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**Familial Nostalgia in A.K. Ramanujan's  
*Of Mothers, Among Other Things* and *Obituary*****Dr. Meghraj N Pawar***Associate Professor, Department of English,  
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**ABSTRACT**

This research paper explores the nuanced depiction of familial nostalgia in the poetry of A.K. Ramanujan, focusing specifically on "Of Mothers, Among Other Things" and "Obituary". While nostalgia in diasporic literature often serves as an escapist longing for a lost homeland, this study argues that Ramanujan employs a critical and objective lens that avoids mere sentimentality. The analysis examines how Ramanujan reconstructs his South Indian roots through vivid, often gritty imagery. In *Of Mothers, Among Other Things*, the poet traces the physical toll of maternal sacrifice, shifting from the "silk and white petals" of youth to the "eagle claws" of old age. Conversely, *Obituary* provides an ironic look at the paternal legacy, focusing on the practical burdens of debt and ritual rather than emotional trauma. By comparing these two works, the paper demonstrates how Ramanujan blends attachment and detachment, utilising his hybrid identity as an expatriate to document the decay of memory and the stark realities of domestic life. Ultimately, the research reveals that for Ramanujan, nostalgia is not a refuge, but a tool for precise cultural and personal excavation.

**Keywords:** *Familial Nostalgia, Diasporic Identity, Maternal Imagery, Irony and Detachment*

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**FULL PAPER****INTRODUCTION**

A.K. Ramanujan (1929–1993) was a distinguished Indian-born poet, essayist, translator, and scholar of Indian literature. Born in Mysore to a Brahmin family, he was deeply influenced by his father, Attipat Asuri Krishnaswamy, a professor at Mysore University who specialised in English, Kannada, and Sanskrit. Ramanujan later became a fellow of Deccan College, Pune (1958–59) and earned his Ph.D. from Indiana University, Bloomington. A polyglot and linguistic scholar, he was fluent in English, Tamil, Kannada, Telugu, and Sanskrit. His literary corpus is celebrated for its "local touch and global appeal," blending profound originality with intellectual sophistication. Ramanujan's academic career spanned several prestigious institutions in both India and the United States, most notably at the University of Chicago, where he contributed significantly to the South Asian Studies program. In recognition of his contributions to literature, he was awarded the Padma Shri in 1976. Tragically, he passed away on July 13, 1993, in Chicago during surgery. His posthumous collection, *The Collected Poems* (1995), was honoured with the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1999. His major publications include *The Striders* (1966), *Relations* (1971), *Selected Poems* (1976), and *Second Sight* (1986).

**Familial Nostalgia**

Nostalgia, derived from the Greek *nostos* (homecoming) and *algos* (pain), traditionally refers to a painful yearning for home. In the context of the Indian diaspora, this often manifests as a romanticised recollection of childhood, rituals, and ancestral landscapes. For many writers, this serves as a psychological buffer against the alienation experienced in a foreign land. However, familial nostalgia for Ramanujan is not escapist longingness. It is an intellectual and sensory engagement with the past. He treats his memories as artefacts-objects to be turned over, inspected for flaws, and described with scientific precision. His hybrid identity as an Indian living in the West allows him to maintain a dual perspective: the emotional attachment of a son and the detached objectivity of a scholar. In his poems, the family unit becomes a microcosm of Indian society, reflecting broader themes of tradition, gender roles, and the inevitable decay brought by time.

In a literary context, "familial nostalgia" refers to the yearning for past domestic memories and their integration into the present. It encompasses life experiences rooted in tradition, culture, religion, and social relationships. For diaspora writers, nostalgia is a defining characteristic; they often reflect on childhood and ancestral homes to navigate the distance from their native land.

While nostalgia can sometimes serve as an escapist mechanism to soothe the loneliness of displacement, Ramanujan's approach is different. He does not view the past through a rose-coloured lens. Instead, in *Of Mothers, Among Other Things* and *Obituary*, he employs a critical, almost clinical perspective to examine his mother and father. This brand of nostalgia reveals the poet's hybrid identity as an expatriate who is both connected to and detached from his roots.

