



IDENTITY CRISIS IN THE RAJA RAO'S NOVEL THE SERPENT AND THE ROPE

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If Raja Rao's Kanthapura is a variation on Indian Sthalapurana, a legendary history of a place, The Serpent and the Rope is the Modern Indian Mahapurana — major epic legend in miniature. While preserving an essentially Indian identity both in spirit and form, the novel also draws upon Western techniques in fiction. As K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar says:

“If *Kanthapura* is Raja Rao’s Ramayana, then, *The Serpent and the Rope* is his Mahabharatha. If *Kanthapura* has a recognisable epic quality, *The Serpent and the Rope* is more than a miniature epic.” (397)

The main theme in the novel consists in the protagonist’s quest for identity and search for the ultimate. The novel elaborates the psychological dilemma experienced by a young Indian intellectual Rama Swamy. An heir to the Indian tradition of spirituality, a scholar trained in the Western academic tradition, Rama develops a curiosity to probe the Reality. The novel presents a vast social canvass and traces the spiritual pilgrimage of the central character Rama against this background. This is the story of a ‘Holy Vagabond, a European Brahmin, a French Vedantin, the Neo-Trestan and the pseudo-Satyavan’ [23] as Rama himself puts it.

Ramaswamy’s lineage could be traced to sage Madhava, who founded an empire, and to the excellent sage Yagnavalkya, a legendary *upanishadic* ancestor. Rama read the *upanishads* at the age of four, knows the grammar and the Brahma Sutras perfectly well. He is an heir to the ancient Vedantic tradition. This young Indian Brahmin goes to France to pursue his research in the Albigensian heresy at the University of Sorbonne. His longing to discover the Real and Absolute and seek Truth furthers his spiritual pilgrimage.

Rama meets Madeline at the University of Caen. She is a teacher of history, four years older than him in age. He falls in love with her and marries her after three years of their first meeting. A child is born whom they first call Krishna and later Pierrie, but the child dies of broncho-pneumonia within a ‘ear of his birth. Rama returns to India, hearing that his father seriously ill. This is the point where the story may be said to start, and the events of next three years comprise the action of the novel. To quote Srinivasa Iyengar –

“Rama has a sense of belonging to the living past which both caresses and possesses him.” (398)

During his brief visit to India, he meets Savitri, who is to play a very important part in his life later? However, not much happens in the first meeting. Rama likes her intelligence and vivacity but detests her modernism. He gets the glimpse of Indian womanhood in her. His subsequent spiritual wedlock to Savitri separates him from Madeline and brings her nearer to his ultimate voyage in search of his Guru.

In his spiritual pursuits Rama is inspired and assisted by a number of people he lives with. However, it is always a woman a woman be it mother or sister or mistress that gives inspiration and proper direction to him in his spiritual quest. His exposure to and the experience of the mystery of womanhood contributes to his spiritual growth and enlightenment. His wisdom gets illumined and gives a definite shape to his philosophy of life ‘Weltanschanung’.

After his father’s death he goes to Benares with his little mother. Since then, his mind is caught in the cross fires of cultural conflict. Rama’s mind becomes a seething whirlpool of cultural currents and cross-currents. Meenakshi Mukherji aptly describes this conflict:

“In the complex fabric of contemporary Indian civilization, the two most easily discerned strands are the indigenous Indian traditions and imported European conceptions. Almost every educated Indian today is the product of conflicts and reconciliations of two cultures, although the consciousness of this tension varies from individual to individual”. (64)



The awareness of the respective qualities of two cultures, social modes of living and civilization variations intensifies the concern of the protagonist Rama. His concern is to define his own identity at personal level and that of his land at national level.

The theme of East-West encounter is not new. There have been several fictional elaborations of this theme. The East-West encounter in this novel assumes a depth, validity and intensity never achieved before in any Indian novel in English. Two contrary world views, two distinct epistemologies interact with each other in the marriage of Madeline and Rama. They come together and get separated only to identify themselves with their respective socio-cultural concerns making the encounter a reality. Both are intensely self-conscious. Sometimes they reach a point of no return or reconciliation. Madeline, however, endeavours to become more Indian to go nearer to Rama to no avail. The constant interpretation of respective cultures and value systems cause slight fissures at the family level.

