



RESEARCH ARTICLE

IMAGE OF INDIA AND INDIAN SENSIBILITY REFLECTED IN THE FICTIONAL WORLD OF RAJA RAO: AN APPRAISAL

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ABSTRACT

This research paper at the outset explores with an intention to throw light on the dexterous writer Raja Rao who faultlessly flourishes a fervent picture of India rendering the vibrant Indian sensibility. This paper vehemently deludes deep into the artistic creed of Raja Rao who expertly implements his metaphysical enlightenment and mystical insights in his fictional realm. Thus, this research paper sum up with the fact that Raja Rao is solely owned by India and Indian sensibility in his fiction.

Key words: India, Indian, Sensibility, Metaphysical, Mystical, Insights, Artistic, Creed.

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INTRODUCTION

Raja Rao is one of the greatest Indo-Anglian novelists, whose contributions to Indo-Anglian literature is undoubtedly unique. Being an Indian novelist the vivid atmosphere of India in his novels. Though being compared with Mulk Raj Anand and R.K. Narayan, the other remarkable Indo-Anglian novelists, he as a story-teller seems rather inferior to R.K.Narayan and M.R.Anand but as a sage and as a novelist philosopher, he is certainly their superior. In *Kanthapura*, Rao's evocation of life in South Indian village is even more vivid and detailed than anything in the Malgudi novels of Narayan. Unlike Narayan, Raja Rao is equally setting. There is thus a sense of cosmopolitanism in him, for he is a man of cosmopolitan taste and wide learning. He is the commendable novelist who is said to have interpreted Indian thought and culture rather than any other novelist. The revelation of the very essence of Indian life and character are his prime object. There is an altogether new dimension in the fictions world of Raja Rao. This is evidently brought out by C.D. Verma who states as:

“Although both Narayan and Anand understand and portray Indian life well, they seem to dwell merely on the surface. While Rao evinces the ability of going deep into it communicating its quiet essential quality, Rao is characteristically Indian and oriental in a way which neither Narayan nor Anand can claim to be” (P 38). The eldest son in a family consisting of two brothers and seven sisters, Raja Rao is of ancient Brahmin descent.

According to family tradition, an illustrious ancestor was Vidyaranya Swami, ‘the greatest teacher of Advaita Vedanta after Sankara’ and the mentor of Harihara and Bukka, who founded the Southern kingdom of Vijayanagar, which was the last Hindu state to fall to the Muslim onslaught in the 16th century. The Rao family, originally belonging to Mysore, migrated to the then Muslim State of Hyderabad. Raja Rao's grandfather was a remarkable man. He was spiritually inclined and the fact that Raja Rao passed part of his childhood with his grandfather at Hassan becomes significant when one considers the deep concern with spiritual values that has characterized both his life and his writings. Some of his early years were also spent at Harihalli, where the family owned ancestral land. Raja Rao's intimate knowledge and keen understanding of rustic life and the rustic mind, as revealed in *Kanthapura*, and in short stories like ‘Akkayya’ and ‘Javni’, can be related to these impressionable years. Actually he was born on November 5, 1908 at Hassan, a town in Mysore State in South India. In an interview he explained how he came to be given the name ‘Raja’:

“My house was near a temple, adjoining a dharmasala. It was a Shiva temple... I was born in the Shiva temple. We had the privilege of receiving the Maharaja of Mysore. He used to come to our village (town) once in 10 to 15 years. My mother was expecting me and I was late in coming. Then suddenly the pains started and there was no place in the house. There were 60 people living in the house. So they took mother to the dharmasala and I was actually born when the Maharaja was standing at the door, and father offered him a lemon. As the Maharaja was about to accept it, I was born. That is why I am called ‘Raja’. It is because of this Maharaja” (P 15)

