

Poetry
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Lecture 70
A K Ramanujan

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A K Ramanujan (1929-1993)



- Historical and Literary Context
- A K Ramanujan
- Three Poems
- "Self-Portrait"
- "Looking for a Cousin on a Swing"
- "A River"
- Analysis



Hello, friends, A K Ramanujan is a great poet in our country and he was born in 1929, and died in 1993 and he has had a very distinguished career. First, we will see the Historical and Literary Context to provide you a brief life sketch of A K Ramanujan and then we will read three poems. One, we will read just for the sake of understanding A K Ramanujan's own 'Self-Portrait' and then discuss two poems in detail, 'Looking for a Cousin on a Swing,' and 'A River.' Finally, we will conclude with an overall impression and a summary.

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Historical and Literary Context



- Post-Independent India; a youthful and energetic nation
- Regional and linguistic divisions in a growing country
- Conflict between tradition and modernity
- Attraction of the Western culture; science, individualism
- Well-trained youth in India; opportunities abroad
- Development of modernism: Pound and Moore
- The Cold War and Area Studies in the US
- Growth of English as a medium of creative writing
- Exploration of both Western and Eastern traditions
- Experiments with Indian poetry in English: Ezekiel, Moraes, Kolatkar, Das, Ramanujan, Mahapatra, etc.



Let us see the Historical and Literary Context. We deal with the post independent India, which became a youthful and energetic nation. And one of the aspects of post independent India we have to realize is, the kind of divisions regionally and linguistically all the while growing as a great country. We have faced conflicts between tradition and modernity. Do we have to follow the old way of life or do we have to follow the new way of life offered by the West?

We have this attraction of the Western culture, science, individualism and all that. And during this time, we have had many well-trained youths in India, looking for opportunities abroad, many of them moved away. In the context of literature, we found the development of modernism, particularly through Pound and Moore (Marianne Moore.) And in the political scenario, we have this Cold War and Area Studies in the US.

American government took interest in certain areas and they promoted Area Studies. And one of the areas studies, Asian and Dravidian study center received Ramanujan. That is why we need to understand this relationship between Cold War and Area Studies and how Ramanujan got into the US.

We also have to see the growth of English as a medium of creative writing in our country after independence. This gave an opportunity for exploring both, western and eastern traditions in our literature. Many poets started experimenting with poetry in English, like Ezekiel, Dom Moraes, Kolatkar, Kamala Das, we have of course Ramanujan and Mahapatra.

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A K Ramanujan (1929-1993)



- An extraordinary poet, translator, folklorist, and linguist
- Appreciated for his modernist poetic outlook with a deeper understanding of the past, especially South Indian languages, literatures, and cultures
- Widely recognized for his visual understanding and expression of the world in his poems, which he learnt from Marianne Moore and also the ancient Tamil poets
- Received the Padma Shri in 1976 and the MacArthur Award in 1983.
- Three volumes of poetry in English: *The Striders* (1966), *Relations* (1971), and *Second Sight* (1986); the fourth *The Black Hen* was published in *The Collected Poems* (1996)
- Most anthologized: "Looking for a Cousin on a Swing," "A River," "Small Scale Reflections on a Great House"



Ramanujan was an extraordinary poet, a translator, a folklorist and a linguist. He was appreciated for his modernist poetic outlook with a deeper understanding of the past, especially South Indian languages, literatures and cultures. He was widely recognized for his visual understanding and the expression of the world in his poems, which he learned from Marianne Moore and also from the ancient Tamil poets and Kanada poets.

He received the Padma Shri Award in 1976 and the MacArthur Award in 1983. He has written four volumes, three of which were published in his lifetime and the fourth one was published after his death. 'The Striders,' 'Relations,' 'Second Site' and the fourth volume is called 'The Black Hen,' which was included in the Collected Poems published in 1996. Some of the frequently anthologized poems of A K Ramanujan are 'Looking for a Cousin on a Swing,' 'A River,' 'Small Scale Reflections on a Great House.'

