



**SOUTH INDIAN FAMILIAL BOND IN A.K. RAMANUJAN'S  
POETRY**

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**Abstract:** *A.K. Ramanujan was a distinguished poet of contemporary India who largely concentrated his poetry on his family relations, South India associations, and on India's glorious cultural heritage. His poems on his relations and other descriptions of his native life have traced their origin in his recollections of his childhood memories and personal experiences of South Indian conventions and traditions of life. The typical Indian milieu finds its effective portrayal in his poetry. That's why an attempt is made to trace the influence of his South Indian familial bond in his poetry. Ramanujan's themes suggest that his poems are deeply rooted with the familial bond. He ever remembers his family members and relations with nostalgia.*

**Key Words :** *A.K. Ramanujan, South Indian, Familial Bond, Native Life, Recollection of his Childhood, Nostalgia, Picture of Hindu Joint Family, Deep Personal Emotions , Poetic Themes , Different from Others.*

A.K. Ramanujan was a distinguished poet of contemporary India who largely concentrated his poetry on his family relations, South India associations, and on India's glorious cultural heritage. He spent greater part of his life in the U.S.A. He was a scholar, poet, playwright and some of his best work consisted of translating from Kannada and Tamil into English. He had the first hand experience of India's history and tradition. His poems reflected his memory of his relations and evocations of family life in his native country. This fact was well observed by Bruce King when he observed it as, "His Indianness is part of his past, he is inextricably linked to it as he changes and develops."<sup>1</sup>

Ramanujan was born in Mysore in 1929 and was educated at D. Bhanumaiah's High school and then at Maharaja's college, Mysore. He was a fellow of Deccan College, Poona in 1958-59 and a full bright scholar at Indian university in 1960-62. He worked as a Lecture in English Literature in Quilon. He joined the University of Chicago in 1962 as a teaching faculty member. He worked there for many years. He died in 1993. Thus he stayed away from South Indian environment. But his poetic sensibility had essentially South Indian and his experiences

were deeply rooted in the life of South Indian culture. The life that was portrayed in his poetry was based on his memory of his native experiences and about his family. His evocations on the personal and family life, were well said by M.K. Naik as, "on the personal plane, this insistent preoccupation with the poet produces a poetry in which memory plays a vigorous, and a creative role."<sup>2</sup>

His poems on his relations and other descriptions of his native life have traced their origin in his recollections of his childhood memories and personal experiences of South Indian conventions and traditions of life. The typical Indian milieu finds its effective portrayal in his poetry. That's why an attempt is made to trace the influence of his South Indian familial bond in his poetry. Six of his poems are taken into consideration. Four from his anthology Relations Poems (1971) and two from his Collection Striders (1966) are taken.

'Of Mother', Among other things is taken from Relations Poems (1971). Here Ramanujan yearns nostalgically for his, mother. He remembers that, in her youth she is very delicate like the silk and white petal of a flower. He also remembers that there are three diamonds in her earnings and they splash handful of bright rays like needles. He has

recollections about her running to the cradle if the baby cries. His mother grows old and with age she becomes lean and her saris have hung loose round her. Looking at her pathetic condition the poet turns very emotional by saying,

“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 floor.”<sup>3</sup>

"Love Poem for a Wife 1" is taken from *Relations Poems* (1971). The poet feels that there is emotional alienation between his wife and himself at the end of so many years of married life. He tries to analyse the cause of this alienation and feels that the reason is unshared childhood. The poet remembers a number of memories about his wife's and about his own past. The poet remembers about a midnight gossiping that occurred when their cousins had met together. That time they had brandy, cashews as their family elders were not present. She showed interest to know of his past and he envied of her village dog rides in her childhood days and the stories of her seven crazy aunts. She was curious to learn about his childhood from the anecdotes of his family members and in the albums. She was amused to know how noisily his father bathed and slapped soap on his back. And he was pleased to see the wedding photo of his parents, father in a turban and mother standing on her bare feet wearing silver rings on her second toes. The poet feels, her father now in his old age would act the wickedness of no reminiscence of her youth's evenings when she came late after her date with a Muslim friend. That time her late return made her father restless but she felt the date innocent. Then the poet remembers an incident that happened only two weeks ago. She and her brother James started a fight about the location of a bathroom in their grandfather's house in Alleppy. As they discuss the matter and draw the blue prints of a house on newspapers and back of envelopes the poet and his sister in law were completely neglected. The poet now realizes that to

enter into another's past life is not possible and he tries to analyse the cause of this alienation between them. He feels that sharing of childhood experiences is necessary and he suggests two alternatives. One is the Egyptians method, the example of Egyptians who married their own sisters. The other one is ancient Hindu custom i.e., children were betrothed even before their birth. In both the cases sharing of childhood experiences is possible. Thus the poet ironically concludes the poem and he feels that the problem remains the same even at the end, but the poem is noted for its sincere portrayal of realistic theme and its authentic treatment.

The poem *Small Scale Reflections on a Great House* is again from *Relations Poems* (1971). The poet is in a nostalgic, reminiscent mood about his ancient house. The poet remembers the old house and he feels that the things that once come into the house never go out. Things come in everyday and get lost among other things that have come into it long ago.

Then follows a list of catalogue of things that come into the house from outside to stay forever wandering cows come into the house and they were encouraged to become pregnant in the day light under the supervision of the elders. Even the girls in the family watched it through holes in the windows, hiding behind. Library books are brought in to the house. As they are neither read, nor touched and dusted, insects begin to lay a row of eggs in the ledgers so as the silverfish breed dynasties of eggs among long legal words. Neighbours dishes with the greasy sweets are brought in by them for the wedding anniversary of a god. They never leave the house as they are never returned. The servants, the phonographs, the epilepsies in the blood, once they come in, never go back. A tragic issue is added with the mention of the disease epilepsy which runs in the blood of the family members.

