

Raja Rao as an Adept in Representing the Modern Indian Ethos for Communicating Richly Indian Sensibility in his Fiction: An Appraisal

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Received Jan. 12, 2018

Accepted Feb. 18, 2018

ABSTRACT

The research paper neatly explores the literary quality and talents of the dexterous writer Raja Rao who is nimble-fingered in rendering the modern Indian ethos articulating the vibrant Indian sensibility in his fictional realm. This paper vehemently delves deep into the artistic creed of Raja Rao who has expertly implemented his metaphysical enlightenment and mystical insights to the interpretation of the realities of life in his art. It adroitly contributes the aspect that Raja Rao is the most Indian of the Indian Writing in English who flauntlessly flourish a fervent picture of India with symbols, cultural ideologies, tradition and ritual code of ethics which were solely owned by India and Indian in his fiction. Thus, this research paper negotiates the point that Raja Rao's fictional world is purely crowded with Indianess and has become the authentic voice of Indian sensibility.

Key words: *Metaphysical, mystical, realities, symbols, ideologies, ethics, Indianess, Indian sensibility, authentic, voice.*

Indo-Anglian fiction has been enriched by the writers of such eminence as R.C.Dutt, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and Rabindranath Tagore, K.R.S.Iyengar calls Bankim Baboo as 'the glorious promise of spring' and Rabindranath Tagore as 'the tumultuous richness of autumnal friction' in his **Literature and Authorship in India**. In Bankim Chandra Chatterjee one can discover a curious blend of romanticism seen in Sir Walter Scott and the nationalism of Bengali. In the words of Prof. Priyanjan, "He awakened the country to the greater world outside, and linked the two together. The East and West met in him. It is said that the literary renaissance came in the wake of his novels. His **The Poison** is a tale of Hindu life in Bengal. No doubt, Indo-Anglian fiction became richer by the translation of his novels. The last decade of the nineteenth century and the early period of the twentieth century saw some sporadic efforts in the fields of Indo-Anglian literature, like **The Hindu Wife** by RajLaxmi Devi (1876), **Sarata and Hingana** by Kshetrapal Chakravarti (1895) Vasudeva Sastri by Raja Ram Iyer (1905), Thillai Govindan by Madhaviah (1912), The Love of Kusama by Balkrishna (1910), Sun Babies by Cornelia Sorabji (1910) etc. Then the phase of Indo-Indian fiction struck a new field with the arrival of Mulk Raj Anand, R.K.Narayan, Raja Rao and D.F.Karaka on the literary scene bring home the point that "contemporary novels are the mirror of the age, but a very special kind of mirror, a mirror that reflects not merely the external features of the age but also its inner face, its nervous system, coursing of its blood and the unconscious promptings and conflicts which sway it" (Allen 19). Thus, the great movements social, political or moral other than romances or historical themes, were sure to be mirrored in the literature of the nation Indian struggle for Independence.

Indian struggle for independence was an epic struggle covering nearly half a century. The unarmed, superstition and poverty ridden Indian nation had to shake off the lethargy of centuries, forget its cases, sub-castes, provisional differences and march ahead on the road of progress. The Indian National Congress and Mahatma Gandhi worked this miracle. The freedom struggle for independent thinking and social vision not only caught the imagination of the entire nation but also inspired the Indo-Anglian writers. The battle that India was fighting was fought on many fronts. On the political front, success seemed to be hiding beyond the horizon. But on the social front, the battle was crowned with victories at many points. Social consciousness was roused, blinding orthodoxy and superstitions were being thrown away, widow remarriages became more and more frequent; the caste system was shakes from its very foundation; untouchability was being gradually kicked out and social injustice was to be abolished. Among these stories, **Kanthapura** describes the glorious struggle of a village. The flight of the people of the village, their civil disobedience, their endurance against severe lathi charges are described in a language that is simply poetic and charming.

