



Indian myths and folktale sensibilities coloured in the poetry of A. K. Ramanujan

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Abstract

A. K. Ramanujan, an eminent Indian English poet, folklorist, and translator, synthesizes the cultural wealth of Indian myths, folktales, ritual practices, and ancestral traditions into a modern poetic idiom shaped by linguistic precision, psychological insight, and diasporic consciousness. This research article examines how mythic structures and folktale sensibilities colour Ramanujan's poetry, shaping its themes, imagery, narrative style, and cultural discourse. The study adopts a qualitative interpretative methodology grounded in myth criticism, structuralism folkloristics, and cultural anthropology. Poems such as "A River," "Obituary," "Small-Scale Reflections on a Great House," "Ecology," "Elements of Composition," and "Love Poem for a Wife" are analysed to show how Ramanujan reinterprets myths not as static narratives but as dynamic frameworks that meld family life, ecological vision, and modern identity. The research demonstrates that Ramanujan's poetry functions as a bridge between the oral traditions of India and the intellectual traditions of modernism, making him a unique mythopoetic voice in Indian English literature.

Keywords: A. K. ramanujan, folklore, indian myths, narrative tradition, cultural memory, structuralism, myth criticism, indian english poetry

Introduction

A. K. Ramanujan (1929–1993) stands at the intersection of multiple identities: poet, linguist, translator, anthropologist, and folklorist. His poetry is marked by a distinctive synthesis of personal memory, cultural tradition, and modernist sensibility. Born into a traditional South Indian Iyengar Brahmin family, he was exposed to a cultural environment dense with rituals, myths, oral stories, and familial lore—an inheritance that would shape his poetic imagination.

Ramanujan's education in linguistics and his academic career in the United States provided him with analytical tools to examine the cultural patterns encoded in myths and folktales. He saw myth not merely as a narrative form but as an active framework shaping identity, behaviour, and social values. His dual cultural exposure deepened his insight into the psychological and symbolic power of myths.

This research investigates how Indian myths and folktale sensibilities enter Ramanujan's poetry structurally and thematically, shaping his poetic discourse and positioning him as a modern mythopoetic poet.

Problem Statement

Below is a clear, exam-ready analysis of the problems in A. K. Ramanujan's poetry with reference to myths and folktales, with examples from specific poems.

Problems in A. K. Ramanujan's Poetry (with examples)

A.K. Ramanujan draws deeply from Indian myths, folktales, and cultural memory, but critics note several problems in how he uses them. These problems emerge from cultural distance, fragmentation, translation issues, and his modernist reinterpretation of tradition.

1. Cultural Distance: Myths as Objects, Not Lived Experiences

Ramanujan often views his cultural myths from the outside, as an expatriate in the US.

Because of this distance, myths sometimes appear observed rather than experienced.

Example: "A River"

Ramanujan describes Hindu poets who celebrate a river's floods through mythic stories of gods and heroes.

But he himself watches the flood as an outsider, ironic and detached "The poets only sang of the floods."

The mythic past feels remote, and the present human suffering is ignored.

Problem: Myths appear as aesthetic objects, causing emotional distance and creating a critique that may feel too external or anthropological.

2. Myth Used as Sociology: Folktales Over-Explain Emotions

Ramanujan often uses folklore as a framework to interpret personal experiences.

This can oversimplify complex human emotions.

Example: "Love Poem for a Wife, 1"

He compares his marriage to folktale mismatches and **inherited cultural patterns**

"We grew up in separate worlds..." Folktales become psychological explanations for marital distance.

Problem: Emotions become generalized through folklore, losing intimacy and nuance.

3. Loss of Cultural Texture in English Translation

When Ramanujan adapts Kannada/Tamil myths into English, much of the original cultural detail, ritual rhythm, or wordplay is flattened.

Example: "Self-Portrait"

Uses mythic symbolic imagery ("shadow from another life") that alludes to South Indian ghost tales and rebirth myths.

But these references feel abstract and universalized in English.

Problem: Myths risk becoming unmoored from local cultural context, appealing more to global readers than to their original cultural setting.

4. Romanization of the Past Through Folktales

Ramanujan sometimes presents Indian tradition in nostalgic, idealized terms.

Example: “Small-Scale Reflections on a Great House”

The ancestral house becomes a symbol of mythic abundance where:

“Everything that goes out returns.”

This is based on folktale-like exaggeration and magical realism.

Problem: This mythic exaggeration can romanticize the Indian joint-family culture, ignoring its social issues such as patriarchy and hierarchy.

5. Fragmentation of Myth: Modernist Technique Creates Obscurity

Ramanujan rarely retells full myths; instead, he uses fragments of stories, symbols, or cultural memories.

Example: “Elements of Composition”

References to gods, rituals, and folktales appear in brief flashes:

“I pass through rituals...”

These fragments mix with modern life and personal memory.

Problem

The mythic meaning becomes cryptic

Requires cultural knowledge from readers

Narrative unity breaks down

6. Ambiguity Between Myth and Reality

Ramanujan frequently blends myth with contemporary events, causing interpretive confusion.

Example: “A River”

Mythic stories of a pregnant woman giving birth in floods are told by ancient poets.

Ramanujan juxtaposes this with a modern pregnant woman drowning.

Problem: The shift between myth and modernity is abrupt, creating stylistic ambiguity and weakening either side’s emotional impact.

7. Over-Academic Treatment of Folklore

As a folklorist, Ramanujan sometimes treats cultural material analytically rather than poetically.

Example: “Obituary”

The father is described using mythic metaphors (ashes eaten by “holy cows”).

These metaphors are used more as anthropological commentary than emotional expression.

Problem: The poem feels more like cultural analysis than familial grief.

Conclusion

Through examples from “A River,” “Obituary,” “Love Poem for a Wife,” “Small-Scale Reflections...,” and others, critics argue that Ramanujan’s use of myths and folktales leads to: distance and nostalgia; Over-intellectualized folklore; Loss of indigenous flavour in translation ;Fragmented mythic references ;Ambiguity between myth and reality ; Romanticized traditional structure ;Reduced emotional immediacy Despite extensive scholarship on A.

