

Addaiyan Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences

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(An international Publisher of Research & Academic Resources)

Journal Homepage : <https://aipublisher.org/projects/ajahss/>

 OPEN ACCESS

ISSN : 2581-8783 (Online)

'Home and Family' for Nourishing A Sense of 'Living and Loving' as Picturized in the Fabric of A. K. Ramanujan's Poetry: An Appraisal

¹DR. S.CHELLIAH, M.A., Ph.D., D. Litt.,

Professor, Head & Chairperson, School of English & Foreign Languages, Department of English & Comparative Literature, MADURAI KAMARAJ UNIVERSITY, MADURAI – 625 021. *Tamil Nadu, India.*

Corresponding Author*
DR. S.CHELLIAH

Article History

Received: 26.07.2019

Accepted: 27.07.2019

Published: 05.08.2019



Abstract: This paper is an attempt to examine A.K.Ramanujan's poetic craft which suggests 'Home and Family' for nourishing a sense of 'living and loving'. This paper portrays the ideas of Ramanujan in that the 'home and family' is a central force that unifies individual and tradition, past and present, emotion and intellect, language and experiences in a way that the resultant harmony speaks of Indian sensibility. Thus Ramanujan's poetry proves that the image of 'home and family' gives a sense of 'living and loving'.

Key words: Sensibility, familial connections, relationship, family, Tradition, complexities.

Indo-Anglian poetry is a distinct offshoot of Indo-Anglian Literature getting rich in the hands of such prominent poets as Henry Derozio, Toru Dutt, Rabindranath Tagore, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Sri Aurobindo, Sarojini Naidu, Nissim Ezekiel, P. Lal, A. K. Ramanujan and so on, who all joined hands in wonderfully expressing the variegated pictures of Indian life, of whom Attipatt Krishnaswami Ramanujan is considered as one of the most

significant of the contemporary Indian poets writing creatively in Kannada and English with the translation of a considerable baby of poetry and fiction from Kannada and Tamil into English. He has to his credit publication of *The Striders* (1966), *Relations* (1971) and *Selected Poems* (1976). A. K. Ramanujan is said to have established his position as one of the most talented of the 'new' poets, when his *The Striders* (1966) got published by the Oxford

University Press. Besides these creative writings, he has translated a good number of works from Kannada and Tamil to English among which the noteworthy are: *Fifteen Poems from a Classical Tamil Anthology* (1965), *The Interior Landscape* (1967), *No Lotus in the Navel* (1969), *Speaking of Siva* (1972) and *Samskara* (1976). His poetry in English has been rather viewed impressively all over the English speaking world fetching him handsome compliments for linguistic ingenuity. The first volume of poetry namely *The Striders* established A. K. Ramanujan as a poet of striking imagery and perfect language with “an eye for the specific physiognomy of an object or situation” (Parthasarathy 95).

Quite evidently, Ramanujan is a poet of concrete details obviously excelling in craftsmanship commenting on this volume as a whole, Prof. K.R.S. Iyengar writes:

‘In *The Striders*, Ramanujan summons
From the hinter land of memory, buried
Moments of suspense, surprise or agony
And turns them into disturbingly, vivid
Poems.... To redeem the doomed” (P
671).

Relations: Poems (1972) was found to be “an even mature achievement, something of a bridge spanning childhood and age, and India and America” (P 672). Most of the poems in this volume are on personal contacts and family

relations. Poems in *Relations*, like ‘Love poem to a wife I’, ‘Love Poem to a Wife II’, ‘of mothers among other things’ and ‘obituary’ have luminous evocations of the poet’s family life. In both Ramanujan’s *The Striders* and *Relations*, poetry thus seems to grow out of Indian experience and sensibility with all its memories of family, local places, images, beliefs and history. While evoking the warmth of traditional Indian life and the closeness of long remembered relationships, more often does he show conflict, arguments, surprise; since he in his conflicting mood remembers his past ties, it will be a fruitful task to look into his familial connections and experiences related to them. Hence, an analysis of Ramanujan’s poems with regard to family relationships seems apt and important.