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According to Rajagopalachari, when we read a book like the Mahabharata, our inner being is seized and cleansed, so to say, by being passed alternately through joys and sorrows and we are finally lifted above both and taken to the Transcendent and Real. Dr. K.R.S. Iyengar also rightly observes that ‘unless the story-teller can. Somehow touch the heart-strings of the listener or reader, unless he can be made to feel implicated in the story, unless the story can awaken him to his ineradicable kinship with his people, his nation, his race, unless the story can melt his congealed sensibilities and make them mingle with the hopes and fears and hopes and sorrows and joys of the race... the story-telling has failed to click and story has failed to bounce the reader. Having evolved a point of view, Raja Rao through his technique, style and attitudes expresses an essentially Indian sensibility. And he presents in his novels and stories not a mere reportage but an action being enacted before the reader because he involves his own self in all this action. His writings, therefore, have exercised a powerful impact on the mind of the reader. It is more so because he has effectively made use of the metaphysical, philosophical and literary wisdom of India in his writings.

As a conscious artist, Rao has a definite and artistic creed. He is of the view that literature is not a profession but a vocation for him and he takes it more in the light of a spiritual discipline and he is out and out convinced that English is not really a foreign language, for it is very much an Indian language as far as intellectual apprehension and communication are concerned, despite the fact that it is not the language of the emotional make-up of an Indian. Far from a nostalgic admiration or a sentimental outburst, his praise of India takes the form of self-understanding for himself and interpretation of its values for others, particularly the people of the west. Even though he lays greater emphasis on the essences and values, he evokes both the external life at its social and cultural plane and the inner meanings at the metaphysical plane. In *Kanthapura* and *The Cat and Shakespeare* we are shown respectively the manifold aspects of the rural and the urban life of India of the early and the mid twentieth century where as in *The Serpent and the Rope*, we are clearly told,

“India is not a country like France is, or like England, India is an idea, a metaphysic” (TSR 376)

Hence for proper understanding of the totality of Raja Rao’s vision of India, one has to take into account both the aspects of external realities and the inner meanings. It is also to be borne in mind that while his pictures of the social, political and cultural life of India owe a lot to his keen interest in the present, his obsession with the metaphysical meanings emanates from his interest in the evocation and revitalization of the past. Though the interest in the past is a nothing but a historian’s quest of roots, it is in relation to the present, as a search of continuity of the Indian tradition. Being equipped with the mental endowments of a philosopher and a realist, Raja Rao has been able to apply his metaphysical erudition and mystical insights to the interpretations of the reality of life in his art. Narsingh Srivastava observes:

“The blend of metaphysical vision and the realistic view of life has enabled him to depict the rope and the serpent together and also to juxtapose the realm of the cat and the realm of Shakespeare for a greater understanding of the either at a level at which they interact” (P 14).

No doubt, Raja Rao is the writer who is good at handling the English language rather skillfully. In fact, it seems difficult for an Indian writer to bring out the real emotions and feelings while writing in a foreign language. But with the use of literal translations, Raja Rao maintains the originality of feelings among the readers. His imagery is thoroughly Indian and his similes and metaphors are all taken from the lives of the people who are described. All the images are drawn from Indian objects and experiences. He says that rice should be fine as filigree and mangoes should be yellow as gold. The sky is as blue as a marriage shawl and some women are beautiful as newly opened guavas and the others are tender as April mangoes. Young boys are as bright as banana trunks. It is apt to say that his images give an Indian flavor to his writings. Rao’s main gift as a novelist is his capacity to create living characters. Though he is a philosopher by temperament, his characters are not symbol’s or representatives of various schools of thought or philosophy. S.S. Mathur rightly observes:

“His characters are real creatures of flesh and blood with their own virtues and vices, their love of gold and their love of the motherland, their prejudices and superstitions, their belief and ideals” (P 35). As the most Indian of the Indians writing in English, he had a thorough grounding in Indian religion and philosophy and he observed Indian life rather minutely. Even while he was writing his stories sitting thousands of miles away from his land, he could visualize the Indian scenes and Indian thought process objectively. He carried his India wherever he went. In his novels and stories, Rao has given graphic descriptions of Indian village life, moving us with his descriptions of the sufferings of Indian untouchables and Hindu widows and proving himself as an adept in drawing vivid pictures of the exploitation of the peasants and labourers by the landlords, the plantation owners and the money lenders. Not only does he point out the glory of his Brahmin ancestors who with their learning devotion and meditation tried to see God face to face, but also picturizes the degradation and corruption of the present day Brahmins of Benares. He brings before us a picture of India with the help of symbols like Kashi, the cow, the Ganga, Rakhi, coconut, kumkum, toe rings etc. “He has widened the scope of the novel to include not only the experience of living people but also the myths and legends of India ... the speculations of philosophers of the past and the present, of the east and the West” (Mathur, 39).

In Raja Rao’s *The Serpent and the Rope*, the East-West theme assumes a depth and validity not achieved before in Indo-Anglian fiction. In the complex and amorphous theme of the novel has been summed up in one concise sentence by a reviewer:

“In the marriage of Rama and Madeleine, two contrary world-views, two contrary epistemologies, come together, and the novel is a study of that encounter” (Ranchan 90)

Despite their sharply differentiated attitude towards life, Ramaswamy and Madeleine have one striking similarity as characters. “They are both intensely self-conscious about the epistemologies they represent. Hardly over do they regard themselves or each other simply as individual human beings. Instead, they are constantly interpreting their own and each other’s actions in terms of their national and cultural differences, invariably ending up with generalizations about “Indian” and “Western traits of character” (Mukherjee 90).

When Ramaswamy feels on affection for Catherine and talks to her like an elder brother, he hastens to explain,

“I acted no doubt from my Indian instinct ... Left to himself the Indian would go on tying *Rakhi* to every woman he met, feel her elder brother, protect her love ...” (P 137)

Even minor events and small actions like buying a pepper-grinder or carrying a suitcase are invested with Madeleine’s “Frenchness” or Ramaswamy’s. Ramaswamy’s inability to deal with the practical side of life, his haphazardness “like the towels in the bathroom that lay everywhere” is attributed not to any personal shortcoming but to his Indianness. Raja Rao’s portrayal of the Bhatta and the Swami in *Kanthapura*, of the intriguing Brahmin brothers in ‘the True Story of Kanakapala’, of the covetous Brahmin in ‘Companions’, of the pot-bellied, greedy, unclean Banares Brahmins, and of the heroes of *The Serpent* and *The Cat* prove that, he does not believe in the essential goodness of the ‘virtue’ of a Brahmin. But his awareness of the Brahmin’s prestigious position in the ‘twenties and the thirties and of his exercising a greater influence than anybody else to bring about reformation in the society of those days has been advantageous in the choice of the Brahmin hero. For a presentation of the point of view of the Brahminic India the choice of a Brahmin hero for his novels is, thus, nothing more than a technical device. *Kanthapura* is the masterpiece of Raja Rao. Its theme entirely reflects Indian thought and atmosphere. Generally revolving around India, the theme of the novel is not only Indian but also reflection of the deepest urges and problems of India. Though written in English, the expression is entirely Indianised and it is thoroughly Indian in its style and form. Commenting on *Kanthapura*, as the most remarkable example of the incarnation of Indian sensibility in English creative writing, Narsingh Srivastava observes thus:

‘It depicts India of Pre-Independence days the real India of that time which still continues to exist in great many respects. The vivid details of the village life are so evocatively described that the Indian way of life comes fully alive’ (P 16)

