A.K. Ramanujan's Multilingual Poetics: Code-Switching and Cultural Identity

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ARTICLE DETAILS	ABSTRACT
Research Paper	This paper studies A.K. Ramanujan uses of multilingual poetics in his writing through the framework of code-switching. It examines how he switches between different languages and cultural styles to create a mixed identity that can't be easily labeled. The study analyzes his poems, translations, and essays to show how Ramanujan uses English to express Indian ideas. This challenges the idea that colonial languages are superior and shows the complexities of living between cultures. The paper argues that this approach makes Ramanujan important not just as a modern poet, but also in discussions about life after colonialism, people living away from their home countries, and how language works in a connected world. From this paper's perspective, Ramanujan is not merely a poet who is fluent in multiple languages, but also a mapmaker of the transitional zones where different cultures intersect and proliferate.
Keywords: *multilingual poetics, Code-switching, cultural style, mixed identity.*	

Introduction :

A.K. Ramanujan is a key figure in South Asian literature, recognized for his roles as a poet, translator, folklorist, and academic. His work highlights India's rich and diverse languages and cultures. Born in 1929 in Mysore, Ramanujan grew up with Tamil-speaking parents and was immersed in the languages of Kannada, Tamil, and Sanskrit. His education in India and the United States helped him become fluent in

English, shaping his life and work significantly. His poetry, including pieces like "A River" and "Self-Portrait," captures the essence of Indian oral traditions. Through his translations of Tamil Sangam poetry and Kannada bhakti verse, he brings ancient voices into the modern English-speaking world. Ramanujan's work is more than just about language connections; it is a vibrant space where different identities interact, adapt, and transform, reflecting the complex realities of living in a postcolonial, global society.

A.K. Ramanujan had deep knowledge of languages like Tamil, Kannada, Sanskrit, Telugu, and English, which greatly shaped his poetry and translations. This linguistic skill helped define his cultural identity making him a key figure in postcolonial literature. By using multiple languages, he added richness to his poetry. For example, in the English poem "A River," Indian rhythms and imagery come through, enhancing the work's expressiveness, as noted by Dharwadker in 1994.

Ramanujan's multilingual abilities helped him develop a mixed identity, blending his South Indian heritage with his Western education. This blend is evident in his translations of Kannada Vachanas and Tamil Sangam poetry, where he serves as a cultural bridge (Selby, 2000). His language skills align with postcolonial views on mixed identities, challenging the dominance of English and representing a flexible, context-aware identity (Bhabha, 1994; Hall, 1990). In his 1990 essay, "Is There an Indian Way of Thinking?", Ramanujan highlights the difference between Indian multilingual thinking and Western perspectives. As of 2025, his ideas continue to be crucial in discussions about linguistic diversity and moving away from colonial influences, offering a framework for cross-cultural conversations (Orsini, 2022).

Code-switching in literature and poetry:

Code-switching happens when people use two or more languages or different styles of speaking in one conversation or piece of writing. It means going back and forth between languages or dialects during the same interaction, allowing for a mix of expressions and styles in talking or writing. This can happen naturally in many different situations involving communication.

In various regions worldwide where several languages are spoken, this phenomenon occurs. Individuals engage in this practice for various reasons, such as to demonstrate group affiliation, enhance comprehension, or use terms that are absent in the other language. In the United States, Spanish-English speakers often switch languages. They might use Spanish for family talk or cultural ideas that are hard to say in English. About 73% of Spanish-English speakers in the U.S. do this regularly, especially with

family and friends. Teachers in bilingual classrooms also switch languages to help students understand better. In the UK, South Asian communities, like those speaking Punjabi, Urdu, or Bengali, often switch with English. About 60% of second-generation immigrants do this, especially at family events. It helps them keep their culture while also being part of British society. Teachers use this to connect better with students from similar backgrounds. In Japan, switching between Japanese and English is becoming more common, especially in big companies and among young people. About 40% of Japanese youth mix English words into their Japanese to seem modern and international. In Brazil, people speak various languages, such as Portuguese and indigenous languages. In cities, many bilingual people, about 30%, often switch between Portuguese and English, especially at work or in professional settings. Teachers use this language-switching to help students learn better and appreciate different cultures.

Similarly, in African countries like Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa, changing languages is common due to the many languages spoken there. In South Africa, about 85% of bilingual people switch languages, especially in casual situations. In Kenya, people often switch between Swahili and English to communicate effectively in a diverse society and express their identity. Movies and TV shows also use this language-switching to make the content more realistic and appealing to varied audiences.

These multilingual communities exist because of factors like migration, colonization, trade, and globalization. Within these communities, languages mix and influence one another. People use different languages to meet specific needs, make friends, and express their cultural backgrounds. Cities such as New York and London have many multilingual communities. In these cities, languages like Spanish, Chinese, Arabic, and Hindi are spoken alongside English. This blend of languages enriches the culture of these communities and influences how people interact in schools, businesses, and public life.

