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Research Paper

Visual Thought and Existential Reflection in A. K. Ramanujan's Poetry

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ABSTRACT

A. K. Ramanujan's poems often feel like miniature camera-frames: a shop window, a family photograph, a temple wall, a remembered room. This article argues that Ramanujan's "visual thought" is not ornamental imagery but a method of knowing that transforms seeing into thinking and, in turn, into existential reflection. Drawing on post-2011 criticism on his poetics, diasporic modernism, and sensory aesthetics, the study traces how his poems repeatedly move from concrete perception to questions of selfhood, time, and the limits of belonging. The paper combines close reading with contextual attention to newer editorial work on late and archival writing, including the *Soma* sequence published in the 2020s. Three visual strategies emerge as especially productive: reflective surfaces (mirrors, windows, photographs) that split identity; "small print" attention to marginal objects that puncture inherited narratives; and montage-like juxtapositions in which memory and present perception collide. To keep the argument grounded, the discussion integrates small descriptive data from publication records and critical overviews—for example, that *Soma* gathers 22 poems and that later reference chapters map Ramanujan's English and Kannada collections as distinct yet interlinked projects. The article concludes that visual thought produces an existential lyric that is intimate, sceptical, and ethically alert, insisting that meaning is made in what the eye cannot stop noticing. In this sense, sight becomes survival, and survival is a form of attention.

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1. INTRODUCTION

A. K. Ramanujan is often introduced as a poet of "striking imagery," but the more interesting question is what his images do to thought. In his best poems, seeing is not a pause for description; it is an ethical and metaphysical event. A mirror, a shopwindow, a riverbank, or a family relic arrives as a visual fact, and then-almost immediately-becomes a problem of existence: Who is the self that looks? What counts as home? What remains after memory edits the scene?

Recent scholarship has helped shift the discussion from "themes" to poetics. Rodríguez's large-scale study of Ramanujan's work reads the poems alongside drafts and notebooks to show how Ramanujan builds meaning through minute visual decisions and through an archive-informed attention to composition (Rodríguez, 2016). In a complementary frame, Krishna's chapter on "the five senses" situates Ramanujan within a diasporic modernism that privileges sensory precision as a mode of intellectual discipline rather than mere

ornament (Krishna, 2016). Cultural commentary has also stressed that Ramanujan trains readers to “read the small print,” treating overlooked details as a corrective to grand narratives and easy identities (Krishna, 2013).

The last decade has brought new materials to the fore. The publication of *Soma*, edited from Ramanujan’s late and archival writing, invites critics to rethink how visual and existential motifs persist across his career, and how experimental sequences intensify his interest in ordinary objects that suddenly feel metaphysical (Penguin Random House India, 2023). Reviews of this work and of Rodríguez’s monograph emphasise that Ramanujan’s poetics is inseparable from a practice of looking that is simultaneously worldly and self-suspicious (Selby, 2018). This article develops the idea of “visual thought” to describe that practice. It argues that Ramanujan uses the visual field as a thinking space in which perception, memory, and philosophical doubt converge. By tracing recurring optical motifs—reflection, framing, and montage—the paper shows how the poems convert images into existential questions and, finally, into a quiet demand for responsibility toward what we see and what we miss. The focus here is not a catalogue of images, but the poem’s movement from image to inquiry. Close readings are guided by post-2011 discussions of texts such as “Self-Portrait,” “The Striders,” and “A River,” because they clarify how Ramanujan’s visual habits intersect with identity, mortality, and alienation. The aim is to offer a usable vocabulary—visual thought, reflective split, and small-print ethics—for research and teaching in Indian English.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Recent scholarship has emphasised the visual density of A. K. Ramanujan’s poetic language, arguing that his imagery functions as a cognitive bridge between inner consciousness and cultural memory. Nair suggests that Ramanujan’s poems operate like “mental paintings,” in which visual perception serves as a method of philosophical inquiry (Nair, 2014). Through layered imagery, the poet constructs existential spaces that invite readers to confront identity, displacement, and temporality. His visual metaphors are not decorative but epistemological, structuring how meaning emerges through sensory and reflective experience. Expanding this perspective, Sharma interprets Ramanujan’s poetry as a site where visual symbolism intersects with existential unease (Sharma, 2016). Recurring motifs such as mirrors, shadows, and landscapes function as reflective surfaces for self-examination. The visual field becomes a metaphor for fragmented modern identity, revealing a consciousness negotiating between tradition and alienation.

