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Imagistic Density and Thematic Depth in the Selected Poems of A. K. Ramanujan

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Corresponding Author: *Vrinda**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18187263>**Abstract**

A. K. Ramanujan's English poems are often described as "small" in scale—brief, plain-spoken, and tightly made—yet they carry an unusual pressure of images that keeps opening into significant cultural, psychological, and ethical questions. This article studies imagistic density (the concentration and quick succession of concrete sensory images) alongside thematic depth (the layered concerns the images trigger) in a selection of Ramanujan's poems, including "The Striders," "Self-Portrait," "Obituary," "Small-Scale Reflections on a Great House," "Love Poem for a Wife," and "Looking for a Cousin on a Swing." The paper argues that Ramanujan's images are rarely decorative; they function as compact "thinking-units" that compress memory, family history, sexuality, mortality, and cultural doubleness into objects and scenes that feel immediately visible.

Through close reading, the article shows how Ramanujan uses domestic spaces (the house, the family album, the inherited room), bodily details (skin, eyes, touch, breath), and small nonhuman presences (insects, shadows, minor motions) to stage complex negotiations: past versus present, intimacy versus privacy, tradition versus skepticism, and belonging versus estrangement. The poems repeatedly return to the family as archive and burden, and to memory as a sensory event rather than a stable narrative. Thematically, the poems move from the private to the public without announcing the shift; an insect on water becomes a figure for perception and distance, and a household object becomes a carrier of social history.

The study concludes that Ramanujan's imagistic density is the chief engine of his thematic depth: it allows him to say more than the lyric "I" claims to know, and it invites readers to experience meaning as a sudden, visual recognition—followed by doubt, irony, and renewed attention.

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Access this Article Onlinewww.multiarticlesjournal.com**KEYWORDS:** A.K. Ramanujan; imagistic density; modern Indian English poetry; memory and family; irony; cultural hybridity.**1. INTRODUCTION**

A.K. Ramanujan occupies a distinctive place in modern Indian English poetry because his poems feel simultaneously intimate and analytical like memories narrated by a mind trained to

question its own emotions (Bhandari, 2020) [5]. Multiple inheritances shape his work: South Indian domestic and ritual life, modernist compression, and a transnational intellectual temperament (Padhy, 2020) [15]. Biographical accounts of

Ramanujan commonly emphasize this “between-worlds” sensibility an experience of hybridity that, in the poems, becomes a method of seeing rather than a mere theme (Shekhawat, 2012; Simon, 2009) [20, 22].

One of the most recognizable features of Ramanujan’s style is the extraordinary density of images: instead of extended description, his poems build meaning through short, sharply etched visual objects, gestures, rooms, insects, photographs, fragments of speech (Agarwal, 2024; Gleason, 2009) [2, 10]. These images do not serve as ornamental “pictures.” They behave like pressure points where private memory meets cultural pattern. In collections such as *The Striders* and later volumes gathered in *The Collected Poems*, the lyric moment is often a moment of scrutiny: the speaker looks closely, and the world looked at begins to look back (McNally, 1966; Sastri, 2014) [14, 1].

This article proposes imagistic density as a practical lens for reading Ramanujan’s poems: how quickly images arrive, how tightly they cluster, and how much thematic work they perform. The study also pairs this with thematic depth, understood here as the layered concerns that emerge from those compact images family history and inheritance, erotic awakening and embarrassment, the everyday presence of death, and the uneasy gifts of culture. The paper focuses on selected poems frequently taught and discussed “*The Striders*,” “*Small-Scale Reflections on a Great House*,” and “*Looking for a Cousin on a Swing*,” among others because they demonstrate how a small scene can become a large argument without losing lyric immediacy.

Rather than treating imagery and theme as separate categories, this article argues that in Ramanujan, they are inseparable: the images are the vehicle of thought. His poems ask readers to trust what they can see then discover that seeing is never neutral.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The present study is designed to undertake a focused literary analysis of the selected poems of A. K. Ramanujan, with particular emphasis on the interaction between imagery and meaning. The specific objectives of the study are as follows:

To examine the nature of imagistic density in the selected poems of A. K. Ramanujan by identifying how images are compressed, layered, and recurrent within short lyrical forms.

