Chapter-VII:

**Indian Ethos in the Poetry of A.K.Ramanujan**

Bruce King correctly introduces Ramanujan as deeply rooted in Indian culture and yet fully cosmopolitan. He notes, “And then there is Ramanujan, a Brahmin, yes, and perhaps the world’s greatest scholar of the languages and literatures of southern India, but married to a Syrian Christian and for most of his life a professor in an American university. When he cooked for himself he was a vegetarian; when invited to a conference in Paris he ate all kinds of gourmet food as he felt he should experience the world.” (King, Bruce. *Three Indian Poets*. New Delhi: OUP, 2005, p. x) But even, as Ramanujan once said, “When you are cosmopolitan, you ultimately have to know something quite deeply.” (As quoted by King, Bruce. *Modern Indian Poetry in English*. Delhi: OUP, 1987, p. 214)

Ramanujan’s poetry is “rooted in and stems from the Indian environment and reflects its mores, often ironically.” (Parthasarathy, R. ‘Introduction’, Ten Twentieth Century Poets, Delhi: OUP, p. 3) He has cut himself from off from his immediate native environment, but this has been a gain and not a loss. His essentially Indian sensibility has enabled him to go to India’s past and his sense of Indian history and tradition is unique. The past comes to life in his poetry, and this ‘presence of past’ might not have been possible had he continued to live in India.

Here is a poet whose views on “culture, Indianness and western metaphysics provide vital clues to the complex configurations of tensions that sustain his poetic universe. The Eastern Brahmin in the Western and Pan-American climate remained unchanged in his perception and approach for his Indian ness. By reading his poems “one may detect a westerns trained intellect looking at things oriental with a detached interest” (Paniker 1980: 106).” (Nayak, Bhagat. ‘The Axis of Hindu Consciousness in A.K.Ramanujan’s Poetry’, Indian English Literature Volume IV. ed. Basavaraj Naikar. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2003. p. 2) He is a kind of Indian who is not carried away by the western expectations that all Indians must have a second sight. He rather wishes to regain the first sight:

As we enter the dark,
Someone says from behind,

‘You are Hindoo, aren’t you?
You must have second sight’. (CP, p.191)
Ramanujan firmly believes that “all creative art must arise out of a specific soil and flicker with a spirit of a place, as D.H.Lawrence has said is not an unnatural or unreasonable expectation. He is an artist whose own response to, and the understanding of, his native traditions, culture and general ethos lend the note of authenticity to his creation. This note forms the core of the native experience or sensibility.” (Chindhade, Shirish. *Five Indian English Poets*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2001, p. 2)

He uses India as a kind of motif to indulge in to his poetic universe. Ramanujan is widely read in India, Western and Western influenced modern Indian poetry in Indian languages. This unpredictable fusion of varied roots in Ramanujan’s poetry is true of the attitudes it expresses. Although Ramanujan uses Indian ethos abundantly in his poetry, he is not some one who would like to recognize India through the eyes of the westerners. Some poets do project India as if looking through the eyes of the westerners. This is suggested ironically and laconically by Ka Na Subramanyam’s poem ‘Situation’ (*The Times of India*, June 22, 1980):

Introduced to
The Upanishads
By T.S.Eliot;

And to Tagore
By the earlier
Pound;
And to the Indian Dance by Bowers;

And to Indian Art by What’s-his-name

And to the Tamil Classics by Danielou (Was he Pope?)…

Vociferous in Thoughts not His own;

Eloquent in Words not His own (The age demanded)…


Perhaps Ramanujan’s poetry is an answer to the charge laid down by the kinds of McCutchion. He was of the opinion that Indian poetry in English has very little that is Indian. In the words of McCutchion, “There is little
that is specifically Indian in the background and imagery; the rivers and mountains are all generalized…the themes and attitudes too are modern European. Alienation and resentment, hatred of machine age…this is machine world…increasingly standardized in every country. (As Quoted by Chindhaide, Shirish. *Five Indian English Poets*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2001, p. 14)

As an expatriate, his sense of commitment finds its roots in native ethos. At the same time he had the genius to adopt critical, rational outlook of the West with the rich cultural and spiritual heritage of the East. In spite of the Western footing he has never ceased to be an Indian, which is both his asset and liability as a poet with authenticity and originality that earns his global acceptance. His poetics is “deeply rooted in the Indian poetic traditions and unlike other poets of the Indian Diaspora he does not express his annoyance at the controversies over relocated homelands.”

(Nayak, Bhagat. ‘The Axis of Hindu Consciousness in A.K.Ramanujan’s Poetry’, *Indian English Literature Volume IV*. ed. Basavaraj Naikar. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2003. p. 6-7) Chittaranjan Misra feels that, “In spite of his constant exposure to American beliefs and culture he has consistently written about India- not as an obsession, but as a source of inspiration. One observes in his writing a possibility that an artist as an Individual is capable of doing a restructuring a personal (Indian) past and nourishing the same as insulated from the ideological oppositions that affect the time and space in which his text is written. While recreating the Indian settings- both urban and rural, he seems to be unaffected by the objects and images of his American surrounding because the life he captures looks so original and just not a memory game.” (Misra, Chittaranjan. ‘Image of Family in the Poetry of

Ramanujan is a kind of expatriate who “enjoys two different lives- the one within, the one without.” (Kumar, Gajendra. ‘The Poetic Cosmos of A.K.Ramanujan’, Indian English Literature: A New Perspective. New Delhi: Sarup and Sons, 2001, p. 147) But this does not mean that Ramanujan is a poet without roots. The persona in the poems find his entire personality “bred in an ancestor’s bone” and “ancestral crocodiles and tortoises” often haunt his imagination. This view of one self as only the product of one’s social roots leads the poet to ponder over his racial heritage and assess its strength and weakness.” (Naik, M.K. ‘A.K.Ramanujan and the Search for Roots’, Dimensions of Indian English Literature. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Private Limited, 1984. p. 15)
Bhagat Nayak rightly considers “Ramanujan as the Indian Ezra Pound for his making India relevant abroad. He is next to Tagore to convince the Western Intelligentsia that Indian tradition is not a single street or a one way street but consists of many connected streets and neighborhoods. As Y.B.Yeats and Seamus Heaney express their concern for Ireland, and Black American poets like Ben Okri for Africa, Ramanujan expresses his deep concern for India and Hinduism in which he is firmly rooted.” (Nayak, Bhagat. ‘The Axis of Hindu Consciousness in A.K.Ramanujan’s Poetry’, Indian English Literature Volume IV. ed. Basavaraj Naikar. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2003. p. 1)

