

Ageing in Literature: Global South and Global North Perspectives

Prof Tess Maginess, Queen's University, Belfast
Supplementary Materials and Suggestions for Further Reading

A.K. Ramanujan, 'Obituary'

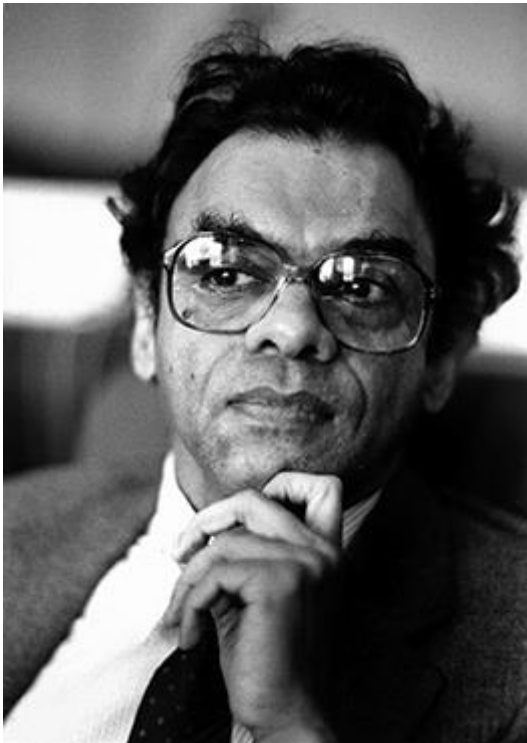
Tess Maginess

A.K. Ramanujan, 1929–1993. Brief biography. Poet, translator, folklorist, and philologist A.K. Ramanujan was born in Mysore, India. He earned degrees at the University of Mysore and Deccan College in Pune and a PhD from Indiana University. Ramanujan wrote in both English and Kannada, and his poetry is known for its thematic and formal engagement with **modernist transnationalism**. Issues such as **hybridity** and **transculturation** figure prominently in such collections as *Second Sight* (1986), *Selected Poems* (1976), and *The Striders* (1966). *The Collected Poems of A.K. Ramanujan* (1995) received a Sahitya Akademi Award after the author's death.

As a scholar, Ramanujan contributed to a range of disciplines, including **linguistics and cultural studies**. His essay "Is There an Indian Way of Thinking?" proposed a notion of "**context-sensitive**" **thinking** based in complex situational understandings of identity that differed significantly from Western thought and its emphasis on universal concepts and structures. Context-sensitive thinking influenced Ramanujan as a folklorist as well. His works of scholarship

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include *A Flowering Tree and Other Oral Tales from India* (1997), *Folktales from India: A Selection of Oral Tales from Twenty-Two Languages* (1991), and *The Interior Landscape: Love Poems from a Classical Tamil Anthology* (1967).

For much of his career, Ramanujan taught at the University of Chicago, where he helped develop the South Asian studies program. In 1976, the Indian government honored him with the title Padma Shri, the fourth-highest civilian award in the country. Ramanujan also received a MacArthur Fellowship. The South Asia Council of the Association for Asian Studies awards the A.K. Ramanujan Book Prize for Translation in honor of his contributions to the field.

Source: [A. K. Ramanujan | Poetry Foundation](#)

On writing obituaries

We may note that this is one of the most difficult forms. The story goes that the test for employment in a good newspaper entailed the candidate writing his/her own obituary. This enabled the editor to judge if the candidate could distill essential details and write both dispassionately and with compassion.

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A (western) reading of the poem

This poem can be said to be a **decline narrative within a decline narrative**.

We begin with a long sentence straddling across stanza breaks. There is a sense of **accumulation**, conveyed through the catalogue technique. It is as if the father's will is being read out after he has passed on. Children may expect a legacy to help them on their way. The father's **legacy is neither heroic nor materially substantial**.

Instead, he leaves a table full of dusty papers. We do not know if these are legal papers or newspapers – at any rate, we can infer that they have not been touched in a while.

Father also leaves **debts and daughters**. Why are the two collocated – beyond the pleasing alliteration?

'In the olden days, daughters were considered a burden because the girl's family had to not only take responsibility for all the marriage expenses but also give a huge dowry to the boy's family. This indicates that the father has left his family with nothing but liabilities to be paid off.'

Source: [Obituary by A.K Ramanujan-Poem, Meaning, Summary, and Analysis – Unread Poets Society](#)

Is it that he has left his daughters in a very vulnerable, precarious position because he has left no money for their dowries? On the contrary, ironically, as the eldest son, he is likely to be responsible for settling the debts and making provision for his sisters. His grandson also seems vulnerable – he wets the bed, perhaps due to grief or stress or because of some condition. And there is a randomness about this grandson, named, not by a careful process of considering his antecedents and family genealogy, but, in random toss of a

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coin, after his grandfather. Does this hint at a fecklessness in the old man – or something more delightful?

