

Chapter-III

Poetry, a revelation of the mysteries of life

“Poetry is more philosophical than history, for poetry deals with universals, history with particulars” (Preminger. 1975. 615) enunciates Aristotle, who feels that every poet is a philosopher and it is philosophy, which remains in the background of his mind, directing his mood and shaping his poetry. The eminent Romantic poet of the nineteenth century, P.B.Shelley declares, “Poets are philosophers of the very loftiest power” (Preminger. 1975. 616), and that “poetry is the center and circumference of all knowledge” (Preminger. 1975. 616-617). “Philosophy first, and poetry, which is its highest outcome, afterwards” (Hudson. 1910. 94), articulates Robert Browning. The poet is a ‘legislator’ and his poetry communicates a philosophy. In the opinion of Lowell, “no poem ever makes me respect its author which does not in some way convey a truth of Philosophy” (Ibid). For the critics in all ages, poetry is an utterance of philosophy, a vehicle of philosophic truth, evincing the poet’s attitude towards life and cultural heritage.

A.K.Ramanujan too, is explicitly a philosopher as his poetry expounds philosophy and takes us to the core of the Hindu heritage. That he has made Indian philosophy a part and parcel of his poetry and assimilated the essence of the Upanishads could be seen when we study his poetry vis-a-vis philosophy, and religion, providing “Sweetness and Light” (Arnold. 1961. 43) to his poetry. He offers us philosophy in the fashion of poetry which, being transfigured by imagination and feeling, is wrought into a true poetic experience. A philosophic insight renders his poetry a richness that is rare.

Being a profound philosopher, Ramanujan explores in his poetry the nature of the human body, and its relation to the phenomenal and the natural world. The poet like William Wordsworth acknowledges the bond between man and nature. Nature, to him is not a great machine as is held by the poets of the eighteenth century; but a being with a soul, linked inevitably with the human soul. One is at once reminded of Shelley's poem "To Jane: The Recollection", where he writes:

A spirit interfused around,
 A thrilling silent life;
 To momentary peace it bound
 Our mortal nature's strife; ...¹

For Wordsworth "the source of man's moral and spiritual growth is to be found in all the external forms of nature" and that "nature acts upon the whole of man's personality" (Cowell, 1973, 64) as nature moulds feelings and directs them through proper channels:

... of all that we behold
 From this green earth; of all the mighty world
 Of eye, and ear, -both what they half create,
 And what perceive; well pleased to recognize
 In nature and the language of the sense
 The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
 The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
 Of all my moral being.²

Ramanujan, on the contrary, looks at the union between human body and nature from a different angle. While exploring the human body and nature nexus in the poem

“Towards Simplicity”, he presents the body as a natural mechanism, a structure, which consists of:

Corpuscle, skin,
 cell, and membrane,
 each has its minute seasons
 clocked within the bones. (CP: 37)

Wordsworth believes that between man and nature there is a ‘mutual consciousness’, and a ‘spiritual communion’. Ramanujan also points, at the intimate ‘relationship of co-ordination’ between body and nature. Unlike Wordsworth, who establishes soul-to-soul relationship between man and nature, Ramanujan, on the other hand, presumes that the body’s internal seasons resemble the external seasonal cycles. He holds the body in high esteem because the mind, which possesses a unique power, dwells in the body and hence, transcends the domain of nature. “Since external nature thus controls our internal organic processes and mechanical properties from beginning to end, it completely ‘contains’ our bodily lives”³.

Everything in our environment has to be recycled. Ramanujan is aware of this principle of conservation and, therefore, he regards man as a part of nature. Like an environmentalist, he admits that the human body is “entirely natural, is contained in nature, and returns after death, or ought to return, to nature”⁴. In “Towards Simplicity” he writes:

From the complexity
 of reasons gyring within reasons,
 of co-extensive spring and autumn,
 into the soil as soil we come, (CP: 37)

Even in “Death and the Good Citizen”, he writes:

Good animal yet perfect

citizen, you, you are

biodegradable, you do

return to nature: ... (CP: 135)

This intimate relationship between nature and human body is reflected in the Bible:

... : for dust thou art,

and unto dust shalt thou return.⁵

The Speaker, in the poem, "In March," lying in a sick bed completely unaware of his physical self and surrounding, feels the entire natural world—continents, oceans, dolphins, icebergs, island, seashores, rivers, alligators, forests and birds circulating inside his body. He is thus assured that not only the body is contained in nature, but also the whole of nature seems to have its co-existence in the human body.