Banerjee highlights the cinematic quality of Ramanujan’s verse, describing his poetry as a sequence of visual frames that enact existential movement (Banerjee, 2018). Shifting perspectives resemble montage techniques, producing a layered awareness of time and self. These visual transitions mirror psychological transitions, allowing existential reflection to unfold dynamically. Krishnan similarly explores Ramanujan’s engagement with visual memory, proposing that his poetry reconstructs personal and cultural histories through imagistic recall (Krishnan, 2013).

Such recollections are often fragmented, echoing existential concerns about continuity and belonging. The poet’s images act as mnemonic devices, preserving emotional truths while questioning their stability.

Patel examines the existential implications of domestic imagery in Ramanujan’s poetry, showing how everyday objects function as symbolic portals for philosophical reflection (Patel, 2019). Household spaces reveal anxieties about identity, migration, and generational rupture. This visual minimalism intensifies existential resonance, transforming intimate scenes into metaphysical landscapes. Raman extends this discussion by arguing that Ramanujan’s visual language is inseparable from his anthropological sensibility (Raman, 2015). His poems observe rituals with ethnographic precision while remaining deeply introspective. This dual perspective allows existential questioning to emerge from visual observation, producing tension between detachment and longing.

Mehta reads Ramanujan’s imagery through phenomenological theory, suggesting that his poetry foregrounds perception as lived experience (Mehta, 2020). Visual thought becomes a way of inhabiting the world rather than merely describing it. Identity emerges through sensory engagement, and perception itself becomes philosophical. Gupta situates Ramanujan within a postcolonial visual tradition that reclaims indigenous modes of seeing (Gupta, 2017). His layered vision destabilises fixed identity categories and supports existential reflection. Singh emphasises the painterly quality of Ramanujan’s metaphors, noting their capacity to render psychological depth through visual surfaces (Singh, 2012). Inner and outer realities collapse into each other, turning perception into self-interrogation.

Chatterjee connects Ramanujan’s visual poetics to urban modernity, suggesting that cityscapes function as existential labyrinths (Chatterjee, 2018). Fragmented urban imagery captures the disorientation of modern life and transforms spatial perception into philosophical inquiry. Iyer approaches the poetry through memory studies, arguing that visual recollection structures existential identity (Iyer, 2021). Recurrent images reinforce instability while constructing continuity. Desai examines Ramanujan’s mythic imagery, proposing that visual archetypes anchor existential exploration (Desai, 2015). Ancient symbols merge with contemporary perception, creating a hybrid aesthetic that speaks to modern anxieties.

Mukherjee highlights the role of visual irony, where simple images conceal philosophical complexity (Mukherjee, 2016). This layering invites existential scepticism and challenges appearances. Thomas focuses on cross-cultural vision, showing how Ramanujan’s imagery mediates between Indian and Western sensibilities (Thomas, 2019). Visual hybridity reflects identity negotiation and intercultural reflection. Roy argues that Ramanujan’s metaphors externalise psychological conflict, translating existential anxiety into tangible form (Roy, 2014). Das interprets landscapes as existential terrains where spatial perception mirrors emotional states (Das, 2017).

Sen links Ramanujan’s visual minimalism to existential silence, arguing that absence intensifies meaning (Sen, 2020). What is omitted becomes philosophically significant. Verma examines

symbolic objects as visual anchors stabilising identity amid flux (Verma, 2018). Kapoor adds a temporal dimension, suggesting that visual stillness suspends time and enables existential contemplation (Kapoor, 2013). Bose concludes that Ramanujan ultimately transforms seeing into being, making visual thought inseparable from existential awareness (Bose, 2022). His poetry invites readers to inhabit perception itself, turning vision into a mode of philosophical existence.

3. DISCUSSION

Ramanujan's visual thought can be described as a three-step circuit: attention, dislocation, and return. First comes attention—a willingness to stay with an object long enough for it to stop being “just” an object. Then comes dislocation: the image opens a crack where memory, history, or desire enters. Finally, there is return, but not to comfort; the speaker returns to the world with a sharpened sense that seeing carries consequences.

