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A bittersweet longing for the past: Familial metaphor in

A.K. Ramanujan's poetry

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Abstract: Ramanujan's poetry places a great emphasis on family themes. He spent greater part of his life in America, but he never lost sight of his familial roots in India. The joys and perils of living in a joint family in India are fittingly described in his poems. He remembers his family members from childhood till adulthood, which includes his wife and kids too. There is a range of emotions that runs through his poetry which is sometimes sarcastic, sometimes resentful, but always longing for the old times. The present paper discusses some of his poems that contain 'family' as the central focus.

Keywords: Ramanujan, family, nostalgia, emotions.

Ramanujan is a poet of metropolitan sensibility, but his poems are collected in personal emotion. His poetry is filled with references of his family members – mother, father, grandmother, wife, sister, aunt and so on. According to Parthasarathy, "The family is, for Ramanujan, one of the central metaphors with which he thinks." Ramanujan remembers his family with a bittersweet feeling. He tends to remain detached while narrating his childhood experiences and his relations with his family members. He doesn't celebrate or romanticize family; rather he depicts it as an institution which has its flaws and imperfections. He loves his family and loathes it too. He is the witness of constant struggles, conflicts, and violence that brews in his family. Many devices such as irony, caricature and sarcasm are deployed by him to mock his family relations and lay bare their pretty struggles and unnecessary insecurities.



Ramanujan has his moments of abhorrence while recounting his family, but all these memories are tied to his familial past without any “haunting sense of loss” (K. Raghvendra Rao, “Reverse Romanticism, 64). His family poems are not alike, rather they depict his mixed feelings towards its members and the family as a whole. The complexity of his feelings makes his family a “matter of pride and denigration (Kumar 197) in the same breath. He reconstructs the family and slowly deconstructs it too. Thus in “Obituary”, the father is the patriarchal head of the family but after he dies, he becomes the source of detestation as:

he left us
a changed mother
and more than
one annual ritual

(TCP 111)

Not only does he discover in him the hereditary traits of his entire family, he also ponders over the similarity of his traits with his unborn great great grandson's. The poet draws the “lineage of his self in terms of various eccentricities he inherits from the dead and the unborn in his extended family (Kumar 71). In “Extended Family”, poet persona says that grandfather endowed him with the habit of bathing “before the village cow” and his father endowed him with the habit of slapping soap on his back while bathing.

Sometimes finding such resemblances overwhelms the poet persona as he says, “I resemble everyone/ but myself” (Self Portrait, TCP 123). The self in Ramanujan constantly beleaguers under the burden of its inescapable foregrounding the family tree (Kumar, 107). The hereditary traits are not celebrated in the construction of the self. Much of these traits are the source of physical disorders or instabilities, thus they are loathed. The genetic code of the family in no way endows him with flattering and beneficial traits. The poet persona perceives himself to be stuck in the evil sphere of the unpleasant traits that he has inherited from the members of his family. In “Saturdays”, he somehow holds his mother responsible for the pain in his fingers:



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The two fingers you learned to pop
on your sixth birthday
crook and ache now,
like mother's on her sixtieth

(TCP 150)

The toothache of the poet persona reminds him of his mother just before her death:

The large tooth in my left jaw
aches; it's mother again
complaining of the large tooth
in her left jaw
the week before she died

(TCP 259)

In "Ecology", the poet persona holds contempt for the Champak trees because they give "one line of cousins/ a dower of migraines in season". Diseases like epilepsies are transferred from grandfather to the poet persona's uncle:

Epilepsies go to an uncle
to fill him with hymns and twitches

("Drafts", TCP 158)

The peculiarities and the diseases that he inherits "lend a distinct familial stamp on the individual self of the poet persona, even though they may be utterly undesirable" (Kumar 68).

The poet persona is indignant regarding his identity because it is always strangled by his father. He vehemently desires his own identity but some realizations leave him utterly displeased with his father:

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.

(“Self Portrait”, TCP 23)

In “Obituary”, the poet persona considers his father worthless individual while he talks about his demise and its aftermath. The absence of any emotion while he remembers his father explicitly depicts his long term attachment with him. The tone is bitterly ironic when he mentions that how his father, who was a Professor of Mathematics, got only “two lines” of obituary in a local newspaper, and that too, in its “inside column”, which mostly gets unnoticed (“Obituary”, TCP 111-112).

