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### CRITICISM AND EVALUATION ON RAJA RAO FICTION

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#### ABSTARCT

That Raja Rao is India's most significant novelist writing in the English language today is now indisputable," wrote the late C.D. Narasimhaiah, doyen of Indian literary critics. That was a judgement made over 30 years ago, but there are many who would still argue for Rao's supremacy in Indo-Anglian fiction. With his ascetic and rather beautiful features, so that even in old age he retained a princely visage that was part-Hamlet and part-Krishna, the slightly built Raja Rao looked every inch a metaphysical and poetic novelist. He was the last of the quartet of writers, the others being Mulk Raj Anand, Nirad Chaudhuri and R.K. Narayan, who made English into a major literary language in the subcontinent. They all lived to great ages, but they were never close to each other.

#### INTRODUCTION

Rao was the most intellectually demanding of the four and there were plenty of people prepared to dismiss him as pretentious, even fraudulent. It is hard, however, to imagine a cultural history of India that did not give proper respect to *Kanthapura* (1938) or to *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960), or which did not acknowledge Rao's place as a bridge between Eastern and Western ideas. His stature was recognised in India by several honours, including the Sahitya Akademi's highest award in 1997.

Raja Rao was born in 1908 (some records say 1909), a Brahmin from Hassan in Karnataka. His mother died when he was only four, so that his upbringing was mainly in the hands of his schoolmaster father and his spiritually minded paternal grandfather. His philosophical bent can be traced to these beginnings, but so too may be his delight in the company of young women, since he knew so few in his childhood and youth.

Though a Hindu by caste and culture, Rao was educated at a Muslim school in Hyderabad and at the Aligarh Muslim University in North India. It was in Aligarh that Rao first learned French, the language which opened up for him a philosophical domain unknown to Anand and Narayan. After matriculating in 1927, Rao returned to Hyderabad, graduating two years later from Nizam's College. He won the Asiatic Scholarship of the government of Hyderabad and left for the University of Montpellier. There, within a short time, he married a Frenchwoman, Camille Mouly, and started publishing stories in the Paris-based *Cahiers du Sud*.

Though now we can see a figure who occupied borderlands between cultures and histories, exploring links and articulating intellectual connections, especially between Europe and India, this was not so apparent in his first novel, *Kanthapura*. Rao had begun by writing stories in Kannada, but as he became more fully integrated in to a European way of life, for a while studying Irish writers at the Sorbonne, he gradually moved towards expressing himself in English. It was an English, however, strongly influenced, at the start of his writing career, by the cadences of his mother tongue.

*Kanthapura* remains one of the key texts in post-colonial literary studies for investigating how forms of English can develop free of some of the accrued associations of British culture. It is closest in spirit to the village locales of the great Anand and Narayan stories, but already Rao's philosophical cast of mind predominates. *Kanthapura* is a village caught up in the nationalist struggles of the 1930s and in the course of it Rao examines Gandhian thought (though not Gandhi himself) as a continuance of ancient spiritual truths to be found in the Puranas. The tale is told in the voice of a grandmother, Rangamma, through whom Rao seeks to capture some of the manner of traditional oral story-telling.

Rao lived a long time, but he was in the first half of his life a slow writer. He was to make up for this in recent years when some of his most complex works appeared, but these were the product of long mental gestation which reached back to his first decades. Apart from *Kanthapura* he wrote mainly short stories at the start of his career, many of which were brought together in *The Cow of the Barricades and Other Stories* (1947). They reflect his interest in social matters such as the plight of women in rural India. However, nothing he had written to date prepared readers for his masterwork, *The Serpent and the Rope*, which came out in 1960.

This took Indian writing in English away from the rural settings not only of his immediate peers but of the newer generation of novelists such as Kamala Markandaya. It marked a return to the metaphysical roots of Indian thought and culture, whilst being at the same time a speculation on the possible shared spirituality in the histories of East and West.

*The Serpent and the Rope* is a patrician novel in manner, but it could also be seen as a precursor of modern feminism in as much as enquiry into the nature of the Feminine Principle is one of its main themes, portrayed not only through the characters of Madeleine, Savithri and Little Mother, but in woman-honouring episodes woven in to the story, such as the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II.

Autobiographical elements are obvious, for the central figure is an Indian postgraduate student called Rama, studying at Montpellier, married to a Frenchwoman, absorbed by apparent connections between ancient Indian philosophy and European medieval heresies and quests. Rama's is a pilgrimage towards what is utterly pure, whether it be in art or in metaphysics, a search for the Holy Grail whereby godliness is distilled into an earthly vessel and the unattainable goal of life is Truth. Late in life Rao was heard to complain that "most of modern

literature is psychological. There is no search in it." *The Serpent and the Rope* is a novel of spiritual searching, but without fulfilment.

