

ISSN 0976-8165

The Criterion



The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Bi - Monthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access eJournal

June 2014 Vol. 5, Issue-3

5th Year of Open Access

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A Mythic and Symbolic Study of Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope*

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Abstract:

The present paper is an attempt to explore the significance and relevance of symbolic and mythic method of narrative technique in Raja Rao's famous novel *The Serpent and the Rope*. In order to analyze this work, it is but imperative to divide this study into different phases. The content part of the novel is highly philosophical and complex, so a straightforward narrative technology would not serve this purpose. Hence, the first part of the analysis aims at understanding the philosophical theme of 'Advaitic' doctrine in this novel and how the protagonist Ramaswamy is apt for this novel because he is an embodiment of great knowledge of east and west. In the second part, a reflection on myth and symbolism has been made to show their universal appeal by interlinking them to Jung's concept of collective unconscious. It has also been brought onto the surface as to how mythical method and symbolism carry cultural associations within their folds and bring forth the parallelisms and contrasts between present and past by posing the identical archetypal patterns in the choice of characters and situations in present work.

Keywords: Myth, Archetypal Pattern, Symbolism, Doctrine of Advaita, Collective Unconscious, Narrative technique, Spiritualism, Ramayana, and Mahabharata.

Raja Rao is one of the greatest of Indian novelists writing in English language. Only two others Mulk Raj Anand and R.K.Narayan could come near him as Uma Parameswaran suggests this in her rigorous study titled *A Study of Representative Indo-English Novelists*, "Among the novelists one could narrow down the choice to Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao....Yet, in the final analysis Raja Rao comes out several steps ahead of Anand" (141). He hailed from a traditional South Indian Brahmin family and after having matriculated from Hyderabad, he went over to Aligarh for higher education and earned his graduate degree. Thenceforth, he proceeded to France on a scholarship awarded to him by government and studied at the universities of Montpellier and Sorborne. Due to a streak of spiritual recluse in him, he returned India and visited the Asharam of Sri Aurobindo, Pandit Taranath and Ramana Maharshi.

Raja Rao was a prolific writer, though not in the sense that he wrote much but whatever he wrote was an outcome of his slow and earnest creative endeavor. He wrote slowly, revised frequently and got published his works at great intervals because he wanted to achieve perfection in his creative works:

He wrote his first novel *Kanthapura* in 1938, and a collection of short stories. But he failed to produce any other piece of fiction immediately because at that time he was experiencing deep stirring of spiritual crisis, he emerged a changed man and a religion and philosophy have a prior claim on him now. After this spiritual metamorphosis, he wrote *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960), *The Cat and Shakespeare* (1965) and *Comrade Kirillov* (1976), *The Chess Master and His Moves* (1988) and he appears in them as more of a religious philosopher . . . (370)

The Serpent and the Rope is the most prominent literary work that came into existence with the maturity of Raja Rao and is generally known as the spiritual and philosophical autobiography of the novelist containing metaphysical undertone running parallel throughout the novel. “*The Serpent and the Rope* is the most mature of Raja Rao’s works. It took ten years in shaping itself . . .” (Raziada 164). Similarly C.D.Narasimhaiah has appreciated this novel saying, “Let me at once admit that I have, ever since, I first read *The Serpent and the Rope* in 1962 considered Raja Rao the most significant Indian writer in English and a major novelist of our age” (68). For this novel he won the *Sahitya Akadami Award* in 1966 and Padam Bhusan was awarded to him in 1969 by the President of India. World attention at once focused on it and it won enormous critical and literary appreciation and it is still praised for its magnificent creative undertone and achievement.

The Serpent and the Rope is a complex and multifarious work of art and hence can be studied at various levels. On narrative ground, it is named as an account of Ramaswamy’s quest for self realization and transcendence which enables a man to distinguish between ‘illusion’ and ‘reality.’ This self realization can be acquired through *Vedantic Philosophy* according to which dualism is ‘illusion’ and the conviction in ‘non-dualism’ is true enlightenment [Gyan]. Ramaswamy calls himself as a holy vagabond as he wanders in search of this enlightenment. He also realizes that in this spiritual pursuit, a Guru’s role is of utter significance and the mode which he adopts for realization of this is not a complete detachment rather he tries to acquire this by remaining an integral part of world and for him marriage, the union of two souls, assists a man to acquire this salvation. He believes in the detached Karmic journey of a man. The novel is embedded with highly metaphysical and sublime thoughts. Harish Raizada suggests:

In *The Serpent and the Rope*, he has extended the scope of the novel by giving it new subject matter, the quest for metaphysical wisdom or meditation on the nature of existence from Indian point of view [. . .] based on the tradition of philosophic India of *Vedas, Upanishadas, Brahm Sutra, the Gita, Yagnyavalkya, Sankara, Madhva* and their descendents who left hearth and riverside fields and wandered to distant mountains and hermitage to see God face to face. (164)

As the subject matter of the novel is philosophical, it requires an intellectual and sophisticated narrator and Ramaswamy is an apt protagonist for this possessing great knowledge of different cultures, philosophies and religions. Through his character, Raja Rao has successfully interwoven *Vedantic* vision and wisdom of age old Indian scriptures by adopting the mythic and archetypal pattern of narration. The very theme of novel is the knowledge of the ‘self,’ so a straightforward and descriptive narrative technique would have been inappropriate to explore the philosophical thoughts and meditation which transcends the limitations of time and space to carry universal appeal which may be yardstick to the whole modern generation. In order to serve this purpose, Raja Rao has employed the mythic and archetypal images with their symbolic undertones to highlight the theme of this novel so as to place it to the epical grandeur. Iyenger states in this regard that “*The Serpent and the Rope* – a far more complex work – is a novel as a modern Indian Mahapurana (major epic legend) in miniature” (397). Hence, before mythic and symbolic study of *The Serpent and the Rope*, it is essential to be well acquainted with the nature, significance and relevance of mythical pattern in modern literature. Charis Baldick points out: Myth is a kind of story or rudimentary narrative sequence normally traditional, through which a given culture ratifies its social customs or accounts for the origin of human and natural phenomena, usually is supernatural or boldly imaginative terms. . . . In most literary context, myths are regarded as fictional stories containing deeper truths, expressing collective attitudes to

fundamental matter of life, death, divinity and existence (sometimes deemed to be universal). (Def. 66 M)

Rene Wellek and Austin Warren reflects on myth and remarks that “myth . . . points to, hovers over an important area of meanings, shared by religion, folk lore, anthropology, sociology, psychoanalysis(190). B. Das has shared his opinion on myth, saying:

Myth is a statement of primeval reality which still lives in present day life and, as a justification by precedent, supplies a retrospective pattern of moral values, a sociological order and magical belief. It is, therefore, neither a mere narrative, nor an explanatory tale. It fulfills a function and the continuity of culture, with the relation, closely connected with the nature between age and youth, and with human attitude towards the past. The function of myth, briefly, to strengthen tradition and endow it with a greater value and prestige of tracing it back to a higher, better, more supernatural reality of initial events. (244)

Owing to universal appeal and everlasting prospective, myths are conveying those things and actions which find no other expressive mode. Modern writers have, therefore, found in them a useful media of communicating the predicament of contemporary people as well as their outlook and view of human life. By employing mythical situations and characters in modern context, they can ponder over human situation with a broader perspective of time and space. Myths are to link modern situations, characters, images and thoughts with archetypes and those archetypes play a significant role in literature.

Like myths, symbols are used as visible sign to suggest something invisible and are capable of evoking indefinite suggestiveness which becomes a very useful tool for a writer to comprehend and communicate his profound vision of reality. Charged with the writer’s imagination, symbols acquire greater evocative and perceptive power. M.H.Abrams remarks, “In the broadest sense a symbol is anything which signifies something In discussing literature, however, the term symbol is only applied only to a word or phrase that signifies an object or event” (Def 22s). Baldick also suggests that “a symbol is specifically evocative kind of image; that is, a word or phrase referring to a concrete object, scene, or action which also has some further significance associated with it. . . .” Moreover, charged with the imaginative and creative faculty of the writer, symbols acquire evocative and perceptive power. Symbols may be called mythic because symbols are derived from a myth and emerges as an archetypal image and evokes deep emotional response on the part of reader because it resonates with an image already existing in his / her unconscious mind. This connotation of symbol has led Cassier to describe them as the best media which helps man to participate both in the realm of the spirit and that of matter and made Jung consider them as means of uniting the conscious with the unconscious. Thus, symbols render great service by creating a full vision of reality “C.G. Jung proposed that certain symbols in dreams and myths were residue of ancestral memory preserved in collective unconscious.” (Baldick Def.79A)