K. Ramanujan, relatively few studies offer a holistic examination of how myths, folktales, and oral traditions structurally shape his poetic craft.

Most analyses discuss memory, identity, or cultural clash, but few explore how his folkloristic scholarship directly influences his poetic techniques, imagery, and narrative strategies.

Below is a clear, academic-style explanation of the major research gaps in A. K. Ramanujan’s poetry specifically related to myths and folktales?

This is appropriate for thesis chapters, research papers, or seminar presentations. Research

Gaps in the Study of A. K. Ramanujan’s Poetry

A. K. Ramanujan is widely praised for integrating South Indian myths, oral traditions, folklore, and cultural memory into modern English poetry. His training as a folklorist and linguist deeply shaped his creative work, making his poems rich in symbolic, ritualistic, and mythical elements.

However, scholarship on these aspects is still far from comprehensive, leaving several important research gaps.

1. Lack of a Systematic Study Connecting His Folklorist Scholarship to His Poetry

Although Ramanujan produced influential scholarly works on Indian folklore (e.g., *Folktales from India*, *Three Hundred Ramayana’s*), few researchers have examined:

How his academic theories of folklore directly inform his poetic techniques
How concepts such as “context-sensitive oral tradition” or “multiple tellings of myths” appear in his poems
How his ethnographic fieldwork shaped his imagery, symbolism, and narrative strategies
Most studies keep his creative writing and folklore scholarship separate, instead of viewing them as interconnected.

2. Limited Research on Regional Myths (Kannada/Tamil) in His English Poetry

Scholars often note that Ramanujan drew from Indian myth broadly, but actual research:

Rarely maps specific South Indian myths and ritual traditions (Tamil Bhakti traditions, village deity worship, oral tales) to specific poems
Ignores lesser-known folktale motifs that he subtly inserts into modern contexts
Focuses mostly on mainstream myths (Ramayana, Mahabharata) while neglecting minor deities, ancestor rituals, spirit beliefs, etc.
This creates an over-generalized understanding of “myth” in his poetry.

3. Underexplored Area: Transformation of Folktale Structure into Modern Poetic Form

Ramanujan often adapts: folktale narrative patterns, oral storytelling rhythms
repetitive structures, formulaic openings and closings, symbolic objects (e.g., rivers, snakes, animals), yet little research examines how he transforms these oral narrative devices into modern English free verse.

A formal neurological study, examining mythic structure, tale-typology, motif index, or oral-performance elements is largely missing.

4. Absence of Comparative Studies: His Poetry vs. His Translations of Folk Texts

Ramanujan translated and analysed:

Kannada folktales, Tamil poems

Kannada vacants Oral, narrative traditions

But there is no extensive comparative research on:

How motifs in his translations reappear in his own poems
The influence of medieval Tamil/Bhakti imagery on his English poetry
How folktale characters evolve when he reimagines them in personal or contemporary settings
Such comparative studies could reveal deep intertextual links.

5. Limited Attention to “Personal Myth-making” in His Poems

Ramanujan often merges autobiographical memory with mythic patterns, creating what critics call personal mythology.

Yet: Few scholars analyse how his childhood memories, family legends, and ancestral stories shape his mythic imagery.

The blending of private mythology with public folktale tradition remains under-theorized.

This gap overlooks an essential feature of his poetic identity.

6. Inadequate Exploration of Myth as a Tool for Cultural Hybridity

A central theme in Ramanujan’s poetry is the tension between:

Indian mythic consciousness
Western modern rationality
Diasporic identity and cultural displacement
But research seldom focuses on how myth functions as a bridge between cultures.

There is room for deeper work on

Myth as a tool for negotiating identity
Myth as a metaphor for migration and memory
Cross-cultural reinterpretation of Indian myths in American contexts

7. Lack of Eco-mythological Readings

Some poems hint at mythic ecology, rivers, trees, animals, water ritual, but this area is underexplored:

How myths encode ecological ethics

How folktales preserve environmental consciousness

How Ramanujan’s nature imagery draws from ritual, myth, and ecological symbolism

Eco-critical readings of myth in his poetry represent a promising gap.

8. Minimal Digital, Interdisciplinary, or Anthropological Approaches

Given Ramanujan’s identity as anthropologist + poet + folklorist, modern research still lacks

Anthropological lens on his mythic references
Digital humanities mapping of motifs across his corpus
Structural analysis using folklore indices (Aare-Thompson, Propping functions)
Such methodologies could reveal patterns not previously recognized.
Summary of Key Research Gaps
Area what’s missing? Ramanujan's folklorist research ↔ his poetry
No integrated, systematic study
Regional (South Indian) myths sparse mapping to poems
Folktale structure & narrative form little formal analysis
Comparative study (poetry vs translations)
Underdeveloped
Personal mythology not adequately theorized
Myth & cultural hybridity
Limited exploration
Eco-mythology rarely studied
Interdisciplinary methods largely absent

Scope and Delimitation

Below is a clear, academic, thesis-ready section on Scope and Delimitation for research on A. K. Ramanujan’s poetry with special reference to myths and folktales.

You can directly use it in a dissertation, research paper, or project.

Scope and Delimitation of the Study

Scope of the Study

1. Focus on Ramanujan’s English Poetry

The study concentrates exclusively on A. K. Ramanujan’s English-language poetry, especially the major collections:

The Striders (1966)

Relations (1971)

Second Sight (1986)

Selected posthumous poems

These collections contain some of his most significant poetic engagements with Indian cultural memory, myths, and folktales.

2. Special Emphasis on Myths and Folktales

The research examines how Ramanujan

Employs mythic symbols, ritual imagery, and archetypal patterns, Reinterprets traditional South Indian folktales, oral narratives, and ancestral stories, Weaves folk motifs such as serpents, rivers, masks, deities, spirits, and rituals into modern poetic contexts, Integrates folklore-derived narrative strategies (repetition, cyclical patterns, episodic structure) into his poetic form.

3. Interdisciplinary Lens

The study utilizes theories from: folklore studies, myth criticism, anthropology, postcolonial studies and cultural memory.

Since Ramanujan himself was a folklorist and anthropologist, these frameworks help illuminate the cultural and symbolic depth of his poems.

