

Appreciating Raja Rao's Nationalist Imagination: A Review of Raja Rao : *The Master and His Moves*

SULE E. EGYA

In this collection of eighteen scholarly essays, we encounter multifarious exegeses of the works of foremost Indian novelist Raja Rao; and more importantly the novelist and his arresting nationalism. The somewhat theatrical title of the book anticipates the bustling philosophy that is the man Rao as ingrained in the distinctness of his fiction. From the preface of the book to the last chapter, the consistent rhythm is that Rao is an Indian writer worth celebrating because of his romanticisation of the Indian culture and genetic wisdom that naturally positions him as an iconoclast in his perception of the Western world. Interestingly, not only the Western readers and critics that find his works too unconventionally experimental, but also his Westernised Indian brothers. In her contribution titled "Raja Rao's Fiction: Cultural Reassertions in the Context of Globalisation," D. Maya hits this point when she, juxtaposing Rao's fiction with other Western immigrant writers' works, draws a distinction that "[Rao's] novels assume special significance against the horde of immigrant writing that adapts itself to the discourse of the Western writers, merging identities, and diluting cultural specificities in the process of winning acceptance." (22)

As is conspicuous in almost all the essays, Rao, who paradoxically sees himself as "a man of Silence," was in constant dialogue with his readers/critics until his death. He would not cavort to the criticism that his fiction is devoid of Western parameters, a criticism that demands him to de-Indianise his fiction. But he insists on writing the characteristically Indian fiction. In this dialogue, Rao has the superior argument because no matter how we decontextualise a work of literature; no matter what paradox or metaphor we reduce a work of literature to, the writer belongs to a society and his proper knowledge of his roots empowers him with a more vigorous voice to communicate to the outer world. At least every writer from a once colonised nation has this duty to perform. At the height of a writer's liberation – a kind of nirvana that the writer must attain – he should

come to know that no literature is superior to another and art is sacred for all people. This is what Nigerian writers such as Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka have successfully pursued: while Achebe speaks through the proverb of his ancestry, the palm oil with which yam is eaten, Soyinka brings the Yoruba idiom to a global fore and dazzles the world with its rich speech wisdom. Seen from this perspective, *Raja Rao: The Master and His Moves* becomes a vital documentation of not only the works of Rao, his verbose speech wisdom, but also of the ubiquitous philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi, the tenets of Hinduism, the spirit of nationalism and the recognition of the common people in India.

In their contribution titled "Women, Dalit and Freedom Struggle? A Study of Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*", C. Kodhndaraman and Anandan Latha incite an interesting issue, in their perception of the feministic theme in the struggles of the enlightened women created by Rao, that tends to reproblematised the inquest of the postcolonial thinker. Hooking their argument on the humanism and feminism that run through Rao's major novel: "The deep structure of the novel brings to the surface how women and dalits enjoyed (sic) certain privilege because of the British rule which is otherwise impossible" (81), they go further to conclude that :

the British rule in India gave dalits and women an opportunity to display their anger and power which in a subtle way foretells that they are capable of fighting any type of oppression. They can both be admired and feared: admired for their role in the freedom struggle and feared for the potential they represent which can subvert and transform the status quo. (81)

What these writers are driving at here is that Rao has portrayed the good side of colonialism because he has an all-encompassing thematic quest as a writer. In his fiction, especially in the much-discussed *Kanthapura*, he touches almost all aspects of life in India. And in doing so, Rao does not blindly romanticise the Indian society and sees just anything in it as good. As a writer he is a social critic. While he performs the duty of showing to the world that India and Sanskrit as a mother language have their own glories, he also looks at his own society with a censorious eye. Most of the scholars make references to Rao's continued dissemination

of Gandhi's non-violence philosophy which he so much admires that he consequently apotheosises Gandhi. In her contribution, Letizia Alterno dwells on the silence that is a paradoxical handled with which Rao links the physical world to the metaphysical one. Rao's characters use silence to ascend the purity of spirituality. The mysticism surrounding the cat in Rao's *The Cat and Shakespeare*, also explored by Alterno, is another peculiarity of the moves of master Rao. The summation is that Rao as a writer creates a microcosm of fiction composited by different auras, miasmas and intricacies of life. Beyond these, man, according to Rao, attains peace when he ascends the extraterrestrial.

Now to the theoretical aspect of this book. Christopher Rollason's essay, "David McCutcheon, Pioneer Critic of Raja Rao", tries to summarise and problematise the contribution of the late critic, Mr. McCutcheon, an English man, to the understanding of Rao's fiction. The English critic appears to be the first person to canonise Rao's writing and point out its deviant style. While Rollason points out that "McCutcheon, like Romania's Mircea Eliade before him in the pre-Independence years, was surely among the first modern-day Europeans to accept India on its own terms, certainly not uncritically but at the same time without a priori (post)colonial prejudices," (16) he fails to point out that Mr. McCutcheon's criticism of Rao's fiction is bereft of theoretical grounding. Let it be mentioned here that the literatures of Asia and Africa have had sweeping, ungrounded statements made by pioneer critics who in some cases were third-rate scholars from where they descended. I do not, by saying this, undermine the contribution of Mr. McCutcheon's contribution to Indian literature.

But on this issue, R. Arunachalam, in his "Criticism on Raja Rao's Fiction," takes critics to task, challenging them to take a more theoretically grounded and text-based study of Rao's works. He decries the emphasis on the extra-textual issues surrounding Rao's fiction at the expense of the intrinsic worth of the fiction. Explicating narratology, Arunachalam differentiates between "the narrated" and "the narrating," the former belonging to the social experience of an author and his book and the latter being "the artistic individualised working" of the book. Arunachalam's shortcoming, however, is that instead of making available other exegetical theories such as deconstructionism, formalism, structuralism and the other isms, he only projects and approves of narratology probably because it is his

chosen route. Yet his piece I dare say is a must read for every serious scholar of literature.

A reader of this book will easily notice that out of the eighteen essays herein, nine are on only one novel: *Kanthapura*. Rao's corpus is vast, with eight works of fiction. What rationale is there for the paucity or unavailability of essays on other works except, I surmise, intellectual laziness? Also a critical reader will see that most of the works, like those of the earlier critics of Rao's fiction, are on non-formal and non-structural influences. In other words there is an unnecessary imbalance in this book. An achieved balance would have made it a greater work.

The entire book is a priceless resource for not only scholars of Rao but also scholars and students of Indian literature and world literature at large. In fact, such book on Rao's fiction, considering the master's moves to position India as a distinct nationality, a duty that no politician can perform, ought to have been out since. Since Dr. Sarangi has set the pace, it is expected that more such assemblage of scholarly works should follow so that such writers with nationalist imagination are duly recognised. Indeed in his diverse characters, Rao has spoken; and in their diverse approaches the scholars have interpreted. Students and even ordinary readers of Rao's fiction can now move from the novels and the short stories into this critical book and will find a lot of benefits.