

Chapter V

The world of imagery: a study in major images and symbols

A. A Poet of Senses

Ramanujan's world of imagery is a fascinating subject of study. This world evolves from his own close observation of the universe around, from the everyday scenes and sights and the facts of everyday life. As his poetry is mainly poetry of perception, the imagery in his poetry records sense experience and thus evokes various sensations—sight, hearing, smell, touch and taste. Images are not merely made of words but are “naked sense – stimulus” (Fogle. 1949. 5). He completely identifies himself with the objects, which appeal to his senses, and an image in his poetry “is a copy or revival of a sense – perception of some sort” (Richards. 1936. 98).

What strikes one most about Ramanujan's poetry is the richness of his imagery, which forms the very core of his poetic art. His poetry is a fabric woven from threads of concept, emotion and sense. It is the senses, which help him observe his environment critically and objectively. Poetry as Hulme said, “is not a counter-language, but a visual concrete one. It is a compromise for a language of intuition which would hand over sensations bodily” (Fogle. 1949. 56). Ramanujan's poetry offers a perfect balance and equilibrium between general notion and sensation. Every image, he employs, relates to a kind of sense stimulation. So, while expressing general ideas, he constructs images with which his memory and imagination are steeped. As he has developed a potent sensory system, his poetry, besides inciting visual impression, stirs up diverse physical sensations. Hence, it is my endeavour to analyse his images in terms of various sensory experiences.

Ramanujan's piercing eyes gaze at a particular situation or an object minutely and communicates it through neat visual images. He, like Keats is acute in observation with an eye to the particulars of every object. His telescopic vision is focused on the simplest everyday things often seen and encountered. His descriptions of the water-bugs—"thin -stemmed, bubble-eyed water bugs" (CP:3) and the ants—"bean-eyed young, / hung perhaps with tigerheads /of red wild ants" (CP:69) are not only sculpturesques but also vivid, sharp and concrete which affirm that "he has an eye for the specific physiognomy of an object or situation which he then reveals with telling detail"¹.

Visual imagery is cardinal to Ramanujan's mode of communication. Shelley's visual imagery is the product of an eye usually directed either up or down and irradiates the distance. So, his skylark soars vertically into the heaven until it disappears:

Higher still and higher

From the earth thou springest

Like a cloud of fire;

The blue deep thou wingest,

And singing still dost soar, and soaring ever singest ².

But Keats's nightingale dwells on earth and does not venture far above the ground. He is concerned himself with describing the particular of things close at hand. Ramanujan is not always satisfied by describing merely the external features of an object. He, like Shelley, has an insatiable eye, which perforates to go beyond the physical world. So, he finds a semblance between a water-bug and a prophet – both having an extraordinary power to walk on water:

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. (CP:3)

Ramanujan pictures objects that are almost accessible to the senses of the average man. His visual imagery has an analytical quality, which enlightens some fundamental truths of the phenomenal world. Shelley's eye can see through the objects of its gaze and can anatomize it. The cloud passes through a series of dissolutions and rebirths, which he visualizes separately in his poem "The Cloud". These swift transformations have been delineated in the images of solid, simple and structural forms:

From cape to cape, with a bridge-like shape,
 Over a torrent sea,
 Sunbeam-proof, I hang like a roof,
 The mountains its columns be³

Ramanujan's inner vision can resolve the complexities of life. Birth and death—the two poles of human life—make up the life on earth. The pain suffered by the human beings on the eve of birth and death has been visualized by the poet in a simple, sharp image:

Birth takes a long time
 though death can be sudden,
 and multiple, like pregnant deer
 shot down on the run.

Yet one would like to think,
 one kicks and grabs the air
 in death throes as a baby
 does in its mother's womb
 months before the event (CP:206)

Ramanujan frequently uses colour images in order to create some visual pictures.

Kamala Das uses yellow colour to describe an ageing man:

And so,
 with every interesting man I meet,
 be it
 a curious editor,
 or a poet with a skin yellowed
 like antique paper,⁴

Sometimes yellow symbolizes paleness and melancholy:

It's goodbye, goodbye, goodbye
 To slender shapes behind window panes
 Shut against indiscriminate desire
 And rain; to yellow moons⁵

Yellow sometimes stands for the diseased:

I yellowed, sickened like the leaves on trees,
 Gained a freedom I never once had asked for.⁶

Kolatkarr uses blue and yellow, which stand for the divine and the red for the physical love. Parthasarathy's predominating colour is gray. Yellow is a recurring colour in Ramanujan's poetry with symbolic significance. It is almost an obsession with him, which has been employed with different connotations. Sometimes it signifies fear:

dwelling on the yellower vein
 in the yellow amber
 or touching a book that has gold
 on its spine;

I think of snakes. (CP:4)

The 'yellow vein' in amber, or gold lettering on the spine of a book induces fear, which projects the picture of a snake into his mind. At times yellow stands for the colour of the sun and indicates brightness:

siamese cats with black on their paws
 tiptoe from the sulphur mines of the sun
 into the shadow of our house. (CP:14)

'Yellow' symbolizes spiritual maturity possessed by the intuitive witty father:

Father sits with the sunflower at the window
 deep in the yellow of a revolving chair, (Ibid)

"Yellowed underwear" (CP:71) gives rise to awe and horror whereas "yellow moustache" (CP:161) of the wrestler in the poem "At Forty" is an expression of his fury. Again it indicates dullness:

but all my furniture
 looked bilious yellow
 in its gorgeous light. (CP:232)

Yellow is a symbol of gloom as we see in the poem "It Does not Follow, but When in the Street". The "walls of Central Jail/drip with spring's laburnum/yellows, yellow on yellow" (CP:57), where the personae is imprisoned, is not made of bricks and cement but of sadness, melancholy and pessimism.