Ramanujan is “an example of a more polished, sophisticated, and profound multiculturalism. His English – language poetry incorporates and assimilates linguistic, literary, and cultural features of Kannada and Tamil into the linguistic, literary, and cultural forms of modern American, British, and European literature. Indian sources and influences produce a poetry which has many of its psychological roots in Indian cultural traditions but which have been westernized, modernized, internationalized. But this is perhaps a western, developmental way of looking at the process. Another way is to see the Indian absorbing and taking over the alien, somewhat like the house in ‘small – scale reflections on a great house’, a poem which itself absorbs a western model to express a supposedly Indian way of being. If so, there are in Ramanujan’s poems two sets of structures, the western and the Indian, the outer and the inner, which, although distinctive, influence without assimilating each other.” (King, Bruce. Three Indian Poets. New Delhi: OUP, 2005, p.115) It’s really difficult to agree with M.K.Naik who remarks that “…Ramanujan has yet to come fully to terms with his
In Ramanujan poetry seems to grow out of Indian experience and sensibility with all its memories of family, local place, images and beliefs. His poetry shows how an Indian poet in English can derive strength from going back to his roots. For a poet like Ramanujan to let go the fairy tales is to let go the entire childhood with its varied images. So in the poem ‘Why I can’t Finish this Book’ the poet declares:

Letting go
Of fairytales
Is letting go
Of what will not
Let go:

Mother, grandmother
The fat cook
In widow’s white
Who fed me
Rice and ogres (CP, p.260)

In poem after poem, he goes back to his childhood memories and experiences of life in south India. At the same time it shows a modern stance with its skepticism, ironies and sense of living in a changing world. His poetry “reflects the Indian mode of experiencing an emotion and the western mode of defining it.” (Mahan, Shaila. The Poetry of
A close textual study suggests that Ramanujan’s poetry consists of nostalgic memories of south Indian life. Ramanujan is basically a poet of memories. Ramanujan hints that memories are hard to escape. So in ‘Extended Family’, he says we

Think
In proverbs (CP, p.169)

Of all the memories, “the ones that are anchored to his familial, personal past make his poetry very rodent with the characteristic native element or the Indian experience.” (Chindhade, Shirish. Five Indian English Poets. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2001, p. 63) He uses this vast memory of his childhood in South India in a complex manner. For example ‘Snakes’ deals with the snakes of his south Indian childhood:

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. (CP, p.4)

Ramanujan’s memories of the Indian past lend the descriptions and the imagery and identifiable Indianness. They are preserved photographically with their fine and vivid detail, as in ‘Still Another for Mother’:

Something opened
In the past, and I heard something shut
In the future, quickly,

Like the heavy door
Of my mother’s black-pillared,
Nineteenth century
Silent house, given on her marriage day
To my father, for a dowry. (CP, p.15)

The mother is gently and indulgently portrayed as an image of patience, suffering and sacrifice in the poem ‘Of Mothers, among other Things’:

My old parchment tongue licks back
In the mouth when I see her four
Still sensible fingers slowly flex
To pick a grain of rice from the kitchen floor.
(CP, p.61)

But it should be kept in mind that when Ramanujan falls back on his memories of India and childhood, the intention is not to be autobiographical or personal. Bruce King also remarks that, “While he may use memories of south India as his subject, his concern is rather with how the past has shaped him than as nostalgia for a lost paradise. Often his tone is ironic since the past returns in the form of fears, anxieties, and other psychological effects. India is the influenced him; it is not necessarily where he wishes to return.” (King, Bruce. *Three Indian Poets*. New Delhi: OUP, 2005, p.72)
Ramanujan is rather interested in presenting the collective consciousness of India by dwelling deeper in to his memories. Taqi Ali Mirza also thinks that “The strong nostalgic note, which is such a prominent feature of much of Ramanujan’s poetry, does not portray the nostalgia of an individual for times and things past. It is rather the collective nostalgia of a whole people who look back, often in an attitude of love-hate, to the past, at once drawn towards and repelled by it. The specificity of allusion to personal experience only leads the poet to a delineation of ‘shared’ experience…The myth that the poet creates is not personal or private but a common heritage, going backwards in time.” (As quoted by Chindhade, Shirish. *Five Indian English Poets*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2001, p. 76) Shirish Chindhade also agrees with this view when he notes that, “Some of the poems can be looked as purely sociocultural in context redolent with Indian experience. Poems like ‘Some Indian Uses of History on a Rainy Day’, ‘Poona Train Window’, ‘Small Town South India’, ‘The Last of the Princes’, ‘A River’ and ‘Conventions of Despair’ are some examples where the focus is not on the familial past of the speaker himself but on the collective past.” (Chindhade, Shirish. *Five Indian English Poets*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2001, p. 76)

Ramanujan “has given his thoughts to the question of Indian ness and makes use of his South Indian Brahmin background in complex ways.” (Nayak, Bhagat. ‘The Axis of Hindu Consciousness in A.K. Ramanujan’s Poetry’, *Indian English Literature Volume IV*. ed. Basavaraj Naikar. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2003. p. 3) Ramanujan’s Indian ethos can be found in the way that “many of his English – language poems use allusions, puns, phrases, themes, idioms, images and

Bruce King remarks that, “Anxieties, fears, bad memories are part of Ramanujan’s imagination especially with regard to India. 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. It may be repressed but it erupts in unexpected places and times.” (King, Bruce. *Three Indian Poets*. New Delhi: OUP, 2005, p.77)

Really what keeps us apart  
At the end of years is unshared  
Childhood. (*CP*, p.65)

‘Small Town South India’ presents a vivid picture of the temple streets in Madras with its characteristic Indian detail of cows, buffaloes and temple employees. Thus “His exile in Chicago only strengthened his sense of Indian past: his disturbingly vivid and agile poetic articulations both in English and Kannada are deeply rooted in myth, folklore, history, culture and ethos of his native soil. While recreating the human situations and details of Indian life the image of family appears a s a key image.” (Misra, Chittaranjan. ‘Image of Family in the Poetry of A.K. Ramanujan’, *Indian English Literature Volume III*, ed. Basavaraj Naikar, New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2002, p. 10) His poetry shows how an Indian poet in English can derive strength from going back to roots. In poem after poem, Ramanujan goes back to his childhood memories and experience of life in South India. The poet can’t help thinking of Mysore house even while staying in Chicago in the poem ‘A Report’:

Yet what can I do, what shall I do, O  
God of death and sweet waters under or next
To the salt and the flotsam, what can I do
But sleep; work at love and work, blunder,

Sleep again refusing, lest I fall asunder,
To dream of a blue Mysore house in Chicago?

(\textit{CP}, p.249)

Ramanujan is “naturally the most rooted in a traditional India; he is also an example of how varied traditions can be and how much they change. From birth on he does not exactly fit into pre-conceived notions of rootedness. The son of a Tamil family born and raised in Kannada-speaking Mysore, he first writes poetry in Kannada and English, hears from his father about both science and Brahmanism, studies out of his own interest the worlds religions and European psychiatry. Ramanujan’s life is an example of how a tradition changes, how a Brahmin becomes a trilingual modern poet in the United States. Ramanujan often spoke of himself as ‘hybrid’, even joking that he was the ‘hyphen’ in ‘Indian American’.” (King, Bruce. \textit{Three Indian Poets}, Second Edition. New Delhi: OUP, 2005, p.19)

Ramanujan’s poetry is full of Indian ethos. While being very much part of the world of modern ideas, international travel, and rapid cultural changes, Ramanujan was also concerned with his Indianness, not in a revivalist manner, but as a past from which he grew, a past which remained part of himself. The poet sounds Buddhist when he urges:

\begin{quote}
No, no, give me back my archaic despair:
\end{quote}
It’s not obsolete yet to live  
In this many-lived lair  
Of fears, this flesh. (CP p.35)

