**THE USE OF MYTH IN RAJA RAO’S**

**“THE SERPENT AND THE ROPE”**

*Mrs. Ratna Shiela Mani. K.*

Of all Indian writers of fiction in English it is Raja Rao whose work is, both in content and form, perhaps the most ‘Indian’, though he has not hesitated to draw freely upon the west. He has brought to Indian fiction in English many elements in which it has previously been largely deficient: an epic breadth of vision, a metaphysical rigour and depth of thought, a symbolic richness, a lyrical fervour and an essential “Indianness” of style.

Raja Rao is virtually the first major Indian writer in English to realize that the *“Indianness”* of his writing should make for not only a typically Indian content but a characteristically Indian form as well. As he himself says: *“The Indian novel can only be epic in form and metaphysical in nature. It can only have story within story to show all stories are only parables”.*1 As a representative of the modern Indian ethos which shows a curious blend of ancient Indian tradition and modern Western attitudes, Raja Rao often makes a unique blend of techniques of modern western fiction and age-old methods of literary expression.

The influence of the Puranictradition in Raja Rao has been not only decisive and strong but amazingly sustained. Raja Rao’s own words give support to this view: “**The Serpent and the Rope**”2 is to be taken like all my writing as an attempt at a Puranic recreation of Indian story-telling: that is to say, the story, as a story, is conveyed through a thin thread to which are attached (or which passes through) many other stories, fables and philosophical disquisitions, like a mala (garland)”. Thus, M. K. Naik calls it a modern Indian Mahapurana in miniature and both the matter and manner, of the Puranic tradition is a great moral or spiritual conflict involving both gods and men and **The Serpent and the Rope** sets forth an emotional conflict arising out of the marriage of two minds which are too true to themselves to co-exist in harmony.3 It can be said that if **Kanthapura** is a Purana meant for an unsophisticated gathering, **The Serpent and the Rope** is a Mahapurana meant for a gathering of more sophisticated and intellectually mature listeners. Here, for the first time, we come into contact with a sensitive intellectual whose narration of the *“sad chronicle of his life”* includes echoes from an extensive field of scholarship stretching from myths and fables to abstruse philosophical dissertations. The reader, familiar with Eliot and Joyce, will tend to conclude that this is the first Indo-Anglian literary work which may be termed truly modern in its complex artistry which resides in its suggestive­ness and implications.

According to Joseph Campbell, myth is a system of metaphysics: it is a *“revelation of transcendental mysteries”,* it is *“symbolic of the spiritual norm for Man the Microcosm”*4. Most of the criticism on **The Serpent and the Rope** had been devoted to the metaphysical and philosophical aspects of the novel. It is true that the novel offers rich material for the pursuit of such a study. Campbell has further said that myth is the picture language of metaphysics. But this study limits itself to studying how myth is used as a technique in the novel, and discusses metaphysics only where the mythical form refers to it. Almost the first thing one notices is the repeated and numerous references to myths and legends, Indian as well as Western. The extensive use of myths and legends, is not meant for digression as might appear at a superficial glance, but forms an integral part of the author’s technique. Raja Rao himself has said that the discursive passages on myth and metaphysics are interpretations and not deviations. 5

**The Serpent and the Rope** is largely autobiographical fiction, a dialectical novel which draws many elements from epic, philosophical discourse and folk-narrative, and blends them all into a plastic flowing structure. The narrator is more intelligent and his point of view more sophisticated than in **Kanthapura**. Hence, the mythology here is more esoteric and emblematical. Legends and myths and folk wisdom are so well blended as to reveal a basic unity and organic conception of the novel. The hero Ramaswamy’s sensibility absorbs astonishingly the myths and legends of different civilizations and integrates the past and the present into the essential oneness of history. Thus, he sees no difference between the Ganges and the Seine; George VI and the Indian Bharata of the **Ramayana**, ‘for both of them believed in the impersonality of monarchy’: *“The king can do no wrong”* justlike Bharata’s establishing a duality in himself by apologizing for being a king because after an apology he is no more a king but his agent only (p. 204). He also equates Gandhi with Bhishma of the **Mahabharata** while explaining martyrdom. Likewise, he universalises *‘matrishakti’* by making the ‘purush’ manifest through *'prakriti'* and by showing Queen Elizabeth II as the feminine principle that makes the universe move. *“To Mitra she is Varuna, to Indra she is Agni, to Rama she is Sita, to Krishna she is Radha”.* (pp. 357-365)