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Three Poems



- "Self-Portrait"
 - A nine line poem on the stranger within the self
- "Looking for a Cousin on a Swing"
 - A 23-line poem on the nascent and mature dimensions of sexual awakenings
- "A River"
 - A 49-line poem on the glorious and guilty aspects of nature and culture, especially poets.
- All three poems were published in *The Striders* (1966)



We have chosen three poems, one for reading, and two for discussion. The first poem we want to read is 'Self-Portrait.' It is a nine-line poem on the stranger within oneself. Then the poem that we want to discuss is 'Looking for a Cousin on a Swing,' it is a 23-line poem on the nascent and mature dimensions of sexual awakenings. And then the second point we have to discuss is 'A River,' it is a 49-line poem on the glorious and guilty aspects of nature and culture, especially poets in Tamil tradition, and literature. All these three poems were published in the first volume 'The Striders' in 1966.

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Self-Portrait



I resemble everyone
but myself, and sometimes see
in shop-windows
despite the well-known laws
of optics, 5
the portrait of a stranger,
date unknown,
often signed in a corner
by my father. 9
□What/ Who am I? The identity of the speaker: An undated piece of painting by his father; people are strangers to themselves when looked at closely.



Let us see the 'Self-Portrait' now.

“Looking for a Cousin on a Swing”



not very tall, but full of leaves
like those of a fig tree,

and we were very **innocent**
about it.

Now she looks for the **swing**
in cities with fifteen suburbs
and tries to be **innocent**
about it

15



“Looking for a Cousin on a Swing”



not only on the crotch of a tree
that looked as if it would burst
under every leaf
into a brood of scarlet figs

20

if someone suddenly sneezed.

23



Let us see this poem, ‘Looking for a Cousin on a Swing’ now.

“When **she** was four or five
she sat on a village **swing**
and her cousin six or seven,
sat himself against her;
with every lunge of the **swing**
she felt him
in the lurching pits

of her feeling;

and afterwards

we climbed a tree, she said,

not very tall, but full of leaves

like those of a fig tree,

and we were very **innocent**

about it.

Now she looks for a **swing**

in cities with fifteen suburbs

and tries to be **innocent**

about it.

not only on the crotch of a tree

that looked as if it would burst

under every leaf

into your brood of scarlet figs

if someone suddenly sneezed.

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Thematic Contrast



- Past and Present
- Girl/Woman and Boy/Man
- Village and City
- **Innocence and Experience**
- **Nature and Culture**
- Growth and Decay
- Pleasure and Pain
- Boredom and Meaning
- Fear and Freedom
- Individual Behavior and Social Norm



When we come to the Thematic Contrast, we can see the contrast between past and present, the young and the old, the girl or woman and boy and man, village and city, innocence and experience, nature and culture, growth and decay, pleasure and pain, boredom and meaning fear and freedom, individual behavior and social norm. How children were growing up in nature in villages, and how adults are growing up in cities, corrupt cities, that is where we have this innocence and corruption or experience. Both have similar dimensions about the awakenings within oneself in the body, how they feel about each other.

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Poetic Devices



- Metaphor:** she felt him/ in the lunging pits/ of her feeling;
Metaphor: and afterwards
we climbed a tree, she said, 10
- Simile:** but full of leaves/ like those of a fig tree,
Metaphor: Now she looks for the swing 15
in cities with fifteen suburbs
- Metaphor:** not only on the crotch of a tree
that looked as if it would burst 20
under every leaf
into a brood of scarlet figs
- Irony:** and tries to be innocent about it.
Repetition: swing and innocent
Pun: lunge, swing, crotch, brood, scarlet



We have a number of poetic devices in this poem, metaphor we have in 'she felt him in the lunging pits of her feeling,' then another metaphor in 'and afterwards we climbed a tree, she

said,' simile in, 'but full of leaves like those of a fig tree,' we also have something like an allusion to the fig tree here to the Bible, Adam and Eve, the kind of awakening that came between Adam and Eve after eating this apple.

We have a metaphor in, 'now she looks for a swing in cities with fifteen suburbs.' Another metaphor in 'not only on the crotch of a tree that looked as if it would burst under every leaf into a brood of scarlet figs.' We have irony in this poem, it is all about the experience and tries to be innocent about it.

