

# Form and the Fiction of Raja Rao

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**Abstract:** *The theme of East and West has been perennial theme in Indian English fiction. Raja Rao, it must be recalled, lived in Europe, i.e., France; therefore the meeting of the East and West obviously became very important for him. He explores this theme through his novel The Serpent and The Rope (1960). The Serpent and the Rope has been called by scholars a modern Indian Mahapurana both in content and form; it is an attempt at a Puranic recreation of story-telling. It contains story within story, fables-legends, philosophical reflection on Christianity, Buddhism, and Vedanta: Tantra, mystical experience, interesting observations on religion and politics. The idealized mental projection of India suggests the harmony and unity of life as a homogenous cultural tradition, and the weight of sensory and intellectual data indicates the multifarious illusions of realist, historical Europe, the two worlds equally form parts of Ramaswamy's consciousness.*

**Keywords:** Form, Myth, East-West, Puranic philosophy

The novel comprises all the salient features of a great novel that is form-story, plot, characterization, social criticism, impressive narrative technique and superb dialogues. The novel was written in twenty nine days in Paris,<sup>1</sup> though in its present sake it took him ten years and only after he had received the grace of his Guru.<sup>2</sup> Infact it would not be going far if one states that this novel is perhaps the greatest metaphysical novel ever written in the Indian English sphere. About the value of this novel Prof. M.K. Naik makes a very significant remark.

“All Raja Rao's powers and interests his intimate knowledge of India the West, his immense erudition, his metaphysical quest, his ability of handle myth and symbol; his lyrical and descriptive talent, and his experimentation with form and style-together found simultaneous fulfillment when he embarked Upon this long semi-autobiographical narrative against the vast background of two continents, giving him enough room and scope to express himself fully and satisfactorily.”<sup>3</sup>

Just as paints are important for a painter, so are words very important for a writer. The writer must possess or develop a capacity for Aesthetic experience. Unless this is done he will be lost for the appropriate words to share his ideas with his readers comprehensive.

Raja Rao's conception of literature and writer has its roots in the grand ancient India literary tradition. It, being universal, is also reflected in the art of distinguished Europeans like Valery, Kafka and Rilke. All great literature is a result of spiritual experiences. The creative act of the writer stems from his devotion and dedication to Metaphysics.

So the idea of literature as anything but a spiritual experience or, Sadhna— a much better word is outside my perspective. I really think that only through dedication to the absolute or metaphysical Principle can one be truly creative....Basically the Indian outlook follows a deeply satisfying, richly rewarding and profoundly metaphysical path.<sup>4</sup>

The writer needs the guidance of a Guru, a lonely and silent life for attaining state of higher being. His spiritual realization or the state of higher being compels the writer to express it. The state of being one with the metaphysical being need no made. The ancient tradition anonymity was result of this. Raja Rao writes:

“The writer should be solitary. He must be above to get the right word. Writing is an extremely severe discipline or a Sadhna, The writer gives everything of himself. He begins with fear and ends in exhaustion. There is nothing more for him to give when he has finished the book.”<sup>5</sup>

Man's life is barren and futile if he does not make incessant effort for the quest of the Absolute.

The world is either unreal or real—the serpent or the rope, there is no between the two and all that's in-between is poetry, is sainthood you might go on saying all the time, ‘No, no, it's the rope,’ and stand in the serpent. And looking at the rope from the serpent is to see paradise, saints, avatars, gods, heroes universes. For where ever you go, you see only with the serpent's eyes. Whether you call it duality or modified duality, you invent a belvedere to heaven, you look at the rope from the posture of the serpent, you feel you are the serpent—you are the rope is. But in true fact, with whatever, eyes you see there is no serpent, there never was a serpent. You gave your eyes to the falling evening and cried, ‘Ayyo! Oh! It's the serpent! You run and roll and lament, and have compassion for fear of pain, others,’ or your own.