“He did not sentimentalize his Indianness and at times seemed to regard it as a plague; but it was there whether he wanted it or not. If his consciousness of being part of an Indian heritage is different from that of Ezekiel or Moraes, he was, of the three, the most influenced by and most a part of modernist poetry. He is at the other extreme from Moraes’ romanticism, use of older literary conventions, ease in British tonalities, and lack of interest in Indianness.” (King, Bruce. *Three Indian Poets*. New Delhi: OUP, 2005, p.10)

His poems are richer in presenting certain unmistakable Hindu myths, customs, gods and certain significant historical events. Ramanujan has “fully explored the opportunities his material offers him.” (Kumar, Gajendra. ‘The Poetic Cosmos of A.K.Ramanujan’, *Indian English Literature: A New Perspective*. New Delhi: Sarup and Sons, 2001. P 151) Bhagat Nayak presents him “both as a propagator of Hinduism and a poet of Indian Identity.” (Nayak, Bhagat. ‘The Axis of Hindu Consciousness in A.K.Ramanujan’s Poetry’, *Indian English Literature Volume IV*. ed. Basavaraj Naikar. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2003. p. 1) In his academic discourse with Rama Jha, as quoted by Bruce King, the poet says that his writing gets its ‘nourishment’ from his Indian culture, which are the backbone of his creativity. The poet expresses his views on his Indianness: “You cannot entirely live in the past; neither can you entirely in the present, because we are not like this. 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.” (As quoted by King, Bruce. Modern Indian Poetry in English. Delhi: OUP, 1987, p. 214) Ramanujan’s Indianness is a part of his past, the seed from which he grew and to which he remained inextricably linked as he changed and developed. The Indian way of life to see all things as one and the same is presented in the poem ‘Christmas’:

For a moment, I no
Longer know
Leaf from parrot
Or branch from root
Nor, for that matter,
That tree
From you or me. (CP, p.33)

For Ramanujan “the American endowment is the ‘exterior’, while the Indian environment is the ‘interior’, and his Indian ness is the part of his past he is inextricably linked with as he changes and develops. (Nayak, Bhagat. ‘The Axis of Hindu Consciousness in A.K.Ramanujan’s Poetry’, Indian English Literature Volume IV. ed. Basavaraj Naikar. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2003. p. 3-4) Even while staying in Chicago, the poet remembers India poetically as in the poem ‘Christmas’:

But where I come from
Things are timed
Differently. (CP, p. 33)
Ramanujan has always been associated with India in one form or another. He first began to write in his first language, Kannada. In his initial stages he was fully involved with Kannada literature because many of his literary friends were Kannada writers whose writing he naturally read even in manuscripts. Along with Kannada, he knew Tamil as well. This dual interest has still persisted with him. He has also involved in translating Indian poetry in English. His “recent translations from the two languages testify his rootedness... The native element contained in them, in addition to his personal experiences, has seeped into his poetry originally written in English.” (Chindhade, Shirish. *Five Indian English Poets*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2001, p. 63) His Hindu upbringing, national history and personal memories are forged into his poetry which carries the canon of great poetry. In poem after poem, he has articulated the Hindu ethos in his sociological and mythological references just by going back to his roots. His articulation of Hindu ethos with moral boldness and strong reasons expresses his nostalgia with simple human values.

Shirish Chindhade gives the account of a group of critics who regard Ramanujan’s poetry as a mouthpiece of Indian ethos. He writes, “Critical and perceptive readers like I.N.lall, C.Kulshreshtha, William Walsh, Ezekiel, R.Parthasarthy think that Ramanujan’s poetry evinces the inevitability of being anchored to his rich literal and personal, familial past’ with a varying degree of emphasis on the (indefinable) quality of Indianness in it. Ezekiel, for instance, thinks that Ramanujan’s poems are “Indian but untypically so”. William Walsh observes that Ramanujan’s manner has “the agitation of his American context, nor the foggy quality
inseparatable from British English, and it communicates in complete ease an Indian sensibility.” I.N.Lall sees “a curious combination of the east and the west. The experience of the emotion is Indian but the mode of defining is western” (Chindhade, Shirish. *Five Indian English Poets*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2001, p. 63)

Ramanujan’s description of relations within the family are just not “simple and direct blood connections but speculative, complex and distant too (a particularly Indian habit) as in ‘On the Very Possible Jaundice of My Unborn Daughter’.” (Chindhade, Shirish. *Five Indian English Poets*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2001, p. 67):

And if that daffodil too flaps all morning  
In grandma’s hands, how can my daughter  
Help those singing yellows  
In the whites of her eyes? (*CP*, p. 14)

There is a charge against Ramanujan that he presents India ironically. But this is only to bring out the status of human mentality. It is not an intended dig at India. So if ‘A River’ exposes cultural or literary sterility of the new poets in a solemn way, ‘Take Care’ pays controlled compliments to certain social reality in India:

In Chicago it blows  
Hot and cold. Trees  
Play fast and loose.  
Invisible crabs
Scuttle in the air.
Small flies sit
On aspirin and booze.
Enemies have guns.
Friends have doubts
Wives have lawyers. (CP, p.103)

Thus it is easy to agree with Shirish Chindhade who notes that “images of dirtiness, ugliness, dilapidation seem to outnumber the pleasant ones when Ramanujan remembers India.” (Chindhade, Shirish. *Five Indian English Poets*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2001, p. 82) In the poem like ‘Looking and Finding’ Ramanujan speaks of the Indian national scene:

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. (CP, p.179)

Thus Ramanujan’s poems present ethos of his native culture. In doing so, familial history plays an important role. Events, persons, and places familiar in the past are frequently brought forward in the present, not for juxtaposition but simply as nourishing, inspiring, recreating memories. A.N.Dwivedi feels that *autochthonousness* is one of the distinguishing features of Ramanujan’s poetry. He notes that, “Indian myth and history, her people and customs, her rich cultural and spiritual heritage: these
form the dominant themes of his poetry. Even a cursory glance at it convinces the reader that Ramanujan has never severed his associations with India despite his long residence in the U.S.A. He rather frequently resorts to native themes and traditions.” (Dwivedi, A.N. *Indian Writing in English, Part I*. New Delhi: Amar Prakashan, 1991, p. 96.) Mr. Lall also agrees with this view when he remarks that, “His poems take their origin in a mind that is simultaneously Indian and western; therefore they succeed in opening more passage to India.” (Lall, Emmanuel Narendra. *The Poetry of Encounter*, New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Private Limited, 1983, p. 43)

Ramanujan’s ‘Small Scale Reflections on a Great House’ is his version of “Yeats’ theme of great houses as monuments of a society’s history and culture.” (King, Bruce. *Three Indian Poets*. New Delhi: OUP, 2005, p.89) In this poem Ramanujan presents a house as a symbol for India as a country who has absorbed everything into it:

And also, anything that goes out
Will come back, processed and often
With long bills attached,

Like the hoped bales of cotton
Shipped off to invisible Manchesters
And brought back milled and folded

