



Indian Ethos, Mores and Morals, in the Novel Serpent and the Rope of Raja Rao

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Abstract-

The present paper proposes to reflect the Indian puranic recreation of story telling; which alludes to Shri Sankaracharya's non dualistic philosophy and the analogies between serpent and the rope; embodying respectively the illusion and the reality. I am of the opinion that illusion is created by darkness or some other factor by which one often mistakes a rope for a serpent. Thus our knowledge of external reality is mistaken and illusive. The world exists and we see it as an illusion – a serpent created by our own mind and we are no longer deluded by the appearance – the snake appearance vanishes into the reality of the rope. In the words of Shri Atmananda Guru, when water is realized, weaves and sea vanish and what appeared as two is thus realized as one.

This topic is not to chronicle a confrontation, a conflict, but to point to the common spiritual ground upon which all people and their cultures rest; and to de emphasise, indeed to reject, the illusion of diversity, the novel by its own thematic imperatives, must avoid conventional plotting, where two opposing forces are placed in a struggle that intensifies to a climax and then drops off to a denouncement in which one or the other forces prevails. Factually the less plot of this sort, the better, the novel which celebrates a spiritual reality in relation to which all temporal or material things are but shadows, illusions, maya. The conflict in the novel is implied in the title – the mistaking a rope (reality) for a serpent (illusion).

Key Words: Non dualistic, Illusion, Thematic imperatives.

Introduction :

The story is narrated by Rama Swamy as a student in Europe in 1946. After a gap of three years he marries Madeline, whom he had met at the university of Caen. It starts with Rama's visit to India at the age of twenty two, when his father falls sick. This outlines the breakdown of this marriage – Rama's meeting with Savitri, the unveiling fiancée of his friend Pratap, highlights what he misses in Madeleine. The death of both of her children proves too much for Madeleine. Rama realizes that the true woman for him is Savitri, but she belongs to Pratap. Rama's second visit to India for the marriage of his sister Saroj increases the rift between Madeleine and Rama, Madeleine lastly being exhausted turns to Buddhism, withdrawing from the world; she mistakenly thinks that all Rama needs to be happy is an Indian wife nearer his age; and so completes the divorce proceedings when he returns to France. These experiences breed a sense of *Vairagya* in Rama; and he realizes that only a Guru can show him the way out of this *Samsara*. At the end of the novel he is at peace, when he finds a guru. Thus one discerns the manifold themes in this novel like love; marriage and death in a cyclic manner. The repeated use of allusions and the emotional human relationship lend the rhythm to the narrative pattern of this novel.

Raja Rao's fiction, though meager in output and clear in its contents and vision, has yet a built-in complexity. The complexity arises partly from multiple influences, which have moulded his sensibility and are embodied in his fictional work. They range from a simple vernacular mode of experience to the complex philosophical tradition as manifested in the Vedas and the *Upanishads* and the various Indian classics. To this accumulation of erudition and experience, Raja Rao brings with him an eclectic and inclusive temper to experiment and innovate, to improvise and adapt. Astonishingly enough, he is at home not only in the Indian tradition of Rabindranath Tagore and Sri Aurobindo, but also in the contemporary European tradition of Heidegger, Anere Gide and Malraux, from whom, he is reported to have said, he got his main artistic sustenance.

Theoretical Context-

The novel is a highly complex one mainly because it reveals three-fold aspects of reality. The quest for reality poses the problem as to where reality begins and the illusion ends. The problem is not only of Ramaswamy alone but of every westerner who wants to know India and Indian thought as also of every seeker of truth who aspires to attain the supreme knowledge. Therefore, in any study of *The Serpent and the Rope*, a probe into the confusion of reality and the illusion — the rope and the serpent at these three levels becomes imperative. But before we analyse these aspects at length, the appraisal of Ramaswamy's character becomes necessary because it is through his illuminating ideas, that the reality of things is received.

To those who find a contradiction between Ramaswamy's metaphysical idealism and his worldly actions, his character appears unconvincing at the level of psychological credibility. But the fact is that in Ramaswamy there is a combination of the ordinary man and the extraordinary mind. As an ordinary man he is involved in sensual urges and emotional experiences, but his extraordinary mind enables him to maintain an attitude of philosophic idealism and psychological detachment. In fact, to be aware of the truth and yet remain

