Metaphysical Speculations and Linguistic Pyramids in the Work of a Raja Rao

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The house of fiction that Raja has built is thus founded on the metaphysical and linguistic speculations of the Indians. As Raja's editor at Oxford University Press, I saw The Policeman and the Rose through the press, and it was published in 1978.

In the 1970s, English departments in universities across the country were at last beginning to take notice of Indian literature in English. Annotated editions of novels were in demand, and to meet this demand OUP published educational editions of Kanthapura (1974) and The Serpent and the Rope (1978), with introductions by C. D. Narasimhaiah of the University of Mysore, a scholar who has done more than anyone else to win international attention for Raja's works. With Raja's approval, I had abridged The Serpent and the Rope.

However, my greatest challenge as an editor came after I had left OUP and moved to Austin, Texas to work on a verse translation of the Cilappatikaram for my Ph.D. degree. I stayed with Raja at 1806 Pearl Street from September 1982 to February 1983 in a sparsely furnished two-bedroom apartment above a garage, where I would work for a few hours every day on the typescript of The Chessmaster and His Moves, a novel unlike any other that I was familiar with. We would spend the evenings at the kitchen table going over the pages that I had edited during the day. Raja approved, for the most part, my suggestions for revision. Editing the novel was an education in itself as we talked about the Indian philosophical, religious, and literary traditions well into the night, and rewrote the 50-odd pages of translations and glossary. I learned more about writing from Raja during those six months than I did from my teachers in high school, college, or university.

LINGUISTIC PYRAMID

I was fascinated by Raja's use of English, and I came under its spell instantly. English is ritually de-anglicised: in Kanthapura English is thick with the agglutinants of Kannada; in The Serpent and the Rope the Indo-European kinship between English and Sanskrit is exploited creatively; and in The Cat and Shakespeare, English is made to approximate the rhythm of Sanskrit chants. At the apex of this linguistic pyramid is The Chessmaster and His Moves, wherein Raja has perfected an idiolect uniquely his own. It is the culmination of his experiments with the English language spanning more than fifty years. "The style of a man . . . ," he had written, "the way he weaves word against word . . . makes a comma here, puts a dash there: all are signs of the inner movement, . . . the nature of his thought."

The Chessmaster and His Moves is structured as a commentary (*bhasya*) on Indian esoteric knowledge from the Upanishads down, often expressed in the terse, aphoristic style characteristic of that literature. The narrative pattern is indigenous: it derives from the story (*katha*) tradition of which the finest example is Bana's Kadambari. The novel has an explicit metaphysical position — that of Advaita Vedanta which provides the focus for both understanding and assessing what happens in it. It was published in 1988 in New Delhi by Vision Books, Raja's primary publishers. It is the first volume of a trilogy, to be followed by The Daughter of the Mountain (in press) and A Myrobalan in the Palm of Your Hand. It was awarded the 10th Neustadt International Prize for Literature in 1988. Raja was the first and only Asian to be so honoured.

The last book of Raja's that I had edited was The Great Indian Way: A Life of Mahatma Gandhi in 1997. It is a sprawling oral history, interspersed with tales from the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. Raja had lived at

Sevagram for six months in 1942, and every page of the book speaks of his awe of Gandhi.

ESTABLISHING STATUS OF LITERATURE

In his "Acceptance Speech" on March 24, 1997 in Austin, when he was elected a Fellow of the Sahitya Akademi, Raja observed somewhat wistfully: "To have been born in India and not have written in Sanskrit, or at least in Kannada is believe me, an acute humiliation. But I still dream of writing in Sanskrit — one day!" But the truth of the matter is that among Kannada, Sanskrit, French, and English, it is English that Raja most consummately possesses, and it is in that language that his fiction most consummately speaks to us. It was Raja who, more than any other writer of his generation, which included Mulk Raj Anand (1905-2004) and R. K. Narayan (1906-2001), established the status of Indian literature in English during India's struggle for independence from British rule.

