



VIDHYAYANA

**ISSN 2454-8596**

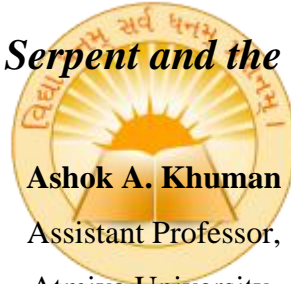
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**An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal**

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## **Manifestation of Self Realization in Raja Rao's**

### ***The Serpent and the Rope***



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VIDHYAYANA

ISSN 2454-8596

www.vidhyayanaejournal.org

An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal

### Abstract

Raja Rao is one of the three founding pillars of Indian writing in English, along with R. K. Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand. Rao's oeuvre was distinct from his contemporaries because he attempted incorporate Indian metaphysics and philosophy into his fictional work. Raja Rao's second magnum opus *The Serpent and Rope*, the Sahitya Akadamy Award winning novel, appeared in 1960. It is very complex and may-sided novel. The narrative closely mirrors Rao's own life. It has an autobiographic quality, the protagonist Ramaswamy, a young Hindu Brahmin narrates his own tragic triangle love story. The novel is too philosophic that it has become complex. There are lines very difficult to get meaning out of it at first reading. For instance two very important phrases: "Waves are nothing but water. So is the see" and "Meaning is meaningful to meaning" these prove how brilliantly and intellectually Rao has chosen his diction. The quest for the ultimate reality is a metaphysical quest, and it forms the heart of the novel. Rama constantly reasons about such metaphysical verities as illusion and reality. He exposes the significance of the journey towards self-realization. Thus, the world is the illusion and the self is the truth. Once the truth is known then sorrows and miseries do not affect the man.

### Key Words:

Self-realization, Jnana, Karma, Bhakti, Philosophy, Spiritual, Absolute, Advaita, Buddhism, Metaphysical

### Main Article

Raja Rao is one of the three founding pillars of Indian writing in English, along with R. K. Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand. Rao's oeuvre was distinct from his contemporaries because he attempted incorporate Indian metaphysics and philosophy into his fictional work. Therefore, Rao is not just known as one who has written five novels but also as one who has reconstructed Indian philosophical identities. Raja Rao has stalwartly concretized the abstract philosophical concepts in his fiction. As Iyengar observes "A novelist and a short story writer, he too, like Anand and Narayan, is a child of the Gandhian Age, and reveals in his work his sensitive awareness of the forces let loose by the Gandhian Revolution as also of the thwarting or steadying pulls of past tradition" (pp. 386).

Born on 8 November 1908, into a family of Kannada Brahmins in Hassan, a district in the princely state of Mysore (now Karnataka), he inherited his metaphysical temperament from his grandfather. He



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ISSN 2454-8596

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attended the Montpellier University in France to study literature and the French language in 1929. Raja Rao's literary journey as an Indian author who wrote fiction in English can be traced by looking at five of his most popular works – *Kanthapura*, his first novel; *The Serpent and the Rope*, an exposition of Indian and European metaphysics, *The Cat and Shakespeare*, a metaphysical Comedy; *Comrade Kirillov*, which manifests communism, and *The Chessmaster and His Moves*, in which he attempted to arrive at some resolution of a metaphysical unity. As M. K. Naik observes:

Within his brief corpus of writings Raja Rao has crammed things which could have been, with a little clever housewifery, neatly spread out into a dozen novels and more. But even with his small output, his position as perhaps the most 'Indian' of Indian English novelists, as probably the finest painter of the East-West confrontation, as symbolist, stylist and philosophical novelist, and as an original voice in modern fiction, undoubtedly remains secure (pp. 182).

Raja Rao's second magnum opus *The Serpent and Rope*, the Sahitya Akadamy Award winning novel, appeared in 1960. It is very complex and many-sided novel. The narrative closely mirrors Rao's own life. It has an autobiographic quality, the protagonist Ramaswamy, a young Hindu Brahmin narrates his own tragic triangle love story. He discovers the distinctions and similarities between life and thought in India and Europe, in an attempt to arrive at an understanding of the human self. "It is a truly philosophical novel in that in it the philosophy is not in the story-the philosophy is the story" (Naik, 177). The novel echoes Gandhism, Jainism, Buddhism, Christianity and many other religions and politics through the interaction of the characters of the novel. As a reader one realizes as if entire novel were a verse than the prose.

