behind glorifying history, delineates the falsifying aspects of history as a genealogist. Such false recognition of history is clearly evident to us when the poet ironically represents an Indian Professor of Sanskrit, “lost / in Berlin rain”, who feels at home when suddenly he discovers the Swastika on the arm of a fellow traveler in his bus (32-33). The metaphysical approach of the professor towards his root has fastidiously negated the material basis of existence and foundational heterogeneity of the dynamic context of living. The professor’s approach is falsifying as he seeks to discover the uninterrupted continuity of forgotten things.

The strategic edge of Ramanujan’s sense of identity can be located within this tension between the two skeptical “technologies of dominations” of past and present - one arises out of the legacy of the past and the other from the demands of the present living context; one emerges out of memories, and other from needs and experiences at
present (Foucault, “Technologies of the” 19). However, in his early poems, juxtaposition of both these two forces does not open up any elucidation to the poet corresponding to his identity crisis and consequent anxieties. Besides operating as a storehouse of imposed identity, memory also provides the poet a “sense of irrevocable loss and of transience and insubstantiality of life” in a displaced location (Ferguson, and Salter and Stallworthy 1925). Most of the eminent diasporic writers like Salman Rushdie have experienced this sense of loss perpetuating within the self in diasporic location. As Rushdie remarks in his celebrated essay “Imaginary Homelands” that “the writer who is out-of-country and even out-of-language may experience this loss in an intensified form. It is made more concrete for him by the physical fact of discontinuity, of his present being in a different place from his past, of his being ‘elsewhere’” (12, emphasis original). In this process of dislocation, the return-to-home tactics is only possible only through the act of regression. One of the most possible impediments in the process of regression in a diasporic location is that the home always “exists in a fractured, discontinuous relationship with the present” (Mcleod 211). In “Obituary”, Ramanujan seems extremely elegiac by remembering the legacy of his father and that sense of “irrevocable loss” (Ferguson, and Salter and Stallworthy 1925); the poet utters:

Father, when he passed on

left dust

on table full of papers,

left debts and daughters
And he left us
a changed mother
and more than
one annual ritual. (2-4, 53-56)

However, what seems really striking in the poem is that nothing is vanished from this world; the past emerges in the form of other traces in the present enhancing the sense of loss and displacement. The news of his father’s death is once more arrived to him when the poet reads a piece of news paper that he received from a grocery shop. In “Of Mothers, Among Other Things”, the poet revitalizes the memory of his mother and mourns over his mother’s losing of youth and beauty. In “Some Relations”, the poet’s “daughter’s turtle try / to hibernate in the jar” (5-6) because they are “confused / by the heat of this Chicago winter” (7-8). The turtles, which are “not yet fully even recovered / from birth”, are “confused” as they are now cut off from their root and habitual environment (9-10). This sense of loss evident in most of the poems of his early period is termed by the poet as absence which, in turn, makes the poet more strategic and manipulative in his approach towards identity. In many times, such strategic maneuvers vis-à-vis identity and self are scrupulously pointed towards inventing the intrinsic bond among past, present and future with the intension to put back the sense of absence and loss. In the fourth stanza of “Some Relations”, the poet remembering the Madurai Temple, visualizes his “daughter’s daughter’s unborn face” (28) in the “natural / piety” of the temple (29-30). In “History”, rendering the sense of
loss produced by the death of his “petite little aunt” (5), the poet traces the
development of history in terms of personal relations and shows how with all its
disjunctions and dissentions, it becomes less grand and romantic. His genealogical
approach towards history is explicitly revealed to us in the very opening of the poem
when the poet says that history “usually / changes slowly, / changes sometimes /
during a single conversation” (1-4). Throughout the poem, while constituting a record
of how his “little dark aunt” (22) changes and “carries a different / face” (7-8) in
course of history, the poet also shows that his self remains unaffected by all those
events in due course. The most prominent one of this group is “Small Scale
Reflections on a Great House”, where the entire history of his “great house” i. e., his
ancient family home is executed through his self. The poet seeks consolation by
uttering the clause that “nothing / that ever comes into this house / goes out. Things
come in everyday / to lose themselves among other things” and hence lost their own
identity (1-4). Recognising the material goods of the ‘great house’, the poet goes on
calculating how past becomes present and mingles with the future in due course of its
historical development. On the other hand, “anything that goes out / will come back”
(40-41) to the house, even if ideas return to this house like prodigal sons born by
“prodigal fathers” (56). The poet firmly believes that in the course of historical
development, things return back to the ‘great house’ as the foundation is never lost in
dissent. Throughout the poem, the genealogical approach of the poet towards
history of the ‘great house’ simply provides him a mere consolation that despite his
prolonged displacement and dissent, the root is not entirely lost by him. The
historical truth of his birth and relation to that ‘great house’ cannot be changed even
by the course of his dissention.
It is because of the course of dissention and disjunctions in historical development of his selfhood, his poems are “eerily rootless” being rooted in the locale and in the past (Ferguson, and Salter and Stallworthy 1925). The resulting ambivalence towards his familial relations and self in most of the early poems of Ramanujan is the outcome of unremitting dissention that the poet has experienced in his displaced location. Such an ambivalent attitude towards the self is clearly executed in his poems like “Love Poem for a Wife” 1 and 2 in which the sense of identity for the poet is incessantly oscillating in between various poles of selfhood and existence. Being products of two separate cultures and of pasts, both the husband and wife are totally unknown to each other as their unshared memories have averted both of them to have a common identity. As his wife cannot understand the poet, the poet in the second poem of the series too fails to recognize his “wife’s always / changing syriac face” (9-10). Furthermore, when he tries to compare his face with her, the poet finds his own face is lost and “cut / loose like my dragnet / past” (43-45). In both the poems, separate foundations and cultural moorings restrict both of them to be intimate and familiar to each other. The same story is repeated in “Routine day Sonnet” also where the poet realises that marriage is not a partnership of equals; rather it is a montage of formalities. In reality, both are strangers to each other. Hence, the poet always hears only the cry of his wife’s heart “as if from a crater / in hell: she hates me, I hate her” (12-13). For the poet, it is not possible to know someone from inside who inherently shares a different foundation and belonging. It is the reason why in the same poem the poet is seen thoroughly comfortable with his daughter with whom he makes his everyday walk. Here again the commonality of experience and cultural consciousness of oneness are vindicated as the binding force of human relationship as well as markers of the dialectical relation between identity and identification.
Throughout his early period, it is apparently revealed to us that Ramanujan is incessantly preoccupied with genealogical approaches towards history and identity as well as various kinds of “technologies of domination” and “technologies of the self” to mitigate his anxieties and crisis of identity resulting out of his diasporic existence in a trans-cultural location (Foucault, “Technologies of the” 19). In his handling of such tactical maneuvers, from Pramod Kumar Nayar’s terminology, the poet is often engaged in an epistemic debate between “analeptic” and “proleptic” agendas of identity creation and thereby maintains a paradoxical attitude towards history and memory (189). In most of the poems of the period, both the agendas, as the basic backdrop of creations, have strategically created a liminal in-between space of physical and mental displacement where the poet is himself converted into a ‘strider’. Within the ambit of that floating existence, however, revitalizing past memories in present is not the final destination of his identity politics; rather his paradoxical use of past both as a storehouse of imposed identity as well as an abode of belonging has itself converted the past into a question begging term in his poetry. Even his ironical posture towards own culture and tradition is the consequence of the internal clash between past memories and persuasive manipulation of substantial things of the dynamic context of living. In consequence of the resulting dissention in the course of historical development of things, the past itself is emerged with new meanings and insight manifesting the apparent heterogeneity and mutability in the entire process. The corporate relation of past and present, hence, does not have any defined reciprocity in his poetry. If anything remedial is left in such a situation, is undoubtedly the art of home-making of ants as described by the poet in his poem “Army Ants”. Heredity simply teaches the ants the “aristocratic tastes” of the art of living with-
separate apartments
for the queen,
colonies
for the various castes

