

Buddhist Normatives and A. K. Ramanujan's Radicalism

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Abstract: Ramanujan's voice emerges from the Indian intertext, rather with an observant eye consistently moving on radical and alternative lines of our plural society and multi-cultural India. To read Ramanujan, the poet, is to discover and experience certain ignored vistas of our complex and great culture beyond the consumerist practices of the self.

Keywords: Buddhism, Ramanujan, Radicalism, Identity.

Reading Ramanujan's poetry and prose leaves often an elusive trail of impressions bordering on Buddhist philosophy and practices. In exploring traces and intertexts available, one would perceive, these are but closely and intricately interwoven with the ideas and concepts in poems that have been treated as Hindu or Western things obviously in the first place. Before coming to deal with Ramanujan's Buddhist consciousness in detail, an attempt is made to gain insights from his poetic dimensions that subtly conceal and reveal simultaneously a Buddhist in him. Ramanujan's poetic is marked by observation of the detail. The poet is comfortable in his modernist attitude toward the object he describes, or the experience he attends to. He is equally aware of sudden terrifying dislocation of life or identity. This suggests that Ramanujan accepts the process of detail and that of dislocation or death as necessary entangled phases of being. He rejoices in both, but celebrates the detail with a tendency toward the undetermined and startlingly new state as a kind of creative evolution, howsoever without evolution's mechanistic idea of progress or finalist future. In the poem "Elements of compositions" (*Second Sight*) he writes of the self as it develops from past bearings: 'composed as I am of... father's seed and mother's egg.' This evolution is not to be the biological imperative alone; and the poet would come up with a philosophic grace, but not rushing into a mystifying lyric:

And even as I add, | I lose, decompose | into my elements, | into other
names and forms, | past, and passing, tenses | without time, |
Caterpillar on a leaf, eating, | being eaten.' (123)

In this, his poetic vision comes close to Bergson's concept of creative evolution, which Bergson explains of the self in the following manner:

(...) our personality shoots, grows, and ripens without ceasing. Each of its moments is something new added to what was before. We go further: it is not only something new, but something unforeseeable. Doubtless, my present state is explained by what was in me and by what was acting on me a moment ago. (8)

In Ramanujan this shift from identity to identity in an unceasing fluidity is also aptly characterized by Kulashrestha as "the plurality of identity."

But the critic stops sadly short and did not explore or extend the Bergsonian affirmation into other areas. What is usually noticeable in Ramanujan's poetic is that becomings rather than beginnings of life mostly engage the poet's exploration and vision of the self. Further, his tale with a twist in the end to begin a new tale brings to our awareness a mode of dialectic between contraries and binary opposites. Thus his antinomian, ambivalent evolution moves toward a 'sudden' transformation of wholeness, which to him does not sustain for long, which does not crystallize into a permanent state. Ramanujan's "Looking for the Centre" recounts:

Suddenly, connections severed | as in a lobotomy, unburdened | of
history, I lose | my bearings, a circus zilla spun | at the end of her rope,
dizzy | terrified, | and happy. (*Second Sight* 184-86)

The poet does not linger to lyrically celebrate the "dizzy, terrified, and happy" state, does not offer the reader explorative glimpses of the apocalypse or the nature of sudden, dramatic moments of epiphanies. It seems he is ever ready, as the self is ready, to take on the immediate next stage of a creative progress. There is an objectivist tendency to mark in all such readiness and the Bergsonian awareness of the self's creative disruption. Ramanujan's objective poetry shaped under the modernist influence and that of William Carlos Williams, in particular, does indicate a mind to broadly demystify the experience. This attitude of demystification serves the poet in three crucial directions: one, in keeping the observation to the details of the concrete and available; secondly, in undermining the symbols of all that has been historically, philosophically, and religiously celebrated and perpetuated as grand mystery; thirdly, in destabilizing the sublimely high by an insinuating analogy with the ordinary and unobserved. We could clearly gauge all of this almost in the opening poem "The Striders":

See them perch | on dry capillary legs | weightless | on the ripple skin
| of a stream. | No, not only prophets | walk on water. This bug sits |
on a landslide of lights (*The Striders* 3)

