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The Spiritual Tradition in the Novels of Raja Rao

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Abstract:

Raja Rao is one of the most widely acclaimed Indian English novelists whose fate rests on wide range of his intellectual, spiritual, national, political and social thought content. Rao as novelist of spiritual dimensions is redemptive in the extreme. He has delineated the microscopically Indian scenario as far as spiritual, political, social and cultural realities are concerned. Being an active participant in political movement, highly educated, and highly influenced by spiritual leaders, Rao has analyzed the socio-political situations of India, spiritual tradition and religions of the nation; and used to breathe the patriotic and spiritualistic zeal among the masses by bringing spirituality in practical life through his novels. Deeply affected by the loss of traditional, cultural and metaphysical values, he dedicates his novels to a very deep and penetrating quest through fictional exercise. In the beginning of his novels, he delineates the feelings of patriotism and religion but gradually his wider, deeper spiritual outlook embraces them all and transcends them too. He presents a spiritual problem of man and also its worthwhile solution through an imaginative and emotional exploration of a particular metaphysical system. The present Research Paper deals with works of Raja Rao as far as his delineation of Indian nationalism and spiritual tradition is concerned.

Keywords: Nationalism, Spiritualism, Intellectual, Political and Social thought content, Novels.

Introduction:

Born in Mysore Raja Rao belongs to an old and learned Brahmin family. He went to school in Hyderabad, and after matriculation was sent to the University of Aligarh. Here he came under the influence of Prof. Dickinson the famous educationist, who soon discovered Raja Rao's gift for writing and encouraged him in the study of French and English literature. At the age of twenty he went to France as a research student of literature and western mysticism, and studied at the University of Montpellier and the Sorbonne. Here in France in the year 1930 his first collection of short stories, 'Javni' was published.

Returning in India in 1940, Raja Rao spent the war years searching for the spiritual traditions of his country. In Banaras which even in his last phase he considered to be the most spiritual place in the world, he shut himself up in a room for several days and tried to decide whether to continue writing or to become a 'Sanyasi'. He stayed in India for eight years and might never have begun writing again had he not met the great Vedantist philosopher and teacher Swami Atmanand who became his 'guru' and made him see that writing was his true vocation. It is significant to recall that he had given up writing for ten years before 'The Serpent and the Rope'

was published. Characteristically, before Raja Rao returned to the world of letters he spent twenty one days in meditation at the temple of *Mahakal* in Ujjain. It shows his meditative spirit and philosophic bent of mind.

Raja Rao's four novels namely, "Kanthapura" (1938), "The Serpent and The Rope" (1960), "The Cat and Shakespeare" (1965) and "The Chessmaster and His Moves" (1988) deal with Indian spirituality and spiritual experiences. Each novel is the product of his own experiences and journey as far as spirituality is concerned. Rao attempts to present a picture of life at the realistic, factual and physical level and also the metaphysical. The characters of Raja Rao move from one dimension to another at the spiritual level.

Raja Rao is one of the most widely acclaimed Indian English novelists whose fate rests on wide range of his intellectual, spiritual, national, political & social thought content. *Kanthapura* which depicts the mirror images of contemporary Indian society emerges as an ancient classic, narrates all affairs of social milieu; through the picture of small village *Kanthapura*, Rao reveals his intense. He strongly displays deep & firmly rooted passion, nationalistic zeal and spiritual concerns begin with his first novel *Kanthapura*. It is believed as an epic and the creative construction of a work of fiction through nationalism and spirituality.

In *Kanthapura* the novelist has delineated various temples and performances. The temple performs an inseparable role in the life of villagers. The novelist brings element of spiritualism in India through myths and legends prevailing in Indian society. He presents *Kanthapura*, a small village with its deities and gods. There are many things like goddess, hill and a river, which manifest the picture of Indian village with spiritual perspective. In the novel, we may experience that spirituality turns into the core of socio-cultural renewal in the accurate convention of India, where social reformers have perpetually been intensely spiritual men. The villagers have been shown spiritual; they abide faith in the power of their deities like *Kenchamma* and *Himavathy*. At the time of Moorthy's trial, they believe that the goddess will free him. She will appear before the judge and free him.