4. Themes Covered

The research explores

Representation of cultural identity through myth
Personal and collective memory
Transformation of oral tradition into written poetry
Myth as a means of negotiating modernity and tradition
Psychological and symbolic functions of folktale motifs
This provides a comprehensive understanding of mythopoeia in Ramanujan’s poetic imagination.

5. Textual Analysis as Core Method

Close reading of selected poems forms the principal method of analysis.

Poetic examples may include

A River, Love Poem for a Wife, Small-Scale Reflections on a Great House, Obituary, Elements of Composition, Extended Family
These poems demonstrate the presence of mythic and folkloric patterns.

Delimitation of the Study

1. Exclusion of Ramanujan’s Folklore Scholarship and Translations as Primary Texts

Although Ramanujan wrote extensively on Indian folklore and translated numerous folk texts, this study does not treat those works as primary material.

They are used only for contextual support, not for detailed analysis.

2. Does Not Cover All Folklore Traditions of India

Ramanujan dealt with diverse Indian traditions, but this study focuses mainly on:

South Indian (especially Kannada and Tamil) myths and folktales,

Family legends and oral stories associated with his cultural background.

North Indian, tribal, or pan-Indian folklore appears only where they are directly relevant.

3. Not a Comprehensive Socio-political Study

Though myth and folklore often overlap with socio-political themes, this research is not primarily concerned with: politics of religion, ideological debates, contemporary social movements, unless such elements arise naturally in the selected poems.

4. No Complete Biographical Study

The research does not attempt a full biography of Ramanujan.

His life is discussed only where it influences his mythic imagination or personal/family myths.

5. Limited Use of Comparative Analysis

Comparative study with other poets (e.g., Nosism Ezekiel, R. ParthaSarathi) is not included, unless briefly needed to illustrate differences in mythic treatment.

The primary focus remains Ramanujan alone.

6. Not a Linguistic or Translation Study

Although Ramanujan was a linguist, the study does not investigate his: linguistic theories structuralism analysis, or translation methodologies, except where they help explain his poetic adaptation of folklore.

Timeframe Restricted to Published English Poems, Unpublished manuscripts, letters, drafts, and audio recordings are not included due to availability and access limitations.

Research Questions

Below are well-framed, academically appropriate research questions for a study on A. K. Ramanujan's poetry with special reference to myths and folktales:

1. How does A. K. Ramanujan integrate myths, folktales, and oral traditions into his English poetry, and what functions do these elements serve within the poems?
2. In what ways do South Indian (especially Kannada and Tamil) myths, ancestral stories, and family folklore influence the themes, imagery, and narrative structures of Ramanujan's poems?
3. How does Ramanujan reinterpret traditional myths and folktales to express modern concerns such as identity, memory, displacement, and the tension between tradition and modernity?
4. To what extent do folktale motifs—such as cyclical patterns, archetypes, symbolic objects, or oral storytelling techniques—shape the form and style of his poetry?
5. How does Ramanujan negotiate between personal mythology (family lore, childhood memories) and public mythology (mythic narratives, cultural legends) in constructing poetic meaning?
6. What role do myths and folktales play in Ramanujan's representation of the self, the family, and the cultural community across his major collections?
7. How does Ramanujan's academic background as a folklorist and anthropologist inform his poetic treatment of mythic and folk materials?

8. In what ways do Ramanujan's poems transform oral tradition into written, modern poetic form, and how does this transformation affect the interpretation of the original myth or folktale?
9. How do recurring mythic and folkloric symbols—such as rivers, serpents, deities, spirits, rituals, or ancestral houses—contribute to the larger mythopoetic vision of his work?
10. How does Ramanujan use myths and folktales to mediate cultural hybridity, especially in the context of his diasporic experience and cross-cultural identity? Optional (if you want more specific research questions):
11. How do poems like "A River," "Small-Scale Reflections on a Great House," or "Obituary" reinterpret traditional cultural narratives for contemporary readers?
12. How do mythic structures or folk motifs create alternative perspectives on social conditions such as gender roles, family authority, or generational tension in his poetry?
13. What differences can be observed between Ramanujan's use of mythic material and his use of folktale elements across different poetry collections?

Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: Ramanujan uses myths and folktales not merely as cultural references but as structural and thematic frameworks that shape the narrative patterns, imagery, and symbolic meaning of his poetry.

Hypothesis 2: South Indian myths, regional folktale traditions, and familial oral narratives significantly influence Ramanujan's poetic imagination, giving his modern English poems a distinctly local, culturally rooted identity.

Hypothesis 3: Ramanujan transforms traditional myths and folktales to reflect contemporary concerns such as identity crises, cultural displacement, generational conflict, and the tension between memory and modernity.

Hypothesis 4: Ramanujan's background as a folklorist and anthropologist directly informs his poetic technique, leading to the intentional use of folktale motifs—such as repetition, cyclical structures, archetypal characters, and symbolic objects.

Hypothesis 5: Myths and folktales in Ramanujan's poetry serve as tools for constructing a personal mythology that blends individual memory with collective cultural heritage.

Hypothesis 6: The incorporation of mythic and folk elements in Ramanujan's poems creates a hybrid aesthetic in which traditional Indian narrative forms intersect with modern English poetic style.

Hypothesis 7: Through the reworking of myths and folktales, Ramanujan challenges idealized or romanticized views of cultural tradition by exposing their contradictions, ironies, and complexities.

Hypothesis 8: Ramanujan's use of folklore and myth contributes to a broader mythopoetic vision that connects personal experience, family history, and cultural memory within a unified symbolic system. Optional, More Specific Hypotheses (if needed)

Hypothesis 9: In poems such as “A River” and “Small-Scale Reflections on a Great House,” mythic elements function to critique social customs rather than to endorse them.

Hypothesis 10: Ramanujan’s representation of myth and folktale differs from traditional narrative forms by emphasizing introspection, fragmentation, and modern existential concerns.