The insistent denial of the prophet (maybe, Christ-like miracle achievers) to positively recognize the ordinary miracles of 'this bug' (water insect), while de-romanticizing the bug's eye-deep drowning is purposely achieved by the poet. The poem has also conveyed a sense that if we 'search for', we would of course find ('see') miracles performed by the ordinary object, experience, and life. The poem subtly asks for opening our eye to and going eye-deep at the things tiny and trite. It is important to remember that this poem is the first poem of Ramanujan's first publication; thus his attention to observe the ordinary has continued throughout his creative life. On the other hand, this demystifying passion in Ramanujan does have its beginnings in his early upbringing in the Indian cultural milieu. Though modern Western influence could produce questioning historically late of the Indian traditions cluttered in ritualistic practices, the native interrogation of orthodoxies and life-sapping customs was not absent. This observant recognition of the unobserved and ignored particular has been spiritually acclaimed and poetically celebrated in the medieval *bhakti* movement of India. And Ramanujan has been acutely aware of this cultural radicalism in his own

translations of *vachana* (sayings steeped in the religious) poetry in Kannada. The poet himself greatly describes the *vachana* thus:

Vacanas are literature, but not merely literary. They are a literature in spite of itself, scorning artifice, ornament, learning, privilege: a religious literature, literary because religious; great voices of a sweeping movement of protest and reform in Hindu society; witness to conflict and ecstasy in gifted mystical men.

He would further qualify the *vachana* literature in deservedly glowing terms:

Vacanas are our wisdom literature, They have been called the Kannada Upanishads. Some hear the tone and voice of Old Testament prophets or the Chuang-Tzu here. Vacanas are our psalms and hymns. Analogues may be multiplied. The vacanas may be seen as still another version of the Perennial Philosophy. But this is to forget particulars. (xii).

Ramanujan's creativity has been molded by these two sources of radical interrogation which integrate indigenous modes of spiritual and literary challenge with non-indigenous rationalization of cultural atrophies and debunking of the traditional mind-set. The same attitude of attending to nature and without falsifying ordinary "calls of nature" informs a poem in *Second Sight* called "Chicago Zen." While a staple of irony runs throughout, parody marks the fourth segment of the poem. "Watch your step," apart from its contextual parodic de-mystification, does bring to mind Zen Buddhism's tenet, which insists on the ever-alert mind of the Zen man or Master.

Watch your step, watch it, I say, | especially at the first high |
threshold, | and the sudden low | one near the end of the flight | of
stairs, | and watch | for the last | step that's never there. (187-8)

It is not clear to identify who ('I say') is speaking in the poem. But the "I" may be attributed to any Zen Master or Taoist Wayfarer. This is to wake us to the fact that Ramanujan is no novice in traditional and transcendental aspects of Zen Buddhism. His early infatuation with Buddhism has been reported by his daughter Kritika who states in her "Preface" to *Collected Poems* (2004): Ramanujan was very interested in Buddhism. (He tried to convert in his twenties). (xvi) Ramanujan's persistent radicalism gets revealed by way of early boosts received from his native roots. This other angle indeed doubtlessly pertains to a Buddhist in him, and the Buddhist is out to decry the overly Sanskritized culture. He does not mask his undermining of the *imperial* Sanskrit in an interview (1989).

AKR: (...) I suppose I'm ideologically radical towards Sanskrit.

ALB: That's interesting. How did that come about?

AKR: Like I said, partly my reaction to the Hindu caste system and my association with Brahmanism, I came from a Brahman family, so I could have it both ways. That is, I could have all the privileges of being a Brahman and also have all the privileges of reacting against it. My discovery over the years is that the mother tongues have so much in them, so much that is alive, and are much more pervasive, in all strata of society, in all ages from children to the very old, men and women, literate and non-literate.

