

Memory, Myth, and Cultural Belonging in the Poetry of A.K. Ramanujan

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ABSTRACT

The paper explores the centrality of family, memory, cultural rootedness, Indian soul and soil in the poetry of A. K. Ramanujan, one of the significant voices of Indian English poetry. Living between India and America, Ramanujan experienced the tensions of migration, displacement, and bicultural existence, yet his poetry consistently returns to the emotional landscape of home. His poems recreate memories of parents, relatives, rituals, family, myths, and domestic spaces that shape his inner world and preserve his Indian identity. Family becomes not merely a social unit but a symbolic shelter and refuge that protects the self from alienation and rootlessness. Through irony, nostalgia, myth, and personal recollection, Ramanujan transforms private experiences into universal reflections on belonging, rootedness and identity. His engagement with Hindu beliefs, legends, and traditions further reveals his attempt to connect the inherited past with the realities of the present. The presence of the past is the hallmark of his poetry. The paper argues that Ramanujan's poetry derives its emotional depth and sustenance from this continuous dialogue between memory and modernity, exile and belonging, tradition and contemporary life. His poems ultimately affirm that cultural memory and familial relationships remain essential sources of emotional stability and selfhood in a rapidly globalizing world.

Keywords: *Family, memory, diaspora, Indian identity, cultural roots, nostalgia, mythology, exile, modernity, cultural memory, belonging, Hindu ethos, migration, biculturalism, tradition, selfhood, familial relationships, alienation, Indian English poetry.*

Leaving behind the familiar boundaries of home is rarely easy, and the psychological weight of displacement can feel like a heavy burden. Yet, a fascinating contradiction exists within the creative world: writers in diaspora often produce their most brilliant work, as if a sudden shift in atmosphere acts as an intense creative stimulant. For A.K. Ramanujan, living as a "voluntary exile" in Chicago provided the exact dual lens needed to elevate his craft. In case of expatriate poets like him, located as he is between the interstices of cultures, the urge to forgo ahead and the urge to return, create a trajectory that is at once tense and liberating. This trajectory with its twin movement of to and fro, becomes the very locus and logic of Ramanujan's being. Poetry becomes a complex narrative of journey back and forth, an only argument for and against the granted home, a play of granted belongings. A.K. Ramanujan marks the brilliant culmination of modern Indian English poetry. Famous critic and Reviewer Bruce King called Ramanujan along with two other transcultural poets, Indo Anglican harbinger of literary modernism. King coined this classification in his seminal 1991 study, *Three Indian Poets: Nissim Ezekiel, A. K. Ramanujan, Dom Moraes*. Along with Ezekiel and Moraes, Ramanujan is credited with moving Indian poetry in English away from the romantic and imitative styles of the 19th and early 20th

centuries. Instead, they embraced modernist techniques such as irony, skepticism, psychological realism, and free verse. He stands for the archetypal Indian English poet in a never-ending search for self in the midst of tradition and contemporary reality, as well as a poetic idiom very adapted. His poetry reflects the quintessential Indian sensibility artistically combined with the temperament of modernity. He was in "two worlds-the one within and the one without". Although he had been a professor of Dravidian studies and linguistics at the University of Chicago since 1962, he had never forgotten of his own country and early years.

The poet tried to cope with an alien land but the memory of the past always chased him. These poets can view India with a sense of missing out, feel free to take a satirical pride in their freedom or claim their biculturalism, but must also gaze with a dispassionate eye at their new home country, as an outsider, feeling as though some was lost in its process of development. The expatriate poets are noted for their ability to accept, adapt and embrace other cultures while keeping the consciousness of being Indian. Poetry, which lies between cultures, assists Ramanujan's sense-making process in the predicament and its conscious choice to live in it. It has therefore been an asset to the literary world to have him as an expatriate. The longer the poet lives and writes outside of India, the more he realizes that he is very Indian. The art of remembering is not a cud-chewing thing, the old times are alive: it brings alive all that is usable in his past. It is nothing that will prevent it from moving forward, but it isn't a kind of sentimentalism that's unwilling to search for the good in things. It is an active lingering to jump about energetically. The rootedness in one's own culture and relatedness to one's family and people provide emotional stability for Ramanujan.

