

## **FAMILIAL METAPHOR IN THE POEMS OF A.K. RAMANUJAN WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO *OF MOTHER AMONG OTHER THINGS & OBITUARY***

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Ramanujan's poetry emanates from his desire to come to terms with himself against the background of expatriation and alienation from his native land. He lived in the U.S.A. but he never forgot his family members in as he hovered between two lands that of his birth and that of his work and domicile. He accepted both without abandoning one for the other. The use of personal experience, and especially the inner world of memories and the continuities and discontinuities of with the past, can be seen as the basis of many of Ramanujan's poems. He was called a family man because his writing is personal but not autobiographical, arising from his own life and experiences. His poetry is confined to only a few but well defined subjects and themes, with delicate overlaps. These are familial situations and relations, the American experience, and memories of home, the Hindu classics, mythology and tradition, anxiety and fear self –search and self definition and about the relation of birth and death. In poem personal and familial secrets have been disclosed.

Thus 'family' functions as a metaphor in Ramanujan's poetry for India, for the values in which he was raised for his entire viewpoints of life. He uses the family in his poetry more deeply and thoroughly than any other poet had, because his mind seems to be perpetually busy probing the areas of strength and weakness of the Hindu heritage this is perhaps because he was not in India; therefore the poems emerge as a sort of microcosm of his family history. The idea of family is Ramanujan's own choice of the title for his second volume of poems *Relations* in 1971. In his poems the past integrates into the present and the presents into the unknown future. His poetry shows how an Indian poet in English can derive strength from going back to his roots. In the poem *Of mother among anything* he remembers his mother and presents deep attachment for her mother during the different stages of her life. In *Obituary* the poet presents a picture of his father he remembers all his living moments.

A. K. Ramanujan's substantial contribution to the growth and development of Indian poetry in English has always been duly recognized. He is certainly one of the greatest masters of English language among the Indo-Anglian poets. His poems develop from his own life. He uses personal emotion, feelings and experiences in his poems. Thus his poetry is personal but not autobiographical because he does not give detail description about himself. Instead, his past is distance from his present through irony. He remembers his past through his relatives and through his own personal experiences of life. A past connected with south India as a whole. Ramanujan's

significance lies in his successful writing with fusion of an essential Indian sensibility, with acutely felt temper of modernity. While in the U.S.A. he always missed his family and his motherland. He was physically there but his soul was in India. That was the main reason of his familial poems.

#### **FAMILY IN A.K.RAMANUJAN'S POETRY:**

Most of his poems, are based on his family life .He had lived in a joint family in India and in his poems the typical Indian joint family is well represented. John Jones writes about the Indian joint family system:

It requires an ideal family, under the on e strong guidance of an ideal head, to live in peace and harmony under this sustem. union is strength.( qtd. in shinde 112)

This means that he frequently examines the merits and demerits of the joint family as compared with the nuclear family that is more frequently found in the cities today. The poet realize that the joint family imparts a sense of belonging that is absent in the nuclear one, and being an expatriate Indian himself he often turns to the ideals of the joint family to rediscover his roots. That is why all the members of his family and many of his other relatives are present in his poetry.

'Family' is the central metaphor in the poems of A.K.Ramanujan because his poems creates a bond between past, present, and future and for the ways in which all his life is interrelated .Past is the source of inspiration in much of Ramanujan's poems. As Parthasarathy remarks:

In a traditional family the constituents members are lineal descendants as well as collaterals within three, and at times even four degrees of relationship. Economic help refuge in situations of crisis ,the upbringing of children are form of the benefit offered by joint family .The family is for Ramanujan , one of the central metaphor with which he thinks.  
(qtd in chindhade 66)

In fact, the family for Ramanujan represents the poets response to the world. Most of his poems are based on his memories of family and his relations. As has been mentioned earlier, although he had lived in U.S.A. for more than two decades in an environment, which was totally different from his roots, his tradition and his culture, that alien culture and tradition had not affected his soul. In poem after poem he writes about his own life in and with his family. This becomes particularly important for him as an inevitable condition. The strong family bonds in India are well known and established and are almost invariably used as a contrast to the alienation in contemporary alienated society. Chindhade quotes from K. Raghavendra Rao about five types of alienation in Ramanujan:

(i)Fundamently a Brahmin , he feels increasingly separated from an emerging secular, modern society.(ii) he faces linguistics alienation.(iii)he is formally trained in a non- literary culture(in the U.S.A.) But now pushed in to the literary realm.(iv) His stay in the states has caused a physical alienation (v) and perhaps, there is the universal sense of alienation that sensitive person experions in a world in which human relationship are falling apart.

