

Paper IV

Indian Writing in English ENGBA (604)

Unit : 3

Poem : 2

Obituary by A. K. Ramanujan

Father, when he passed on, left dust on a table of papers, left debts and daughters, a bedwetting

grandson named by the

toss of a coin after him,

a house that leaned slowly through our growing years on a bent coconut tree in the yard. Being the burning type, he burned properly

at the cremation

as before, easily and at both ends, left his eye coins in the ashes that didn't look one bit different, several spinal discs, rough, some burned

to coal, for sons

to pick gingerly and throw as the priest said, facing east where three rivers met near the railway station; no longstanding headstone with his full name and two dates

to holdin their parentheses everything he didn't quite manage to do himself, like his
caesarian birth in a brahmin ghetto and his death by heart- failure in the fruit market.

But someone told me he got two lines in an inside column of a Madras newspaper
sold by the kilo exactly four weeks later
to streethawkers

who sell it in turn to the small groceries where I buy salt, coriander, and jaggery in
newspaper cones
that I usually read

for fun, and lately in the hope of finding these obituary lines. And he left us a changed
mother and more than one annual ritual.

'Obituary' by A.K. Ramanujan is an eight stanza poem that is separated into sets of seven lines. These lines do not do follow a specific rhyme scheme, but that does not mean that there aren't moments of rhyme and rhythm in the text. For example, Ramanujan makes use of slant or half rhymes.

These are seen through the repetition of assonance or consonance. This means that either a vowel, or consonant sound is reused within one line, or multiple lines of verse. There are a few examples of this kind of rhyme in the first stanza with the words "papers" and "daughters" and "on" and "grandson". These words do not rhyme perfectly, but they are clearly similar. In the fourth stanza, the endings of the first three lines are connected due to a similarity in assonance. The long "e" sound is repeated in "gingerly," "priest" and "east". Alliteration is another technique found in 'Obituary'. It helps to create additional moments of rhyme for the text, and also, at times, helps support the tone. One example is "debts" and "daughters" in the first stanza. The relationship between these two words is somewhat humorous and the fact that they begin with the same letter only emphasizes this fact.

Summary of *Obituary*

'Obituary' by [A.K. Ramanujan](#) describes the aftermath of a father's death and all the things he left behind, physical and emotional.

The poem begins with the speaker telling the reader that his father died. When he died, he left behind a lot. There are useless and meaningless things, like dust and old papers. But there are also memories and rituals which are going to last a lifetime.

In the second half of the poem the speaker describes how they cremated this father and threw his leftover bones into the river. He also speaks about something he learned, but is yet to see with his own eyes. Apparently, his father left an obituary in a local paper. Now, the son is searching the most popular papers for it, hoping to see this other thing he left behind. The poem ends with an emphasis on the importance of the rituals, that came from his father, and are now established parts of family life.

Analysis of *Obituary* Stanza

One

In the first stanza of '*Obituary*' the speaker begins by telling the reader who died – his father. The speaker focuses on what the father left behind. There were utterly normal things that have taken on a new importance. Such as, dust on a “table of papers” and “debts and daughters.” The father also left behind a grandson named after him. Little details, like the fact that the grandson was named after him because of a “toss of a coin” are interesting and bring the reader closer to the speaker’s family.

Stanza Two

In the second stanza of '*Obituary*' the list of things the father left behind grows. There was a house, that had been leaning slowly throughout the speaker’s years. It is on a coconut tree in the yard.

In the next lines, there are a number of things the “burning” could allude to, practices associated with farming are the most obvious. To make it more complicated and relate it more easily to the loss, the speaker compares his father’s habit of burning to the way he burnt promptly when he was cremated. The humour here lightens the mood a bit and tells the reader that the speaker is not intending to speak too heavily on loss and depression. Instead, he is celebrating his father’s life.

Stanza Three

In the next lines of '*Obituary*' he refers to the “eye coins”. This is related to the tradition of putting coins on a dead person’s eyes when they are buried, or in this case, before they are cremated. He draws attention to the fact that that the coins didn’t burn. They were left in

the ashes, looking the same as when they went into the fire. Alongside the coins are “several spinal discs. These, unlike the coins, are rough.

Stanza Four

The sons, the speaker and his brothers, engage in a ritual of throwing these bits of bone “facing east / where three rivers met / near the railway station”. The speaker mixes traditional and mysticism with reality. This ritual happens somewhere normal, right near a train station. He goes on to describe how they chose not to have a headstone for their father. They didn’t think that “his full name and two dates would do him justice.

Stanza Five

The “parentheses” which would go around the dates would’ve represented “everything he didn’t quite / manage to do himself”. The kind of things the speaker is thinking of are the father’s birth and his death. He was born in a “brahmin ghetto” and he died “by heart- / failure in the fruit market”. Simple places are again contrasted with important events.

Stanza Six

The sixth stanza relates directly back to the title of the poem, *‘Obituary’*. The father has left something behind, “two lines / in an inside column / of a Madras newspaper”. The son doesn’t know exactly which paper, or where the lines are. But he did hear that it is sold by the kilo and would turn up with the “streethawkers,” or those on the street selling goods, “four weeks later”.

In these lines the poet makes use of half rhyme with “newspaper” and “streethawkers”.

Stanza Seven

These sellers bring their papers to the grocery stores where the speaker goes to buy normal everyday products. Usually, he buys a newspaper along with spices such as coriander.

In these lines, “groceries” and “jaggery” are half rhymes, connected due to their “e” sounds.

Stanza Eight

In the last seven lines the speaker describes reading the paper and hoping to find the “obituary lines”. Their presence is one thing the father left behind, along with everything else mentioned in the previous stanzas. The poem ends with the speaker describing how his mother has changed. Now, he adds the family is left with annual rituals which were started by a man who is no longer alive.