

### The Sage of Indian English Literature: Raja Rao

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**Abstract:** Literature is the mirror to society. It reflects the people, the lifestyle, culture, religion, traditions, trends, and practices of the contemporary world. Raja Rao, a doyen of Indian English literature, is viewed as a philosopher who emphasizes the spirit of India with the modernity of the world. The paper will carry out a thematic analysis of some select novels of Raja Rao with a view to exploring how Raja Rao's works reflect India's socio-cultural milieu, spiritual traditions, and the human quest for meaning. In such novels as *Kanthapura* and *The Serpent and the Rope*, Rao unravels the synthesis of Indian metaphysical thought with its adverse swing towards modernity. *Kanthapura* evokes the intricate joining of India's struggle for independence with Gandhian ideals of communal unity, non-violence, and the strength of rural India, while *The Serpent and the Rope* covered the gamut on questions of identity, spirituality, and the search for self-realization that draws heavily from Advaita philosophy. This paper also tries to understand how the works of Raja Rao have brought out the tension between tradition and modernity, showing the cultural dilemma of post-colonial India. His depiction of the character's inner struggle, his spiritual pursuit, and relationship with Indian traditions reflect his intense involvement with India's philosophical traditions. Besides, the employment of myth, folklore, and oral traditions in his narratives gives added dimensions to his engagement with questions of identity, nationalism, and existentialism. The paper thematically explicates these novels with the view of establishing Raja Rao's contribution to Indian English literature and his role in shaping modern Indian thought, especially in the post-colonial era. His novels stand as a testimony to the continuing dialogue between the past of India and the variously emerging present of the country.

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#### Introduction

Raja Rao was born on November 8, 1908 in Hassan, in the state of Mysore (now Karnataka) in South India, into a well-known Brahmin (Hoysala Karnataka) family. He was the eldest of nine siblings - two brothers and seven sisters. His native language was Kannada, but his post-graduate education was in France, and all his publications in book form have been in English. His father taught Kannada at Nizam College in what was then Hyderabad State. The death of his mother, when he was four, left a lasting impression on the novelist - the absence of a mother and orphanhood are recurring themes in his work. Another influence from early life was his grandfather, with whom he stayed in Hassan and Harihalli. Rao was educated at Muslim schools, the Madarsa-e-Aliya in Hyderabad and the Aligarh Muslim University, where he became friends with Ahmed Ali. He began learning French at the University. After matriculation in 1927, Rao returned to Hyderabad and studied for his degree at Nizam's College. After graduating from the University of Madras, having majored in English and history, he won the Asiatic Scholarship of the Government of Hyderabad in 1929, for study abroad. Rao moved to

the University of Montpellier in France. He studied French language and literature, and later at the Sorbonne in Paris, he explored the Indian influence on Irish literature. He married Camille Mouly, who taught French at Montpellier, in 1931. The marriage lasted until 1939.

Later he depicted the breakdown of their marriage in *The Serpent and the Rope*. Rao published his first stories in French and English. During 1931-32 he contributed four articles written in Kannada for *Jaya Karnataka*, an influential journal. Returning to India in 1939, he edited with Iqbal Singh, *Changing India*, an anthology of modern Indian thought from Ram Mohan Roy to Jawaharlal Nehru. He participated in the Quit India Movement of 1942. In 1943-1944 he coedited with Ahmed Ali a journal from Bombay called *tomorrow*. He was the prime mover in the formation of a cultural organization, *Sri Vidya Samiti*, devoted to reviving the values of ancient Indian civilization; this organization failed shortly after inception. In Bombay, he was also associated with *Chetana*, a cultural society for the propagation of Indian thought and values. Rao's involvement in the nationalist movement is reflected in his first two books. The novel *Kanthapura* (1938) was an account