The influential British literary critic William Walsh believes that A.K. Ramanujan is too immersed in the Indian ethos and psyche in its pure Hindu state to be able to affect a detachment from the Indian scene as Nissim Ezekiel is able to. The learned critic fails to realize that in Ezekiel case, because of Jewish heritage vis-à-vis Indian background, the dominant theme is search for roots, a quest for identity, whereas in Ramanujan's case, it is an agonizing struggle with one's deep-rooted past. In fact, Ramanujan's concern with his Indian past is a source of strength for, one would do well to remember, as D. H. Lawrence has stated in a different context, "All creative art must rise out of specific soil and flicker with a spirit of place". Ramanujan has himself confessed that:

English and my disciplines (linguistics and anthropology) give me outer forms-linguistics, metrical, logical and other such ways of shaping experience and my first thirty years in India, my frequent visit

and field trips, my personal and professional preoccupations with Kannada, Tamil, the classics and folklore give me my substance, my inner forms image, symbols. 1

The above quote perfectly encapsulates his dual identity: a mind shaped by rigorous Western academic disciplines and a soul deeply nourished by the rich, localized traditions, languages, and folklore of South India. As R. Parthasarathy observes, both Raja Rao and Ramanujan connect the inherited past with the living present, and their writings emerge from this creative tension.

Through recreating memories of his personal, private, and familial past, Ramanujan overcomes a feeling of insecurity, rootlessness, and alienation. These memories protect and shield him from the fear of death, from the lack of human warmth. They also help him establish a link with the past to make their present meaningful and relevant. Like the casuarina tree in Toru Dutt's poem 'Our Casuarina Tree,' the family tree in Ramanujan's poetry becomes a symbol of emotional shelter, memory, and belonging. Under its shade, the poet feels secure and comforted, breathing the warmth of familial love. The images of home and ancestry are so deeply inscribed in his poetry that he appears as a homebound pilgrim and an instinctive insider.

Ramanujan often turns to religion and myth to escape the alienation he feels in America. Poems like "A Hindu to his Body," "The Hindoo: he reads his Gita and is calm at all events," and "The Hindoo – the only risk" present an ironic view of Hindu life and beliefs. In "The Hindu: He reads his Gita and is calm at all events," the poet exposes the gap between outward calmness and inner anxiety. Similarly, "The Hindu: He does not hurt a fly or spider either" questions how the principle of non-violence can sometimes become passivity and indifference. In "Hindoo to His Body," Ramanujan stresses the importance of spiritual growth over bodily attachment and reflects the Hindu ideal of attaining Moksha, or liberation from the cycle of rebirth.

"Mythologies 1" recounts the story of the ogress Putana who tried to kill Krishna by offering him her poisoned breast to suck. But the little one, the holy one, was able to see all those horrible plans and ended her life. The poet's depiction, even if precise is remarkable:

The child took her breast
in his mouth and sucked it right out of her chest,
Her carcass stretched from north to south,
she changed, undone by grace,

from deadly mother to happy demon. (CP, 221)

Salvation brings about Killed by God. So, the demon is ‘happy’ to be dead and experience a new life; purged of all demonic qualities. It is, then, the poet's prayer that is important. All poison has been injected into this life in the poet's body. His ability to be raised from the dead, his readiness to start a new life, to find himself in salvation. This is the most truthful and sincere prayer and for every Hindu it is prayable:

O Terror with a baby face
such me dry. Drink my venom
Renew my breath... (CP, 221)

In “Mythologies 2” the poet employs Prahalad-Hiranya Kashyapu myth to unravel the strength of his Hindu mind and belief. After alluding to the slaying of Hirana Kashyapu, the demon by Vishnu in his Avatar as Narsimha, the speaker pleads:

Connoisseur of negatives and assassin
of certitude, slay now my faith in doubt.
End my commerce with bat and night
owl. Adjust my single eye, rainbow bubble,
so I too may see all the things double... (CP, 226)

By juxtaposing of the mythical with the real, the poet’s assertion of their interdependence reinvigorates his faith wherein lie his roots. In “Mythologies 3” (CP, 228) the poet portrays a scene where the wife tells her husband to stay clear of her when he goes to worship Shiva. Ramanujan compares two people to explain how they differ one from each other – devotional and physical, for the spirit and for the body or matter.

Ramanujan’s poetry shows a deep engagement with Hindu myths, legends, and folk traditions beyond the poems included in Mythologies. He often uses regional stories and cultural symbols to reflect upon Indian life and identity. In “Prayers to Lord Murugan,” he refers to the South Indian deity Murugan to express his connection with his cultural roots, though the treatment carries a subtle irony. Poems like “Zoo Garden Revisited” and “The Difference” mention the incarnations of Lord Vishnu such as Matsya, Kurma, and Varaha, while also recalling the story of Lord Vaman and King Moradhvaj. In “A Minor Sacrifice,” the poet presents the story of King Parikshit and Janamejaya’s snake sacrifice to show the harmful effects of anger and revenge. Likewise, “No Fifth Man,” based on a Panchtantra tale, presents poetry as a force that is creative yet potentially destructive for the poet himself.