For a price, cloth for our days’
Middle-class loins and muslin
For our richer nights. (*CP*, p.97)
In this poem Ramanujan presents authentic picture of Indian life:

Nothing stays out: daughters
Get married to short lived idiots;
Sons who run away come back

In grandchildren who recite Sanskrit
To approving old men, or bring
Betel nuts for visiting uncles

Who keep them gaping with
Anecdotes of unseen fathers, (CP, p.98)

The poem “deliberately avoids turning into a family chronicle. Instead, it uncovers suggestive parallels between the family’s fortunes and the modern social history of middle-class and upper-caste India as a whole, and hence acquires the shape of a national allegory. According to the allegorical argument of the poem, in the house that resembles the nation, ‘nothing that come in ever goes out’; everything inside circulates and recirculates over long periods of time; and despite the clutter and the confusion, nothing ever gets lost. This is, the economy of both household and the nation is governed by a complete balance of means and ends, or what metaphorically might be called the ‘law’ of the material and ‘moral’ conservation of energy. Colored by the ambiguities, paradoxes, and ironies that are typical of Ramanujan’s social poetry, this poem paints one of the most memorable ‘national portraits’ of modern India that we

In yet another poem titled as ‘On a Delhi Sundial’, Ramanujan presents the life of Delhi in a picturesque manner:

Four-faced clocks on market-towers school the town
And make the four directions sell and buy
In the stalls below where watches run
Their certainties on the uncertain pulse. (CP, p.8)

One of Ramanujan’s great scholarly achievements was to reveal how Indian culture is varied and yet the many streams are related. In globalizing the Hindu myths, cultures, religion, culture, family, society, history and ethical dilemmas he has used his poetic sensibilities to portray the landscape of mind. Ramanujan alludes to The Bhagavad-Gita when he writes in the poem ‘That Tree’:

The legendry tree is upside down.
Roots in the air, branches in the ground. (CP, p.234)

Ramanujan’s “Hindu consciousness of Dharma as a doctrine and right way of living in Sansara refer to the process of birth and rebirth on the result of Karma and ultimately leads to Moksha or release from the cycle of Sansara. This remains pivotal and helps to bind him with his tradition though he lived in a different country.” (Nayak, Bhagat. ‘The Axis of Hindu Consciousness in A.K.Ramanujan’s Poetry’, Indian English Literature Volume IV. ed. Basavaraj Naikar. New Delhi: Atlantic
As A.N. Dwivedi puts it, “the most delicate and luminous of the poems are those which picture experience of India, and in particular his family life... Ramanujan is particularly striking when he portrays typical Hindu conventions and consciousness.” (As quoted by Chindhade, Shirish. *Five Indian English Poets*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2001, p. 63)

Ramanujan’s poetry draws substance from his intense awareness of his racial burden and his Hindu heritage. The ideas of hell and heaven weigh heavily on the Hindu psyche and these bring in the concept of Karma. He defines this concept as “a notion that is almost synonymous in some circles with whatever is Indian or Hindu. Brahminical texts had it, the Buddhists had it, the Jains had it... Karma implies the self’s past determining the present, an iron chain of cause and consequence, an ethic of responsibility.” (As quoted by Nayak, Bhagat. ‘The Axis of Hindu Consciousness in A.K. Ramanujan’s Poetry’, *Indian English Literature Volume IV*. ed. Basavaraj Naikar. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2003. p. 4)

While dealing with Indian ethos, Ramanujan naturally touches Hindu ethos. The presentation of Hindu culture and rituals is abundant in the poetry of Ramanujan. M.K. Naik feels that while, “Highly critical of many aspects of his Hindu heritage as Ramanujan is, he is by no means blind to some of its stable virtues. He admires its strong faith in the unity of all life and contrasts this with the dichotomy between Man and Nature and Man and the lower creation which the Western tradition appears to make.” (Naik, M.K. ‘A.K. Ramanujan and the Search for Roots’,
Ramanujan hints at the great absorbing power of his traditional Hindu culture in the poem “Small Scale reflections On a Great House”:

And also, anything that goes out
Will come back, processed and often
With long bills attached, (CP, p.97)

According to Bhagat Nayak, this poem evocatively reflects “Hindu customs, rituals, myths and superstitions that are part of Hindu family’s everyday life, transmitted character traits over several generations, upbringing of children, shaping of adult lives, social transactions and the series of minor and major tragedies that strike the individual members, and affect the whole household. The poem appears very suggestive as it resembles a national portrait of modern India where “nothing that comes in ever goes out.” (Nayak, Bhagat. ‘The Axis of Hindu Consciousness in A.K.Ramanujan’s Poetry’, Indian English Literature Volume IV. ed. Basavaraj Naikar. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2003. p. 10-11) Ramanujan here makes “the familial motif a symbol of the larger theme of the Hindu heritage.” (Naik, M.K. ‘A.K.Ramanujan and the Search for Roots’, Dimensions of Indian English Literature. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Private Limited, 1984. p. 19). Mr. Naik further notes that, “In spite of the slightly ironic tone employed throughout the description, the final impression is one of admiration… It is equally clear that the ‘great house’ in the poem may with justice stand for the ancient house of Hinduism, ‘the house that Krishna, built’- a house which in its
motto of ‘vasudhaiva kutumbakam’ has absorbed from time to time numerous cults, cultures and races to create one of the greatest examples of synthesis in all human history.” (Naik, M.K. ‘A.K.Ramanujan and the Search for Roots’, *Dimensions of Indian English Literature*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Private Limited, 1984. p. 19)

According to Vinay Dharwadker, this poem offers us “an ironic yet celebrity profile of a large Hindu extended family, tracing its history thematically (rather than chronologically) from about the end of the nineteenth century to the third quarter of the twentieth. The poem evocatively reflects on the customs, rituals, myths, and superstitions that are part of the family’s everyday life; the permutations and combinations in which character traits are transmitted over several generations; the upbringing of children and the shaping of several kinds of adult lives; the private and public facets of the family in a web of social transactions; and the series of minor and major tragedies that strike individual members and affect the whole household. Besides, the poem also alludes satirically to the colonial economy of the Raj, and symbolically re-enacts the family’s transition from a traditional Indian world to a distinctly more modern one over the period of a century.” (Dharwadker, Vinay. ‘Introduction’, *Complete Works*, Delhi: OUP, 1995, p. xxx)

Ramanujan’s ‘Snakes’, ‘A River’ and ‘A Hindu to his Body’ are his significant poems that present pictures of the Indian life and culture. He brings into new and modern interpretation of river in the poem ‘A River’ that causes havoc and suffering to people during floods. ‘A Hindu to his Body’ emphasizes the importance of the body to a Hindu who is
supposed to attach greater importance to the soul. The poem ‘Snakes’ is quite memorable as it throws light on one of the prevalent Hindu customs and rituals—that of offering milk to nagas. The poet describes the reverential Hindu attitude of his mother towards “a basketful of ritual cobras”:

Mother gives them milk
In saucers. She watches them suck
And bare the black-line design
Etched on the brass of the saucer.
The snake man wreathes their writhing
Round his neck
For father’s smiling
Money. But I scream.
Sister ties her braids
With a knot of tassel. (CP, p.4)