It is a difficult quest, perhaps an impossible one, and Rao acknowledges that in the novel, which can be viewed as not only a celebration of what it means to be human but also the role of one's own culture in that development. For Rao, the quest for self realization continued to be an important one and he attempted to show this through Ramaswamy's character. As Esha Dey observes: The incessant repetition of *self* – 360 times in a novel of 406 pages- is pervasive ...Ramaswamy's goal is to realize the vedantic concept of the Absolute..." (pp. 108)

Ramaswamy marries Madeleine, a French woman who is some years older than him and represents all he loves in French philosophy. For Madeleine, he is the Indian ideal. But this Indian and European resolution is not an easy one. Later in the novel, when Ramaswamy returns to France after visiting his family, Madeleine notes that he is "darker" and when she kisses him "it was like kissing a serpent or the body of death". This is the shattering of the built-up illusion for both Madeleine and Ramaswamy and this is perhaps where Rao's deftness as an author lay. He was able to weave together the planes of reality and



VIDHYAYANA

ISSN 2454-8596

www.vidhyayanaejournal.org

## An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal

illusion to bring forth a story that is ultimately about the human experience with all its complex contours.

The title of the novel itself refers to illusion and reality. Sankaracarya has spoken of these two faces of the coin illusion and reality. Rao is influenced by Sankara's philosophy. Another title of the novel can be Appearance and Reality. It suggests that the lack of understanding makes life futile. The perception of the reality regarding the self is the Supreme Truth. In reality, the Self is one. One who experiences this is experienced. *Maya* is responsible for making Brahman appear as the world. J. P. Thripathi asserts "The novel seems to convey the old Indian belief that love of God is the source of all joy and prosperity. And whosoever expresses love to God devotedly will be rewarded with all blessings." (pp. 244)

The novel is too philosophic that it has become complex. There are lines very difficult to get meaning out of it at first reading. For instance two very important phrases: "Waves are nothing but water. So is the see" and "Meaning is meaningful to meaning" these prove how brilliantly and intellectually Rao has chosen his diction. Again in the novel Ramaswamy says: "I became alone and full of love. When one is alone one always loves. In fact, it because one loves, and one is alone, one does not die" (p. 9). Each line of the novel is philosophical. Therefore it has been said that the novel itself is a philosophy. As Alterno asserts,

Rao's mode of exploration is like realism turned inward, as it were. His imaginative world is the world of the inner being. The result of this sort of psychological realism so to say, an inner-looking mode of writing intended as an introspection on life rather than an external view on human condition." (pp. 18)

In addition to the philosophy of Sankara, the reflection of Buddhist philosophy is seen in the novel. In his conversation with either Savithri, Madeleine, Georges or Lezo, Ramaswamy speaks of the story of the birth of the Buddha and other matters of the religion. In the novel Rao has symbolized certain things. For instance as Buddhism was driven out from the Hinduism, at same time in the novel Ramaswamy, a Hindu Brahmin, abandons his wife Madeleine who has become Buddhist. Another application of Buddhism can be made in terms of leaving the wife and son. Buddha leaves home leaving his wife and the son at home, Ramaswamy too does the same with Madeleine and his son. Rao has considered Buddhism historical. As Ramaswamy says: "I did not want merely to write thesis, but to write a thesis which would also be an Indian an attempt at a philosophy of history. I wanted to absorb more than I know" (pp. 103) Rao also explains some philosophic concepts regarding Buddhism. At the end of the novel Ramaswamy realizes that only the spiritual guide can help him out of the darkness of ignorance, releasing within him, the light of knowledge. In short, novel teaches one to see object as an object. The object is existed because you are existed. Guru can destroy ignorance and give true knowledge.

According to Nikhilananda Swami, "Like change, suffering, too, was observed to be a universal



VIDHYAYANA

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## An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal

phenomenon. No one escapes its cruel jaws. Rich and poor, high and low, old and young, learned and ignorant, righteous and unrighteous: all embodied being suffer (p. 2). The ego is the apparent man and the self is the real man. It is the ego that performs righteous and unrighteous deeds and experiences their fruits, sweet and bitter, while the real man, the self, neither enjoys nor suffers. The more a person identifies himself with the physical body the more he degenerates. Yet the delusion of the body does not in the least affect the real nature of the self in its pristine purity and glory. It is man's idea of man that determines his view of life, and it is his view of life that determines his way of living. As long as man is deluded by the body-idea, all human interests are bound to be subservient to the sense life. Self-realization and God-realization are not two different experiences. In realizing the self we realize God. In realizing God we realize the self. The self and God are subjective and objective views of the same Reality which is the Soul of all souls, the approach being through the self. This is the reason why we seek God with closed eyes in the inmost depth of our being. In the novel, Raja Rao states thus: "We were not married that morning we discovered, we had ever been married—else how understand that silent, whole knowledge of one another". (pp. 213). "For to wed a woman you must wed her God". (pp. 84). In another place in the novel Raja Rao states: "The God of woman must be the God of her man". (pp. 113).