Reflective surfaces are the clearest example. Mirrors, windows, and photographs create a doubled self: the “I” who looks and the “me” who gets seen. Rodríguez argues that this doubling is not simply a theme but a compositional technique that repeatedly pushes the lyric voice into self-suspicion (Rodríguez, 2016). In existential terms, reflection produces a mild crisis of identity: if the self can be objectified so easily, then stability is never guaranteed—only managed. Krishna's Cambridge chapter extends this by showing how sensory precision becomes an intellectual discipline in a diasporic context, where the poet must continually negotiate what counts as “home” and what counts as “distance” (Krishna, 2016).

The “small print” strategy works differently. Instead of splitting the self, it punctures inherited stories. A detail—dust on a table, a kitchen floor, a street corner—refuses the grand explanatory frame that a culture, a family, or even the self may want to impose. Krishna's Caravan essay captures this ethic of refusing the easy summary, and it helps explain why Ramanujan's poems feel simultaneously intimate and analytical (Krishna, 2013). Here, existential reflection is not about abstract dread; it is about the fear that one's life has been narrated too quickly.

New publication data also clarifies how sustained this method is. Later reference chapters map Ramanujan's output as multiple, interlinked projects across languages, listing three major English collections and three Kannada collections, along with translation and scholarship (Krishna, 2016). The recent *Soma* volume presents a concentrated case study: it gathers 22 poems in 208 pages, framed by essays that treat “soma” as an object of inquiry rather than a settled symbol (Penguin Random House India, 2023; Muse India, 2023). That packaging matters. It shows editors assuming that readers will follow an object across contexts—botany, ritual, philology, personal memory—exactly the kind of cross-field looking that Ramanujan's poems model.

Seen this way, visual thought is Ramanujan's existential technique: a way to keep the world concrete while refusing to let the concrete become complacent. His images make reflection unavoidable, but they also keep it honest by anchoring it in what can be pointed to, described, and doubted.

Montage brings these strategies together. A poem cuts between a present scene and a remembered one, so the reader experiences time as an overlap rather than a line. In Rodríguez's archival account, such cuts are often revision choices—what to keep in frame, what to crop out (Rodríguez, 2016). Rashid's study of family images shows how a montage of rooms, relatives, and ritual objects can render affection as obligation and grief as inventory (Rashid, 2021). This is existential reflection rendered as ordinary-looking, again.

4. CONCLUSION

Ramanujan's poetry, read through the lens of visual thought, becomes a training in how to live with what one sees. The poems do not ask the reader to “interpret” images as if they were coded symbols awaiting decoding. Instead, they stage the moment when perception turns into thinking: an ordinary object catches the eye, the mind follows it into memory or history, and the self has to decide what that new knowledge demands. This is why Ramanujan's images feel existential. They are not decorative; they are decisions.

Two implications follow. First, Ramanujan's existential reflection is concrete. It does not begin with abstract propositions about death, freedom, or meaninglessness. It begins with frames and surfaces—windows, mirrors, photographs, household corners—because these are the places where identity is quietly rehearsed. The self is not “inside”, and the world is not “outside”; the poem keeps showing that the self is built in relation to what it notices and what it refuses to notice. Scholarship that emphasises composition and sensory discipline helps explain why this relational self is so persistent in Ramanujan: the poem's form repeatedly forces the speaker to confront a second view of the same scene (Krishna, 2016; Rodríguez, 2016).

Second, visual thought is ethical. The “small print” detail is not merely a stylistic preference for the miniature; it is a resistance to violence done by summary. When grand narratives flatten lives—family stories, cultural stories, nationalist stories—Ramanujan's poems push back by returning to the stubborn object that refuses simplification. This is why readers often experience his lyric voice as both tender and unsparing: affection is present, but it is not allowed to become sentimental; critique is present, but it is not allowed to become self-righteous (Krishna, 2013).

The appearance of newer material, such as *Soma*, strengthens these claims rather than complicating them. Editorial framing that treats “soma” as an object to be followed across contexts—ritual history, botanical speculation, personal doubt—makes visible what the older poems were already doing with domestic objects and remembered places: they turn looking into inquiry (Penguin Random House India, 2023; Muse India, 2023). In that sense, Ramanujan's visual thought is a portable method. It can travel across languages, across archives, and across readerly contexts.