Ramanujan, like Shakespeare has immense interest in colour contrast particularly of black and white. Shakespeare's sense of colour contrast is often connected with the theme. The purity of Desdemona and the opposition of her colour and that of the Moor is symbolized in black and white all through "Othello". The chasteness and fairness of Desdemona is manifested by the colour white:

Nor scar that whiter skin of hers that snow,
And smooth as monumental alabaster.⁷ (5.2)

The black Moor, Othello stands as a contrasting figure and is a symbol of devil as Emilia says:

O, the more angel she,
And you the blacker devil !⁸ (5.2)

Ramanujan is sensible to the colour and the contrasts of the various shades. His use of colour contrasts adds to the beauty of his poems. The unusual numbers of bright colours that we find in his poems are freely contrasted while describing an insect, an animal, a flower and a human being. This enhances the beauty as does the flash of light on jewels:

mating white and black lizards
in schoolbook Sanskrit. (CP:76)

..... white

hair in a red turban. (CP:80)

blackwhite kitten yawn,
mew, make water
on a livingroom (CP:101)

when will orange banners burn
 among blue trumpet flowers and the shade
 of trees (CP:113)

Ramanujan is well acquainted with the racial prejudice that prevails in the western world. "Black" and "white" in the poem "Take care" suggest this racial discrimination:

In Chicago,
 do not walk slow.
 Find no time
 to stand and stare.

Down there, blacks look black.
 And whites, they look blacker. (CP:104)

The auditory images employed by Ramanujan are straightforward, often sharp and harsh. Soft humming and buzzing noises, which are frequent in Keats are rarely heard in his poems. But like Shelley his auditory images are numerous—"One day /hear her skeleton crack beginning /with the backbone" (CP:236), "tinkling in glass-/bead curtains" (CP:180), "rattles my chains" (CP:235) strike a sharp note; whereas "A beggar once come with a violin/to croak out a prostitute song" (CP:98), "the jangle/of medals on the breast of your happy/unhappy widow" (CP:72), "a peanut seller's/raucous cry" (CP:76) register a harsh sound. Gentle, low-toned sound is audible in some of his poems—"the papers/rustle" (CP:190), "leaky taps upstairs and downstairs,/purring at my side like the kitchen fridge" (CP:215), "cats being cats will purr/at all sorts of occult things" (CP:73), "no one will hear me for/the noise of rustling nails" (CP:86).

Sometimes alliteration produces an auditory effect. "I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore"⁹ (SP:16)—the repeated 'l' sound echoes the sense of the water of the lake striking at the shore producing a melodious music. Similarly, "The twirls of their hisses/rise like tiny dust-cones on slow-noon roads" (CP:4) in the poem "Snakes", the reiterated 's' sound echoes the hissing sound of a snake. The slithering of the snake, and "a sibilant alphabet" (CP:4) suggest that the snake possesses a language which is full of 'sibilant' speech sound. Again, in the lines "The snakeman wreathes their writhing/round his neck" (CP:5)—"the rolling r's create a serrating sound here like a reptile would while wriggling on the floor" (Daruwalla. 1994. 21).

In the poem "A Leaky Tap After a Sister's Wedding" the sound of water leaking "drop after drop" (CP:9) from a tap is envisaged through images. The sound of the leaky tap sounds like "mallet touches/of silversmiths" (CP:9) working for the personae's sister's wedding. As Ramanujan's imagination soars higher, he further visualizes the sound with the 'pecking' sound of a summer woodpecker at a tree, which acquires symbolic implication. It reminds the poet of the husband's ceaseless pecking at his helpless wife.

The tactual imagery of Ramanujan like Keats is organic. It reckons with the sense of touch as well as with sight. The description of Cupid and Psyche in each other's arms in the poem "Ode to Psyche" is achieved by a concentration of tactual image, which strengthens the central visual impression:

They lay calm-breathing on the bedded grass;
 Their arms embraced, and their pinions too;
 Their lips touch'd not, but had not bade adieu,
 As if disjointed by soft-handed slumber...¹⁰

The tactual image Ramanujan manipulates in describing a chimp named Subbu in the prose poem "Zoo Gardens Revisited," who is paralysed neck down, creates a visual picture:

He couldn't lift his chipped blue enamel mug to his lips and slurp his tea

any more nor pout his lips to puff at his cigar. (CP:154)

Sometimes sight is enhanced by touch as in "A Minor Sacrifice" where the poet describes how the children, in keeping with the advice of Shivanna, catch scorpions, return home and retire to their bathroom to clear their hands of the sins committed :

sneak by the backdoor

to the bath house

to scrub and scour with coconut fibre

till the skins of our palms come off. (CP:148)

The words "scrub" and "scour" help in establishing the effect of vivid visual images.