Ramanujan continues transparently and is equally emphatic about the diversity in mother tongues: What holds them together? It's not Sanskrit. It's these mother tongues. I think I went into linguistics because of that. (61/62) One could ask politely a political question to know what diversified language he has used to make his transcreated poetry (in English) speak. The fact is that since the very beginning of his creative career, Ramanujan has been oriented toward counter-cultural traditions, as evident in his translations of classical saintly poetry, which shaped his mind and steadied his use of the specific nuances of a radical critique. One could well mark some ideological leanings of Ramanujan toward English as against Sanskrit as the metalanguage in India or all what Sanskrit signifies. To him, English could be comfortably taken as a supple yarn to weave and forge with the mother tongue in South. It sounds mostly to be a familiar clangor of the language politics in South India. As a practicing linguist he is intensively and passionately pleading the mother tongue, even while cognizant of its inner diversity, which is to be appreciated, of course. But does the mother tongue warrant a certain cleansing in order that it could speak more perfectly against its suspected adversary? Molly Daniels-Ramanujan, his wife, has this to say in her introductory to *The Oxford India Ramanujan* (2004):

He knew the intricacies of the Indian language problem. The aesthetic part of him is moved by the soul-stirring resonance of Sanskrit at Vedic ceremonies. The vocabulary of the regional languages was drawn from Sanskrit, but he felt the pull of 'the native woodnotes'; he valued the power of the oral tradition. Ramanujan was a builder of bridges.... (xix)

But in much of his apparent disposition to keep Sanskrit, as it were, waiting at the door step of *akam*, while inviting English fast into his kitchen, seems somewhat hypersensitive and absurd. And the whole irony of this language/culture politics would turn out to be an amusing encounter for the guest on the wait, since the aged guest (Sanskrit) could hear its morning (Sanskritic) slokas uttered in the interior Tamil/Kannada house, while it is blasphemed in the learned dialogue between the American and Dravidian ideologues. The fact is the mother tongue is no body's birth pang, and culture is no body's singular self-simmering. When Ramanujan translated the Vachana or Sangam poetry, in all probability, it would have irked and embarrassed him by the innate tangles of the language with Sanskrit, certain gods, symbols, sounds and concepts of an ancient culture. If he falls out with Sanskrit, what should we ask of his learned disposition as regards English? It is Ramanujan to declare in the interview (1989): "English made us self-critical, ... English made us critical of English itself." (79) It strongly implies, before the British colonial regime, the Indians, as if, were not self-critical, whose parody and irony could venture even to lash out at their most revered gods poem after poem; and that parody going more radical and subversive in women's conversations, family repartees, children's natural travesties, say, in academically unapproved private domains, what he would love to collect as the folklore of the *interior* yard, or interior landscape. One must refrain from supposing that Ramanujan was unaware of the blasphemy traditions in Indian literature which never invited any Indian materialist to face the death knell of heresy. Perhaps he

wanted to convey that after historic destructions wrought by the Buddha of age-old shibboleths and scaffolds, Indian culture has reverted back into its putrefying practices and un-liberating customs. And he too is equally outspoken about certain wrong beliefs held by the Western intellectual about Indian history and Indian achievements in many fields. It is interesting to realize that he would always interpret his native classics in the light of his ideological agenda and perceive threats from the non-vernacular Hindi/ Sanskrit in India, and more interestingly, a similar threat does never appear from the governing English (not imperial?), which, to him, would appear more liberating than the *imperial* Sanskrit. Ironically, he is speaking to those in the USA who probably do not know what “diversity” in language could spell for the monoliths of their language (English), their culture (predominantly Euro-American) and their religion (Christian). Here, he is not to be seen as an exile speaking out his frustrations because of political persecutions in India. And he never perceives himself as the one. Nevertheless, any patronage, one would suspect, in the present case of Ramanujan's American Fulbright Fellowship, would not be a 'free lunch' despite ideological signboards of the so-called disinterested academic cake. Further, he would support “enlarging the canon” of Western literature (73). On the other hand, Gauri Viswanathan in her *Masks of Conquest* (2000) would categorically disclose how as literary study English was taught in nineteenth-century India well before its institutionalization in England “with a political or religious purpose, demonstrating the superior virtues of Englishmen or Christians or both”. It remains no more secret that as a strategy of colonial management, the imperial English did not encourage Oriental studies in India. In her study she challenges contemporary assumptions about canon formation and modern literary study in the West. (Ballhatchet 103). It seems problematic to perceive Ramanujan as a postcolonial reader of India; some other radical register, maybe (post-Indian?), would better qualify him. (Baral 92). His critique of India is not confined to postcolonial periods, its intent far goes down in history to the remote age of clashing ideas and philosophies that helped evolve many languages, religions and diverse schools of free thought. It is not to be an overstatement that the poet's politics of empowering the mother tongue and ideologically positioning himself against Sanskrit for protecting diversity of Indian spoken tongues is all a part of his creative identification with the particular and the diverse as against the pure, the sublime, and the imperial. His modes of de-mystification or de-romanticization are of a piece with the earliest premise of Ramanujan's acute observation of things, which is not devoid of his sprite Buddhistic normative.