Ramanujan’s ‘Hindoo Poems’ are good examples to study how the poet deals with the themes of Hindu culture in his poems. Through these poems Ramanujan “introduces us to various aspects of the Hindu family system.” (Lall, Emmanuel Narendra. The Poetry of Encounter, New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Private Limited, 1983, p. 48) His three Hindu poems: ‘The Hindoo: He reads his GITA and is Calm at all Events’, ‘The Hindoo: He doesn’t Hurt a Fly, or a Spider either’ and The Hindoo: The only Risk’ are the reflections of his Hindu consciousness. The impossible ideal of accepting both good and evil, joy and sorrow in an equal spirit is well expressed in the poem ‘The Hindoo: He Reads his Gita and is Calm at All Events’. In this poem Ramanujan does not “satirize Hinduism or
the sacred scripture but rather those Hindus who know the content of the scripture but miss its spirit. In the content of the poem, he encourages to follow the precepts of the GITA not by its letter but by its essence and spirit.” (Nayak, Bhagat. ‘The Axis of Hindu Consciousness in A.K.Ramanujan’s Poetry’, *Indian English Literature Volume IV*. ed. Basavaraj Naikar. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2003. p. 10-11) The speaker in the poem has “learnt not to marvel, “when I see good and evil”, treating rain and horsepiss alike. He can watch lovers “without envy/as I’d watch in a bazaar lens/houseflies rub legs or kiss.” He can also “look at wounds calmly”. However, he declares in the end, “yet when I meet on a little boy’s face/the prehistoric yellow eyes of a goat/ I choke, for ancient hands are at my throat.” Is the poet trying to suggest here that in spite of all his traditional training as a *sthitaprajna* (“the man of tranquil wisdom”), he is profoundly disturbed when he finds that in life sometimes elemental innocence becomes a sacrificial victim, and realizes that this strange law of life is more ancient than the most ancient of religious system?” (Naik, M.K. ‘A.K.Ramanujan and the Search for Roots’, *Dimensions of Indian English Literature*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Private Limited, 1984. p. 18)

Ramanujan hints at the fact that *sthitaprajna* or the perfect equanimity easily degenerates into callousness and indifference as in the poem “The Hindoo: the only Risk” points out:

> Just to keep the heart’s simple given beat
> Through a neighbor’s striptease or a friend’s suicide…..

Not to be caught
Dead at sea, battle riot, adultery or hate/….

At the bottom of this bottomless
Enterprise to keep the heart’s given beat,
The only risk is heartlessness. (CP, p.90)

In the poem ‘A Hindoo to His Body’, Ramanujan seems to go against the accepted notions of body among the Hindus. The Hindus do not regard body ‘dear’ as described by the poet in the opening lines:

Dear pursuing presence,
Dear body… (CP, p.40)

On the Contrary to the accepted notion that the soul changes the body, this poet yearns for a permanent company of the dear body:

Let me go with you and feel the weight
Of honey-hives in my branching
And the burlap weave of weaver-birds
In my hair. (CP, p.40)

And again,

You brought me: do not leave me
Behind. When you leave all else,
My garrulous face, my un kissed
Alien mind, when you muffle
And put away my pulse
To rise in the sap of trees
Let me go with you (CP, p.40)

Shirish Chindhade opines that, “The Hindu view doesn’t regard the body as ‘dear’, something to be pursued and cherished. On the other hand, the four-fold scheme of one’s métier (calling or duty), namely Dharma, Artha, Kama, and Moksha views Moksha as the culmination and a desirable ideals of human life. Moksha is basically liberation of the soul from the cycle of bodily births and the ultimate unification with the Brahma, the highest and absolute Truth.” (Chindhade, Shirish. Five Indian English Poets. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2001, p. 71). Parthasarathy praises these poems and accepts them to be “a microcosm of the Hindu family which has ensured the continuity of a rich traditional culture.” (As quoted by Lall, Emmanuel Narendra. The Poetry of Encounter, New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Private Limited, 1983, p. 48). Bruce King remarks that he is “struck by how much Ramanujan remained emotionally part of India and how insistent he was to distance himself from any form of the Hindoo.” (King, Bruce. Three Indian Poets. New Delhi: OUP, 2005, p.91)

The poem ‘The Hindoo: He doesn’t Hurt a fly, or a Spider either’ ironically demonstrates the kind of ‘gentleness’ the Hindus possess:

It’s time I told you why
I’m so gentle, do not hurt a fly.

Why, I cannot hurt a spider
Either, not even a black widow, \( (CP, \text{p.62}) \)

Poem ‘Obituary’ is a “Hindu way of connecting with eternity, the soul with god after it leaves the body. The priest supervises the age-old ritual and the sons obey his instructions. Ramanujan not only explores the Indian life rhythm through this Hindu ritual but seems to be quite aware of the secular world that Hindus inhabit. Hence the railway station is chosen as a locale to denote the meeting point of three rivers. (Misra, Chittaranjan. ‘Image of Family in the Poetry of A.K.Ramanujan’, *Indian English Literature Volume III*, ed. Basavaraj Naikar, New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2002, p. 12)

In this modern world of environmentalists, Ramanujan’s depiction of traditional Hindu mother in the poem ‘Ecology’ who is ready to bear the migraines but would not allow to cut down the trees, is a tribute to the age old Hindu traditions of having regard for ecology:

But mother…  
Would not let us cut down  
A flowering tree  

Almost as old as her, seeded,  
She said, by a passing bird’s  
Providential droppings  
To give her gods and her daughters  
And daughters’ daughters basketfuls  
Of annual flower
And for one line of cousins
A dower of migraines in season. (CP, p.125)

His portrayal of mother giving farewell and advice to the grown up son departing for America evokes a true Indian picture in the poem ‘Images’:

Mother’s farewell had no words,
No tears, only a long look
That moved on your body
From top to toe

With the advice that you should
Not forget your oil bath
Every Tuesday
When you go to America (CP, p.259)

In Ramanujan’s poetry we find ample references to Indian past and mythology. By evoking admiration for the myths and legends on the Hindu gods and way of life he has glorified the cultural heritage of India. Ramanujan’s mythology poems are slightly different from his other Hindu poems. In Hindu poems there is a tone of irony and sarcasm. But in his mythology poems there is a pure narration of myths. In ‘Mythology 1’ he describes notorious demon king Kansa’s plot to kill baby God Krishna by sending Putana who makes a heinous conspiracy to kill him by coating her nipple with poison:

The child took her beast
In his mouth and sucked it right out of her chest.
Her carcass stretched from north to south.  
She changed, undone by grace,  
From deadly mother to happy demon,  
Found life in death. (CP, p.221)

In ‘Mythology 2’ the poet has presents the story of how Lord Vishnu saved His devotee Prahalad:

When the clever man asks the perfect boon:  
Not to be slain by demon, god or by  
Beast, not by day nor by night  
By no manufactured weapon, not out  
Of doors nor inside, not in the sky  
Nor on earth.  
Come now come soon.  
Vishnu, man, lion, neither and both, to hold  
Him in your lap to disembowel his pride  
With the still glint of bare claws at twilight.  
(CP, p.226)

