
A Critical Survey Of Raja Rao's Early Short Stories

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Abstract

The fame of Raja Rao chiefly rests on his achievements as a novelist, but his short stories, though in a meagre number, should not be cast aside while discussing Indian thought and tradition. 'A Client' is one of the nine stories which were published in the first collection of his short stories called 'The Cow of the Barricades and Other Stories' (1947). The story is very simple but it is a fine evidence of thought and tradition. People are of the mind that marriage is a social necessity. But they do not think about its appropriate age. A comparative study of 'Javani' and 'Akkayya' shows that a widow is, after all, a widow. It matters a little whether she belongs to a low caste or a high one. The miserable plight of the widows as described in the two stories, reminds one of the statement given by Adam Gondavi, 'wound of widowhood pinches alike both a 'Kshatrani' and 'Sudrani'. 'The Cow of the Barricades' is an outstanding one among the first collection. Its title becomes the title to the first group. The Hero is a representative of Mahatma Gandhi. He persuades people to remain non-violent. The chief of the soldiers is a British man. He shoots Gauri to death. The Indians erect a statue of the cow. The love for the cow is the love for Mother India.

Key words: Raja Rao, A Client, Javni, Akkayya, Narsinga, Nimka & The Cow of the Barricades.

Introduction

The fame of Raja Rao chiefly rests on his achievements as a novelist, but his short stories, though in a meagre number, should not be cast aside while discussing Indian thought and tradition. In this respect, all of his short stories are of considerable significance. It should be kept in mind that Rao himself did not have very high attitude about them. At the same time, he does own his works. Like his novels, every sentence of his stories, exhales Indianness. They have native and homely flavours.

It is undisputedly admitted that Rao tried his hand at story writing but did not take it seriously. Even then, he has brought out three collections of his short stories. The very first one entitled 'The Cow of the Barricades' (1947) and the second one 'The Policeman and the Rose' (1978), the third group of his short stories 'On the Ganga Ghat' is the last one. His short stories deserve attention as they are the

products of an unavoidable stage in the growth of his mind, in the evolution of a major novelist who was, really, cultivating his craft. Of course, a perusal of his short stories shows Rao's total vision of life. They are true and realistic records of Indian thought, ways of life and traditions. Some of them are of much social and political relevance. In some of them, Rao tries to unfold meta-physical truth and reality of the world.

The cultural tradition of India which flowed from the Vedas, finds its continuity in his short stories. His stories are not only expressions of inner feelings but they bear reformatory desires also. The mythological frame work and folklore techniques at different places practiced in the short stories enrich nativity in them. The observation of M. K. Naik about Rao's short stories seems to be very apt:

The form he experiments with here is the folk tale form or the popular legend with all simplicity and credulity, its myth making power and the strong moralistic substratum on which it is in the popular wisdom, often grounded'.¹

Despite writing fewer stories than his contemporaries, Rao has secured an outstanding and celebrated place among Indian story writers. He has treated the themes very objectively. He is never personal while telling a tale. His approach in the short stories also is philosophic. Rao aims at presenting the irresistible impact of Indian thought and tradition on its people. At the same time, it is also to be mentioned here that he comes up with a reformatory zeal in his short stories. What we find in his short stories had been almost prevalent in Indian society since the time immemorial in the name of tradition.

'A Client' is one of the nine stories which were published in the first collection of his short stories called 'The Cow of the Barricades and Other Stories' (1947). The story is very simple but it is a fine evidence of thought and tradition. People are of the mind that marriage is a social necessity. But they do not think about its appropriate age. Ramu is a simple school going boy. He is persuaded for marriage. Hereat the place, *Rao castigates the institution of traditional marriage. Thought and tradition both are hit here by the writer. Rao's reformatory zeal is dominant over the evil tradition. Visualizing the odd circumstances of the boy, a critic remarks:*

The prolonged battle between the unwilling simple youth and the crooked marriage broker, symbolizing this problem of our society in a certain historical context, has been pretended devices of a patient hunter luring his prey into his trap.²

'Javni' is a worth mentioning story that appeared in the first collection. The central character is Javni. She is a widow. She belongs to the lower strata of the society. Her kiths and kins do not treat her sympathetically. However, she serves in a middle class Brahmin family. Very often, she gets some solace here from her mistress. Her brother and his wife seldom think of her poor lot. She is below forty

but the heavy weight of woes has bowed her down. She eats rice and pickle behind the house where there is a calf that throws out enormous quantities of urine and dung. She sleeps on a wattle mat. She has no grudges against the Almighty and man. She suffers silently.

Despite all the hard ships, she saves some money every month out of her meagre salary. But it is not for her own future rather for the son of her brother. She is broken, but not defeated. She nourishes the dreams of the little boy.

‘**Sakrit Prdeeyate Kanya**’³, (A girl is married but only once) has been our ancestral thought. Widowhood; traditionally has been a curse in Indian society because widow remarriages were not allowed. Rao has exposed the evils of caste-system and unjust treatment given to widows by society. Javni has an unexpressed quest as to where she should go and shake off the overwhelming burden of widowhood. Rao also makes some persons think about this social evil and find out appropriate solution to the problem.

