



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 13. Issue 1. 2026 (Jan-March.)

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

The Problem of Poetic Craft and Technique in A. K. Ramanujan's Poetry: A
Study of Selected Poems

Dr. Aktar Islam

P.G.T. (English), Upgrade High School, Malhariya, Baisi, Purnia, Bihar, India
Email: aktarislam6@gmail.com

[doi: 10.33329/ijelr.13.1.295](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.13.1.295)



Article information

Article Received:03/03/2026
Article Accepted:25/03/2026
Published online:31/03/2026

Abstract

A.K. Ramanujan is one of the most prominent Indo-American poets. He was born in Mysore city (presently Karnataka) on 16th March 1962. He was not only a poet but also linguist, philologist, translator and playwright. He is truly a born poet who has given a new direction to the poetry along with other Indian poets viz. Nissim Ezekiel, Dom Moraes, K.N. Daruwalla, Jayanta Mahapatra, R. Parthasarathy and so on. He is bi-lingual, having written both in his native Kannada and English. His poetry is largely autobiographical and thought-provoking. In Ramanujan's selected poems, the careful arrangement of words, vivid imagery, and subtle irony create a unified artistic effect. Poems like *The Striders*, *A River*, *Conventions of Despair*, *Prayers to Lord Murugan*, *Small-Scale Reflection on a Great House* and two love poems for his wife 1 and 2 and *Obituary* illustrate how personal memories and cultural experiences are transformed into universal poetic expressions. Through contrast, symbolism, and controlled structure, Ramanujan presents tensions between tradition and modernity, family and individuality, and memory and reality. The significance of Ramanujan's poetry lies primarily within its textual richness and artistic (poetic) craftsmanship rather than external interpretations.

Keywords: Indo-American, Bi-lingual, Irony, Symbolism, Paradox, Memories, Craftsmanship.

Among expatriate Indian English poets, A.K. Ramanujan enjoys a unique reputation by virtue of his distinct approach to complex problems of roots and exile from the land of his birth and education. Critics too are divided in their interpretation of his poetry. Among foreign critics, William Walsh regards him as a 'conservative Indian', lacking objectivity and detachment but Bruce King praises him for striking a balance between two opposite attitudes viz. nostalgia and adjustment for dignified survival. In a revealing interview, he has words like 'outer form' and 'inner form' for his English studies, and interest in linguistic and anthropology and his professional and personal engagement with Tamil and Kannada classics and folklores and his frequent visits to his native land. However, he shares his dilemma with a number of post-independent poets viz. Nissim Ezekiel, Dom Moraes, K.N. Daruwalla,

Jayanta Mahapatra and R. Parthasarathy who came of mixed cultural background and had the advantage of travelling abroad and benefiting from the Modern English and American poetry. However, as Parthasarathy, a fellow Tamilian poet, has rightly observed, "In no other before Ramanujan is such a scrupulous concern with language. He has been able to forge an oblique, elliptical style all his own..... It is an attempt to turn language into artifact". (Parthasarathy 195-196) Everyone has praised his technical competence but a question of 'Indianness' and 'intellectual thinness' or lack of double vision has sometimes been raised.

Without entering into any polemics, I would like to discuss some of his key poems to demonstrate that he was turned his experience of living abroad and settling there into memorable verse. His dilemma has been well-expressed by R. Parthasarathy: "There is something to be said for exile/you learn roots are deep". Even in his early poetic volumes *The Striders* (1966) and *Relations* (1971), there is an aesthetic tension caused by the experience of negotiating two diverse cultures, two different peoples and environments. While his Indian roots are deep enough to fade away, his long stay in the West (U.S.A., Chicago) has left its indelible imprint on his mental-make and personality. But since the publication of third volume '**Second Sight**' (1986) to his posthumous volume '*The Black Hen*' (1993), finally published in a single volume '*Collected Poems*' (1995). With a preface by Kritika Ramanujan, one finds that his poetic culminates in a constant exploration of the dichotomy between body and soul, resulting in the disintegration of body and natural world and eventual triumph of spiritual wisdom and cultural heritage.