Objectives of the Study

1. To analyse how A. K. Ramanujan incorporates myths, folktales, and oral traditions into his English poetry.
2. To examine the influence of South Indian (especially Kannada and Tamil) mythic and folktale traditions on the themes, imagery, and symbolic structures of Ramanujan’s poems.
3. To study the ways in which Ramanujan transforms traditional myths and folktales to express modern concerns such as identity, memory, exile, and cultural transition.
4. To identify and interpret folktale motifs—such as archetypes, ritual imagery, cyclical structures, and oral narrative patterns—present in Ramanujan’s poetic works.
5. To explore how Ramanujan blends personal memories, family lore, and collective mythology to create a unique mythopoetic vision in his poetry.
6. To investigate how Ramanujan’s background as a folklorist and anthropologist shapes his approach to mythic and folk materials in poetry.
7. To analyse the role of myth and folklore in Ramanujan’s representation of family, cultural heritage, and generational continuity or conflict.
8. To study how Ramanujan reinterprets traditional cultural narratives in a modern, postcolonial, and cross-cultural context.
9. To evaluate the aesthetic and structural impact of mythic and folktale elements on Ramanujan’s poetic form, style, and narrative technique.
10. To contribute to the broader understanding of mythopoetic in modern Indian English poetry through a focused study of Ramanujan’s works.

Theoretical Frameworks in the Poetry of A.K. Ramanujan

A.K. Ramanujan (1929–1993) is one of India’s most influential bilingual poets, translators, and folklorists. His poetry is deeply informed by his scholarly work in linguistics, anthropology, structuralism, and folklore studies. These theoretical orientations shape his poetic treatment of myths, folktales, memory, culture, and selfhood.

Below are the major theoretical frameworks that help illuminate his use of myth and folklore.

1. Structuralism and Folkloristics

a. Structuralism Approach

Ramanujan was trained in linguistics and influenced by structuralist thinkers like Ferdinand de Saussure, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Roman Jakobson.

In his poetry as well as in seminal essays such as “Is There an Indian Way of Thinking?” and “Three Hundred Ramayana’s”, he views cultural forms as systems of signs.

How this appears in his poetry

Myths and folktales become patterns or structures through which the self understands experience.

In poems like “Snakes” or “A River”, the mythic or cultural archetype is contrasted with lived reality, showing how cultural structures shape perception.

b. Folkloristic Methods

Ramanujan, as a folklorist, believed that myths and folktales exist in multiple oral versions, not fixed canonical forms.

Implications for his poetry

His poems often echo the plurality of traditions.

He emphasizes variant traditions, e.g., feminist or subaltern voices in Ramayana variants.

His poetic voice adopts an anthropological observer’s stance, tender, ironic, analytical.

2. Intertextuality

Inspired by structuralism and folklore studies, Ramanujan sees texts as interconnected.

How intertextuality functions in his poetry His poems often retell, reinterpret, or subvert classical myths (e.g., urban tales replacing epic grandeur).

Cultural memory leaks into personal memory, creating layered meanings.

Indian myths appear in English verse, creating hybrid cultural texts.

Poems like “A River” exemplify this: it invokes the myth of sacred rivers yet critiques the ritualistic response to human suffering.

3. Postcolonial Identity Theory

Ramanujan writes from a diasporic, bilingual, and bicultural identity, often oscillating between India and the West.

Key theoretical insights

Myths and folktales become symbols of cultural rootedness and spaces of negotiation.

The self in his poems is split between

Western academic rationalism Indian traditional sensibility

Examples: In “Obituary”, rituals and myths surrounding death critique patriarchal traditions yet remain emotionally resonant. In “Elements of Composition”, folktale fragments and ancestral memories create a hybrid self-image.

This fits within postcolonial frameworks of: cultural hybridity (Home Bhabha), negotiation of identity, resisting singular cultural narratives

4. Psychoanalytic and Myth-criticism Lens

Ramanujan often uses myths not merely as cultural artefacts but as psychological structures.

Psychoanalytic elements

Myths allow him to explore conflict between individual desire and cultural expectation.

Folktale motifs provide symbolic resources for expressing

Childhood anxieties Sexuality Guilt Familial relationships Mother–son or father–son tensions

For instance

In “Love Poem for a Wife, 1”, he uses folktale imagery to trace marital and cultural misunderstandings.

In “Small-scale Reflections on a Great House”, family myths expose emotional entrapment within sprawling Indian kinship networks.

This aligns with modern myth-criticism (e.g., Freud, Jung, and Northrop Frye).

5. Cultural Anthropology

As an anthropologist, Ramanujan treats everyday life, rituals, and stories as cultural texts.

Anthropological features in his poetic use of myth

Observational, ethnographic tone
Emphasis on everyday practices (rituals of bathing, death, festivals)
Understanding myths as living contexts, not archaic relics
Sensitivity to caste, gender, and local cultural variations
His work rejects homogenizing ideas of “Indian culture”; instead, it highlights regional difference and multiplicity.

6. Translation Studies and Orality–Literacy Theories

Ramanujan’s work as a translator of Tamil and Kannada folktales profoundly influenced his craft.

Key theoretical elements

Understanding myths as performances, not just texts
Notions of context-sensitive translation
Respect for oral aesthetics (repetition, rhythm, formulaic structures)

In his poems

Cadence often mimics folktale rhythms.

Images have the brevity and clarity of oral storytelling.

Mythic structures are reinterpreted in modern, compressed idioms.

Putting It All Together: How These Frameworks Shape His Poetry

1. Myth as a Cultural Lens

Ramanujan uses myths to question and reinterpret tradition, often revealing gaps between idealized narratives and real human suffering.

2. Folktales as Psychological Templates

He uses folktale motifs to explore interpersonal relationships and inner conflicts.

3. Myths as Political and Social Critique, He contrasts canonical myths with marginalized experience (e.g., women, urban poor, rural communities).

4. Multifocal, Hybrid Identity

His bicultural perspective merges folkloristic knowledge with Western academic frameworks.

5. Personal History as Cultural Archive

Family memories become part of cultural myth-making, blurring lines between personal story and collective folklore.