of the impact of Gandhi's teaching on non-violent resistance against the British. The story is seen from the perspective of a small Mysore village in South India. Rao borrows the style and structure from Indian vernacular tales and folk-epic. Rao returned to the theme of Gandhism in the short story collection *The Cow of the Barricades* (1947). In 1998 he published Gandhi's biography *Great Indian Way: A Life of Mahatma Gandhi*. In 1988 he received the prestigious International Neustadt Prize for Literature. *The Serpent and the Rope* was written after a long silence during which Rao returned to India. The work dramatized the relationships between Indian and Western culture. The serpent in the title refers to illusion and the rope to reality. *Cat and Shakespeare* (1965) was a metaphysical comedy that answered philosophical questions posed in the earlier novels. Rao relocated to the United States and was Professor of Philosophy at the University of Texas at Austin from 1966 to 1983, when he retired as Emeritus Professor. Courses he taught included Marxism to Gandhism, Mahayana Buddhism, Indian philosophy: The Upanishads, Indian philosophy: The Metaphysical Basis of the Male and Female Principle. Nobel laureate Czesław Miłosz, a friend of Rao's, published his only poem in the English language, "To Raja Rao", after a conversation with him. In 1965, he married Katherine Jones, an American stage actress. They have one son, Christopher Rama. In 1986, after his divorce from Katherine, Rao married his third wife, Susan, whom he met when she was a student at the University of Texas in the 1970s.

Rao died on July 8, 2006 at Austin, Texas, at the age of 97. Indian writer of novels and short stories, whose works are deeply rooted in Brahmanism and Hinduism. Raja Rao's semi-autobiographical novel, *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960), is a story of a search for spiritual truth in Europe and India. It established him as one of the finest Indian stylists. "Writing is my dharma," he once said. Raja Rao's native language was Kanarese, but his post-graduate education was in France, and all his publications in book form were in English. Rao's father, H.V. Krishnaswamy, was an anglicised Indian; he died in 1940. Rao's mother, Gauramma, died in 1912. Like the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe, writing in English, Rao was concerned with the colonial language. In the foreword to *Kanthapura* (1938), published in London, he admitted the difficulties in using "a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own," and conveying "the various shades and omissions of certain thoughtmovement that looks

maltreated in an alien language." Rao was educated at Muslim schools. After graduating from Madrasa-e-Aliya (Hyderabad) as the only Brahmin student, he studied English at the Aligarh Muslim University and took a degree from the Nizam College (Hyderabad). The novel *Kanthapura* (1938) was an account of the impact of Gandhi's teaching on non-violent resistance against the British. The story is seen from the perspective of a small Mysore village in South India. Rao borrows the style and structure from Indian vernacular tales and folk-epic. The narrator is an old woman. She tells how the community obtains from daily life, with its millennia-old worship of the local deity, the strength to stand against the British Raj. In the character of the young Moorthy, who comes back from the city, Rao portrays an idealist and supporter of ahimsa and satyagraha, who wants to cross the traditional barriers of caste. The younger generation has city ways, they read city books, and they even call themselves Gandhi-men. Doré, as the old woman calls the "university graduate," has given up his "boots and hat and suit and had taken to dhoti and khadi, and it was said he had even given up his city habit of smoking." The work was highly praised by the English writer E.M. Forster, whose masterwork *A Passage to India* (1924) criticized British imperialism. However, Rao's India is not a certain geographical or historical entity, but more of a philosophical concept and a symbol of spiritual calling. Rao returned to the theme of Gandhism in the short story collection *The Cow of the Barricades* (1947). *The Serpent and the Rope* was written after a long silence during which Rao lived India, where he renewed a connection with his roots in the modern rendering of the Mahabharata legend of Satayavan and Savithri. The work also dramatized the relationships between Indian and Western culture. Ramaswamy, a young Brahmin studying in France, is married to a French college teacher, Madeleine, who sees her husband above all as a guru. As Ramaswamy struggles with commitments imposed on him by his Hindu family, his wife becomes a Buddhist in her spiritual quest and renounces worldly desires. She leaves her husband to find his own true self. The serpent in the title refers to the illusion and the rope to the reality. *Cat and Shakespeare* (1965) was a metaphysical comedy that answered philosophical questions posed in the earlier novels. In the book the Hindu notion of karma is symbolized by a cat. The hero discovers in his attempts to receive divine grace, that there is no dichotomy between himself and God. *Comrade Kirillov* (1976) was written early in Rao's career and was first published in French. It satirized

communism as an ideological misunderstanding of man's ultimate aims, and argued that all foreign creeds gradually become indianized. The Chessmaster and His Moves (1988) is peopled by characters from various cultures seeking their identities. Like Nabokov, Rao used the metaphor of the chess game to animate philosophical and psychological ideas. In the story Sivaram Sastri, an Indian mathematician in Paris, meets Proust, and recounts his love affairs and friendships. Rao has confessed: "I am no scholar. I am a creative writer. I love to play with ideas. It is like a chess game with horses, elephants, chamberlains and kings which might fight with one another. On the other hand, I met the man Rao, this frail little figure with brilliant blue eyes whose voluminous head could only be a sign of extraordinary intellectuality. A kind sweetness transpired from his figure.

