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## Portrayal of Mother in Ramanujan's 'Ecology'

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### **Abstract:**

Literature presents the human relations with all their intricacies. Love and hatred which are discernible in all human relations are the two opposites commonly found in almost all the humans. However, mother is supposed to be an exception to this. Every literature across the world celebrates the motherhood and its qualities. Every culture venerates the motherly qualities in woman. She is supposed to be the fountain of love and caring for everyone that is in her contact. She is selfless and sacrifices herself for those whom she is related with in some ways or the other. Mother is supposed to be impartial and just. Naturally, she becomes the centre of focus in numerous works of literature. But she is also a human being with her own strengths and weaknesses. The present paper attempts to point out how A. K. Ramanujan portrays the true and 'down to earth' character of mother in his short but remarkable poem, 'Ecology'.

**Keywords:** mother, love, selflessness, sacrifice, hatred, motherhood

Mother begins life. Life is impossible without mother. Biologically mother is a female of the species who gives birth to the young one. The word mother has two definitions: the female parent of a child or animal and the title of a woman who is head of a convent. However, the common feature that these definitions have is the act of caring. When it comes to human societies, a mother plays a very significant role in the life of the children. She is not only associated with physical growth of the child but she makes a very significant contribution in making the child socially and psychologically sound. Every human culture has mother at its centre. It would not be wrong or an exaggeration to say that culture begins with mother. She cultivates virtues in her children and in a way contributes in shaping sensible and responsible citizens of country. Then mother is not just biological female factor responsible for the birth of a new life but a set of familial, social and ethical values. She is a galaxy of virtues. She is loving, caring, affectionate, warm and selfless. Actually, mother, it can be observed, is an epitome of selflessness and sacrifice. She sacrifices her life for others, especially for her children who mostly follow the ways paved by her. In this way she becomes a godly figure. As she is the creator, she is supposed to be next to god. And in most of cultures she is respected, revered and even worshipped as god.

Literature mirrors the life. It is made of events, characters and everything that is taken from human life. Literature, for its composition, relies chiefly on the human life. And when it comes to life, we find mother being portrayed in all the genres of literature. Sometimes she is centre of the focus. Sometimes she is given the subsidiary role. Hers is an omnipresence as far as literature is concerned. Literature is such a dais where a human role is delineated from multidimensional views. A literary dimension is, it can be seen, comprised of the author's observations and experiences and through their literary works the writers give vent to their observations and experiences about mother.

Poetry is an expression of delicate thoughts and feelings. It is a tool to give vent to the perceptions which may be very hard to express in a normal day-to-day manner. It is in manner of presentation that poetry differs from the other forms of literature. Poetry presents the ideas, feelings, emotions and experiences of the poet in a very precise way. A word in a poem may communicate an idea to the reader precisely, whereas a novelist or a prose fiction writer may take pages together to express the same idea or thought. Accordingly, A. K. Ramanujan's "Ecology" is a short poem consisting of thirty one lines of uneven length. Even though the poem is short, it is rich in thought. It highlights the subtleties in the character of mother who is a common woman having her pluses and minuses as they percolate in character through culture and law of nature.

A. K. Ramanujan whose full name is Attipat Krishnaswami Ramanujan is one of the eminent Indo-Anglian poets. Some critics him regard as one of the three great Indo-Anglian poets, the other two being Nissim Ezekiel and Kamala Das. He was born in Mysore in 1929. He spent the first thirty years of his life in India. He received his education in Mysore. Then he was a Fellow of the Deccan College, Pune. After that went to Indiana University as a Fulbright Scholar and studied there for two years. Then he worked at the University of Chicago as a Professor of Dravidian Studies and of Linguistics. He remained in Chicago until his death on 13 July, 1993.

Ramanujan was not just a bilingual but a trilingual poet. He wrote poems in English, Tamil and Kannada. He was a transnational, transdisciplinary scholar working as a poet, translator, linguist and folklorist. He made the Indian English literature graceful with his unique work. He is a complete Indian poet who expresses Indian sensibility and imagination in true sense. His poems reflect day-to-day Indian life. He precisely writes about the family, history, problems of belonging, rootedness and many more touching subjects. He is mainly a poet of experience and memories. Ramanujan's poetic work in English language is rather slender. He has three volumes of poems to his credit. They are 'The Striders' (1966), 'Relations' (1971) and 'Second Sight' (1976). He was honoured with the coveted Padmashree award by the Government of India.

