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**REVIEW ARTICLE**

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# A Thematic Overture of the Serpent and the Rope by Raja Rao

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Raja Rao is attributed the following words in "The Future World is Being made in America: By force of An Interview with Raja Rao": "By force of circumstances purely accidental and a mental I have lived abroad; my roots are in this country. That is why I come here every year and spend as much time as I can. I live abroad but I am chained to this country." One of the chains that bind Rao to India is his belief in the Indian Advaita, Vedanta philosophy. *The Serpent and the Rope* can be read at different levels, and interpreted in different ways. The novelist has intertwined a number of ideas and themes in it. But the basic theme of the novel is that of metaphysical, quest. By metaphysics is meant the branch of philosophy that deals with the nature of existence, truth and knowledge. Raja Rao deals with the theme of self-knowledge, self-transcendence or self-fulfilment. *The Serpent and the Rope* is metaphysical insofar as it explores the nature of spiritual and metaphysical quest in some of its complex meanings, and attempts rare synthesis of the cultures of Indian and Europe. Rao is in a propitious position to mediate between the two.

Realizing that our ultimate aim of life on Earth is not just social or religious but also metaphysical, Rao communicates his ideas in the novel by bringing into its fold religion, philosophy and metaphysics.

Ramaswamy, the hero-narrator of the novel, is a highly sensitive and imaginative Indian who calls himself a "holy vafabond" and a "pilgrim." He tees upon himself the role of a quester. By turning many questions that he has a curiosity to answer. He questions his own momentary glimpses of truth, and peers through the veils of life to face the eternal question-mark to life that death raises:

Who is he that tells me they did not  
die? who but me?....  
And if they have died, I ask you,  
where is Sunder now? where?  
For I cannot understand what

death means.

Such questions, preoccupied with the mystery of death, abound in the opening section of the novel. Use of the interrogative form is one of Rao's mannerisms for making ideas appear in the forefront

In *The Serpent and the Rope*, Ramaswamy's identity crisis pushes him on to the path of self-realization. The novelist describes the process whereby his attitude towards life is changed. After the death of India to perform the former's funeral ceremonies, and this is a turning-point in the life of the hero-narrator. During his pilgrimage to some sacred places along with Little Mother, he becomes aware of some unanswered questions. Take, for example, this highly relevant question:

Something had just missed me in life,  
some deep absence grew in me, like a  
coconut on a young tree, that no love  
or learning could fulfil. And sitting  
sometimes, my hand against my face, I  
wondered where all this wandering  
would lead to. Life is a pilgrimage, I  
knew, but a pilgrimage to where and of  
what?

Raja Rao employs the device of questioning to speak of ideas intimately touching the ultimate truth and self-realization. In the process, he carries out a passionate exploration based on the essence of Hinduism, or Brahminism. His hero-narrator explores his roots in Brahminism. For him "India is not a country like France is, or like England; India is an idea and a metaphysics".

Another fine illustration of the novelist is focusing on an idea is that of his preoccupation with the idea of the Guru being the spiritual protector.

Ramaswamy's first visit to India for performing the funeral ceremonies of his father is responsible for insinuating metaphysical notions in him. On his second home-coming, a changed Ramaswamy encounters a changed Madeleine. Madeleine's study of Buddhism has now similarly imparted to her a kind of escape from her frustration. She gradually withdraws herself from the world in general, and from Ramaswamy in particular.

The ritual marriage of Ramaswamy and Savitri is explained in terms of the eternal love of Radha and Krishna. In the world of J.P. Sharma, "The Radha-Krishna legend recurs in *The Serpent and the Rope*, and the seeker and the sought' is an important leitmotif in it."

Savitri is predestined to be the partner of Rama's spiritual life. Rama says, "I understand the rhythm and meaning of history through her." Even though Rama and Savitri could not unite in real life they were spiritually one and made for each other. They were married because Rama had broken coconut to Kumkum on her forehead and put the toe-ring with his own hand on her toe. He had also told Savitri to go to her Brindavan, the town associated with Lord Krishna and Radha for their adolescent love.

There is, most importantly, metaphysical symbolism in the title of the novel *The Serpent and the Rope*. Rao seeks to explore the nature of man's metaphysical identity in all its diverse connotations. The novel is not just a story of external doings and happenings, but a chronicle of Rama's spiritual life, told with the "the objectivity of the historical sciences."<sup>9</sup>

The novel is permeated by the novelist's faith that the ultimate aim of life is not social or religious but metaphysical, and that "the true meaning of life can be sought more in the psychic life of a character than in the external and overt of speech."<sup>10</sup>

Raja Rao borrows quotations and even whole tales from the Upanishadas, the Vedas and Hindu folklore and conveys through them a Vedanta-based vision of India. In the very opening paragraph, history and legend mingle with each other in the fashion of the true Indian tradition. There are references to Yajnyavalkya, Sankara, Madhava and their descendents. Rao communicates ideas about Ramaswamy's Upanishad ancestry, and matters relating to the Indian consciousness through the use of myths.

The novel is encyclopaedic in its scope, and that explains why fables freely jostle in disconcertingly. As the narrative moves across time and space, Raja Rao mingles the past, the present and the future to put across his Vedanta-based vision of India.

In Rao's view man's life in Sansara should have the August mission of finding the Absolute, "which is incarnate in the Guru".