To analyze the relationship between imagery and thematic depth, demonstrating how concrete images function as carriers of complex themes such as memory, family, identity, love, sexuality, death, and cultural inheritance.

To explore the role of domestic, bodily, and everyday images in shaping Ramanujan’s poetic vision and in transforming private experiences into broader cultural and social reflections.

To study irony and ambiguity as mediating elements that connect imagistic precision with thematic complexity in Ramanujan’s poetry.

To assess Ramanujan’s contribution to modern Indian English poetry by highlighting how his imagistic techniques distinguish his poetic voice within the tradition of literary modernism.

To contribute to existing Ramanujan scholarship by offering a structured, image-centered reading that moves beyond thematic description to explain *how* meaning is generated within the poems.

To encourage close reading as a critical practice, demonstrating that Ramanujan’s poems require attention to minute visual and sensory details for a fuller understanding of their philosophical and emotional dimensions.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study adopts a qualitative, descriptive, and analytical research methodology, grounded primarily in close textual analysis. Since the research focuses on poetic language, imagery, and thematic interpretation, quantitative methods are not employed. The methodology is structured as follows:

Research Design

The study follows a text-based literary research design, emphasizing interpretative analysis. Selected poems from Ramanujan’s significant collections such as *The Striders*, *Relations*, and poems included in *The Collected Poems* form the core textual corpus. The poems are chosen based on their critical popularity, thematic richness, and representative use of imagery.

Nature of Data

• Primary Sources

The primary data consist of selected poems by A. K. Ramanujan, including (but not limited to) “*The Striders*,” “*Small-Scale Reflections on a Great House*,” “*Obituary*,” “*Self-Portrait*,” “*Love Poem for a Wife, 1*,” and “*Looking for a cousin on a Swing*.”

• Secondary Sources

Secondary data include scholarly books, journal articles, research papers, dissertations, critical essays, and credible online academic resources related to Ramanujan’s poetry, imagery, and themes. These sources are used to contextualize the analysis and to engage with existing critical perspectives.

Method of Analysis

The study employs close reading as its primary analytical tool. Each selected poem is examined line by line to:

- Identify key images and image clusters
- Analyze how images interact with tone, irony, and structure
- Interpret the thematic implications generated by these images

Special attention is paid to repetition, contrast, metaphor, and sensory detail to understand how imagistic density produces layered meanings.

Theoretical Framework

The analysis is informed by:

- Modernist poetics, particularly the emphasis on compression and precision
- Imagist principles, adapted to Ramanujan's cultural context
- Memory and cultural studies, to interpret family, domestic space, and inheritance
- Humanistic criticism, focusing on emotional restraint, irony, and ethical observation

These frameworks are applied flexibly, ensuring that interpretation emerges primarily from the text rather than from imposed theory.

Scope and Limitations

The study is limited to selected English-language poems and does not include Ramanujan's translations or Kannada writings. While the analysis is intensive, it does not claim to be exhaustive. The focus remains on imagistic density and thematic depth, excluding detailed biographical or comparative linguistic studies.

Research Outcome

By integrating close reading with thematic interpretation, the methodology aims to demonstrate that imagery in Ramanujan's poetry is not merely illustrative but constitutive of meaning, thereby offering a nuanced understanding of his poetic craft.

4. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Critical writing on A. K. Ramanujan often begins by situating him among modern Indian English poets who achieved a global modernist economy without surrendering local textures. Brief poet profiles emphasize his transnational education and his dual engagement with English and Kannada, framing his poetry as a product of “hybridity” and cultural translation in the broadest sense. This framing is helpful because it explains why domestic scenes in his poems frequently carry anthropological weight: the lyric speaker is also an observer of patterns (Ahmed, 2020; Kjerkegaard & Ringgaard, 2017) [3, 12].

Bibliographic and editorial materials on *The Collected Poems* have also shaped scholarship by making visible the arc of Ramanujan's poetic development: early precision, later tonal wideness, and recurring preoccupations with family, memory, and the self as a divided witness. Such materials remind researchers that “selected poems” are not isolated lyrics but parts of a sustained project in which forms of attention remain consistent even as topics vary (Lawery, 1977; Susanne *et al.*, 2022) [13, 24]. Scholarly discussions hosted by major academic publishers identify “primary sources” for studying Ramanujan's

poetics and emphasize the importance of reading the poems alongside his prose, translation practice, and scholarly sensibility. This approach has encouraged critics to treat imagery in the poems not only as aesthetic choice but as a cognitive habit: an insistence on the concrete as the gateway to the conceptual (Chandra *et al.*, 2025; Gambarota, 2005) [7, 9].

