

Representation of India as an Ideology in Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope*

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Abstract. Raja Rao is considered as one of the eminent novelists and an accomplished post-colonial writers in English. His one of the famous novels *The Serpent and the Rope* depicts the idea of 'India' and his indigenous approach to local and foreign issues makes the novel distinct. Raja Rao has his own style of writing and it challenges the reader to discern the intended message and it is undoubtedly aesthetically appealing. His passion to uncover the truth is quite apparent in all his writings, which makes him one of the outstanding Indo-Anglian writers. *The Serpent and the Rope* is considered as one of the outstanding works of Raja Rao and it puts him among the distinguished post-colonial authors. The story of the novel revolves around the interminable cultural conflicts between the east and the west. Another social issue of inter-caste and inter-religion marriages has also been brought to light in the novel, which is the main theme of the novel. *The Serpent and the Rope* is also considered as the autobiographical work of Raja Rao and is regarded as his Mahabharata. In this novel, Raja Rao has sketched the true picture of India as an ideology for the world.

Keywords : Mahabharata; philosophy; psychological action; mysticism; vedanta.

Since Raja Rao was outlining an exceptional subject of pan-Indian philosophy and ideology, he adopted an entirely new method which was distinct in its own way and was quite different from the western style. For example, the plot has been made perplexing and protracted, demonstrating that man's quest for truth, is an arduous adventure. This can be seen in the remark made by Trollope 'stand straight on the ground'. Raja Rao's way of dealing with the issues of myths, symbolism, legends, etc. is unique.

Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope* is one of his brilliant literary works and is admired for its perfect plot, description of events, and characters in a philosophical way. This novel is regarded as a metaphysical fiction and the main character in the novel Ramaswamy's quest for the truth in the Vedanta, which is one of the six schools of Hindu philosophy, is quite apparent. Raja Rao has incorporated all the essential and integral elements of a novel like a plot, story, philosophy, criticism, social issues, arguments, the portrayal of characters, etc., which are indispensable for the effective composition of a literary text like a novel. However, the way Raja Rao treats these essential components give a fresh appearance to the whole novel. Although the novel has an original plot line, the portrayal of the characters is quite strong in its nature which outshines the story. The novel received positive criticism for giving more emphasis on characters than

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the story. Hudson has rightly said that the interest, aroused by a story merely as a story may be very keen at the time of reading, but it is in itself a comparatively childish and transitory interest, while that aroused by characterization is deep and lasting.

As Raja Rao himself says, "The Indian novel can only be epic in form and metaphysical in nature. It can only be a story within a story to show all stories are parables".(Joshi, 167) According to Dr. Krishna Sastry, "While *Kanthapura* is a novel of action, *The Serpent and the Rope* is essentially one recollection".(167) K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar states, "If *Kanthapura* is Raja Rao's *Ramayana*, then *The Serpent and the Rope* is his *Mahabharata*. (Iyengar, 397)

In addition, Meenakshi Mukherjee says, "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".(68) Raja Rao successfully combines the idea of reality and illusion and presents it through the symbols of 'The Serpent' and 'The Rope' respectively in Indian tradition Ramaswamy, the main character in the novel, expresses his feelings as, "The world is either unreal or real - the Serpent or the Rope. There is no in-between in poetry, is sainthood-one-the Guru-brings you the lantern: the road is seen, the long, white road". (Rao, 27)

Therefore, the plot line of the novel is quite palpable and revolves around illusion and reality. Raja Rao symbolises the main characters of the novel Ramaswamy and Madeleine, which gives an authentic touch to them. *The Serpent and the Rope* is purely a philosophical novel. The metaphysical treatment and realization of the prevailing conflict between western and eastern cultures are presented in a vivid and much philosophical manner. The issue of marriage between a Hindu and a French is dealt with in sociological perspectives. The theme of the novel revolves around this issue and the novel is the author's endeavour to analyse and investigate it. The novel is considered as the author's autobiography.

As the novel is written in an autobiographical manner, the author has tried to adopt an honest approach in presenting the truth. The author uses 'I' for himself as a narrator in the novel. Moreover, the narrator emphasises the philosophy of life and the meaning be discerned from life events. However, the author seems less interested in the construction and structure of the plot line and more in describing the philosophy of humans. The novel's dramatic action of the story has nicely embedded its psychological and physical aspects. Whilst the physical aspect has a temporary and superficial effect, the psychological aspect affects the mind, soul, and heart of the protagonist.

The plot line and its construction seem very weak in nature. The incomplex story progresses in a simple narrative. However, the interrelation of the characters is woven in a complex form. The hurdles in the marriage between Ramaswamy,

Representation of India as an Ideology in Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope* who came from India, and Madeleine, who was French are the main element of the plot. Their marriage in an amalgam of two entirely different cultures and philosophies and the novel is an estimation of the issues which underlie it.

Rama, the protagonist in the novel, is an intellectual personality having a profound understanding of Eastern and Western philosophies, cultures and mental attitude. He holds a master's degree in History and obtains a government scholarship to do his research at the University of Sorbonne, France. There he met Madeleine, who was a college teacher, who was "like the palace of Amber seen in moonlight".(47) Madeleine is an intellectual. She is abrasive in the manner and does not mingle with others. However, her avid interest in Indian philosophy brought her closer to Rama. Later they married and had a child named Krishna. The child dies in his early childhood. This terrible tragedy changed Madeleine entirely. Madeleine and Rama, both have an interest in religion and philosophy, and they used to discuss them quite often.