The novel centres around Rama who is born a Brahmin, and believes in being a Brahmin. As *“the Brahmin is never contemporary”* (p.125), one of the main tasks of the author is to take the novel out of contemporaneity, free it from the bond of immediate time. In trying to achieve this Raja Rao has to face a serious problem by the very choice of his literary genre that is the novel which is always deeply rooted in temporal and spatial reality. It is by this constant and copious use of myths, legends and fables that he attempts to impart timelesness to the characters and their interrelations. The hero is described by his wife Madeleine as *“either a thousand years old or three”* (p.140) and is *“the wisdom of ages”* (p.233). Immediate present means very little to him, his roots being deeply embedded in timelessness, as he himself says, *“I belong to the period of Mahabharatha”* (p.351).

The novel is at once the history of an intellectual’s quest for self-­knowledge, which takes the form of memory and autobiography, and an affirmation in philosophic terms of universal truths to which the hero is guided by tradition and experience. What happens is a consequence of Rama’s decision *‘to stop life and look into it’.* Rama’s vital relationships - those with India, Madeleine and Savithri - are controlled and determined by his Brahmin identity and his conscious quest for self-knowledge. India is one cause of the parting of ways between Rama and Madeleine for, each tried to adopt the other’s world-view, too divergent to permit a fruitful sharing of life. But there is also the basic metaphysical difference in their conception of self and Reality. Here we have the famous analogy of the serpent and the rope (pp. 335-336):

*“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 only with the serpent’s eyes ……… 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; the road is seen ……‘It’s only the rope.’ He shows it to you”.*

It states the advaita position of Sankara which is the ultimate truth which denies the world while affirming the underlying reality of Brahma, and emphasises the role of the Guru in removing ignorance (ajnana) of the nature of reality. These passages are, obviously, central to the navel whose main philosophical concern is the nature of Reality but, occuring as they do at the most crucial phase of the relationship between Rama and Madeleine, they are integral also to the navel as history. Rama’s denial of the world as real, poses a serious threat to Madeleine’s new found identity as a Buddhist. She realises that she can neither be an Ananda or a Beatrice to Rama and her relationship with him comes to a logical end. In Rama’s view, Madeleine commits what his creator has called the heresy of the *‘modern’* womanin trying to reach the ultimate directly, but Savithri is woman par excellence. Rama and Savithri to­gether affirm the central advaitic position that ultimate reality is identical with the individual self and that the duality of I and Thou is false. Her value of him was to wake into the truth of life, to be remembered - unto God:

*Nothing mare had happened in fact, than if you look*

*deep and long at silence you perceive an orb of*

*centripetal sound which explains why Parvati is*

*daughter of Himalaya and Sita barn to*  *the furrow of*

*the field ……… she became the awareness behind my*

*awareness, the leap of my understanding. I lost the*

*world and she became it.* (p.169).

Through Savithri Rama is able to achieve the annihilation of the world and attain a full recognition of his true self, but the ego, which the Guru alone can remove, persists and a perfect union, the 00 of Rama’s formulation, is not yet possible. In Raja Rao’s reworking of the Satyavan ­Savithri myth of the Mahabharata Satyavan is the symbol of *‘the self, the Truth’* and Savithri a symbol of Life through which the self knows itself to be deathless and eternal (pp.359-360). Rama had often thought of Kanthaka, the charger who had taken Gautama on his pilgrimage from which there is no returning, but when the time comes it is not Kanthaka but the Guru who takes him where he wants to go, for recognition and not renunciation is the way to freedom.