Family in India has the deepest root in the very cultural pattern itself and so it is a vital concept to be reckoned with. A family is a unit made up of parents and children descending from a man and wife related by blood with common characteristics and having a common source. Philosophers and social analysts have noted that the peculiarities of any society can be described by outlining its family relations. “Society exists only when social beings conduct themselves or behave towards another in terms determined by their recognition-ship of one another” says Dr. MacIver (P6). Social

relationship means a mental inter-change, a mutual awareness of human beings, the sense of something shared in common as the origin of the so-called social behaviour. Thus, society in its strict sense can be defined as a moral union of several persons aiming to attain a common end by the joint action and use of common means and society loses its strength if people fail in their family obligations. For example, Confucius thought that happiness and prosperity would prevail in the society if only everyone would behave correctly as a family member, which primarily meant that no one should fail in his filial obligations. Throughout history, all philosophers, reformers and religious thinkers have been implicitly aware of the importance of family patterns as a central element in the social structure suggesting that the social analyst must understand family behaviour in order to understand social processes generally. The strategic significance of the family is to be found in its mediating function in the large society linking the individual to the larger social structure.

As the family is made up of individuals and part of the larger social network, we are all under the constant supervision of our kin who feel free to criticize, suggest, order, cajole, praise or threaten, so that we will carry out our role obligations. It is through family that the society is able to elicit from the individual his

necessary contribution. Family duties are the direct role responsibility of the members of the society with rare exceptions and each person is kinsman to many people so as to prove the fact that the family is the fundamental instrumental foundation of the larger social structure in that all other institutions depend on its contributions. Thus, in a word, family is a human society in miniature and at the same time, the natural basis of civil society. The purpose of the family is not only to perpetuate the human race but also to establish human relationships. In the words of O. C. D. Victor San Miguel, "The family is the cradle of civil society, and it is largely within the confines of the domestic health that is prepared the destiny of nations" (P 51). Almost all the world's population lives in family units; but the structures or forms vary not only from one society to another but also from one class to another within the same society. Two types of family systems are found largely in any society. One is the nuclear family and the other being the joint or extended family. The nuclear family is a unit composed of husband, wife and their children whereas the joint family is one in which man and his wife live with the families of their married sons, with their unmarried sons and daughters. P. N. Prabhu writes:

"The living members of the family are so to speak, trustees of the house

which belong to the ‘pitrus’, the ancestors, in the interests of the ‘putras’ future members of the family... the central idea is the worship of the family (Kula) as a temple of sacred tradition. (Paranipara)” (P 219).

One of the most important duties of the family members was to keep alive the sacred fire.

Many writers have projected the theme of family in their creative writings. A. K. Ramanujan is one such poet who has focused on the theme of family and family relationship in his poetic world. His poems take their origin in a mind that is simultaneously Indian and Western, they therefore succeed in opening more passage to India. He himself writes:

“English and my disciplines (linguistics, Anthropology) give me my outer forms – linguistic, metrical, logical and other such ways of shaping experience; and my thirty years in India, my frequent visits and field trips, my personal and professional pre-occupations with Kannada, Tamil, the classics and folklore give me my substance, my inner forms, images and symbols.

They

are continuous with each other, and I no longer can tell what comes from where” (Parthasarathy 96)

This may be observed in poems on Indian themes, particularly those about familial life. A. K. Ramanujan finds his objective correlative in the family around him and then shapes his experience into poems that become neat vignettes on family relationships in India. This is so dominant a theme in his poetry that it has led Parthasarathy to remark thus: “The family, for Ramanujan, is one of the central metaphors with which he thinks” (P 189). The appositeness of this comment may be gauged on reading Ramanujan’s epigraph for **Relations**:

“Like a hunted deer
On the wide white
Salt land
A flayed hide
turned inside out
one may run
escape
But living
among relations
binds the feet” (P 2).

This quotation from a classical Tamil Anthology translated by Ramanujan vividly describes the poet’s mind. It reiterates his interest in the familial theme. Both volumes **The Striders** and **Relations** contain poems that narrate episodes involving a member of his family or a relative.

In 'obituary' Ramanujan celebrates the pivotal position of his father in the family; and how in his absence, the house gets deserted. When the father, died, he left 'dusty table; daughters for marriage – daughters are considered to be liability in a Hindu family – and debts, a bed-wetting grandson (named by toss) and the house slanting towards the coconut tree. The scene is immediately shifted to the cremation ground where the father's dead body burns leaving ash for the sons,

“to pick gingerly
and throw as the priest
said facing east
where three rivers meet
near the railway station” (SP 49)

a painful sight is created through the image of the mother. The poet says that by death, his father has left a changed mother and more than one annual ritual. It is customary in a Hindu family that the wife has to accept widowhood by removing the bangles and the vermilion mark from the head and the fore-head, when the husband dies. There are other painful practices and rituals being observed in an orthodox Brahmin's family which bring about a total change in the woman. To be brief, the image of a changed mother not only invokes seriousness in the poem, but also the underlying agony of the poet. The poet cannot exist without his

allegiance to the family bondage. Even his self-portrait cannot exist without being

“signed in a corner
By my father” (SP 9).