I would like to analyse for the present source of his representative poems from the early phase and the later phase in order to chart the poet's maturity of vision and technical skill (imagery, irony, human paradox etc.). The poems selected are "The Striders, A River, Conventions of Despair, Prayers to Lord Murugan, Small-Scale Reflection on a Great House and two love poems for his wife 1 and 2 and Obituary". (Ramanujan v-x)

To begin with the first poem *The Striders*, this poem shows the poet's wit and satiric observation on the self-styled, pretentious miracle men. This poem informs us that the striders is American (New England Region) name for the water insect (water bug) he actually puns on the word 'bug' which means at once an insect and a cheat. The poem impressed by its wit:

No, not only prophets
walk on water. This bug sits
on a landslide of lights
and drowns eye-
deep
into its tiny strip
of sky. (Ramanujan 3)

While reading these lines, one is invariably reminded of Dryden's and Dr. Johnson's comments on the Metaphysical poets of England. However, it shows the promise and potency of a rising poet, but also an inadequacy or a kind of chanciness (Prof. Nagrajan's chanciness).

The poem *A River* is however, more successful. The poet here refers to the river Vaikai which flows through Madurai, well-known holy city in South India, the seat of Tamil culture. However, the poet draws our attention to the callousness of poets of Tamil Nadu both old and new, for ignoring the suffering of the people caused by floods in the river. The poet describes in detail the erratic behaviour of the river. In every summer, the river dries to trickle the poet's interest in the travails of the people

and the destructive role of the river, causing deaths and damaging property. The poet takes the insensitive poets for being sentimental and laudatory about the river as preserver:

The river has water enough
to be poetic
about only once a year. (Ramanujan 39)

He shows how the swollen river during rainy season causes devastation, carries away “three village houses, a couple of cows named Gopi and Brinda and one pregnant woman expecting identical twins.....”. This kind of sardonic wit shows the poet’s realistic observation and sharpness of visual imagery. The poet is ironical and critical of regional poets for their sentimental romantic attitude to a river known for its reputation as seat of culture and reverence. The variations in the lines is an added charm of the poem.

As for the poem “Prayers to Lord Murugan”, it tells a direct relation to Hindu way of observing ritual. It is dedicated to lord Murugan, the ancient Dravidian god of fertility, joy, youth, beauty, war and love, having six faces and twelve hands. The poem is a long one, consists of eleven stanzas. The poem has lyrical rhythms and flow. The poem belongs to group of poems which show his preoccupation with Hindu myths and legends and various gods and goddess. This is how the poem invokes the lord Murugan:

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. (Ramanujan 116)

The poet prays to Lord Murugan to restore the glory of Dravidian people in a language of incantatory verse rhythm:

Lord, return us.
Bring 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. (Ramanujan 117)

The poem is at once a detailed catalogue of Tamilian cultural rituals and its ancient glory. The poet takes pride in the glorious poet of Tamils and their gifts to people. The poem ends on a positive note:

Lord of lost travellers,
 find us. Hunt us
 down.
 Lord of answers,
 Cure us at once
 of prayers. (Ramanujan 117)

In short, his long poem is a tribute to the poet's poetic skill in involving the glory of Tamils for their regeneration.

As for Conventions of Despair, this poem from *The striders* (1966) confirms our belief that despite his ironic stance in the early phase of exile, Ramanujan has not served his association with India. He rather frequently resorts to his native themes and roots among Hindu religion. He begins with an assumption that one must behave in Rome as Romans do. Following this adage, he is expected to ape the mannerism of the present-day Americans in the name of Modernity and shortness but he begs to differ and in a very remarkable stanza he bursts out:

But, sorry, I cannot unlearn
 convention of despair.
 They have their pride.
 I must seek and will find
 My particular hell only in my Hindu mind: (Ramanujan 34)