Ramanujan “expresses his Hindu consciousness in myth, folklore, culture and legend” (Nayak, Bhagat. ‘The Axis of Hindu Consciousness in A.K.Ramanujan’s Poetry’, Indian English Literature Volume IV. ed. Basavaraj Naikar. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2003. p. 15) While the third poem in the series ‘Mythology 3’ “dramatizes a wife’s warning to keep her husband off at the time of worshipping Lord Shiva. But the husband touches her thrice not believing her as his interest only lies in her body, and he does not understand what devotion means

Ramanujan’s ‘No Amnesiac King’ is “one of his well known poems based on the legend of Raja Dushyanta and the forest beauty Shakunntala, the adopted daughter of Kanva Rishi. The poet suggests Dushyanta’s commitment an act of crime in forgetting his incidental beloved Shakunntala in just not recognizing her in his court as he had failed to produce the wedding ring as she had lost it during her bathing in the river. When fisherman’s fish for the royal cook disclosed the mystery of the myth, with the discovery of the ring in its belly the amnesiac king regained his consciousness and at one stroke all memory of his Gandharva marriage with Shakunntala revived. In connection with Dushyanta’s repentance for his inadverence towards her, the poet suggests that in such matters even a commoner is much better than the King Dushyanta.” (Nayak, Bhagat. ‘The Axis of Hindu Consciousness in A.K.Ramanujan’s Poetry’, Indian English Literature Volume IV. ed. Basavaraj Naikar. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2003. p. 12)

‘A Minor Sacrifice’ is another poem on Hindu myth and legend which narrates the story of King Parikshit and his son Janamejaya. The myth of killing a snake by the king in order to garland a sage in a forest earned the latter’s curse- “an early death by snake-bite” for the king. The King’s son, Janamejaya performed a sacrifice:
A magic rite
That draws every snake from everywhere,
Till snakes of every stripe
Begin to fall
Through the blazing air
Into his altar fires. (CP, p.144)

The yajna (holy fire) to sacrifice all the poisonous snakes ended in a failure. One poisonous snake takshak could survive by sticking to Lord Indra’s throne, and consequently bit the king who at last resigned to his death. By “introducing the myth the poet tells us about the killing of poisonous scorpion by his uncle in order to save his son Gopu. In the poem Ramanujan establishes a connection, harping on the perpetual tension between the scientific temper, and god fearing karma-adhering attitude which suggests that the killing or sacrificing insects or animals is an act of reproachful sin.” (Nayak, Bhagat. ‘The Axis of Hindu Consciousness in A.K.Ramanujan’s Poetry’, Indian English Literature Volume IV. ed. Basavaraj Naikar. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2003. p. 12-13)

In ‘Zoo Garden Revisited’, “the poet invokes various gods of the Hindus to protect different kinds of animals in the zoo, in quite superstitious way. He imagines and invokes different incarnations of Lord Vishnu in different Avatars as Matsya (the fish) in order to save Manu, the progenitor of the human race from the great deluge; Kurma (the tortoise) on whose back lord discovered some valuable things lost in the deluge and whose back also served as the pivot of the Mandara Mountain during churning of the ocean by the gods and demons for the nectar and immortality; Varasha (the Boar) to lift the Earth from waters; Narsingha
(with Lion’s face) who saved the world from the clutches of Hiranya Kashyap; Yamana (the Dwarf) to test the generosity of the world-renowned King Moradhvaj renounced for his charity; though God has four human avatars as Parashuram, Rama, Balaram and Buddha. The Lord is also depicted as Kalki (the White Horse) who purged the creation and destroyed the powerful crocodile with his great wheel to save the elephant in distress. The poet has used these Hindu myths in a harmonious whole by his excellent poetic use of the quintessence of the Indian culture and wisdom.” (Nayak, Bhagat. ‘The Axis of Hindu Consciousness in A.K.Ramanujan’s Poetry’, Indian English Literature Volume IV. ed. Basavaraj Naikar. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2003. p. 13-14)

The poem ‘No Fifth Man’ starts with a reinterpretation of old Sanskrit parable from Vishnu Sharma’s Panchtantra. It narrates the story of four Brahmins who knew the miraculous Sanjivni Vidya (sixty four arts) that breathes life into the dead. The Brahmin scholars used this Vidya to resuscitate a dead tiger that in turn devoured them all. The fifth Brahmin who was a coward but had common sense saved his life by climbing up a tree before the mantra was cast on the dead tiger. Ramanujan equates the making of a poem with the using of the Sanjivni Vidya:

    Poetry too is tigress
    Except there’s no fifth
    Man left on a tree
    When she takes your breath. (CP, p.245)

‘A Minor Sacrifice’ evokes the Indian myth of the King Sagara who insulted Kapilmuni by garlanding him with a dead snake and thus invited
the rishi’s anathema on the thousand sons of the king. The use of myth, Hindu rituals and Indian folklore is made subtly as well as in detail in ‘Questions’, ‘Astronomer’, ‘Death and the Good Citizen’, ‘Pleasure’, ‘A Minor Sacrifice’. In ‘Questions’ he suggests “the Hindu philosophic concept that the doer and the observer are one and the same. ‘Astronomer’ makes use of familiar Hindu images of the almanac, horoscope, and Sanskrit zodiac.

Ramanujan’s Indianness can also be found in his fascination towards the concept of ‘nothingness’. Ramanujan was very interested in Buddhism. (He tried to convert in his twenties.) I think there is here a Buddhist idea of nothingness, as well as perhaps an Existential one.” (Ramanujan, Krittika. ‘Preface’ Complete Works, Delhi: OUP, 1995, p. xvi) In ‘A Meditation’ Ramanujan’ stretches towards “what can only be called the metaphysical and the mystical, combining the Upanishads and bhakti poetry, the Virashaiva tradition in Kannada and the Shrivishanava tradition in Tamil, Spinoza and Zen Buddhism, and Pascal and Borges.” (Dharwadker, Vinay. ‘Introduction’, Complete Works, Delhi: OUP, 1995, p. xxi) In the poem ‘Questions’, Ramanujan derives its epigraph from one of the well known Upanishads namely Mundaka hinting at his associations with Indian scriptures. Here “we have the description of the two birds sitting on the same self trees, one of them eating the fruit of the same tree while the other simply watching. The pertinent question is: which of the two birds acting in a right manner? The first one who is ‘eating’ and in turn is ‘being eaten’, or the second one which does not burn with the desire of ‘eating’. In the Mundaka Upanishad it is suggested that the bird which is eating the fruit of the tree is doing so in sheer ignorance, but the second which abstains from ‘eating’ is full of
wisdom and has discarded the ways of the world. The second bird has controlled his desires and therefore is wiser. Through the image of the bird, the poet has set at rest all questions, all doubts and distractions, about the purpose of human life on earth.” (Nayak, Bhagat. ‘The Axis of Hindu Consciousness in A.K.Ramanujan’s Poetry’, *Indian English Literature Volume IV*. ed. Basavaraj Naikar. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2003. p. 14). Bruce King remarks that, ‘Questions’ “consists of two questions. What are the specific causes which determine life’s mixture of happiness and pain? Were the various parts of the self, especially the self observant consciousness, already there in the past, in previous incarnations of the self and when being born into this world of mixed pleasure and pain? The speaker, in questioning the relationship of the past to the flux and suffering of this life, is using the central concerns of Hinduism and Buddhism.” (King, Bruce. *Three Indian Poets*. New Delhi: OUP, 2005, p.107)

