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Use of Myth, Allegory & Classical Allusion in Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope*

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The very title of novel *The Serpent of the Rope* alludes to Sri Sankaracharya's non-dualistic philosophy and the analogies of the serpent and the rope, embodying respectively the illusion and the reality are derived from his famous Bhashya of the Brahma Sutras of Baddarayan in his he has elaborated his philosophy. The epigraph to the novel is significant:

“Waves are nothing but water.

So is the sea.”¹

Quoted from *Atma Darshan – At the ultimate* by Sri Atmanand Guru gives credence to Advaita truth propounded by Sri Sankaracharya. The passage from the novel quoted below

“The world is either unreal or real – the serpent or the rope. There is no in-between-the two and all that's in-between is poetry, is sainthood.... You see the serpent and in fear you feel you are it, the serpent, the saint. Once the Guru brings you the lantern: the road is seen, the long while road, going with the statutory stars. It's only the rope: He shows it to you. And you touch your eyes and know there never was a serpent, the actual, the real has no name. The rope is no rope to itself,”²

The Serpent and the Rope (1960) was written after a long silence of almost two decades after the publication of his first novel *Kanthapura*(1938) during which Raja Rao returned to India in a quest for a spiritual guru (teacher).

M.K. Naik rightly calls this novel a kind of modern Indian *Mahapurana* in miniature. Different subjects, motifs and techniques are blended ala *Puranic* style in this novel, albeit naturally on a much reduced scale. It can be said that if *Kanthapura* is a *Purana* meant for a simple unsophisticated gathering. *The Serpent and the Rope* is a *Mahapurana* meant for the intellectual high bra. The alleged ‘philosophical garrulousness’ of the novel has been variously commented upon by several critics. For example, David Me Cutchion makes the following remark about *The Serpent and the Rope*:

“Is this a novel at all? Is it not rather a book of wisdom, a compendium of interminable commentary and philosophizing, where even the conversations are dialogues in pursuit of truth a book of discourse enquiry rather than narration? All the central concerns of the western novel are absent – social relatives, psychological motivation, characterization, judgement, a passion for the concrete...”³

The nature and roles of man and woman are also examined in the novel, with conclusions perhaps not wholly palatable to a western mind. Rama's trip to India at the time of his father's death, bringing him into contact with Indian women for the first time in years, deepens his dissatisfaction with his own experience of marriage and intensifies his questioning of its meaning. Finally, Rama-Madeleine marriage breaks up throwing both into a deep sense of detachment: Madeleine embraces Buddhism in a sort of *Buddham shranam gachami*, *Sangham shranam gachami*, and Rama setting out on a spiritual voyage, sort of *vairagya* or worldly renunciation, in search of a *guru* (spiritual teacher) which he finally finds and comes to peace and equanimity of mind. The novel deals with the themes of love, death, marriage in a cyclical manner; the many repeated allusions lend rhythm to the narrative in which the scene goes on dynamically shifting back and forth, in time and space, with frequent use of the flashback technique.

As Raja Rao himself proclaims about the novel:

“The Serpent and the Rope is to be taken like all my writings as an attempt at a Pauranic recreation of Indian story telling: that is to say, the story as a story to conveyed through a thin thread to which are attached (or which passes through) many other stories, fables and philosophical disquisitions, Like a *mala*”.⁴

The occurrence of numerous myths, legends and stories interspersed in the whole narrative imparts complexity to the structure of the novel, as for example, the story of Satyavrata, the sage who has to face the dilemma of giving up the deer which had sought refuge or breaking his vow of silence (*The Serpent and the Rope*, p. 354) or the parable about Radha and Durvasa (*The Serpent and the Rope*, pp. 385-387). Such and many other folk-tales and myths proffer a parallel or a foil to the life of the principal character, the novel is a highly complex one mainly because of its themes operating simultaneously at three levels of reality viz., the reality of India, the reality of love in its various forms, and the metaphysical reality. The guest poses the problems as to where reality begins and 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 ardently desires to achieve the supreme knowledge or Brahmgyan, Therefore, in any study of the novel, a probe into the confusion of reality and the illusion – the rope and the serpent at these three levels becomes necessary. Taking up the significance of real India, Ramaswamy had taken the

“Albigensiam hereby as a subject for research for he (his father) though India should be made more real to the European.” (*The Serpent and the Rope*, p. 17)

Least interested in the social and economic aspects of India life in the present time, Raja Rao rather keenly evokes the image of the spiritual India in reality:

“Where the past and the present are for ever knot into one whole experience”. (*The Serpent and the Rope*, p. 19)

And where

“Going down the Ganges who could not imagine the compassionate one himself coming down the footpath, by the Sarajn, to wash the mendicant bowl?” (*The Serpent and the Rope*, p. 86)

This fable suggests the three planes of reality that Sankara postulates – the *pratibhasika*, the *vyavaharika* the *paramarthika*, depending on the point of view. The many allusions in the novel have another function to perform C.D. Narasimhaiah has compared the novel with T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* for its “unusual intellectual density.”⁵

Ropethat critics like Meenakshi Mukherjee asks, rhetorically though, of Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope* and *The Cat and Shakespeare*:

“Are these two books to be regarded as fiction or as treatises of philosophical enquiry?”⁶

The Serpent and the Rope is a vehicle for examining Raja Rao's complex spiritual and philosophical ideas, while it is superficially the story of a failed marriage, the marriage itself the main themes of the novel. First of all, the marriage of Ramaswamy and Madeleine represents a clash of Eastern and Western cultural values. For Rama, India is as much a state of mind as a country, which is one reason that Madeleine can never completely assimilate: She can never “become” Indian, Because of the spiritual nature of Rama's search for fulfilment, religion-Catholic and Buddhist – becomes a primary symbol of this cultural rift. Madeleine a former Catholic, studies Buddhism

Siva and Sakti are two aspects of the *Paramatman*, and both are equally real, the Absolute and the creative; the world is accepted as *Sakti*, not as an unconscious principle dependent on the Masculine Absolute, but as Consciousness veiling itself with its own power or *Mayasakti*. “In the Sakti method, it is not denial of the world, but by and through the world, when known as the Mother, that liberation is attained. World enjoyment is made the means and instrument of liberation.”⁸

I.A. Richard comments on the many allusions in Eliot's poem that could be applied to Rao's novel: “These things come in, not that the reader may be ingenious or admire the writer's erudition but for the sake of the emotional aura which they bring and the attitudes they incite.”⁹

Again,

“The ideas are of all kinds, abstract and concrete, general and particular, and, like the musician's phrase, they are arranged, not that they may tell us something, but that their effects in us may combine into a coherent whole of feeling and attitude and produce a peculiar liberation of the will. They are there to be responded to, not to be pondered or worked out.”¹⁰

Raja Rao employs allusions for their evocative power, and this moulds the style of the novel.

Thus, one may conclude by saying that Raja Rao's mastery of the fictional art climaxes here in this novel, as he very artistically manage to steer clear of the oversimplified and over-enthusiastic approach of a mechanical assimilation of the Eastern and the Western cultures. One may not also commit the mistake of taking Ramaswamy as an embodiment of Raja Rao, the creator of the finely delineated character, autobiographical or semi-autobiographical as the novel may seem; his predicament just brooks of a variation on the familiar East-West motif unfolded in myriad aspects and profound depths. Hailed by critics as a ‘truly Indian novel’ in its spirit and acknowledged as one of the best classics in modern English fiction, the central theme of the novel is marriage as a means to attain *moksha* or salvation. Through the use of a rich repertoire of myths, the novelist re-establishes and demonstrates the meaning of love and marriage as an ‘impersonal principle’ in the Indian context because the mythical truth embodied in them, through the ages, sustained the Indian society for which the institution of marriage, in this sense, is a corner-stone. And the significance of the title of the novel lies in the fact that the novel portrays two ways of apprehending reality: one, to see the object as one perceives it – the former is Reality and the latter is Illusion. Without involving a value – judgement, the novel merely presents the confrontation of these two modes, but very subtly avoids coming to

a definite preference of the one over the other. Herein lies the superb artistic authenticity of the novel which catapulted Raja Rao to the position of one of greatest novelists of Indian English literature.

Notes & References

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3. Mc Cutchion, David, “*The Novel as Sastra*” (a review of *The Serpent and the Rope*) in *Writers Workshop Miscellany*, No. 8, pp. 91-99.
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5. Richards, I.A., *Principles of Literary Criticism*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963, p. 290.
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7. Narasimhaiah, C.D., *Raja Rao*, New Delhi, Arnold-Heinemann, p. 110.
8. Qtd. By Naik, M.K., *Raja Rao, Blackie and Son*, Madras, 1972, p. 84.
9. Quoted, Richard chase, *Quest for Myth* (1949), p. 6.
10. Among recent instances are Archibald MacLeish’s play, *J.B.* (1958) and John Updike’s novel, *The Centaur* (1963).