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Quest for truth: Metaphysics and Raja Rao

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Abstract

Like Mulk Raj Anand and R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao is one of the greatest Indian novelists writing in the early phase of Indo-Anglican fiction. Raja Rao expressed his metaphysical quest in his novels, *Kanthapura*, *The Serpent and the Rope* and *Cat and Shakespeare* and some other novels. These novels can be termed 'Metaphysical Novels'. Raja Rao has been acknowledged as a writer with a mission. This article explores his quest to find the answer of the fundamental question that every human asks himself or herself at some point in time — "Who am I?" This is a question that haunted Rao throughout his life as he attempted to arrive at some reconciliation about himself as an Indian author writing in English about Indian sensibilities in a foreign land.

Keywords: Metaphysics, culture, divinity, self -realization, sadhna, dharma, enlightenment, Vedanta, vision, advaita

Introductions

It will be a misconception to regard Raja Rao an ideologue or social reformer. Selecting the medium of fiction because of ready access, Rao wove into its fabric his metaphysical patterns of thought. The resultant product became so steeped in philosophy that critics were swept into labelling him a metaphysicist. An ardent believer in Indian culture and ethos Raja Rao considered novel writing as a personal and private endeavor. His novels embodied Rao's own journey into metaphysical regions of Truth, being and divinity. Aiming to combine together a probe into the singular human psyche; his own vital and significant contact with metaphysics; and the profound 'Indian experience', Rao sought a medium for communication. The fiction format offered him a suitable apparatus wherein he felt free to experiment with these preoccupations. The novel form and its component-theme, character, plot, dialogue, provided the essential structure into which Raja Rao wove his entire metaphysical principle of initiation, awareness, surrender, worship, perception, realization and enlightenment. Raja Rao's project is to show the viability of a world view—Advaita Vedanta. More specifically, it is a tradition of wisdom exemplified in the Vedas and Vedanta, which was later systematized and popularized by the great Sankara and into which Raja Rao was initiated by his Guru, Sri Atmananda. His literary product and philosophical stand has brought him the status of a classic writer. In an interview, published in the *Illustrated Weekly of India* in January 1964, Raja Rao said, "For me literature is sadhna, my dharma - not a profession but a vocation". He writes his novels as his steps towards the process of self - realization. His novels, hence, essentially represent a quest for the Absolute. From *Kanthapura* to *Comrade Kirillov*, Rao's protagonists grapple with the same concerns: What is Truth? How is one to find it? Their methods vary, as do their results, but they share the same preoccupation. Formally, all of his novels share certain features. Plot is de-emphasized; the narrative is generally subjective—even idiosyncratic—and episodic. The progression of the narrative is not linear but circular; in the Puranic manner of storytelling, which Rao adapts to the form of the Western novel, there are digressions, stories within stories, songs, philosophical disquisitions, debates, and essays. Characters are also frequently symbolic figures; often, the motivations for their actions might seem puzzling or insufficient.

Kanthapura

His first novel, *Kanthapura*, a Gandhian novel came out in 1938 which he has written in France. The novel was an account of the impact of Gandhi's teaching on non-violence resistance against the British. In this novel, Rao borrows the style and structure from Indian Vernacular tales and folk epic. According to him, one must be a man first, and a writer afterwards.

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By man, he means a metaphysical entity, one who has realised the absolute truth. In this novel, he renewed a connection with his roots in the modern rendering of the Mahabharata and legend of Sathyavan and Savitri. It is his semi autobiographical novel and it deals with the story of a search for spiritual truth in Europe and India.

Kanthapura is a classic of its own kind. In his monumental book on Indo- English literature, Prof. K.R.S. Iyengar describes Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* as a Gandhi - Purana. It portrays the Freedom Movement launched by Mahatma Gandhi in the 1920's to liberate India from the imperialistic hegemony of the British. In any case in different and differing ways, he emphasizes the PURANIC quality of the present novel. In his foreword to *Kanthapura*, Raja Rao says that there is perhaps no village in India which does not have a rich Sthala-Purana or legendary history of its own. It is generally said that a particular God or God - like hero has passed by this or that village, that Lord Rama crossed the Ganga at this particular point of the village, or that Sita stayed in a hut at that particular place. Similarly, the story that we get in *Kanthapura* is associated with the gospels and activities of Mahatma Gandhi. It is true that the novelist does not say at any place in the book that Mahatma Gandhi visited *Kanthapura* but throughout the book Gandhi is looked upon as the invisible God, and his ardent follower, Moorthy, is regarded as his avatar or incarnation in the village of *Kanthapura*.

Similarly, the Gandhian hero, Moorthappa, has been idolised as an extraordinary person. Gangamma describes him as "Moorthy the God", "Moorthy the Religious" and "Moorthy the Noble". He is visible Gandhi for the people of *Kanthapura*. Moorthy goes from door to door, even in the pariah quarters of the village, and explains to the villagers the significance of Gandhi's struggle for independence. Inspired by Gandhi's principle of truth, non - violence and the Harijan movement, he participates in the freedom struggle. The villagers under the leadership of Moorthy offer satyagraha and picketing outside the coffee state. There are merciless lathi charges and shootings, but the villagers put up a brave resistance which gave a jolt to the British Government. For Gandhi, both the ends and means are important, the cardinal principle of ethics. Moorthy as a satyagrahi follows the line of Mahatma Gandhi who preached that we should unremittingly worked for the good of mankind.