(qtd.in chindhade 64)

*Of mother, among other things* uses the plural form for through his portrait of his own mother, a traditional South Indian lady who is dedicated to her family, the poet suggests what being a mother means, and the quality that all mother share. As is well known, mother have a very special position within the Indian family in particular, and mother and sons traditionally share a very close bond.” The mother has always been through the initial biological closeness between her and the child, the focus of warmth and affection. She symbolizes the integration of the family” [shinde110].in this poem Ramanujan displays his impressions of his mother, his responses to her, during the different stages of her life. Living as he does in the different stages of her life. Living as he does in the far-off U.S.A., he remembers her and yearns for her. The poem begins with these lines:

I smell upon this twisted  
 backbone tree the silk and white  
 Petal of my mother’s youth  
 From her ear rings three diamonds [1-4]

The poet’s mother in her youth was beautiful and delicate like the “silk and white” petals of a flower, the adjectives in the metaphor emphasizing these qualities. He remembers that there were three diamonds in her ear-rings that sparkled brightly like needles splashing out rays of bright light, which was very beautiful. Diamond ear-rings and nose-pins were traditionally, and often still are, worn by south Indian married woman as a sign of their wedded state.

She was young and beautiful then, but her concern was always for her children .He remembers how she was always thinking and worrying about them whenever they cried. In his memory:

[...] I see my mother run back  
 From rain to the crying cradles.  
 The rains tack and sew  
 With broken thread the rags  
 Of the tree tasseled light. [6-10]

From one point of view the life-giving rain that is invariably welcomed in Indian homes, and described in much traditional Indian Nature-poetry and Bhatia poetry as a sign of the renewal of life and the symbol of romance. But the rains here are more than that. The poet personifies the rains as a mother image mending—tacking and sewing –whatever is torn and spoilt in her children ’s garments and toys ;the light outside is tasseled with trees, and is in rags, which the rains help to knit together. Thus his mother becomes, part of Nature’s own forces for renewal and nurturing, especially in the way the word-picture of the rains working with the light brings to mind the rays of light that had emanated from the mother’s ear –rings.

But the rains may also be a symbol of the rain of years or of misfortunes which come with come with the passing of time to one and all. His mother too loses her youth and beauty with burdens that come too soon with the years. She grows old and withered. Her hands became wrinkled through age and hard work like “a wet eagle’s two black pink –crinkled feet” [11-12, emphasis added], in fact like misshapen talons:”one talon crippled in a garden –trap set for mouse ‘[13-14]. The water that could once have been a symbol of renewal has now become the water that prevents her from soaring , just as a wet eagle cannot fly high in the sky .She becomes thin with age and weariness and instead of clinging to her saris hang around her: ‘They hang loose feathers of a onetime wing ”[15-16] This image immediately sums up what time has done to her .she was a bird –like creature who could fly wherever she wanted ,an eagle who could ascend to unseen heights . But now her wings lie unused and unusable, the feathers coming out.

The image attributes a birdlike delicacy, a fleeting character to the existence of the mother. And draws a poignant contrast between what she was and what she could have become on the one hand and what has happened to her on the other. The poet's anguish is clear as he sees her old age, grown weak and helpless; what had once helped her to raise high above ordinary have now turned into the signs of her impending end. Just as the eagle's injured can no longer catch mice, her fingers are stiff and only four of them can be flexed to pick up 'a grain of rice from the kitchen floor' with difficulty [20]. The adjective 'still' [19] that lies between 'four' [18] and 'fingers' [19] seems to have a double meaning: only four of her fingers can still move, and that her fingers are now still that once used to move so easily.

The eagle image is an interesting one, for as a bird of prey it is usually associated with violence and terror. It is traditionally the king of the birds, and as such in all cultures a male figure. As Chevalier and Gheerbrant put in their Dictionary of symbols, "The eagle, too is the primitive and collective symbol of the father and of all father-figures" [Chevalier and Gheerbrant 323]. In Indian mythology, the eagle is Garuda, the Vahana of Vishnu, and as such "the symbol of strength, courage and penetration [...] by reason of the sharpness of its sight" [Chevalier and Gheerbrant 325]. That is very Chinhade say: Ostensibly the image of the eagle does not seem to go well with the fleeting, delicate, fragile personality. The eagle is being a powerful huge bird of prey; the sense of violence also seems to strike a note of disharmony as it clashes with the affectionate protective nature of mothers" [Chinhade 68]. But Ramanujan associates the eagle with the female figure—the mother, the symbol of the feminine—in this poem. This could be because the eagle is also traditionally endowed with special powers that remove it from earthly constraints, and because its keen eyesight resembles the way the mother looks after the children. Another possible reason could be that eagles are supposed to have the power of regaining their youth by exposing themselves to the sun. This is an ironic contrast to what happens to the mother, all mother, in fact, in Ramanujan's poem. The mother's transformation saddens the poet, and dries up within him the joys of life:

My cold parchment tongue licks back  
In the mouth when I see her four  
Still sensible fingers slowly flex  
[...]of rice from the kitchen floor.[17-20]

The whole poem is an expression of the strength of the mother-son relationship that security even when the son himself is old. It suggests that security and fear are the two predominant emotions of the poet's attitude towards his mother. In this poem, through the use of vivid visual images the poet has shown readers what his mother was like during the different stages of her life, youth, middle-age and old age, as well as his own deep anguish and nostalgic yearning for and for his own lost childhood, when his mother had seemed unchangingly young and untouched by time.

*Obituary* is about the death of Ramanujan's father. It depicts middle-class life in the context of the mail-dominated Indian family; in which the father is the major figure, who burdens him with all responsibilities in the family. Things come to a standstill with his passing away. He leaves a changed wife, because she has become a widow, and daughters whose marriages become difficult to arrange now that they are fatherless. The liabilities are left for the sons to be settled and the little grandsons growing against this setting.

An *Obituary* is an account of the life, career and achievements of a dead person as published in newspapers and other media. When the poet's father died he left his children nothing except dust on a table full of papers, debts that they would have to repay and daughters

left to get married, a sickly bedwetting grandson named after him, and an old, decaying house, which is like the bent coconut tree in the yard. He also left them ashes and the two coins with which his eyes had been closed when he was on the funeral pyre.

Being the burning type,  
He burned properly  
At the cremation (8-14)

Bhatnagar remarks of the image of the bent coconut tree:

The process [of life and death] continues as naturally as a coconut tree bends with the passing of years. The old house leans on the death and cremation of the father, the Indian life cautious meaningfully through rituals. The rhythm of continuity is maintained. (Bhatnagar M.K. 78)

The poet says his father did many things, but actually he did not do them; rather, they happened to him. He is born through a Caesarean operation in a slum where poor Brahmins lived, and dies of heart failure in a fruit market. Nobody remember him except and grieving poet. Ramanujan was known to be particularly attached to his mother, but this poem also shows his real love for his father. His feeling of loss is tellingly conveyed by the way he describes reading old newspapers in the hope of finding in them even two lines about his father, which, he has been told, were published in a Madras newspaper:

In an inside column  
Of a madras newspapers  
Sold by the kilo  
Exactly four weeks later  
To street hawkers. (37-42)

The irony and apparent detachment behind these lines underscores, instead, the poet's sorrow and sense of bereavement.

The death of the father, as the head of the family, affects everyone. Above all, his mother has now 'changed', for she has had to divest herself of the signs of being a married woman. Not only does she dress differently, she obviously feels and thinks differently. This is one more thing that he has bequeathed his children:

And he left us  
A changed mother  
And more than  
One annual ritual. (49-56)

Das writes, "Ramanujan may lack the feminist aggressive overture but exposes the preconceived gender disparity with unusual honesty and uprightness" (qtd. In Pandey 96).

Clearly, then, it is the rootedness in one's own culture and relatedness to one's family and people that offer emotional stability to Ramanujan. Every poem of his bears testimony to the presence of the past, the vital relationship with people, with family, culture language and country. Many of the poems in *relations* focus on his individual relationships and their lasting effect on his poetic consciousness. Some of them assert and privilege his relationships with the immediate family members.

## Conclusion

The 'family' is the central metaphor in Ramanujan's poetry because it acts like a bridge between his alienated present and the values that he was raised in, although he is not necessarily nostalgic about the past, nor uniformly idealizes family values. Relationships are the very important part in

human life without them human being can not be complete. This is what Ramanujan's beautiful poetry about the family emphasizes. In the poem *Of mother among other things* the traditional image of a mother as a symbol of patience, endurance and self-sacrifice is written large in the poem. She is the one who integrates the family together. She was once young and beautiful, but her concern was always for her children.

In *Obituary*, Ramanujan presents a realistic picture of his father who had no control over his Brahminical birth and over his death in the fruit market because of heart attack. The poem suggests the fact that one does not live in obituaries in print nor the lines on the head stone. Attempts of this kind belong to more or less a western method of documenting and preserving the memory of the dead. The Indian way is more human and warm as it involves more than one annual ritual and the renewal is more than more reminiscence. It is the rootedness in one's own culture and the relatedness to one's family and people that offers emotional stability to Ramanujan.

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