

Raja Rao: The Man and His Mind, an Exploration

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Abstract - One of the greatest Indo-Anglian novelists, Raja Rao is a genius who can talk of Nirvana-Astekam of Sankara, Dakshinamurti stotram; Pascal, Albigensian heresy and the civilization of the Cathars, and of Advaita, Buddhism and Christianity in the same breath. He has gathered in him the traditional wisdom of Indian Rishis (Holy seers) and has combined it with his intimate knowledge of the western religion and philosophy. Further, his amazing erudition is embellished by a brilliance of wit and analysis. He is endowed with a broad vision of human civilization which has enabled him to focus a synthetic view of values of various cultures of the world. As the creative experience is transcendental, the personality of the writer is lost in the impersonality of the Absolute. Raja Rao, a great believer in the impersonality of art, holds that all creation is entirely impersonal.

Keywords - Nirvana-Astekam, Sankara, Religion, Philosophy, Indian Rishi

I. INTRODUCTION

... there seems something else in life besides time, something which may conveniently be called “value”, something which is measured not by minutes or hours, but by intensity, so that when we look at our past it does not stretch back evenly but piles up into a few notable pinnacles and when we look at the future it seems sometimes a wall, sometimes a cloud, sometimes a sun, but never a chronological chart [1]. One of the greatest Indo-Anglian novelists, Raja Rao is a genius who can talk of Nirvana-Astekam of Sankara, Dakshinamurti Stotram; Pascal, Albigensian heresy and the civilization of the Chathars, and of Advaita, Buddhism and Christianity in the same breath. He has gathered in him the traditional wisdom of Indian Rishi’s (Holy seers) and has combined it with his intimate knowledge of the western religion and philosophy. Further, his amazing erudition is embellished by a brilliance of wit and analysis. He is endowed with a

broad vision of human civilization which has enabled him to focus a synthetic view of values of various cultures of the world.

Raja Rao, the eldest among his two brothers and seven sisters, was born on November 5, 1908 at Hassan, a small town in Mysore state now known as Karnataka. He was named “Raja” as he has restated in an interview published in *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, [2] on account of the specially privileged occasion of his birth which took place when the then Maharaja of Mysore was standing at the door of his house and his father was receiving him in the ceremonial way. He was born in an orthodox Brahmin family, and his Brahmin descent and the family environment as well as the traditions have gone a long way in the making of the man in him and in shaping the type of mind he has. Like Ramaswamy the hero in his *magnum opus*, *The Serpent and the Rope*, [3] Raja Rao was born a Brahmin who knows fully well that a Brahmin is one who is devoted to truth and all that; and Brahmin is he who knows Brahman; etc., etc....

II. LITERARY ENDEAVOUR

It is worth mentioning that each of the chief protagonists of Raja Rao’s novels— all coming of Brahmin families represents one dominant aspects of his own personality. Moorthy, Ramaswamy and Govindan Nair represent respectively through their dedication to selfless action, self-knowledge and self-surrender not merely the three dominant tenets of Indian philosophy— *Karma*, *Jnyan* and *Bhakti*, but also the three aspects of their creation’s personality which is as composite as the Indian culture itself. Moorthy’s dedication to the cause of the liberation of the motherland presents his creator’s own patriotic Zeal. We know that in 1942 he was associated with the underground activities of the young socialist leaders. Even during his stay in France, Raja Rao had never lost

contact with events in India, and as M.K. Naik puts it, he “appears to have ‘discovered’ India only after going abroad”[4]. One might rather say that his nationalist sentiments got a spur only after he found himself physically away from the mother-land. In 1943-44 he worked as a co-editor of journal called *Tomorrow* and later in 1946 he joined *Chetna*, a cultural organization. He also started another organization called *Sri Vidya Samiti* under the patronage of a South Indian prince for the promotion of ancient Indian culture, through this society could survive only for a short time.