In The Serpent and the Rope, the present becomes a past, al­most a continuation, of an old myth. Thus Madeleine is seen associating herself with the legend of Vashita and Buddha. The mythical parallel here extends our understanding of the present situation of Madeleine’s loss of her child. Sometimes Raja Rao associates a myth or legend with a particular character to such an extent that the character becomes a part of the myth, and the present is mythologized into timelessness. This is the case with Savithri who is a fact and merges into the myth and becomes a symbol that she has always been in the Indian tradition, the Feminine principle in life, which means she is *‘the earth, air, ether, sound’* and worshipped as such. Three legends are associated with Savithri: that of ‘budumekaye’, the legend of Tristran and Isolde and the Radha-Krishna legend. The first tale tells of the *‘budumekaye* thatguided the exiled prince Satyakama of Dharmapuri to a new kingdom, and later reconciled him to his parents and restored to him his original kingdom. Savithri’s influence redirected him onto the path of his original pilgrimage. Then again, Savithri is the Isolde of Ireland and Madeleine, the Isolde of the White Hands “lacks the warmth of love which Rama experiences with Savithri in London and Cambridge. The myth of Radha and Krishna and the allegorical representation of their love (the seeker and the sought) is well known, Rama-Savithri relationship is grounded in this myth. The fantastic ritual of Savithri worshipping Rama (pp. 210-212), just another human being, has given offence to many and is misunderstood. Mrs. Mukherjee feels that this appears ritualistic without being sufficiently human and is unnatural to the character of Savithri who has been depicted as a non-conformist. 6 The basic fact is that the peculiar render­ing of the Rama-Savithri relationship discourages a full-blooded human approach, and also the episode is mythicized from the start. Thus when Savithri asks to bring some Ganges water for the ‘arathi’, Rama gives ordinary water.7 The mythicization is self-conscious too. Savithri admits that she is a Cambridge under-graduate, who smokes too, and says, *“I* *have known my Lord for a* *thousand years, from janam to janam have I known my Krishna ....* “Moreover, this mythicized worship of the husband by the wife has its parallel in an actual ritual still widely practised in India, the Disha–Gauri vrata. The Rama-Savithri type of mythic relationship has its parallels in such pairs like Chandidas and Rami, Jayadeva and Padmavathi, and Rupmati and Baz Bahadur.

There are incidental references to many legends which are related to Mira, Malavika, Shakuntala, the Swastika, Rakhi, Jagannath Bhatt’s marriage with Shah Jahan’s daughter and the composition of Ganga Lehri, Rama and Ravana in relation to dharma, Sita’s exile, Guru Arjun Dev, Rama’s story retold every Saturday for some benediction, the origin of Hyderabad, the Holy Grail, and Wang-chu and Cheng-yi. But none of them is recurrent in the novel nor is any of these integral to it. Rama uses these legends successfully to establish a point of view. The digressive stories of Iswara Bhatta, and Krishna, Radha and Durvasa also are not integral but since Raja Rao is trying to revive the puranic tradition, these apparently unnecessary elements lose their superfluousness. Obviously the puranic narrative has a good deal to do with the tortuously rambling story unfolded by Ramaswamy, but some doubt arises if it is only this influence that underlies the form and style of the novel. Certainly, the style is anecdotal, digressive, self-indulgent; but its rambling qualities generate cross-references as memory catches up with itself, so that the narrative progresses in a series of loops along the path of Rama’s life­story. Rama’s narrative attempts to create an a-historical, cyclic order which progresses from tradition to family history, and thence to the immediate, personal past. The last stage usually arrives as a rude ‘bump’ that sends the narrator spinning off into the realms of legend, tradition and myth once more.8

The Benares and the Ganga, which are mentioned often in the novel, also have many traditional mythic associations with both life and death. The Ganga is the river of the dead. But its waters also hold rejuvenative myths: *“....she represents joy (in this life) and hope (for the life to come). She washes away the sins of him whose ashes or* *corpse are committed to her waters, and secures for him rebirth among the gods in a* *realm of celestial bliss.”* 9

The author’s immense erudition, his restless curiosity, his unortho­dox orthodoxy, his flaming Brahminism, his noble conception of India, his mastery of the English language and idiom make – The Serpent and theRope a remarkable, even unique book. God, truth, love, nature, beauty, sex, art, music, religion, philosophy, metaphysics, and East-West, encounter are discussed leisurely and with sensitivity. No single theme permeates the book. In the words of K. Natwar Singh, fantasy piles over fantasy, plot upon subplot; the work has little structure in the conventional sense. *“But if the purists dismiss it as a* *clever and hectic accumulation of anecdotes by a* *mysterious, muddled mind, they will have missed the point. The vision may be personal; the ramifications are universal.”* 10

