

Classic Poetry Series

A. K. Ramanujan
- poems -

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A. K. Ramanujan(16 March 1929 - 13 July 1993)

Attipate Krishnaswami Ramanujan (Kannada: ?????????? ?????????????? ??????????) (Tamil: ?????????????? ?????????????????? ??????????) also known as **A. K. Ramanujan**, was a scholar of Indian literature who wrote in both English and Kannada. Ramanujan was a Indian poet, scholar and author, a philologist, folklorist, translator, poet and playwright. His academic research ranged across five languages: Tamil, Kannada, Telugu, Sanskrit, and English. He published works on both classical and modern variants of these literature and also argued strongly for giving local, non-standard dialects their due.

Childhood

He was born into an Iyengar(Brahmin) family in Mysore City on 16 March 1929. His father, Attipat Asuri Krishnaswami, a professor of mathematics at Mysore University and an astronomer, had a study crammed with books in English, Kannada. and Sanskrit. The house was alive with ideas. On summer nights, the children gathered on the third floor terrace while their father pointed out and explained the constellations. Sometimes at dinner, the children listened intently as their father translated for their mother the stories of Shakespeare and other Western classics into Tamil.

Ramanujan's mother was an orthodox Brahmin woman of her time, limited by custom in the scope of her movement and control, in this way a typical housewife. Though she was no intellectual practitioner, she was neither typical nor limited in her learning and imagination. She was widely read in Tamil and Kannada, and comfortable in the world of ideas.

These were the parents who gave Ramanujan the telling metaphor of father language and mother tongue that enlightens much of the analysis found in the essays of this book. By the time his father died, when Ramanujan was only twenty, the older man had already helped shape his son's devotion to an intellectual life.

As a youth, Ramanujan was perplexed by his father's seemingly paradoxical belief in both astrology and astronomy: how could one man blend the rational and irrational in this way? Curiously, Ramanujan chose magic as his first artistic endeavor. While in his teens, he had the neighborhood tailor fashion him a coat fitted with hidden pockets and elastic bands in which he concealed rabbits and bouquets of flowers. With added accoutrements of top-hat and wand he performed for local schools, women's groups. and social clubs. The desire to be a

magician was perhaps a strange use of the insight he gained from his father's quirky belief in the irrational.

 Education

He was educated at Marimallappa's High School and Maharaja College of Mysore. In college, Ramanujan majored in science in his first year, but his father, who thought him 'not mathematically minded', literally took him by the hand to the Registrar's office and changed his major from science to was a Fellow of Deccan College, Pune in 1958 - 59 and Fulbright Scholar at Indiana University in 1959 - 62. He was educated in English at the Mysore University and received his Ph.D. in Linguistics from Indiana University.

 Career

Having been a lecturer in English at Quilon and Belgaum, he taught at The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda for about eight years. In 1962, he joined the University of Chicago as an assistant professor, where he was affiliated throughout the rest of his career, teaching in several departments. However, he did teach at several other U.S. universities at times, including Harvard, University of Wisconsin, University of Michigan, University of California at Berkeley, and Carleton College. At the University of Chicago, Ramanujan was instrumental in shaping the South Asian Studies program. He worked in the departments of South Asian Languages and Civilizations, Linguistics, and with the Committee on Social Thought.

In 1976, the government of India awarded him the honorific title Padma Shri, and in 1983, he was given the MacArthur Prize Fellowship (Shulman, 1994). In 1983, he was appointed the William E. Colvin Professor in the Departments of South Asian Languages and Civilizations, of Linguistics, and in the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago, and, the same year, he received a MacArthur Fellowship.

As an Indo-American writer Ramanujan had the experience of the native milieu as well as of the foreign milieu. His poems like the "Conventions of Despair" reflected his views on the cultures and conventions of the east and the west.

A. K. Ramanujan died in Chicago, on July 13, 1993 as result of adverse reaction to anesthesia during preparation for surgery.

 Contributions to South Asian Studies

A. K. Ramanujan's theoretical and aesthetic contributions span several disciplinary areas. In his cultural essays such as "Is There an Indian Way of Thinking?" (1990) he explains cultural ideologies and behavioral manifestations thereof in terms of an Indian psychology he calls "context-sensitive" thinking. In his work in folklore studies, Ramanujan highlights the intertextuality of the Indian oral and written literary tradition. His essay "Where Mirrors Are Windows: Toward an Anthology of Reflections" (1989), and his commentaries in *The Interior Landscape: Love Poems from a Classical Tamil Anthology* (1967) and *Folktales from India, Oral Tales from Twenty Indian Languages* (1991) are good examples of his work in Indian folklore studies.