In *Comrade Kirillov*, Raja Rao has employed a unique artistic technique, developed ofcourse within the limited range of a short novel, of presenting a single personality split into two— Kirillov and ‘R’ (Raja Rao himself) and of an ‘inverted’ one in Kirillov. Obviously, Kirillov may be the project in of a suppressed element existing in Raja Rao’s own mental make – up which had inspired him during his stay in France to be closely associated with the socialist movement in Paris, particularly with French trade union leaders and Trotskyites. Yet, Raja Rao never became a Marxist like Kirillov. Their logic belongs to different dimensions but their sentiments converge on the point of identity. Besides his innate love of Sanskrit and India, Kirillov also visited the ashram of Sri Raman Maharishi as did Raja Rao. Kirillov’s personality is a strange mixture of contradictory elements whereas Raja Rao (‘R’), a cousin to Kirillov as described in *Comrade Kirillov* is a staunch Brahmin, upholding the unmixed value and ideals of an orthodox traditionalist— the Cathar of a Brahmin and yet combining his orthodoxy with the liberation of a progressive Indian who has seen much of the Western world. In Rao’s personality the saintly metaphysician and the progressive liberal do not quarrel in continuous equation as they do in that of Kirillov. Raja Rao is endowed with a perfectly balanced attitude of a highly enlightened intellectual who can arrange the things of his mind in their right places even as he visualizes them in their right perspective, and above all he can link them with some metaphysical truths. Quoting her husband, Irene, the Czeek wife of Kirillov, writes about ‘R’ in her diary. His stronghold is metaphysics. He floats in metaphysics as I float in

figures. He is straight and simple as a child and like most Indians magniloquent.

Yet, the predominance of metaphysical ideas in *The Serpent and the Rope* and its undercurrent in other novels of Raja Rao are not due to a mere ideological interest in philosophy. It has been an expression of an inner discovery— a prolonged quest of his inner being as well as the higher truths that have shaped the traditional values of Indian society. The knowledge of philosophical systems alone cannot bring about the kind of spiritual enlightenment that Raja Rao has ever been in search of and which has been the highest goal of the yoga is and seers in India in all ages. On his first return to India from abroad, he went to Banaras where, as P.P. Mehta writes: “he shut himself in a room for a number of days, trying to decide whether he should become a *Sanyasi*”[5]. He visited the *Ashrams* of all the great living saints of the country including Sevagram of Mahatma Gandhi where he stayed for sometime in 1941-42 and translated into English some of his stories now collected in *The Cow of the Barricades*. He went to Sri Aurobindo Ashram in 1939 at Pondicherry and the impact of Sri Aurobindo’s writings has gone a long way in shaping his own views on literature and aesthetics. Raja Rao met Sri Raman Maharishi at his Ashram at Trivannamalai during 1939-40 and visited Narayan Maharaj at Kedgaon in Maharashtra in 1940-41. Raja Rao influenced also by the Kannada sait-poets of the twelfth century known as Vachankaras who were the followers of the *Lingayat* faith as well as by the writing of Kanakdasa and Purandaradas— the followers of the Vaishnava devotional cult of Dasas. These influences account for the underlying strain of devotional fervor that co-exists with the intellectual exposition of philosophical ideas in his novels. Raja Rao’s spiritual quest came to an end in 1943 when at Trivandrum he met Sri Atmananda Guru who became his spiritual teacher— his Guru in the traditional sense of the term and who solved all his doubts and questionings and showed him the path to final wisdom. It was Sri Atmananda Guru himself who asked him to continue his writing profession instead of becoming a *Sanyasi*. It shows that Raja Rao has, besides being an erudite philosopher, always lived the life of a spiritual

aspirant, eating vegetation food, abstaining from drinks even during his stay abroad and practicing his *dhyana* (meditation) regularly, enlightenment theoretical knowledge of truth has always to be combined with yoga—the practical exercise of self-realization—for a wholesome development of man’s personality as well as the liberation of his self. Having imbibed this truth, Raja Rao has ever been inspired by a spiritual purpose in the real sense of the term. His meetings with the great saints have instilled in him a practical sense of the spiritual life as also the realization of the traditional Hindu world-view. From the early years of his youth he had cherished an earning to become a *Sanyasi*. Romain Rolland, when Raja Rao visited on 8th July, 1930, records in his diary that Raja Rao offered himself to go to North Africa for propagating the message of Sri Ramakrishna [6]. Though he could never become a *Sanyasi*, stung as he was by the snake of love and marriage, he remained “engrossed in metaphysics” [7] for almost a decade after the publication of *Kanthapura*. Raja Rao told E.M. Forster: “I had not written a book for ten years because of my study of metaphysics”[8]. We notice that a metaphysical approach to the problems of life, political, moral or spiritual, is the Keynote of his novels, and it is this special approach that enables him to view things in their temporal and eternal frame of reference simultaneously. As a result, his views on art and literature are also coloured by a transcendental aesthetics.