under the bondage of the illusion is the dilemma of Ramaswamy's life as it is of every seeker of truth at the initial stage. It adds roundness to his character and also forms the starting point of the spiritual quest. *The Serpent and the Rope* presents the confrontation between the knowledge of the real and the attractions for the unreal more than it depicts any direct quest for truth in the traditional sense of the term. Yet, Ramaswamy is shown free from any inner conflict and mental tension simply because he is equipped with a philosophical knowledge of truth as well as a dispassionate temperament. He has an attitude of intellectual detachment which is born of his metaphysical understanding and an inborn temperamental impersonality of outlook. This impersonality manifests itself in his freedom from prejudices and reactions as well as his introspective tendencies. Ramaswamy has been introspective from the very beginning and remains undisturbed by Lakshmi's abuses at his unexpected departure, Savitri's marriage with Pratap and Madeleine's decision to divorce him. The reason is that he is a philosophical type who, quite in the line of spiritual initiates of the Indian tradition is endowed with a mind inherently disinterested in worldly affairs. Rightly says Catherine of Ramaswamy that "He is not a man-man, He is an Indian" He is more realistically than symbolically, a true representative of the Indian seeker after truth at a level of spiritual development at which reality is understood by him even though he may not have realized it fully within himself. Ramaswamy's involvement in family affairs, his ambition of getting a doctorate and settling down as a professor in some university, his emotional concern for his sister's marriage, his sensual and romantic affair with Lakshmi, his attraction towards Savitri and his deep and passionate love for Madeleine, - all place him in the line of average men and women with domestic and social responsibilities and personal emotions and passions. It is merely his unique mind that separates him from the common run of men and makes-him according to his own assessment "one person in ten million."

Ramaswamy's introspective detachment is a result of a substantial action which is continuously going on in his mind. And this is how he feels attracted to this internal action: "For the going inward is the true birth, He indeed [sic] the Brahmin who turns the crest inward; even if you are a Pandit great as a Jaggannath Bhatta or learned in logic as Kapilacharya, the true life, the true Brahmin hood commences when you recognize yourself in your eternity. At some moment you must stop life and look into it."

So complete is Rama's dedication to intellect as the only trustworthy tool by means of which he hopes eventually to arrive at truth that he even scoffs at any other approach which involves action on the one hand and feeling and emotion on the other. Ramaswamy, quite like his creator, discovers invisible meanings in visible things. His pilgrimage to holy places with his widowed step-mother lends him a greater maturity of mind and a deeper understanding of things. Experiences of a larger life lead to an encounter between thoughts and feelings, the two constituents of human experience, which finally terminate into an awareness of their futility and a realization of more lasting values. In his research as well as in life he aims at tracing the roots of history and unity of cultures. Savitri, while giving vent to the cause of her surrender to Ramaswamy, gives true picture of Ramaswamy's unique mind. According to her, Ramaswamy has always such interesting things to say about everything, and that he relates things apparently so unrelated. For him, history is a vast canvas, for the discovery of value, of metaphysical value.

Literary Framework-

“The aesthetic love of an intellectual like Savitri is bound to be, moral; it flows like a soft flowing river in summers, well within its banks that stand on both sides like guards to protect its identity and freedom.” Savitri can cherish her love for Ramaswamy at the mental plane even when she marries Pratap Singh in adherence to the conventional morality of an established social order. Ramaswamy knows that for Savitri marriage would be to wed anyone, for whatever happened would just happen, and the wedding too would be a happening. Seen from another angle, we find in Savitri's character a combination of western modernism and the traditional Indianness, even as her marriage with Pratap presents a synthesis of the two ideals. What is suggested is that love should by no means be confused with marriage, for though it might sound paradoxical at the purely social and moral planes of reality, it is quite normal for one like Savitri who is made of such stuff as also for Ramaswamy who, by dint of his spiritual development, remains detached from this kind of love and himself persuades Savitri to marry Pratap and rejoice in his happiness. The problem of loving one and marrying another was always on Savitri's mind and she wanted to hear it proven that Pratap could love her, but that she might not love him and yet marry him. To this Ramaswamy gave his metaphysical solution saying that in such case love can never be a movement, a feeling, an act, because all that acts can only be of the body, or the mind, or the ego. Only the selfish can love. Ramaswamy's own conviction about her was that nobody could marry Savitri, nobody could marry a soul, so why not marry anyone? Replying to her hitting question as to what one should do if one is tied to another even as "the plane is tied to the radar" Ramaswamy said, "The plane must accept the direction of the radar, that there be no accident." In the acceptance of the law *Dharma* is the joy of life, and it is joy that one can give to oneself as to another. Ramaswamy closes the chapter of his persuasion with Savitri with the words that she should "Rejoice, rejoice in the rejoicing of other, and know that you include the world as joy in the depth of your sleep." In the joy and freedom of Savitri was Ramaswamy also free. It is Ramaswamy's metaphysical awareness that saves him from bondage and attachment. He knew that he loved Savitri but could not possess her and, therefore, he remained his own self-pure and free: "I could not possess Savitri — I became I.”

Madeleine's love for Ramaswamy is an example of complete love, different from the purely sensual and the intellectual kind. Her love is like the sea which never gets a diminution in its depth, and absorbs everything, even love when she becomes conscious of its true nature. Waves are silenced and smoothed in the end, and only the sea remains calm and serene.” Madeleine's love which becomes with physical attraction and intellectual appreciation and develops into total surrender, finally becomes perfectly spiritual. In divorcing Ramaswamy she weds her own true self which assimilates all otherness. Love of real India and the love of truth meet at one point in Madeleine's love for Ramaswamy because in marrying him she could "know and identify herself with a great people." The deep love that binds them together needs no specific illustration; in fact, the whole novel abounds with evidences, particularly in the "Pages from my diary". About Ramaswamy's relationship with Madeleine Georges accepts that he had never seen a European couple act and behave with such innocence. The