Later they settled at home in Haridwar. After settling at home, Rama goes back to France to finish his research. Madeleine gets interested in studying Buddhism and takes lessons from Lezo. He starts liking her and offers her for fornication. However, his offer was strongly rebuked and castigated. On her way back to Cambridge from India, Savitri meets them there.

Rama also meets Savitri during his visit to Cambridge for his research work. They start spending time together and come very close to each other. Finally, he fell in love with her. Rama comes to London after finishing his research work and starts staying there. Savitri also stays in London and frequently visits Rama's apartment. One day, Savitri comes with kumkum and coconut to perform aarti of Rama and touches his feet to get his blessings. As Savitri is completely in love with Rama, she is ready to run away and marry him. However, Rama's true religious and spiritual spirit stops him to run away and marry her. He suggests Savitri to marry the person chosen by her parents. Finally, Savitri marries Pratap Singh, who was destined for her. It was expected from her that she would be a good wife to Pratap.

Rama remains in touch with Saroj, little mother, and Sukumari and regularly receives letters from them to know about the affairs at home. Rama comes back to India to arrange and oversee Saroj's marriage. He is also expected to give away the bride. Although Madeleine is pregnant and is supposed to deliver the baby soon, he goes to organize the wedding in India. Rama falls sick and is unable to go to France for the delivery. The doctor advised him to stay in Bangalore because of the warm weather. On the one hand, due to some complication, Madeleine undergoes a cesarean operation. During the delivery, her second child also dies, but her life is saved somehow. This gives an immense shock to Madeleine and changes their whole life.

Later, Rama comes back to France and starts living with Madeleine. She already left her big house and moved to a smaller one and abandoned all the luxuries of life. Her sincere efforts and practice make her a devout Buddhist. She starts following the eightfold path of the god. She frequently keeps fasts, does meditation, and offer prayers for most of her time. Rama starts feeling uncomfortable with the one-day fast ritual and wants to separate from her.

Rama again falls sick when he goes to London. One of his lungs stops working and needs to be taken out. Savitri often visits him as she lives in London. Lakshmi, whom he met at Cambridge, also visits him regularly. Later, Rama goes back to Paris to finish his thesis work. There he visits Madeleine and comes to know that she has shifted somewhere else. Madeleine has completely devoted herself to God and has become a sanyasini. However, she continues her job and does her official work as usual. This is when they meet for the last time. Madeleine requests to initiate the divorce proceedings and they formally divorce each other.

Rama feels depressed and unhappy. He struggles to work out his own salvation. He writes in his diary, "Not a God, but a Guru, is what I need".(58) 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". (63)

Rama and Madeleine both belong to different cultures and philosophical schools and they both know it well. Their interpretation of each other's actions in terms of their own culture and philosophy leads them to form generalizations about each other's character, culture, and country. After separation, Rama comes back to India full of sorrow and grief. According to Meenakshi Mukherjee :

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. (Mukherjee, 67)

Raja Rao beautifully moves the physical action of the novel between France, India, and England. The way he has portrayed different characters in the novel and the way he has infused the cultural, philosophical, and local traits into them makes the novel very vivid and intense in its nature. All the characters in the novel are from different countries and cultures. The characters of Rama and Madeleine are the strongest ones in the novel. The character of Savitri also seems quite strong.

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The psychological aspect of the characterization and the psychological action in the novel are equally important. As per Raja Rao's vision, the character of Rama seems to him as true reality and all the characters, including Madeleine and Savitry, seem illusion to him.

The novel highlights the deep-rooted social problems of East and West. Can Rama, an Indian and Madeline, a French spend their whole life together? Can their marriage be successful? The problems are everywhere and are symbolised with the serpent. However, they might not be real problems. However, the actual problem lies in the fact that there is no harmony within a person – between him and his own self. Most of the problems can be dealt with and solved through the true spirit.

The rope in the novel has symbolised the ultimate truth and the Guru is awaited to come and show the right path and bring forth the reality. Rama himself defines the novel as "the sad and uneven chronicle of a life, My life".(Rao, 71) Rama finds himself in a dilemma after his marriage to choose between 'the Serpent' which represents unreality and the beguiling world, and 'the Rope' which represents reality, which is unseen to the serpent's eye. In the end, Rama divorces Madeleine, comes back to India, and settles at Travancore in search of the Guru.

In conclusion, it can be said that the novel is an account of the encounters between Indian traditions and western cultures. Philosophy and metaphysics are essential parts of the novel and form the heart of it. These two elements are quite visible in the cultural encounters shown in the novel.

In this novel, Raja Rao tries to delineate the relationship between a man and his mystic beliefs in comparison with contemporary perception. The novel has multiple versions in terms of different cultures of India, France, and England shown in the novel. *The Serpent and the Rope* is Raja Rao's unique experiment – to use Vedanta philosophy and Indian mysticism as a subject for his novel. As K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar says, "*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". (405)

Certainly, *The Serpent and the Rope* is considered as Raja Rao's *Mahabharata*. It represents Raja Rao's own vision of India and considers it to be the only reality in the world. India is signified as an ideology rather than a country or a geographical location.

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