It was a warm July morning at the Onion Creek Memorial Park in Austin. In a grove of live oaks and flowering myrtles under a clear Texan sky, Raja ended his long journey that had begun almost a hundred years ago in a small town in South India.

CONCLUSION

The cremation could as well have taken place on the banks of his beloved Pampa at Anandavadi, his Guru Sri Atmananda's ashram in Malakkara in central Kerala. To the gentle recorded sounds of Radha Devi Amma's chanting and to the strains of the Gayatri *mantra*, Raja was cremated.

He was robed in a white *dhoti* with a red *zari* border, raw silk *kurta*, brown Nehru jacket, and off-white Kashmiri shawl. A garland of jasmine, lilies, and basil leaves covered his neck. Three of his guru's books, frayed at the edges, were placed on his heart at his request.

Susan, Raja's wife of 20 years, strewed rose petals around his body that lay in a casket made of ordinary cardboard. The ceremony was over in 20 minutes. Meanwhile, the Pampa waits for Raja's ashes, and when she receives them, Raja would have truly come home.

In K. S. Maniam's *In a Far Country,* which depicts the challenges facing different ethnic groups seeking a place in the sun, the tiger is the central symbol used to establish and network a number of basic themes. These include the historical position of the Malays, their identity, and their relationship with the land. In political and cultural terms, it sums up what the other races must recognize and negotiate with at various levels. This search for a balance between ethnic and national identities, to accommodate their traditions in a form satisfactory to all, is still ongoing in the continuum of experience from which the novel is drawn. Once introduced, the tiger remains a continuing presence, a silent but potent part of the narrative. Reasonably attentive readers will see that it stands for the land's immemorial spirit, making it a near permanent guardian. It is both a presence and a force that must be sought out and understood. The tiger's symbolic status allows Maniam to locate it at strategic points of the narrative to provide tactful, less overt, but nonetheless powerful comment on deeply sensitive issues. Time for a Tiger, in more ways than one. For the Malays it is a necessary part of their inheritance and identity; for the others—Chinese, Indians, and others—to be understood as part of the accommodations of living in a Malay-dominated society. The fundamental question is whether to integrate or to retain one's Chinese or Indian identity. That is Ravi's, the main protagonist's, dilemma. With his friend Zulkifli, who has inherited the promise and the demands of tradition as his guide, he makes a second attempt to discover the tiger:

Is it a miracle when after I dump my gun in a cachement of leaves my movements become more fluid? Some of the resistance to our advance seems to withdraw itself. As we go deeper and deeper some of my fatigue falls away. But I can't escape the vigilant eye. It is there on my head or back or legs. It is there in front, ahead of us, besides us but all the time disconcertingly near.

"Any time now," Zulkifli says at my side. "But we've to take on the character of the tiger first. We must see through its eyes. Feel through its body. We must become the tiger."

"I'll kill it first," I say.

"With what?" he says.

"By surprising it," I say.

"Nothing can surprise it," he says. "We don't have the intelligence."

"You seem to know everything about it," I say.

"Through the instinct that has traveled to me through the blood of my ancestors," he says.

"Are you saying I can't have such an instinct?"

"You don't have ancestors here," he says.

"You must be without purpose to come into its presence,"

Zulkifli says as if reading my thoughts.

"Then I won't." I say.

"You have come this far," he says. "You must surrender yourself to be the other self."

He went into a ritual on my behalf. All I remember of it is the incessant chanting that came from his lips. Though words poured from him, I only remember their sounds. . . . All the time the chant poured from Zulkifli's throat like an ageless invitation to disown whatever I was and to merge with the tiger. I didn't wait for that to happen. (Maniam, 1993: 100–101)

This passage raises a number of issues that frame my presentation. These include the distance that most of the new literatures have traveled since their beginnings about five decades ago; the ground they have had to cover, including the changing relationship with the major centres of the ex-colonial language; and the gradual emergence of an essential internal confidence in the new literatures.

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