for the abstract

and the bean-eyed young. (2-5, 7-8)

The ants make their house with their own living bodies. The poet quotes a comment of C. Judson Herrick in the very opening of the poem: “The army ants not only make their houses but they are their house, for of their own living bodies they form the whole complicated dwelling” (The Collected Poems 69). In that body-house relationship, it is the body as “stigmata of past experiences” which inherently establishes and maintains relationship with other ants (Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” 83). Incorporating such unconventional perspective of house making, the poet considers the importance of material things in constituting relation with others; the mental or psychological domain, basically the product of the substantial things of the living context and surrounding, cannot afford such relation in a diasporic location. Considering his alienation in diasporic location, in the last poem of the volume namely “Prayers to Lord Murugan”, the poet explicitly appeals to the “Lord of great changes” (39) and the “Lord of lost travelers” (125) to find those
missing person who are displaced and distracted from the primordial cultures and traditions.

From the above critical analysis, it seems clear to us that the early poems of Ramanujan are the products of his perpetual quest of identity and self-experimentations over his memories and legacies of the past that the poet experiences in present within his self as a displaced individual. His has a strong inclination towards all those living and non-living material as well as non-material things that he has lost in his dissention now as a diaspora. In his early poetry, the poet is basically endowed with those material things of past which may render a substantial bond with family and ancestors. In his perception of “a double self” (Singer xiii) as indicated earlier, both the subject and the object perpetually are in perpetual tension with various “technologies of domination” and of “technologies of the self” manifesting the poet’s active role as a diaspora (Foucault, “Technologies of the” 19). In diasporic location, although, absence of all the substantial things of the context of living, which essentially constituted the notion of his double self, now themselves make the self absent to the poet and have problamatised the concept of identity thereupon. Whereas in *The Striders*, the poet seems to be nostalgic to have a sense of belonging and identity in his dislocated existence, in *Relations*, those nostalgias are found as a storehouse of imposed identity to the poet. The sight that is developed by the poet in his early period for negotiation in-between his “positioning” (Hall 237, Sachez 39) and “positionality” as well as identification and identity is failed in constituting his sense of discrete identity in the diasporic location (Sachez 38). In such situation, what
remains provocative to the poet is to develop a subsequent sight so as to negotiate those problematic concepts and domains of identity.

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