As Srinivasa Iyengar aptly remarks:

"There is, of course, a sort of sociological or, shall we say, an East-West problem posed in the book: Can the marriage of a Hindu with a French girl succeed? Can the pull of tradition and modernity be purposively reconciled? Suppose, however, these problems are but the serpent! These are not the real problems the real problem is, not establishing harmony without, or with another, but within with oneself. All problems are in the final analysis really spiritual problems". (403)

The real East in the novel consists in the Advitic, metaphysical entity of India but not moral India. Rama hates moral India as it has given way to the Muslim invaders, Britishers with sighs and salutations. East to Ramaswamy's represented by the reality of India but not culturally corrupt urban India. He condemns urban culture with all the vehemence.

Meenakshi Mukherjee observes:

"It is India, Brahminical India, which represents the quintessence of advita philosophy" (91).

The West to Raja Rao is not mere contemporary Europe, but its history from Homer to present day, Tristan and Iseult, Bousset, Marx, Nietzsche, Hitler, Stalin and Troboudars. The West has a host of other representatives in the novel such as Catherine, cousin of Madeline, her uncle Charles, Aunt Zoubeida, besides Lezo, an exile from Spain, the Russian Georges, the French Taxi driver Henri, the porter and the patroness at cafe six.

The novel is free from the murkiness of politics and treats the cultural conflicts and civilizational variations on intellectual plane. It does not miss the practicalities of real life. Here the conflict is internal rather than external. The creative challenge in this conflict and the tensious material between two cultures provides the novelist a double-edged instrument to explore the multifaceted nature of Indian reality. Meenakshi Mukherjee terms such kind of reality as 'Hydra headed' reality. The novel deals with truth from the Indian point of view –

"Truth is the only substance India can offer and that truth is metaphysical and not moral." (350)

Ramaswamy has a word of praise for modern Indian savants like Ananda Cooniara Swamy –

"India would never be made by politicians and professors of political science but by those isolate existences of India, in which India is rememorized, experienced and communicated, beyond history, as tradition, as the truth". (352)

The humdrum of politics and the slogan monging ideologues can never offer an authentic account of India.

Ramaswamy always emphasizes the Vedantic concept of non-dualism. His assertion of all that is Indian as represented in the concept of Advita 'EkamAdvitiyani' can be seen in the very title itself. The title of the novel shows that there are two ways of apprehending reality. The recognition of object as object and the recognition that the object exists because the perceiver perceives it. These two modes of reality coalesce on the canvas of the novel. The central note of the title is –

"The World is either unreal or real — the serpent or the rope. There is no-in-between-the-two and all that is in-between is poetry, is sainthood...." (335)

The real conflict lies in rejecting the duality and resolving the issue of reality –

"Duality according to Rama is non-Indian; non-dual affirms the truth" (41).



The doctrine of non- dualism is also indicated in the epigraph to the novel, ‘Waves are nothing but water. So is the Sea.’ [42]

The above words are actually from the great savant Atmanandaguru. The exposition of monistic concept of Advita is presented in Ramaswamy’s incessant reflections he pours out in his diaries. Savitri gets so enthralled by his philosophical outpourings that she urges upon him time and again to continue his quest unimpeded.

The theme of cultural conflict acquires special significance in this context. Indianness is weighed against the temptations of alien culture. As C. D. Narsimhaiah points out:

“The metaphysical expositions are directed often by the central pre-occupation of India and his awareness of Indianness.” (191)

Rama’s psychological conflict typifies the dilemma of Indian intellectuals brought upon Western education. They are pulled by two mutually opposing forces — the tradition they inherit and the culture their education implants in them. What Dostoevsky said of Russians holds good in Indian situation as well:

“We Russians have two motherlands, Russia and Europe even in case we call ourselves Slavophiles.” [45]

The same is true in the case of Ramaswamy who is caught in the crossfires of cultural crisis. Ramaswamy makes certain odd reflections on the present state of Brahminism. When he goes to Benaras with his title mother and step sister on the death of his father he queries:

“Whether the Brahmins of Benaras like the crows asking funeral rice-balls, saying ‘caw, caw’; or like Sadhus by their fires, lost in such beautiful magnanimity, as though love were not something one gave to another, but what one gave to oneself.” (12)