“You see the serpent and in fear you feel you are it, the serpent, the saint—One—the Guru—brings you lantern; the road is seen, the long white road, going in the statutory stars. ‘It's only the rope.’ He shows it to you. And you touch your eyes and know there never was a serpent.”<sup>6</sup>

The novel is artistic exposition of the Vedantic philosophy non-dualism (Advaita Vedanta), as propounded by Sri

Sankar, famous philosopher of the classical age of India. The hero-narrator Ramaswamy makes a very candid admission:

...but I am not telling a story here, I am writing in sad and in even chronicle of a life, my life. With no art or decoration, but in the 'objectivity,' the discipline of the "historical sciences," for by taste and tradition I am only a historian.<sup>7</sup>

*The Serpent and the Rope*, Raja Rao's second novel, has been called by scholars a modern Indian Mahapurana both in content and form; it is an attempt at a Puranic recreation of story telling. It contains story within story, fables-legends, philosophical reflection on Christianity, Buddhism, and Vedanta: Tantra, mystical experience, interesting observations on religion and politics. It is punctuated with long dialogues and lots of interior monologues. Prof. M.K. Naik remarks about the merit of this novel:

"*The Serpent and the Rope* is a highly complex and many-sided work of art, being at once the tragic story of a marriage of minds which drift apart; the spiritual biography of a learned, sensitive and imaginative modern Indian intellectual saga of his quest for self-knowledge and self-fulfillment; a memorable statement of the prime value of both the East and the West and a drama enacting their impact on each other; a sustained piece of symbolism and recreation of a valuable ancient Hindu myth; and a conscious attempt both to create a truly Indian novel with its roots firmly embedded in native tradition to forge an Indian English style through which alone could its complex vision be authentically and adequately presented."<sup>8</sup>

Raja Rao employs the narrative technique of 'I' as the protagonist-narrator. Ramaswamy, the hero-narrator of the novel is a scholarly young-man gifted with exceptionally intellectual and reflective nature. He is, thus, most suitable for the role narrator, dealing with discussion and philosophical, intellectual and religious subjects. He reveals his innermost thoughts and understanding of Indian life through his self-revelatory letters and introspective diary entries. The novel deals with Ramaswamy's quest for knowledge of the self and the eternal self. The novel has some of the stylistic feature of the Puranas like artless garrulity and forceful narration of the Panchtantra. The narrator of being an erudite scholar draws up-from various languages like French, Sanskrit, Italian and Hindi. He uses a lot of Latin and French words in keeping with the narrator's personality.

The novel has an architectural symmetry which is related to the development of the theme. Epical in form, it has myths, legends and digressions. The novel can be conveniently divided into six intermeshing blocks, each dealing with the hero-narrator's encounter with different women characters, viz. 'Little Mother' block, 'Madeleine' block, 'Catherine' block; 'Savithri' block, 'Saroja' block and metamorphosed 'Madeleine' block. These named after the most prominent woman-character in the block. The protagonist-narrator

Ramaswamy is a young Brahmin from South India, in his twenties. His lineage can be traced to the legendary Upanishadic sage Yagnavalkya of South India. As a research scholar of history, he goes to France to work on Albigenian heresy. Madeline Rousselin, a lecturer in History, is working on the origin of Holy Grail and its connection with the Cathars. Thus, Rama who also has gone there in the hope of finding a link between Cathars and his Vedic ancestors comes into her contact and they soon marry. After completing his doctorate in History, he hopes to return with his wife to India and take up the job of a Professor of History in some Indian university.

Woman plays a very important role in man's life. It is through a woman that a man fully knows and realizes himself. In intimate moments, Ramaswamy feels that Madeleine is the very essence of his life. He says:

.... and taking me into myself, I transpire as the truth, as though touched by itself, like the wave that sees itself to be sea, like the earth that was spread out and was called Madeleine. But when I have to say Rama-her lips are mine turned outward, her flesh mine turned inward, and what a sound she makes the sound of a jungle doe.<sup>9</sup>

Rama, the hero-narrator feels that Madeleine is inseparable from him. He loves so deeply that he finds him, his own self, deeply reflected in her. Rama passes through wonderful experiences in his intimate moments; he is filled with insatiable lust. He unlocks his heart to her with the following passionate outburst.