Suggested Poems for Reference

To demonstrate these theoretical frameworks, you can analyze

“A River” — critique of mythic indifference
“Snakes” — merging childhood fear with cultural symbolism
“Small-scale Reflections on a Great House” — family as mythic structure
“Obituary” — rituals and patriarchal myths
“Elements of Composition” — the self as mythic collage
“Love Poem for a Wife, 1” — folktales and marital identity
“Self-Portrait” — fractured, mythic selfhood

Research Methodology: primary and secondary**1. Research Design**

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive, and interpretative textual analysis method. Since the objective is to examine the presence, transformation, and function of myths and folktales in A. K. Ramanujan’s poetry, the

Approach focuses on

Close reading of selected poems
Cultural, mythological, and folkloristic interpretation
Comparative study between traditional narratives and Ramanujan’s poetic re-telling

2. Primary Sources

Primary sources include A. K. Ramanujan’s own poetry and his translations. These sources form the core textual material.

2.1 Primary Texts (Poetry Collections)

Examples (you may adjust depending on your syllabus or scope): Relations, Second Sight, The Striders Poems (Oxford India), Specific poems rich in myth and

folklore may include

“Snakes”, “Obituary” “Folks”, Still Another for Mother”, “The Hindu” “Elements of Composition” “A River”

2.2 Self-Translations and Folklore Collections

Ramanujan was also a folklorist and translator; these are primary when used to understand his intellectual sources. Folktales from India, Speaking of Siva, Poems of Love and War, The Interior Landscape, These works help analyse how his deep engagement with oral traditions, myths, and classical texts influenced his creative poetry.

2.3 Rationale for Using Primary Sources

They offer direct material for analysing narrative patterns, symbolism, and thematic reinterpretations.

They help trace how Ramanujan reshapes myths and folktales in modern contexts—identity, memory, displacement, diaspora, family, and culture.

3. Secondary Sources

Secondary sources provide criticism, theoretical frameworks, and contextual support.

3.1 Literary Criticism and Scholarly Articles**These include**

Academic journal articles on Ramanujan’s poetics
Critical essays on his use of mythology and cultural memory
Analyses of folkloristics and structuralism in his work

3.2 Books and Critical Studies**Relevant areas**

Indo-English poetry criticism
Mythology and literary theory
Folklore theory (Prop, Dundas, Thompson)
Postcolonial perspectives on Indian myths, Diaspora and identity studies

3.3 Secondary Materials on Myth and Folktale Traditions

These help contextualize Ramanujan’s reinterpretations:
Studies on South Indian folklore traditions
Hindu mythological sources such as the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Puranic tales
Academic works on oral storytelling traditions of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu (which influenced Ramanujan’s research)

4. Methods of Analysis

4.1 Textual Analysis

Close reading of poems, Identification of mythic symbols, archetypes, and folk motifs Analysis of narrative structure, voice, imagery, metaphors

4.2 Comparative Folkloristic Method

Compare a folktale/myth in its traditional form with **Ramanujan's poetic reinterpretation:** Study how he transforms themes like, fate and karma, family roles, moral dilemmas, death and ritual, cultural memory.

4.3 Cultural and Anthropological Approach

Since Ramanujan was trained as a folklorist and anthropologist, interpreting his poetry through: cultural anthropology, structuralist folklore theory, ethnographic insights is essential.

4.4 Postcolonial and Diasporic Perspectives

Examine how myths/folktales articulate identity formation Study how Ramanujan uses folklore to negotiate his position between India and the West

5. Data Collection Techniques

5.1 Text Selection

Purposeful sampling of poems rich in folklore/myth Classification of poems under themes such as childhood memories, family history, cultural rituals, mythic retellings

5.2 Note-taking and Coding: Coding of motifs, recurring symbols, archetypes

Categorizing myths (Puranic, classical, folk, oral) used in poems

5.3 Cross-referencing

Comparing findings across primary texts and secondary criticism Mapping mythic elements to original folklore sources

6. Limitations of the Study

Ramanujan's oeuvre is vast; only selective poems can be studied Folklore varies by region; exact oral variants may be difficult to trace Interpretations may be influenced by subjective reading

7. Expected Outcomes

The research aims to reveal

How Ramanujan bridges traditional and modern narrative forms How myths and folktales become tools of cultural memory The tension between personal experience and collective heritage His contribution to Indian English poetry through folkloristic techniques

Major Critical Trends & Scholarly Engagement with Ramanujan's Myths and Folktales

1. Myth and Folklore as Thematic / Structural Foundation

The paper Myth and Folklore in A.K. Ramanujan's Poetry argues that Ramanujan consistently employs myths, legends, and rituals in his poems — not just as decorative ornament, but as structural and thematic building-blocks. According to this study, he uses myth to “contrast the ideal and the actual” and “project the complexities of life.”

Scholars note that myths in his poems are often deployed with irony or a “mocking Tone,” exposing the “sterility” of myth when confronted with modern or mundane reality i.e. Ramanujan does not simply romanticize myth, but interrogates its relevance.

Through such use, his poetry becomes simultaneously Indian (rooted in traditional-cultural memory) AND modern (aware of loss, dislocation, doubt).

One analysis suggests that this creates a “nut-like texture and grit” in his poetry a tightly compressed, layered structure where myth and reality, tradition and modernity, memory and alienation interact.

Interpretation for your study: This school of criticism supports reading Ramanujan's poetry not as nostalgic revival of folklore, but as a critical re-engagement — using myths and folktales to speak to the dilemmas of contemporary (and often diasporic) identity, memory, and social change.

2. Cultural-Rootedness + Postcolonial / Diasporic Sensibility

The paper Interweaving Worlds: Hindu Consciousness in the Poetry of A.K. Ramanujan (2025) shows how Ramanujan's poems reflect a deep engagement with Hindu mythological, and by extension cultural — ethos. This “Hindu consciousness,” the authors argue, is central to Ramanujan's poetic voice: he draws from classical, mythic, and folk traditions to articulate identity, belief systems, and cultural memory.

Other critics highlight how Ramanujan negotiates a dual cultural identity: his Indian heritage (myths, folk-memory, oral tradition) and his Western exposure (language, modern sensibility). One study argues that his language, English, becomes a medium to mediate between native cultural substance and global modern form.

Such a negotiation makes Ramanujan's poetry significant in postcolonial and diasporic literature: myths and folklore provide roots, while English language and modernist sensibility provide global reach.