Ramanujan like Shakespeare and Keats is very sensitive and delicate in the matter of touch. He has drawn similes from the texture of substances—silk, velvet, satin and so on. Shakespeare, susceptible to the smoothness of the skin, describes Perdita's hands "as soft as dove's down"¹¹ (4.3), Venus's "smooth moist hand"¹² and "flower-soft hands"¹³ (3.2) of Cleopatra's maidens. Keats, with a view to produce an effect of sensuous luxuriance, makes use of soft silky surfaces. The couch on which Adonis lies is silken; his coverlids are like the peach:

... on a silken couch of rosy pride,

In midst of all, there lay a sleeping youth

... ..

And coverlids gold-tinted like the peach,

Or ripe October's faded marigolds,¹⁴

Ramanujan is very conscious of and responsive to the feelings and the quality of various stuff. So, the new born salamanders soft and glossy are described as “naked earthlings, poor yet satin/to the eye, velvet to the touch” (CP:202), and the “tumbled hair” (CP:45) of his lady love is as soft as silk. The ripe oranges are so soft and light which can be felt in the finger-tips:

some so ripe, there was a hint

of fungi-ash

on a slightly hollowed cheek;

some flushed and saffron,

some gamboge, some tangerine;

some pulpy, velvet-skinned, (CP:53)

He articulates the endless sticky nature of anxiety by a tactual image. Anxiety is unwakeful and drowsy by temperament but it is “viscous and fibered as pitch” (CP:29). Images such as, “father bathed/slapping soap on his back”; (CP:65), “the calico cat laps water/from the white well,” (CP:215), “his dog would wake me/with licks on my sleepy face” (CP:253), “I wipe myself dry/with an unwashed/Sears turkish towel” (CP:169), “I’d watch in a bazaar lens/houseflies rub legs or kiss” (CP:79) convey some kinds of tactile sensations.

Ramanujan’s olfactory images like Keats’s are heavy and pervasive. Incense and its massive fumes overcloud the banquet-scene in “Lamia”:

Before each lucid pannel fuming stood

A censer fed with myrrh and spiced wood,

... ..

... fifty wreaths of smoke

From fifty censers their light voyage took

To the high roof, still mimick'd as they rose

Along the mirror'd walls by twin-clouds odorous.¹⁵

Inceuse, used in rituals has strongly appealed to him, which is soft and agreeable. The olfactory imageries of Ramanujan are both pleasant and unpleasant. The strong odour of “street-long heavy-hung/yellow pollen fog of a fragrance” of “Red Champak trees” (CP:124) permeates the atmosphere which causes migraine to his mother. So, a pungent fragrance often causes sickness. The smell of garlic cloves, a cure for cancer, is for the poet very redolent. Hence, “the breath of garlic as we enter/the elevator suffocates me” (CP:265). The poem “Eyes, Ears, Noses and a Thing about Touch”, dealing with the various sense perceptions states that noses possess a unique sense of smell which can smell everything that pervades in the atmosphere:

Urine on lily,

women's odours

in the theatre, a musk cat's

erection in the centre of a zoo, (CP:77)

Ramanujan like Shakespeare has a very acute sense of smell and is particularly sensitive to bad smell. Shakespeare's Coriolanus expresses his contempt for the common people through the image of a foul smell:

You common cry of curs! Whose breath I hate

As reek o' the rotten fens, whose loves I prize

As the dead carcasses of unburied men

That do corrupt my air, ¹⁶ (3.3)

His Henry V, while giving a realistic picture of the dead bodies fears “The smell whereof shall breed a plague in France”¹⁷ (4.3). Ramanujan's disdain for stink is evident in his description of the “fertile shabby pair” who smell of “unwashed hair”

(CP:13). The smell of a breaded fish “thrust a blunt-headed smelt”(CP:7) into his mouth as it revives the memory of the reek of a dead body of a woman.

Ramanujan is equally fond of aroma. So, the smell of “twisted/ backbone tree” (CP:61) reminds him of the youth of his mother when she was as delicate and beautiful as “silk” and “white petal”. Shakespeare connects the sweet smell of spring with sparkling youth who “smells April and May”¹⁸ (3.2). Ramanujan’s passion for perfumes is evident in “Love 5” where he says that the intense passion of a personae for his lady is abated only after enjoying the odour of her body and, therefore, he wants to “catch the waft/of odours transcending all perfume” (CP:229). The new groom in the poem, “Mythologies 3”, in spite of the strong warning of his bride, touches her as he is tempted by her perfumes:

... all he could think of was her round breast,

her musk, her darling navel and the rest.

So he hovered and touched her, ... (CP:228)

The “smell of a woman’s perfumes” is so invigorating that it will help an amnesiac to recover “all pasts and circulation of sap”(CP:76).

Closely related to olfactory images are gustatory images. It is not only the act of tasting, which arouses this sense but also the things meant to be tasted. The gustatory images of Ramanujan show that he possesses a tender, discriminating and touchy palate which can easily distinguish the different tastes—sweet, sour, salty, oily etc. A few examples of such images are—“a whiskey sour” (CP:15), “garden of sweet limes”(CP:107), “salt,/coriander,/and jaggery” (CP:112), “Water-layers salt” (CP:100), “greasy sweets” (CP:96) etc. A breaded fish, a food to be tasted, stirs up a sense of taste. The image of a dead snake in the poem “Snakes” –“ Now/frogs can hop

upon this sausage rope" (CP:5)—evokes a gustatory sense which is repulsive and disagreeable.