For the sheer weight of wisdom and the adroit concealment in the realm of art, there is hardly anyone to equal Raja Rao in the whole range of Indo-Anglian fiction. One of the greatest Indo-Anglian novelists, Raja Rao is a genius who can talk of Nirvana-Astakam of Sankara, Dakshinamurthi Stotram; Pascal, Albigensian hereby and the civilization of the Cathars and of Advaita, Buddhism and Christianity in the same breath. He has gathered in him "the traditional wisdom of Indian Rishis (Holy Seers) and has

combined it with his intimate knowledge of the Western religion and philosophy” (Srivastava 2). Further, his amazing erudition is embellished by a brilliance of wit and analysis. He is endowed with a broad vision of human civilization which has enabled him to focus a synthetic view of values of various cultures of the world. Mulk Raj Anand has written with credit about the underdog and the persons insulted and injured ‘by the White Sahebs, the Zamindars, the money lenders and the businessmen.’ In him, one can find the life of the Sweeper, the peasant, the plantation labour, the city drudge, the sepoy’ and others. R.K.Narayan has created the regional novel in India with the interesting topography of Malgudi. He is capable of a high romance making it streak poignantly through a narrative. But neither Anand nor Narayan is capable of both psychic and terrestrial expansion throwing into the orbit a planet as large as life itself-spiritual, mundane, mental, intellectual, of low and high spirits, sexual, ceremonial and what not. And “as an artist, Raja Rao changes into a new design – the ordinary, the mediocre, the sordid and things of pure existence... he seems to proceed from idealism to the characteristic human reality, a feat which only few are capable of showing” (Deva 14).

Such a distinguished writer Raja Rao was born in an orthodox family of the Brahmins of Mysore on November 5, 1908. Matriculated from Hyderabad, he studied French Literature at the University of Aligarh. At the age of twenty, he started doing research, first at the University of Montpellier and at the Sorbonne under Prof. Cazamian. He came back to India in 1940 during the war. He got married to an American actress by name Katherine Rao. They had a young son between them. He then burgeoned into a philosopher-writer due to his interest in philosophy. He was convinced that the avant-garde young Americans and concerned primarily with the search for philosophical truth. Santha Rau comments on Raja Rao in the following words: “Perhaps the most brilliant and certainly the most interesting of modern India” (P 15). Raja Rao is “a great admirer of the great ‘triumvirate’ – Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman” (Deva 16). It is because of the fact that they were influenced vastly by the philosophy of India. Raja Rao is, no doubt, in his attitude towards life is much elevated and in thoughts sublimated beyond a degree. As a lover of truth, he has a greater hold on life more than any other writer, even Tagore. He has to his credit publication of such novels as 1.*Kanthapura* (1938) 2.*The Cow of the Barricades* (1947), 3.*The Cat and Shakespeare* (1965), 4.*The Serpent and the Rope* (1960) and 5.*Comrade Kirillov* (1976). In the words of Narsingh Srivastava, “Both through his life and literature, Raja Rao has fulfilled the mission of a cultured ambassador of India to the West even as he has proved himself to be a philosophical interpreter of Indian tradition and thought in a western medium of expression which he has naturalised as his own for himself as much as for millions of his readers in India” (P 5). One can see an altogether new dimension in the fictional world of Raja Rao. Commenting on the literary and artistic ability of Raja Rao, C.D. Verma observes:

“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 quintessential quality, Rao is characteristically Indian and oriental in a way which neither Narayan nor Anand can claim to be” (P 38).

Raja Rao is a conscious artist who has a definite literary 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. One can appreciate Rao’s style better if one understands that there is an element of deliberateness in its rhythms. He writes the way he does because he is convinced that is how an Indian writer ought to use English. Rao maintains that English is not really a foreign language, it is very much an Indian language so far as intellectual apprehension and communication are concerned, through it is not the language of the emotional make-up of an Indian. Rao himself models his style on the rhythms of Kannada, though he also has Sanskrit in his mind. He interprets Indian thought and culture rather than any other novelist. The revelation of the very essence of Indian life and character is his prime object as a novelist. For 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 other, particularly the people of the West. Though he lays greater emphasis on the essence 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*, are reflected the manifold aspects of the rural and the urban life of India of the early and mid-twentieth century, whereas In *The Serpent and the Rope*, it is pictured as:

“India is not a country like
France is, or like England,
India is an idea, a metaphysic” (P 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 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 historian's quest of roots, it is in relation to the present a search of continuity of the Indian tradition. 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 interpretation of the reality of life in his art. Narsingh Srivastava writes:

“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).