"Fight" Says He, "But Harm No Soul."

"Love All", Says He, "Hindu, Mohammedan, Christian Or Parlah As All Are Equal Before God."

In *Kanthapura*, Moorthy is no seeker of truth, but believes in the applied truth.

Rao's narrative technique in *Kanthapura* is, no doubt, characterised by chattiness and digressions, but it is also characterised by a mythic parallelism that draws its sustenance from Indian tradition and culture. Just as the village of *Kanthapura* celebrates the Rama festival and the Krishna festival and the Ganapati festival, similarly through the turmoils of freedom struggle, it does also celebrate the Gandhi festival. Moreover, just as the people of *Kanthapura* love to hear Hari - Kathas, in a similar manner, they do also love to hear what is called the Gandhi katha. In this novel we are told how Gandhi is the very incarnation of Brahma, how he is to our age what Prahlad and Harishchandra were

to their own age. Reading a news item relating to Mahatma Gandhi becomes something like reading the GITA itself. It is interesting to see how in this novel, contemporary history, the Gandhian revolution of 1930's, is transformed into a myth and a legend, and how reality passes off into dream.

Thus we can say that Raja Rao makes the spirit of *Kanthapura* to participate in the epic struggle and identify the contemporary struggle for Swadeshi, Swaraj and Swatantrata almost as sacred as the tradition could sanction.

The serpent and the rope

The *Serpent and the rope*, published in 1960 established Raja Rao's reputation as a philosophically complex novelist. This novel is considered to be his spiritual autobiography and was written after he met his Guru, Sri Atmananda. The Indian Vedantic vision and wisdom of age - old Indian scriptures - The Vedas, The Upanishads and The Gita - are woven into the very structure of the novel. The central theme of the novel is the anti -thesis between illusion and reality, and the novelist Raja Rao himself states:

"The World Is either Unreal or Real• the Serpent or the Rope."

The thought and the analogy of the rope here are taken from the non - dualistic philosophy of Shankaracharya, the celebrated Indian philosopher of 8th century A.D., who says,

"Just As Owing To One's Ignorance Of The Rope, The Rope Appears To Be A Serpent, The Self."

The novel, *The Serpent and the Rope* is deeply rooted in the Indian philosophy and tantricism. It depicts man's quest for self-realization. The theme of the novel, as Raja Rao says, is "The futility and barrenness of man in human existence when man has no deep quest and no thirst for the ultimate. Man's life here in samsara is a mission to find the absolute." The hero of this novel, Ramaswamy is an Indian Brahmin, sensitive and educated in the Advaita philosophy of "oneness of all". In this novel, he expresses his irrepressible quest for God. Here Raja Rao advocates following Vedanta, which is truth. In Vedanta, everything is revealed. According to the hero, the world is an illusion; life is unreal. In the light of futile worldly glories, both Ramaswamy and the author insist upon salvation. Since man's life is mortal or temporary, he must aspire for Moksha or liberation from the fetters of life. Ramaswamy speaks much about death. His ideas on death are taken from the Upanishads. He argues that soul is imperishable. In his view, soul and God are one and the same.

"Not Hearing nor Tasting nor Smelling or Seeing But Form of Consciousness and Bliss;
Shiv A I Am, I Am Shiv A."

The hero, Ramaswamy, goes and lives in France for a long time and marries a French Woman, Madeleine. He is thus both of the East and West and understands the attitudes and values of both. For Ramaswamy, self portrait of the novelist, India is both a metaphysical and geographical area. He venerates India as an 'ideal', a 'tradition', 'cultural and metaphysical', 'the Guru of the World', 'the sages which

have no history and biography', and 'the quintessence of Advaita philosophy.'

But the wonder is that although he speaks much about Vedantic philosophy, observance of Brahmacharya and virtues, Ramaswamy, a graduate in London does not practice anything. In fact he suffers from several human frailties such as sexual morbidity, craze for material advancement and sense of possessiveness. It is significant to observe that Ramaswamy's pilgrimage in the novel culminates in his misery and suffering, because he became rootless without a home, temple, city and age. He is a rootless figure always in search of quest-hood. First he tries to get self realization through Vedanta. But his carnal desires take him to tantric cult. In the end, when Rama finds most of his worldly ties cut off, he decides to go to his guru in Travancore.

The novel deals with the larger theme of the quest for self knowledge suggested in the title, 'The Serpent and the Rope.' The analogy illustrates the doctrine that just as the rope is wrongly taken to be the serpent, the limited self is often regarded as the individual soul, which is only an aspect of God.