In ‘Prayers to Lord Murugan’, Ramanujan tries to expose the selfishness of human beings and their sense of island-existence and complexity. The loss of Lord’s significance today has been nicely depicted through the image of arrival and more particularly through the concluding lines of the first stanza where the poet visibly laments over the loss:

O where are the cocks combs and where
The beaks glinting with new knives
At cross roads
When will orange banners burn
Among blue trumpet flowers and shade
Of trees waiting for lightening? (*CP*, p.113)


In ‘Prayers to Lord Murugan’, “Ramanujan’s dig and irony are not directed or drawn towards either Lord Murugan or prayers. The dig is at the changed men and women who in the modern scientific world have drifted away from the tradition and ritualistic practices which constituted the characteristic innocence of the people who lived without the dehumanizing effects of the industrialized civilization.” (Mohanty, Niranjan. ‘Poetics of Prayer: A Study in the Poetry of A.K.Ramanujan and Nissim Ezekiel’, *Indian English Literature Volume IV*. ed. Basavaraj Naikar. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2003. p. 23) That’s why the poet urges:

Deliver us O presence
From proxies
And absences

From Sanskrit and the mythologies
Of night and the several
Roundable mornings

Of London and return
The future to what
It was. (*CP*, p.117)

While referring to Indian religions and scriptures, Ramanujan is not always without a dig. His ‘Pleasure’ takes a critical, ironical view of Jainism. The monk in the poem seems a renegade from his faith as he enjoys the masochistic and even sensual pleasure of ant bite. His life of the soul is lost and life of the body begins:
As the ants climb tattooing
Him limb by limb, and covet his body,
Once naked, once even intangible. (CP, p.139)

While referring to India Ramanujan is never without touch of modernity. In the words of Bruce King, Ramanujan was “very much a modern poet, instinctively ironic, and had a mind packed with a wide variety of ideas and information.” (King, Bruce. Three Indian Poets. New Delhi: OUP, 2005, p.10) The portrayal of Common Indian people’s fascination for the ideals is presented vividly in the poem ‘A Report’:

Gandhi and King
Are black and white photographs Smiling

Away in bidi shops. They live and die
Again and again in followers who buy

Potatoes, foreign cars, or just bidis,
Changing coins and bills with Kings and Gandhis

Stamped on them (CP, p.248)

The description of dilapidated temple and idol of God Shiva in ‘Some Relations’ looks realistic:

Someone’s cleaning out scorpions
From the many armpits of Shiva
One leg in the air
Broken by time
Or a passing Muslim
From Ghazni (CP, p.101)

The uniqueness of Ramanujan lies in the fact that “although rejecting the contemplative other – worldliness of Hinduism, Ramanujan uses classical Indian and Buddhist philosophical distinctions to present a modern, psychologically influenced vision of life.” (King, Bruce. Three Indian Poets. New Delhi: OUP, 2005, p.19)

Nissim Ezekiel refers to Ramanujan’s non-believing attitude with that of Daruwalla. He writes that, “Ramanujan is a Hindu and Daruwalla a Parsi but neither is a believer, and they have no conventional attachments to community or race. Both have a sharp eye for the illusions and delusions of Indian life. Ramanujan poeticizes and dramatizes them. Daruwalla is a castigator. They walk the Indian tightrope wearing the home-made masks of the insider-outsider. Ramanujan avoids the sophistication of the rootless. Daruwalla avoids the parochialism of the native. They are men of integrity and strength who recognize the easy solutions and reject them. (Ezekiel, Nissim. ‘Two Poets: A.K.Ramanujan and Keki N. Daruwalla’, Nissim Ezekiel Remembered. ed. Havovi Anklesaria. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2008, p. 302)

The poet reacts strongly to certain aspects of Indian life and situation, but his comments are never direct or explicit. His criticism inheres in the way he designs and constructs his images on themes of power-mad politicians, of sensation loving poets, and hypocritical society of men.
The poet is no more enchanted by the romantic ‘second sight’ that has been associated with the Hindus. He is rather seeking his ‘first and only sight’ in ‘Second Sight’:

I fumble in my nine
Pockets like the night-blind

Son-in-law groping
In every room for his wife,

And strike a light to regain
At once my first, and only,

Sight. (CP, p.191)

His theory of history reflects his attitudes towards past. Ramanujan’s use of tales from Indian epics not only endorses and affirms his instinctive access to the rich cultural heritage of his native land but also to ascertain its relevance to the contemporary time. Ramanujan wishes to write about the “actual rather than the spiritual and religious. He senses the religious in the actual world, the spiritual in the world of sense, in contrast to the Hindus supposed intuitive ‘second sight’.” (King, Bruce. Three Indian Poets. New Delhi: OUP, 2005, p.76)

Mr. Lall has mentioned the two-fold of attachment and detachment in the poetry by referring to critics like Harriet Zinnes and Nissim Ezekiel. He notes, “Other critics have also noticed the twofold nature of Ramanujan’s poetic sensibility. Harriet Zinnes, in her review of The Striders, says:
“Although Mr. Ramanujan writes frequently about his childhood Indian experiences, and thus flavors the poems with images of fig trees, mynahs, snakes, Madurai, a Delhi sundial, he is completely Western in his language, diction, and attitude toward the object.” Nissim Ezekiel in his review of Relations points to the detachments with which Ramanujan writes: “The poet reads his passion as if it is a newspaper report about turmoil in a distant country.” And later in the same essay he says that Ramanujan’s poems are “Indian but untypically so.” Both evaluations corroborate my thesis that Ramanujan’s poetry is the expression of a poetic sensibility in which the Indian subjectivity coalesces with the western objectivity. In other words, his Indian heritage and experience inspire his poetry which is given speech and forms based on English poetic traditions.” (Lall, Emmanuel Narendra. *The Poetry of Encounter*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Private Limited, 1983, p. 51)

Bruce King compares Ramanujan’s obsession with past with that of T.S.Eliot. He notes that “rather than the reactionary revivalism or conservative traditionalism which attempts to bring back or continue an unaltered past, Ramanujan has in mind the kind of continuity that T.S. Eliot wrote about in ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ which says that each new significant text added to a tradition will both alter and confirm that tradition. Although his poetry can be read on its own as modern English – language poetry and within a context of modern themes and forms, it is also rooted in Indian cultural traditions.” (King, Bruce. *Three Indian Poets*. New Delhi: OUP, 2005, p.12)

So his ‘Small-Scale Reflections On a Great House’ might be discovered as “symbolic of the mind in which all new experience and information

Perhaps Ramanujan’s direct satire on the Indian gurus is in the poem ‘The Guru’ where the guru teaches

Forgive the weasel his tooth
Forgive the tiger his claw

But do not forgive the woman
Her malice or the man his envy

Said the guru

Give the dog his bone, the parrot
His seed, the pet snake his mouse
But do not give woman her freedom
Nor man his midday meal till he begs

Said the guru (CP, p.251)

But the persona rebels:

I gave the dog his bone, the parrot
His seed, the pet snake his mouse,

Forgave the weasel his tooth,
Forgave the tiger his claw,

And left the guru to clean his own shoe
For I remembered I was a man born of woman.

