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Dust, Debt, and Ritual: A Multi-Dimensional Study of A. K. Ramanujan's "Obituary"

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Abstract

A. K. Ramanujan's *Obituary* is a poignant meditation on death, legacy, and the complex intersections of familial memory and ritual. Through a layered narrative of personal recollection and cultural commentary, the poem captures the emotional aftermath of a father's passing, highlighting what remains: ashes, obligations, and yearly rites. Written in sparse, evocative free verse, the poem resists sentimental eulogy, offering instead a critical exploration of mortality, transience, and ritual. This paper analyzes the poem through multiple lenses—literary, philosophical, spiritual, and cultural—revealing its deep alignment with Upanishadic and Vedantic wisdom concerning impermanence, karma, ritual, and the nature of the Self. Drawing from scriptural references such as the *Katha Upanishad*, *Bhagavad Gita*, *Shrimad Bhagavatam*, and the *Vachanamrut*, the study unpacks how Ramanujan's modern voice resonates with ancient truths while questioning the hollow shell of social customs divorced from inner realization.

Preface

A. K. Ramanujan, one of India's most influential postcolonial poets, had a unique gift for weaving the personal with the philosophical, and the familial with the metaphysical. His poem *Obituary* stands as a haunting and ironic portrayal of a father's death—not as an end marked by honor or glory, but as a quiet dissolution into dust, debts, and rituals. The poem is not merely a literary artifact; it is a cultural critique and a spiritual mirror reflecting the hollowness of outward traditions when severed from true knowledge and inner transformation. It poses questions deeply rooted in Indian spiritual thought: What is the worth of a man's life? What remains after death? Are rituals enough to sanctify a soul, or is something more essential lost in the process?

This research paper is an attempt to navigate these questions, exploring *Obituary* through the tools of literary criticism and the lenses of Indian philosophical traditions, especially the *Upanishads*, *Bhagavad Gita*, and other scriptural sources. The poem, despite its brevity and irony, opens a space for profound reflection on samsāra (worldly entanglement), mokṣa (liberation), and the subtle currents of inherited karma. It also confronts the reader with the universal realities of grief, remembrance, and the search for meaning in the wake of death.

1. Literary Devices and Figures of Speech

Ramanujan's poem is rich with poetic devices that amplify its emotional and thematic intensity:

- **Metaphor:** "left dust / on a table of papers" serves as a metaphor for unfinished business or intellectual legacy.
- **Irony:** The line "he got two lines / in an inside column / of a Madras newspaper" emphasizes the trivialization of a life once complex and alive.
- **Imagery:** Vivid images such as "a house that leaned / slowly...on a bent coconut / tree" and "eye coins / in the ashes" construct an evocative sensory world.
- **Symbolism:** "Eye coins" symbolize the final rites and the transactional nature of death in traditional Indian cremation rituals.
- **Alliteration:** Subtle instances such as "salt, / coriander, / and jaggery" offer a rhythmic cadence.

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- **Enjambment:** The flow of thought between lines mimics the meandering nature of memory and grief.

2. Structure and Form

- **Form:** The poem is written in **free verse**, devoid of any fixed rhyme scheme, allowing flexibility and conversational tone.
- **Line Breaks and Enjambment:** Ramanujan uses enjambment extensively to echo the stream of consciousness and the fragmented recollection of memories.
- **Stanza Structure:** It appears as a single block of text, symbolizing the uninterrupted continuity of life, memory, and grief.

3. Theme and Subject Matter

- **Death and Legacy:** The poem revolves around the physical and symbolic legacy of the father—emotional, financial, and ritualistic.
- **Memory and Identity:** The speaker reflects on how the father is remembered not by monuments but by minor daily rituals and newspaper clippings.
- **Transience and Permanence:** It captures the ephemeral nature of human life and the paradox of how one's impact lingers in mundane ways.

4. Tone and Mood

- **Tone:** The tone is **wry**, **ironic**, and **melancholic**. Ramanujan avoids overt sentimentality, opting instead for restrained emotional expression.
- **Mood:** The poem evokes a mood of quiet introspection mixed with discomfort, frustration, and a hint of dark humor.