Because of his preoccupation with the metaphysical issues of nature of ultimate reality and epistemological problem of human comprehension of that reality, Raja Rao finds myth and symbolism as the most appropriate mode. He possesses an encyclopedic knowledge as to draw material from Indian mythology as well as from history and culture of the whole world. He has employed various myths in the very texture of this novel. The ritual marriage of Ramaswaymy and Savithri is the suitable example in this concern as Savithri (modern Savithri) comes to worship him, her lord, her Shiva, her Krishna to perform *aarthi* and in this way to accept him as her husband: “She took flower and kunkum and mum ling some song to herself, anointed my feet with them. Now she lift a camphor and placing the censer in the middle of kunkum water she

waved the flame before my face once, twice and three times in *aarthi*” (*The Serpent and the Rope* 213). Som P. Rancham denotes that this worship of Ramaswamy by Savithri holds great significance, “Ramaswamy Savithri relation under the archetypal sign of Shiv and Parvati; Radha and Krishna has cast spell on countless readers of *The Serpent and the Rope*” (102-103). Moreover, the very name of Savithri reminds a sincere and devoted wife in one of the stories of *the Mahabharata*: “Savithri is one of the prototypes of wifely devotion, and Hindu brides even today are blessed with the benediction that they may be like *Savithri*. Sometimes it is known as the Dish-Gauri ritual (Vrata) with a different story to justify its observance by all married women” (Nagrajan 106).

That Indian people are religious and attaches significance to their rituals and archetypal figures hailing from mythology. Little Mother tells Rama the story of *Sri Rama*, the mythical figure of *the Ramayana*, the holy epic to acquire the blessings of *Sri Rama*:

Rama, Rama, *Sri Ram*, give us wealth, and give us splendour; give us the right riches auspicious, give us an heir, give us a home and sanctuary, give us earth and gardens; those who to lands distant, may they return, may the body be firm and innocent; give eyes to the blind, give legs to the lame, give speech to the dumb. Rama, *Sri Rama*, *Rama*, give us Thy Holy Presence (*The Serpent and the Rope* 257)

Myth emerges from collective unconscious of mankind. Rama and Savithri are contemporary prototypes of archetypal *Prakrati* and *Purusa*, *Krishna* and *Radha*, *Shiv* and *Parvati* because their experience of love is akin to that of their original archetypal figures. As Nagrajan has remarked: “Man is *Purusa*, the lord of creation and woman is *Prakrati*, the inherent power of *Purusa*, whereby *Purusa* creates. Woman’s function is to give herself as *Prakrati* to man as *Purusa* so that man may know that is his true self is *Purusa* himself (80). Hence, *Rama* and *Savithri* are the symbols of creative power of the universe. All men and women are one and *Savithri* merges into *Radha* and *Krishna* and the two then into *Shiva* and *Parvati* and ultimately in all such figures. At last there is no dualism but ‘Om.’ Rama says that “there never was anything but *Shivoham-Shivoham*. I am *Shiva*, I am Absolute” (*The Serpent and the Rope* 197)

Collective unconscious shows that the experience of whole humanity is one and the same. Thus, through the collective experience of Rama and Savithri, the novelist has successfully manifested ‘*advaitic*’ philosophy of non-dualism charged with mythic symbolism. Savithri says to Ramaswamy “I have known my lord for thousand lives; from *Janam* to *Janam*, I have known my Krishna” (*The Serpent and the Rope* 224). Moreover, she says:

I would go round you three times, once, twice, thrice and fall at your ash-coloured feet, beginning that the lord might absorb me into herself . . . I am a woman, she added hesitatingly, ‘Me’retho Girdhara Gopal . . .

Mine the mountain-bearing Krishna

My Lord none else than He. (*The Serpent and the Rope* 211)

It shows that in ‘spiritual union,’ there are not ‘you’ and ‘I,’ but only ‘I,’ ‘Om.’ This is what *Yagnyavalkya* tells *Maitreya*: “Not for the sake of the husband is the husband loved, but for the sake of the self in him. Not for the sake of the self in her” (*The Serpent and the Rope* 34).

Rama seems like Tiredias who is an archetypal figure and has the experience of both man and woman. His personality is fluid and he is capable of transcending the limitations of time and space. The protagonist of this novel Ramaswaymy is the symbol of the human consciousness of mankind. Rama visualizes:

I could see in myself a vastness as it were, a change of psychic dimension of a more ancient in me Brother, have you seen my brother? I had asked: from kings, and going beyond the

Ganges or the Cauvery, from saints and sages I had asked, backward in history to times of Upanishads and even unto *Yagnyavalkya* and *Maiteryi* and as though at each epoch, with each person, I had left a knowledge of myself, a remembered affirmation of myself, and in this affirmation had been the awareness of the Presence that I am, that I am brother. Thus it was I walked about in Kensington room (*The Serpent and the Rope* 197).