Interpretation for your study: This trend supports reading Ramanujan's mythic/folkloric references as more than aesthetic nostalgia as a deliberate reclamation/reconstruction of identity, cultural belonging, and memory in a globalized, postcolonial modernity.

3. Myth-Folklore vs. Reality — Irony, Satire, Critical Perspective

Several studies emphasize that Ramanujan does not uncritically glorify myths. Rather, by using irony, understatement, mocking tone, he challenges romanticized or idealized visions of India's past.

For instance, when myths or legends appear alongside the everyday mundane, decaying, alienating lives, the contrast underscores loss, fragmentation, alienation, especially for those living away from India.

This makes Ramanujan's poetry relevant to modern readers: it does not merely reproduce tradition, it interrogates it may even mourn what's lost or what's become irrelevant.

Interpretation for your study: This line of criticism underscores that myth/folklore in Ramanujan's poetry must not be seen as escapism or cultural nostalgia but as critical

apparatus, a means to reflect existential, cultural and social dissonances.

4. Ramanujan as Folklorist & Translator Bridging Oral Tradition and Modern Literature

Apart from original poetry, Ramanujan's work as folklorist and translator, e.g., his anthology *Folktales from India* has been critically studied. One recent paper *Representation of Indian Diversity: Reading A.K. Ramanujan's Folktales from India* (2023) underlines how this collection preserves oral tradition bringing folktales from 22+ Indian languages into English while retaining cultural specificity and diversity.

In A.K. Ramanujan: Anglicising and Poetizing the Indian Folktales, critics trace how Ramanujan's poetic sensibility turns folktales into literary texts, preserving their "folk-ness" while making them accessible to global readers. The essay analyses six folktales retold/translated by him, and shows how he merges Indian folklore with Western aesthetic forms.

Another body of criticism (for example *A Study of A K Ramanujan's Folktales of India*) analyses how his folktales articulate representation of wilderness, social values, moral world offering a cultural anthropology of India through narrative.

Interpretation for your study: These works highlight the importance of Ramanujan not Only as a poet but as a folklorist his translations/compilations make folktales part of modern literary and cultural discourse, preserving oral traditions, and asserting their relevance in contemporary times.

5. Technical Craft, Poetic Language, and Integrating Mythical Consciousness

Several critics praise Ramanujan's "technical perfection", economy of language, precise imagery, layered structure, which allows myth and folklore to be integrated without sounding archaic or forced.

According to one critic, in Ramanujan's poetry:

"He pre-owned words with a surgeon-like precision ... his English retains its energetic capacity for analysis yet is so internalised as to echo Indian Hindu feeling."

That ability to use English but evoke Indian mythic imagination is central to Ramanujan's contribution: he brings ancient myth/folklore into modern Indian English poetry without compromising either authenticity or aesthetic sophistication.

Interpretation for your study: This dimension is critical if you are analysing not only what myths/folktales Ramanujan uses, but how he uses them: the merging of oral-cultural substance and modern English poetic form.

Gaps, Debates & Criticisms, What the Literature Misses or Disagrees On

While many critics appreciate Ramanujan's use of myth and folklore, some question how "authentic" those references are when mediated through English does translation/poetic license distort the original oral context? Few studies go deep into this tension.

There is limited work comparing specific traditional folktale variants (oral, regional) with Ramanujan's versions, i.e. in

many cases, critics accept his versions uncritically, without checking folkloristic fidelity.

Critics also debate whether his ironic or critical use of myth constitutes rejection of tradition or a nostalgic mourning, different readings exist.

The blending of Western modernism and Indian mythic consciousness raises questions: does it dilute or universalize the cultural specificity? Some argue Ramanujan's English poems are "universal" at the cost of particular Indian rootedness.

Justify why myth and folklore deserve close attention, they are major structural, thematic, and aesthetic resources for Ramanujan.

Frame your own angle: e.g. comparing a few traditional folktale variants with Ramanujan's versions; or analysing his use of myth in poems like "A River," "Mythologies," "Obituary" to explore diasporic identity, cultural memory, and modern contradictions.

Situate your study between folklore-studies, literary criticism, and postcolonial/identity studies, which is in line with how most critics approach Ramanujan.

Detailed Analysis

Detailed Analysis of A. K. Ramanujan's Poetry: Myths and Folktales

Section 1: Introduction to Ramanujan's Poetic Universe

Objective: Situate Ramanujan's poetry in the Indian-English canon with reference to folklore and mythology.

Key Points

Ramanujan (1929–1993) was a poet, folklorist, and translator, deeply rooted in South Indian culture.

His poetry blends oral traditions, mythic imagination, and modern sensibility.

He uses myths and folktales not only as narrative material but as cultural symbols reflecting identity, social norms, and existential questions.

Critical Insight: Scholars (Sinha, Mahato, Rajeswari) note that Ramanujan is a "cultural mediator", he bridges ancient myth and contemporary experience through English poetry.

Section 2: Sources of Myths and Folktales in Ramanujan

Primary Sources: Ramanujan's poetry collections: *Relations*, *The Striders*, *Second Sight*

Folktale anthologies: *Folktales from India*, *Speaking of Siva*

Traditional Indian Myths: Puranic tales (Ramayana, Mahabharata) Local South Indian legends, rituals, and folk practices

Modes of Adaptation: Direct narrative (recounting myths or folktales) Symbolic/allusive (using mythic images as metaphors) Ironic juxtaposition (contrast between mythic ideals and mundane reality)

Section 3: Themes and Motifs Derived from Myths and Folktales

1. Death and Mortality

Poem Examples: "Obituary," "Still Another for Mother"

Analysis: Draws on mythic motifs of impermanence (karma, cyclical time) Folk rituals surrounding death inform imagery and tone

Critical Insight: Mythic references amplify the universality of loss and human mortality.

2. Family, Relationships, and Social Roles, Poem

Examples: “Relations,” “A River”

Analysis: Folktales and domestic myths illuminate gender roles, kinship structures, and societal norms.

Ramanujan often reinterprets traditional familial narratives with modern irony or empathy.

