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Indian Sensibility in Raja Rao's 'The Serpent and the Rope'

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Abstract

Raja Rao is a pioneer of India writing in English. He has helped to accommodate an essential Indian sensibility. An author difficult to understand, a class by himself in technique and vision, a great lover of truth, Raja Rao is a novelist of extra-ordinary powers. He is a novelist as the author of *The Serpent and the Rope* that he has earned for himself a place among the outstanding novelists in Indo- Anglian literature. Through this novel Raja Rao has found a new genre - the philosophical novel, and has vividly and forcefully realized the confrontation of eastern and western cultures. He presents sociological problem-whether the marriage between a Hindu Brahmin and French woman is possible or not. The theme of the novel is a study of that encounter. The novel is also regarded as the spiritual autobiography of Raja Rao. Indeed *The Serpent and the Rope* is Raja Rao's Mahabharata and it presents his vision of India which is only reality in the world. India is presented as an idea and not as an area on the map.

Keywords: Caesarian, Mysticism, Philosophy, Psychological action, University of Sorborne, Vedanta

1. Introduction

Raja Rao is a pioneer of India writing in English. He has helped to accommodate an essential Indian sensibility. An author difficult to understand, a class by himself in technique and vision, a great lover of truth, Raja Rao is a novelist of extra-ordinary powers. He is a novelist as the author of *The Serpent and the Rope* that he has earned for himself a place among the outstanding novelists in Indo-Anglian literature. Through this novel Raja Rao has found a new genre-the philosophical novel, and has vividly and forcefully realized the confrontation of eastern and western cultures. He presents sociological problem-whether the marriage between a Hindu Brahmin and French woman is possible or not. The theme of the novel is a study of that encounter. The novel is also regarded as the spiritual autobiography of Raja Rao. Indeed. *The Serpent and the Rope* is Raja Rao's Mahabharata and it presents his vision of India which is only reality in the world. India is presented as an idea and not as an area on the map. Although he has written a large number of short stories, he is a novelist as the author of *Kanthapura*, *The Serpent and the Rope* and *The Cat and Shakespeare* that he has earned for himself a place among the outstanding novelists in Indo-Anglian literature.

According to Raja Rao, "The Indian novel can only be epic in form and metaphysical in nature. It can only be story within story to show all stories are parables"^[1]. As Dr. Krishna Sastry points out, "While *Kanthapura* is a novel of action, *The Serpent and the Rope* is essentially one recollection"^[2]. K. R. Srinivasa Iyenger observes, "If *Kanthapura* is Raja Rao's Ramayana, then "*The Serpent and the Rope* is his Mahabharata"^[3].

Meenakshi Mukherjee points out, "As the title suggests, the novel involves two ways of apprehending reality: the recognition of the object as object and the recognition that the object exists because the perceiver perceives it"^[4]. *The Serpent and the Rope* are the symbols of illusion and reality in Indian tradition and it is Raja Rao's fond hope to weave into his novel his ideas regarding illusion and reality. The protagonist of the novel, Ramaswamy says, "The world is either poetry, is sainthood-one-the Guru-brings you the lantern: the road is seen, the long, white road"^[5].

So the theme of the novel is obviously illusion and reality. Raja Rao's use of symbols in the novel provides authenticity to the character of Madeleine and Ramaswamy When Rama has been in Europe for about a year, his father dies and he has to hurry back home. He carries his second step mother, known as little mother and Sridhara, a little step brother, to Banaras for the last rites of his father. A detailed account is given of the city and philosophical significance. From Banaras they go over to Allahabad where they stay for some time with an old friend of Rama's father. There he meets Pratap Singh who is betrothed to Savithri, the young western

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Educated daughter of the Raja of Surajpur. She is backing home from Cambridge at the time for the vacations and Rama is introduced to her, so that he may get an opportunity of changing her views. Rama is fascinated by her.

From Allahabad they go to Haridwar and then go back to then- home. Having settled affairs at home, Rama goes to France to complete his work on the thesis which will take one year more. Madeleine takes lessons in Pali from Lezo so that she may study Buddhism at first hand. He tries to make love to her, but is firmly and sternly rebuffed and rebuked. Savithri also comes to them on a short visit on her way to Cambridge from India. Rama also visits Cambridge in connection with his research work and comes in close contact with Savithri. Many are the evenings they pass together. He is passionately in love with her. After his work in Cambridge is over, he comes to London and stays there for sometimes. Savithri visits him in his apartments and one morning she comes with coconut and kumkum, performs aarti, touches his feet. She takes Rama to be her Lord and master, with God as their witness. Savithri is ready to run away with him. But Rama realizes that their love can have meaning only if it is grounded on a spiritual base. So like a dutiful Hindu girl, she must go back to her home and marry the husband destined for her. Savithri eventually marries Pratap Singh, and it is hoped she will be a good wife to him.