Nothing that Rao subsequently wrote had the impact of his first two novels, though his longest work, *The Chessmaster and His Moves* (1988), coincided with his winning the prestigious Neustadt International Prize for Literature. Rao refused to compromise over its length or its difficulty. Many reviews of the long-awaited book were hostile. "Is he a Vedantic philosopher or an insufferable poseur?" asked Prema Nandakumar in India's national daily *The Hindu*.

The popular readership that was there for *Kanthapura* and the intellectual discourse to which *The Serpent and the Rope* gave rise both evaporated with this unwieldy, often highly impersonal and abstract philosophical journey towards defining the Absolute. It may be that an editor, freed from the author's insistence that nothing be cut or re-shaped, will now be able to hew from this monument an elegant summation of Rao's understanding of wisdom. Meanwhile there is more to come from the same well, for *The Chessmaster* was planned as the first part of a trilogy, much of which was written but is as yet unpublished.

Rao wrote two novellas, *The Cat and Shakespeare* (1965) and *Comrade Kirillov* (1976), as well as two more books of short stories, *The Policeman and the Rose* (1978), which included some tales already published in *The Cow of the Barricades*, and *On the Ganga Ghat* (1988), short pieces which he hoped would be read in sequence as facets of one novel. He also brought out in 1996 an anthology of essays called *The Meaning of India*, which looked back to his nationalist days and to meetings with writers such as André Malraux and E.M. Forster. Included in it is his superb discussion of political leadership, "Wisdom and Power", derived from a lecture he had given in Washington, DC.

In 1998 his life of Mahatma Gandhi, *The Great Indian Way*, was published, an astonishingly lively account of the man whose spirit had illuminated *Kanthapura*. Rao felt that other biographies of Gandhi had been true to the facts but not to the meaning of his life. He had stayed at Gandhi's ashram in 1942, during the short period of his life when nationalism appealed to him more strongly than writing.

In 1965 Rao began teaching courses on Indian religion and philosophy at the University of Texas, Austin, which became his main residence for the rest of his life. He stayed in touch with India and continued well into his nineties to return each year. Although he defined India, as Nirad Chaudhuri had also done, as a state of mind, a perspective, a darsana, more than as a nation or a culture, he never lost his taste for the smells and actuality of his home state.

This most meditative, serene and ascetic of men was also the embodiment of quiet courtesy. Over a simple lunch in London, in coffee breaks at conferences, or in his letters, he emanated a quality of calmness to which people naturally gravitated. Indeed, he valued silence almost as a moral condition. His simplicity of dress, invariably black, nevertheless carried with it a hint of dandyish elegance.

Raja Rao, the famous Indian English writer, was born on 8th November 1908 in Hassan, Karnataka. He lost his mother at the age of four, which left a lifelong impression on him. This could be the reason for the absence of mother and orphanhood being recurring themes in his work. He received his early education at a Muslim school and later went to Aligarh Muslim University. He graduated from Madras University with English and History. He won the Asiatic Scholarship of the government of Hyderabad in 1929 and went abroad for higher studies.

He went to the University of Montpellier in France to study French language and literature. He later joined the Sorbonne University of Paris. He married Camille Mouly, a French language teacher at Montpellier, in 1931 and came back to India in 1939. Though studied abroad, Raja Rao was a nationalist at heart. After returning to India, he joined the National struggle for independence. He was the co-editor of *Changing India*, an anthology of modern Indian thought. He also edited 'Tomorrow', a journal from Bombay. He actively took part in the Quit India Movement of 1942. Apart from being a nationalist he was a social activist also. He was at the forefront of the formation of a cultural organization, Sri Vidya Samiti, devoted to reviving the values of ancient India and was associated with Chetna, another organization involved in propagation of Indian thoughts and values.

Nationalism was a theme of many of his novels. His novel *Kanthapura* is an account of Mahatma Gandhi's teachings. It is the story of national struggle through the view point of a villager in Karnataka. Raja Rao wrote another short story on the theme of Gandhism, the 'The Cow of the Barricades'. He also published Mahatma Gandhi's biography: *Great Indian Way: A Life of Mahatma Gandhi*. He wrote a semi autobiographical novel, *The Serpent and the Rope*. The novel narrates the relationship of east and west and his experiences related to west. In the Title the Serpent refers to the illusion and the Rope is the reality of the life. He emigrated to the United States in 1960s and taught at the University of Texas at Austin. In United States he remarried Katherine Jones, an American stage actress in 1965, but after relationship of 20 years this marriage also ended in divorce. In 1986 he married for the third time to Susan, He was awarded the famous International Neustadt Prize for literature in 1988. Raja Rao died on 8th July 2006 at the age of 97, at Austin, Texas. The life and works of raja Rao can be best summarized in the words of R. Parthasarthy, poet, critic, and Director of Program in Asian Studies at Skidmore College in New York, when he said: "Rao is one of the most innovative novelist now writing. Departing boldly from the European tradition of the novel, he has indigenized it in the process of assimilation material from the Indian literary tradition. He has put the novel to uses to which it had not perhaps been put before by exploring the metaphysical basis of writing itself, of, in fact, the word. As a writer Rao's concern is with the human condition rather than with a particular nation or ethnic group. The house of fiction that Rao has built is founded on the