 Controversy Regarding His Essay

His 1991 essay "Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translations" courted controversy over its inclusion in B.A., History syllabus of Delhi University. It was included in 2006. In this essay, he had written about existence of many versions of Ramayana and a few versions portrayed Rama and Sita as siblings, which contradicts the popular versions of the Ramayana, such as those by Valmiki and Tulsidas.

ABVP a student wing of BJP opposed its inclusion in the syllabus, saying it hurt the majority Hindus' sentiments, who viewed Rama and Sita as Gods and were husband and wife. They demanded the essay be scrapped from the syllabus. In 2008 Delhi High Court directed the Delhi University to convene a committee to decide on the essay's inclusion. A 4-member committee was formed, which subsequently gave its verdict 3-1 in favour of inclusion in the syllabus.

The academic council however, ignored the committee's recommendation and voted to scrap the essay from its syllabus in Oct 2011. This led to protest by many historians and intellectuals, and accused the Delhi University of succumbing to non-historians' diktat.

A River

In Madurai,
city of temples and poets,
who sang of cities and temples,
every summer
a river dries to a trickle
in the sand,
baring the sand ribs,
straw and women's hair
clogging the watergates
at the rusty bars
under the bridges with patches
of repair all over them
the wet stones glistening like sleepy
crocodiles, the dry ones
shaven water-buffaloes lounging in the sun
The poets only sang of the floods.

He was there for a day
when they had the floods.
People everywhere talked
of the inches rising,
of the precise number of cobbled steps
run over by the water, rising
on the bathing places,
and the way it carried off three village houses,
one pregnant woman
and a couple of cows
named Gopi and Brinda as usual.

The new poets still quoted
the old poets, but no one spoke
in verse
of the pregnant woman
drowned, with perhaps twins in her,
kicking at blank walls
even before birth.

He said:
the river has water enough

to be poetic
about only once a year
and then
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.

A. K. Ramanujan

Astronomer

Sky-man in a manhole
with astronomy for dream,
astrology for nightmare;

fat man full of proverbs,
the language of lean years,
living in square after

almanac square
prefiguring the day
of windfall and landslide

through a calculus
of good hours,
clutching at the tear

in his birthday shirt
as at a hole
in his mildewed horoscope,

squinting at the parallax
of black planets,
his Tiger, his Hare

moving in Sanskrit zodiacs,
forever troubled
by the fractions, the kidneys

in his Tamil flesh,
his body the Great Bear
dipping for the honey,

the woman-smell
in the small curly hair
down there.

A. K. Ramanujan

Chicago Zen

I

Now tidy your house,
dust especially your living room
and do not forget to name
all your children.

II

Watch your step. Sight may strike you
blind in unexpected places.

The traffic light turns orange
on 57th and Dorchester, and you stumble,

you fall into a vision of forest fires,
enter a frothing Himalayan river,

rapid, silent.

On the 14th floor,
Lake Michigan crawls and crawls

in the window. Your thumbnail
cracks a lobster louse on the windowpane

from your daughter's hair
and you drown, eyes open,

towards the Indies, the antipodes.
And you, always so perfectly sane.

III

Now you know what you always knew:
the country cannot be reached

by jet. Nor by boat on jungle river,
hashish behind the Monkey-temple,

nor moonshot to the cratered Sea
of Tranquillity, slim circus girls

on a tightrope between tree and tree
with white parasols, or the one

and only blue guitar.

Nor by any
other means of transport,

migrating with a clean valid passport,
no, not even by transmigrating

without any passport at all,
but only by answering ordinary

black telephones, questions
walls and small children ask,

and answering all calls of nature.

IV

Watch your step, watch it, I say,
especially at the first high
threshold,

and the sudden low
one near the end
of the flight
of stairs,

and watch
for the last
step that's never there.

A. K. Ramanujan

Elements Of Composition

Composed as I am, like others,
of elements on certain well-known lists,
father's seed and mother's egg

gathering earth, air, fire, mostly
water, into a mulberry mass,
moulding calcium,

carbon, even gold, magnesium and such,
into a chattering self tangled
in love and work,

scary dreams, capable of eyes that can see,
only by moving constantly,
the constancy of things

like Stonehenge or cherry trees;

add uncle's eleven fingers
making shadow-plays of rajas
and cats, hissing,

becoming fingers again, the look
of panic on sister's face
an hour before

her wedding, a dated newspaper map,
of a place one has never seen, maybe
no longer there

after the riots, downtown Nairobi,
that a friend carried in his passport
as others would

a woman's picture in their wallets;

add the lepers of Madurai,
male, female, married,
with children,

lion faces, crabs for claws,
clotted on their shadows
under the stone-eyed

goddesses of dance, mere pillars,
moving as nothing on earth
can move &mdash

I pass through them
as they pass through me
taking and leaving

affections, seeds, skeletons,

millennia of fossil records
of insects that do not last
a day,

body-prints of mayflies,
a legend half-heard
in a train

of the half-man searching
for an ever-fleeing
other half

through Muharram tigers,
hyacinths in crocodile waters,
and the sweet

twisted lives of epileptic saints,

and even as I add
I lose, decompose,
into my elements

into other names and forms,
past, and passing, tenses
without time,

caterpillar on a leaf, eating,

being eaten.