secret of this happiness is their fullest taking and giving of sexual, emotional and aesthetic love to each other Prof. M.K. Naik's view that "conscious of the growing rift, Rama and Madeleine desperately seek and find temporary fulfillment in sex" is misleading. There is no depiction of growing rift in the novel, nor could sex be excluded from the experience of complete love. Ramaswamy's marriage with Madeleine is not doomed on account of Savitri in a symbolic ritual marriage. There are many arguments from Western and Indian critics as to why the marriage tie between Rama and Madeleine comes to an end. Prof. M.K. Naik finds two main reasons for breaking off the marriage bond of this couple: Madeleine's awareness of "her husband's infidelity" and "an unbridgeable gulf between two cultural ethos." Prof. Narsingh Srivastava refutes the charge of "an unbridgeable gulf" and finds this break off a result of "the triumph of one over the other." Raja Rao himself brings some arguments forth to make this point very clear. He observes "The answer (for an Indian) is simple. As the Gita so justly and nobly proclaims, "the dharma of another, however, good, is not to be followed as against one's own dharma."¹⁸ To be true to one's own background is to be true to all backgrounds. However the truth lies in the moral and psychic levels of the character. Both Rama and Madeleine are rooted deeply in their inhibitive and inborn impulses and hence even the slightest difference may lead to a fatal repercussion for human relationship; both are the seekers after the truth, but with their different modes of life. Madeleine, however, may be described as spiritually selfish, as she though having risen above self, strives to seek her salvation independently and not through identification with Rama as a true Indian wife is supposed to do. To accept one as husband or wife is a pious act of acceptance with discrimination — an act of discriminating one from the rest of the humanity. Once the state of non-duality of the self is attained, discriminations and distinctions vanish; and what remains is merely the all embracing and indivisible self. Ramaswamy says, "Love cannot be added to love; to know love is to love love and to love love is just to be." Madeleine has reached a state of consciousness in which she alone remains, neither a wife nor a beloved but only she herself. It is in this way India is wedded to Europe, even though Ramaswamy is divorced from Madeleine. What is paradox at one level is a truth at the other, and therefore, the two levels should not be muddling together in the interpretation of Madeleine's love and marriage with Ramaswamy.

Conclusion:

The rope(*reality*) is misconstrued as the serpent(*unreality*) whereas it is only the rope in actuality. This is due to the darkness of ignorance(*avidya*-the cloud of unknowing) and when the light (*vidya*) is brought, the darkness is dispelled and the object is perceived in its true nature. The wrong attribution is due to "Adhyasa" which is an illogical transference of the subject (*Visayin*) to the object (*Visaya*). This subject-object relationship corresponds to that which exists between the transcendental reality and the empirical existence.

The marital confusions in the novel may be seen as stemming from a radical ignorance of these relationships. If extended, the symbolical sense of describing the world as the serpent implies that he serpent, which appears where there is only a rope, is 'neither existent nor nonexistent.' It is only a psychological transference which defies any logical conclusion. It can imply that even though 'the physical world is not ultimately real, there is yet a certain order of reality.' Appearances 'are appearances in the sense that they depend

for their being on some higher reality. The serpent, for instance, points of the existence of the rope, but the disappearance to the rope does not necessarily mean the disappearance of the serpent.

This metaphysical postulate can also be explained in terms of allegory. The world, the serpent, is the manifestation of Brahman; the individual self, that is the rope, is only the empirical reality. Hence in 'negating the world, one is only denying its existence apart from Brahman.' The conclusion is that the world is not a part or phase of Brahman, but an appearance of it. It further implies that the world is an actual transformation of *maya*, or it is a change as it were, of Brahman; and so the Brahman is the cause of the universe just as the rope is the cause of the serpent. There would be no serpent without rope, no world without '*maya*' or the spirit. In fact, 'the spirit is the only reality, all else being illusion or its transformations.' The truth is the metaphysical discrimination consistent with Rama's own thought — provoking *obiter dicta*. For, Rama's spiritual odyssey told in the best 'Upanishadic' tradition, allegorises the predicament of the modern man enmeshed in the existential stalemate. Rama is the archetypal image of the universal man struggling to come out of the flux of life. Neither time nor space has anything to do with his spiritual freedom.

In Raja Rao's novel, too, the motif of life as a pilgrimage is used with a particular emphasis in the life-story of Rama, who, too is a pilgrim sojourning into the endless night of darkness. Rama's spiritual journey terminates in uncertainty and ambiguity, and he like Hesse's Siddhartha seeks the aid of the intercessor, the spiritual guide. The spiritual experiences of Rama thus correspond to those of Siddhartha's, though placed as they were in different time, place and situation.

However, the structure of *The Serpent and the Rope* also underscores the philosophy in the book. While the structure *Kanthapura* is radial, that of *The Serpent and the Rope* is antithetical. Two different worlds have been brought together up to a certain distance, contrasted, but not kept perennially apart. At one place Raja Rao writes in the novel that the job is to build bridges — not of stone or of girders, for that would prove the permanence of the objective, but like the rope bridges in the Himalayas, you build temporary suspensions over green and gurgling.

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