Raja Rao conceives his story as a *sthal-purana*, or the epic of a place. The narrator is not the learned and omniscient author, nor the hero, Moorthy but an aged village woman so that the story inevitably takes on some characteristics of a folk tale: “The soul of the novel resides in all the inspiring ideas of selfless action-Satyagraha which manifests itself in the guiding principles of truth, non-violence and universal love. And to all this is added the glowing skin of the form of a *sthal-purana*. In *Kanthapura*, Raja Rao has created a veritable *sthal-purana* a legendary history out of the Indian life in the Pre-Independence era (Srivastava 40). In the very first chapter itself, there is a rather elaborate story about the legend of Kanchamma who once saved *Kanthapura* from being destroyed by a demon. It is cited as a Proof of this incident that Kanchamma Hill is even now red. The Goddess Kanchamma is the presiding deity of the village of *Kanthapura* and its neighbourhood. The Harikatham from the city invents another story which gives a mythological origin to Gandhi, regarding him as an incarnation of Siva. The entire background of the story is mythological and religious, for both the parties cite lines from the Gita in which Krishna says that he takes birth in a human form whenever evil reaches its extreme, in order to punish evil doers and protect protector of dharma.

Whereas Jayaramachar says that Gandhi is the divine protector of dharma and an upholder of Truth, a supporter of the Swami claims that the English came to India as protectors of not only the lives but the dharma of the Indians. *Kanthapura* is thus thoroughly Indian because it presents a phase of Indian history through the real story of a small South Indian village in the thirties with a unique force of evocative description and vividness of detail. Narsingh Srivastava observes:

“The development of events in *Kanthapura* represents all that was happening in every village and every city at that time; thus *Kanthapura* is not one village, but every village; nay, India in microcosm” (P 40)

Kanthapura is a novel depicting the early stages in India’s freedom struggle. It can be looked upon as a Gandhi-epic because it celebrates the activities of the freedom fighters led by Gandhi, and even its hero, Moorthy, is only Gandhi on a smaller scale, a small mountain, as he is referred to in the novel, in comparison with Gandhi who was a large mountain. The ideals of Gandhism and some of the actual incidents and events which took place in the 1930’s when the Civil Disobedience Movement was at its height, are immortalized in *Kanthapura*. Non-violence, non-cooperation including non-payment of taxes and other Government dues was a prominent part of the Gandhian methods of struggle against the foreign rulers. Some staunch followers of Gandhi in the novel could not imagine anything beyond Gandhism. Gandhi appears in a scene or two in *Kanthapura*. Samares C.Sanyal comments:

“The one major Indian novel in English in which figures more prominently is Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura*. The most potent force behind the Independence Movement, the Mahatma is a recurring pressure in this novel. He has been treated variously as an idea, a myth a symbol, a tangible reality and a benevolent human being” (P 128)

Moorthy’s austere practice of the Gandhian philosophy creates a stir in the village. All the orthodox men and women raise such a cue and cry against Moorthy’s way of doing things, that the Swami, the custodian of the *Santhana Dharma*, threatens to ex-communicate the whole Brahmin community of the village. Only Ratna, the young widowed daughter of Kanchamma turns out to be the spiritual helpmate of Moorthy. The threat results in Narasimma’s Suicide. But Moorthy continues his work undaunted with more vigour and determination. Rangamma, an enlightened lady shows active sympathy for the cause of Moorthy. Active non-co-operation movement, non-tax campaign and picketing the toddy shops swiftly succeed the imprisonment of national leaders. Moorthy, the spiritual guide, a friend and philosopher of the people of *Kanthapura* leads the villagers ably in launching and carrying on the movement. The strategies adopted by Gandhiji during the freedom movement have been vividly pictured by Raja Rao. The entire atmosphere of depended India is brought out by the author. In *Kanthapura*, Rao deals with some social abuses prevailing in India, the most important of which is ‘untouchability’. The residents of *Kanthapura* village live in segregation according to the caste or class to which they belong. As a follower of Gandhian idealism, Moorthy works for the upliftment of the Pariahs and even when he is excommunicated, he identifies his activities for them. Another thing is that the socio-economic divisions of the village in various quarters, like the Pariah-quarter, weaver’s quarter and Brahmin quarter of four and twenty houses give a veritable picture of a traditional Indian village.