5. Philosophical and Spiritual Interpretation

The poem, though not overtly religious, is deeply embedded in Indian philosophical and ritualistic frameworks:

- **Rituals and Samskāras:** Reference to cremation, river confluence, and eastward rites align with **Hindu mortuary customs**.
- **Vedantic Thought:** The absence of permanence (anitya) and the futility of clinging to worldly achievements echo **Upanishadic** insights (e.g., *Katha Upanishad*: "What is mortal remains mortal").
- **Bhagavad Gita:** The poem indirectly reflects Gita's teaching that the body perishes but karma and samskāra (impressions) linger—seen in the changed mother and "annual ritual."
- **Vachanamrut Wisdom:** The emphasis on inner transformation and detachment from worldly expectations finds a parallel in Swaminarayan's teachings, as the speaker seems more reflective than resentful.
- **Spiritual Irony:** Despite the rituals, the speaker finds no profound peace—suggesting a disconnect between outer rites and inner solace.

A. K. Ramanujan's poem *Obituary*, though modern and personal in tone, aligns deeply with **Upanishadic and Vedantic wisdom** in its reflections on **death, transience, ritual, detachment, and samskāra (residual**

impressions). Below is an interpretive analysis that draws parallels from **Vedas, Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, the Vachanamrut, Shrimad Bhagavata Mahapurana**, and related scriptural traditions.

1. Impermanence and Transience of Life (Anitya Bhāva)

Theme in the poem: The father's passing is reduced to mundane remains—ashes, debts, forgotten newspaper lines.

Scriptural Parallel:

- **Katha Upanishad 1.2.10ⁱ**

"Anityam asukham lokam imam prāpya bhajasva mām"
("Having come to this transient and joyless world, worship Me.")

→ Life is temporary, and worldly accomplishments fade quickly—just as the father's obituary is reduced to a few lines printed and sold by the kilo.

- **Iśa Upanishad 1ⁱⁱ**

"īśāvāsyam idam sarvam yat kiñca jagatyām jagat..."
("All this—whatever exists in this changing universe—should be covered by the Lord.")

→ The poem echoes the futility of ownership, status, or even remembrance in the face of death.

2. Ritualism vs. Inner Realization

Theme in the poem: External rituals like cremation, coin offerings, facing east are mentioned—but seem insufficient to create emotional closure or spiritual peace.

- **Mundaka Upanishad 1.2.10ⁱⁱⁱ**

"Na karmana na prajaya dhanena tyagenaike amṛtatvam ānaśuḥ"

("Not by rituals, progeny, or wealth, but by renunciation alone is immortality attained.")

→ Ramanujan critiques blind ritualism without inner transformation—rituals are performed, but the family is left broken and unresolved.

- **Vachanamrut, Gadhada I-10**

"The only path to liberation is true knowledge of the Self, and not mere observance of outward rituals."

→ Echoes the poet's subtle irony toward mechanical traditions lacking spiritual depth

3. Death as a Transformation, Not an End

Theme in the poem: The father "burned properly," yet his legacy is intangible—more psychological and emotional than material.

- **Bhagavad Gita 2.20^{iv}**

"Na jāyate mriyate vā kadācin..."

("The soul is never born and never dies. It is eternal, indestructible.")

→ Though the body burns, the soul moves on. The "eye coins" and ashes are just remnants; his *ātman* has passed into another state.

- **Shrimad Bhagavatam 11.22.39^v**

"The body is only a designation and not the Self. The Self remains unchanged through birth and death."

→ The poem's portrayal of the body as decaying, fragmentary, and eventually forgotten reinforces this Vedantic view.

4. Karma, Samskāra, and Lineage

Theme in the poem: The father leaves debts, daughters, and a grandson named after him—symbolizing the ongoing chain of karma and memory.

- **Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4.4.5^{vi}**

“According as he acts, so does he become. One becomes virtuous by virtuous action, bad by bad action.”

→ The father's legacy is not spiritual greatness, but unresolved karma passed on to the next generation.

- **Vachanamrut, Gadhada I-27**

“A person should perform virtuous actions with spiritual awareness so that his lineage benefits.”

→ Ramanujan shows the opposite: unconscious actions lead to burdened descendants.

5. The Notion of Moksha and Futility of Earthly Legacy

Theme in the poem: The father did not achieve great worldly or spiritual goals—he left “no longstanding headstone,” only fleeting memories.

