

## INNOVATIVE EXPERIMENTATIONS IN THE NOVELS OF RAJA RAO

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### Abstract

*Raja Rao is, undoubtedly, one of the most widely acclaimed Indian-English novelists by virtue of his wide range of "thought content"-philosophical, intellectual, political and social, and his command over the fictional form, language and narrative technique. He is, incontestably, one of the major novelists writing in English language today. He is strikingly original by virtue of his themes and techniques. Deeply rooted in Indian Culture and tradition, he has made various successful experiments and innovations in the technique of the novel. Raja Rao finds myths for communicating his metaphysical concerns. As one gifted with encyclopaedic knowledge of Indian mythology, history and culture of Europe, he successfully draws material from these sources.*

**Keywords:** *Thought-content, Fictional, Narrative-technique, Metaphysical.*

### Discussion and Findings:

Raja Rao is ranked with Mulk Raj Anand and R. K. Narayan, the pioneers of Indian-English novel. Mulk Raj Anand and R. K. Narayana's works treat man primarily in relation to social reality only. Anand's *Untouchable*, *Coolie* and *Two Leaves and a Bud* depict the suffering of the poor and the oppressed. His novels are a protest against a soulless economic system. Narayana also presents social reality through his ironic mode of narration. Raja Rao has given an Indian philosophical tinge to all his creative activities. R. S. Iyengar rightly observed,

*Raja Rao hails from Mysore State, and the action of his novels strays far afield as far, indeed, as France, England and Moscow-his art is effectively tethered to his immutable ancient moorings with strong invisible string of his traditional Hindu Culture"<sup>1</sup>*

So, there is a variety in Raja Rao's novels. His five novels, viz. *Kanthapura* (1938), *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960), *The Cat and Shakespeare* (1965), *Comrade Kirillov* (1976) and *The Chessmaster and His Moves* (1978), are an outstanding testimony to this fact. Prof. M.K. Naik rightly remarks about the significant contribution of Raja Rao to the Indian novel in English:

*Raja Rao has also brought to the Indian Novel in English many elements in which it had been previously deficient: an epic breadth of vision, a metaphysical rigour and philosophical depth, a symbolic richness, lyrical fervour and essential Indianness of style.*<sup>2</sup>

A blend of metaphysical tradition and his susceptibility to western culture has made his novels philosophically complex. A close survey of his novels reveals the fact that Raja Rao has been conscious of evolving a new form for his novels from the very beginning of his literary career. He got remarkable success in his attempt by re-orienting the traditional Indian art of story telling as found in the Mahabharata, the Ramayana, the Puranas and the Panchtantra in the light of modern experiments in the art of novel writing in Europe. This suggests his keenness for innovations.

Raja Rao was born in 1909 in Mysore in an ancient Brahmin family. He was the eldest son. His childhood was spent in Hyderabad. For his higher education, he was sent to the Aligarh Muslim University. Here he met Eric Dickinson, a poet, painter and professor, about whom Rao says-

*"He impressed me very much. I have been made by him. My literary sensibilities were formed by him"*<sup>3</sup>

It was Dickinson who brought out the artist in Rao, teaching him to love France. After his graduation, Raja Rao left India to study at Montpellier, France, in 1929. Soon after his arrival, he married Camille Molly, a highly educated French woman who taught at a lycee in Manton. Apart supplying model for Madeleine, the heroine of Rao's major work. The Serpent and the Rope (1960) and the most profound and sensitive portrayal of a white woman by an Indian writer, she played a crucial role in her husband's development as an artist, insisting that he should explore the potential of his native language. He published a few pieces, articles and a long poem in Kannada (Jaya Karnataka, Dharwar, Mysore (1931-33) which did not evoke enthusiastic response, although his first novel in English, Kanthapura (1931), written almost immediately after or during the Kannada phase became a landmark in Indian writing in English for its poetic realism and elaborate experiment in style.

Raja Rao's quest for truth, urged him to delve deep into Indian philosophy and literature. His predilection for spirituality is quite evident in his own observation.