Rama constantly receives letters from Saroj, little mother and Sukumari. Thus he is kept informed of the affairs at home. When Saroj's marriage is fixed up, he has to come back to India to supervise the arrangements as head of the family and give away the bride. He goes for the wedding, even though Madeleine is in the family way at the time. He could not reach France in time for the delivery due to illness. He is advised to take rest in the warmer climate of Bangalore for three months. During this time, Madeleine has to undergo a caesarian operation. Her life is saved, but their second child also dies. This is the second shock received by Madeleine and it changes the whole course of their future life. Rama comes back to Madeleine. He finds that a great change has come over her. She has moved up to a much smaller house and is gradually giving up the comforts and luxuries of life. She has become a devout Buddhist. She is gradually moving along the eight fold path of the lord. She keeps fasts frequently and passes most of her time in prayer and meditation. She even goes on a long forty. One day fast Normal life with her is no longer possible, and it is obvious that they must separate.

Then Rama goes to London and falls ill. Savithri who is in London frequently visits him. He is also visited by Lakshmi, a young lady whom he had met at Cambridge. He goes to Paris to write out his thesis. He visits Madeleine and finds that she has moved into another house. She has become a sanyasini, though she still keeps up her job. It is their last meeting. Soon, at Madeleine's instance, divorce proceedings are initiated and they are duly divorced. Rama shows the way to Savithri. He can give solace to little Mother and Saroja, his sister. He can help Catherine, his wife's cousin to find happiness with Georges. But he is unhappy. How is he to work out his own salvation? In his diary he writes, "Not a God, but a Guru, is what I need" ^[2]. To a Hindu Brahmin the surer way will be the killing of the ego, the ending of the illusion of individuality. And so Rama seeks out his Guru. He comes back to Travancore - I must go to Travancore. I have no Banaras now, no Ganga; no Jamuna Travancore is my country" ^[2].

Rama and Madeleine are both self-conscious about the epistemologies they represent. They are constantly interpreting their own and each other's action in terms of their

national and cultural differences, invariably ending up with generalization about Indian and western traits of character. Madeleine slowly excludes Ramaswamy. Rama brings his burden of infinite pathos back to India. As Meenakshi Mukherjee observes.

"With admirable restraint, Raja Rao has steered clear of the facile solution of concocting an easy assimilation of two cultures. If there is an enduring solution, it is a private solution, and may not yield its secret to any public discussion. Such a solution be worked out only through a Guru and it is hinted at the end that Rama hopes to find him in Travancore" ^[6].

In this way the physical action of the novel constantly shuttlecocks between India, France and England. Within it are a whole host of interesting characters- men and women from India, France, England, Russia, and Spain. Madeleine, Rama's wife, is a finely realized character. The other triumph of characterization is Savithri.

The psychological action is also very important. We see places, men and phenomena as Rama sees them. So far as the novel is concerned, Rama is the reality, the rest is illusion. We may go further and say that Raja Rao is the reality and Rama, Madeleine, Savithri and all other characters are the serpent, the glamour of the novelist's illusion.

The novel presents a sociological or an East- West problem. Can the marriage of a Hindu with a French girl succeed? But all the problems are the serpent. They are not the real problems. The real problem is not establishing the harmony without, or with another but within, with oneself. All the problems are really spiritual problems. Yet it is true that the phenomenal world, the serpent, cannot be easily conjured up.

The truth, the ultimate or the only truth may be the rope only, but the Guru is yet to come with the lantern. In one of his sudden transitions, Rama describes the novel as "the sad and uneven chronicle of a life, my life" ^[7]. After his marriage Rama has to choose between two entities- the Serpent which stands for unreality and is the symbol of the seductive world, and the rope which stands for reality that is hidden because man looks at it through the serpent's eyes. Finally Rama separates from his French wife and comes to Travancore to find out the Guru.

2. Conclusion

Thus the novel is an evocation of the truth that the tradition of India has an essential vitality, especially in its encounters with the west. The heart of the novel, its essence lies in the philosophy and metaphysics which ran through it and in its presentation of the East-West encounter. In The Serpent and the Rope an attempt is made to redefine man's relation to the supernatural of the absolute in terms consistent with modern thought. It is at once intriguing with its wide canvas and multiple visions of France, England and India. The novel is Raja Rao's first attempt at making Indian mysticism and Vedanta philosophy a subject of regular novels. As K.R. Srinivasa Iyenger observes, The Serpent and the Rope is an ambitious and meritorious effort at achieving a total projection of India in vivid fictional terms: and perhaps, it is the most impressive novel yet written by an Indian in English" ^[2]. Indeed The Serpent and the Rope is Raja Rao's Mahabharata and it presents his vision of India which is only reality in the world. India is presented as an idea and not as an area on the map.

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