We do something not innocent, but people feel about it. Then we have repetition in the words swing and innocent. We also have a pun on lung, swing, crotch, brood, scarlet. These words are transposed from one context to another, that is where we have this pun and also the kind of sexual meanings which are hidden in the poem, some of which will appear obviously some others we have to dig deeper into.

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Rhyme, Rhythm, and Meter

Form: Free verse



Rhyme: Repeated words like swing and innocent rhyme

Rhythm: iambic; conversational;
Actually a cute Indian story of Adam and Eve

Meter: polymetrical; line length varies from 3 syllables to 8 syllables; mono-, di-, tri- and tetra meter

Caesura, Enjambment, and End-Stopped Line:

When **she** | was four | or five (3 feet)
she sat | on a | village | swing (3+feet)
and her | cousin, | six or | seven, (4 feet)
sat him | self a | gainst her; (3 feet)



Let us see the Rhyme, Rhythm, and Meter. This is a poem in free verse and some words are repeated and that is why we have some kind of rhyme in swing and innocent. We have this conversational speech pattern which is like iambic where we have this a little story, we can say that, this is actually a cute Indian story of Adam and Eve, similar to the biblical Adam and Eve.

When we come to meter, we can say that, the meter of this poem is polymetrical. Because the line length varies from 3 syllables to 8 syllables, mono-, di-, tri- and tetra meter. We have Caesura, Enjambment and End-Stopped Line in this poem. Let us see the extract we have.

“When she was four or five
She sat on a village swing
and her cousin, six or seven,
sat himself against her.”

So, 3 feet and 4 feet; and this kind of alteration we have in this particular extract.

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Overall Impression

- This is a lyrical poem of love, longing and lust at different stages of human life from childhood chance encounters to serious and meaningless adult engagements.
- The speaker narrates the innocent experience of a swing between cousins from the age of four to seven. The swing continues behind the thick foliage of the fig tree. But the participants pretend to be innocent about the affair.
- The clever play of shifting voices from male to female to male is a comment by itself on the collusion between them.
- When the grown up cousin looks for such swings in cities, the problem of propriety arises, particularly after marriage.
- The poem is full of sexual imagery with psychoanalytical symbolism in which Ramanujan was seriously interested to understand human behaviors and cultures.



This overall impression will give us an understanding of this poem much better. This is a lyrical poem of love, longing and lust at different stages of human life from childhood chance encounters to serious and meaningless adult engagements. The speaker narrates the innocent experience of their swing between cousins from the age of four to seven. The swing continues behind the thick foliage of the fig tree, but the participants pretend to be innocent about the affair.

The clever play of shifting voices from male to female to male is a comment by itself on the collusion between male and female. When the grown-up cousin looks for such swings in cities, the problem of propriety arises, particularly after marriage. The poem is full of sexual imagery with psychoanalytical symbolism in which Ramanujan was seriously interested to understand human behaviors and cultures.



Actually, when poets write poems, they want to understand themselves they want to understand the society, they want to pass on their understanding to the posterity. It is a quest for the meaning of life.

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“A River” - I

In **Madurai**,
city of temples and poets,
who sang of cities and temples:

every summer
a river dries to a trickle 5
in the sand,
baring the sand ribs,
straw and women's hair
clogging the watergates 10
at the rusty bars
under the bridges with patches
of repair all over them
the wet stones glistening like sleepy
crocodiles, the dry ones
shaven water-buffaloes lounging in the sun 15



Let us move on to the second poem, ‘A River,’ which we have given in different slides and in different sections.

“In **Madurai**

city of temples and poets,

who sang of cities and temples;

every summer

a river dries to a trickle

in the sand

bearing the sand ribs,

straw and women's hair

clogging the watergates

at the rusty bars

under the bridges with patches
of repair all over them
the wet stones and glistening like sleepy
crocodiles the dry ones
shaven water-buffaloes lounging in the sun.”

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“A River” - II



The poets only sang of the **floods**.

He was there for a day
when they had the **floods**.
People everywhere talked
of the inches **rising**, 20
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,
one pregnant **woman** 25
and a couple of cows
named Gopi and Brinda, as usual.