III. INFLUENCES OF EPICS AND SCRIPTURE

Obviously, Raja Rao believes, quite like Sri Aurobindo, that the creative writer has to be a poet-seer and the reader or the critic has also to rise to a supra-mental level of communion with the Absolute for receiving the full impact of the word as mantra. A Mantra, according to Sri Aurobindo, is the “highest in tensest revealing form of poetic thought and expression”[9] and as the Vedic poets meant by *mantra*, it was “an inspired and revealed seeing and versioned thinking...”[10] although “poetry is the mantra only when it is the voice of the inmost truth and is couched in the highest power of the very rhythm and speech of that truth”[11]. How much

Raja Rao’s views on the creation of word as mantra owe to similar views of Sri Aurobindo is quite evident. But more important than the formative influence of the personality of this saintly genius is the impression of his ideas about art and aesthetics on Raja Rao’s own view on literature. According to Taranath art is “whole and wholesome in origin and effect, rising from and appealing to the whole *Chitta*” which “Not caitiffs but only kings of the spirit can produce or appreciate...” and which “can surely be recognized as the stepping stone to spirituality”[12]. Further he asserts that “only he whose expression is the perfume of the heart in blossom is an artist”[13] These ideas of Pandit Taranath about the spiritual genesis and function of art are clearly echoed in Raja Rao’s own ideas on aesthetics noted earlier.

Besides these influences of Saints, mystics and aestheticians, Raja Rao has been profoundly influenced also by certain important works of the great authors, both Indian and European [14]. The combined impact of the *Ramayana* the *Mahabharata* and the *Brihatstotra Ratnakar* compiled by Vasudevashastri Panshikkar has ever enlivened his mystic cast of mind as much as his philosophical quest of reality within the scope of his artistic medium. About the *Ramayana* he writes:

“What could be more glorious, more sacred, more fantastic, a books— showing every beauty and treachery of this our tragic-comic existence, absurd, inhuman, gentle, develop, noble, cruel, yet not altogether felt as of this world, described for our terror and our joy and final wisdom—than the *Ramayana*”[15].

IV. CONCLUSION

Obviously, these philosophical and literary influences which Raja Rao has assimilated, have lent to him a quality of mind that distinguishes him from the other great writers of Indo-Anglian fiction such as Mulk Raj Anand and R.K. Narayan, and have also given to his style a typical trait born of the combined forces of simple narrative and profound thinking. Equipped with the mental endowments of a philosopher and a realist, Raja Rao has been able to apply his metaphysical erudition and mystical insights to the interpretations of the reality of life in his art. The blend of metaphysical

vision and the realistic view of life has enabled him to depict the rope and the serpent together and also to juxtapose the realm of the Cat and the realm of Shakespeare for a greater understanding of the either at a level of Shakespeare for a greater understanding of the either at a level at which they interact. Raja Rao is a curious type who can command at every moment of his creative thinking a firm holds of the concrete reality and the philosophical abstractions. In this respect, he can well be placed in the company of the great literary minds, even though at a lower pedestal, of world literature like Valmika, Vyas, Homer, Dante, Shakespeare and John Steinbeck with whom, however, much they may differ in everything else as writers, he shares the power of creating revelatory utterances of universal truth and combining the descriptive and the interpretative with the intuitive Vision of things. Indeed, we feel bigger and wiser as we move along his ideas woven into the thematic fabric of his novels.

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 [8] *Ibid.*, p. CLXXXI.
 [9] Sri Aurobindo. *The Future Poetry*. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1953, p.33.
 [10] *Ibid.*, p.280.
 [11] *Ibid.*, p.281.
 [12] Naik, M.K. *Raja Rao*. Blackie and son Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1982, p.30.
 [13] *Ibid.*, p.31.