The attitudes of both old and new Tamil poets are clearly reflected in the poem “The River” where they have unmindful and callous towards the human suffering during the devastating flood. It is a poem on the river Vaikai which flows through Madurai city that has for long been the seat of Tamil culture. In the poem he mentions that the river Vaikai was sufficient water for attracting the poets only once a year during the monsoons. During the summer, the river Vaikai would turn into a trickle. And at the bottom of the river could be glimpsed through straws, and women's hair filling the rusted water quats. The stones that were wet, looked like a crocodile sleeping, and the dry ones, like a buffalo shaven and sleeping in the sun. The poet was present one day, when the river was flooded. He noticed people talking about the inches rising water and the beauty of the floods and he noticed that the other poets wrote about what the older poets said, but no one said anything about the destruction of three houses in the village along with a pregnant woman who had twins in her womb, that the floods took away. It's not so much a poem about the river, so much about the attitude of the people who prefer sensationalism over humanism. The poet's use of irony is a reflection of his attitude towards the callous attitude of the old and the new poets who romanticize the floods while neglecting the human element of loss and suffering because of the flood. The tone of the poem is of sarcasm and irony. This is really a beautiful piece of cynical criticism aimed at poets who force themselves to look only at the beautiful things in life and mindlessly ape the same lines quoted by poets for eons:

The new poets still quoted
the old poets, but no one spoke
in verse
of the pregnant woman
drowned, with perhaps twins in her, (CP, 38)

In “Death of a Good Citizen” (CP, 135), the poet juxtaposes two kinds of funeral rites – one eastern and the other western- privileging and acknowledging his allegiance to the former over the latter. He prefers to be cremated in Sanskrit and sandalwood and to be “sterilized to a scatter of ash”. He cherishes a hope to die in his own native land for in a culture not his own, “his tissue will never graft”. The poet’s inner forms never intend to dispossess their ties with the native land. Affirmation of such an attitude in terms of his explicit preference makes Ramanujan an instinctive insider, a settler in the blood. The poem “The Last of the Princess” (CP, 105) is a pathetic poem which deals with the slow disintegration and ultimate dissolution of the Moghul Empire in India. The great dynasty after the death of Aurangzeb, the Moghul

dynasty fall on evil days and gradually decayed and died out like a patient suffering from T.B. In “Elements of Composition” (CP, 121), what remains striking is Ramanujan’s capacity for absorption. The self at center critically examines, explores its possible dimension to identify its true nature. By way of cataloguing and juxtaposing two distinct levels of the self- one diasporic and the other native – Ramanujan harps on the kind of amalgamation that has gone into the making of his personality. The poem deals with the composition of the poem and Hinduism belief on the five elements- earth, fire, air, water and sky. A nice recollection of the poet of his uncle's agility with his 11 fingers (first finger is actually his thumb), in making interesting images of kings of kings, cats etc. and sounds as if his uncle could hiss and make the images of kings and cats turn into fingers again. This poem therefore sums up the essence of the poetic self and resolves the problems of a dichotomous identity which apparently traverse through the woods of his poetry.

The past, according to the poet, “never passes either the individual past or historical past or cultural past. It is with us”. The family history is the very nucleus of his poems. Nostalgia, pathos irony, humour and sympathy are found in these relationships. His poems show a sure sense of the poet's own identity with the family, a sense he sorely needed after he moved to Chicago. In the fabric of his poetry home remains a central point that unifies the individual and the traditional. We can call his family poems as, “emotions recollected in tranquility” or recollection emotionalized in untranquil moments”. Ramanujan was 37 when his first collection of poems entitled *The Striders* (1966) was published. There after comes *Relations* in 1971 and *Second Sight* in 1986. His sudden death on an operation table, while undergoing minor surgery in USA in 1993 came as a great shock to all. He had left at his death 148 poems on three computer disks. Of these, 60 poems have been collected under *The Black Hen* and published as Book IV of the *Collected Poems of A. K. Ramanujan* (1995). A poem in it, dated 16th March 1992, reads uncannily like a premonition:

Birth takes a long time
Though death can be sudden,
And multiple like pregnant deer
Shot down on the run...“Birthdays” (CP, 206-07)

The epigraph poem that Ramanujan chose for his second collection, *Relations* indicates that he wanted to make it clear that the poem included in the volume have drawn their sustenance from the people near and dear to him.

