

Research Papers



**THE SERPENT AND THE ROPE – RAJA RAO'S
NOVELTY OF CRAFTSMANSHIP**

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Abstract

Raja Rao's The Serpent and the Rope is an Indian English novel acclaimed as an Indian classic. Critics have termed this novel as the spiritual autobiography of the novelist because the events and incidents depicted in the life of the protagonist, Ramaswamy, point not only to his (the author's) own life-story but also to his metaphysical awakening through the absolutely monistic Vedanta philosophy. The novel has all the ingredients -- story, plot, social criticism, philosophy of life, characterization, dialogue – that go into the composition of a novel. The present study is a modest attempt to analyze the novelty in the craftsmanship that the author has adopted in dealing with each of the characteristics mentioned above.

Because he was delineating an uncommon theme – Indian metaphysical thought – he had to invent and use a craftsmanship that was unlike the western mode of novel writing. For instance, the plot has been made complex and lengthy indicating that man's search for truth is a long drawn out journey. The characterization is vivid as the characters in Trollope's phrase “stand straight on the ground.” Other factors like symbolism, narration, myths and legends etc also find a place in the novel with a freshness of approach.

KEYWORDS:

The Serpent and the Rope; Raja Rao; Ramaswamy; philosophy of life; miniature epic; myths and legends; digressions; symbolism; Advaita philosophy; Indian atmosphere; aphorisms; craftsmanship.

The Serpent and the Rope by the renowned Indian English novelist, Raja Rao, is a metaphysical prose fiction wherein we find the protagonist, Ramaswamy, searching for eternal truth in the tradition of Indian philosophy of the Vedanta. The novel is acclaimed as one of the best in Indian English fiction not only for its plot and philosophy but also for its artistic perfection. Though this spiritual autobiography is epical in form, it has an architectural symmetry which is

closely related to its thematic development. One cannot deny the fact that it has all the known ingredients that go into the composition of a novel – story, plot, social criticism, philosophy of life, characterization and dialogue. It must be acknowledged, however, that their treatment differs from the traditional pattern owing to the newness of the subject-matter probed in the novel. It has a story, though according to certain critics, the story is not as important as characterization in a novel. As Hudson puts it: 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.

About the Plot:

The plot of The Serpent and the Rope is based on a simple drama of life and is narrated with simplicity and directness. As a result, mystifying suspenses and tension-filled intrigues do not find a place in this metaphysical novel which according to K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar “is more than a miniature epic.” The plot is not even a series of interesting and exciting dramatic incidents hung together. The hero is the indispensable part of the plot. All that happens in the novel is directly connected with the protagonist whether he is at

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Benares, Allahabad, Mysore, France, London or Cambridge. In other words, the protagonist is the key-character around whom every event revolves.

For the sake of simplicity, the novel can be easily divided into six interrelated movements in accordance with Rama's relationship with different women characters in the novel, Little Mother, Madeleine, Catherine, Savithri, Saroja and the transformed Madeleine. These characters occupy a prominent place each in their respective realms of action, although there are other women characters that play minor roles. Each realm contributes to a new meaning to Rama's life and helps in the development of his metaphysical outlook. The climax is reached in Savithri's realm which is almost in the middle of the novel. It is here that Rama realizes his self as exemplified by his comment: One cannot possess the World, one can become it: I could not possess Savithri –I became I” (p.171).^{*} Thus the writer speaks out the philosophy he believes in through the character of Rama.

Some critics have pointed out that structurally the novel lacks unity of form. The discussion above, however, clearly shows that the novel does have a form and a well-planned structure. Nevertheless, in an interview with Shiva Niranjana, Raja Rao admits: I don't like to write like a foreign novelist. I am very much an Indian and the Indian form is the puranic form...Hence it is wrong to study my novels in the light of the Western conception of well-made novel.”² The development of the plot is made mainly by the thought processes of the chief character, and not by the action of the story. The dramatic actions are more or less sex-oriented. The novelist, in brief, does not seem to be interested in the plot construction or technique of the plot in the Western sense of the terms. His interest lies in depicting a philosophy of life or the philosophy of human beings. P.P. Mehta says: In this novel, the story element is almost threadbare, or to put it the other way, Raja Rao has packed pages and pages of his reflections in this story to such an extent that the whole becomes mystifyingly dull.³ Srinivasa Iyengar too makes similar observation when he says: Rama is dry as dust as well as poet, he is terribly introspective and can also be detached when necessary.... No wonder his way of telling his story makes demands on the reader, though there are not wanting rewards as well.⁴ Raja Rao's answer is that he has not written for every reader. He says: In fact the Purana is not written for every reader. I don't want to compare myself with