To Rao the man I started to speak French, as Susan had told me this was the language that he had adored throughout his whole life. Unfortunately, his health conditions were not good when I visited him so I had to renounce to the idea of an interview with the writer, while helping in the daily care of Rao the man. Hence our five minutes walking exercise per day during which I had the chance to talk to him about his work and my research, in French. And what a pleasure to clearly see happiness shining through his big blue eyes when I addressed him in the language of the revolution.

#### **Raja Rao's and Themes In Indian Literature :-**

Raja Rao's first novel, *Kanthapura* published in 1938, mainly portrays the freedom Movement launched by Mahatma Gandhi in the 1920's to liberate India from the imperialistic hegemony of the British. India's struggle for independence with its powerful impact on Indian sensibility forms the nucleus of the novel. Some critics opine that the novel is predominantly political in inspiration and does not reveal the author's characteristic metaphysical preoccupations, except in a general way. Raja Rao, who developed an immense love for India after his first visit to France in his twenties, kept himself abreast with the political happenings that were shaping the destiny of India in the pre-independence period. When the Quit India movement was started by Gandhi in 1942, Raja Rao was associated with the underground activities of the young socialist leaders." In *Kanthapura* Mahatma Gandhi is portrayed as a symbol of divine power as well as a tangible reality. He is an incarnation of Krishna and, therefore, he will remove the suffering of the Indians. Gandhi would slay the serpent of the foreign rule as Krishna had killed the serpent Kaliya.

As a statesman, Gandhi preaches the spinning of yarn to his countrymen for if they spin, the money that goes to Britain will be retained in India to feed the hungry and clothe the naked.

Since the theme of the novel is "Gandhi and our village" and the village has a legendary significance, it is natural that the past blends with the present. The traditional belief of the villagers that the gods walk by lighted streets of *Kanthapura* during the month of *Kartik* suggests that the myth co-exists with the contemporary reality. As the gods pass by the potters' street and the weavers' street, lights are lit to see them pass by; This description affirms the peasants abiding faith in gods - a belief shared by the author with his characters. Raja Rao emphasizes the role of religion in the struggle for freedom. That is why religion and politics are often intermingled in the novel. The significance of independence is expressed in a religious metaphor. The political activity of the citizens of *Kanthapura* gathers strength from their religious faith. Thus *Kanthapura* remains primarily a novel about the freedom movement. It propounds the political beliefs of Mahatma Gandhi, and Gandhism forms the basis of the book. The novel expounds the Gandhian values of non-violence and abolition of Untouchability. The tremendous religious activity, the mythicising of Gandhi and Mother India and the spiritualization of the Freedom Movement within the framework of Indian cultural tradition suggest Raja Rao's Zeal for Indian philosophy. (7) A European naturalism is often present; a concern to posit India as an arena within which western readers can identify realities is inherent within much of this writing. Indian literature in English which is accessible to us in the West still has its roots in colonial literature and the tensions between East and West. The following are three examples of the progression of Post-Independence literature.

20 years after Independence, R.K. Narayan was still tackling issues of colonialism. *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967) takes us through the tensions integral to a family in which two generations belong to two different cultures. Ascetic Jagan belongs to an old India of family and history; his son to an India increasingly subject to the foregrounding of the commodity and a dramatic industrialization. Narayan explores the inevitable class of what is, in many ways both a colonial and a post-colonial encounter: Jagan, a follower of Gandhi and a veteran of the wars against British Imperialism, must attempt a negotiation of an ethos invasive to his own definitions of nationality; Mali, without this structure,

must reconcile an American capitalism with India's own sense of what constitutes a modern nation. This theme is continued in Ruth praver Jhabvala's „Heat and Dust“ (1975). Again two generations, this time British, must come to terms with an romanticised, Jhabvala attempts to 10 explore in a more sophisticated manner the social outlay of Anglo-Indian relations with the higher Muslim classes and Olivia's step-grand-daughter is confronted with an India that remains hidden in the works of kipling, forster or Narayan.