Like a hunter deer
on the wide white
salt land
A flayed hide
turned inside out
One may run,
Escape
But living
among relations
binds the feet. (CP, 101)

In the family he finds his objective correlative, and he develops his experience into a neat vignette on family relationship in India, in his poems. There is no better example of this theme than in his poetry; because of it, Parthasarthy has commented “the family for Ramanujan is one of the central metaphors with which he thinks” 2. What raises these poems from the level of mere documentation of the Hindu joint family is Ramanujan’s poetic sensibility; particularly the way he repossesses the scene which his memory is able to evoke and the manner in which he translates his experience.

Ramanujan's poetry of the Indian scene and its familial relationship is ironic and bemused. In the poem 'Obituary', he reflects on the death of his father, and in a tongue-in-cheek manner discusses rituals and ceremonies surrounding the deceased. Through syntax and diction of everyday speech the ironist removes the awe that people experience in the presence of death. Irony, in this context, becomes an effective device in negating the impact of death which is similar to the effect John Donne achieves in his sonnet on death (Holy Sonnet X). The poet, in the opening part of the poem, very pointedly and precisely says:

Father when he passed on,
left dust,
on a table full of papers,
left debts and daughters,
a bed-wetting grandson named by the toss
of a coin after him.(CP, 111)

The poet’s play of words in the lines:

Being the burning type
He burned properly
At the cremation
As before, easily
And at both ends.(CP, 111)

It brings up sarcastic voice with tears in its eyes and helper's smiles. But generally the death poems end with a philosophical surrender, Ramanujan just tried to depict the situation as it is, realistically affecting the relations. There is a poignant undertone suggesting his father's miserable position that left nothing to his son except debt, responsibilities and expenses for performing annual ceremonies:

And he left us
a changed mother
and more than
one annual ritual.(CP, 112)

.In "Of Mothers, among other things", the poet conjures up various images of his mother from the dark vortices of memory. Although his memory is twisted and dry with grief, yet he remembers how delicate and vivacious she was in the prime of her life. Being an affectionate mother, she ran back in rain to the cradle in which the baby cried.

From her earrings three diamonds
splash a handful of needles
and I see my mother run back
from rain to the crying cradles(CP, 61)

The physical decay that the persona observes in his mother so overwhelms him, that he becomes inarticulate. The metaphor in the first few lines of the final stanza briefly conveys the experience:

My cold parchment tongue licks bark
in the mouth when I see her four
still sensible fingers slowly flex
to pick a grain of rice from the kitchen door.(CP, 61)

The feeling of fondness transports him to the times when he used to leave for the United States. Whirls back in a small poem, "Farewell", to the dear memory of his mother:

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, 259)

In "Looking for a Cousin on a Swing" (CP, 19) Ramanujan nostalgically describes a cousin with whom she played in childhood. She was four or five years of age, and he was about six or seven. They would play together for hours, would sit in a swing and every forward movement on thrust of the swing thrilled her feelings. They were innocent children. After swinging they would climb a tree, not very tall but full of leaves like a big tree. The simple and Edenic life of childhood is symbolized by the words "swinging" and "climbing". Two poems are composed by him on his wife – "Love Poem for a Wife 1" (CP, 65) and "Love Poem for a Wife 2" (CP, 83) and in both these poems the selection of indefinite article 'a' in place of personal pronoun 'my' creates an ambiguity as to whom are they being addressed. A close reading of the poems shows that the poet persona is addressing two distinct auditors. The first love poem uses the second person possessive pronoun 'you' throughout the poem and identifies the persona's wife as the auditor whereas in the second poem the reader is allotted the role of the auditor. In both poems, the narrative is in the form of a monologue as the auditors never speak.