He is a curious type who can commend at every moment of his creative thinking a firm hold of the concrete reality and the philosophical abstractions. In this respect, he can well be placed in the company of the great literary minds of world literature like Valmiki, Vyas, Homer, Dante, Shakespeare and Steinbeck with whom he shares the power of creating revelatory utterances of universal truth and combining the descriptive and interpretative with the intuitive vision of things.

Raja Rao is the most Indian of the Indians Writing in English. Even while he started writing his stories, sitting thousands of miles away from his land, he could visualise the Indian scenes and Indian thought processes objectively. He carried his India wherever he went for early in life, he had a thorough grounding in Indian religion and philosophy and observed Indian life rather minutely. In his novels and Stories, he is said to have given graphic description of Indian life. He moves the readers with his excellent descriptions of the sufferings of the Indian untouchables and Hindu widows and draws vivid pictures of the exploitation of the peasants and labourers by the landlords, the plantation owners and many lenders. Rao is no doubt, a great novelist of Indo-Anglian literature, who brings before the readers a profound picture of India with the help of symbols like Kashi, cow, the Ganga, Rakhi, coconut, kumkum, toe rings etc. He is an adept in bringing out the real emotions and feelings while writing in a foreign language. His imagery is out and out Indian. His similes and metaphors are all taken from the lives of the people who are described and his images and symbols are drawn from common Indian objects and experiences. According to him, rice should be fine as filigree and mangoes should be yellow as gold. The sky is as blue as a marriage shawl. Some women are beautiful as newly opened guavas while others are tender as April mangoes. Young boys are as bright as banana trunks and it will be 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. While commenting on Rao's art of creating living characters, 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 superstitious, their beliefs and ideals” (Mathur 35).

Truly speaking, his characters, even minor one, are Indian in spirit and temperament pulsating with life and lingering in our memory for long. S.S.Mathur further adds:

“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 and other nations and the speculations of philosophers of the past and the present, of the east and the west” (P 39).

As the master piece of Raja Rao, *Kanthapura* entirely reflects Indian thought and atmosphere as its very theme revolves around India. Though written in English language, the expression is entirely Indianised and the rhythms of speech are more often those of South Indian languages like Kannada. It is nothing but a reflection of the deepest urges and problems of India and a remarkable example of the incarnation of Indian sensibility in English creative writing. “It depicts India of Pe-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” (Srivastava 16). Rao's conception of narration is thoroughly Indian. He approaches his story as a sthala-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. In the words of Narsingh Srivastava,

“In *Kanthapura*, Raja Rao has created a veritable sthalapurana a legendary history out of the Indian life in the Pre-Independence era” (P 40).

In the very first chapter itself, there is an 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 and the Goddess Kanchamma is the presiding deity of the village of Kanthapura and its neighbourhood. The Harikatha-man 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 'dharma'. Whereas Jayarama Char 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 is an example of Peculiar Indian art form (ie) the Sthala-purana. Some staunch followers of Gandhi like Rangamma in the novel could not imagine anything beyond Gandhism. Gandhi appears in a scene or two in **Kanthapura**. C.Sanyal writes:

"The one major Indian novel is English in which he figures more prominently is Raja Rao's **Kanthapura**. The most potent force behind the Independent movement, the Mahatma is 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)

In **Kanthapura**, the residents live in segregation according to the caste or class to which they belong. Even the narrator, who is kind and sympathetic, says that the readers would not expect that as a Brahmin, she would never have actually entered the Pariah quarters of the village, so she describes them as they appeared to her from the Temple Corner, Moorthy follows the ideals of Gandhi by working for the upliftment of the pariahs, and when he is excommunicated for this, he intensifies his activities, Moorthy's austere practice of the Gandhian philosophy creates a stir in the entire village. In the neighbouring town of Karwar, the anti-untouchability movement has thrown his temple open to the pariahs in spite of the dissuasion of the Swami. As a result of this defiance of the Swami's wishes, he also has been excommunicated. To attest to the fact that Indian customs are followed by the village people, superstitious beliefs and conventions are normally entertained by the village people. Narsingh Srivastava is right in saying:

"Superstitious and age-old conventions Sway the minds of the inhabitants of Kanthapura as they do in any other village of India" (P 17).