Ramanujan as a radical Hindu can be justly reconsidered from his alternative viewpoints and ideologies. It is lately realized that his radical deconstruction of the Sanskritized India, his counter culture sympathies embody the Buddhistic dispositions. This belatedness in the critical enterprise is not new to this country, now of recognizing the poet's radical voice in the Buddhistic light. His voice is still drowned in the crowd noise of other familiar philosophies and East-West deliberations. The fact is that Ramanujan cannot be a radical basking in the modern intellectualism of the West alone; his fundamental radicalism

is far more rooted in his native Indian climate of diversities, native twangs of languages, and native tugs of philosophies. As a poet he himself has never indicated his express disposition in poetry to be understood as a Buddhist in practice. The dominant image that emerges in his poetry and prose is one Hindu critiquing his culture's false systems and prejudices. Obviously, in these radical perspectives is concealed his innate Buddhist spirit of criticism. Delighting in life's ceaseless motion, slipping by man's grand myths, these stumbling blocks of truth, his creative spirit sometimes resonates more than the Bergsonian terms of the evolving self do. The significance of life lived *moment by moment* in Ramanujan's art is also sensitively, though too briefly, observed by King when he reflects on the artist's sense of "living from moment to moment" (1987: 115). Elements of laughter and irony intersecting with appreciations of life, of course, work in his poetry like titillating stimuli toward unfastening the locked gate, the blocked mind, like unscrewing the rusted nuts in recognition of life's vitality and its self-reflexive energy. The idea of momentariness does not in Ramanujan speak of metaphysical entropy of the life force. On the contrary, its staple is to ever enforce the supple fluidity of the being, nature, and truth. And by this norm of the ordinary and natural processes, Ramanujan's creativity is steeped in postulates, elusive as they are, that can be acknowledged as Buddhist and Taoistic. "Towards Simplicity" (*The Striders*) is a poem in recognition of the natural self, and which details the particularities of its physical nature. It is roughly designed in a 'sonnet' form, which draws the body as mysterious a house as embodying "co-extensive spring and autumn" and inside which millions of cells, tissues, and corpuscles die their 'hourly' death: they are "fertile in fall, ending as others begin."

Millions grow lean and fall away | in the hourly autumn of the body. |
But fertile in fall, ending as others begin, | to the native of death they
run. | From the complexity of reasons | *gyring* within reasons | of co-
extensive spring and autumn, | into the soil as soil we come, | to find
for a while a simplicity | in larger, external seasons. (37)

The image of gyre reminds us of W. B. Yeats, his idea of the underlying change of history and the recreation of the world through his antithetical gyres of self-conflicting forces (Ward 144). Further, Yeats's idea has its Chinese premise in the gyre symbol. Thus, the terms of the entire poem and, in particular, "co-extensive spring and autumn" might be read in the interactive polarities of yin/yang principles of the Taoist philosophy. As regards the thought in "fertile in fall, ending as others begin," not only are the metonymic as well as metaphoric paradoxes pronounced; its just appeal is approximate to the Taoistic nature or Zen's practical self. There is a meditative recognition and a quiet acceptance of 'the fall' or 'ending' in evolving life, and an eye-deep gaze into the body, which Zen too minds to nurture and understand. Life practices Zen in its impermanence, which a Buddhist, far more than others, could consciously celebrate. Suzuki explains the practical Zen while emphasizing its truth:

(...) "Your everyday life, that is the Tao." ... Zen is pre-eminently practical. It appeals directly to life, not even making reference to a soul, or to God, or to anything that interferes with or disturbs the ordinary course of living. The idea of Zen is to catch life as it flows. There is

nothing extraordinary or mysterious about Zen. (44-45)