Contrary to the valuable property and legacy that fathers normally bequeath to their children, the poet persona’s father:

left dust
on a table of papers,
left debts and daughters,
a bedwetting grandson
named by the toss of coin after him

(“Obituary”, TCP 111-112)

The “sardonic sarcasm” (Shinde 109) is evident in the portrayal of the father in the above lines. Such portrayal of the father is also shown in the way his funeral is described:

Being the burning type
he burned properly



at the cremation

(“Obituary”)

The use of phrase “burning type” suggests the anger stuffed inside the poet persona’s mind, which doesn’t let him utter even a few words of praise or eulogize him a little at his father’s demise. His resentment towards his father increases because his death affected the dearest person to him (poet persona) – his mother:

And he left us
a changed mother
and more than
one annual ritual

(“Obituary”, TCP 111-112)

The poet persona’s relationship with his wife is of disharmony and discord. He doesn’t believe in the sacred institution of marriage according to the Hindu belief. One of the reasons of his emotional estrangement from his wife is the differences in their cultural background. The poet persona feels that both of them have negligible knowledge about each other’s past and culture, and it directly hinders any trace of emotional ties between them:

Really what keeps us apart
at the end of years
is unshared childhood

(“Love poem for a wife 1”, TCP 65)

The poet persona and his wife try to familiarize themselves with each other’s childhood through family anecdotes, but he still feels the essential strangeness lingering in between them. to him, the passionate and affable relationship between his wife and her brother seems to stem out of the common childhood they have shared. He feels that he is a mere “blank cut out” in her life. The poet persona “is so thoroughly disgusted with the hypocrisy of adult marriage (Kumar 81) that he wouldn’t disapprove to “continue the incests/ of childhood into marriage” (TCP 67). Thus, he



suggests and approves the obsolete Egyptian practice of marriage without any hesitation. His hatred for adult marriage and its forced nature takes him to the extent of even approving the ancient Hindu practice of child marriage:

Betroth us before birth,
forestalling separate horoscopes
and mother's first periods,
and wed us in the oral cradle
and carry marriage back into
the namelessness of childhoods

(TCP 67)

Such retrogressive ideas coming out of a well educated man as Ramanujan explicitly present his disbelief in the practice of forced adult marriage. One of the reasons Ramanujan considers wife as an outsider is his genealogical construct. In the poem "Extended Family", right from "grandfather" to unborn "great great-grand-son", everyone endows a particular legacy to the formation of the poet persona, "the conspicuously missing link space is wife" (Kumar 81).

The cultural dissimilarities and the "unshared childhood" constantly remind him of the distance between him and his wife. Similar to the Love poems 1 and 2, "Love poem for a Wife and her Trees" is also about "the exploration of the differences between the couple" (King, Three Indian Poets 111). He again mentions the pain of unshared childhood when he compares his wife to an exotic plant which "inhibits my space/ but migrates/to Panamas of another/childhood" (TCP 182).

The relationship that Ramanujan shares with his mother is one of warmth. It defies the view that he is emotionally barren, as it seems while analyzing his relationship with other family members. The poet persona seems to have developed a strong attachment to his mother due to the pull of the umbilical cord. "The cord is a kind of hanger that engenders in him a sense of belongingness and attachment right from the embryonic stage onwards" (Kumar 74):



A fetus in an acrobat's womb,
ignorant yet of barbed wire
and dotted lines
hanger - on in terror of the fall
while the mother - world turns somersaults
whirling on the single bar

(“Alien”, TCP 149)

The poet persona depicts a moving image of his mother in “Of Mothers, among other things” (TCP 61), where she has lost all the radiance of her youth due to her deep indulgence in the domestic life. This lends a genuine flavor of Indianness in the depiction of mother-who is an epitome of patience and sacrifice. She never complains of any uneasiness while taking care of her family:

her hands are a wet eagle's
two black pink - crinkled feet,
one talon crippled in a garden-
trap set for a mouse. Her sarees
do not cling: they hang, loose
feather of a onetime wing.

(“Of Mother, among other things”, TCP 61)

Her devotion to domesticity and running the dull household chores has left her no time to pamper herself. As a result she has grown so weak and thin that her “sarees/do not cling: the hang” (TCP 61). Ghosh says that Ramanujan presents the ‘archetypal image of mother as a symbol of patience, endurance and self sacrifice.’

Despite having a strong emotional attachment and a deep reverence for his mother, the poet persona doesn't idolize her as flawless and unerring. She is depicted as a normal human being who is prone to making mistakes, and believes in superstitions. In “Ecology”, he rages over the presence of Champak trees in her home whose “yellow pollen” give his mother “her first blinding



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migraine/of the season” (TCP 124). Though the tree causes immense suffering to the mother every year, she doesn’t let it cut down due to her religious beliefs. To a person of metropolitan sensibility like Ramanujan, his mother’s innocent adherence to traditional customs and rituals seems absurd. Thus he playfully ridicules her when she asks him to take “oil bath/ every Tuesday” (“Farewell”, TCP 77) while bidding him farewell.