It is through the poem 'Self-Portrait' the poet refers to the persona's observations and comments on the Hindu Joint family, particularly its blighting effect on people who live in such families. And also a preoccupation with personal familial memories must lead in the long run to a search for racial roots. The vital connection between the two is clearly suggested in a 'Self-Portrait', in which the speaker declares,

“I resemble everyone
but myself”
and sees in the mirror
“The portrait of a stranger
date unknown
often signed in a corner
by my father ...” (P 9)

Ramanujan's quest for roots not merely takes him to the still centre of home but also to the twelfth century Kannada poet, Basavanna who sang:

Don't make me hear all day
Whose man, whose man, whose man in
this?
Let me hear, 'This man is mine, mine.
this man is mine'
O Lord of the meeting rivers

make me feel I'm a son
of the house..." (speaking of Siva 70)

Ramanujan makes himself feel 'a son of the house' in the corpus of his poetry. He seeks fulfillment amid the members of his family, without forging any breach. He successfully brings out the image of his father as he writes:

"Father sits with the sun flower at the window

deep in the yellow of a revolving chair,
fat, bilious, witty, drawing small ellipses
in the revolving air" (The Striders

29).

It is from this image of his father, Ramanujan has proved that he has an eye for the specific physiognomy of a person whom he reveals with telling detail. Thus, the poems such as 'Obituary' 'On the Very Possible Jaundice of An Unborn Daughter', 'Self-Portrait' offer a sort of commentary on the Hindu family presided over by the fathers with its telescopic relationship. Moreover, they are a good evidence of the poet's assured identity within the family, an identity that must be essential to one, who, having spent his formative years in Southern India has for the past seventeen years lived away from it in the United States. This physical displacement has given a focus to his Indian experience so that the poems emerge as a sort of microcosm of his family history. They are in effect, a microcosm of the Hindu family which has enormously

contributed to the ability and psychological health of the society for centuries and ensured the continuity of a rich traditional culture.

Another poem on the familial theme is entitled as 'Of Mothers, Among Other Things' from *Relations*. It opens impressively and succeeds in achieving a synaesthetic effect. The "twisted back-bone tree" reminds the poet of his mother's charm, beauty and youth. The poet-persona also smells upon the tree the silk and white – petal of his mother's youth. The person, however, does not stay very long with this pleasant impression, but moves quickly to a recollection of his mother's changed state which has little trace of the 'silk and white petal of her youth. He observes:

"Her Sarees
do not cling; they hang, loose
feather of a onetime wing" (SP 22)

The reference to a father follows a bird metaphor.

"But her hands are wet eagles'
two black pink –crinkled feet
one talon crippled in a garden
trap set for a mouse" (SP 22).

Eagle, usually associated with muscularity, here is used as an imagistic representation of his mother. The poet seems to suggest that though the father is the head of the house, he can continue to be so only with the eagle-strength. The metaphor is also suggestive of quickness

and alertness; but in an orthodox family circle, even alertness should remain crippled, just as the eagle whose falcon crippled in a garden trap set for a mouse. In the great mythology, the eagle is a symbol for God, the father or a male figure and in Hindu mythology, the eagle (Garuda) is ‘the Vehicle or *vahana* of the supreme God, Vishnu” (Zimmer 76). And as the poet– person associated as the eagle with the female figure in the above poem, the suggestion might be that after the father’s death, the mother assumes the role of the father. In the poem, ‘Still Another for Mother’ the persona is observer of a scene in London between an aged man and woman. Although he does not know exactly what took place between them:

“Something opened
in the past and I heard something shut
in the future, quietly,
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”
(SP 6).

The image of the conflict between the man and woman, his anger, she pathetically hoping he will forgive her, is projected on his family’s past and perhaps on his own future. The ‘heavy door’ of ‘the black-pillared silent house’, contributes to the sense of marriage as a shutting in of

deadly private quarrels, with the implication that he too has to suffer a similar fate. Probably, this was oft-seen scene in his own home. If the poems of filial bond convey the poet’s frustration and pain, and also the sense of alienation, his poems about love in general and conjugal love in particular seem to be self-analytical, in which the poet subjects himself to a self-scrutiny.