An intimate study of the imagery of Ramanujan reveals the fact that there is one characteristic which attracts him most throughout, that is, the quality of movement—both in the animal and the human worlds. The extensive use of kinesthetic imagery throws light on his poetic technique and creates some visual impressions on the mind. Shelley has many images of swift movement in the poem "Ode to the West Wind" where the west wind, with all its activities, is beautifully portrayed:

Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead
 Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing,

 O thou
 Who chariotest to their dark wintry bed
 The winged seeds, where they lie cold and low,
 Each like a corpse within its grave, until
 Thine azure sister of the Spring shall blow
 Her clarion o'er the dreaming earth, and fill
 Driving sweet buds like flocks to feed in air.¹⁹

The motor images employed by Ramanujan are both swift and slow, drawn from two worlds—the human and the animal. The pictures drawn from the body and bodily actions constitute a large section of his imagery. A number of images of quick nimble bodily actions are visible in many poems such as, "pacing/to and fro as you came to the gate"(CP:66), "Leaping and hopping all over the lawn." (CP:146). The grasshoppers are described as "little writhing objects"(CP:147) and when their wings are pulled off they "shiver a bit/as we put away/those wriggles in our bottles"

(CP:147) comes almost vivid to the eyes. We witness similar swift movement in the verbs—“herons fly round and round/in his eyes”(CP:230), “his steed, with a neem-leaf mark/upon his brow, will prance/again to splash his noonday image” (CP:17), “Even leaping Beast shall wait to be bidden” (CP:11), adjutant storks “flap *themselves into air*” and “it circles/*on motionless wings*” (CP:128).

Ramanujan’s love for movement is to be seen not only in his direct images but also in the use of certain words like “peep”, “peek” , “blink” expressing quick, darting action—“peeking in and out/of the black box” (CP:58), “not yet fully recovered/from birth,/blinking blackwhite kitten yawn” (CP:101), “suppress/that itch to take a peek at the dead street-/dog before the scavengers come” (CP:90) and “I walk through the holy place,/one eye wincing” (CP:246).

Ramanujan’s keen and sharp vision can even observe the minute movement and can convey it through an image. A few images of slow and smooth movement are—“a thin old snake vacillating” (CP:176), “Brown eyes, family faces, maculate giraffes/jiggle and disappear” (CP:205) and “twigs and twiglike insects/that turn slowly round the twigs” (CP:146-147).

Sometimes some human feelings or actions are set in motion to create a sense of activity. Shakespeare uses verbs of movement about things, which are motionless or abstractions, which cannot have physical movement. He even endows inanimate and motionless object with a sense of life:

that pale, that white-fac’d shore,

whose foot spurns back the ocean’s roaring tides,²⁰ (2.1)

He often attributes to them human feelings and infuses a sense of activity:

Where the Norwegian banners flout the sky

And fan our people cold.²¹ (1.2)

Notes and References

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B. Ramanujan's Universe

Ramanujan's artistry rests chiefly on his deft use of imagery, which is inseparable from the theme of his poetry. The realistic, fresh, exact, startling and polished images play a "key role" (Mizra. 1980.157) in his poetry, which clarify a picture and express an idea with more concentration. The objects he contemplates stir in his imagination a picture which gives rise to the imagery he creates. His response to an experience is not only finer but is more refined than an average man. Hence, his language is not only elegant but also different. He finds the imagery the only tool on which he can bank on for a total poetic effect. It is said, "wisdom first speaks in images" (Singh. 1992. 135). A study of images and symbols in the poetry of Ramanujan throws light on the peculiar ways the poet's mind functions in order to design the theme of his poetry.

An image in Ramanujan's poetry is a "constituent of a unified expression" (Srivastava. 1996.50), which imports his vision of life, reveals his critical outlook and analytical mind. As his poetry is "born out of the dialectical interplay between his Indian and American experiences" (Dulai. 1989.n. pag), he has presented us two sets of images—one, of rural India, which serves as "the backdrop", the other, the sophisticated urban life of "America serving as the frontier" (Mohanty. 1990. 167). The image of a shepherd driving home a flock of sheep represents the simple Indian landscape:

turning around I see a flock of sheep
 in a tree-filtered slant of sunlight
 gilding a cloud of dust
 coming towards me, black, white,

walking clouds of wool
 with downcast faces
 behind them a man in a dirty
 red turban and a brown
 rough blanket

wielding a stick ... (CP:224)

The imagery draws a picture of the rustic life—a life that is humble, devoid of ornamentation and revolves in harmony with nature. As he is born and brought up in India, scenes and images peculiar to Indian life abound in his poems:

his [shepherd's] father now blind

and sitting in the sun

outside his hut smoking

bidis all day (Ibid)

I return from the wide open spaces.

Temple employees have whiskered nipples.

The streetcows have trapezium faces.