Again, the sudden and dramatic entry of the self into a startlingly new form unburdened of history enforces the fact of evolution remain open-ended. Such a conception of the self as growing, evolving, ceaselessly shifting, is not a recent postmodern postulate only in the history of thought or theory, since empiricist and materialist thinkers of ancient ages have been increasingly prone towards conceiving the self in objective terms of the world and life. However, when, Ramanujan brings in a Buddhist norm of delight (a dizzy, *terrified* and *happy* self) in dislocation, he is saying something of a deep mystery, which he will not engage in for reasons perhaps beyond his experience, beyond his capacity to delve into the domain of the mystical and the sublime. None of his poems is ambitious of a rhetorical sublime soaring to touch epical dimensions of the grand and the mystical; none is mystical, to be precise. As one would readily urge, the true Buddhist does not remain eccentric on the orthodox performance of right actions alone, relevant as these really are, to the phenomenal existence, he has to have the ultimate *nirvana* experienced once, because this experience is the final validation of all right actions. Ramanujan does not appear as a mystic, or a doctrinaire, or a moralizing philosopher. His poetry reveals its writer to be a Zen practitioner far more than a traditional believer in grand beliefs. Nonetheless, he has been eying a *Buddhist* sublime of sorts, in that his consistent motion towards the recovery, appreciation and projection of *the ordinary*, in the sense also of the *alternative* domains and premises of life as subversive of the grand thought, remains a major preoccupation in his creativity. Ramanujan has not made a song as grand and deep, and justifiably so, as in glorifying terms of praise to the self. And this could be called an anti-centralist, *anti-sublimist* premise of Ramanujan's aesthetic. To this kind of art and thought, parody and irony are a means of apt allegiance, and on which the self-reflexivity of such poetics always relies. His use of laughter is not meant to demean its target; laughter is a ready way to slip away from, all the while cognizant of the object's oddness or even beauty, its usefulness or obstinate non-malleability, from all these impediments to our mindfulness of *The Way* (the Tao). His irony does not aim at moralizing, thus, fixing into an artificial form, what is ever natural, even if ordinary, not grand-looking. One remembers early poems such as "The Rickshaw-wallah" and "Epitaph on a Street Dog" (*The Striders*) where the poet's objectivity leads many readers to quick conclusions like unsympathetic or insensitive portrayal of the ordinary. The poet denies us this kind of comfort, since his way is to uncover the unattended and overlooked, thus defamiliarize our automated habits of anticipation and pleasure. The ordinary has moments of grace, the fact of which has been consistently recognized and recaptured in almost all of his poems. For in moments, there arrives an insight to truth, a revelation that suddenly changes a prolonged history as in the poem "History" (*Relations*), and these moments are of flux, not sticking to any goal, ideal, pleasure, as in the flow of life. This offers at a second sight of Ramanujan's artistry much that is in spirit and nature akin to Zen and the Tao. The figure "caterpillar on a leaf, eating,/ being eaten" ("Elements of compositions") contains

a perennial norm of Taoism of 'eat and be eaten'. Even his three exotic love poems 'for wife', his prayers to Lord Murugan, his imagist poems and poems centered around family, folk ideas, shifting self and memory, and the Hindoo poems, all important categories of his poetry do stand attested by a deceptive dialectic of the ordinary with the sublime of course without intellectually sever dialogues. The dialectical in Ramanujan is not to be understood within confining binaries only. His post-structuralist orientations too surpass the binarist limitations in opening up as well as deepening awareness and insight. But the fact is that since the very beginning of his creative career, Ramanujan has been moved by counter-cultural perspectives, as even seen in his translations of classical poetry (Vachana and Sangam), the usually neglected thing, the marginally small, the peripheral one is set before his mind to treat, and to treat with belief and to attend to with Zen sensitivity and precision rather than uneducated passion. All these nuances intricate, subtle, fumbling and alien, also awesomely though elusively eye-deep and deceptively simple, make into what may be called Ramanujan's *ordinary sublime*, an anti-sublimist aesthetic.

