

# OBITUARY


A K RAMANUJAN

# POEM:

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.

- ▶ The word “Obituary” means a notice of death in newspaper including a brief biography of the deceased person.
- ▶ ‘Obituary’ by A.K. Ramanujan describes the aftermath of a father’s death and all the things he left behind, physical and emotional.
- ▶ The poet explains how his death has affected his family and what his father has achieved in his life.
- ▶ Has ironical sketches in it.
- ▶ This poem is taken from the collection “Relationships”, 1971.
- ▶ Poem is written in first person narrative. Narrator is poet himself.
- ▶ Contains 8 stanzas.
- ▶ Through this poem the poet expresses his views about how the responsibilities he had to shoulder of his family and how his father’s life was meaningless and was without any achievement.
- ▶ Says in a Mock ironic tone, that what is the legacy that he left behind.
- ▶ Family is the root of A K Ramanujan’s poem. all through his poems he speaks about his various relationships and in this poem he is considering his relationship with his father, he is paying a tribute to his father in his individual way.
- ▶ 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.

# STANZA 1

- ▶ The poet says that when his father died he left nothing for the family but problems like dust on a table of papers, debts, unmarried daughters & a bedwetting(infant) grandson whose name is a little bit similar to his father's name.
- ▶ In the Indian context, even daughters are considered to be as debts. Coz the son who has left behind after the death of the father he has to perform all the rituals of the marriage and marriage cost a lot, of the dowry that has to be given at the time of marriage should be fulfilled by him. Here, daughters are equal to debts.
- ▶ It is expected the duty of the son to fulfil all the debts of his father.
- ▶ The lines show the poet's dissatisfaction with his father. He does not seem to be sorrowful because of death.
- ▶ The poet is more concerned about the duties (of his family) which he has to perform. He has to pay the debts of his father, he has to marry off his sister and also has to take care of a young child who urinates in the bed. (The infant is named after his father.)
- ▶ These lines also show the culture of a typical Indian family which is patriarchal in nature. Neither the mother of the poet nor his sisters are earning.
- ▶ As the poet is now the eldest male in the family, all the duties are bestowed on him.



# STANZA 2

- ▶ The poet continues that his father has left *a house that leaned slowly through our growing years on a bent coconut tree in the yard.*
- ▶ The line means that they have inherited a house from his father which is leaning on a coconut tree and thus in bad condition.
- ▶ He didn't have enough money and even the house he has passed on to us was in a very dilapidated condition. Like the bent coconut tree.
- ▶ It actually needed construction and lots of repair. (House seems to be leaning)
- ▶ The poet calls his father as *the burning type*. indicating that he was a bad-tempered man(angry, complaining man) and would never have behaved properly with him or the other family members.
- ▶ He was so much Dissatisfied of the life, he didn't had the urge to live and because of this he burned properly at the time of cremation.
- ▶ All through the life he was burning out of the affliction of life , he struggled throughout his life, was not happy with his life, and now his death was a sort of welcoming relief to him.
- ▶ Being hot-tempered *he burned properly at the cremation*. The phrase gives the message of *tit for tat*.

# STANZA 3

- ▶ The line continues from the previous one (enjambment).
- ▶ He is burnt very easily from *both the sides*.
- ▶ Coins –coins that are put on the eyes when the eye lids of the deceased are closed.
- ▶ Ashes were left for the family and also the eyeballs.
- ▶ The eyes were not diff from the coins.(looking similar)
- ▶ except *his eye coins* (coin either signifies his anger or his greed for money) which *didn't look one bit different* even after burning
- ▶ and also *several spinal discs* though some of them burnt to coal.
- ▶ The duties or the rites that the son has to do. Apart from the eye balls the son could find was the several spinal discs and these as advised by the priest he had to pick those up and had to do the rituals that the priest suggested him to do.
- ▶ Several spinal disc rough and Some of them had burn to coal, black in colour

# STANZA 4

- ▶ This stanza continues from the previous one.
- ▶ According to the poet, the remains of his father's pyre are left *for sons to pick as the priest said, facing east where three rivers met near the railway station.*
- ▶ and for some stupid gingerly. Means this is the rite or duty the son has to perform that he has to pick it up very carefully as the priest advises him and throw as the priest said facing east where 3 rivers meet.
- ▶ These rites are to be performed in the river where the 3 rivers meet. Its like Triveni and the river is near the railway station.
- ▶ The priest suggested that all these ashes and the leftovers they are to be thrown over into the river.
- ▶ The lines show that the priest forces the sons to perform the Hindu Rituals.
- ▶ The poet is in no way ready to do it.
- ▶ His father has no grave (as his ashes and remains are thrown in the river) *with his full name.*

# STANZA 5

- ▶ After the cremation, there is no headstone.
- ▶ Only the birth date and date of death that holds within the parenthesis (brackets)
- ▶ With his full name and two dates to hold in the brackets.
- ▶ He says that his fathers life was restricted to this, means he is not having anything imp to mention all thru his life.
- ▶ The only two things that were important in his life was the birth and the death.
- ▶ His father didn't do anything by himself. Things just happened to him. He just accepted everything as it came to him
- ▶ There nothing actually which was going
- ▶ Even the birth was not natural.(caesarian)
- ▶ In addition, there also no *two dates* (his birth and death dates) to show throw light on his life.
- ▶ The poet calls him incapable as he didn't do anything on his own.
- ▶ His birth was Caesarian *in a brahmin ghetto and his death by heart failure in the fruit market.*
- ▶ In Hinduism, the Brahmans or the Upper Casts are worshipped as Avatars of Gods.
- ▶ However, the poet shows that his father took birth as a Brahman yet his birth was ordinary and even his death could not be controlled by him.
- ▶ In spite of being educated, he died in the market of heart failure and he couldn't save himself.
- ▶ These lines, in other sense, mark that he has achieved nothing in this world.
- ▶ His birth was ordinary, his death was ordinary and what he did in life showed his incapability.

## STANZA 6

- ▶ However, the poet comes to know that *two lines* were written for him *in an inside column of a Madras newspaper* which is *sold by the kilo* (as junk) after *four weeks* of his death *to street hawkers*.

## STANZA 7

- ▶ These street hawkers sell it in turn to the small groceries. From these groceries, the poet buys salt, coriander, and jaggery in newspaper cones which he reads for fun.

# STANZA 8

- ▶ The poet says that he began to buy more of these things *in the hope of finding these obituary lines* which were written for his father.
- ▶ In the end, he says that his father left with them *with a changed mother* (she remains sorrowful) *and more than one annual ritual*.
- ▶ The poet is showing his dislike for the ritual which is celebrated in the memory of his father for his peace.
- ▶ Thus the poet says that his father achieved nothing in this world except those two lines (obituary) which were written in the newspaper he could never find out.
- ▶ On the other hand, he left an unbearable burden on the poet. The poem is hence a critique of the poet's father and his incapacabilities.