Code-switching is a concept that comes from sociolinguistics. It means switching back and forth between two or more different languages, dialects, or ways of speaking during a conversation. People do this to express what they mean better, show who they are, or fit in with a particular group. It's different from code-mixing, where languages blend into one. In code-switching, each language remains clear and separate, but the person shifts between them, even if just through small style changes. This isn't only in speech; writers also use code-switching in their work, mixing languages to show cultural connections or discussions. A.K. Ramanujan is a good example. He used code-switching to show how he balanced languages like Tamil, Kannada, Sanskrit, Telugu, and English in his poems. This approach helped him create a rich cultural identity that reflects the mixed nature of postcolonial and transcultural experiences.

In Ramanujan's work, you see him switch between languages in clear and subtle ways that reflect his personal experiences across regions. He often incorporates Tamil proverbs into his English writings. A notable instance is in "Is There an Indian Way of Thinking?" where he uses Sanskrit terms with English explanations to highlight context-sensitive thinking (Ramanujan, 1990). Although he primarily writes poetry in English, it subtly shows the influence of Indian languages through its structure, rhythm, and imagery. For instance, in his poem "A River," the concise and powerful style resembles Tamil Sangam poetry (Dharwadker, 1994). This ability to switch between languages is more than a stylistic choice; it's a deliberate way to bridge different cultures, aligning with Myers-Scotton's Markedness Model. This model views code-switching as a strategy for managing identity or context (Myers-Scotton, 1993). For Ramanujan, these language transitions capture his dual identity as a South Indian deeply immersed in local traditions and as a global scholar addressing an international audience.

Code-switching plays a key role in Ramanujan's poetry because it helps express and connect different cultural identities. Using ideas from postcolonial theory, code-switching mixes languages to create a "third space" where language boundaries blur. This challenges the dominance of English, a language with colonial roots (Bhabha, 1994). Ramanujan shows this in his work, such as the translations in "Speaking of Siva." He keeps the devotional tone of the original Kannada Vachanas while translating them into English, demonstrating how he switches languages to maintain cultural essence (Selby, 2000).

On a broader level, code-switching shows how Ramanujan questions the idea of sticking to just one language. This is linked to ongoing debates in 2025 about embracing language diversity and overcoming colonial language influences (Orsini, 2022). By using code-switching, he not only enriches his artistic expression but also encourages readers to appreciate different cultural perspectives. This makes code-switching an important tool for understanding his rich multilingual heritage.

Code-Switching in Ramanujan's Selected Poems:

A.K. Ramanujan's poetry serves as a brilliant example of using multiple languages to create something unique. He artfully combines Tamil, Kannada, Sanskrit, and English. This blending, known as code-switching, highlights his diverse cultural roots. In poems like "A River," "Self-Portrait," and "Snakes," he mixes Indian rhythms, visuals, and thoughts into English, crafting a poetic style that transcends the confines of a single language. This approach supports the notion that language-switching is a means of expressing one's identity.

In the poem "A River," A.K. Ramanujan uses code-switching to delve into different languages and cultures. By mixing English with Indian languages and cultural references, the poem achieves a distinctive rhythm. The structure reflects Tamil and Kannada poetic traditions while relying on English vocabulary. It features South Indian cultural images from Tamil Sangam poetry, alongside a Western analytical approach. The poem transitions between past and present, traditional and modern, and shifts perspectives from insider to outsider. Through these techniques, "A River" showcases Ramanujan's complex identity as an Indian poet and worldwide scholar. It demonstrates how code-switching involves not only languages but also cultural concepts, poetic traditions, and viewpoints.

In "A River," Ramanujan paints a picture of a dry riverbed in Madurai, using straightforward English interwoven with motifs from Tamil Sangam poetry's depiction of landscapes.

In Madurai,
city of temples and poets,
who sang of cities and temples,
every summer
a river dries to a trickle
in the sand (Ramanujan, 1985, p. 34).

The plain and straightforward language reflects the English modernist style, yet the recurring imagery of the river drying up "every summer" and the mention of "poets / who sang" subtly allude to the akam tradition of Tamil poetry, where nature mirrors internal emotions (Dharwadker, 1994). This implicit code-switching—from English syntax to Tamil poetic norms—infuses a regional sensibility into a universal form. The poem uses irony to compare the grand songs of poets with the simple reality of the river. This sets up a cultural conversation between the rich Tamil literary heritage and Ramanujan's outsider perspective, shaped by his experiences in the West. It highlights his mixed identity.