Attending, moreover, in detail to the anatomy of an image or object is also an urge in the Buddhist who practices an appreciated closeness to life, which he accepts as vital to understanding the nature of the self. "KMNO4 in Grandfather's Shaving Glass" has demonstrated Ramanujan's wakeful and absorbed awareness of the self's shifting motion, while he seems outwardly attending to an object. Wakeful to every moment and accurate observation ("Butcher's Tao"), in the positive sense also of 'watch your step' ("Chicago Zen"), and acute discretion in the sense of sharp insight are the Taoist as well as the Buddhist tenets to practice and adhere in everyday life. To believe in such a norm has its possible effects on the mode of presenting an object, when the concerned artist regards as insincere and false any romanticization of the object or life. It is, therefore, likely that Ramanujan's language keeps to the ordinary speech, which is another way of debunking the ornate and heavily ornamental Sanskrit predilection in expressions. A poem called "Zero" in *The Black Hen* feature an amusingly pithy dialogue on zero which reflects the east and west dichotomy. The last few lines bring out an implication that "you, me and this talk" has "no value," for any of us cannot be "a real number." And the final implication follows that zero alone is paradoxically real. The poet delves no further into its metaphysics. Many of his poems illustrate his creative enquiries into death and negation what continues to be the deceptive domain of life. In such inquisitiveness he again comes close to the Buddhist and Taoist. We would like to know what inspires the poet to muse on death in a poem that sounds un-Ramanujanian in this direction. In "Birthdays" (*The Black Hen*), while reflecting on the special significance of birthday in life (great humans/ mayflies), he writes otherwise enquiringly and seriously, without his usually lightening touch of irony:

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? (16/03/92)

This doubt at death on the body's dispersal into elemental forms is a serious reflection on his own almost secure conviction that we have in "Towards Simplicity" and "Elements of Composition". The poem "Birthdays" raises many questions: why birth is a time-taker, when death is sudden? Are death throes and birth pangs the same? 'There is no evidence', as *closely* as the poet can see. This rings of a certainty, but a doubt more disturbing lingers on when we become aware of the exact day of composition of the poems, "Death in Search of a Comfortable Metaphor" and "Birthdays". The day indicates the same date, (16/03/92) which is the poet's sixty-third birthday, and which is a year earlier than his untimely death in July 1993. The issue is not simply a premonition of death for the poet; it would significantly suggest what feel is death that the poet yearns to know. If the dispersal of the gathered energies back into their elements is a crystallized experience, it would mean something unbelievably singular and substratum to experience, because something essential has to persist in order to experience the dispersal of the being. This would lead into the marvelous principle of the Buddhistic *Consciousness Only* as the Real, which is rarely available in Ramanujan. *Tao Tê Ching* states that the law of the Tao is everything returns to its starting point: "Reversion is the movement of the Tao" (Ball 37).

These two birthday-dated poems end markedly in questions. Considering the poet's serious thought on death on his birthday, one may view this change as a slight revision of his past conviction, which is accommodated within his conception of the self as an ever changing, evolving and ambivalently dialectical process. And this indicates no contradiction as such to his primary premise; and his question not a total cancellation of the earlier conception. We may see it as a further twist in his growing vision of the self. On the other hand, it would be more reasonable to suggest that his Buddhist position is felt to be incomplete somewhat. It seems at this stage of his life (in the 63rd year), he is awake to something bordering on a stable truth other than or beyond the flux of being. The poem "Fizzle" in *The Black Hen* (1995) does not carry a date of composition, which complicates and pre-empt any assumption of a stable truth, since the fizzling of the soul is contemplated. But like a Buddhist believing in non-self (*anatta*) he is not unnerved to "watch" the soul and its corporeal twin dissipating into nothing. Nevertheless, the last lines "the seer and the seen/ fizzle towards nothing" are awesomely axiomatic of Zen; the Zen pith fills his earlier conviction of the co-creative living and dying. To echo the Zen philosophy of Dogen: "life and death are equally the manifestation of the total dynamism" (Heine 374). This, in other words, would reveal an affirmation of the death principle in Ramanujan. However, the *Mahayana* Buddhist believes in a principle of permanent substratum, which endures beyond all vicissitudes and transience affecting only the existential and temporal and not the impeccable, ultimate real, which nevertheless defies human conceptualization or approximation into pre-fixed norms. Such a principle gets open though disconcerting to the reader when he comes across the last poem "Fear No Fall" in the volume *The Black Hen*, and the most likely personal heed of the poet to "a voice both within and without" saying: 'Fall, fall | you will never fear a fall again, | fall now!' (275-77)