The poets only sang of the **floods**.

He was there for a day

when they had the **floods**.

People everywhere talked

of the inches **rising** 20

of the precise number of cobbled steps

run over by the water, **rising**

on the bathing places

and the way it carried of three village houses,

one pregnant **woman** 25

and a couple of cows
named Gopi and Brinda as usual.

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“A River” - III



The new poets still quoted the old poets, but no one spoke in verse	30
of the pregnant woman drowned, with perhaps twins in her, kicking at blank walls even before birth.	
He said:	35
the river has water enough to be poetic about only once a year and then it carries away	40



The new poet still quoted
the old poets, but no one spoke
in verse 30
of the pregnant woman
drowned, with perhaps twins in her,
kicking blank walls
even before birth.
He said: 35
the river has water enough
to be poetic
about only once a year
and then
it carries away. 40

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“A River” - IV



in the first half-hour
three village houses,
a couple of **cows**
named Gopi and Brinda
and one pregnant **woman** 45
expecting identical twins
with no moles on their bodies,
with different coloured diapers

to tell them apart. 49

□ The **design** of the printed page is crucial for Ramanujan’s poetry, e.g., the line “to tell them apart” is printed separately with noticeable spacing.



in the first half-hour

three village houses,

a couple of **cows**

named Gopi and Brinda

and one pregnant **woman** 45

expecting identical twins

with no moles on their bodies

with different colored diapers

to tell them apart.” 49

The design of the printed page is crucial for Ramanujan’s poetry. We have for example, the line to tell them apart separately printed which is noticeable in this poem. Spacing, line or words, line length everything matters in Ramanujan’s poetry and many poets for that matter.

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Thematic Contrast



- City and Village
 - Summer and Rainy Seasons
 - Wet Stones and Dry Stones
 - Human beings and Animals
 - Old and New Poets
 - Birth and Death
 - Similarity and Difference
 - Ordinary/ Normal and Poetic
- The Vaigai river flows once a year and brings water/life and death as well; the river of life and death; but poets sing of the river partially.



Let us see the Thematic Contrast now between city and village, summer and rainy seasons, wet stones and dry stones, human beings and animals, old and new poets, birth and death, similarity and difference, ordinary, normal and poetic expressions or life. We have the river here, and the name of the river is the Vaigai river which flows once a year and brings water at life, and also death. The river of life and death that is what we find in this poem. But the poets sing of the river partially, they do not have a complete picture. They forget about the pregnant woman or the three village houses or the animals that is the cows, Brinda and Gopi.

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Poetic Devices



- Metaphor:** barring sand ribs (7)
- Simile:** the wet stones glistening like sleepy crocodiles, the dry ones shaven water-buffaloes lounging in the sun (13-15)
- Irony:** the old and new poets singing about the river, but not mentioning anything about the pregnant woman with twins or the cows floating in the floods




We have some poetic devices in this poem. The metaphor we can see in ‘barring sand ribs,’ like a human body, the ribs are open. Then we can see the simile ‘the wet stones glistening

like sleepy crocodiles,’ the stone on the riverbed, that is like sleepy crocodiles. Then we have ‘the dry ones shaven water-buffaloes lounging in the sun.’ Then the whole poem is about irony. The world and new poets singing about the river, but not mentioning anything about the pregnant woman with twins or the cows floating in the floods.

This is a partial picture; poetry should not be partial it should be able to cover up the entire vision. The poetry is inclusive that is what A K Ramanujan is trying to convey through this poem.

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Rhyme, Rhythm, and Meter


Form: Free verse

Rhyme: repetitions of the same words at the end to denote some rhyme: floods, woman, rising, birth, COWS

Rhythm: casual and riverine

Meter: predominantly iambic tri meter

The <u>new</u> <u>poets</u> still <u>quo</u> ted	(3+ feet)
the <u>old</u> <u>poets</u> , but no <u>one</u> <u>spoke</u>	(3+ feet)
in <u>verse</u>	(1 foot)
of the <u>pregnant</u> <u>woman</u>	(3 feet)
<u>drowned</u> , with perhaps <u>twins</u> in her,	(3+ feet) (28-32)



When we come to rhyme, rhythm and meter, we see that this poem is written in free verse. Rhyme we can see in the repetitions of the same words at the end to denote some kind of rhyme floods, women, rising, bird cows, these words are repeated, so that we can have some kind of rhyme. And the rhythm of this poem is somewhat casual, it is something like we can say riverine, there is a kind of flow that is why we say riverine.