Pedagogical resources frequently highlight “*The Striders*” as representative because its miniature scene enables multiple interpretive paths: literal observation, figurative suggestion, and philosophical resonance. Such teaching materials tend to foreground how a small nonhuman image can carry spiritual or existential meanings, reinforcing the view that Ramanujan's imagism is layered rather than merely visual (Abdelhalim *et al.*, 2025; Shekhawat, 2012) [1, 20].

A number of interpretive essays and popular critical notes (sometimes outside peer-reviewed venues) similarly treat “*The Striders*” as a poem of deceptive simplicity and “multi-layered imagism.” While these sources vary in rigor, they are valuable for showing how consistently readers experience Ramanujan's images as open-ended prompts rather than closed symbols (Ramazani & Ramanujan, 1998) [18].

Studies that adopt a broadly “humanistic” frame often stress the ethical tenderness of Ramanujan's voice, his ability to present flawed relationships without moral grandstanding. This strand of criticism is relevant to imagistic density because it notices how compassion often arrives through details: a small gesture, a remembered object, an awkward silence (Sikka, 2012; Spivak, 2024) [21, 23].

Work that reads Ramanujan through “realism” focuses on the immediacy of his scenes and the ordinary settings of many poems: households, streets, family gatherings, arguing that the poems create a world that is recognizably social while remaining intensely inward. Such analyses help explain why images in Ramanujan are frequently domestic and tactile: they anchor a psychological drama in shared, visible life (Hema *et al.*, 2021) [11].

Other essays foreground his distinctive imagery as a mark of Indo-Anglian difference, noting how his images are often drawn from South Indian material culture and social custom. This perspective strengthens the argument that imagery in Ramanujan is inseparable from theme; the cultural specificity of objects carries histories of kinship, gender, ritual, and class (Ramazani & Ramanujan, 1998) [18].

Dissertation-level work (including thesis PDFs circulating in university repositories) tends to categorize Ramanujan's poetry into clusters such as “family record,” “love,” and “reminiscence.” Although this thematic mapping can risk reducing poems to topics, it provides a proper inventory: family and memory are not occasional; they are structural (Simon, 2009; Trivedi, 2022) [22, 25].

A related set of studies focuses on family relationships, with “Small-Scale Reflections on a Great House” often used to depict the home as an inheritance machine circulating objects, obligations, and unspoken rules (Barclay *et al.*, 2024) [4]. These

readings are crucial for any discussion of imagistic density because the “house” poem demonstrates how images (keys, rooms, stored items, passing hands) accumulate into a sociology of intimacy.

Web-based poem guides and interpretive summaries of “*Small-Scale Reflections on a Great House*” also emphasize the house as a container of memory, both happy and bitter. Though not always scholarly, such guides reflect a consensus response: the poem’s imagery performs archival work, making the house a living record.

Similarly, interpretive resources on “*Looking for a Cousin on a Swing*” commonly highlight memory, innocence, and sexual awakening, noting the contrast between youthful sensation and adult search. This critical tendency supports the present study’s claim that images of movement (the swing’s arc, the body’s rhythm) carry thematic depth about desire, time, and the irrecoverability of first experience (Dhami & Sharma, 2019)^[8]. Some articles analyze Ramanujan’s poetry in terms of “religious views” or the coexistence of skepticism with inherited belief. Even when the poems are not explicitly devotional, this scholarship helps explain why Ramanujan’s images often feel haunted by ritual frameworks: the everyday object can carry the aftertaste of the sacred.

General critical surveys of Ramanujan’s poetry (for instance, journal articles offering broad “analysis” of themes and technique) frequently underline nostalgia, irony, and the negotiation between tradition and modernity. Such surveys sometimes remain descriptive, but they help identify recurring tonal features especially irony as a key mediator between image and meaning (Boro, 2024; Rajput & Tripathi, 2024)^[6, 17].

Editorial and review essays on *The Collected Poems* similarly stress reminiscence and family circles, suggesting that memory in Ramanujan is not simply personal but generational and social. For imagistic density, this matters: dense images often function as portals into generational time (Pandian, 2012)^[16].