A vice both within and without is epiphanic and suggestive of transcendental potential, while the invited quotation links the revelation to 'the Old One', the Tao, even 'the Chinese sage' in the poem and Arunagiri the Hindu saint. Why the editor of this posthumous volume placed the poem as the last piece is a significant question but left unanswered, since no date is provided to the poem. If due stress is laid on the consequence of 'the fall', something like a stable substratum appears to underlie his awakening. Because, such a possibility is not to be regarded a fantasy, since already Arunagiri the Tamil saint stood as the undisputable testimony of such a secure vision, which Ramanujan has celebrated in his poetry. This fall of Arunagiri is not merely loosing into unknowing elements, it too assures a re-gathering into a human consciousness. This would indicate Ramanujan's lifelong search for such a certainty. This sense of certainty emerges in an elegant poem which gauges a rare experience. This rare poem is 'A Meditation' (239) in *The Black Hen*, which of course relates a transformed awareness of the persona being a black walnut tree, and the ordinary observation of a dog posing to piss at the tree (i.e. at him). The serious self-awareness and the comic sense of the dog piss must not dilute the implication that meditation does transform consciousness; even this transformed condition is recognized by a nonhuman instinctually, when to other intelligent humans this transformation idea might be nonsense. The poem has reinforced this transformation beyond the human intellect and this too remarkably in nature, in its natural process. It illustrates this by the example of a tree undergoing several avatars: its storm-hit break down, its turning into a butcher's block table at a carpenter's hands, its turning into writing sheet by the paper factory. Finally, it comes to the writer persona who is but a transformed tree. And strangely enough, the persona inwardly knows how he, indistinct from a tree, writes on a tree.

I know I'm writing now on my head, | now on my torso, my living |
hands moving | on a dead one, a form imagined body | working with
transience | of breathless | real bodies. (240)

This experience, even its idea, properly belongs to eastern mysticism, and particularly to mystical Buddhism, Taoism and Hinduism. The metaphysical question deals with how could a tree know or feel; and more exceptionally, who or what lies beneath or behind such processes or acts to cognize the sophistries. The only possible answer points to the indelible existence of the self who knows no death through innumerable transformations. And this self is the immortal principle out of which is formed a human, tree, or an animal, insect, or elements, earth, air, water, and fire. The self is both distinct and non-distinct from its phenomena. But mysticism is rare in Ramanujan, which did not see publication while he was alive. One word may have to be said finally in recalling Krittika's important but briefest reference in her "preface" to Ramanujan's Buddhist conviction and existentialist nothing as coexistent. (xvi) Our present discussion has pursued to privilege his Buddhist nothingness rather over the Western existentialist nihilism. Because the Buddhist nothingness has always ensured a higher life of affirmation and freedom, and it is by no means a semiotic maneuver to deconstruct and negate all logocentrist or solipsistic and relativistic premises. It is firmly rooted in

concrete experiences of satori and passes beyond linguistic strategies of intellectual juissance. Suzuki remarks observing that Zen is “not nihilism” and “frees us from conditions”:

(...) that we live in affirmation and not in negation, for life is affirmation itself; and this affirmation must not be the one accompanied or conditioned by a negation.... (38)

Life and Zen are not distinct things, since one is vitally the other like Zen is the innate spirit of life in performance. And most of Ramanujan's poetry is embedded in this conviction. However, from detailed discussion of his poetry and visionary pursuits, nothing emerges to support the alleged view of his 'intellectual thinness.' (Nagarajan 20) Ramanujan's voice emerges from the Indian intertext, rather with an observant eye consistently moving on radical and alternative lines of our plural society and multi-cultural India. To read Ramanujan the poet is to discover and experience certain ignored vistas of our complex and great culture beyond the consumerist practices of the self in library splintering into plural virtualities. And above all, his vision of the self is but enlivened with a comic awareness of life in the Buddhistic way, which intellectual strategies alone are not enough to obfuscate.

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