metaphysical and linguistic speculations of the Indians. It is to the masters of fiction in our time, such as Proust and Joyce, that we must ultimately turn for a writer of a comparable stature."

With the passing away at the ripe age of 97, at his home in Austin, Texas, of Raja Rao, Indian Writing in English (IWE) has lost the last of its three 'grand old men', the triumvirate of R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao who are generally held to have exerted a crucial influence over IWE's key transition period between the late colonial and post-Independence epochs. Of the three, Raja Rao was, while not neglecting either the regional orientation of Narayan or the political discourse of Anand, certainly the most philosophical, and his writing career can be seen as a constant effort to bring a distinctively Indian metaphysical outlook into the province of the novel form in English.

Born into a Brahmin family in 1908 in what is now Karnataka, Raja Rao was nonetheless educated, as the only Hindu student, at a Muslim university in Aligarh, and went on to study in Montpellier, France, and later at the Sorbonne in Paris. He was thus early exposed to a multiplicity of cultural influences, and saw it as his task to disentangle a distinctively modern Hindu sensibility in a world where cultures inevitably meet and come into dialogue. Over a literary career spanning three-quarters of a century, he published five novels (more are for the moment unpublished), three short-story collections and a large amount of non-fictional prose (more, again, will appear posthumously). From 1960 on he was resident in Austin - and yet expatriate though he was, Mother India was always at the forefront of his thought and work.

Raja Rao began his writing career with the short stories that were later collected as *The Cow of the Barricades* (1947), but it was the novel *Kanthapura* (1938) that catapulted him to prominence. This tale of a Gandhian struggle in a fictional South Indian village is notable for its anti-colonialist thrust, its first-person narrative assuming the voice of a woman villager, and its deliberate espousal, as set out in Rao's famous Preface, of a distinctively Indian form of the English language ('We cannot write like the English. We should not. We can only write as Indians'<sup>1</sup>). After a lengthy interval came a very different work, *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960), a long philosophical novel set variously in France, England and India, in which Rao explored the convergences and divergences of the Indian and Western mindsets, in what the critic David McCutcheon, writing in 1969, perceptively called 'a consistent, convincing presentation of a particular kind of mind' - 'an authentically Indian mind'<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Raja Rao, *Kanthapura*, 1938. Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 2001, Preface, p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> David McCutcheon. *Indian Writing in English: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Calcutta: Writers Workshop. 1969, repr. 1997, pp. 38. 98.

In Comrade Kirillov (first published in a French-language edition in 1965), Rao, writing under the influence of the great Russian masters, engaged controversially in philosophical dialogue with Marxism, a belief-system which he rejected. The next novel, *The Cat and Shakespeare* (1965), was deliberately local - and yet universal - in its feel, offering a parable of enlightenment in a small-town South Indian environment. 1978 saw another volume of stories, *The Policeman and the Rose*; the autochthonous vein continued, this time with a more cosmopolitan view of India, in *On the Ganga Ghat* (1989), a volume of interlinked short stories about Benares and its manifold pilgrims. *The Chessmaster and His Moves* (1988), Rao's last published novel, witnessed a return to the metaphysical concerns of *The Serpent and the Rope*: it is the first volume in a trilogy whose remaining parts will see the light of day in due course.

Raja Rao is survived by his devoted wife Susan, who tended him in his last years. His work will be continued and his unpublished writings edited by a small band of equally devoted scholars. The highly distinctive philosophical tone of his writing remains unique in the annals of IWE, and we now here pay homage to Raja Rao's voice by sampling a passage from *On The Ganga Ghat* that communicates something of that particular flavour, as the devout cow, Jhaveri Bai, immerses herself in the Ganges:

The cow's tears are purer than your brahmin prayers. Come and see it there, if you will, by the Benares ghat. 'God you made the elephant and the peacock, the bear and the porcupine - even the dog did you make and the hyena, creatures of this earth. But the cow, Lord, you made as your first child. Lord, I sink in your waters, I sink into my origins. Lord, give me the gift of truth.'