In "History" the impression recalled is that of the persona's "little dark aunt" looking for something under the cot of the great aunt who is just dead. His impression at the moment is that she is only "looking for something/... may be rolling pin/ her little son had brought for play" (CP, 107). Years later, the full significance of what the woman was actually doing there, is revealed to the protagonist, when his mother discloses that what the "little dark aunt" was looking (and found too) were the ornaments of which she and her sister "unknown each to other / alternatively picked their mother's body clean / before it was cold/ or the eyes were shut". (CP, 107)

His "Small Scale Reflections on a Great House" is an ironic reflection on a revered practice of the Hindu joint family. It's a 91-line poem in groups of 3 and 4 lines and/or in one, lonely line of verse. It is written in free verse ..The great house is defined by its insatiable appetite and the

poem is coldly ironic in its tone and its reportorial style of describing a family whose virtue is its possession of an inordinately possessive attitude. The word 'great' appears to be ironical for there is nothing 'great' about it. The poem begins:

Sometimes I think that nothing
that ever comes into this house
goes out. (CP, 96)

It is opposite in title, yet it is a collection of remembrances and humor with a pathos to showcase that life is a voyage with joys and sorrows, success and failure, good times and bad times all recorded in the memories. The bizarre nature of the house is that whatever comes into this house never goes. The poet gives a long catalogue of the various things-and things include even living creatures that came into the house, and got lost there. wandering cows, books in the library, dishes from neighbours, servants, inherited epilepsies, sons-in-law, daughter-in-laws, letters, ideas, beggar's songs, widowed daughter's, nephews killed in the war. In some instances, the poet could be sarcastic when he mentions borrowed books that were never read that are overdue and still in the house. The poet's self – his consciousness- is the theatre in which the history of the ancient family is presented. Nostalgic and comic are the evocations of things that came in to the house and will remain forever. The use of the present tense bears witness to the "presence of the past" in Ramanujan's poetry. The poet also ridicules the "tabooism" about natural things in Indian culture. Example: Cow marrying – girls of the house were carefully protected from this. The poet presents events and persona as he normally does, in his "confessional" way, and looks for roots again. This poem is not merely a criticism by a Brahmin of the very large family in South India. When human beings lose their dignity and identity they are little better than cows, dishes, bales of cottons and gadgets like phonographs. It is interesting to note, however, that of the poem, it can be compared with the greatness of the 'A House for Mr Biswas' written by V. S. Naipaul. The protagonist of Naipaul's novels despises a great house, as Ramanujan puts it. Actually, the great house is an overcrowded house like the Hanuman House in Naipaul's novel. Mrs. Tulsi doesn't allow her sons-in-law to go outside her house. The sons-in-law of Ramanujan are the same as at his Great House. The sons-in-law of Ramanujan are the same as at his Great House.

Sons-in-law who quite forget
their mothers but stay to check
accounts or teach arithmetic to nieces (CP, 96)

There is one thing Hanuman House does not have like Great House: No Mr. Biswas to stir up a rebellion here. We are, however, informed that sons and nephews ‘ran away’ to join the army but unlike Biswas, they do not stay and fight like rebels.

Nissim Ezekiel in his review of Relations mentions Ramanujan's “détachment” in his writing. He is the poet of a poetic sensibility and the subjectivity of India meets the objectivity of the West through his poetry. He is neither a classicist with a twinge of memory, nor a modernist or a westernizer. He is product of both, and his poems reflect a personality conscious of change, enjoying its vitality, freedom and contradictions but also aware of memories which form his inner self, memories of an unconscious “namelessness” which are still alive, at the foundations of the self. He not only tries to establish with the historical and cultural past of his native land but also wants to prove the fact that in the postcolonial and globalized world, the local becomes the center and this center must hold people and its culture, in harmony so as to ascertain a sense of meaning and relevance, a sense of value in our living in the present.

In conclusion, A.K. Ramanujan’s poetry emerges from a continuous dialogue between memory and modernity, homeland and exile, tradition and contemporary experience. Though physically distant from India, he remained emotionally and culturally rooted in its family structures, myths, rituals, and everyday realities. His poems reveal that memory is not merely a recollection of the past but a living force that shapes identity and sustains the self in unfamiliar surroundings. Through family relationships, cultural symbols, folklore, and Hindu mythology, Ramanujan reconstructs an inner world that protects him from alienation and rootlessness. What makes his poetry remarkable is the balance he maintains between affection and irony. He neither blindly glorifies Indian tradition nor completely rejects it; rather, he examines it with intimacy, sensitivity, and critical awareness. His poems transform private memories into universal experiences of belonging, loss, displacement, and emotional longing. The presence of the past in his work becomes a source of continuity and self-recognition in a rapidly changing world. Ramanujan’s poetry ultimately reminds us that cultural belonging is not confined to geography alone. It survives through memory, language, familial bonds, myths, and inherited traditions. His work stands as a powerful expression of the diasporic mind that continues to search for roots while negotiating multiple identities. In this way, Ramanujan secures a distinct place in Indian English poetry as a poet who successfully bridges the local and the global, the personal and the cultural, the remembered past and the lived present.

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