Man, being an integral part of the natural world, is the very 'life of her life'. This identification of man with nature reminds us of Shelley, who, while lamenting the death of John Keats in "Adonais", identifies Keats with nature:

He is made one with nature: there is heard

His voice in all her music, from the moan

Of thunder, to the song of night's sweet bird;

He is a presence to be felt and known

In darkness and in light, from herb and stone,

Spreading itself where're that Power may move

Which has withdrawn his being to its own;

Which wields the world with never-wearied love,

Sustains it from beneath, and kindles it above.⁶

In the poem "A Meditation", Ramanujan associates himself with nature. As he enters a trance he visualizes his ageing body as a black walnut tree toppled over by a storm, whose planks are used to fashion a table and a chair and other parts of the tree to produce writing paper. While using the various products of the tree in every day life, he imagines himself sitting.

... in this chair,
 paper and pencil on my table,
 and as I write

I know I'm writing now on my head,
 now on my torso, my living
 hands moving

on a dead one, a firm imagined body
 working with the transience
 of breathless

real bodies. (CP: 239)

He, therefore, affirms that like Wordsworth's Lucy, he too simply "Rolled round in earth's diurnal course, / With rocks, and stones, and trees" and be 'naturalised' in due course.

Ramanujan visualizes a close affinity between man and nature. In "Love Poem for a Wife and Her Trees", he draws an analogy between the human body and a tree. He cherishes the metaphorical notion that bodily reproduction occurs on the 'branches' of a 'family tree' and that the human spinal cord is like a tree-like formation:

... : your spinal cord
 will wither—

that stem of all senses, that second tree
 with the root at the top, branches branching
 in limb and lung,
 down to toe, hangnail, and fingertip. (CP: 181)

The comparison is heightened as he co-ordinates these trees with an apple tree, which corresponds to the tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden. Thus, "the relation between body and nature becomes an instance of the trope of metonymy, which equates trees with bodies and bodies with trees"⁸.

As the poet proceeds further to investigate the body-nature relationship, he opens 'an old anatomy book' "where/pictures in flesh tones/unfold a human body, layer/under layer," (CP: 184). The human body, with its constituents appears to him nothing, but "a map/of the heavens" (CP: 185). The solid body of flesh and bone contains the largely empty, mineral heavens and the human body can be substituted for the insect or animal body in nature. The human body keeps up a natural rhythm, which one can discern in the vegetable and mineral worlds.

While exploring the body-nature link, the poet, apprehends the eternal truth that death is the supreme reality in life. Death, the indomitable, ingests not only the human body but annihilates the entire order of the animate nature. Birth, copulation and death occur not only in the human domain but also in the natural world. "The clock that ticks inside the natural mechanism of any living body is also the clock ticking away in the natural world outside, and it is the nature of this universal clock to tick inexorably towards the terminal irony of death"⁹.

Ramanujan, though confronted with the new culture in Chicago, however, does not yield to the temptation of the west, but remains steadfast in his traditional faith. As we

read his poems, we experience that his poetic self attempts to establish a link between himself and his Hindu past. The Gita and the Upanishads nourish his poetic imagination and some of his poems unfold the mysteries of life.

While plunging deeper into the abyss of Hinduism, he feels that the 'Hindoo' possesses a 'Second Sight' – a privileged vision. This "first, and only, sight" (CP: 191) is the "natural direct vision of reality through the five senses, the vision with which we are born before it is corrupted by doubts, ideas, false learning and other mental processess ..." (King. 1991. 82-83).

