CONVERTING PAST TIME INTO PRESENT SPACE:  
A.K. RAMANUJAN’S POETRY  
(1929-1993)

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His, or is it her, parts
are yours, but they do not add up
to who you are …

In one of his Kannada poems, “Nenne” (“Yesterday”), A.K. Ramanujan presents us the picture of a young man, his own self, who left India to go to the United States:

I was young, green-eared,
Carrying in my suitcase, secured with a rope –
The key having broken – a single blue suit,
Ten tubes of Neem toothpaste that Mother had
Packed, thinking, they won’t have it there.

(PAN, 145)

The key to the suitcase is lost and the contents of the suitcase are held together precariously by a rope tied around it, with the suitcase

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2 This poem is entitled “A Reel Played Over and Over” in Poems and a Novella but what I give is a literal translation of the Kannada title of the poem, and for my purposes in this essay, a better description.
threatening to burst open and spill the contents all over the floor. Ramanujan’s poetry is somewhat like that: the lyric voice holds together a bunch of selves and experiences, sourcing themselves to a disappearing Mother, that span the limits between India and the United States, the writings across the languages of Kannada and Tamil and English, and work that spans the genres of folktales, short fiction, ancient Tamil poetry and modern Anglophone Indian poetry. And while this essay will focus mainly on the contexts for reading his Anglophone poetry, it is important to remember that Ramanujan did not write in the isolation of that one particular form or that one particular language.

A.K. Ramanujan’s poetry is one of self-proclaimed failures – of the failure to find the mother, the lover, the perfect translation, the past, the nation/home, the self. But it is also poetry of luminous success, of finding a home in language practices and in translation, of creating a resting place in them when none is available outside – of creating on the space of the page what is lost in the irretrievable past of his life. The theme of failure/success is inextricably connected with the complex imaging of his mother, who is present in her absence throughout Ramanujan’s poetry. By representing the voiceless in their myriad forms in Ramanujan’s life, the mother becomes the epitome of the subaltern – and, despite the persistent efforts of the poet in his work, neither Ramanujan nor the reader can hear this subaltern woman speak. This question of source and origin (and hence of parentage) haunt all these poetic concerns and animate the most seemingly unconnected images in his work.

Let us gently unpack that suitcase of his poetry and life that holds so many disparate elements together, and categorize them into four sections: 1) his biography, which is integral to his work because, in his poetry, he openly integrated the people and events of his life and work; 2) the role of English – in his personal life, in the society around him, and, as representative of Westernization and modernity; 3) the role of the regional languages in his English poetry, and also his persistent attempt to engage with the regional contexts through his writings in Kannada; 4) questions of gender roles and a doubting identity derived from these questionings.

These elements will finally demonstrate the supreme importance of