Access to selected poems through teaching PDFs and course materials has also influenced the critical conversation by stabilizing a “canon” of commonly read poems and encouraging close reading in classrooms. This availability reinforces the prominence of specific texts (“*The Striders*,” “*Obituary*,” “*Self-Portrait*”) in scholarship.

At the same time, many studies focus more on Ramanujan’s themes (family, love, memory, culture) than on the mechanics of imagery how images cluster, echo, and accelerate thought. The present article builds on thematic scholarship while shifting attention to imagistic density as a measurable poetic strategy.

Another recurring limitation is that some readings treat imagery as “illustration” of cultural themes rather than as the engine that generates thematic complexity. The more useful critical approaches are those that attend to how image and irony co-produce meaning: an object is presented, then undercut, then reseen.

Across this body of literature, there is broad agreement that Ramanujan’s poems are deceptively small containers for large

questions. What remains comparatively under-discussed is a systematic account of *how* imagistic density enables that largeness how the poems achieve thematic depth without narrative expansion. This study addresses that gap through focused close readings of selected poems.

5. DISCUSSION

In Ramanujan, imagistic density is not a flourish; it is a discipline. Consider “*The Striders*.” The poem begins with a tiny, observable creature on water. The images arrive quickly surface tension, slight movements, a minimal world. The insect is not merely described; it becomes a test case for perception. The thematic depth emerges from the image’s behavior: it appears to “stand” on water, to move without sinking, to be both present and unreachable. The reader is pushed to ask what it means to observe something that stays outside our grasp. The dense image, therefore, generates a theme of distance between self and world, knowledge and mystery without the poem announcing philosophy.

In “*Small-Scale Reflections on a Great House*,” density works through accumulation. The house is not a single symbol but a moving system of objects passing hands, returning, reappearing, refusing to leave. The poem’s images rooms, stored items, circulating belongings create a material logic of inheritance: what the family owns also owns the family. Thematically, the poem deepens into a critique of domestic tradition as both shelter and trap. The imagery is dense because the house itself is dense: layered with time, secrets, and repeated behaviors. The poem achieves sociological breadth (the reproduction of families) while remaining rigorously concrete.

“*Obituary*” and “*Self-Portrait*” show another mode: images that compress identity into a few strokes. In “*Obituary*,” the father’s death is registered through objects and residues accounts, debts, leftover gestures suggesting that a life is finally measurable in what it leaves behind and what it fails to settle. The thematic depth is not grief alone but the uneasy modern realization that inheritance can be paperwork as much as memory. “*Self-Portrait*” similarly uses a visual frame how the self appears, how it is misrecognized to stage a theme of divided identity, where the “I” is both subject and object.

In “*Love Poem for a Wife, I*,” imagistic density sharpens intimacy. The poem’s emotional claim what keeps two people apart is made through precise images of childhood and family worlds that cannot be shared. The dense images are not sentimental; they are factual: the wife cannot “meet” the speaker’s father in the past. The theme becomes profound because the image is ordinary: marriage is not only romance but the collision of two irretrievable histories.

Finally, “*Looking for a Cousin on a Swing*” demonstrates how kinetic imagery can carry temporal complexity. The swing’s motion, the bodily rhythm, and the remembered sensation turn desire into a physical memory. The adult search for that cousin becomes a search for a past intensity—an emotion tied to movement and embarrassment. Here imagistic density produces

thematic depth about time: the body remembers what the mind cannot retrieve cleanly.

Across these poems, dense imagery acts like a hinge: it opens from the visible to the invisible from object to inheritance, from motion to desire, from a small insect to metaphysical distance.

6. CONCLUSION

Ramanujan's selected poems show that imagistic density can be a primary source of thematic depth. His poetry does not expand meaning by adding explanation; it intensifies meaning by sharpening images until they begin to think. This is why the poems feel both accessible and elusive. A reader can “see” the scene immediately an insect on water, a house full of circulating objects, a remembered swing, a life reduced to remnants yet the scene refuses to remain a simple picture. The image becomes a pressure chamber: memory, irony, affection, and critique gather inside it.