He by implication emphasizes on the need to be true to Brahmanical traditions and strict adherence to its tenets. The presentation of a system lies in practicing it in letter and spirit. The real Benaras if realized is in every body. The one where greedy Brahmins, coquettish concubines live side by side is not the real one. Inner purity is the essence of Brahminism. Cities like Bombay have no meaning to Brahmins in terms of material gains. Besides, the urban pollution in the name of cosmopolitan culture is not to his liking:

“This barbaric city simply had no meaning for a Bralintin like me.... Bombay had no right to exist....” (44)

He condemns the haste of northern Indians in switching over to extreme modernism –

“I could not understand these Northerners going from strictest pardah to the extreme modernism, with unholy haste. We in the South were not sober and very distant. We lived by tradition, shameful though it might look.” (31)

Ramaswamy is very critical of the corrupt practices resorted to by Brahmins even if it were at the cost of the interests of their own land. Brahmins, says he, sold India through back door –

“The Brahmins sold India through back door — remember Devagiri — and the Muslims came in through the front. Purnayya sold the secrets of Tippu and the British entered through the main gateway of Sriranga-patnam. Truth that is without courage can only be the virtue of slave or widow.” (350)

The above observations of Ramaswamy of sociological interest and portray the social reality in a cognitive vein.

Ramaswamy chooses to offer a corrective to the distorted versions of India in circulation in the West. For instance, the distorted version of Vastayana’s *Kama Sutras* and the exotic display of female anatomy in its sculptures and architecture as painted by the book-sellers in a bid to make money is misleading, *The Serpent and the Rope* offers to provide a corrective to such gross misreading.

The relationship between Rama and Madeline, the eventual failure of their marriage is a reflection on the nature and consequences of an inter-racial marriage. Rama and Madeline are both evolved beings. But they fail to remain united in their



purpose of journey of life. Initially Madeline addresses herself to all that is Indian. She wishes to realize in her the Advitic ideal of human perfection which her husband infused in her. She could realize it in her inner being, in her character and in her love.

She passes from emotional phase to intellectual plane and turns Buddhist for the sake of her husband. Ironically enough, the same Buddhist asceticism stands in between her and her husband. She declares –

“Beloved it’s you who have brought me all this I’m sadhaka now, my Buddhism is very serious”. (314)

Rama has his own personal convictions about marriage and love of woman. Man can love woman for her personal self and he loves her for the self within her. Yagnavalkya says to Maitreyi : ‘It is the love of souls which is true love” and attains fulfillment in their love.

Rama asserts that only when the ego is dead is marriage true. Rama believes in salvation for man and life for woman. Her salvation lies in the salvation of her man, not by getting access independently to the Absolute according to Hindu tenets. He is critical of Dante’s Beatrice.

“But what an impossible tyrant she becomes. It is she who should see light through him, now wants to show the light to him. It is the inversion of Truth. (379)

The possibilities and limitations of human love are elucidated in his union with Madeline. She wishes for a divorce without being asked by Ramaswamy as though she visualised her husband’s wish. It is not so much her physical vacillation as her intellectual maturity which prompts her to effect a voluntary divorce.

Madeline’s attainment of spiritual regeneration evokes in her a feeling of being free from ‘Bhava bandhas’ or bonds of physical world. She opts to remain in the domain of ‘Jnana Yoga’ — Yoga of knowledge as against ‘Karma Yoga’ — Yoga of action. When asked what separated them Ramaswamy says: “India separated” them. Buddhism is catholic in outlook. She chooses to be a Buddhist and follow the path of four-fold truth, Buddhism vanished from India to flourish in alien soils like Tibet, so is the case with Madeline.

The following is what Srinivasa Iyengar has to say on the love and marriage of Rama and Madeline –

“Madeline, Rama’s wife is a finely realized creation and her drifting away from Rama — but towards Buddhism — is seen to be both natural and, under the circumstances inevitable. Her headmistress says rightly of Madeline.” “This is the sister soul of Simone Weil.” Marrying the Hindu Brahmin, the French Catholic becomes an ardent Buddhist: how is one to explain this amazing alchemy? Madeline experiences the glory and the agony of love and marriage and motherhood — and races beyond them through aspiration and asceticism to sainthood or atleast near sainthood. Yet she remains human, and lovable and understanding till the last.” (401)