Even 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. Thus, the novelist here succeeds in evoking familiar pictures of village life through concrete details of their names, houses, way of living occupants. In short, **Kanthapura** is out and out Indian in treatment and description. 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 dedicated his life to the selfless service to humanity.

To the local people he is respected as a local Mahatma" (169).

The reflection of India in **Kanthapura** is also emphasized by its conception of women. Women held an honoured place in Indian society in ancient times, but their position became secondary and insecure afterwards. The greatest curse of Indian womanhood has been widowhood and the plight of child widows has been graphically presented by many Indian writers. Remarriage of widows has been looked upon as a taboo in India, although many social reformers, right from Ram Mohan Roy, have pleaded for it. There are several widows in **Kanthapura** – Rangamma, Narasamma, Kalamma, Venkamma and others. No doubt, Raja Rao presents the women characters to symbolise Indian Womanhood. As a matter of fact, India is reflected obviously by the Indianised English in which it is written. This is true of the diction in which Indian words like 'kumkum', 'linga', 'katha', 'Bhajan' etc. frequently occur in **Kanthapura**. The expressions here are really creative. Raja Rao doesn't consider English a foreign language. His English springs from the scene and soil of India and seems to have reached maturity in the fields, markets and homes of the country. It harmonises well with Indian habits, gestures and ways of thought. His style is at its best in **Kanthapura** for its distinctive quality is naturalness. This naturalness enhances the authenticity of the content which is thoroughly Indian. Thus, **Kanthapura** is a good example of the embodiment of the peculiarly Indian sensibility in English creative writing. **Kanthapura** is nothing but a breathless tale from the beginning to the end and fascinatingly told in the age old Indian tradition of story-telling. While describing Raja Rao's narrative technique, Narsingh Srivastava says:

"From the beginning of his career as a novelist Raja Rao has been conscious of the need of using a kind of English expression in which the truly Indian life and sensibility could be powerfully expressed. He aimed at evolving an Indian English which was to be truly Indian – almost a dialect" (P 108).

In a word, *Kanthapura* is a fine work of art rousing the conscience of India and even of the world at large, at the ills and injustices which plagued Indian life in the 1930's. This novel does not project a single problem, but a number of problems faced by the Indian folk. The most important of them is, of course, the problem of foreign rule and the description of the struggle against it led by Mahatma Gandhi. In the words of Samers C.Sanyal *Kanthapura* is a veritable grammar of the Gandhian myth – the myth that is but a poetic translation of the reality” (P 130). Thus *Kanthapura* does reflect the perfect picture of India.

If *Kanthapura* was an epic of the Gandhian movement for the country's freedom, *The Serpent and the Rope* is an epic of Rama's quest for self-realization and self-transcendence. Ramasamy, the hero of the novel *The Serpent and the Rope* carries India with him.

Sanyal rightly holds:

“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 observation about cosmic truth” (P 38).

Rama started learning the Upanishads when he was four years old and by the time he completed his education and went to France for his research work, he was thoroughly imbued with Indian learning and culture. He believes in Advaita philosophy and spreads it wherever he goes. In this novel, Rama describes his life and ideas and so it is a thoroughly Indian novel. The style is garrulous and verbose and it is full of digressions. This is the style in which the puranas were written. Thus, *The Serpent and the Rope* is Indian in matter as well as its manner of narration. 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 lives of devotional songs. In spite of his criticism of India's decadent culture in the present, Ramaswamy remains a Vedantin and a true Indian with an individual love for his mother land. Ramaswamy says:

“India is wonderful to me. It was like a juice that is supposed to drink to conquer a kingdom or to reach the deathless juice of rose, jasmine or golden myrobolen, brought from the neither world by a hero or dark mermaid. It gave me sweetness and the desire of mortality” (SR 15)