### **Kanthapura**

*Kanthapura* is really a novel about a village rather than about a single individual; nevertheless, Moorthy, the Brahman protagonist of the villagers' struggle against the government, is a prototypal Rao hero. Moorthy is the leader of a political uprising, but for him, as for Gandhi, whom he follows, politics provides a way of life, indistinguishable from a spiritual quest. In fact, for Moorthy, Action is the way to the Absolute. In Gandhi, he finds what is Right Action. Thus, for him, becoming a Gandhi man is a deep spiritual experience that is appropriately characterized by the narrator as a "conversion." At the culmination of this "conversion" is Sankaracharya's ecstatic chant, "Sivoham, Sivoham. I amSiva. I amSiva. Siva am I," meaning that Moorthy experiences blissful union with the Absolute. Indeed, the chant, which epitomizes the ancient Indian philosophical school of Advaita or unqualified nondualism, is found in all Rao's novels as a symbol of the spiritual goal of his protagonists. Moorthy, the man of action, thus practices Karma Yoga (the Path of Action), one of the ways of reaching the Absolute as enunciated in the Bhagavad Gita. In the novels after *Kanthapura*, Rao's protagonists, like Moorthy, continue to seek the Absolute, although their methods change.

### **The Serpent and the Rope**

Published twenty-two years after *Kanthapura*, *The Serpent and the Rope* is Rao's most ambitious work. If the former is modeled on an Upa Purana (minor Purana), the latter is a kind of Maha Purana (major Purana) or epic; geographically, historically, philosophically, and formally, its sweep is truly epical. The novel includes a variety of settings, ranging from Paris to Ramaswamy's ancestral home in a South Indian village, from European locales such as Aix, Montpalais, Pau, Montpellier, Provence, Cambridge, and London to Indian locales such as

Hyderabad, Delhi, Lucknow, Bombay, Bangalore, and Beneras. Rao delves into almost the whole of Indian history, from the invasion of the Aryans to the advent of British rule; European history, chiefly the Albigenian heresy; Chinese history—all of these come under discussion as the protagonist, Rama, a historian by training, expounds his theories in conversations with the leading characters. Philosophically, too, the novel's sweep is formidable: Rao discusses Hinduism, Buddhism, Catholicism, Islam, Daoism, Marxism, Darwinism, and Nazism. Hence, it is not surprising to find *The Serpent and the Rope* extremely diverse in form as well. Rao quotes from an array of languages, including Sanskrit, Hindi, French, Italian, Latin, and Provençal; only the Sanskrit quotations are translated. There are long interludes and stories, such as Grandmother Lakshamma's story of a princess who became a pumpkin and Ishwara Bhatta's "Story of Rama." In addition, the novel contains songs, myths, legends, and philosophical discussions in the manner of the Puranas. The main narrative, the gradual disintegration of Rama's marriage with his French wife, Madeleine, is thus only a single strand holding a voluminous and diverse book together.

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*The Serpent and the Rope* is an extremely challenging work thematically as well; Savithri's words in the novel sum it up well: It is "a sacred text, a cryptogram, with different meanings at different hierarchies of awareness." It may be approached on at least two different levels, the literal and the symbolic, although the two usually operate simultaneously. On the literal level of plot, the novel may appear puzzling and unsatisfying. The crux is: Why does the marriage of Rama and Madeleine disintegrate? Critics have attempted various answers, ranging from incompatibility between the Indian Rama and the French Madeleine to Rama's infidelity. Although such answers are plausible, they do not satisfy completely because these reasons are not perceived by the characters themselves. Rama and Madeleine are both aware of the growing rift between them, but they do not attempt to bridge it on a practical level. Instead, both watch the dissolution of the union with an almost fatalistic helplessness. Similarly, it is hard to understand why Rama seeks fulfillment in other women while averring his love for Madeleine at the same time, or why he never tells her of his affairs in spite of his claim that he keeps no secrets from her.