The cat and shakespeare

Raja Rao's third novel, *The Cat and Shakespeare*, a sequel to *The Serpent and the Rope*, has actually baffled the critics and consequently it has been called "all too chatty and catty." This novel is the best example of an enigmatic work, for it combines both comic and serious and amorous and metaphysical. Here we get the story of two clerks, Ramakrishna Pai, the narrator of this story and his neighbour, Govindan Nair who is working at the rationing office. Nair evolves his own philosophy of life which he repeats like this." Learn The Way Of The Kitten. Then You Are Saved.

Allow The Mother Cat, Sir, To Carry You."

According to him, we are all kittens carried by the cat. Some, who are lucky, will know it, others merely hear 'meow, meow!'

Govindan Nair is charged with corruption and fraudulent practices. His boss, Boothalinga Iyer dies of heart failure as a cat jumps suddenly on his bald head. Govindan Nair is summoned to the court where he throws the whole blame on Boothalinga Iyer. He comes with a cat in the court which creates a diversion by jumping here and there. The innocence of Govindan Nair is proved when the signature of Boothalinga Iyer is revealed under another signature in the light of a sunbeam. After this, the novelist comes with a spate of question only to find out whether the reader is capable of going beyond mere intellectual comprehension and losing himself in the silences between Govindan Nair's speeches.

Raja Rao considers this novel as a book of prayer, since he has to learn to cease to be himself and to become 'what he sees, he sees.' Through the nimble and subtle walk of cat, Raja Rao suggests us that once we learn the way of the kitten, we are saved; once we know that there is a soul within and Grace above, nothing can really touch us. He again teaches us the ways of the Upanishadic illumination through the analogy of the sunbeam that pierces through the paper and reveals to the court the hidden signature behind

the superficial one. There are words, words, words, a whirl of words, but their true meaning is understood only when there is inner illumination, sudden flashes of lightening illuminating the dark and the unknown. C.D. Narasimhaiah says.

"The Cat And Shakespeare Is The Most Mature Of His Novels."

Raja Rao has found in it the most adequate concrete equivalent of a profound vision of life which has its validity not only for the contemporary Indian situation, but for our entire fragmentary civilisation.

The novel, too, is an indulgent glorification of the supreme Goddess. Most of the characters are the worshippers of the Goddess who is the supreme deity of the Hindu tantric and Vedantic cult. The cat in the novel is symbolic of the female deity but the meaning of the title word 'Shakespeare' is not at all hinted in the novel. The addition of Shakespeare to the title was an afterthought because the first version was called simply 'The Cat.' The novel rests on a symbol drawn from the animal world and used on an abstract philosophical level. Reverence and irreverence, fantasy and reality, mysticism and mammonism, the past with its age-old philosophy and the present of the global war- are all mixed together in this brief, teasing fable.

Comrade Kirrilov

It is interesting to note that his last novel *Comrade Kirillov*, first published in a French translation in 1965, was written earlier. thematically and it represents the stage of negation before the spiritual fulfilment of *The Cat and Shakespeare*. Kirillov, as a Communist and atheist, has negated the Karma Yoga of *Kanthapura* and the *Jnana Yoga* of *The Serpent and the Rope* by denying the existence of the Absolute; thus, his quest results in failure. The Bhakti Yoga of *The Cat and Shakespeare*, especially in the character of Nair, is the culmination of the various stages of spiritual realization in the earlier novels. Nair is the first character in Rao's novels who does not merely seek Truth but who has found it and actually practices it. The arrangement of the titles of Rao's novels is significant. They represent a thematic and ideological progression. If *Kanthapura* be regarded as the stepping-stone in the journey of the protagonist's spiritual life, it is in *Comrade Kirillov* that illusion bewilders him. However, the struggle which starts from the first novel, continues to the last. *Comrade Kirillov* sharply develops the motif of personal struggle.

The Chessmaster and His Moves

If *The Serpent and the Rope* highlighted binaries in metaphysics, a certain form of non-dualism emerge in *The Chessmaster and His Moves*. Many literary critics believe that Rao modelled this novel on the principle of Advaita Vedanta, or the belief that the true self or atman is the same as brahman or the highest metaphysical reality. The novel consists of deep meditations on life, death, divine unity, time and love. The protagonist of the novel is Sivarama, a Tamil Brahmin mathematician. Rao was obviously attempting to play on the much-discussed mathematical dimension of Indian metaphysics, particularly the concept of brahman. At one point in the novel, Sivarama says, "My mind was essentially metaphysical... thus evading humans. For after all, the human has no ultimate significance."

Conclusion

In the midst of all these complicated questions, the most prominent one that his novels seek to address is the fundamental question that every human asks himself or herself at some point in time — “Who am I?” This is a question that haunted Rao throughout his life as he attempted to arrive at some reconciliation about himself as an Indian author writing in English about Indian sensibilities in a foreign land. The dilemmas of faith; efforts to comprehend vital issues; understanding the secret of maya; shedding duality; awareness of the self and merger with Brahman or Absolute Reality constitute the course run by Raja Rao himself. His protagonists are a projection of his own self.

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