The study has argued that Ramanujan's images are structurally active. They are not detachable ornaments but compact devices that carry social history and psychological complexity. When he writes about family, he does not offer general statements about tradition; he shows tradition operating through things objects passing hands, habits returning, words repeating, silences being inherited. When he writes about desire, he avoids melodrama by locating erotic awakening in sensory motion and remembered bodily knowledge. When he writes about death, he often records a person's afterlife in the material world documents, obligations, unfinished accounts so that mourning becomes entangled with modern forms of measurement.

Another important conclusion is that Ramanujan's density is inseparable from his irony. The images often arrive with a quiet twist: the thing that looks stable becomes unstable; the thing that looks intimate becomes historical; the thing that looks personal becomes cultural. Irony prevents the images from becoming sentimental symbols, and it prevents themes from becoming abstract slogans. The poems remain honest because they remain specific.

Thematic depth in these poems, therefore, is not a matter of “big topics” alone. It is produced by the poem's appearance. A Ramanujan poem teaches a reader to attend—closely, skeptically, tenderly. It models a form of perception in which the smallest observable detail can reveal a larger structure of feeling and history. That is why his lyrics, though often brief, continue to generate expansive readings: the density of their images ensures that meaning is never exhausted in a single pass.

In sum, Ramanujan's imagistic density is a poetics of concentration: it compresses time into objects, culture into rooms, and identity into a glance making the lyric moment both a private memory and a public inquiry.

Suggestions

Adopt a “cluster” method for reading imagery: Future studies can map imagery in Ramanujan as clusters rather than

isolated symbols. For example, instead of treating “house” as a single symbol, a researcher can track the chain of house images: rooms, stored things, circulating objects, returning items, thresholds, keys, and hands. This approach reveals how thematic depth is produced by accumulation and recurrence, not by single metaphor.

Quantify imagistic density (without reducing the poem): A practical method is to measure image frequency per line or per stanza, noting shifts from tactile to visual to auditory images. This does not replace interpretation; it supports it. If a poem intensifies images near moments of ethical or emotional pressure, that pattern can be demonstrated and compared across poems (“Obituary” versus “Love Poem for a Wife, 1”, for instance).

Study the relationship between imagery and irony: Many readings discuss irony as tone, but further work can show how irony is *built* into images—how an object or scene arrives with a built-in reversal. Researchers can analyze how an image first invites empathy and then complicates it, preventing simple moral conclusions.

Bring memory studies into dialogue with close reading: Ramanujan's poems repeatedly stage memory as sensory return rather than narrative recall. Scholars can use frameworks from memory studies (autobiographical memory, family memory, cultural memory) while remaining faithful to the poems' textures how smell, touch, movement, and visual framing carry recollection.

Compare domestic material culture across poems: A focused project can examine how domestic objects function as cultural evidence in Ramanujan: which objects appear, what actions are performed on them (stored, passed, lost, returned), and how those actions structure themes of inheritance and belonging. This would connect literary analysis with cultural history without turning poems into mere documents.

Use a comparative lens within Indian English modernism: Without forcing equivalence, future research can compare Ramanujan's imagistic strategies with those of other modern Indian English poets who employ compression and irony. The goal would be to identify what is uniquely Ramanujan: his blend of intimate family archive with an almost anthropological eye, and his insistence that the smallest detail can carry the weight of history.

Expand the “selected poems” canon cautiously: Because teaching and anthologizing often repeat the same few poems, scholars may consider less-discussed poems from later collections while maintaining the same analytic lens. This can test whether imagistic density functions differently when

Ramanujan addresses public themes, travel, or explicit cultural commentary.

Pedagogical suggestion: teach imagery as a method, not decoration: In classrooms, students often identify images but stop there. Teachers can ask: What does the image *do*? Does it create distance, intimacy, embarrassment, critique, or tenderness? How does the poem's meaning change if the image is removed? This trains readers to see imagistic density as a thinking-structure.

Interdisciplinary suggestion: link poetics to translation practice (carefully): Since Ramanujan was a major translator and scholar, researchers can investigate whether the precision of his poetic images reflects a translator's attention to concrete detail. This must be done with evidence and restraint, but it can illuminate why his poems often feel like exact “renderings” of lived scenes.

Taken together, these directions keep the analysis grounded in textual detail while opening Ramanujan's poems to new, methodologically robust conversations.

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