

Outstanding contribution of Raja Rao to the Literature and Culture of the South Asian Diaspora

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Abstract

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 nonviolent resistance against the British. Rao borrows the style and structure from Indian vernacular tales and folk-epics. He returned to the theme of Gandhism in the short story collection *The Cow of the Barricades* (1947). *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960) was written after a long silence, and 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. He had great respect for women, and once said, "Women is the Earth, air, ether, sound, women is the microcosm of the mind".

Key word: metaphysics, autobiographical, significant

Although Rao admitted to several Western influences, his work is best understood as a part of the Indian tradition. Rao regarded literature as *Sadhana*, or spiritual discipline; for him, writing was a consequence of his metaphysical life. His novels, hence, essentially represent a quest for the Absolute. From *Kanthapura* to *Comrade Kirillov*, Rao's protagonists grapple with the same concerns: What is Truth? How is one to find it? Their methods vary, as do their results, but they share the same preoccupation. The novels, thus, become chronicles of this archetypal search. Formally, all of his first four novels share certain features. Plot is deemphasized; the narrative is generally subjective even idiosyncratic and episodic. The progression of the narrative is not linear but circular; in the Puranic manner of storytelling, which Rao adapts to the form of the Western novel, there are digressions, stories within stories, songs, philosophical disquisitions, debates, and essays. Characters are also frequently symbolic figures; often, the motivations for their actions might seem puzzling or insufficient. Finally, because the narration is subjective, the language of the narrator also tends to be unique, reflecting the narrator's peculiarities his or her social, regional, and philosophical makeup.

Rao's first novel, *Kanthapura*, is the story of how a small, sleepy, South Indian village is caught in

the whirlpool of the Indian freedom struggle and comes to be completely destroyed. In the foreword, Rao himself indicates that the novel is a kind of *sthalapurana*, or legendary history, which every village in India seems to have. These local *sthalapuranas* are modeled on the ancient Indian Puranas—those compendia of story, fable, myth, religion, philosophy, and politics—among which are the *Upa Puranas*, which describe holy places and the legends associated with them. Hence, several features of *Kanthapura* are in keeping with the tradition of *sthalapuranas*. The detailed description of the village at the opening of the novel is written in the manner of a *sthalapurana*, wherein the divine origin or association of a place is established. The village is presided over by Goddess *Kenchamma*, the *Gramadeveta* (village deity), and the novel provides a legend explaining her presence there, recalling several similar legends found in the Puranas. Like the place-Gods of the Puranas, *Kenchamma* operates within her jurisdiction, where she is responsible for rains, harvests, and the well-being of the villagers. She cannot extend her protection to other villages or to outsiders. The village deity thus symbolizes local concerns such as famine, cholera, cattle diseases, and poor harvests, which may have little to do with the world outside the village. Like *Kenchamma*, the river *Himavathy* also has a special significance in the novel and recalls passages describing famous rivers

in the Puranas, such as the description of the river Narmada in Matsya Purana and the Agni Purana.

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.

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 epic. 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 Benaras. 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 Albigensian 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. *The Serpent and the Rope* is an extremely challenging work thematically as well; Savitri'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.

Gandhi's vision of life finds an outlet in Kanthapura. Raja Rao through Moorthy, who is called village Gandhi, spreads Gandhian ideals and thoughts among Indian population. Moorthy is a self sacrificing young man, who has no personal ambitions. He cares for poor villagers. The people of his village refer to Moorthy as „Gandhiman“. He tries to imitate Gandhi in every respect. Moorthy duplicates every action of Gandhi in his village that Gandhiji initiates in his struggle for independence. He reads the Bhagwad Gita, plies the spinning wheel,

and even mimics Gandhi's Dandi March. This action of Moorthy makes him out to be a parody of Gandhi. This paper presents Moorthy as the replica of Gandhi who follows Gandhian philosophy and appeals to the people of village to follow the same and actively participate in Gandhiji's freedom struggle.

References

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