In "Self-Portrait," Ramanujan explores the idea of code-switching, which is changing how we speak and act depending on the situation. He uses a mirror as a strong symbol to show not just his appearance but also the complex layers of his cultural and language identity. By looking into the mirror, he examines different parts of who he is, each shaped by various cultures and languages. The mirror helps him think about his own struggles and the choices he faces living between different cultural and language worlds. When he looks, he might see his Indian roots, his Western education, and the many languages he

knows, all coming together in one reflection. This exploration shows both the challenges and the richness of code-switching. It illustrates how people balance different parts of their identity in a world that is more connected with different cultures.

I resemble everyone
but myself, and sometimes see
in shop-windows
despite the well-known laws
of optics,
the portrait of a stranger,
date unknown,
often signed in a corner
by my father (Ramanujan, 1985, p. 23).

In this context, the English language is both precise and contemplative, yet the idea of a fragmented identity "signed in a corner / by my father" echoes the oral traditions of Kannada or Tamil families, where one's identity is closely linked to ancestry and storytelling (Nerlekar, 2016).

Here, code-switching occurs on a conceptual level: the Western scientific allusion to "laws / of optics" contrasts with the Indian cultural perspective of selfhood as something inherited and elusive. This linguistic and thematic transition highlights Ramanujan's transnational identity, positioned between the individualism of Western modernity and the collective memory of his South Indian heritage.In "Snakes," Ramanujan explores childhood memories with vivid imagery that bridges English and Indian linguistic worlds.

In these poems, code-switching functions as both a stylistic and cultural tool. Ramanujan uses English as the primary language but enriches it with Indian syntax, imagery, or thematic elements, aligning with Myers-Scotton's perspective that code-switching is a conscious act to express identity (1993). Culturally, these linguistic shifts reflect his role as a South Indian poet within a postcolonial, transnational framework, echoing Bhabha's idea of hybridity (1994). The blending of languages reflects his personal journey—growing up in Mysore, studying Sanskrit, and teaching in the U.S.—turning his poetry into a platform for transcultural exchange. As of 2025, this multilingual technique remains important, providing

insights into linguistic diversity and identity formation in an increasingly interconnected world (Orsini, 2022).

Relationship Between Language and Cultural Identity:

Language and cultural identity are deeply connected, both reflecting who we are and our history. A.K. Ramanujan understood this in his poetry, where he used Tamil, Kannada, Sanskrit, Telugu, and English to express an identity that mixes South Indian traditions with a global, postcolonial world. Language is crucial for preserving and sharing cultural heritage since it encompasses the shared experiences, beliefs, and perspectives of a community.

According to Hall in 1990, this close connection between language and cultural identity is important. In Ramanujan's poetry, this is uniquely shown. His English poems form a link between different linguistic and cultural traditions. Through his work, we see the complex relationship between language and cultural memory. By making linguistic choices, cultural details are preserved even in a foreign language. Ramanujan's English poems follow English standards but integrate elements of Indian linguistic traditions such as rhythmic patterns, vivid imagery, and idiomatic expressions. This blend creates a deep and rich meaning, merging his Indian heritage into English poetry. It lets readers appreciate the many layers of his cultural identity and see how language serves as a vessel for cultural memory.

In the poem 'a River' poets , invokes the Tamil Sangam tradition, where poetry was an oral, communal act tied to place and nature (Selby, 2000). By incorporating a cultural reference in English, Ramanujan works to protect and share a distinct South Indian identity. He does this even when addressing a larger audience. For Ramanujan, language isn't just a neutral tool. It serves as a carrier of cultural heritage. This is shaped by his multilingual upbringing in Mysore and his familiarity with Tamil and Kannada spoken traditions.

Cultural Identity in Ramanujan's Works:

A.K. Ramanujan's poems, translations, and essays that highlight his rich and varied cultural identity. This identity evolved, shaped by the different languages he mastered. Born in Mysore, Ramanujan spoke Tamil but also knew Kannada, Sanskrit, Telugu, and English. This multilingual ability allowed him to exist between the traditions of South India and a more globalized world influenced by different cultures. His cultural identity wasn't fixed; it was lively and flexible. Ramanujan showcased this

through his language skills, often switching between them. In his work, we see how he combined local traditions, personal memories, and interactions between different cultures. His approach aligns with ideas about identity in places affected by diverse cultural influences.

Ramanujan's poetry, even when written in English, vividly depicts images and themes from his South Indian background, reflecting his roots and cultural journey.