Raja Rao's hunger for maternal love has tremendously influenced his view of woman and her principle on earth. Man-woman relationship has been extensively explored in modern fiction. D.H. Lawrence has deeply probed this relationship. Among the Indian English novelists, Raja Rao has delved deep into the changing colours of this relationship, the mysteries of the Female Principle. *The Serpent and the Rope* is an excellent probe in its basic nature and its various facets. Ramaswamy the protagonist narrator, in an interior monologue ruminates: "what a deep and reverential mystery womanhood is,"<sup>10</sup> after his meeting with Saroja, the step-sister. In his unique experience with Savithri, he finds the real woman, a never changing truth, the abiding reality. In a flash-back he recollects:

"...in that blank, the silent was blank between books and behind them,. I felt the presence, the truth, the formula of Savithri. Was the Source of which words were made, the Mother of Sound, Akshara-Lakshmi, divinity of the syllable,' the night of which the day was the meaning, the knowledge of which, the book was the token, the symbol-the prophecy."<sup>11</sup>

Rama's attitude to this theme can be discerned in his relation to various women whom he encounters in one capacity or

another mother, sister, wife and beloved. Speaking about the pre-eminent place of woman on earth the narrator remarks:

“There is only one woman, not for one life, but for all lives; indeed, the earth was created-with trees, seas, boats, buildings, books, rivers, towers, aeroplanes-that we might seek her.”<sup>12</sup>

Ramaswamy, in a very reflective mood, realizes man is incomplete without woman and “life is made for woman-man is a stranger to this earth.”<sup>13</sup> In an interior monologue he speaks to himself:

For all women have the womb of poetry and it is we that seek back our integrity of flesh and so lose our freedom.... You should know a woman and not understand her-for if you understand her, then you can never be a pilgrim to knowledge.<sup>14</sup>

True marriage is a positive step towards self-realization. The hero-narrator, in order to qualify his points refer to the Upanishads: “To him who is earnest to the Atman comes the Atman.”<sup>15</sup> Ramaswamy feels enlightened and says: “It was not land and rivers that separated us, it was Time itself. It was myself. When the becoming was stopped I would wed Savithri.”<sup>16</sup> Thus, the marriage of Rama and Madeleine fails, not because of Rama’s supposed infidelity or marital inconstancy but because of unbridgeable gulf between two cultures. Madeleine becomes a Buddhist and she goes far away from Rama. Madeleine fails to understand Rama’s truth. Had she tried to reach him through her Catholicism, and not through Buddhism, there was a possibility of success.

Madeleine fails to be true Feminine Principle which is active and material cause of the universe. “To Mitra she is Varuna, to Indra she is Agni, to Rama she is Sita, and to Krishna she is Radha.”<sup>17</sup> She is Prakriti that makes Purush manifest. She is Shakti, the active creative principle. Ramaswamy, in a discussion with Madeleine makes a very significant statement “All women are perfect women, for they have the feminine principle in them, the Yin, the Prakriti.”<sup>18</sup> In India woman is presented as Shakti, and self-realization through the woman or Female Principle is a very significant theme of the novel. For portraying woman as the metaphysical counterpart of man, Raja Rao takes recourse to myths of Satyavan Savithri, Sita, the fair consort of Rama, the poetess Mira (also a Rajput princess), Radha and Krishna, Shiv and Parvati. True woman is essential for man’s spiritual development. Seeing the ghats of Benares, he takes himself in the good old days of great saints and Rishis. He speaks to himself thus:

Somewhere on these very banks the Upanishadic sages, perhaps four, five, or six hundred years ago, had discussed the roots of human understanding. And Yagnyavalkya had said to Maitery. For whose sake verily, does a husband love his wife? Not for the

sake of his wife, but verily for the sake of self in her.<sup>19</sup>

Rama feels that he does not love Madeleine ‘for the sake of the Self in her.

The author in order to communicate his philosophical ideas to the readers makes an effective use of mythical parallels. He calls all women Prakriti, the Matri-Shakti, which is the active creative Principle. She is Eve, ‘the Eternal Feminine.’ This concept is artistically woven in Advaitic philosophy, inherent in the symbol of the Serpent and the Rope. Maya creates all illusions. Ramaswamy’s quest for truth, which is linked with ‘Feminine Principle,’ is revealed through his varying relationships with the women, viz., Madeleine, Savithri, Saroja, Little mother. The narrator refers to Savithri and Sita who have become symbols of wifely devotion. Rama’s relationship with Savithri enables him to rod the right path in the quest for the Ultimate Truth. Their symbolic marriage is the marriage of souls which paves the way for Rama’s quest for the ultimate. Savithri of the novel, like the Savithri of the legend succeeds in leading her eternal lover to the path of the knowledge of the self. Though on the material level, she is married and her relationship with Rama is sublime and spiritual. Savithri symbolizes the true Feminine Principle (Shakti, Prakriti and Sri). She is a true symbol of love, power and devotion. She can snatch her husband from the clutches of Death. On the contrary Madeleine is a symbol of Death, for her relations with Rama are only physical ones.