Life is duality and the perfection one dreams about can never be achieved on the material or mental plane. If the perfection is to be attained, duality is to be resolved not into oneness but into non duality. Life then becomes nothing but meaning. As Rakesh Kumar Pandey asserts:

Raja Rao felt the sincerity and the spirit of dedication even when he wrote his first novel, *Knthapura*. He was, however, then a "confused and a lost person" and had not realized his metaphysical entity. It is in *The Serpent and the Rope* that he expresses his vision of life fully. (pp. 12)

Raja Rao affirms marriage to be medium for attaining the truth. In the novel, Rao says "woman is the earth, air, ether, sound; woman is the microcosm of the mind, the articulations of space, the knowing is knowledge; the woman is fire, woman is growth, the gods, inherence, the woman is death, for it is through woman that one is born- woman rules, for it is she, the Universe." (p. 352). Raja Rao thus renders to the state of womanhood a quality of holiness a deep and reverential mystery. This quality of sanctity and holiness is seen by Rama in Saroja's flowering into womanhood as also Raffia's stepmother maturing after widowhood. "Man is incomplete without woman. It makes all the difference in the world whether the woman of your life is with you or not; she alone enables you to be in a world that is familiar and whole. If it is not his wife, then for an Indian it may be a sister in Mysore or Little Mother in Benares." (p. 57). Reiterating the importance of woman, Raja Rao allows his protagonist to declare, "The woman needs our



VIDHYAYANA

ISSN 2454-8596

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worship for her fulfillment, for in worshipping her we know the world and annihilate it, absorbing it into ourself” (p 172). Therefore a marriage is a step towards self-realization.

The philosophical attitude of Raja Rao is visible in all his novels. From *Kanthapura* to *The Chessmaster and His Moves* there is a sound progress in the journey of the quester. In fact, the protagonists in his novels are most often questers represent the different stages a *Sadhaka* undergoes in his Spiritual journey. The novels are to be considered autobiographical in that sense, since they exhibit the writer’s own spiritual yearnings and his quest. As Makarad Paranjape observes in his introduction,

Rama’s path to Truth, unlike Moorthy’s Karma Yoga is Janan Yoga (the Path of Knowledge) also enunciated in Bhagvad Gita. Rama is not a man of action but an intellectual. Although he has accumulated knowledge, he still does not apprehend Truth clearly; like the deluded seeker in the fable, he mistakes the rope for the serpent, failing to see himself, unlike Savithri, as already united with Truth. Traditionally, a Guru is necessary for Jan Yogi because only a Guru can cure his delusion by showing him that what appears to be a serpent is really a rope.

Thus, in the end, Rama resolves to seek his Guru to be cured of his delusion. (pp. xii)

For Raja Rao literature was a *Sadhna*, and he was a *Sadhak*. According to him literature is also a spiritual experience. Therefore his writing deals with metaphysics. As he says, a writer is one who strives for metaphysical experience. After spiritual realization, *Sadhak* is compelled to express it and this is how literature is created. He was engaged in searching deep recesses of human mind. All his writing is nothing but the manifestation of his quest for Truth. Philosophy and Metaphysics are the main concerns of his writing. Esha Dey asserts “An Indian writer in English must absolutely discover and identify himself as an Indian first. For him therefore literature as *sadhana* - not a profession but vocation.” (pp. 23).

The quest for the ultimate reality is a metaphysical quest, and it forms the heart of the novel. Rama constantly reasons about such metaphysical verities as illusion and reality. As Ramaswamy states, “Seeing oneself what we always seek; the world, as the great sage Sankara said, is like a city seen in mirror.” (pp. 13-14). Raja Rao has creatively blended the complex philosophical queries in this novel. Knowing the self has always been a fascinating subject for Indian sages and seekers from time immemorial. Rama represents that Indian psyche. The suffering of Rama is universal suffering. The only remedy is self-realization. In order to attain self realization, Rama has tried various paths but finally he realizes only Guru can help to reach the Absolute, which is the state of peace of mind and far away from miseries and sorrows. As Raja Rao states in the novel “I knew His face, as one knows one’s face in deep sleep. He called me, and said, ‘it is so long, so long, my son. I have awaited you. Come, we go.’” (pp. 403)

The self realization is the ultimate goal of human life. Ramaswamy proclaims himself to be the



VIDHYAYANA

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www.vidhyayanaejournal.org

## An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal

follower of Advaita Vedant. Therefore, Ramaswamy is the epitome of seeker after truth. Raja Rao has artistically manifested the journey towards self-realization by putting it into practice through the character of Ramaswamy. Rah has exposed the significance of the journey towards self-realization. Thus, the world is the illusion and the self is the truth. Once the truth is known then sorrows and miseries cannot affect the man.

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