Rao's spiritual doctrine presented in *Kanthapura* has a *Puranic* pattern fundamentally suits the socio-spiritual cosmic insight articulated in the novel. For revealing woman as the metaphysical counterpart of man, Rao uses the myths of *Satyavan*, *Savithri*, *Sita*, the fair consort of *Rama*, the poetess *Mira*, *Radha* and *Krishna*, *Shiv* and *Parvati*. It is here clear that true woman is vital for man's spiritual enlargement. Rao with the intention of exchange a few words his spiritual ideas to the readers, crafts an efficient utilize of mythical parallels. He makes an all-embracing use of myths, legends, folklores that institute the identity of *Rama* as a spiritual person. He is attracted towards the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. His way of knitting stories within a story takes the readers to the *Puranas*. He entitles all women *Prakriti*, the *Maitra-Shakti*, who is the lively creative Principle. She is *Eve*, the *Eternal Feminine*. This notion is inventively woven in *Advaitic* philosophy. He employs the myth of *Shiva* and *Parvati* to distinguish between the relationship of *Rama* and *Madeleine* and that of *Rama* and *Savithri*. Thus, this novel is replete with spiritual dispositions. It contains innumerable spiritual discussions.

The novelist has sincerely rendered fables, legends, philosophical manifestation on Christianity, Buddhism, *Vedanta*, *Tantra*, mystical experience, to prove how the human psyche use to build as far as civilization, socio-political, cultural and spiritual values. *Kanthapura*, known as an epic of freedom struggle is elaborately mirrors the Indian nationalism and spirituality. The novelist has spiritualized the socio-politics in India. Meenakshi Mukherjee rightly remarks:

‘*Kanthapura* is narrated by an old woman to a hypothetical listener...Raja Rao’s choice of this narrator serves several purposes at once. Making this old woman the narrator enables Raja Rao to mingle facts and myths and in an effective manner. For the old woman, Jawaharlal is a *Bharatha* to the Mahatma who she believes will slay *Ravana* so that *Sita* may be freed. For her Gandhi has attained the status of God and Moorthy is regarded *Avatar* in *Kanthapura*. The characteristically concrete imagination of the uneducated mind pictures the Mahatma as large and blue like the *Sahyadri* mountain on whose slopes the pilgrims climb to the top, while Moorthy is seen as a small mountain. To her the *Satyagraha* becomes a religious ceremony to which she devotes her sacred ardor.’ (*The Twice Born Fiction*, 37)

The novelist also narrated many myths, legends, *Vedantic* texts and *Puranas* and tried to show the relation between an individual and spirituality to boost spiritualistic enthusiasm among the villagers.

The *Bhajans* and *Hari-Katha* become popular and sustain the spirit of the *Kanthapurians*. Moorthy becomes a symbol of a modern progressive and spiritual leader. He is considered *Bhakt Prahalad*, a *Messiah* and a symbol of new life in *Kanthapura*, who teaches Love of mankind, and there is one God in life and that is God of all.

Rao brings out the fact about Gandhi’s belief that politics and religion are inextricably mated together. *Kanthapura* clearly renders that man’s status in the society is spiritual as much as it is political divine truth.

Raja Rao’s another prominent novel, *The Serpent and the Rope*, known as a worldly creations also deals with nationalism and spiritualism in Indian context. This novel also stands as a semiautobiographical story of Raja Rao. Unlike *Kanthapura*, it leads us to think and find the place of masses in the nationhood. Though pathetic in tone in the earlier but leads towards the self-awareness and fulfillment. The nationalism and spiritualism in the East and West is being rendered and shown as the prime concern of India in the novel by Raja Rao.

The Serpent and the Rope is famous as a highly complex and many-sided work of art. It presents at once the tragic story of a marriage of minds which drifts apart and the spiritual biography of learned, imaginative, sensitive and modern intellectuals. The title depicts some spiritual thoughts and by this the author wants to show some truth of life. The serpent in the title refers to the illusion and the rope to the reality. Rao’s involvement in the nationalist movement is reflected in his novels. *The Serpent and the Rope* is a story of a search for spiritual truth in Europe and India. The novelist indirectly tries to show the nationalism and national proud by the rich tradition of spiritual knowledge. During his stay in

India, he wrote the novel, which renders the *Mahabharata*, legend of *Satayavan* and *Savithri*.