Myths play a significant part in Indian life because of the fact that even the most illiterate Indian is well acquainted with mythological stories. It is common for Indian preachers to give a mythological or spiritual significance to physical phenomena. Indians at every level are also extremely well acquainted with the stories in the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. It is quite usual to compare two loving brothers or friends to Rama and Lakshmana and the narrator does that in the case of her Seenu and Moorthy. In the myth that Jayaramachar invents about the divine birth of Gandhiji, he is held to be an incarnation of Siva, but Achakka compares him with Rama and India with Sita. Gandhi's going to England to participate in the Round Table Conference is compared to Rama's exile and the Indians who participate in the process of Government are compared to Bharatha who worshipped Rama's Sandals in his absence. The foreign rulers are compared to Ravana and Gandhi is to kill this demon, and bring back enslaved Sita, i.e. India who is under domination of foreign rulers, back with him after liberating her. His return is expected to be like the triumphant return of Rama to Ayodhya when there was a shower of flowers from the sky. The followers of Gandhi are like Hanuman and they are equally ready to carry out his instructions at any time. Sanyal rightly comments:

'In the novel Moorthy is presented as a figure much above the level of common human beings. He is an ideal man who has described his life to the selfless service to humanity. To the local people he is respected as a local Mahatma' (169)
He adds further thus:

"A myth or legend necessarily deals with a man much higher than the normal level of humanity. Raja Rao uses the device of mythicising facts in order to give his hero that godly status" (P169).

Thus, the image of India and Indian sensibility gets reflected in *Kanthapura*. No doubt, *Kanthapura* depicts the close alliance between politics, religion and spirituality which was Gandhiji's main contribution to the public life of India. Sanyal aptly describes *Kanthapura* as 'India in microsm'. If *Kanthapura* is an epic of the Gandhian movement for the country's freedom, *The Serpent and the Rope* may be called an epic of Rama's quest for self-realization and self-transcendence. Ramaswamy, the hero of the novel stays in France and England for most of the period covered by the novel and yet it is wholly Indian novel. That is because Ramya may go anywhere but he carries India with him, wherever he goes. Sanyal rightly observes:

"The form of *The Serpent and the Rope* is as truly Indian as its sensibility. Raja Rao unearths metaphysical proportions everywhere and the interweaving of myths, legends and spiritual beliefs, instead of steadily illuminating a particular situation merely adds to the flux of general observations about comic truth" (P 38).

The Serpent and the Rope is the story of Rama's spiritual quest for self-realisation by following the direct path of renunciation. The novel of spiritual autobiography of Raja Rao with its emphasis on getting at the truth becomes the unfolding as a Vedanta based vision of India and deals with the magnitude, mystery, complexity, philosophy and metaphysics of India from the point of view of one who seeks Brahman and whose sensibility and values are uncompromisingly Indian. Ramaswamy seeks metaphysical and not moral truth. Evil to him is a superstition and so the whole novel is built mainly on impressions and interpretations. But these impressions, interpretations and common places of thought have their significance in the unfolding of the vast and tranquil metaphysics of India. The novel presents a contact between India and Europe through the union of Ramaswamy and Madeleine but the union consummates not in a lasting married life but in the assimilation of the highest wisdom of India – the vedantic truth of Advaita that is suggested to be a permanent bond of unity between the East and the West. India is evoked in *The Serpent and the Rope* through a discussion of the chief tenets of Indian thought. The whole novel reverberates with echoes of the salient ideas of Buddhism, Advaita, Vedanta, the chanting of Gayathri, truths of The Gita and the lines of devotional songs. The title itself points to the cardinal truth of Indian and illusion which is clarified by such statement as

"Maya is Maya to Maya – Maya cannot be where Brahman is" (TSR)

To conclude, it may be said that Raja Rao has achieved a great feat in the field of Indo-Anglian literature and his novels reveal the atmosphere of India in a magnificent manner. Through his novels, India has been depicted so vividly and naturally that the judicious use of Indian myth, legend, mythology, religion and philosophy has made him the most Indian of the Indo-Anglian novelists.

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