Buffaloes shake off flies with a twitch of ripples. (CP:100)

Ramanujan is not persistently obsessed with India, he “sees reality of existence in the immediate environments and cultural atmosphere in America, the country where he has been living for the last thirty years” (Sharma. 1994. 181). So, he has painted the shallow, urban life of Chicago—a city of racial violence and vulgarity, where “dry chlorine water” replaces the holy Ganges and “the naked Chicago bulb” becomes “a cousin of the Vedic sun” (CP:169). In “One More After Reading Homer” Ramanujan

tells us how in Chicago “dehumanizing and stupefying elements dangle in the air”

(Mohanty. “ Chicago and AKR”. 1994. 39.):

... ... I come
 upon a half-burned shoulderblade
 greening in a lake of dead alewives
 among leftovers papercups and condoms.

I wonder if in Chicago too
 love indifference and hate
 in some devious way relate
 at all to deaths by fire. (CP:73)

The poem, “Take Care”, begins with a natural description of the city. The poet, then, through a series of images depicts how danger and calamities lark in the city threatening the security of the people:

In Chicago it blows
 hot and cold. Trees
 play fast and loose.

 ... Enemies have guns.
 Friends have doubts.
 Wives have lawyers.

 All tall buildings
 use telescopes.
 Give daughters pills,
 learn karate.

Prepare to get raped

bending for a book (CP:103)

Ramanujan, often juxtaposes the images drawn from two different worlds— the Indian and the western. In “Death and the Good Citizen” he has presented two sets of images to show the “ritualistic ubiquitous way of handling the dead body” (Mohanty. “Things as they are...”1999. 170). The typical Indian method of cremation is conveyed to us through a concrete image:

... .. they'll cremate
me in Sanskrit and sandalwood,
have me sterilized
to a scatter of ash. (CP:136)

This method of cremation is contrasted with that in the west;

Or abroad,
they'll lay me out in a funeral
parlour, embalm me in pesticide,
bury me in a steel trap, lock
me out of nature
till I'm oxidized by left-
over air, withered by my own
vapours into grin and bone. (Ibid)

The dominant images deployed by Ramanujan are tree, water, insects, animals, birds, widow which gradually evolve into symbols. He employs these images with a purpose to link poem with poem. The images knit the poems together giving them coherence and order and, thus, revealing the pattern of the poet's mind. The richness and fullness of his imagery instills life into his poetry and his poetry develops an

immense potentiality to “evoke the multi-dimensional experience of life” (Talwar. 1994. 41).

Ramanujan is deeply influenced by the medieval Kannada Vachana poets Basavanna, Mahadeviyakka and Allama Prabhu who have made an extensive use of tree image. Basavanna, a devotee to Siva, compares the relationship between Siva and his devotees with the ‘roots’ and ‘shoot’ of the tree:

The root is the mouth
of the tree: pour water there
at the bottom
and, look, it sprouts green
at the top.¹

Allama Prabhu, on the other hand, identifies tree with awareness which arises after the clearing of the physical nature, yields eight kinds of subtle bodies (flowers) and finally reaches the basic knowledge:

A tree born
in a land without soil,
and look!
eight flowers
thunderbolt-coloured.
Fruit on the branch
ripen at the root.²

The tree, for Ramanujan, “represents an evergrowing ramification of the family” (Rao. 1996. 60-61). The tree image used in different contexts acquires multiple connotations. The image of a fig tree in the poem “Looking for a Cousin on a Swing” indicates the growth and change that take place as a girl moves from childhood to

adulthood. The poet's cousin, as she grows up, develops a flabby body with a bulging belly like the fork of a fig tree and it seems that she will burst out with "a brood of scarlet figs" (CP:19). Again the tree symbol in "I Could Have Rested"—"treeless island youth" (CP:20)—"represents enlightenment for the calm and peace that accompanies enlightenment bringing about a total relaxation and rest" (Raghunandan, 1990.188- 189) which has been denied to the poet-lover as he is brave, young and hot-blooded.

The tree is used as a symbol of life and death as "contemporaneous forms of existence" (Raghunandan, 1990. 186). The "dynasties/of the mountain-pine" (CP:27) represents the royal dynasties that ruled the kingdom but whose banners are 'tattered' and "harped at the drizzling strings of rain" (CP:27). The dying dynasty is represented by the living ex-maharajah who loses his kingdom in politics. The endless nature of anxiety is presented through the image of a tree which like a tree branches out on all sides—"it has naked roots and secret twigs" (CP:29). A leafless tree in the poem "Despair" is symbolic of despair which denotes that a man should get relief of his own despair because he is not alone in his predicament. Tree image in this poem and also in "Anxiety" signifies *avidya* or ignorance which is common to all minds.

The paradox of birth and death is symbolized in the tree in the poem "Christmas". Christmas, the birthday of Jesus Christ comes in December. Again, this month heralds the death of the year. The bare branches, which look skinny and root like in winter become green with "a shock of leaf" (CP: 32) and throb with life with the approach of summer. Like the two-headed Janus, who is the patron of beginning and end, the tree is also "two in one" (CP:32) as it is dead and alive at the same time. The tree is like an angle both "open and shut" (CP:32). It is like Euclid, the first Alexandrian geometrician, who though dead is still alive and lives again through his books.

Euclid's ghost arrests life for the poet and he completely identifies himself with the tree and realises that one Life Force pervades all forms of life. The tree as a symbol of all creations occurs again in "One Reads" where the shadow of a tree is merged into the shadow of a beggar—"his shadow, clotting/the antlers of bare April's trees" (CP:49).