In the poem "A River," he writes:

> *In Madurai,*
> *city of temples and poets,*
> *who sang of cities and temples,*
> *every summer*
> *a river dries to a trickle*
> *in the sand (Ramanujan, 1985, p. 34).*

Here, the river's drying represents the fading of cultural memory in urban India, a theme that resonates with the swift pace of modernization today. This stanza explores a person's deep connection to Madurai, a key hub of Tamil culture. In Madurai, temples and poetry are important symbols of heritage. The recurring event of the river drying up acts as a metaphor in Tamil Sangam poetry, representing human experiences and embedding a regional identity. The writing combines modern English with traditional Tamil themes. Ramanujan, the writer, uses an ironic tone when describing how poets tend to exaggerate in their work. This irony reflects his outsider view, shaped by his experiences in the U.S. It suggests that Ramanujan's cultural identity is rooted in Madurai yet reflects a thoughtful understanding gained from living abroad. His identity merges the local culture of his heritage with diverse global influences.

Bridging Cultures Through Translation of Kannada Vachanas:

Ramanujan's translations of Kannada Vachanas in "Speaking of Siva" highlight his skill in translation and his role as a bridge between Indian literature and global readers. He preserves the spiritual depth and devotion of bhakti poets like Basavanna, allowing those who don't speak Kannada to experience the intense emotions and deep thoughts of these ancient texts. His translations maintain the clarity and

directness of the original Vachanas, making them accessible to a larger audience and encouraging conversations about spirituality and devotion across cultures.

Ramanujan's work is more than just changing languages; it involves cultural interpretation. He includes notes and explanations that help readers understand the social and historical context of these poems. This approach keeps the original texts' meanings intact while enriching readers' understanding of Indian mystical traditions. By doing this, Ramanujan connects Indian literary heritage with the curiosity of readers worldwide, promoting a deeper appreciation of Indian culture and spirituality.

Throughout his works, Ramanujan's identity reflects his multilingual background and personal experiences.His poetry anchors him in South Indian places and memories, his translations extend that identity to a global stage, and his essays theorize it as a dynamic process. Code-switching—whether through Tamil rhythms in English verse or Sanskrit allusions in prose—serves as the mechanism that binds these facets, reflecting Stuart Hall's view of identity as an ongoing negotiation (Hall, 1990). As of 2025, this hybrid identity resonates with contemporary discussions on diaspora, decolonization, and cultural pluralism, positioning Ramanujan as a poet-scholar whose works illuminate the interplay of language and culture in shaping selfhood (Orsini, 2022). His cultural identity, thus, is not a fixed essence but a living dialogue, crafted through the multiplicity of his voices.

Relevance of Ramanujan's Approach in Today's Globalized Context:

A.K. Ramanujan was a celebrated poet who used multiple languages and cultures in his writing. This approach is highly significant in today's interconnected world, as of March 17, 2025. We are in an era where ideas move swiftly between countries, people talk online, and there is a mix between blending cultures and keeping their uniqueness. Ramanujan's work includes languages like Tamil, Kannada, Sanskrit, Telugu, and English. By doing this, he provides an example of how to handle identity and creativity across different cultures. His poetry, translations, and essays work to preserve local traditions while engaging in a global context. They raise important discussions about protecting endangered languages, reclaiming cultures after colonial times, and facilitating communication between different cultures. This makes his work a key resource for researchers, poets, and global citizens (Orsini, 2022).

As the world becomes more connected, it often favors widespread languages such as English, which can endanger smaller languages—a concern highlighted in UNESCO's 2025 reports on endangered

languages. Ramanujan's approach challenges this pattern by making English more personal and integrating Indian rhythms and emotions, providing a unique method to support and celebrate linguistic diversity.

His code-switching—subtly embedding Sangam poetic conventions—offers a strategy for preserving regional identities within a global framework, a practice increasingly relevant as communities in 2025 use digital platforms to revitalize languages like Tamil or Kannada through poetry and storytelling (Varughese, 2012).Ramanujan's hybrid cultural identity, forged between South India and the U.S., resonates with the experiences of today's diaspora communities, who navigate multiple cultural affiliations in a globalized world.

The oscillation between Western rationalism ("laws / of optics") and Indian familial ties reflects a postcolonial identity that aligns with Bhabha's concept of hybridity (1994), where new meanings emerge in the overlap of cultures. In 2025, as migration and digital nomadism blur national boundaries, Ramanujan's approach provides a lens for understanding how individuals construct identity across contexts, a theme echoed in contemporary South Asian diaspora literature and online identity discourses (Nerlekar, 2016).

Future Scope for research:

Ramanujan's approach transcends his time, addressing 2025's pressing questions: How do we maintain cultural identity amid globalization? How can language serve as both a bridge and a bulwark? His multilingual poetics, rooted in code-switching, suggests that identity thrives in multiplicity, not uniformity, a perspective that resonates with Stuart Hall's view of identity as a process shaped by cultural encounters (Hall, 1990). Whether in poetry classrooms, digital forums, or postcolonial studies, Ramanujan's work inspires a rethinking of how we engage with language and culture in an interconnected world, affirming its enduring relevance.

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