Kalidasa. But you know, Kalidasa is difficult to read. Kalidasa wrote for a very few readers. The aim of an Indian writer is to write for that level of 'Purnadhikara'. I don't want that popularity. I have no desire to be a popular writer.⁵ The critics forget that the writer is dealing with an uncommon subject, a metaphysical thought, which a common man finds difficult to grasp. One must, therefore, judge the novel on the basis of yardsticks which are out of the ordinary. To put it simply, in order to understand this metaphysical novel, one must rise to the level of metaphysics which is not everyone's cup of tea. Although the writer has explained in detail his idea of Indian mysticism and philosophy through the mouth of the protagonist, it is only a discerning reader with some inkling of Indian metaphysics who will be able to grasp the import of the novel and judge it with justification. Otherwise one would mistake a 'rope' for a 'serpent'.

The Movement of Action

As mentioned already, the real action in the novel takes place not on the physical level but in the mind and psyche of the hero. What distinguishes the action in this novel from that of others is that the action does not result from the motives of the characters or from their conflicts. It is in the thought processes and metaphysical reflections of the protagonist that we have to look for the movement of the action.

Destiny of man

The destinies of characters in the novel run parallel to each other's. For instance, Little Mother, Saroja, Madeleine, Savithri, Catherine and Lakshmi are presented as working out their own destinies separately each in her own way without coming into the way of any other. However, each of them touches Rama's life at a tangent without creating deep impression or crises. Each of these contacts gives rise to a new meaning to Rama's sensibility and understanding but the process of tangible life remains unchanged. The author highlights that he is not so much interested in the destiny of his characters as in the destiny of man as exhibited through the thought processes of Ramaswamy. Nevertheless, we also observe here Raja Rao's uncommon skill in portraying living characters.

Universal view

In *The Serpent and the Rope*, the author is not merely concerned with depicting characters in

relation to their private affairs but he takes a universal view and expounds them in relation to the broader and more impersonal aspects like public affairs, philosophy, art, culture and religion. In short he steers clear of narrow parochial outlooks and sets out to explore the possibilities of a view which is as wide as the universe. In *Kanthapura* he had shown a rare quality in delineating the surface personality of his characters. He could describe vividly their manner, charm, tricks of speech and peculiarities of behaviour. The characters leap out of their local contexts, become symbolic, and echo in the corridors of time.⁶ In *The Serpent and the Rope*, however, he digs deep into the psychological being that lies behind speech and manner. His discerning mind penetrates beneath the superficial impressions, and brings out the psychic qualities that give rise to a person's particular conduct and individuality. The fact that he depicts characters from different races and nationalities speaks of his universal approach. If Little Mother stands for the Indian women of the older generation, Saroja represents those of the younger generation with her anger and revolt against age-old customs like the arranged marriage. Savithri, on the other hand, stands for the emancipation women. The author has breathed life by a few strokes of his pen, even into minor characters like Savithri's Cambridge friends, Lakshmi, Sharifa, Swanston, a Marxist, Stephen, a logical positivist and his girl friend, the beautiful Julieta.⁷ The other characters who stand upright on the ground are Henri, the taxi driver, Madame Petensi, the patronne of *Hôtel du Ro Jean*, Madame Chimaye who hates the man carrying on business in birds near her restaurant more than she hates the Americans, Sukumari, the younger sister of Rama, who marries a communist, and uncle Seetharama who helps out Rama during the marriage of Saroja. In spite of the representative nature of his characters, they become alive and natural in the artistic hands of the author who tries to create a balance between the real and the unreal, between the physical and the metaphysical, between the divine and the human.