Then the meter is predominantly iambic tri meter. Although, line number varies from one to another, so in one line we have 3 feet and another line we have just 1 foot, and in some lines, we have 3 plus feet. That means one extra syllable will be there. So, let us see the extract we have here.

“The new poets still quoted

The old poets, but no one spoke

in verse

of the pregnant woman

drowned with perhaps twins in her” (28-32)

That is where we have some kind of imagination of the poet, just not the pregnant woman, not just one only one child, there may be two children as well.

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Overall Impression

- The context of the poem is the old and new poets of Madurai, the famed seat of Tamil literature and culture, singing the glory of the river.
- As a visitor observes, the river is usually dry during the summer but when it floods, it carries villages, women, and cows and destroys them.
- The speaker sadly notes that both old and new poets are apathetic to human suffering, especially the pregnant women with twins, and the cows.
- The images of the sand ribs, crocodiles and shaven buffalos to describe the river bed are evocative and offer a sharply ironic view of the furious river and the indifferent poets.
- The environmental impact of the city dwellers on the river reveals that humans have lost their sense of humanity.
- The zig-zag lines with repetitions of “floods, woman, birth, and cows indicate the fury of the river and of the speaker.



To give an overall impression of this poem, let us look at the points here. The context of the poem is the old and the new poets of Madurai, the famed seat of Tamil literature and culture singing the glory of the river Vaigai. As a visitor observes, the river is usually dry during the summer, but when it floods it carries villages, women and cows and destroys them.

The speaker sadly notes that both old and new points are apathetic to human suffering especially, the pregnant woman with twins, and also the cows. The images of the sand ribs, crocodiles and shaven buffaloes to describe the river bed are evocative and offer a sharply ironic view of the furious river and the indifferent poets.

The environmental impact of the city dwellers on the river reveals that humans have lost their sense of humanity. The zigzag lines with the repetitions of floods, women, bird and cows indicate the fury of the river and of the speaker as well, about the sufferings of humanity, which are not fully expressed in poetry.

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Summary



- Historical and Literary Context
- A K Ramanujan
- Three Poems
- "Self-Portrait"
- "Looking for a Cousin on a Swing"
- "A River"
- Analysis
- "Everything comes to him who waits."
- A K Ramanujan's *Journeys: A Poet's Diaries* (2019)



To summarize, A K Ramanujan's poems that we have discussed, we saw the Historical and Literary Context in which A K Ramanujan wrote his poetry. He was born in India, studied here, took interest in poetry, but went to US for study, settled there and wrote poems and also involved himself in translations and other research activities.

We discussed two poems primarily, but we also read 'Self-Portrait' to understand the kind of poet he was, how he felt about his father, how he felt about himself. And then, we saw his two poems 'Looking for a Cousin on a Swing' and 'A River.'

While Looking for a Cousin on a Swing talks about the sexual awakenings in a boy and a girl, the river talks about some kind of social awakening, which was not understood by poets in the past and also in the present. And it takes a poet like A K Ramanujan to go to US, America, live there for some time, come back here, see the river, read the literature, and then see how we have been apathetic to our own human suffering.

We analyze the two poems linguistically, politically, rhetorically and gave our own overall impressions. We have a beautiful quotation from A K Ramanujan's recent book 'Journeys: A Poet's Diaries.' It is fantastic to see. This is something that normally we don't notice in our writers. He kept some diaries throughout his life and these diaries have been put together, under the title 'Journeys. A Poet's Diaries' and published in 2019. And here we have one line like this "everything comes to him who waits."

Remember, Nissim Ezekiel, "the best poets wait for words, the best readers wait for best poems."

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Let us see the references now. Here are some, hope you will be able to see at least one or two and expand your own understanding of A K Ramanujan. Thank you.