### **Maternal Memories in *Of Mothers, Among Other Things***

Published in the collection *Relations* (1971), this poem provides a tender yet vivid portrait of the speaker's mother across various stages of her life. Despite living in America, the poet's memories of his South Indian upbringing remain sharp. However, these memories are not mere sentimental accounts; they are practical, sometimes cynical, observations. The speaker traces his mother's journey from youth to old age, highlighting her domestic toil and silent sacrifices:

*I smell something twisted.  
Black bone tree, the silk and white  
Petal of my mother's youth  
From her earrings, three diamonds  
Clash a handful of needles (1-5)*

Ramanujan uses the obscure metaphor of the "black bone tree" to contrast with the "silk and white petal" of his mother's youth, suggesting a delicate beauty that has since hardened. The mention of diamond earrings reflects a traditional Indian affinity for jewellery.

As the poem progresses, the imagery shifts from "petals" to "eagle claws." The speaker notes the "rain to the crying cradles," symbolising the relentless labour of child-rearing. By comparing her hands to the "black-pink wrinkled feet" of an eagle, Ramanujan subverts a symbol of prey and violence to represent a mother's fierce, protective love and the physical toll of her labour.

The poem concludes with the mother in her twilight years. Her saris no longer "cling" but hang loose like the "feather of a one-time wing." Even in her frailty, she is seen picking up a grain of rice from the floor—a symbolic act that represents a generation's values of thrift and domestic responsibility.

### **The Father Legacy in *Obituary***

In *Obituary*, Ramanujan shifts his focus to his father. Unlike a traditional elegy that mourns emotional loss, this poem examines the practical—and often burdensome consequences of a father's death. The tone is notably ironic:

*Father, when he passed on,  
left dust on a table of papers,  
left debts and daughters,  
a bedwetting grandson named by the toss of a coin after him,  
a house that leaned slowly through our growing years  
on a bent coconut tree in the yard. (1-6)*

The father's legacy is defined by what he left behind: unpaid debts, unmarried daughters, a bed-wetting grandson, and a decaying house leaning against a coconut tree. To the speaker, these are not cherished heirlooms but heavy responsibilities.

The poem details the Hindu cremation rituals with a detached objectivity, mentioning the "two coins" on the eyes and the scattering of ashes "where three rivers meet." Ramanujan emphasises the "ordinariness" of his father's life, a man who was born in a Brahmin ghetto and died of heart failure in a fruit market. His father's death was so unremarkable that it merited only two lines in an "inside column" of a local Madras newspaper. Four weeks later, that same paper is sold by the kilo to street hawkers, who eventually use it as packing material for groceries like jaggery and salt. This highlights the transient nature of human existence. The only lasting legacy is a "changed mother" and the "annual ritual" of the death anniversary, which the speaker views as yet another recurring obligation.

### **Comparative Study**

Both poems explore the decay of memory and the physical transformation of parents, yet they differ in focus. *Of Mothers, Among Other Things* centres on the physical toll of a mother's lifelong sacrifice, while *Obituary* focuses on the logistical and financial aftermath of a father's mundane life. In both works, Ramanujan's tone is objective and detached, blending attachment with a cold, almost clinical observation. He refuses to sentimentalise his family, instead presenting a vivid, routine domestic picture that captures the reality of the South Indian middle class. Through this "critical nostalgia," Ramanujan explores his identity as an expatriate, forever anchored to his roots by the very burdens and memories he seeks to describe.

### **Conclusion**

A.K. Ramanujan's exploration of familial nostalgia in *Of Mothers, Among Other Things* and *Obituary* transcends the typical sentimental longing often found in diasporic literature. Rather than portraying his parents through a blurred lens of affection, Ramanujan utilises a clinical, almost forensic objectivity to reconstruct his South Indian heritage. He successfully bridges the gap between

his life in the United States and his roots in Mysore by focusing on the physical and practical realities of the past, ranging from the "eagle claw" hands of a hardworking mother to the "dust on a table of papers" left by a deceased father.

His poetry reveals a complex hybrid identity in which the speaker is simultaneously an intimate family member and a detached observer. By highlighting the ironies of legacy and the inevitable decay of the human body, Ramanujan demonstrates that memory is not merely a refuge from the present but a rigorous excavation of one's identity. Ultimately, his work suggests that while we may leave our ancestral homes, the rhythms of domestic sacrifice and the burdens of familial duty remain permanently imprinted in the consciousness of the expatriate writer.

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