Finally, Mrs. Mukherjee feels that the structural unity of the novel is based more on a philosophical concept than on a mythical parallel: Raja Rao unearths metaphysical propositions everywhere. Per­sonal relations do not always count unless they correspond to some archetypal pattern, abstract truth is read into the smallest action; hence the interweaving of myths, instead of steadily illuminating a particular situation merely adds to the flux of general observations about the cosmic truth. The myths and legends are part of the characterization of Ramaswamy, but not integral to the progress of events.11

While this is largely true, these legends are interesting in them­selves and show some of the aspects of the composite phenomenon called life. What Raja Rao portrays is not faith or freedom in the usual sense but an introspective way of life, a monistic vision anchored in a central mythic structure. To comprehend it fully, one needs to belong, to be part of that evocative tradition.12 Raja Rao has tried to join myth and metaphysics into a harmonious whole. Raja Rao’s greatness lies in the steadiness and fineness of his emotional and technical growth, together with his refusal to dilute the Indian myth. Thus The Serpent and the Rope is a classic of Indian fiction.

But critics do not seem to be easy about the use of myth in The Serpent and the Rope which is not surprising considering the complex­ity of its form and its narrator. Mythicizing reality through myths has a purpose if they are fully integrated within the texture of the theme as in The Waste Land. While accusing The Serpent and the Rope of dif­ferent ‘kinds of simplification’ that an expatriate writer is prone to, Rajeev Taranath says that this ‘simplification’ spreads into his (Raja Rao’s) use of myth and fable and makes them successful usually at the periphery of experience and not at the centre.....Eliot’s use of myth is part of the essential structure of his creation. In Raja Rao it is subsidiary.”14 So many legends and myths instead of clarifying the theme, seem to overwhelm the reader with a brilliant display of classical and oriental learning rather than with a sympathetic understanding of their inner meaning. For instance, it is pointed out that Rama’s affair with Savithri does not coalesce with Satyavan Savithri legend and Tristran-Isolde romance. But, one should bear in mind here that Raja Rao seems to concentrate more on the emotional emphasis of the legend he uses than on factual parallels. Like the rustic old woman narrator of Kanthapura, in The Serpent and the Rope too, the language of symbol and myth comes naturally to the narrator, Rama brought up in ancient Brahminic tradition. Like Baudelaire’s man, he walks through a forest of symbols. A “huge flat stone at the edge of the garden” in his house in France becomes Shiva’s bull, Nandi, for him and ‘a huge gently-curved rock’ at the top of the hill, an elephant. Rama’s life-story can be appropriately summed up, in William York Tindall’s words describing Melville’s Billy Budd, ‘a mixture of myth, fact and allusion that have values beyond reference’. Moreover, the importance of metaphysical speculations and conclusions can never be ignored in this book. “India”, observes Heinrich Zimmer, “is one of the great homes of the popular fable .....The vividness and simple aptness of the images drive home the points of the teaching; they are like pegs to which can be attached no end of abstract reasoning.”15 It is through fables that Rama’s Vedanta is best expressed. The nature of Maya as cosmic illusion which ceases to exist only for the person in a state of illumination is brought out well by the story of Radha, Krishna’s beloved, and her crossing the rain-swollen Jamuna river. The acutal incidents are so fused with the old myths and legends, and theories of history based on certain metaphysical standpoint that the novel progresses more through digressions - either into myths, or discussions on metaphyscial problems, than through actual happenings in the world of phenomenal reality. One may see that Raja Rao is not so much narrating a story as weaving a romantic myth imbued with a variety of intellectual insights and spiritual apprehensions. One may hear discussion on Marxism-Nazism-Vedanta, Masculine-Feminine Principle, his­tory and individual identity; one may have legends and fables of various kinds culled from different cultures, or one may note a variety of objects being processed through the mythical imagination; but the effort is always the same: to convey a special vision of life with the aid of evocative philosophical suggestions and poetic insights. Thus, a pattern is there in the novel beneath its “philosophical garrulousness” as some critics may regard it. “The poetic, dream-like intimations, the view of life offered from a position above the conscious mind, the mythical scaffolding, and, finally, the surrender of a liberal-humanistic emphasis on human reason and personality, are the truly revealing qualities of its Indianness. 16 An unsigned review Hickory Record (NC) April 4, (1963) says: “Reflecting the flavour and wholeness of the traditional Indian way of life, where fact and fable, philosophy and the matter-of-fact blend into one, this semi­autobiographical novel can be called timeless, just as India herself seems timeless and other-worldly by virtue of her unchanging rituals.”17