Ramaswamy is an Advaita Vedantin, and the novel centres round his spiritual quest and his realization of his self, as a first step through the female principle, and finally through the Guru. The internalization of the quest is so powerful in this novel that it appears as though the novelist has embarked upon the odyssey of the spirit. In the novel, the protagonist groups through life to realize his self-identity and self-knowledge. He finds human existence barren if there is no desire to know the ultimate.

The events of the novel are presented from the point of view of Ramaswamy a South Indian Brahmin, and adept in the Vedas and the Upanishadas. He is "a holy vagabond" in search of the ultimate metaphysical reality. He is variously described in the novel as "a European Brahmin," a "French Brahmin," "a Satyavan". He has a sense of belonging to possess him. The novel becomes an intellectual treatise on the tensions that the modern Indian youth faces on account of being the product of two largely opposed civilizations: those of the East and the West. Most ideas in the novel are syphoned through Raja's Indian consciousness. In the novel, Rama goes over the entire gamut of Advaita Vedanta. According to Shankara, just as owing to one's ignorance of the rope the rope appears to be a serpent the self is regarded as the individual soul owing to the absence of the true knowledge of the self. At the word of a reliable person, the illusion disappears and what seemed to be a serpent is now seen as a rope.

In Raja Rao's novels ideas also emerge through or are implied in the novelist's unique treatment of his characters, including his minor characters. Characterization is a powerful tool in the hands of Rao for generating ideas. Rao throws up ideas after ideas in the process of developing his characters. Curiously, in the case of Raja Rao's novels, particularly *Kanthapura*, the reverse is true. Characters are handled ever as they come handy in enunciation of certain ideas. Even Moorthy's character cannot be said to be round in E. M. Foster's sense.

By the time Rao came to write *The Serpent and the Rope*, he had gained a high conception of his calling. He looked upon fiction-writing as Sadhna or spiritual preparation, and like Milton and many other poets, he believed that strenuous preparation, selfless love and dedication are necessary for it. He had given himself adequate preparation by the time he came to write his second novel of ideas.

Rao makes the above admission because both his novels in question are novels of ideas, and his versatility in insinuating ideas, political or metaphysical, is more perspicuous in his second novel than first.

Rao suggests that one must be man first and a writer afterwards. By 'man' he takes to mean a metaphysical entity, one who has realised the Absolute Truth. After *Kanthapura*, he gave up writing for a long time, for then he had not realised his own spiritual identity, and his metaphysical vision was not yet firmed up.

His vision of life came to be permeatingly implied in *The Serpent and The Rope*. All Raja Rao's writing, Says Srinivas Iyenger, "is part of Raja Rao's Sadhna, or spiritual experience, and so *Kanthapura*, and *The Serpent and the Rope* should be viewed as steps on the path towards self-realization. If *Kanthapura* may be looked upon as a Purana, as a Gandhi Purana, *The Serpent and The Rope* may be regarded as an epic, a mini Mahabharate.<sup>11</sup>

Such a Guru is Lord Brahma (The Creator). He is Lord Vishnu (the Protector), and he is Lord Maheswra (the Destroyer). The Guru is Lord supreme, and Ramaswamy repairs to the feet of this Guru: "Now I think I know, but I must go, I must go to Travancore. I have no Benares now, no Ganga, No Jumna; Travancore is my country, Travancore is my name. ... Truth indeed is He, the Guru."<sup>12</sup>

The hero-narrator then goes to Travancore to prostrate at the Holy Feet of the Guru. M. K. Naik aptly remarks thus on the end of Rama's quest in the direction of his fulfilment in these terms: "In the end, Rama decides to go to his Guru, who alone can destroy his ego and make him fit for an eternal marriage with Sarithri, which could bind her to him with imperiage with imperishable love of Radha for Krishna. True marriage is thus a meeting of two souls which is only a preparation for ultimate union of the soul with God."

The local ideas related to plot and character and the direct philosophical utterances of the narrator, as if, merge into the global symbolic idea of oneness of all, particularly oneness of the Guru and god. The novelist's concern with the Advaita Vedanata is confirmed by the epigraph of the novel: "Waves are nothing but water, so is the sea".

The scence of Advaita percolates through these few words, which are taken from Atma-Darshan, written by Atmananda Guru, Raja Rao's own Guru. This Guru's teachings also end on this very culminating note: one can reach the water of truth and become one with it, as the waves do with the sea, by the help of the Guru. All duality vanishes before the light of wisdom-inner illumination-which the Guru brings. Then it is realized that Brahma is the reality, and this phenomenal or material world, the serpent, is only superimposition upon the ultimate realit. When self-knowledge is attained, the 'serpent' vanishes and only the 'rope' remains.

Raja Rao symbolically conveys that man can transcend his sense of mortality by bringing together truth and power of devotion. *The Serpent and the Rope* is a complex network of sybolism. If myths are used to explain human situations and relations, on a more comprehensive scale, symbllism is taken recourse to highlight the idea of attainment of ultimate reality.

An obvious form of symbllism in Rao's second novel obtains in nomenclature. The novelists' selection of the name Savithri, for example has an obvious symbolic significance for the Hindus. This name is borrowed from that of the Vedic solar deity, savitur, a character at once a symbol and a living human being, and belonging to the same tradition as Sita of the Ramayana and Draupadi of the Mahabharata. The myth of Satyavan and Savitri form the central motif of the novel.

This interpretation of the Savithri legend is synonymous with the symbolism with which Sri Aurobindo has invested this ancient tale in his great epic Savitri. Here Satyavan is truth, wedded to Savithri, who represents love and power of devotion to save her husband from the clutches of death by her wonderful loyalty-Savithri thus becomes synonymous with wifely devotion.

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