According to A. K. Mehrotra, "Like tricky Chinese boxes, A. K. Ramanujan's poems are difficult to open but of exquisite workmanship; they're objects to hold between fingers as much as they are printed lines to read with the eyes." (Mehrotra: 34)<sup>1</sup> A. K.

Ramanujan is an expatriate poet. His poetry is deeply rooted in native ethos. Though he stayed away from India, his motherland, he is out and out an Indian. He expresses his sensibility through his poems. His poetry is “deeply rooted in the Indian poetic traditions and unlike other poets of the Indian Diaspora he does not express his annoyance at the controversies over relocated homelands.” (Bhagat: 6-7)<sup>2</sup>Ramanujan’s poetry is full of Indian experience and sensibility. His poems develop out of his memories of family, local places, traditions, and relations. However, his intention is not to present the personal or autobiographical incidents, events or occasions from his life. According to Bruce King, “While he may use memories of south India as his subject, his concern is rather with how the past has shaped him than as nostalgia for a lost paradise. Often his tone is ironic since the past returns in the form of fears, anxieties, and other psychological effects.”(King: 72)<sup>3</sup>As most of the poems by Ramanujan are based on his past memories, they are nostalgic. He dwells deeply in to his memories. However, he is keen in presenting the collective consciousness of India. In the words of Taqi Ali Mirza, “The strong nostalgic note, which is such a prominent feature of much of Ramanujan’s poetry, does not portray the nostalgia of an individual for times and things of past. It is rather the collective nostalgia of a whole people who look back, often in an attitude of love-hate, to the past, at once drawn towards and repelled by it. The specificity of allusion to personal experience only leads the poet to a delineation of ‘shared’ experience...The myth that the poet creates is not personal or private but a common heritage, going backwards in time.”(As quoted by Chindade: 76)<sup>4</sup>

“Ecology” was published in his second collection of English poems which is entitled ‘Relations’. The collection has several poems that talk about his relations. He remembers them and tries to delineate them not just outwardly but inwardly too. This poem is not about ecology as the title may mislead. It is about a mother. The poem focuses a mother’s association with the objects from nature and the subtle meanings involved in her relation with nature. Nature is used to put light upon the psychological dimension of the character of mother. It is used to expose the contradictory traits in the personality of the persona’s mother.

The poem reveals the temperament and nature of the mother of the persona or the speaker. The persona at the very outset of this short poem recalls his past. He remembers his experience of every year in the past during the rains. He tells that he used to come home angrily. The cause of his anger was nothing but,

*for I could see from a mile away*  
*our three Red Champak trees*  
*had done it again,*  
*had burst into flower and given Mother*  
*her first blinding migraine*

*of the season (Chindhade: 19)*<sup>5</sup>

The smell or scent of the pollen of the Red Champak used to bring a severe attack of migraine to the persona's mother. The persona is devoted to his mother. He could not tolerate the pains of migraine suffered by his mother. She was allergic to the fragrance of the trees. Every year she used to suffer the blinding migraine and the sole cause was the blossom of the red champak trees standing in the vicinity of the house. The fragrance of the blossom could not be stopped from entering the house and ultimately she had to bear with the unbearable migraine. The persona wanted to cut down the red Champak trees, so that his mother would get relief from the migraine. The mother suffering from the intolerable pains of migraine makes the son restless. He wants to end the very cause of her suffering. This shows the close attachment between the son and the mother.

However, the mother is a woman with peculiar womanly qualities. She belongs to the traditional Indian family having its peculiar features. She too knew the cause of her sufferings but she would not allow the trees to be cut down. She had some attachments with the tree. The first of her attachments was that the trees were almost of her age. She was rather emotional about the tree. The mother had not planted the tree. This means she did not have that attachment of creation with the tree. When somebody plants a tree, he/she develops the lifelong bond with that tree. The red Champak trees were seeded by the providential droppings of a passing bird. Its existence was an accident. Her relationship with the trees was not that of the creator and creation. When we plant a tree, we look after it as if it is our offspring. We water it. We take all the care so as to make the tree have flowers and fruits. Its very green and lively existence give us a joy. However, the persona's mother did not have such a kind of relationship with the red Champak trees. The age of the trees is not the sound reason for not cutting them down. Further, it would be permissible to cut down a mature tree rather than a young one. Still she did not allow him to cut down the tree.