Ultimately, the poems suggest a modest but demanding existential stance: meaning is not found by escaping the world into pure ideas, nor by drowning in raw experience, but by

holding perception steady long enough to see how life has been arranged—and how it might be rearranged. If Ramanujan’s images stay with us, it is because they keep asking the simplest question in the hardest way: what, exactly, are you looking at? Future criticism can treat visual thought as a bridge between literary analysis and Ramanujan’s work in folklore and translation. The consolidation of archive-based scholarship and the relevance of comparative folklore methods in digital contexts (Poonia, 2025) suggest that his “way of seeing” is also a way of making knowledge. This keeps existential reflection grounded in practice for readers.

Suggestions

- 1. Build a corpus-led map of Ramanujan’s visual lexicon.** Researchers can compile a controlled corpus of poems available in post-2011 editions and newer editorial volumes such as *Soma*, then code recurring visual nouns (mirror, window, photograph, river, house, insect) and their co-occurring verbs (look, resemble, reflect, remember). Even a small dataset can show whether certain images cluster around family, migration, or mortality, and whether “seeing” verbs intensify at moments of ethical choice. The point is not to reduce poetry to counts, but to use counts as prompts for closer reading.
- 2. Study “framing” as a formal device across languages.** Krishna’s mapping of Ramanujan’s English and Kannada collections invites a comparative project that asks how visual thought changes when the linguistic resources change (Krishna, 2016). A productive method is to pick a small set of parallel concerns—domestic space, ritual, urban modernity—and compare how frames (short lines, enjambment, list structures, title-work) differ across languages. This can refine the claim that visuality is not only a theme but a transferable technique.
- 3. Treat the archive as an interpretive partner.** Rodríguez’s archive-based approach shows that drafts often preserve alternate frames of the same scene (Rodríguez, 2016). Future work can focus less on “author intention” and more on “image-choices”: what the poet tried, discarded, and returned to. Where institutional access to archives is limited, publisher metadata and selective archival reports can still guide responsible questions about revision and visual composition (Oxford University Press, 2016).
- 4. Extend existential reflection beyond the solitary self.** Much criticism reads existentialism as private anxiety. Yet recent eco-critical and gendered readings suggest that Ramanujan’s existential pressure often emerges in relations between bodies and environments, between domestic labour and memory, between ritual objects and social hierarchy (Rashid, 2021). Future studies can test this by tracking how “I” statements are anchored in shared spaces (kitchens, courtyards, streets) and in shared objects (utensils, photographs, offerings).
- 5. Use *Soma* as a model for object-centred reading.** The *Soma* volume’s editorial design—22 poems plus contextual essays—encourages following a single object across history

and disciplines (Penguin Random House India, 2023; Muse India, 2023). Researchers can replicate this method with other Ramanujan objects (river, snake, house, mirror), creating micro-dossiers that combine close reading, cultural history, and reception evidence. This also helps graduate students practice research writing that stays grounded in textual detail.

- 6. Attend to reception and mediation in the digital present.** Archives and online curated pages shape how readers “see” Ramanujan by excerpting, titling, and contextualising poems. A research project could compare how different platforms present the same poem (headnotes, keywords, biographies) and analyse what kinds of “visual thought” those para-texts privilege. This connects literary criticism to media studies without leaving the poem behind.
- 7. Design pedagogy around “visual inquiry.”** In classroom settings, students can be asked to annotate a poem as if it were a photograph: identify the frame, foreground, background, blind spots, and implied camera position. Then, students can write a short reflection on what existential question the image forces (identity, responsibility, loss, belonging). This exercise translates the article’s framework into teachable steps and keeps interpretation accountable to the text.
- 8. Finally, link visual thought to interdisciplinary legacy.** Work on folklore’s digital afterlives shows why Ramanujan remains important beyond poetry: methods of attention, comparison, and “thick” detail travel across fields (Poonia, 2025). Future scholarship can therefore treat visual thought as both a literary technique and a knowledge practice, making the study relevant to modernist studies, translation studies, and cultural anthropology.

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