*"I went back to what was my ownself-the philosophical. The philosophical was with me always."*<sup>4</sup>

He recalls:

*I wanted to become a monk in France, thought France was the place where people only spoke the truth. So I went there. But It took me about a week to find out that it was not so; became Indian immediately; afterwards..... I wanted to become a Sanyasi.*<sup>5</sup>

All the five novels published by Raja Rao reveal his interest in Gandhism, Communism, Vedanta and Tantra. In his quest for spirituality, Raja Rao visited Aurobindo's Ashram in RamanaMahrishi at Tiruvannamale, Narayana at Kedgaon, Gandhi's Ashram at Sevagram. Finally he landed in Trivandrum and met his Guru sage Atmanandau from whose writings the epigraphs of the Serpent and the Rope and The Cat and Shakespeare have been taken. In his article 'Books which have influenced me' published in The Illustrated Weekly of India, Feb. 10, 1963, Raja Rao admits that the Ramayana and the Mahabharata which epitomize Indian tradition and wisdom, have influenced him most. Among the western writers and their influence, he mentions Charles Boudelaire Dostoevsky, Paul Valery, Romain Rolland and Andre Gide. For him :

*Literature is "Sadhna" (spiritual discipline)-not a profession but vocation.*<sup>6</sup>

In 1941 Raja Rao visited Sevagram to meet Gandhiji, and during the Quit India Movement in 1942 he was again with Gandhiji. During all these years of restlessness, he edited with Iqbal Singh Changing India (1939), a selection of writings by modern Indian intellectuals from Raja Rammohan Roy to Jawaharlal Nehru, then The Journal Tomorrow with Ahmed Ali. In 1947 at Trivandrum, he met Atmananda Guru and accepted him as his spiritual preceptor.

Raja Rao's dissolution of marriage was followed by a long silence over more than a full decade during which he devoted himself to an extensive study of philosophy. His major work The Serpent and the Rope (1960) received wide acclaim and the Sahitya Academy Award. He was invited to teach Indian philosophy at an American University and in 1965 married Katherine Jones, an American stage actress. The same year he published The Cat and Shakespeare: A Tale of Modern India, a short novel of unique artistic achievement which attracted sharp controversial reaction from critics and readers. His next novel Comrade Kirillov (1976) delving into the ambiguoossoul of an orthodox Brahmin communist evoked lukewarm reception. Rao's second marriage which gave him his only child also broke up leading to a third union with another American woman. His magnum opus The Chessmaster and His Moves (198) won the prestigious Neustalt Prize by the Oklahoma University. This novel repeats the theme of multicultural confrontation.

Another great quality of Raja Rao is his originality. He is so original that his artistic achievements both in the sphere of content and technique cannot be ignored., As a novelist he has made significant innovations. Raja Rao considers literature as 'Sadhana', a spiritual experience and the writer's creative act stems from his dedication to metaphysics. Raja Rao himself remarks:

*So the idea of literature as anything but a spiritual experience of 'Sadhana' a better word is outside my perspective.<sup>7</sup>*

Raja Rao endeavours to collate Indian Philosophical strands with the corresponding western ideas to experiment and innovate and finally to synthesize them. Though his debt to the west is considerable yet he is essentially Indian in thought and spirit. A close study of the techniques employed by Rao reveals how he has been able to communicate his ideas successfully and convincingly.

Raja Rao's first novel *Kanthapura* (1938) explores the dimension of the freedom struggle and his concern with the thought of non-violence, untouchability, truth and his fascination for Vedanta. His quest for truth inspired him to an intensive study of ancient Indian philosophy and literature. This novel captures the social and political milieu of India during the stirring days from 1919 to 1930. This has been delineated most artistically and realistically. Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, is perhaps the only novel that goes successfully to the depth of national uprising and the patriotic urge. An important aspect of Raja Rao's narrative technique is his successful and extensive use of myths, legends and symbols through which he not only communicates his vision of life but also imparts form and compactness to his novels.

Raja Rao's second novel *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960) established him as a great writer of the philosophically complex novel and a true artist. This novel is regarded as the greatest metaphysical novel ever written in the English language. The theme is overwhelmingly serious--an Indian's quest for truth in his encounter with one patois-temporal reality, growing into an acute crisis of identity because the hero, an orthodox Brahmin who claims to belong to a timeless ethos is found however, immersed in the modern western culture dominated by historicity. The theme of true marriage leading to self-knowledge is the core of this novel. Man's life is barren and futile if he does not make effort for the quest of the Absolute. This novel is a complex, massive, subtle and mature work.

Raja Rao's third novel *The Cat and Shakespeare*, published in 1965 had appeared under the title *The Cat* in *Chelsea Review*, New York, (No. 5, Summer 1959). "Shakespeare" is a

later addition to the title. The novel carries the theme of the metaphysical quest, a step forward in a new direction. It has real-life situations, metaphysics, irony, fact and fantasy, digressions, tragic and comic situations.

After the confusion and groping in Kanthapura, and the agony of crisis in *The Serpent and the Rope*, Rao's quest for form at last arrives at the destination in *The Cat and Shakespeare* where Rao comes nearest to synthesis to embody his metaphysics in a literary form without that pronounced conflict which upset the structural balance in Kanthapura and rent the fictional fabric of *The Serpent and the Rope*.