A. K. Ramanujan

Extended Family

Yet like grandfather
I bathe before the village crow

the dry chlorine water
my only Ganges

the naked Chicago bulb
a cousin of the Vedic sun

slap soap on my back
like father

and think
in proverbs

like me
I wipe myself dry

with an unwashed
Sears turkish towel

like mother
I hear faint morning song

(though here it sounds
Japanese)

and three clear strings
nextdoor

through kitchen
clatter

like my little daughter
I play shy

hand over crotch
my body not yet full

of thoughts novels
and children

I hold my peepee
like my little son

play garden hose
in and out
the bathtub

like my grandson
I look up

unborn
at myself

like my great
great-grandson

I am not yet
may never be

my future
dependent

on several
people

yet
to come

A. K. Ramanujan

On The Death Of A Poem

Images consult

one

another,

a conscience-

stricken

jury,

and come

slowly

to a sentence.

A. K. Ramanujan

Prayers To Lord Murugan

1

Lord of new arrivals
lovers and rivals:
arrive
at once with cockfight and banner—
dance till on this and the next three
hills

women's hands and the garlands
on the chests of men will turn like
chariotwheels

O where are the cockscombs and where
the beaks glinting with new knives
at crossroads

when will orange banners burn
among blue trumpet flowers and the shade
of trees

waiting for lightnings?

2

Twelve etched arrowheads
for eyes and six unforeseen
faces, and you were not
embarrassed.

Unlike other gods
you find work
for every face,
and made
eyes at only one
woman. And your arms
are like faces with proper
names.

3

Lord of green
growing things, give us
a hand

in our fight
with the fruit fly.
Tell us,

will the red flower ever
come to the branches
of the blueprint

city?

4

Lord of great changes and small
cells: exchange our painted grey
pottery

for iron copper the leap of stone horses
our yellow grass and lily seed
for rams!

flesh and scarlet rice for the carnivals
on rivers O dawn of nightmare virgins
bring us

your white-haired witches who wear
three colours even in sleep.

5

Lord of the spoor of the tigress,
outside our town hyenas
and civet cats live
on the kills of leopards
and tigers

too weak to finish what's begun.

Rajahs stand in photographs
over ninefoot silken tigresses
that sycophants have shot.
Sleeping under country fans

hearts are worm cans
turning over continually
for the great shadows
of fish in the open
waters.

We eat legends and leavings,
remember the ivory, the apes,
the peacocks we sent in the Bible
to Solomon, the medicines for smallpox,
the similes

for muslin: wavering snakeskins,
a cloud of steam
Ever-rehearsing astronauts,
we purify and return
our urine
to the circling body
and burn our faeces
for fuel to reach the moon
through the sky behind
the navel.

6

Master of red bloodstains,
our blood is brown;
our collars white.

Other lives and sixty-
four rumoured arts
tingle,

pins and needles
at amputees' fingertips
in phantom muscle

7

Lord of the twelve right hands
why are we your mirror men
with the two left hands

capable only of casting
reflections? Lord
of faces,

find us the face
we lost early
this morning.

8

Lord of headlines,
help us read
the small print.

Lord of the sixth sense,
give us back
our five senses.

Lord of solutions,
teach us to dissolve
and not to drown.

9

Deliver us O presence
from proxies
and absences

from sanskrit and the mythologies
of night and the several
roundtable mornings

of London and return
the future to what
it was.

10

Lord, return us.
Brings us back
to a litter

of six new pigs in a slum
and a sudden quarter
of harvest

Lord of the last-born
give us
birth.

11

Lord of lost travellers,
find us. Hunt us
down.

Lord of answers,
cure us at once
of prayers.

A. K. Ramanujan

Self-Portrait

I resemble everyone
but myself, and sometimes see
in shop-windows
despite the well-known laws
of optics,
the portrait of a stranger,
date unknown,
often signed in a corner
by my father.

A. K. Ramanujan

Still Life

When she left me
after lunch,I read
for a while.
But I suddenly wanted
to look again
and I saw the half-eaten
sandwich,
bread,
lettuce and salami,
all carrying the shape
of her bite.

A. K. Ramanujan

The Black Hen

It must come as leaves
to a tree
or not at all

yet it comes sometimes
as the black hen
with the red round eye

on the embroidery
stitch by stitch
dropped and found again

and when it's all there
the black hen stares
with its round red eye

and you're afraid.

A. K. Ramanujan