Stepped in the Hindu ethos, Ramanujan's 'Second Sight' penetrates the veil of the world of illusion and perceives the family tree from where he comes in. He describes this family tree as

... those topsy

turvy trees

with their roots in heaven

and branches in the earth. (CP:180)

Does not this tree resemble the Tree of Life, the cosmic tree, "asvattham" (peepal tree) as alluded to in the Gita, which is imperishable having its roots above and branches below? "As the tree originates in God, it is said to have its root "above"; as it extends into the world, its branches are said to go "downwards"" (Radhakrishnan.1993.326). This world tree as referred to in the Kātha Upanishad is eternal and rooted in Brahma:

Its roots is above, its branches below –

That eternal fig-tree!

That (root) indeed is the pure. That is *Brahman*

That indeed is called Immortal.

On it the worlds do rest,
 And no one so ever goes beyond it.

This, verily, is That!"¹⁰

The root is the radiant and constant Brahman, the Supreme. All the worlds find refuge in Him and none can overcome Him. He is indestructible, the changeless reality and the source of all life and all living beings originate in the Brahma.

The three "Hindoo" poems expounding the teachings of the Gita reveal the fact that Ramanujan's Hindu sensibility is always operating in his conscious mind and thus provides strength for his poetry. "A Hindu to His Body" throws light on the concept of body and soul as preached in the Gita. "The soul", as is said in the Gita chapter two, verse twenty, "is never born, nor does he die at any time, nor having (once) come to be will he again cease to be. He is unborn, eternal, permanent, and primeval. He is not slain when the body is slain" (Radhakrishnan. 1993. 107). The Gita thus celebrates the triumph of soul over body. Ramanujan asserts that when the body is killed, the soul is liberated. Hence, his existence is not completely wiped out. A body may die but his soul may live on forever:

... a mere odourless soul,
 a see-through man-shaped hole

 in the air, a late lamenting ghost
 looking in vain for an empty seat

 at the full house of your posthumous
 fame where you can see but not hear

 the rain of applause, the jangle
 of medals on the breast of your happy

unhappy widow ... (CP:71-72).

In the poem "A Hindu to His Body" Ramanujan regards the body as important as the soul. He addresses the body as "a pursuing presence" because "the soul is reborn time and time again, every time rejecting the old body and assuming a new one: hence pursuing" (Chindhade. 1996. 71). Chapter two, verse twenty-two in the Gita holds a similar view about the soul and the body:

Just as a person casts off worn-out garments and puts on others that are new, even so does the embodied soul cast off worn-out bodies and take on others that are new (Radhakrishnan. 1993. 108).

The body, an image of the soul, is "dear" because:

... you brought me
curled in womb and memory

Gave me fingers to clutch
at grace, at malice; and ruffle
someone else's hair; (CP: 40)

Ramanujan deviates from the point of view of the Hindus who do not regard body as "dear" but desire for "Moksha" as it liberates the soul from the circle of bodily birth and ultimately unifies it with the Brahman, the Highest and the Absolute truth. The Hindus believe that the body is perishable whereas the soul is not. Verse twenty-four of chapter two in the Gita sings the glory of the soul:

He is uncleavable. He cannot be burnt. He can be neither wetted nor dried. He is eternal, all-pervading, unchanging and immovable. He is the same for ever (Radhakrishnan. 1993. 109).

The metaphysical poet, John Donne treated the body and the soul alike. Ramānujan, on the contrary, holds the body in high esteem and for him the body is the source of dharma. Body, for him is an organic site where birth, copulation and death come together. So, the body as the Gita propounds is “the field in which events happen; all growth, decline and death take place” (Radhakrishnan. 1993. 300). The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad postulates the body as “the constituent of all action; it is from the body that all action originates. The body is like the mantras of the Sama Veda; the body is the soul of all action. It is the body that sustains all the action in the universe” (Debroy. 1993. 213). The poet, therefore, yearns for the permanent company of the body, which leaves the soul after physical death:

to rise in the sap of trees
 let me go with you and feel the weight
 of honey-hives in my branching
 and the burlap weave of weaver-birds
 in my hair. (CP: 40)

The poet here equates the body to a tree and the sap its spirit or soul and echoes the teachings of the Chhandogya Upanishad embodied in the twelfth verse of book six: “The Self as life, fills the tree; it flourishes in happiness, gathering its food through its roots” (Swami. 1971. 93).