The sons-in-law of the house forget their mothers and stay in the house to check accounts are to teach arithmetic to nieces. The women who come as daughters in law to the house stay in this ancient

home forever. These are all things that stay. There are other things that go out but return to this house. Hooped bales of cotton are shipped off to invisible Manchester but come back in the form of clothes with long bills attached to these dresses. Thus cotton goes out but comes in the form of cloth, like this letters which are mailed are redirected to this great house as they are not delivered due to wrong addresses. And Ideas behave like this and come back to the house like children born to prodigal fathers. A beggar song also stays in the house for the song is sung by the servant in the backyard. Daughters who get married return to the house as they are widowed. Sons who runaway as boys come back to the house in the form of grand children and they perform some duties in the house. They recite Sanskrit to old men in the family, bring betel nuts for visiting uncles who tell them anecdotes of their unseen fathers. They also bring Ganges water in a copper pot for the last stages of life of ancestors. Lastly the poet says rarely a nephew who has won military honours for his service in the army returns to the house in the form of dead body as he has been killed in the war.

This is the true picture of a Hindu joint family. But the poet turns the ordinary things into unique expressions. The poem reveals Ramanujan's intense yearning for his family and his ancient home. In his memory everything revives and it is presented to the readers with a touch of pathos. This fact has been well observed by Mosam Sinha when he feels the same about the poet as, "one may run, escape. But living among relations binds feet. In several of his poems, family and familial relations find effective poetic treatment.... Family in fact is a spring board to project his varied viewpoints, philosophical and psychological. It is used to perceive continuity, a major poetic preoccupation in his poetry."<sup>4</sup>

The poem Obituary is also from Relations Poems (1971). The poet expresses his deep personal emotions and it deals with the memory of his father. The poet says when his father passed away, he left

his family dust on a table full of papers, debts, daughters, a bed wetting grandson and an old house that leaned on a coconut tree. His father was the burning type and had been burnt properly at the cremation. The ashes of the dead body were thrown by the sons as per the instructions of the priest at a location where three rivers met near the railway station. The poet said that his father's birth happened to him through a caesarian surgery in a Brahmin ghetto, a place where poor Brahmins lived and his death occurred to him by heart failure in the fruit market. The poet also said that he had been told by someone that his father got two lines in an inside column of a madras newspaper. And the poet started reading old newspaper cones which were used to pack items like salt, coriander and jaggery. in the hope of finding these obituary lines. The poet at the end of the poem added to the list of things their father left for them two more legacies i.e. a changed mother and one annual ritual to be performed. Here the poet's tone turned ironic but the poet had shown his love for his father and his grief about the death of his father.

Looking for a Cousin on a Swing is from Ramanujan's first anthology The Striders 1966. This poem deals with the poet's memory of a cousin who has been play-mate in his childhood. When she is four or five years of age, her cousin six or seven, they used to sit against each other on a swing. At that time she feels very happy with the movements of the swing. After swinging they used to climb a tree, not very tall but full of leaves like a fig tree and they were innocent children at that time. After some years, living in a distant place from their home town, she looks for the swing innocently in cities with fifteen suburbs. The poet implies that with age she too has turned fat and it looked that she will burst into a brood of scarlet figs even with the least provocation like a sudden sneeze.

The poem 'A River' is from Ramanujan's anthology of poem 'The Striders' (1966). The river, celebrated in the poem flows through Madurai i.e., the river Vaikai. The poet says that Madurai is the

city known for temples and poets. and the poets sang of cities and temples. The poet describes the river in summer with the use of vivid visual images.

“Straw and women's hair  
Clogging the water gates  
At the rusty bars”<sup>5</sup>

The poet complains that no one sang of the dry river. The poet of his day are indifferent to human suffering and these dry images suggest the dryness of the poets. But, Ramanujan has a specific poetic process with which he describes the indescribable things and scenes so vividly. This truth is well said P.K.J. Kurup when he says about the process as, “such a poetic process not only helps him to achieve a remarkable precision and subtlety in describing the indescribable but also helps his poetic self, preoccupied with the desire to discover his roots, to catch the subtle nuances of the vibrations of his Hindu sensibility.”<sup>6</sup>

The poets of the day sing only of the floods, without caring for the suffering human beings. They seek poetic subjects like full river, but they are not particular about the suffering it causes. He informs about the real experience in the village. When the river floods, it is not all poetic. it carries away village houses, cattle and a woman. The new poets still

quote and follow the old tradition of old poets and sing only of floods. But no one has spoken about the loss it causes. Here the poet exposes the callous attitude of both old and new poets, their indifference to suffering. The poet refers to the report of a person who is there in the village when they have the floods. He remarks about the river as,

“it carries away  
in the first half-hour  
three village houses,  
a couple of cows  
named Gopi and Brinda  
and one pregnant woman  
expecting identical twins  
with no moles on their bodies,  
with different-coloured diapers  
to tell them apart.”<sup>7</sup>

Thus the destruction caused by the river in flood has deep effects on the life of the villagers, Thus Ramanujan's themes suggest that his poems are deeply rooted with the familial bond. He ever remembers his family members and relations with nostalgia. R.Parthasarathy aptly says in this connections as. "The family, for Ramanujan, is in fact one of the central metaphors with which he thinks."<sup>8</sup>

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