Ramaswamy is profoundly rooted in his culture. His wife Madeline does not partake of his inner self. In Savitri he finds a perfect spiritual companion. In spite of her modern ways she wears kumkum, choli, black beads which are essentially Indian. She has a fair knowledge of Barthihari and sings the songs of Mira. To Rama she is earth, ether, light, sound, perception, apprehension, intuition, vision or in the inadequate knowledge of empirical West she is a dream picture. Rama says, “When Savitri touches my arm the whole world rose in my awareness.” Ramaswamy’s self identifies with Savitri’s self –

“Savitri was there, not in me but as me; not as someone far, unreal, relegated to a country rounded in space, but as light which seemed never to fade, never to know where to go — like that constant sound, the texts say in the silence of things the first vibration, the primary sound pranavam OM”. (242)

She conforms to the Vedantic concept of “I am not two, I am neither one nor two” [243]. She represents the love of milk maids of Brindavan to Krishna. To him she is Radha. She is the Prakriti of Sankya. She is the feminine principle or Shakti. He gave her the toe-rings which little mother gave him to handover to Madeline, the daughter-in-law of the house. He effects the symbolic spiritual marriage in a ritual fashion in a hotel room.

Ramaswamy’s glorification of feminine principle is Divine Mother, Shakti or ‘Maha Maya. Siva and Shakti are two aspects of paramatman, and the reality of both is acceptable. The absolute and the creative merge in each other, while remaining



independent, Shakti method does not deny the world, but propagates the theory of ‘through the physical world the liberation is to be attained.’

Madeline and Savitri both fulfilled their responsibility to Ramaswamy in their respective styles. Madeline gives her husband full freedom from bondage in the form of unasked divorce, while Savitri is content to marry Pratap and thus set Rama free from the clutches of Samsara. The divorce of Madeline and Rama is a case of mutuality. The much talked about divorce is meant for respective self-realisations.

Ramaswamy encounters three women of different mental makeup. Madeline’s ideal world, Savitri’s spiritual realm and Laxmi’s earthly paradise help him further his prospect in his effort to secure his release from bondage. Ramaswamy’s distinctness lies in his recognition of the divine presence in man which is but a part of universal existence. His universality of outlook is significantly revealed in his attempt to bring into focus the underlying unity of different faiths, notwithstanding their distinct features. Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and Catharcism all are placed on a footing which is fundamentally one. He points out the fundamental differences also in an impartial manner. Father Zoubius, Georges, Lezo, Ramaswamy with different roots make a curious assembly of contradictions, yet with consensus on basic truths of life.

Indian sensibility is all inclusive. It is not ambivalent as alleged by some section of Westerners; it is accommodating with a keen sense of adaptability. It has an uncanny knack of combining polarities into complementarities.

Rama’s search, operating within this framework is for universals. His attempt is to synthesize and build a system of truths, ideals of several religions and cultures and to show the essential oneness of humanity. He feels on one occasion that Marxism, Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, Hitlerism, the British Commonwealth, the Republic of U.S.A. are so many voices, for some unknown principle which we feel but we cannot name. According to him “All rivers but lead to the Absolute.” This Absolute can be realized in the congenial and sacred atmosphere of India alone –

“It is beautiful to live, beautiful and sacred to live and be an Indian in India. India is contiguous with time and space; it is anywhere everywhere.” (311)

The Serpent and The Rope is a novel of social reality in an authentically Indian sense. It chooses a wide canvas including the East and West. It presents a varied milieu including the Indians, French, Russians and other Europeans. It embodies different approaches to life. It presents the veritable sea of humanity. The experience of this multifaceted, multilayered reality is particularized in the sensibility of the protagonist, Rama. All colours merge in the prism of Rama’s consciousness, only to emit the spotless white light of Ramaswamy’s self-realization.

The epic dimension of the novel offers the writer scope to reflect on various aspects of social life. These include the social structure in India, familial relationships, widespread malaise of corruption eating even into the roots of religious institutions. This apart, the status of Indian women, the conflict between tradition and modernity, the impact of Western education on the Indian elite, East-West encounter and a host of other issues constitute to make the novel a confluence of many realities. The novel does not read like a mere sociological account. The observations of the novelist take their place in the panoramic vision of the story and unobtrusively merge into the fictional fabric of the novel. Furthermore, the social and spiritual realms of experience blend with each other in such harmony that one cannot see where the social ends and the spiritual begins, or where the secular yields place to the sacred. The novelist presents the sea of human life. It all looks like the waves rising only to merge into the oneness of the huge water body.