In fact, the poet records the inner tensions of an emigrant on living his country. In fact, he is expected to belong, to adjust, to follow and imitate the manner of the new country like a responsible citizen. But it is easier said than done. The poet has obviously learnt his lesson for the sake of a bright future of 'ideal tomorrow' and 'the theory of peacock-feathered future' but the inner voice cries out: 'No, no, give me back my archaic despair'. Once again, this poem is typical of self-dramatization (the inner-outside syndrome) and the success of the poem lies in recreating those moments of conflict and agony in a convincing manner. Expression like 'strippers at the Tease', 'a psychoanalyst', 'Marginal Man', 'Hell in my Hindu mind' and 'archaic despair' are powerful images and expression.

Small Scale Reflections on a Great House is another wonderful poem from the pen of A. K. Ramanujan. It narrates and assimilates the good and bad elements of a traditional Hindu family. It is often said that a great poem presents the horror and the glory of an intensely experienced emotions and joys and pains of life. From that yard's tick, it is gem of a poem. In a joint Hindu family, we have the advantage that it accommodates all kinds of people and is warns towards all kind of guests, neighbours, relatives, sons-in-law, wives coming from poor families, daughters married to worthless dull wits, sons returning into grandchildren and nephews killed in the war on borders. This certainly is a redeeming feature of old joint family system but on the negative side, it results in sloth, irresponsibility, slackness and many dirty habits viz. delay sent books from libraries and detain neighbour dishes. The poem is a brilliantly successful in bringing alive the various positive and negative features of aristocratic life.

"Sometimes I think that nothing
 that ever comes out into this house

goes out". (Ramanujan 96)

But in fact, many unpleasant realities also come out in a very singular effects by employing speech rhythm, clinches and slangs without any inhibition.

Finally, the poem **Obituary** along with two **Love poems for his Wife** (I and II) complete the picture. His love poems for wife show the genuine difficulties of appreciation of adjument for the bride coming a different background in learning the chores of domestic duties. But in my mind, 'Obituary' is even better to already stated, in many early poems, **The Strides** (1966) and **Relations** (1971) Ramanujan creates an impression of a split personality, a man of divided loyalties and often creates impression of another version of Eliot's Prufrock, a neurotic or psychic case. In **Obituary** he uses the device of ironic homage beautifully and in critical of his father's legacy which left him with debts and liabilities:

Father when he passed on

Left dust

On a table, full of papers

Left debts and daughters. (Ramanujan 111)

It is certainly a kind of left-handed compliment to his departed Brahim who could not inspire the sun when he was alive. Even after his death, he created problems for him and lost respect and cultural tribute. The poet uses an ironical language for the father's failure in mismanaging his life and passed on the legacy of failure to his son. In a very witty image 'the fed-wetting grandson', he refers to repetition of the same story as well loss of traditional value. This is suggested through the image of a leaning house. The end of the poem is equally significant. The poet refers to the funeral rites of the departed father but he clearly shows that presently the sons are just paying a lip service and are not liberated either emotionally or intellectually. This is very wittily suggested by the indifference of the members of the society. The poet learns about the death of his father from some outsider through a news item in 'an obscure column of a Madras newspaper,' which has been ironically sold to 'a street hawker'. Four weeks ago. Incidentally, the mother and the wife image recur in Ramanujan's poetry.

In short, Ramanujan's poetry is an example of blend of wit, paradox, memoirs, myths and images and symbols and they bring out his struggles to accommodate, liberate and reconcile the various extractions of human experiences in a convincing language.

References

Ramanujan, A. K. (1995). *Collected poems*. Oxford University Press.

King, B. (2013). *Modern poetry in English*. Oxford University Press.

Parthasarathy, R. (1977). How it strikes a contemporary: The poetry of A. K. Ramanujan. *Osmania Journal of English Studies*, 13(1).

Walsh, W. (1973). *Readings in commonwealth literature*. Oxford University Press.

Iyengar, K. R. S. (2014). *Indian writing in English*. Sterling Publishers.