Rao’s prose seems to me to be bound up in the construction of a mythic aura around Rama, whose autobiography is being narrated. This ‘project’ serves exonerate him from those human failings which might spoil his final conversion to the teachings of his guru<sup>20</sup>. The movement of Rao’s narrative creates a sense of inevitability so that Rama appears to be acting out a universal, recurrent drama in accordance with that traditional, ordered culture of which he seeks to be an integral part. Moreover, the mythicising elements of Rao’s style help to enact, or imply, the stresses and strains of Rama’s mental processes as he faces up to and shies away from the realities of the world. This is the case because cyclic patterns in the text hold together opposing forces of the mythic and the historical. The struggle between these forces points to a reading of the novel in which the main interest lies not in anyone position held by author or narrator, but in the dramatic conflict between them, as well as between the contending ideas held by each. The final concern is with reaching a satisfactory cultural and psychological adjustment to living amid the confusion of the mingled east and west of modern times.

The style is anecdotal, digressive, self-indulgent; its rambling quality generates cross-references as memory catches up with itself, so that the narrative progresses in a series of loops along the path of Rama’s life story voice/memory/sensibility of the obtrusively first-person narrator lends a consistency of mood to these fluctuations in reportage’ that is matched by an underlying thematic logic. The first paragraph, for example, begins with birth and ends in talk of death, thereby setting a

pattern for so many episodes through the novel. It speaks of the two human universals in generalised terms that even appear to express a casual of mocking attitude. It is Ramaswamy's birth that is mentioned, but it is his connection through that specific event with a social group (Brahmins), cultural tradition (Yagnayavalkya) and national history (Saga Madhava) which is discussed at length and in panoramic perspective. From this sense of inclusion Rama draws much comfort and turns to as curious to a curious internalisation of the primacy of knowledge which seems to invert the relationship between self and world so that tradition, legend, myth flows from the present individual:

"But when they (Rama's ancestors) died - for indeed they did 'die' they too must have been burnt by tank or grove or meeting of two rivers and they too must have known they did not die. I can feel them in me and know they did not die. Who is it that tells me they did not die? Who but me."<sup>21</sup>

Via the connection image of the river, Rama returns to his childhood, and moves through personal memory until we are brought up against the recent past when, dramatically, he reveals himself at twenty-two in a foreign land, alone and sobbing on finally being confronted with the reality of separation from his long-dead mother. The same narrative path from distant to the near past, to the self and to knowledge is traced out, but whereas the first 'journey' ended in feelings of inclusion and confidence, the second presents us with an image of radical solitude and grief.

The way in which Rao makes the transition from one 'movement' of the story to another is significant. He uses a geographical image (river) that becomes a motif in the novel (Siene, Rhone, Thames, Cam) and is also a powerful cultural symbol (Ganges) that serves to unify some of the levels of the story. The river is implicit in the water symbol of the novel's epigraph, thereby connection with the philosophical content of the book; as the Ganges that serves to unify some of the levels of the story.

Besides the pull between reality and abstract symbol, personal concern and tradition, the novel alludes subtly to cultural conflicts inbuilt. In Hindu thought so that, even as Rama appears Indian, the narrative anticipates the various tensions and ruptures that he is likely to project on to his life in Europe.<sup>22</sup>

For Rama, death holds out the ultimate promise of union with illustrious ancestors, while more immediately it separates him from even the most recent addition to them. The urbane calm with which he narrates his legendary family history and cultural background is set against the pressing discomfort childhood of hunger-pang and sorrow, and the recent encompassing sense of loss. The effect of the opening 'prehistory' of wandering hermits is to generate an

atmosphere of myth and epic quest around the 'history' of Ramaswamy's childhood and the 'present' of his early nineteen-fifties manhood, If Rama the sage-Brahmin is one with the distant past, Rama the questing hero is at odds with the deaths of a personal past, so that 'at twenty-two he is like that other, older figure who mingled myth with history and told a tale of himself as central character.

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- [22] See J.P. Parry, 'Death and Cosmogony in Kashi,' in T.N. Madan (ed.), Way of Life: King, Householdel Renoucel; New Delhi: Vikas, 1982, p. 337. Other articles in this collection usefully discuss the tensions between kshatriya and brahmin, world and renunciation.