- **Bhagavad Gita 2.14–15^{vii}**

“mātrā-sparśās tu kaunteya...”

(“O son of Kunti, the contact of the senses with objects causes happiness and distress; they are temporary...”)

→ The poet captures this impermanence poignantly; nothing lasts—not pain, fame, or name.

- **Isha Upanishad 17^{viii} (funeral prayer)**

“Agne naya supathā rāye asmān...”

(“O Agni, lead us by the good path to righteousness...”)

→ The poem mentions the cremation and the offering of coins to the fire—showing the continuity of this Vedic prayer in actual death rituals.

6. Psychological and Spiritual Aftereffects

Theme in the poem: “He left us / a changed mother / and more than / one annual ritual.”

- **Chandogya Upanishad 6.14.2^{ix}**

“Sarvam khalv idam brahma”

(“All this is indeed Brahman.”)

→ The poem does not glorify the father but presents his imperfections and the silent ripples his life left in the lives of others, pointing toward the Vedantic ideal of transcending ego and accepting the whole as Brahman.

- **Shrimad Bhagavatam 1.13.10^x**

“Whatever is accepted as good or bad is simply due to the interaction of the senses with their objects.”

→ The poet's neutral, almost detached voice mirrors this wisdom: he does not sentimentalize, he observes.

Conclusion:

Obituary resonates with **Upanishadic and Vedantic teachings** by exposing the **illusory nature of ego, name, fame, and ritualistic legacy**. Ramanujan masterfully contrasts **cultural ritualism** with **spiritual emptiness**, and the **inward fragmentation** of modern identity with the

Vedantic call to self-realization. In doing so, he invites readers to reflect on what truly survives after death—not ashes or obituaries—but the **ethical and spiritual impressions** left behind.

6. Historical and Cultural Context

- **Time Period:** Written in post-independence India, the poem reflects a middle-class South Indian Brahmin household in transition.

- **Cultural Dissonance:** Ramanujan juxtaposes traditional Brahminical values (e.g., “caesarian birth / in a Brahmin ghetto”) with the reality of modern Indian life (e.g., “death by heart / failure in the fruit market”).

- **Modernism:** As part of the Indian English Modernist movement, Ramanujan's poetry blends Indian subject matter with Western literary techniques.

7. Poet's Perspective and Emotional Mindset

- **Personal and Autobiographical:** Ramanujan's own father was a well-known scholar and a complex figure, making this poem a deeply autobiographical act of reckoning.

- **Emotional Layers:** The poem carries suppressed sorrow, unresolved tension, and a subtle indictment of patriarchal expectations.

- **Inspiration:** Possibly inspired by the conflict between Western rationalism (as a scholar of linguistics) and Indian ritualism (as a Brahmin by birth), the poem attempts to reconcile both worlds.

8. Target Audience and Purpose

- **Audience:** The poem is directed to both Indian and global readers—those who understand the nuanced rituals of Hindu death rites and those grappling with questions of legacy and loss.

- **Purpose:** Ramanujan aims not to glorify his father but to present him in all his human complexity—highlighting the futility of social stature, the impersonality of death, and the ongoing impact on those left behind.

9. Personal Interpretation

Obituary is a poem that does not seek closure. Instead, it invites readers into a space of contemplation—on family, death, tradition, and memory. The poem's brilliance lies in its ability to weave the personal with the cultural, the sacred with the mundane, and the sorrowful with the ironic. It leaves the reader with a sense of quiet disturbance, asking not how we die, but how we are remembered—and whether we can ever escape the web of ritual, legacy, and expectation spun around us. For those steeped in Indian traditions, the poem may mirror the discomfort of unresolved familial ties; for global readers, it reveals the universal nature of grief filtered through cultural specificity.

Conclusion

Obituary is not a conventional elegy—it does not praise the deceased, nor does it wallow in sorrow. Instead, Ramanujan dissects the silent aftermath of death with clinical precision and poetic subtlety. Through vivid yet fragmented imagery, he portrays a father's legacy not in terms of glory or moral triumph but in everyday remnants:

newspaper clippings, ritualistic ashes, and a fractured household. In doing so, the poem aligns with Vedantic and Upanishadic insights, particularly the view that worldly accomplishments are ultimately perishable, and true liberation lies in detachment and self-knowledge.