Raja Rao here gives a picture of India as she was in Pre-Independence days. It is a realistic picture of Indian society and her ageless culture, philosophy and civilization. It is a picture of India in which religion and philosophy have had the upper. Here Raja Rao brings out the pathetic situation of the people of India. Most of the people of India are poor for India is generally called a poor country and there is widespread poverty and misery in the land. There are lot of beggars. At one stage, Ramaswamy says that his communism is made of Mother India's tears. So Raja Rao presents here not only the rosy aspects of India but also her darker aspects. While referring about Raja Rao, Dr. K.N.Joshi and B.Shyamala Rao rightly observe:

‘His close acquaintance of history, philosophy and literatures of India as well as Europe and his wide reading constitute an altogether new literary experience in the Indo-Anglian fiction” (PP166-167).

Thus, in fact, *The Serpent and the Rope* is the finest and fullest possible expression of an essentially Indian sensibility.

The Cat and Shakespeare, like his previous novels, has also the reflections of India. Indian customs, attitudes and Indian way of life have been most brought out by the novelist. Truly speaking an Indian atmosphere has been created vividly and beautifully. It is the story of two friends Govindan Nair and Ramakrishna Pai dealing with corruption in the rationing department. The social scene in *The Cat and Shakespeare* shifts from rural to the Urban India. A realistic view of Indian social and political life in a city of Kerala evokes the veritable picture of life as it was lived in whole of India during the days of the Second World War.

Mr.Panikar rightly remarks in his review of the novel thus:

“Raja Rao has delved deep into the charm and bane of Kerala life, a life steeper in superstition, traditions, casteism and corruption and yet full of colour, freshness, vitality and Vedanta” (Panikar 124).

The natural aspects of Trivandrum are vividly evoked through landscape features along with the recapitulation of history. Ramakrishna Pai's wife approvingly describes Trivandrum as:

Oh! it is just like home, coconut trees, huts and the sound of Sea” (*The Cat and Shakespeare* 6)

The way of life of the people of Trivandrum has been brought out well. The depth of Raja Rao's observation of Indian life can be clearly understood by reading *The Cat and Shakespeare*. What adds significantly to the realism of the novel is the depiction of the material side of life symbolised by the ration shop. Food is the greatest need of life and that was most scarce during the global war, hence the made race for it and the prevalent corruption in the ration office. The ration offices were centres of corruption and we are told:

“The kingdom of Denmark is just like a ration office” (CS 83)

Here Raja Rao has brought out the corruption of ration shops in general. This kind of corruption happens in almost all the ration shops in India. The simple tale of life in Trivandrum in the mid-twentieth century is, in fact, the real tale of the whole of India of the time. At the purely materialistic level, the possession of a three-storied house is as much a status symbol in the northern Indian as in the South. Similarly, the puranic myth of a fortunate hunter who got the vision of Shiva by accidentally dropping bilva-leaves on the image of the Lord is a popular myth throughout India. Besides, the feminine principle of a cosmic mother as a creator of this universe and also the preserver and destroyer is a traditional metaphysical truth universally believed in all over India. It is India in its many fold aspects that we are shown in this short novel of Raja Rao as also in his other novels, which aim at revitalizing the metaphysical truths and spiritual values. In this respect, Raja Rao has become an authentic voice of India, painting the present and enlivening the past for revealing both the outer and the inner realities of India. If one wants to know about India and its customs, he may well read the novels of Raja Rao so as to get a clear picture of India. Narsingh Srivastava is right in his saying:

‘Of all the Indo-Anglian novelists Raja Rao happens to be the greatest interpreter of Indian thought and culture, the revelation of the very essence of Indian life and character being his chief object as a novelist. 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’ (P 15).

Thus, Raja Rao is a voice of Indian sensibility for his fiction steals a march over that of other writers because it is Indian in both form and content. No doubt, in Raja Rao's hand, the Indian novel has acquired an epic stature and he has become the most 'Indian' of all Indo-Anglian novelists.

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There is no exercise better for the heart than reaching down and lifting people up.

~ **John A. Holmes**(American writer and minister)