Ramanujan's imagery often derives from his childhood memory. As T.S.Eliot says "only a part of an author's imagery comes from his reading. It comes from the whole of his sensitive life since early childhood"³. In the poem "Of Mothers, among other things" a tree with its white flowers and the twisted branches revives his memory of his deformed mother clad in silk. Here the mother and the tree are identified in one metaphor. The tree in "Man and Woman in Camera and Out" is a symbol of love in full moon which simultaneously hints at man's close association with nature. The images of man, tree and shadow find their respective places "by a tiny act/of grace" (CP: 58) inside the black box of the camera. The cherry tree in full bloom, symbolic of the love of man and woman, foresees the flowers dropping. The lovers in real life encounter a similar situation and are always afraid lest their love wanes in near future.

The image of the tree in the poem "That tree" upholds the Hindu view of the universe:

The legendary tree is upside down.

Roots in the air, branches in the ground. (CP:234)

The universe is like an inverted tree with its branches in the human world and its roots in the divine. But the image of the tree gradually acquires a new dimension and emerges as a symbol of family tree. "It is symbolic of the everwidening family relations and stands for "*Vamsa Vriksha*". The branching off of the tree is symbolic of the evergrowing family tree" (Rao. 1996. 62). Though isolated in his exile,

Ramanujan has tied himself up to the family tree and just as the tree gets nourishment from its roots, he too thrives with life as he thinks of his family. The parents and the relatives who are spread like “the inverse/ branching under the earth” (CP:76) give him back his normal life.

The image of water is manipulated in the poems “The Striders”, “A River” and “No Amnesiac King”. In the poem “The Striders” the stream image is associated with an insect image. Yeats’s living stream in “Easter 1916” symbolizes change and growth of life. The hearts of the martyrs concentrated on a single purpose—to liberate the country—are like stones and the living stream of life, which flows is disturbed by them:

Hearts with one purpose alone
 Through summer and winter seem
 Enchanted to a stone
 To trouble the living stream.⁴ (SP:94)

In “West-Running Brook”, Frost’s brook symbolizes everything in life and human experience amidst the world of flux:

It flows beside us in this water brook,
 But it flows over us; It flows between us
 To separate us for a panic moment
 It flows between us, over us, and with us.⁵

In “The Striders” Ramanujan combines the image of flow with that of fixity. “The ripple skin of a stream” (CP:3) denotes *samsara* or life in a state of flux. The bug stands for the “liberated- in- life” (Kumar. 1993 .13) and its perching on the stream or sitting on a “landslide of lights” (CP:3) suggests a fixity within the flux. Life is like a flowing river and so when we step into it, the river will have changed from what it

was before. So, a man longs for the past happiness. The poem "No Amnesiac King" reviews man's nostalgia for an idealized world in terms of a stream image. A human being always wishes for perfection but he is aware that his desire to catch and cling to the ideal world is, in fact, only the "inverse images in the water/of a stream" (CP:127) of the actual life he leads. But man tries in vain to retire to the ideal past, which is only an image or reflection of the actual he experiences.

The river Vaikai in Ramanujan poem "A River," which flows through Madurai, is symbolic along whose bank grows up the rich Tamil culture. For him, a river is holy and so death rites are performed near it. The ashes of his father were thrown according to the instructions of the priest at a place "where three rivers met" (CP: 111). K.N. Daruwalla's river Ghaghra is a symbol of the fury of a river in flood. In the afternoon she is "a grey smudge/exploring a grey canvas"⁶ and there is no sign of flood. But this deceptive calmness is destroyed as the river swells into flood:

When dusk reaches her
 through an overhang of cloud
 she is overstewed coffee.

... ..

And suddenly at night

... ..

Twenty minutes of a nightmare spin

and fear turns phantasmal

as half a street goes

churning in the river-belly.⁷

Ramanujan's river, calm and quiet in summer, becomes destructive and violent in the rainy season. The rise of the water level is described with precise accuracy, which not

only tolls human life but also causes heavy material loss:

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. (CP:38)

The archetypal image of flood, destroying all life upon the earth, is a very familiar image used by the poets and dramatists in all ages. Sometimes flood is symbolic of world destruction as we find in Yeats's "The Gyres":

Irrational streams of blood are staining earth;
Empedocles has thrown all things about;
Hector is dead and there's a light in Troy;
We that look on but laugh in tragic joy.⁸ (SP:180)

The image of the "flooded stream"⁹ (SP:100) in "A Prayer for my Daughter" is an irrational force symbolizing the 'irrational stream' of violence that would flood the world. Shakespeare sees in the image of "a river overbearing its boundaries a perfect analogy to the result of stress or rush of emotion in men" (Spurgeon. 1935. 93). When Desdemona has left Brabantio for Othello, he expresses his grief in a flood image:

... .. my particular grief
Is of so flood-gate and o'erbearing nature
That it engulfs and swallows other sorrows,
And it is still itself.¹⁰ (1.3)

Indian culture and civilization evolve and thrive along the river bank and so, the river forms the very hub of local culture. Both Parthasarathy and Ramanujan draw the