Dialogue

Raja Rao's knack of framing natural dialogues is an evidence of his technical skill. He varies their tone and style to suit his characters and situations. While discussing philosophy and religion with Georges, Lezo, Madeleine and Savithri, the language turns formal, intellectual and witty. On the other hand, the conversation becomes chatty

and colloquial when he is in the midst of family relations. The author proves himself to be a master craftsman in the use of formal and informal language. At both the levels, there is a natural rhythm because of which the dialogue does not turn out to be artificial or jerky. The narrative in *The Serpent and the Rope*, however, is predominantly geared to carry the burden of immense erudition and remarkable insight. Raja Rao has, thus, adopted a style which is superbly suited to the mode of a metaphysical novel. According to Hudson: Good dialogue greatly brightens a narrative and its judicious and timely use is to be regarded as evidence of a writer's technical skill.⁸ Raja Rao has succeeded in this admirably.

Indian atmosphere

The nature and texture of Indian life is created by the author's apt employment of mythological parables, philosophical symbols and metaphysical ideas. Similarly, appropriate utilization of geographical settings and historical facts, and allusions to the Indian social, cultural and religious life contribute to the depiction of Indian atmosphere in the novel. The metaphysical ideas are revealed through Ramaswamy's narratives which throw open the meanings and values of his philosophical outlook. His dialogues with other sagacious and enlightened characters like Madeleine and Savithri also demonstrate his highly intellectual mental framework and ideas.

Rama describes the narrative of *The Serpent and the Rope* as the sad and uneven chronicle (p.231) of his life. This has led some critics to consider the novel as essentially a spiritual autobiography⁹ without taking into consideration its fictional character. It is an autobiography in the sense that all books are autobiographies (p.166). While being interviewed by Annie Brierre, Raja Rao pointed out: Everything one writes is autobiographical. But it is a metaphysical novel.¹⁰ Because of its distinctive character, *The Serpent and the Rope* does not call for judgement by the strict norms of traditional Western novel.

Aphorisms

Although Raja Rao's depiction of action, places or things is full of aphoristic statements pregnant with philosophical maxims, the purely metaphysical narratives acquire a rare distinction in the world of fiction. Obviously, the narrative in '*The Serpent and the Rope*' produces the

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impression that we move not in space but in time and often from time to timeless meanings.¹¹

The aphoristic statements are put to ample use in *The Serpent and the Rope* and they constitute an important, inseparable and unavoidable element in Raja Rao's narrative technique in this novel. In his other novels such statements are few and far between. They are applied merely to vivify the dialogue. A few examples of his aphoristic statements used in *The Serpent and the Rope* are: 'Affection is just a spot in the geography of the mind' (p. 18), 'Holiness is happiness. Happiness is holiness' (P. 22), 'The unreal is possible because the real is' (p.22), 'One is wonderful when one is not one but the I' (p. 79), 'Is-ness is the truth' (p. 130), 'To forget time is to live in recognition' (p. 134), 'Truth is the fact of existence' (p. 170.). Statements like these and hundreds of others lead the reader to deep thinking apart from throwing light on the erudite ideas which have a direct bearing on the theme of the novel.

Symbolism

Another characteristic of Raja Rao's technique is his capitalization of adequate and suitable symbols. The characters delineated in *The Serpent and the Rope* have a symbolic significance in various ways. Rama, the hero, represents the silent protagonist of Brahmanism. The characters of Julietta and Stephen symbolize the new voices challenging the traditional ways of thinking and behaving. They rebel against the prevailing values and ideals and embark on new modes of thinking and living. These characters come out as men and women of flesh and blood beating and alive at the skilful and artistic hands of Raja Rao. They are thus not presented as mere puppets. Georges and Lezo represent the various genres of wisdom. Little Mother is a symbol of the silent suffering of man's inner psyche. Saroja as a symbol tends to crystallize the absurdity of the ritual-ridden marriage in an Indian society.

There are other symbols which are equally noteworthy. The new brooms, a basin, a towel, boot-polish and a summer hat which Madeleine has brought, speak of materialism. The fact that the marriage of Rama and Savithri does not take place has symbolic overtones. The symbolism brought to light here is the unity of the individual self (Rama) with the purity and power of devotion (Savithri) or in other words, there is the fusion of the Masculine Principle with the Feminine.