(CP, p.251)

There is a blending of oriental vision and occidental mind in Ramanujan’s vision of Indian past and history. While he largely “concentrates on his family and relations, on his Indian associations, on India’s glorious cultural heritage, on the Hindu myths and legends, on Hindu gods and ways of life, for his poetic utterances, he very knitwitly blends his oriental vision and occidental mind in a harmonious way.” (Nayak, Bhagat. ‘The Axis of Hindu Consciousness in A.K.Ramanujan’s Poetry’, Indian English Literature Volume IV. ed. Basavaraj Naikar. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2003. p. 8)
The secular modern Ramanujan debunks petty prayers in ‘Prayers to Lord Murugan’. By doing so he has not only “exposed the ruptures of human faith in the Lord, but also has strongly supplanted the belief that such prayers are not prayable, for these do not elevate or redeem man from his misery.” (Mohanty, Niranjan. ‘Poetics of Prayer: A Study in the Poetry of A.K.Ramanujan and Nissim Ezekiel’, *Indian English Literature Volume IV*. ed. Basavaraj Naikar. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2003. p. 25). Talking about origins of ‘Prayers to Lord Murugan’, Ramanujan writes, “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 it and all that it 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.” (A.K.Ramanujan, *Uncollected Poems and Prose*, ed. Molly-Daniels, Ramanujan and Keith Harrison, Delhi: OUP, 2000)

The love for realism is more explicit in the poem ‘A River’. The poet avoids nostalgic subjectivity in the poem:

In Madurai,

City of temples and poets

Who sang of cities and temples: (*CP*, p.38)

And,

The poets sang only of the floods. (*CP*, p.38)
He is engaged in looking critically into the Hindoo forms. As a mature artist, he tries to put things and show things as they are, with of course with a tinge of bitterness. Rather the poet “narrates the poem through the mouth of a visitor to make it objective. The greatness of the poem lies in the fact that the traditional praise for river has been contrasted with what is actually experienced by the people during the floods. Apart from presenting the grim realities of a river in spate, Ramanujan hints at the sterility of new Tamil poets who ‘still quoted the old poets.” (Sumana, K., ‘A Realistic Look at Ramanujan’s ‘A River’, Indian Writing Today, ed. By C.R.Visweswara Rao, IAES, Delhi, 1996, p. 41) Ramanujan “deprecates its uncritical acceptance of tradition and its neglect of the individual, as when he describes how the ancient Tamil poets praised the river in flood and ‘the new poets still quoted the old poets.” (Naik, M.K. A History of Indian English Literature. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1982, p. 200)

About the poem ‘Entries for a Catalogue of Fears’ Mr. Lall observes detachment of Ramanujan. He says that, “In this poem… he draws on an Indian experience but treats with an objectivity and detachment which is Western.” (As quoted by Chindhade, Shirish. Five Indian English Poets. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2001, p. 76)

The Hindu poems “expose weakness of a time honored way of life than glorify.” (Chindhade, Shirish. Five Indian English Poets. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2001, p. 74) The dig at the Hindu scriptures and way of life can be seen in the poem ‘One, Two, Maybe Three, Arguments against Suicide’:
Remember what the wise callous Hindus

Said when the love-god burned: keep your cool,
Make for love’s sake no noble gesture. (CP, p.72)

‘The Last of the Princes’ is much more moving and subtle in presenting decaying Indian kings. Like all traditions the Indian Princes with their long dynasties are quite die-hard. See the description of the prince:

He lives on, heir to long
Fingers, faces in painting, and a belief
In auspicious
Snakes in the skylight: he lives on, to cough,

Remember and sneeze, (CP, p.105)

The princes “fall in slow motion from Aurangzeb’s time.” Their manner of death and devastation is varied and vivid: Some die of T.B., some of imported wine and women, some in war, some in poverty. They die and yet not without an heir. He lives on, with two school going daughters on half-fees:

His first son, trainee
In telegraphy,
Has telegraphed thrice already for money (CP, p.105)
Same kind of satiric picture is presented in the poem ‘Prayers to Lord Murugan’:

    Rajahs stand in photographs
    Over nine foot silken tigresses
    That sycophants have shot. (CP, p.115)

In the poem ‘Obituary’ he recalls his fathers death, and uses the occasion to comment ironically on Indian ceremonies and rituals associated with the dead. Of his father, he says,

    Being the burning type,
    He burned properly
    At the cremation
    As before, easily
    And at both ends,
    Left his eye coins
    In the ashes that didn’t
    Look one bit different,
    Several spinal discs, rough,
    Some burned to coal, for sons
    To pick gingerly
    And throw as the priest
    Said, facing east
    Where three rivers met
    Near the railway station;
    No longstanding headstone
    With his full name and two dates
To hold in their parentheses
Everything he didn’t quite
Manage to do himself,
Like his caesarian birth
In a Brahmin ghetto
And his death by heart-
Failure in the fruit market. (CP, p.111)

Bruce King remarks about this poem that Ramanujan “debunks attempts to give grandeur to rituals, tradition, ceremonies, death, or history. In ‘obituary’, a father’s death and cremation leaves nothing to the family except ‘debts and daughters’, a changed mother and annual rituals to perform.” (King, Bruce. Three Indian Poets. New Delhi: OUP, 2005, p.88)

Ramanujan’s ‘Some Indian Uses of History on a Rainy Day’ provides a “compensation for the reality of contemporary India when the madras white collar workers stand in the rain discussing the glories of old king Harsha while they are unable to use the inefficient, over packed municipal buses.” (King, Bruce. Three Indian Poets. New Delhi: OUP, 2005, p.86) The details are really eloquently presented:

Madras,
1965, and rain.
Head clerks from city banks
Curse, batter, elbow
In vain the patchwork gangs
Of coolies in their scramble
For the single seat
In the seventh bus:

They tell each other how
Old King Harsha’s men
Beat soft gongs
To stand a crowd of ten
Thousand monks
In a queue, to give them
And the single visiting Chinaman
A hundred pieces of gold,
A pearl, and a length of cloth;

So, miss another bus, the eighth
And begin to walk, for King Harsha’s
Monks had nothing but their own two feet. (CP, p.74)

M.K.Naik observes about this poem that, “Ramanujan also tries to juxtapose ironically the ancient Hindu ethos with the situation of the modern Hindu as in ‘Some uses of History on a Rainy Day’.” (Naik, M.K. *A History of Indian English Literature*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1982, p. 200)

‘No Amnesiac King’ “examines our nostalgia for an idealized world in terms of the stream image.” (King, Bruce. *Three Indian Poets*. New Delhi: OUP, 2005, p.101) The description of ‘Jatti, palace wrestler of Mysore’ is all ironic and full of satire who has
No shirts under his military pea-coat
Except on special days, when he wears
Ribbons, medals and stripes—his father’s
From World War One. (CP, p.159)