As the poet ruminates over the relation between body and soul, he becomes acutely conscious of the limitation of the body, its impermanence and mortality because he knows that the body

will one day be short of breath,
 lose its thrust,
 turn cold, dehydrate and leave

a jawbone with half a grin

near a pond: (CP: 209)

“The Hindu: he reads his Gita and is calm at all events” examines critically the concept of “*sthitaprajna*” (A state of absolute nonchalance), which advocates to maintain mental equilibrium in all situations. The Gita teaches a Hindu to remain calm at all events:

He who regards pain and pleasure alike, who dwells in his own self, who looks upon a clod, a stone, a piece of gold as of equal worth, who remains the same amidst the pleasant and unpleasant things, who is firm of mind, who regards both blame and praise as one (Chapter-14. Verse-24. Radhakrishnan. 1993. 324).

He who is the same in honour and dishonour and the same to friends and foes, and who has given up all initiative of action, he is said to have risen above the modes (Chapter 14, Verse 25. Radhakrishnan. 1993. 324).

So, non-involvement as the poet holds forth and practices should be the motto of our life:

... yet I come unstuck

and stand apart. I do not marvel

when I see good and evil ... (CP: 79)

To maintain the equilibrium and equipoise of the mind as the poet attempts at, one should have the courage to accept good and evil, joys and sorrows in an equal spirit because “He is a *jitatman* (one who has control over one’s body and organs) whose calm and serenity are not disturbed by the pains of the opposites” (Radhakrishnan. 1993. 191). As a true Hindu Ramanujan is detached and indifferent to all happenings around him:

I've learned to watch lovers without envy

as I'd watch in a bazaar lens

houseflies rub legs or kiss. I look at wounds calmly. (Ibid.)

As time moves on, the poet finds it impossible to attain such an ideal state, loses the tranquillity of his mind and becomes disbalanced as he witnesses primeval violence in the innocent face of a boy:

Yet when I meet on a little boy's face

the prehistoric yellow eyes of a goat

I choke, for ancient hands are at my throat. (Ibid.)

In the poem "The HINDOO: the only risk", the poet visualizes that a person cannot attain true freedom by controlling physical urges. "Just to keep the heart's simple given beat/through a neighbour's striptease or a friend's suicide" (CP: 90.), is not the true practice of "*mukhtasangah*" (Stoicism). Such a poise may lead to a dangerous result and "the perfect equanimity of this ideal may, in actual practice, easily degenerate into callousness and indifference" (Kurup. 1996. 218).

At the bottom of all this bottomless

enterprise to keep simple the heart's given beat,

the only risk is heartlessness. (CP: 90)

"The HINDOO: he does not hurt a fly or spider either" is a poem, "where the Indian ethos of reverence for all kinds of life on this planet and the creed of non-violence is epitomised" (Mahajan. 1993. 32). Both Jainism and Buddhism make non-violence or *Ahimsa* as a rule of life, -one of the five virtues which constitutes right conduct, the other four being truth-speaking, non-stealing, chastity and non-attachment. "A man is not noble (or elect) because he injures living creatures. He is called noble because he does not injure living beings"¹¹. The Upanishad counsels the Hindus to emulate the

doctrine of non-violence because “he who is harmless (*ahimsant*) toward all things elsewhere than at holy place (*tirtha*)- he, indeed, who lives thus through his length of life; reaches the Brahma-world and does not return hither again”¹². Compassion to living beings, as the Gita says, is the greatest virtue which makes a man godlike:

Non-violence, equal mindedness, contentment, austerity, charity, fame and ill-fame (are) the different states of beings proceed from Me alone. (Chapter-X, Verse. 5 Radhakrishnan. 1993. 257)

This tenet of non-violence has greatly influenced Ramanujan-the poet, as we can discern in this “HINDOO” poem. As a Hindu, he controls his violent nature, as he believes in the philosophy of non-violence. He reveals his affinity with the Vedantic and Buddhistic ways of life and with the mysticism of the Upanishads. Being a typical Hindu, he believes that every creature, big or small deserves love and mercy. The attitude of the poet towards the living world bears the testimony of the fact:

I'm so gentle, do not hurt a fly.