There are no exclusive poems for a sister but she is mentioned in few of them. From what one analyzes, the relationship of the poet persona with his sister reeks of incest. There is no such feeling of brotherly warmth and the innocent love towards her. In “Snakes”, he looks at his sister’s braid and says:

Sister ties her braids
with a knot of tassel.
But the weave of her knee - long braid has scales
their gleaming held by a score of clean new pins
I look till I see her again

(TCP 5)

“The braids remind the persona of glossy snakes that crowd his unconscious as archetypal images of deadly sensuality and surreptitiously sexual motives. In women centric folk tales, snakes are often lovers or husbands” (Kumar 86). This reminds us of the favourable attitude of the poet persona towards the Egyptian practice of marriage inside the family and also the retrogressive Hindu practice of child marriage in “Love Poem for a Wife 1”.

In “Looking for a Cousin on a Swing”, the relationship between the poet persona and his female cousin is again incestuous:



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When she was four or five
she sat on a village swing
and her cousin, six or seven,
sat himself against her;
with every lunge of the swing
she felt him
in the lunging pits
of her feeling

(TCP 19)

The poet persona shares a warm relationship with his grandmother whom he fondly calls “granny”. Like the universal relationship between a grandmother and grandson where the grandmother is the reservoir of ancient tales and interesting stories, the poet persona shares the same bond with his “granny”. His grandmother is so adept at narrating stories of princes and princesses, that he urges her to tell him the story of ‘The Sleeping Beauty’, once again.

Granny,
tell me again in the dark
about the wandering prince,
and his steed, with a neem leaf mark
upon his brow, will prance
again to splash his noonday image
in the sleep of these pools

(TCP 17)

The way Ramanujan reminisces about his grandmother depicts “a prominent streak of sentimentalism in his otherwise detached sensibility” (Ghosh 80). While we see such sentimental



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feelings of Ramanujan towards his grandmother, they are negated by his cold attitude towards an incident of violence against her:

Said my granny, rolling her elephant leg
like a log in a ruined mill;
'One two three four five
five princes in a forest
each one different like the fingers on a hand,
and we always looked to find on her pan
just one finger left of five: a real thumb,
no longer usual, casual or opposable after her husband's
knifing temper one Sunday morning half a century ago
(“The Opposable Thumb”, TCP 6)

The unemotional and off handed tone while remembering his grandmother's huge loss indicates that how lightly he weighs his relationships with his close ones. Not once does he shudder at the thought of his grandmother bearing an unbearable pain, as normal grandsons would do.

The poet persona is afraid of being a father, because being a parent means fulfilling a lot of responsibilities and bearing continuous burdens. Therefore he thinks that he should not give birth to children, because this world is a continuous struggle to survive:

Poverty is not easy to bear
the body is not easy to wear
so beware, I say to my children
unborn, lest they choose to be born.

(“Excerpts from a Father's Wisdom”, TCP 42)



The poet persona tends to over think when he fears that his daughter will inherit jaundice in the form of legacy that their ancestors have bequeathed to them. This fear comes out of his own experiences wherein he has inherited some to most unwanted and minutest details from his ancestors. Thus he fears that his father sitting “with the sunflower at the windows/deep in the yellow of a revolving chair” and “daffodils that flaps all morning in grandma’s hands” (TCP 14) will eventually lead his “unborn” daughter to have “yellows in the whites of her eyes”.

Being the father of a grownup daughter also scares him because of the perpetual concern for her safety in an unsafe environment. The violence and unspeakable crimes against girls make the poet persona shudder at the thought of his daughter being out of the home alone:

Sudden knives and urchin laughter
in the redlight alley
add now
the men in line
behind my daughter

(“Entries for a Catalogue of Fears”, TCP 86)

The poet persona’s attitude towards his aunts is full of disgust and aversion. This seems due to an incident that he witnessed in childhood where he saw the aunts robbing their mother of the precious jewels and gold immediately after her death:

her two
daughter, one dark and fair,
unknown each to the other
alternatively picked their mother’s body clean
before it was cold
or the eyes were shut



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of diamond ear rings,
bangles, anklets, the pin
in her hair,
the toe rings from her wedding
the previous century,
all except the gold
in her teeth

(“History”, TCP 108)

The extent to which the aunts got to fulfill their avarice is utterly shameful. The poet persona thus despises the immoral and unprincipled act which also leads him to believe that families are not perfect.

The above poems reflect the unbearable stamp of family on Ramanujan’s psyche. He remembers his family with utter nostalgia though he is not proud of every familial anecdote. The reminiscences of his past life find adequate expression in his family poems.

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