What else is left to his family? We have the somewhat vertiginous house leaning slowly over, as if bent like an old person with back trouble. There seems a hint of **tenderness** here, almost **nostalgia**. And is there, perhaps a wry amusement evident in the way the lines themselves seem to lean over one another in a kind of suspended memory of childhood?

The speaker now considers another aspect of his father. There seems to be a wry pun in the reference to the father burning – as if this is a feature of his life as well as the mode of his funeral rites.

Might there be a sardonic allusion to the English idiomatic phrase '**burning the candle at both ends**'? According to the Cambridge English dictionary, this means 'to work or do other things from early in the morning until late at night and so get very little rest.' But in the poem, what does this mean? Does the speaker imply that the old man was able to manage burning at both ends, easily? Or does it mean that, in fact, ironically, he fritters away his time? He burns properly and easily maybe also because he follows tradition?

Apparently, in Hindu cremations, **coins** are sometimes placed over the eyes.

Source: [Hindu Funeral Cremation Guide: The Ceremony, Beliefs, Customs, & More \(cremationinstitute.com\)](https://www.cremationinstitute.com/)

But here, the old man leaves his eye coins in the ashes, where they do not look one bit different! Does this mean that they do not seem to have been destroyed by the immolation? Or is it, rather, that his eyes reflect a soul that was always concerned about money? Or simply, that his eyes had a kind of blankness to them?

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The speaker almost slips in, as it were, the next breath, the burning of his **spinal discs**. These fare less well than the coins and are rough; some burned to coal. The sons seem **detached from the ritual**, picking gingerly at the remains, and throwing them, according to the instructions of the priest, towards the east; the traditional direction in which the head of the corpse should be oriented.

Is the speaker being **sardonic** – mocking traditional rituals and the putative distance from the Ganges, when he tells us that the cremation takes place. It seems unlikely that rivers could meet near a railway station – the old world of ritual seems to be juxtaposed with the modern world of commerce and travel. The **banality and possible poverty of the situation** seems to be compounded by the information that the father has no permanent marker or headstone. Perhaps this also hints at the absence of any antecedents in this same family who could afford to have their resting place marked.

There is **no stone and no inscription** where his full name could have been inscribed, nor are the dates of his birth and death recorded. The portrait of the father here is of a man who is **hapless or helpless**, or of a man with great intentions but who does not manage to achieve much.

The speaker then, in a kind of **parody of an official obituary**, makes reference to his birth, which is by caesarean. It is as if he cannot even make his own way from his mother's womb and has to be surgically removed from her.

We note that he is born in a brahmin ghetto. In Hinduism, the Brahmins or the Upper Casts are worshipped as Avatars of Gods. However, the poet shows that his father took birth as a Brahmin yet his **birth was ordinary** and even **his death could not be controlled by him**.

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Source: [Obituary By AK Ramanujan Summary • Summary & Analysis | English Summary](#)

The father dies of **heart failure**. Could this have a **double meaning**; suggesting not the physical condition, but rather, a failure on the part of his father to love his family?

There is a **remoteness of relationship** implied in the next stanza. But, what is also conveyed in these lines is **how unimportant the father was in the eyes of the world**. His obituary is brief, it is consigned to an inside column and the impact of his death is nugatory in the eyes of the world. Even that tiny official presence is negated by its very **evanescence** – the papers are sold by weight not content and to streethawkers.

The next stanza reveals the **decline narrative**; the papers are sold on to small grocery shops where the narrator, his son, buys small but essential items, wrapped in newspaper cones. Jaggery is unrefined cane sugar and date or palm sap.

Ironically, these cones, which the narrator usually reads for fun. But what does the narrator reveal about **his own sensibility** – he reads the cones in the hope of finding these obituary lines? Is this craven, or does he know only too well that this will be where his father's obituary will, in fact, be found? In that case, there is a kind of **sardonic poignancy** as the narrator mourns how insignificant his father was to the world.

He returns to his father's **legacy** in the concluding lines of the poem. What his father has left, on top of debts and unmarried daughters, is a mother who suddenly comes to the forefront, but who has been profoundly affected by this death. And there is, also, perhaps, the implication that her son must now assume responsibility for her now too? This reflects the tension and even

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trauma which can be associated with the tradition of the eldest son looking after elderly parents and, indeed, other family members like the daughters who are not married.

There is the sense too that the narrator must now, effectively, take much more responsibility and that this is reduced or elevated to ritual – now he must conform to tradition, compromising his individual freedom?

Form. The poem is in '**free verse**'. It has no regular rhyme scheme but there is a **regular beat**. We can hear this as **mostly iambic** – weak stress followed by strong stress. This helps to give some shape and structure and, perhaps, suggest the son's attachment to more western forms. There is some nifty **alliteration and assonance**, for example, in the pithy 'left debts and daughters' (an example of zeugma – one verb governing two apparently unrelated items).