The title of the novel, *The Serpent and the Rope* itself is significantly symbolical. The serpent

and the rope stand for appearance and reality in the tradition of Indian thought. Rama has explained the meaning of the title in a key-passage in the novel:

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, saint-hood. You might go on saying all the time, 'No, no it's the rope' and stand in the serpent. And looking at the rope from the serpent is to see paradise, saints, avatars, gods, heroes, universes. For wheresoever you go, you see only with the serpent's eyes. Whether you call it duality or modified duality, you invent a belvedere to heaven, you look at the rope from the posture of the serpent, you feel you are the serpent – you are – the rope is. But in true fact, with whatever eyes you see there is no serpent there never was a serpent.... One – the Guru – brings you the lantern.... 'It's only the rope.' He shows it to you. (p. 335). Raja Rao has taken the analogy of the rope from the non-dualistic philosophy of Shankara-charya, the well-known Indian philosopher of the 8th century who propagated the Advaita philosophy.

Myths and Legends

That brings us to another dimension to this technique, namely, his exploration of various myths and legends in the novel. The myths and legends have been employed in order not only to bring out the real nature of characters and their situations but also to substantiate and exemplify the abstract ideas of the protagonist, Ramaswamy. For instance, Madeleine describes her yearning for Rama, who had left for India, by using the analogy of Penelope and Ulysses. While Ramaswamy likens her to a devotee who would want her Shiva or Krishna to be big and grand, that she might make a grand abhisheka with milk and honey and holy Ganges water (pp. 80-81). Although Savithri, at times, refers to Rama as her Shiva (p. 210) and at times, Satyavan and Tristan (p. 360), the relationship between them is depicted by repeatedly alluding to Radha-Krishna legend. Thus mythical allusions which are resorted to by Raja Rao to unravel and support Rama's philosophical thoughts, are integral parts of the theme of the novel.

Digressions

Raja Rao has been criticized for indulging in unnecessary digression in his novel. P.P. Mehta, for instance, remarks that though he quite often inserts irrelevant digressions, the digressions do

not jar our sensibilities because they are pleasantly charming.¹² Mehta seems to be grudgingly sympathetic towards Raja Rao. However, the digressions which he and certain other critics refer to, only appear to be so as a result of superficial reading. When one's reading of the novel penetrates beneath superficialities and appearances, one will be enlightened and enriched by the depth of thought, and one can observe the seemingly unrelated digressions forming a unity as a whole. Raja Rao himself has silenced these critics by making the following clear and emphatic statement in his interview with Shiva Niranjana. He says that the digressions are not deviations, they are interpretations. They seem to be deviating from the main plot only to the superficial reader. In fact, they do not.¹³ K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar too finds no digressions in the novel. He says:

Scraps from his diary mingle with narrative, dialogue (which sometimes reads like catechism), description and reportage; he zigzags disconcertingly in space and time, he mixes memory and reverie, he jostles recitation and speculation, he scatters with a seeming recklessness, aphorisms, witticisms, cynicisms, scholarly jottings and gems of recapitulated song. Yet, in spite of all this riot of apparent irrelevance and irrepressible loquacity, everything – give, that is, the character, with the 'elements' so tantalizingly mixed in him – seems to fit perfectly. ¹⁴ The digressions in the novel are meant to drive home to the reader the deeper significance of the truth that the author is trying to expound. Once we understand the truth, the digressions fall in place

Conclusion

Thus, Raja Rao has demonstrated in *The Serpent and the Rope*, that he is a master craftsman in the art of fiction writing. The techniques he has used serve not only to enhance the development of his philosophy of life, style, characterization and plot but also to throw light on the unusual subject he has chosen. The metaphysical discussions in the novel lead to a universal view of the destiny of man from the standpoint of Indian philosophy. Besides, the dialogue, aphorisms, symbolism, myths and legends, the digressions and the allusions also enrich the general fabric of the novel. The novelty of his craftsmanship is a superb contribution to Indian literature in general as well as to Indian English literature in particular.

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