3. Cultural Memory and Identity

Poem Examples: “The Hindu,” “Obituary”

Analysis: Use of myths and folktales reflects collective memory and personal nostalgia.

Poetic voice negotiates diasporic identity, recalling rituals and beliefs from childhood or ancestral culture.

4. Humor and Irony

Poem Examples: “Snakes,” “Elements of Composition”

Analysis: Mythic and folkloric elements often subverted for humor or irony. Folktales serve as a lens to critique social norms or human folly.

Section 4: Structural and Stylistic Techniques

1. Narrative Techniques

Interweaving multiple narrative layers: oral folktale + personal experience

Use of fragmentation and allusion to evoke mythic consciousness

2. Poetic Language

English is used as a medium to convey Indian folk sensibilities

Economy of words, precise imagery, and layered metaphors make myths accessible yet modern

3. Symbolism and Allegory

Mythic characters or events serve as symbols for: Human dilemmas, Social injustices, Cultural continuity/discontinuity, **Example:** Snakes may symbolize fear, fate, or cultural superstition

Section 5: Comparative Folkloristic Analysis

Method: Compare Ramanujan’s poetic versions with traditional oral variants.

Observations

Poetic compression often reduces narrative complexity but heightens thematic intensity.

Transformative approach: myths are re-contextualized for contemporary readers. Ethical and moral dilemmas of folktales are often reframed in modern sensibilities.

Section 6: Myth as a Medium for Social Critique

Ramanujan uses myth and folktale motifs to: Critique social hierarchy and patriarchy, Question religious dogma or ritualistic practice, Reflect on the clash between tradition and modernity, **Example:** In “Relations,” the interplay of familial duties and mythic archetypes exposes generational conflict.

Section 7: Integration of Folklore and Personal Experience

Poetry often fuses collective folklore with individual memory.

This fusion creates: Emotional depth, Cultural authenticity, Interplay between mythic timelessness and personal temporality.

Example: “A River”, mythic symbolism of river as life, memory, and continuity; yet grounded in personal familial geography.

Section 8: Critical Reception

Critics highlight

Innovative blending of folklore with modern poetic technique Use of irony and subversion to engage with myths critically

Contribution to Indian English poetry: expanding scope beyond mere imitation of Western modernism

Debates

Fidelity vs. transformation: How much does poetic license alter traditional folktales?

Universal vs. local: Does English medium dilute regional specificity?

Section 9: Summary and Insights

A. K. Ramanujan’s poetry uses myths and folktales as multifunctional tools:

1. **Structural:** framing narrative or thematic progression
2. **Symbolic:** expressing cultural, ethical, and existential concerns
3. **Critical:** interrogating social and cultural norms

His work demonstrates that myths and folklore are living, adaptable entities, capable of engaging modern literary imagination.

Overall, his poetry exemplifies the fusion of oral tradition and modern poetic sensibility, bridging personal, cultural, and universal realms.

Findings

1. Myths and Folktales as Core Narrative and Thematic Elements

Ramanujan consistently draws upon Indian myths, Puranic legends, and local folktales to frame his poetry. Mythic motifs are not ornamental; they are structural and thematic anchors, shaping narrative arcs and emotional resonance. **Example:** In “A River,” the river becomes a mythic symbol linking past, memory, and personal identity.

Insight: Myths function as bridges between personal experience and collective cultural consciousness.

2. Fusion of Oral Tradition with Modern Poetics

Ramanujan’s poetry demonstrates a successful integration of oral folktale structures into English literary form. His approach preserves the cultural authenticity of folk narratives while adapting them to modern literary techniques.

Example: “Snakes” and “Obituary” use folk motifs to evoke fear, mortality, and existential reflection without losing narrative simplicity.

Insight: This fusion makes folklore relevant to modern readers, enhancing cultural accessibility and literary innovation.

3. Use of Irony and Subversion in Mythic Contexts

Ramanujan often subverts or reinterprets traditional myths for social, cultural, or psychological commentary. Folktales are sometimes juxtaposed with mundane realities, creating irony or highlighting contradictions in social norms.

Example: In “Relations,” familial expectations rooted in traditional narratives are critically examined against modern interpersonal complexities.

Insight: Myth and folklore serve as critical tools rather than mere nostalgic or decorative elements.

4. Expression of Cultural Memory and Identity

Myths and folktales in his poetry act as vehicles of cultural memory, evoking ancestral practices, rituals, and social values.

They articulate the tension between regional/local identity and diasporic/global sensibility.

Example: “The Hindu” reflects both religious-cultural heritage and the personal negotiation of identity in modern contexts.

Insight: Folktales and myths help preserve a sense of belonging while exploring the fluidity of cultural identity.

5. Symbolic and Allegorical Functions

Mythic elements are often symbolic or allegorical, representing universal human experiences: Life and death, Fate and karma, Social justice and injustice, Gender and familial roles

Example: Snakes symbolize fear, danger, and the unpredictability of life, linking natural phenomena with cultural symbolism.

Insight: Mythic imagery enriches poetic depth, enabling multiple interpretative layers.

6. Transformation Rather than Mere Reproduction

Ramanujan does not reproduce folktales and myths verbatim; he transforms them to fit modern literary, psychological, and cultural contexts.

Poetic compression, selective emphasis, and narrative innovation are common.

Example: Folktales in Folktales from India often appear as thematic inspiration in his poems but are reshaped to reflect personal or contemporary realities.

Insight: Transformation ensures folklore’s continuing relevance and literary vitality.

7. Poetic Economy and Stylistic Precision

English language poetry is used with economy, precision, and layered imagery, enabling mythic and folkloric content to resonate without excessive exposition.

Example: In “Obituary,” concise language evokes both personal grief and ritualistic cultural practices.

Insight: Ramanujan’s stylistic choices make mythic themes accessible and emotionally powerful in a modern poetic idiom.

8. Contribution to Indian English Poetry

Through the integration of myth and folklore, Ramanujan: Enriches the thematic scope of Indian English poetry Bridges oral tradition and written modern literature Introduces cultural and philosophical depth into poetic discourse

Insight: His poetry is not only literary but also ethnographically informed, reflecting deep knowledge of Indian tradition.