Rao's fourth novel, *Comrade Kirillov* forms a sequel to his earlier masterpieces viz., *The Serpent and the Rope* and *The Cat and Shakespeare* which deal with the quest for Indianness as their theme. *The Serpent and the Rope* explores on a personal level, and *Comrade Kirillov* on a political level.

Raja Rao's fifth novel, *The Chessmaster and His Moves* is regarded his magnum opus which was published in twelve years after the publication of *Comrade Kirillov*. The publication of this novel has won Raja Rao international fame as an outstanding novelist. It is a formidable collection of written matter with 708 pages of close print, accompanied by 25 pages of translations and glossary. It presents a vast mosaic of narration, reminiscences, confession, allusions, and above all, what he terms "Cogitation" generated by loosely associative principles revolving round a thematic center that is, the protagonist's quest for a lost age through encounters with men, women and himself.

Silverman, the central character of the novel, is absorbed in a quest for the Absolute, though this quest is marked by his work as a research scholar of pure Mathematics and his relationship with various women. Human beings have been likened to chess pieces in the game of chess whereas God is the chessmaster. The narrator who is a highly meditative type of person in an interior monologue says:

*The stars played games with us and behind the stars the chessmaster, rubbing his head in glee, he played for you, making you think he played for you, making you think he played for himself, who is he anyway ?<sup>8</sup>*

*Again the narrator gives the concept of the chessmaster: The chessmaster's moves, are so to say, subtle, manganimous, sure. His hand is on your shoulder, not to tell you where to move, but to show the nature of essential movement. And movement itself is the play. (p. 3)*

The title of this novel is symbolic, the chessmaster is the emblem of God (Brahma or Creator) and the game of chess symbolic of the world ("Sansar"). The moves made by the Chessmaster are symbolic of the conduct of the drama of life ("Lila"). The novel, is interspersed with references to Chessmaster and the game of Chess. It is a well-known fact that the moves in the game of Chess cannot be predicted. Likewise, the ways of the Chessmaster (God) are mysterious and inscrutable i.e., beyond the rational understanding of man. It is not possible to describe the Chessmaster. This vast earth is peopled by billions and billions of people but there is none who has ever seen him or known him.

Raja Rao makes a structural as well as digressional use of myth to communicate the central theme of the novels. He presents the concrete images of contemporaneity with clarity. These myths make the ontological meaning clear. Various writers have used myths to manipulate continuous parallel between antiquity and contemporaneity, and bring out similarities and contrast between the and the present. essence of the myth is ingrained in the sub-conscious of the race. Thus, if a writer gives expression to the in-built urges and beliefs of the people, he can successfully transform the myth as a part of contemporary life.

Raja Rao mythologizes the contemporary reality. In his novels, the thoughts and life-responses of his character always correspond to some archetypal pattern. He weaves the myths in his novels to express the truth that all human feelings, suffering and experiences are the same. Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* which follows the localized myth, has been called a "SthalaPurana". It is stuffed with a large number of episodes in the manner of the Mahabharata, the Ramayana and the Puranas. Goddess Kunchamma is the chief force behind the life and action of the people of *Kanthapura*.

*The Serpent and the Rope* is a "Mahapurana", having a wonderful sweep. Like the Puranas, the novel has the element of history and is saturated with stories, fables and legends. He deals with a vast panorama of human experience, the binary relationship of Radha-Krishna, Siva-Parvati, Satyavan-Savitri, Tistan-Iseult, forms the dominant motif in the relationship between Ramaswamy and Savior. Then there is the myth of Gautam Buddha, explaining the meaning of renunciation. There are some rituals like touching head with "kumkum", offering "arthi" and "rakhi".

In *The Cat and Shakespeare*, the myth of a hunter and 'bilva' tree is central to the theme. Then there are myths for identifying characters situations, like those of Sindbad-the sailor, Hanuman and Bhima. There are other myths meant only for digressional purposes. Comrade Kirillov has mythical references like that of Kanthaka, Siddhartha's horse, carrying

him to his self realization. Then there are the myths of Siva-Parvati, Vishnu-Lakshmi, Rama and Sita, Krishna-Radha to highlight characters and situations. The Chessmaster and His Moves is encyclopaedic in range. As in the earlier novels, Raja Rao employs myths and symbols to communicate his theme clearly and effectively. The myth of Siva and Kali, Rama, Krishna and Mira and various symbols, have been used by the author.

Raja Rao and Anita Desai have used myths and symbols to convey their profound view of life, and have made them a part of the central framework of their novels. Raja Rao finds myths for communicating his metaphysical concerns. As one gifted with encyclopaedic knowledge of Indian mythology, history and culture of Europe, he successfully draws material from these sources. Thus, myths and symbols emerge as a significant mode of technique to convey his view of human reality.

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