The father's memory is sustained less through reverence and more through the psychological and karmic imprints he leaves behind. The rituals surrounding his death, though rooted in sacred tradition, are portrayed as mechanical acts—perhaps lacking the transformative insight that ancient scriptures insist upon. This dissonance reflects a broader cultural critique: when ritual loses its connection to the inner self (*ātman*), it becomes hollow, a theme echoed across the *Gita*, *Upanishads*, and *Vachanamrut* alike.

Ultimately, *Obituary* becomes a deeply reflective poem that transcends its apparent simplicity. It invites readers to confront the impermanence of life, question the essence of legacy, and seek meaning beyond societal rituals. In Ramanujan's quiet irony lies a profound spiritual urge—a whisper from the margins of memory that asks us not how we die, but how we are remembered, and more importantly, how we have lived.

Reference

- I. जानाम्यहं शेवधिरित्यनित्यं न ह्यधुवैः प्राप्यते हि ध्रुवं तत् ।
ततो मया नाचिकेतश्चितोऽग्निरनित्यैर्द्रव्यैः प्राप्तवानस्मि नित्यम् ॥ १० ॥
- II. ईशावास्यमिदं सर्वं यत्किञ्च जगत्यां जगत् ।
तेन त्यक्तेन भुञ्जीथा मा गृधः कस्य स्विद्धनम् ॥ १ ॥
- III. इष्टापूर्तं मन्यमाना वरिष्ठं नान्यच्छ्रेयो वेदयन्ते प्रमूढाः ।
नाकस्य पृष्ठे ते सुकृतेऽनुभूत्वेमं लोकं हीनतरं वा विशन्ति ॥ १० ॥
- IV. न जायते म्रियते वा कदाचि
नायं भूत्वा भविता वा न भूयः ।
अजो नित्यः शाश्वतोऽयं पुराणो
न हन्यते हन्यमाने शरीरे ॥ 20 ॥
- V. विषयाभिनिवेशेन नात्मानं यत् स्मरेत् पुनः ।
जन्तोर्वै कस्यचिद्धेतोर्मृत्युरत्यन्तविस्मृतिः ॥ ३९ ॥
- VI. स वा अयमात्मा ब्रह्म विज्ञानमयो मनोमयः प्राणमयश्चक्षुर्मयः श्रोत्रमयः
पृथिवीमय आपोमयो वायुमय आकाशमयस्तेजोमयोऽतेजोमयः काममयो-
ऽकाममयः क्रोधमयोऽक्रोधमयो धर्ममयोऽधर्ममयः सर्वमयस्तद्यदेत-
दिदंमयोऽदोमय इति; यथाकारी यथाचारी तथा भवति—साधुकारी
साधुर्भवति, पापकारी पापो भवति; पुण्यः पुण्येन कर्मणा भवति, पापः पापेन ।
अथो खल्वाहुः काममय एवायं पुरुष इति; स यथाकामो भवति तत्कृतुर्भवति,
यत्कृतुर्भवति तत्कर्म कुरुते, यत्कर्म कुरुते तदभिसंपद्यते ॥ ५ ॥
- VII. मात्रास्पर्शास्तु कौन्तेय शीतोष्णसुखदुःखदाः ।
आगमापायिनोऽनित्यास्तांस्तितिक्षस्व भारत ॥ 14 ॥
- VIII. वायुरनिलममृतमथेदं भस्मान्तं शरीरम् ।
ओं । क्रतो स्मर कृतं स्मर क्रतो स्मर कृतं स्मर ॥ १७ ॥
- IX. तस्य यथाभिनहनं प्रमुच्य प्रब्रूयादेतां दिशं गन्धारा एतां दिशं ब्रजेति स
ग्रामाद्गामं पृच्छन्पण्डितो मेधावी गन्धारानेवोपसम्पद्ये तैवमेवेहाचार्यवान्पुरुषो
वेद तस्य तावदेव चिरं यावन्न विमोक्ष्येऽथ सम्पत्स्य इति ॥ ६.१४.२ ॥
- X. भवद्विधा भागवतास्तीर्थभूताः स्वयं विभो ।
तीर्थीकुर्वन्ति तीर्थानि स्वान्तःस्थेन गदाभृता ॥ १० ॥