Why, I cannot hurt a spider
either, not even a black widow,

for who can tell Who's Who? (CP: 62)

His compassion for a dog, the neglected and ugliest creature, is evident in the poem “Epitaph on a Street Dog”. He observes that the tails of peacocks are mere ornamentation but the pair of breasts in a dog, though devoid of beauty, has life sustaining power and, therefore, excels the beauty of a peacock:

Peacocks may have eyes in their tails, and crests.

But She had in a row four pairs of breasts,
where blind mouths plucked and swilled their fill

till mouths had eyes, and She was full of flies. (CP: 43).

The poet seems to be aware of the creation of the universe that all spring from Brahman. In the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad it is mentioned:

As threads come from the spider, as little sparks come from the fire, so all senses, all conditions, all gods, all beings, come from this Self (Brahman). He is known as "Truth of all truths". The senses are true, but He is the truth of them all (Swami. 1971. 128).

So, to kill a life is to assassinate Brahman as He is the spirit of life. Being deeply influenced by the admonition of the Gita and the Upanishads, he becomes a staunch supporter of non-violence and leads a life of austerity.

Ramanujan's obsession with the concept of continuity and change is deep. The universe is transient, and, therefore, every being or object, however stable, is in reality ephemeral. The world is in a constant flux. It is a law of nature that "The old order changeth, yielding place to new"¹³. Under such circumstances, the self and even the identity of a person change socially, psychologically and physically as it happens in an American Square dance where one constantly swerves a partner. As "this part of me/that turns and returns/with a different partner" (CP: 22), the personal identity cannot be firm.

Ramanujan, being a poet-philosopher, with a poetic insight, can perceive the reality and tries to unearth the origin and the end of the universe. The caterpillar image—"caterpillar on a leaf, eating,/being eaten" (CP: 123)- points at the truth that the world of desire is continually recycling, a reference to that is found in the Taittiriya Upanishad. It is said that Brahma, an embodiment of Knowledge, Truth and Infinite, has created air, fire and water, which have brought forth the earth. Out of earth comes

vegetation, seed, food and man. All creatures are born of food, sustained by food and return to food after death:

From food, verily, creatures are produced,

whatsoever [creatures] dwell on the earth.

Moreover by food, in truth, they live.

Moreover into it also they finally pass.¹⁴

So, human beings come from and will return to the Brahman. We are within the Brahman and the Brahman is within us. "What began as a composition of elements becomes, as part of the world of continual change, a decomposition, and this is the only constancy of life" (King. 1991. 87).

"Questions" opens with a quotation from the Mundaka Upanishad. Two birds sit on the "selfsame tree:/one of them eats the fruit" while "the other watches without eating" (CP: 130). These two birds represent two aspects of the self—"the '*Jivatma*', or individual self and the '*Paramatma*', or Supreme Self. The former is Pure Consciousness conditioned by the body and mind on account of Its association with ignorance (*avidya*). The latter is Pure Consciousness, the Lord Himself, who is eternally, pure, free and illumined and is the master or controller of *avidya*" (Nikhilananda. 1951. 297). The first, the human soul is the active soul in the world of desire, which is continually transformed, recycled and reborn and the second is the immobile observant self, which avoids temptation of the world of flux and illusion. Here, the poet is concerned with two fundamental questions: what are the causes of human sorrow and happiness, and were the various parts of the self already there in the past, and when being born into this world of mixed pleasure and pain? These questions, which come uppermost in his mind—questions which baffle the poets down the ages that life is beset with joys and sorrows. So, everybody yearns for an

escape from “The weariness, the fever, and the fret”¹⁵ of the world. Ramanujan knows that the human ego self is afflicted with desire, which does not perish when the body withers: “Desire, bodiless, is endless” (CP: 72). Therefore, “Parts of me burn” (CP: 130)^{*} with desire and it is desire, which is the root cause of all evils. Even W.B. Yeats confesses that his heart, sick with desire is tied down by the mortal body. His heart is the seat of passion and so, he requests the saint to consume his heart sick with desire:

Consume my heart away: sick with desire

And fastened to a dying animal

It knows not what it is; and gather me

Into the artifice of eternity.¹⁶ (SP: 105)

Ramanujan reminds us of the legend of the burning of the god of Love and Sexual Desire-Kamadeva-by Lord Shiva in great fury, when the former had stirred the latter into passion while the Lord was in deep meditation. He advocates us to burn all desire and even the desire of Kama (love or passion) as it is the cause of all sorrow. This attitude of the poet reflects the doctrine of Buddhism, which regards “Sorrow, suffering, dissatisfaction, and all the manifold unpleasantness which are referred to by the word *dukkha* (sorrow), are inherent in life as it is ordinarily lived; they can only be eliminated by giving up “thirst” (*tanha*, often translated “craving”), which includes personal ambition, desire, longing, and selfishness of all kinds” (Basham. 1954. 270). This pursuit of desire and the pleasure, which springs from it lead to rebirth.

The second question confirms the poet’s belief in rebirth and in the theory that the self is “born over and over” (CP: 130) again each time rejecting the old body and assuming a new and beautiful form. “When body grows weak through age or disease, the Self separates itself from the limbs, as a mango, a fig, a banyan fruit separates itself from the stalk; man hastens back to birth, goes, as before from birth to birth”

(Swami. 1971. 153). And it is Karma, literary means “work” or “deed” which determines the existence of beings. A good act results in happiness whereas an evil act ensues sorrow. Karma is a ‘creative force’ and it is “Through karma the body of the next life, divine, human, animal or hellish, was acquired; and on previous karma depended a man’s character, fortune and social class, and his happiness and sorrow” (Basham. 1954. 324). Therefore, nobody can escape this law of Karma. When something goes wrong, we think this happens as an outcome of past Karma without making an effort to find out the real cause behind it. We do not attempt to improve the existing conditions. Ramanujan in his essay “Is There an Indian way of Thinking? An Informal Essay” defines Karma as

a notion that is almost synonymous in some circles with whatever is Indian or Hindu. Brahmanical texts had it, the Buddhists had it, the Jains had it ... *Karma* implies the self’s past determining the present, an iron chain of cause and consequence, an ethic of responsibility¹⁷ (CE: 37).

The ‘ethic responsibility’ is a serious matter, which a man cannot avoid and, therefore, has to reconcile with it by accepting the punishment awarded to him in proportion to his sins. Ramanujan seems to ridicule the Hindus who accept everything in the name of Karma. They can see Karma

in the fall of a tubercular sparrow,
in the newspaper deaths in Burma

of seventy-one men, women and children; (CP: 87)

But his hindu sensibility cannot ignore the doctrine of Karma. Fear predominates and he becomes charitable towards nature and feeds breadcrumbs to ants and doves in the park and shelled peanuts to bluejay and tries to be fair to all:

even I talk now and then of God,

find reasons to be fair

: * everywhere

to the even and to the odd, (Ibid.)

Hence is the emergence of Ramanujan's attitude to death. He is ever obsessed with the thought of death. Saturday, for him is a harbinger of death because his mother and one of his brothers passed away on a Saturday. It is said, "It is natural to die as to be born". Our birth, according to Ramanujan, is uncertain but "death is the only inexorable reality of human existence. It is the central frame of reference that lends meaning and coherence to the mystique of life" (Kumar.1995.52). So, death is inevitable

Millions grow lean and fall away

in the hourly autumn of the body.

But fertile in fall, ending as others begin,

to the naivete of death they run. (CP: 37)

"...Great and mean/Meet massed in death" ¹⁸, so says Shelley in "Adonais". Death, for Kamala Das is "Life's obscure parallel"¹⁹, and "Death is/So mediocre, any fool can achieve/It effortlessly"²⁰. She acknowledges the ineluctability and universality of death, and so the sights at the seashore and the tombs at the cemeteries make her aware of the presence of death in every house and in every town:

From every town I live in

I hear the rattle of its death,

The noise of rafters creaking

And the window's whine.²¹

Kamala Das considers life “as a slow yielding to the ‘cold loveliness’ of death” (Kohli. 1975. 100). So, it is futile to challenge the power of death, and every human being, however, great and small, cannot escape death:

... We were the yielders,
 : • Yielding ourselves to everything. It is

 ... , not for us even to
 Question death, but as child to mother’s arms
 We shall give ourselves to the fire or to
 The hungry earth to be slowly eaten,
 Devoured---²²

The “clockwork clicking” (CP: 5) of the footfall reminds Ramanujan of the “inexorable passage of time, the limited number of hours of his existence” (Raghunandan. 1990. 158). Death, the “irrevocable law of nature” (Raghunandan. 1990. 162) is sudden and invincible:

Everyone in this street
 will become cold, lie under stones
 or be scattered as ash
 in rivers and oceans. (CP: 210)

Ramanujan does not “accept death as an end in itself, a final cessation of all activities”, but “a new beginning and an instrument that is responsible for the continuation and expansion of this beginning” (Mohanty. 1998. 150). Death may not be a sudden pause to life in the middle of the night after a nightmare of crematory fires or vultures. It may not leave the body as dead, unfeeling and as wood under the merciless beaks of woodpeckers plucking out worms like nerves. The body might

have just enough sensation to feel vultures picking out vulnerable part. Death does not liberate a man from all worldly attachments. Death, for Tennyson is nothing but a journey of the soul from this world to the other and ultimately becomes one with the divine. A man does not die but passess from world to world and from birth to birth.

Tennyson in "In Memoriam" writes:

... They do not die
 Nor lose their mortal sympathy,
 Nor change to us, although they change;

"Rapt from the fickle and the frail
 With gathered power, yet the same,
 Pierces the keen seraphic flame
 From orb to orb, from veil to veil"²³

'Gluttonous death' as John Donne calls it, will separate the soul from the body. The body will sleep in the grave but the soul will soar to heaven to face God.

In "Death in Search of a Comfortable Metaphor", Ramanujan suggests that life cycle is perpetuated in and through death and ushers in a new beginning and hence, he discovers in the scorpion an apt symbol for death:

Maybe death is such
 a scorpion: bursts its back
 and gives birth
 to numerous dying things,
 baby scorpions, (CP: 273)

Death, therefore, will not release a person from the cycle of existence. It is rather an entry into another life. Though the poet believes in the continuity of life, his search, however, will be to reveal the mysteries of death:

but death? Is it a dispersal
 of gathered energies
 back into their elements,
 earth, air, water, and fire,
 a reworking into other moulds,
 grass, worm, bacterial glow
 lights, and mother-matter
 for other off-spring with names
 and forms clocked into seasons? (CP: 207)

Ramanujan deeply interested in Buddhism, wanted to embrace it in his twenties, when the Buddha's concept of Nothingness seemed to hold the only key to life's mystery. According to Buddhist philosophy, the ocean flowing round the universe wherein we find ourselves placed, is the ocean of Nothingness, from which we are driven out into the universe. Everything has emerged out of Absolute Nothingness into this world. A true happiness is enthroned beyond the pleasures of the senses, and consequently beyond the world, at a place, where the great chasm of Nothingness yawns at the worldliness. This idea of Nothingness, of Zero occurs frequently in his poem:

How describe this nothing
 we, of all things, flee in panic
 yet wish for, work towards,
 build ships and shape whole cities with? (CP: 202)

The poem, "At Zero" speaks how at zero hour there is a standstill universal:

clocks lose their tongues,
 the hands fall off,
 spider legs: pendulums sway

no more, scrotums

of dead bulls: timepieces

on wrists and towers

lose time, (CP: 200)

The stillness of the zero hour is compared to the blankness and stillness of the life of the brahmin widow. At this hour, all the movements come to an end and there is a stoppage of passing time. Similarly, a saint's mind, at the moment of worship is filled with ecstasy and the mind is free from thoughts, emotions and consciousness.

Like W.B. Yeats, A.K. Ramanujan has plunged deep to know "the truth" of life and he feels that perennial truth is enshrined in the pages of Indian philosophy, the Bhagavad Gita and the Upanishads. And this Indian philosophy has made his roots so strong and his self and identity so authentic.

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