Animals appear everywhere in the poems, but the poems are not 'about' animals. They have a double *vision*. The poems are about life, death, cycles of birth, pain and love. They are also about poetry. They are full of irony, humour, paradox and sudden reversals.¹⁴

There are some poems in which animal imagery is used to criticize man's conduct—his moral and ethical behaviour. Human nature in social context is explored in the poem "Lac into Seal", where the crow, a symbol of evil and crookedness is compared to a politician who enjoys all the privileges in the society. The poor, timid masses are as innocent as crows:

When summer months branch backward
 day after day after day
 you'll only see now and then
 a crow or two stopping
 its beak on the back of a cow. (CP:50)

Again, the image of "a couple of cows/named Gopi and Brinda" (CP:39) carried away by the flood is very suggestive. Simplicity, innocence and purity are the qualities which are ascribed to this animal. The death of these cows deviously signifies that these virtues are being disappeared from our society.

Very often Ramanujan uses animal imagery to evaluate men in relation to animals. The "sheep—mouth look in a sepia wedding/picture of father in a turban" (CP:65) brings out the inherent quality of the poet's father who is innocent, gentle and simple like a sheep. The proud and learned uncle, having an extensive knowledge about animals and insects have been compared with a monkey—" he says, shaking his marmoset head" (CP:145). "Black—faced monkeys of grave lowbrow" (CP:153) at once reminds the poet of his uncles with "movable scalps and wrinkled long back

hands" (CP:153). The "later centurions" walking in a pompous manner is attributed to a cat who as it watches a stranger "walk close/ to his knee to arch the fur/on their backs and mimic/the strut of later centurions" (CP:73). The frog, an amphibian, and an enemy of a serpent symbolizes fertility and evolution which "moves from egg to tadpole/to adult, to grow/from water to land and back" (CP:198). The various stages of development that a frog passes through refer to the act of creation—a transition from water to the element of earth. As a cold-blooded creature it anticipates man and in this respect it represents the highest stages of evolution.

The salamander, a lizard like reptile lives in fire, quenches it with the extreme coldness of its body. Ramanujan finds a link between a man and a salamander. The salamanders eat fire but are born in the sludge in the woods after the rain. Man is no different from these salamanders because

... .. we, we burn
 and eat fire no less than salamanders
 but live in the wet, crawl in the slush,
 five-toed lizards eating dragonflies;
 waiting no less than the three-toed for a turn
 of the body's season to copulate (CP:202-3)

A man is very much like this lizard who keeps himself cool amid the fire of passion.

Ramanujan adopts a variety of methods to explore the animal world and his "animal poems symbolize inner aspects of human experience" (Pandey 1997, 74). Often he uses animal imagery to identify his instinctive self; to explain the human predicament. The poet's daughter's turtle "carrying a daily cross" (CP:101) reflects the poet's plight as an expatriate trying to live in an alien culture. There is an affinity between the poet and the animal. The turtle's precarious exile "very far from the

ocean" (CP:101) confuses it and it tries to hibernate in a jar. The turtle, an image of the poetic self, is as alienated in Chicago as the poet. The snake "on slow-noon roads" (CP:4) is an "alien" which hints at the alienation of the poet.

Ramanujan's attitude to the metaphysical question of death is exhibited in terms of animal metaphor. The praying mantis sitting on a can of DDT in the Madurai temple continues its act of praying being unaware that it is very near to death. The poet, like the praying mantis "disregards the proximity of death or institutionalized religion and continues to pray" (Raghunandan. 1990. 175). Again, he visualizes a close association between a man and an animal and identifies each generation with a cold-blooded creature—his ancestors with crocodiles and tortoises, his grand daughter with a praying mantis and himself with a lizard.

Ramanujan, in some of his poems draws analogy between men and animals. He surveys both the worlds – the world of his relations and the world of animals. With apt attention he explores similitudes between them. He identifies his aunt with the snake whose black lorgnettes are etched on its hoods like his aunt. He is afraid and hostile towards this creature like D.H. Lawrence, who in his poem "Snake", says "The voice of my education said to me / He must be killed"¹⁵. Ramanujan too heaves a sign of relief when the snake is killed:

Now

Frogs can hop upon this sausage rope,
flies in the sun will mob the look in his eyes,

and I can walk through the woods. (CP:5)

Whereas aunt arouses fear, the great grandfather, the "still man" puts to shame who like some "spider-lover a pair/of his Borneo specimens mate" (CP:63) will be a silent observer of the illicit love affairs between his wife and the fisherman. The grand-

mother, on the other hand, a crafty lady who like “spider-/fashion, she clamped down and bit/him” (CP:62). She is like a spider weaving web and watching quietly the insect entangled in the web, jumps suddenly to catch it. In like manner this spider-woman attracts and draws the fisherman into her fold .

Many strange and grisly insects crowd Ramanujan’s poetic landscape. He uses insects imagery to belittle the power of the theological despots. In “From Where” inchworms remind him of Hilter and his army:

green inchworms arching

their backs in ’39 from peapod

to desolate peapod, when I’d just heard

of the World and Hitler’s packs? (CP:271)

Cannibalism, a metaphor of modern polity is employed by Ramanujan to reveal the “petulant and murky nature of contemporary politics” (Kumar. 1998. 12). The fight between the politicians for scrambling power and wealth is delineated through the image of worms where the bigger worms devour the smaller ones:

cannibal

devouring smaller cannibal

till only two equal

giants are left to struggle,

entwined,

like wrestlers on a cliff: (CP:46)

The tussle continues until “One /omnipotent/maggot-ceasar” (CP:46) “emerges as a lone victorious survivor from the mob of worms” (Kumar. 1998. 12). This image of an insect, thus, flashes a social observation.