This shows that she was attached to the trees in a different way. Her second attachment with the trees was that the trees gave her flowers that she used in worshiping her gods. This means the mother, it can be seen, has faith in God. And such a person is supposed to be ethically balanced and impartial. She does not permit to cut down the Red Champak trees as the flowers of the trees are used by her to offer to God during worships. Here the grandmother portrayed by Dilip Chitre in his remarkable poem, entitled "The Felling of the Banyan Tree" can be remembered for her attachment with trees. When her son, that is the persona's father orders the trees around their house be removed, the persona's grand mother observes:

*'Trees are sacred my grandmother used to say*

*Felling them is a crime.....'* (www.english-for-students.com)<sup>6</sup>

This is a logically considerable reasoning as far as culture is concerned. The persona's mother in 'Ecology' wants the Red Champak trees as they give her flowers to offer to God.

Furthermore, the trees felled by her son are not troublesome to the persona's grandmother in Chitre's poem. She respects nature. She is a worshiper of nature. So she is against cutting down the trees.

Similarly, the act of saving the trees reminds us of the great Chipko movement organized in India. It was organized in order to resist the felling of the trees by the contractors as per the orders of the Maharaja of Jodhpur. The leader of the movement was a lady named, Amruta Devi who along with eighty four villagers hugged the trees in order to protect them from being felled. They were killed there. They considered the trees sacred and they were the worshippers of nature. They lost their lives protecting the trees.

The mother in the present poem is protecting the Red Champak trees, though they are troublesome to her. She wants them not to be cut down. And this is very contradictory. The mother argues that the flowers of the Red Champak trees make her daughters and granddaughters happy. That is why she does not allow the trees to be cut down. This means she loves her daughters and granddaughters very much. She loves them so much that she is ready to bear the unbearable pains of the migraine for them. These are the positive attachments that the mother had with the trees. They indicate her love of religion and the way she loved her daughters and daughters' daughters. She believed that, or showed to that the tree came from the sky i.e. from the god -

*to give her gods and her daughters*

*and daughters' daughters basketful*

*of annual flower*

This brings out the 'womanly' woman in her character. She did not allow the persona to cut down the tree because it gave her flowers to offer to god. Belief in God is the common feature of a traditional Indian woman. In fact this is an evidence of attachment of an Indian woman with the nature. Hence the title of the poem is 'Ecology'. However, this title turns out to be paradoxical in the end.

The poem ends in a shocking way. The end of the poem that is the last two lines of the poem:

*and for one line of cousins*

*dower of migraines in season. (Chindade: 20)*

disclose the true and strong reason behind the mother's not allowing cutting down the trees. Here the readers come to know the dual nature of the mother, a woman. She hates the other relations. As the cousins of the persona were allergic to the fragrance of the tree, his mother was

against the act of cutting down the trees. She was ready to suffer the severe pains in order make her children's cousins suffer the same.

The mother in the poem is not an exceptional case. There are countless people around us with the similar nature. She has Kaikai-like temperament. She does not wish the good of the children of her in-laws. There are instances, where it is found mothers taking care of others' children whole heartedly. Mother is supposed to be selfless and self-sacrificing. She is supposed to liberal, impartial and generous. That is what we mean by the mother archetype. On the contrary, the mother in this poem puts not only her son i.e. the persona of the poem but the readers also in dilemma. The poem vividly points out that it is very difficult to predict or define the character of a person culturally. Mother is the cultivator of the culture. She is the teacher who motivates her child to march on the right path of the life. She is supposed to imbue virtues in the children. She is supposed to cultivate positive attitude and fraternity among the young ones. That is why Mother has been given a significant status in the cultures around the world. She is respected and revered. She is not just supposed next to god but god herself. But whatever that is found in the poem may shock the common people. Mother cannot be so cheap and mean. She creates dilemma in the minds of the readers. She herself is not facing any dilemma because she has decided that the trees should not be cut down even though they are causing pain to her, but she makes the reader to be Hamlet-like. Hence, she cannot be a good mother, but is not even an evil mother too. She is between the extremities. She is a common mother having the common deficiencies in her character.

To conclude, A. K. Ramanujan has presented the hidden inner self of a mother. She is ready to suffer great pains for the happiness of her children. That is but natural. She suffers the migraine caused by the fragrance of the Red Champak trees because the same fragrance is the cause the suffering of the cousins of her children. This means she has dual nature. She is the dilemmatic character. That disturbs the cultural set up of the readers and puts them into a dilemma. The poem has considerable psychological value. It peeps into the psychology of mother and exposes her negative thoughts that no one would appreciate. She can be compared neither to the activists in the Chipko movement nor the grandmother in Dilip Chitre's poem. The presents rather the ecology of a mother's mind.

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