Rama, the narrator, does not answer such questions; he only chronicles the breakdown of the relationship, almost impersonally, as if there were little he could do to save it. He also does not feel himself responsible for having affairs with other women, one of which involves a ritual second marriage, while being married to Madeleine at the same time. What is lacking, then, is an adequate motivation for the actions of the characters, something that most readers are conditioned to expect from a novel. Perhaps a better approach, however, instead of asking of the novel something that it did not intend to give, is to consider what it does clearly provide; indeed, questions that appear unresolved on the literal level are resolved more satisfactorily on the symbolic level.

Rama, the Brahman hero, is a seeker of Truth both by birth and by vocation (a Brahman is one who seeks Brahma, or the Absolute). As an Indian scholar in France, Rama is seeking Truth in the form of the missing link in the puzzle of India's influence on the West. According to Rama, this missing link is the Albigensian heresy: He thinks that the Cathars were driven to heresy by the influence of Buddhism, which had left India. Rama's quest for Truth is also manifested in his search for the ideal woman, because in the Hindu tradition, the union of husband and wife is symbolic of the union of man and God. The marriage of Siva and Parvathi is one such paradigmatic union in which Siva, the Absolute, the abstract, the ascetic, is wedded to Parvathi, the human, the concrete, the possessor of the earth. Another such union is that between the mythical Savithri and her husband Satyavan (*Satya* means "Truth"); Savithri, through her devotion, restores her dead husband to life.

### The Cat and Shakespeare

*The Cat and Shakespeare*, described by Rao as "a metaphysical comedy," clearly shows a strong formal Upanishadic influence. The spiritual experiences of its narrator, Ramakrishna Pai, are reminiscent of the illuminative passages in the Chandogya Upanishad that describe the experience of the Infinite. The dialogues in the novel are also Upanishadic in their question-and-answer patterns; the best example is the conversation between Govindan Nair and Lakshmi in the brothel. Nair's metaphysical speculations—such as "Is there seeing first or the object first?"—seem to be modeled on philosophical queries in the Upanishads. The cat links the novel to the Indian beast fable, and Nair's comic roguery shows similarities to the rogue fable in the Panchatantra.

The major Western debt is to William Shakespeare, who is acknowledged in the title. Shakespeare is a symbol for the universal; according to Rao, Shakespeare's vision transcends duality and arrives at a unified view of the universe. There are numerous allusions to Shakespeare's play *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* (pr. c. 1600- 1601) in the novel, culminating in the "rat-trap episode" in which a cat is trapped in a large rat trap; this prompts Nair to deliver a parody of *Hamlet* that begins: "A kitten sans cat, that is the question."

*The Cat and Shakespeare* is Rao's sequel to *The Serpent and the Rope* in that it shows what happens after a seeker's veil of illusion has been removed by the guru. Its theme may be summed up in Hamlet's words to Horatio toward the end of the play: "There's a divinity that shapes our ends,/ Roughhew them how we will." A similar view of grace is embodied in the novel in what Nair, the man who is united to Truth, calls "the way of the Cat." The "way of the Cat" is simply the notion that just as the kitten is carried by the scruff of its neck by the mother cat, the human being is completely at the mercy of the divine; consequently, the only way to live is to surrender oneself totally to divine grace, as the helpless kitten surrenders itself to the mother cat. Nair lives this philosophy and is responsible for teaching it to his ignorant neighbor, the narrator Pai. Pai is like the innocent hunter in the story who unknowingly heaped leaves on Siva and was rewarded with a vision.

**Conclusion:** Rao clearly develops the tension between the troubles and disappointments of the horizontal and the call of the spiritual. Amid this exploration of the troubling world of the immediate is an ongoing discussion Siva conducts with a friend, Michel, a learned rabbi, conversations that represent Rao's complex anatomy of the horrific reality of the Jewish Holocaust and the implications of its legacy for those who seek the path to Absolute Truth. It is under the tutelage of Michel, a survivor of a Nazi concentration camp, that Siva first begins to perceive the inadequacies of his own suppositions about the Truth. With the gradual evolution appropriate to a pilgrim character setting out to achieve a most comprehensive transcendent state, Siva comes in turn to see the thinness of the sensual, specifically his own pursuit of beautiful, intelligent women and ultimately the deceptive faux absolutes of numbers themselves.

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