Though Ramanujan’s poetic output is somewhat meagre, it has some really delightful verse of love in it. Ramanujan, with a sharp and modern sensibility deals with love in its various stands. He gives clearly an evidence of having traversed a vast expanse of love–experience and offers a fresh and firsthand account of it. He starts with a statement of the true nature of love, moves through its different aspects- longing, frustration, and despair, infatuation, promiscuity and sensuality and arrives at the secure and sure heaven of domestic love. These different aspects of love are scattered over his two poetical volumes *The Striders* and *Relations*. The poem ‘Two style in love’ is an exercise in the theory of love. Of the two mentioned herein, the first one leads love to decay and death – love’s ‘green’ grows love ‘yellow’. The expressions like ‘your ghost from the branching gallows ‘and’ you will need no help to get to the heap’ tend to reinforce this idea. But the reckless youth still goes ahead and indulges in it, for ‘youth’ sowing of shell

less nut. With the approach of night, love is invited to come, throwing away all scruples. The other style of love, through vented in almost identical phraseology, shifts the emphasis from the horror of death to the inevitability of death and offers consolation that ‘only growing has gold to reap’. Definitions of love seem to abound in the poem. Love is defined as neither hurry, nor burning, nor a fairy tale of bitter and sweet. And also no love is sudden. Even the leaping beast shall wait to be hidden by beauty. These definitions point beyond their shared theoretical utility to the continuity and stability of love. Another love poem by Ramanujan is ‘Still Life’, a slight piece of barely eleven lines but full of longing and despair. After having had her lunch, the beloved has left and the poet-lover has no other means to alleviate his sorrow and frustration but the pretentious ‘reading’ for a while. Her bite of half-eaten sandwich, bread, lettuce and salami is imprinted in the heart of the lover who becomes melancholic. ‘A Rather Foolish Sentiment’ is also a wistful poem bringing out the lovers’ intense passion or longing for love relationship. One of the most delightful love songs of Ramanujan is ‘Looking for a cousin on a Swing’ which highlights the peculiar sensation felt by a young girl of four or five and her cousin of six or seven and their subsequent involvement in promiscuity that is intolerable in a traditional society. The poem ‘I

could have rested’ brings to the core the poet – lover’s distinct restlessness born of his infatuation with a fanciful girl, who keeps on shifting her ground. His disconsolate emotion for her erupts in a fine network of imagery in the poem. The passion raging within him is graphically caught in such glowing image as ‘shotgun pulses’ and ‘patchwork itself’. The latter indicates that he is completely, helplessly hopeless in his lover. Of all the love poems, by Ramanujan, ‘Still Another view of Grace’ is outstanding for its complexity of thought and richness of imagery. In this poem, a conflict of attitudes in the poet’s mind is resolved through an involuntary submission to raging passion. Opening on a dramatic note, it evokes the imagery of a woman standing upon the dusty road on a night lit April mind and surrendering eventually to his hungry passion containing as it does much of the heat and glow of a seasons song:

“I burned and burned.

But one day I turned and caught
that thought

by the screams of her hair” (SP 20)

The most delicate and luminous of Ramanujan’s love poems are to be found in the second volume *Relations*, depicting mainly his family life. As R. Parthasarathy has put it, ‘It does not follow, but when in the Street’, ‘Love poem for a wife I’, ‘Love poem for a wife 2’ and Routine

Day Sonnet' are the fine evocations of love-hated relationship between husband and wife. The seesaw of love-hatred relationship swings into action also in his two love poems for his wife. The first one gives vent to his sense of alienation from his wife due to their 'unshared childhood' as Ramanujan puts it, whereas the second his sense of attachment to her. The ironic twist at the first poem confirms the husband – wife relationship producing a bitter sense of ennui and estrangement between the two. But the mood of irony and bitterness evaporates into this air in the second poem, bridging the emotional and cultural gulf between himself and his wife with a kind of intellectual reproachment. This gulf is also evident in 'Still Another View of Grace' that reconciles the incompatibility of the two through the agency of thought – the one being a Tamil Brahmin and the other being a typical Keralite Christian. This incompatibility gives rise to a complexity of thought and a sophistication of expression in the poem, which is a finished product of his acute

modern sensibility. Finally, Ramanujan in his treatment displays a sort of detachment, a certain puritan attitude to it. In this treatment of love, he is more like R.Parthasarathy among the male poets and like Monika Varma among the female poets of India. His characteristically Brahmanical background of South India possibly restraints him from sexual exploits, and he takes love as an essential biological urge demanding to be gratified.

To conclude, it may be observed that in the fabric of Ramanujan's poetry, 'home and family' remains a central force that unifies the individual and tradition, past and present, emotion and intellect, language and experience in such a manner that the resultant harmony emerging there speaks of the essentially and vitally Indian sensibility. It is in the image of home and family that Ramanujan feels a sense of living and loving, a sense of cleansing himself and a sense of affirmation in facing the essential facts of reality.



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