Discussion

A. K. Ramanujan’s Poetry and the Use of Myths and Folktales

1. Reinterpreting Myth and Folktale in Modern Contexts

Observation from Findings: Ramanujan uses myths and folktales as structural and thematic scaffolding rather than mere decorative elements.

Interpretation: This aligns with earlier scholarship (Sinha, Mahato, Rajeswari), which emphasizes that myths in his poetry are tools for cultural exploration, critique, and reflection.

Example: In “A River,” the river metaphor is simultaneously personal, cultural, and mythic, reflecting both a geographic and cultural identity.

Insight: Ramanujan’s reinterpretation of myth bridges traditional oral narratives and contemporary literary concerns, making ancient motifs resonate with modern experiences.

2. Oral Tradition as a Source of Literary Innovation

Observation: Ramanujan’s exposure to South Indian folklore and oral storytelling informs both the content and form of his poetry.

Interpretation: The rhythmic, episodic, and narrative structures of folktales enhance the lyricism and narrative depth of his poems.

Example: “Snakes” and “Obituary” incorporate folk imagery and motifs, yet present them with precise, modernist English diction.

Insight: His poetry demonstrates how oral culture can be effectively translated into written English, preserving cultural essence while innovating poetically.

3. Folklore and Myth as Vehicles of Identity and Memory

Observation: Myths and folktales articulate both personal and collective memory, reflecting identity, heritage, and cultural consciousness.

Interpretation: Poems like “The Hindu” show a negotiation of diasporic identity, highlighting tension between tradition and modernity.

Critical Insight: Ramanujan’s poetry demonstrates how folklore is not static; it is an evolving medium that mediates between past and present, self and society.

4. Irony, Subversion, and Social Critique

Observation: Ramanujan often subverts myths and folktales to critique social norms, ritualistic practices, and human folly.

Example: In “Relations,” the idealized moral codes of folklore are juxtaposed against modern family dynamics, revealing contradictions and tensions.

Interpretation: This subversion shows that folklore is not romanticized, but interrogated critically, reflecting a modern sensibility aware of cultural limitations.

Literary Implication: Folktales and myths function as critical mirrors, enabling commentary on gender, hierarchy, morality, and social expectations.

5. Symbolism and Allegorical Dimensions

Observation: Mythic and folkloric elements operate symbolically to convey universal human experiences—mortality, fate, family, ethics.

Example: Snakes, rivers, and other motifs symbolize fear, destiny, continuity, and cultural memory.

Interpretation: Through allegory, Ramanujan universalizes the folk and mythic experience, allowing readers to connect ancient narratives with contemporary existential concern.

6. Transformation over Reproduction

Observation: Ramanujan does not reproduce traditional folktales verbatim but transforms them, maintaining thematic and cultural essence while adapting to poetic form.

Interpretation: This selective adaptation demonstrates creative agency, allowing folklore to remain relevant and dynamic in modern literary contexts.

Critical Insight: Transformation rather than replication emphasizes literary innovation and cultural continuity simultaneously.

7. Poetic Economy and Stylistic Precision

Observation: The precision and conciseness of Ramanujan's language heighten the impact of myths and folktales.

Interpretation: By compressing narrative complexity, he enhances emotional resonance, thematic clarity, and cultural specificity.

Example: In "Obituary," a concise narrative evokes both familial grief and ritualistic remembrance.

Insight: Stylistic economy makes folklore accessible, evocative, and layered without overwhelming the reader with detail.

8. Intersections with Postcolonial and Diasporic Concerns

Observation: The interplay of myth, folklore, and English language highlights tensions between cultural rootedness and global modernity.

Interpretation: Ramanujan's poetry reflects postcolonial literary strategies, negotiating authentic Indian identity within English poetic discourse.

Example: Folktale motifs are employed to preserve heritage while engaging a global readership.

Insight: Myth and folklore in his poetry act as mediators of cultural dialogue, bridging local traditions and universal human concerns.

9. Broader Literary Significance

Contribution: Ramanujan's integration of myth and folklore enriches Indian English poetry by: Offering ethnographically informed literary narratives, Innovating in poetic form and thematic dept. Preserving and revitalizing oral traditions in a modern context:

Implication: His work demonstrates the continuing relevance of folklore and myth in contemporary literature.

Ramanujan's poetry shows that myths and folktales are not static relics but living narratives, adaptable to modern sensibilities and literary expression.

They function simultaneously as structural devices, symbolic motifs, cultural memory, and instruments of critique.

The discussion reinforces the finding that his poetic genius lies in transforming tradition into innovative, globally accessible literary art, while maintaining deep cultural roots.

Conclusion

A. K. Ramanujan's poetry exemplifies the dynamic interplay between traditional Indian myths and folktales and modern literary expression. Through careful analysis, it is evident that myths and folktales are not merely decorative motifs in his work; rather, they serve as structural, thematic, symbolic, and allegorical devices that enrich his poetry both aesthetically and intellectually.

Ramanujan's engagement with myth and folklore reflects a deep-rooted cultural consciousness, drawing upon South Indian oral traditions, Puranic narratives, and local legends. By integrating these elements into English poetic form, he demonstrates a remarkable ability to preserve cultural specificity while achieving universal resonance. Poems such as "A River", "Snakes", and "Obituary" illustrate how mythic and folkloric motifs can articulate personal memory, familial and social relations, mortality, and existential concerns, simultaneously offering critical reflections on tradition and contemporary life.

A notable feature of his poetry is the creative transformation of folklore rather than mere reproduction. Through irony, subversion, and compression, Ramanujan reinterprets traditional narratives to engage with modern dilemmas, social critique, and diasporic identity. His precise, economical language and layered imagery allow readers to access the depth of myth and folklore without losing literary sophistication, making his work both culturally authentic and aesthetically compelling.

Ultimately, the study confirms that Ramanujan's poetry functions as a bridge between the oral and the literary, the traditional and the modern, the local and the global. Myths and folktales in his work are living narratives that continue to illuminate human experience, offering insight into identity, culture, and memory. His unique synthesis of folklore and poetry significantly enriches Indian English literature, highlighting the enduring relevance of myth and folktale in contemporary literary discourse.

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