The Ganges flows fierce and fresh on Jhaveri Bai's back. Head inturned and her horns unshaking, Jhaveri Bai contemplates her own face in the moving waters. There's magic in this picture that appears and disappears<sup>3</sup>.

Indian novelist, short story writer, and editor.

Rao, who was educated in India and England, is one of India's most outstanding authors writing in English. His distinctive style captures the rhythms of Indian speech and idiomatic expression. His writing is complex but poetic. Intensely philosophical, Rao examines, in his fiction, the religious and mythic roots of India, at times offering a comparison to Western thought.

Rao grew up during colonial India's struggle for independence and his first novel, *Kanthapura*, depicts the impact of Gandhi's passive resistance movement on a South Indian village. *The Serpent and the Rope*, considered his best work, describes the dissolution of a marriage between an Indian student and his French wife. It is semi-autobiographical, and because of its extensive symbolism and the nature of its philosophical discussion, it is considered a metaphysical novel. *The Cat and Shakespeare*, also metaphysical, is an allegory which has been variously interpreted. *The Cow of the Barricades and Other Stories* is a 1947 collection of some early short stories.

In this collection of eighteen scholarly essays, we encounter multifarious exegeses of the works of foremost Indian novelist Raja Rao; and more importantly the novelist and his arresting nationalism.

The somewhat theatrical title of the book anticipates the bustling philosophy that is the man Rao as ingrained in the distinctness of his fiction. From the preface of the book to the last chapter, the consistent rhythm is that Rao is an Indian writer worth celebrating

because of his romanticisation of the Indian culture and genetic wisdom that naturally positions him as an iconoclast in his perception of the Western world. Interestingly, not only the Western readers and critics that find his works too unconventionally experimental, but also his Westernized Indian brothers. In her contribution titled "Raja Rao's Fiction: Cultural Reassertions in the Context of Globalisation," D. Maya hits this point when she, juxtaposing Rao's fiction with other Western immigrant writers' works, draws a distinction that "[Rao's] novels assume special significance against the horde of immigrant writing that adapts itself to the discourse of the Western writers, merging identities, and diluting cultural specificities in the process of winning acceptance." (22) As is conspicuous in almost all the essays, Rao, who paradoxically sees himself as "a man of Silence," was in constant dialogue with his readers/critics until his death. He would not cavort to the criticism that his fiction is devoid of Western parameters, a criticism that demands him to de-Indianise his fiction. But he insists on writing the characteristically Indian fiction. In this dialogue, Rao has the superior argument because no matter how we decontextualise a work of literature; no matter what paradox or metaphor we reduce a work of literature to, the writer belongs to a society and his proper knowledge of his roots empowers him with a more vigorous voice to communicate to the outer world. At least every writer from a once colonised nation has this duty to perform. At the height of a writer's liberation – a kind of nirvana that the

## REFERENCES

Rao, "The Writer and the Word," in *The Meaning of India*, 155; quoted in McCutcheon, "Introduction," 14. In the glossary to his book, Rao defines *upasaka* as "follower of a metaphysical discipline" (202).

<sup>7</sup> McCutcheon, "Introduction," 14.

- <sup>8</sup> McCutcheon, "Introduction," 14, 15.
- <sup>9</sup> McCutcheon, "Indian Writing in English," in *Indian Writing in English*, 25-47.
- <sup>10</sup> McCutcheon, "Indian Writing in English," 37; Rao, *Kanthapura*, 5.
- <sup>11</sup> McCutcheon, "Indian Writing in English," 37, 38.
- <sup>12</sup> Rushdie, "Introduction" to *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing*, xvii.
- <sup>13</sup> Chaudhuri, *The Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature*, 398-413; Rao, *The Serpent and the Rope*, 7-26.
- <sup>14</sup> Chaudhuri, 397.
- <sup>15</sup> Sales Salvador, *Puentes sobre el mundo*, 378.
- <sup>16</sup> Alterno, "The Mystic Cat," 63.
- <sup>17</sup> Alterno, "The Mystic Cat," 54.
- <sup>18</sup> McCutcheon, "The Novel as Sastra," 83.
- <sup>19</sup> McCutcheon, "The Novel as Sastra," 84.
- <sup>20</sup> McCutcheon, "The Novel as Sastra," 85.
- <sup>21</sup> McCutcheon, "The Novel as Sastra," 87, 88.
- <sup>22</sup> McCutcheon, "The Novel as Sastra," 91.
- <sup>23</sup> McCutcheon, "The Novel as Sastra," 92-93.
- <sup>24</sup> Rao, *The Serpent and the Rope*, 407 (quoted McCutcheon 95).
- <sup>25</sup> McCutcheon, "The Novel as Sastra," 98.