Myths are also used as digressional technique. The most important is the myth of *Budumekaye*. In this myth a young prince Satyakama, exiled through the machination of his step mother, follows a rolling pumpkin through a forest. The pumpkin clashes against a rock and outcomes a beautiful princess named Ramadevi, who leads the young prince to his glorious destiny which is to be a king. This digressional myth is closely related to the very narrative technology employed by the novelist as Rama recalls this story when he goes from India to France for the first time: “Savithri was a real princess by birth, but what must have brought the story back to me was that as I stood at the bottom of gangway this somewhat round and shy thing rolled down as she ran . . . I had almost to catch her by hand lest she fell against some trunk or cargo, as it on the pier” (*The Serpent and the Rope* 123).

Rama is a highly sensitive and imaginative Indian whose mind is a seething whirlpool of culture and cross culture. He is familiar with the myths and legends of a number of countries ranging from east along with west: “Rama is familiar with myths and legends of different civilizations and he can discern parallel between them and forge link between the past and the present by comprehending oneness” (Raziada 166). On the one hand, there are the myths of Satyakama and Ramadevi, Radha and Krishna, Shiva and Parvati; on the other, the fable of Wang Cha and Chang Yi and the tale of Tristan and Isult.

The Serpent and the Rope is a sustained and highly symbolic piece of writing. If myths are employed with an aim to explain human situations and relations, symbols are applied to highlight the theme of the quest for and apprehension of ‘Ultimate reality.’ They also help to serve the technical function in order to organize experiences into a kind of order and reveal the complex relationship among divided things. The title of the novel *The Serpent and the Rope* is symbolic as the serpent symbolizes ‘appearances,’ ‘illusion,’ and ‘unreality’ and the rope symbolizes ‘reality.’ But in truth there is no such duality, the serpent and the rope are one and same. In this way Raja Rao seeks to convey the *Advaitic* doctrine of oneness of all, of the identity of ‘*Jiva*’ and ‘*Siva*’ forms: “The Rope (reality) is misconstrued as the serpent (unreality) whereas it is only the rope in actuality. This is due to the darkness of ignorance (*avidya*) the cloud of unknowing and when the light (*vidya*) is brought the darkness is dispelled and the object is perceived in the true nature” (Rao 82).

The theme of the novel is again symbolized by the epigraph of the novel, “waves are nothing but water / So is the river” (*The Serpent and the Rope* 5). Sea symbolizes the ‘Ultimate reality’ and waves symbolizes individual soul. Both are one and the same “[b]ut the sea is not ultimate word: it still signifies separateness of duality. The ultimate word is water, and when the water is realized, waves and sea vanish” (Bhattacharya 286). Ramaswamy, the hero narrator, is basically *Advaitic*, the follower of Hindu creed and believes in Vivekananda’s word: “As a man you are separate from woman, as human being you are one with the woman; as a man you are separate from the animal but as living being the man, woman, the animal, the plants are all in one; and as existence you are one with the whole universe. That existence is God, in Him we are all one” (Parameswaran144).

The drawing on the title page also possesses symbolic connotation. It shows Siddharatha leaving his wife and child, and going out on his long quest for truth and self knowledge. This

symbolizes Rama's own exploration or search for truth. Rama is modern Siddhartha. During his visit to India, Rama stays in Bombay for few days and indulges in sexual pleasures in the company of Laxmi. Then he remembers the Buddha's story and realizes the evil of his way and says, "I booked my seat on the plane, somewhat secretly (*The Serpent and the Rope* 299). Moreover, a drawing of a horse that appears at the head of several chapters is also symbolic of Siddhartha's horse. Rama thinks "Kapilvastu is the true home of mankind, each of us has a kanthaka at his door" (*The Serpent and the Rope* 289).

Apart from this, the myths are also used with symbolic overtone in this novel to highlight the situation or relationship between characters. Her (Savithri's) love for Rama represents Radha-Krishna relation and is symbolic of the seeker's unrealized longing for the 'Absolute' and her ritual marriage with him is also symbolic as it represents the union of feminine principle with that of masculine or of Prakriti (nature) with Purusa as S.Nagrajan remarks that "the Purusha himself knows only in knowing his power of Prakriti" (81).

To conclude, it can be said that the novel is highly symbolic as it is replete with myths charged with symbolic significance. Sometimes the reader finds himself or herself bewildered in the labyrinth of too much philosophy with symbolic cross current of myths, but this would be an injustice with the very nature of this novel because these myths provides this work with high richness and literary grandeur and also facilitates the reader to understand the very theme of this novel.

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