The work also dramatized the relationships between Indian and Western culture as well. Ramaswamy, a young Brahmin studying in France, is married to a French college teacher, Madeleine, who sees her husband above all as a *Guru*, a traditional Indian teacher. Madeleine accepts Buddhism for her spiritual quest and renounces worldly desires. Unlike the *Kanthapura*, the novelist has treated the social, religious and spirituality in Indian context to prove the rich national heritage and culture of India. He also highlights sociological problem -like marriage between two castes, education, religious activities in *The Serpent and The Rope*. Through this novel Raja Rao has founded a new genre -the philosophical novel, and has vividly rendered the confrontation of Eastern and Western cultures. The novel is also regarded as the spiritual autobiography of Raja Rao.

In another notable novel *The Cat and Shakespeare*, too Rao puts forth his spiritual thoughts and concepts through reference to religious books. Govindan uses quite simple language. He uses the simplest words to put across complex ideas. This is probable for the reason that, like the *Upanishads*, he works through allegory, not by straight details. On one occasion, he laughs and remarks:

‘You no more find the truth in the *Himalayas* than you find it in the Indian Law Register. You may find it on your garden wall and not know it was it. You must have eyes to see....’ (*The Cat and Shakespeare*, 39)

Govindan’s apprehension for his neighbour does not bring to an end at immediately giving spiritual blessing. It is greatly further realistic, and makes bigger to nurturing him when he falls ill. Rao presents his spiritualism and nationalism in the novel *The Cat and Shakespeare* through the character Ramkrishna Pai. Ramkrishna Pai, the narrator, thirty-three-year-old clerk working in Trivandrum. Pai’s neighbour is Govindan Nair, who works in the ration office where thirteen clerks from Indian regions works. It is a microcosm of India.

Another notable novel by Raja Rao is *The Chessmaster and His Moves* deals with Indian spirituality and nationalism. The novel highlights Indian Metaphysics. *The Chessmaster and His Moves* is a most ambitious novel, and like most of Raja Rao’s writing, rooted in Indian tradition, thought and sensibility. Raja Rao attempts to revive through his fiction the Indian quest tradition, spirituality and religiosity. As a voyager in the realm of spirit, he discovers man’s inner world which is rooted and constructed by the ancient traditional culture all over in the world in general and Indians in particular. His novels are intense expositions of the Indian consciousness which are completely embedded in the *Upanishadic* tradition of India and rooted in the *Advaita Darshana* or *Sankaracharya*. Through his writing he unfolds the human beings quest for truth and explores the possibilities of being and becoming. He himself confirms that his ‘writing is my *dharma*’. (*The Chessmaster and His Moves*, 59)

Conclusion:

Raja Rao one of the prominent Indian English writer, philosopher and the worldly experienced person remain successful in delineating the various facets of nationalism and spiritualism in the Indian context comparing with the West directly or indirectly. We may strongly claim that the themes of nationalism and spirituality form the base of his novels nearly all his novels are deeply rooted in Indian philosophical tradition and culture. Realistically he has delineated the fusion of nationalism and spiritualism of India. Kanthapura has been rightly understood as '*Ghandi Purana*' and '*Sthala Purana*'. The other novels, *The Serpent and Rope*, *The Cat and Shakespeare* and *The Chessmaster and His Moves* have been deeply rooted in Indian metaphysics and culture encompassing the religiosity. He rightly renders in his novels that Indian life is inseparable from myths and legends which establishes fundamentals for spirituality. He accepts the fact that the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* and *Purana* epitomize Indian tradition and wisdom and hence we do find their presence in his novels. However, as a creative writer, he makes significant innovations making his novels philosophically complex. Raja Rao proves his own view about his writing that 'literatures as a *Sadhana*, a spiritual experience'. (*World Literature Today*, 167)

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