Ramanujan observes homogeneity between an insect and a human being. He

infuses human ideals of socialism into ant life in the poem "Army Ants". The young ants are used as brick and mortar in the construction of an anthill:

Extremists, true makers

of made things, they have

only themselves

for bricks; knees for hinges; heads

for the plinths of their rain-

soaked Corinthians; (CP: 70)

Like a true socialist they live for the benefit of the society. They are both constructive and destructive because it is the destruction of an individual that constructs the society.

Ramanujan, a poet of scientific perception, can smell danger in his immediate environment. To describe the milieu of a large modern city like Chicago he employs an insect imagery very effectively:

Invisible crabs

scuttle the air.

Small flies sit

on aspirin and booze. (CP: 103)

The flight of the crabs symbolizes air pollution; one of the major problems of a modern city, which destroys the healthy atmosphere of the place.

The bird imagery of Ramanujan is often rich in suggestion. He mentions particular birds with a purpose to characterize a human being or a place and as his typical Indian sensibility is ascetic he deliberately avoids ferocious animals and birds. Shakespeare's bird images are remarkable for the intense feeling. In "Macbeth", we

find, when Lady Macduff and her little son apprehend an impending danger, she compares his body to a poor bird:

Poor bird! thou'dst never fear the

The pit-fall nor the gin.¹⁶ (4. 2)

Othello, when he realizes that he has been deceived, uses a bird metaphor to express Iago's treatment of him:

demand that demi-devil

Why he hath thus ensnar'd my soul and body.¹⁷ (5. 2)

Lucrece's escape from Tarquin's brutality is denoted in a bird image:

Wrapp'd and confounded in a thousand fears,

Like to a new-kill'd bird she trembling lies;¹⁸

Ramanujan is an ornithologist, showing his considerable knowledge in the study of birds. The bird image has an abiding quality. Birds and men are often identified with one another. The archetypal concept of mother as a symbol of patience is envisaged in a bird image. Her saree is described as hanging loose like the "feather of a onetime wing" (CP: 61). The image of the feather is an obvious reminder of a bird, attributing a bird-like delicacy and a bird-like fleeting character to the existence of the mother.

Her hands are compared with an eagle with one talon broken:

But her hands are a wet eagle's

two black pink-crinkled feet,

one talon crippled in a garden-

trap set for a mouse. (CP: 61)

Apparently, the image of the eagle—a powerful, huge bird of prey—does not seem to go well with the delicate, fragile personality of a mother. In Greek mythology, the eagle is the vehicle of supreme God Zeus. The association of the eagle with the

associated with animality and sexuality, with corruption and defilement. She appears as a seductress in Poverty Poem:

She didn't know beggars in India
smile only at white foreigners.¹⁹

The picture of the woman sometimes reveals her sensuality and nakedness as we find in "Nudes 1978":

'Yes, this is me as I am',
naked seen, seeing nakedness,
named, flawed in detail,
womanly and vulnerable.²⁰

The image of a woman as a victim of cruel forces in a loose administrative framework features most prominently in Jayanta Mahapatra and Ramanujan's poetry. The humanist attitude of Mahapatra is highlighted in the image of a woman labourer in the poem "Again, One day, Walking By the river". It reveals the plight of a poor Indian woman:

A tar drum smoulders in front of the judge's house
as four women working rule the hot tar
onto the pitted face of the road.
It is two in the afternoon, and
the heat of yesterday still clings to the old walls
like harsh salt on the skin.²¹

The pitiable image of a woman makes a sad commentary on the economic condition of the working woman of the lower class. We experience it in "Poona Train Window":

Three women with baskets

on their heads, climbing
 slowly against the slope
 of a hill, one of them
 lop-sided, balancing
 between the slope and
 the basket on the head
 a late pregnancy. (CP:80-81).

The prejudices and superstitions that are so prevalent in the Indian society make the life of a woman miserable. In our patriarchal society a male child is preferred to a girl child and to beget a boy child a woman follows certain practices:

Women circumambulate the peepul
 tree hoping for a son. (CP:199).

If this does not grant a boy child, then the baby girl that is born will have to live in shadows:

Daughters breed in stark
 family dungeons like slow
 perennials waiting for the rains. (Ibid).

The image of widowhood is often found in the Indo-Anglian poetry. Mahapatra's widows are devoutly religious:

White-clad widowed women
 past the centres of their lines
 are waiting to enter the Great Temple.²²

Ramanujan's widows lead a plain, quiet and simple life and the white clothes they wear symbolize both purity and austerity:

grandmother wearing white

day and night in a village (CP:83).

mother, grandmother

the fat cook

in widow's white

who fed me

rice and ogres (CP:260).

Imagery lends charm and beauty to the poetry of Ramanujan- a conscious and painstaking artist who aims at precision and accuracy of language. His language has a "cold, glass-like quality"²³ which helps Ramanujan in achieving the objectivity and sophistication at the same time.

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