‘Akkayya’ is another important short story of this group. She is a beautiful girl. Her horoscope predicted ‘a most brilliant marriage’. But the case is otherwise. She is married to an old man. The husband dies soon, leaving her a widow. She lives in her brother’s house and manages the house hold affairs. She is described as having a vessel at her waist and a broom in her hand. She has a shaven head and face like a dry mango. Even then, she is ill treated by everyone in the family.

A comparative study of ‘Javani’ and ‘Akkayya’ shows that a widow is, after all, a widow. It matters a little wheather she belongs to a low caste or a high one. The miserable plight of the widows as described in the two stories, reminds one of the statement given by Adam Gondavi, wound of widowhood pinches alike both a ‘Kshatrani’ and ‘Sudrani’. Javani’s and Akkayya’s widowhood and exploitation bear similarity with John Webster’s protagonist in ‘The Duchess of Malfi’, who is made to suffer by her wicked brothers in the name of family honour although they have eyes on her property, which is in reality the cause of their opposition. None bothers about her needs and desires. When she gives a vent to her inner feeling:

We are forced to woo

Because none dares woo us.⁴

‘The Little Grain Shop’ is a realistic portrayal of contemporary society. The present story gives very life-like picture of day to day rural life. It shows man’s degradation due to greed and lust. Motilal is a greedy Bania. His wife is Beti Bai. Motilal has amassed wealth through utter miserliness and cheating. He has raised himself to the position of a moneylender. Being aggrieved at his exploitation, people abuse and curse him. He beats his wife every day very pitilessly. She bears all the torture because she has no place to go to. Her mother’s death cuts off her links from her parental home. She has to suffer

patiently. Even then, she has unshakable faith in God. She manages household works and sings the songs of Lord Krishna. Her son, Chota goes away with his wife leaving her alone. Motilal dies in an accident. Motilal's grandfather had ten concubines. Chota's wife elopes with another man. Beti Bai has only one living creature with whom she can talk and that is; the parrot in the cage. Sometimes, she converses with it to unwind her sufferings. Her talk with the parrot reminds one of Nagarjun's lines when a young girl married to a toothless old man utters:

Ham bhi Machhali Tum bhi Machhali

Dono hi upbhog vastu hain.⁵

Herein the story Raja Rao draws our attention towards moral decline of men and pitiable condition of women in Hindu society. He also hits at women's slavery. The decline of traditional values regarding business and women becomes a concern for Rao. The evil practice of prostitute going is also a shock to our healthy code of conduct. The story is not much important from the view point of quest.

The theme of the story 'Narsinga' tells us about the freedom movement of India. It is of much traditional value. It may be taken as a prologue to 'Kanthapura'. The hero takes Gandhiji a Rama, and himself as Hanuman and the British rulers as Ravana. It is a parallel to Devasur Sangram.

'Nimka' is a great story which shows the mature art of Raja Rao. In this story Rao's 'Vision of mother' crosses the boundaries of India and becomes cosmopolitan. It is the story of a poor but beautiful Russian girl who works in a hotel in France. She is admired for her beauty by so many students. She loves an Indian but fails to marry him. After that, she loves a French man but does not marry him. Finally she marries a Russian Count twenty years older. She gives birth to a son. The count loses his money in horse-racing and then quits her. She has a necklace and wants to run a small shop by selling it. But God alters her plan. Her mother dies and she is bound to sell the necklace. Even in her troubles, she has faith in God and maintains her goodness.

In this story, Raja Rao has once again glorified motherhood in Indian tradition. Nimka is imbued with Indian thought. She is, every inch, a worshipable mother. Her role as a mother strengthens the Indian view-

Janni Janmbhumishcha Swargadapi Gariyasi⁶

Meaning: Mother and motherland are greater than Heaven.

The place of mother in India has always been very respectable in our scriptures. Her sacrifices are often boons for children. As a contrast from the mother, the father, in this story is charged with the negligence of his duty. He is interested in sensual pleasures only and does not shoulder responsibility.

Narsimhaiah's comments on this story show how deeply the story speaks of Indian thought and tradition:

Such is this heart rending story, a very European story though suffused with Indian thought and precisely because of that tradition of story telling what unsuspected range of material-social, intellectual, philosophical- this story can take in with expanding concentric circle of awareness, and corresponding planes of reality, vertically arranged, each yielding a significance appropriate and unique to itself.⁷

‘The Cow of the Barricades’ is an outstanding one among the first collection. Its title becomes the title to the first group. The Hero is a representative of Mahatma Gandhi. He persuades people to remain non-violent. The cow, Gauri, represents Mother India. Barricades have been erected between the armed soldiers and unarmed Satyagrahis. The cow moves towards the barricades. She seems to be in tears. When the soldiers see tears in her eyes, they give up arms and are so appealed that they join the satyagrahis and start raising patriotic slogans. The chief of the soldiers is a British man. He shoots Gauri to death. The Indians erect a statue of the cow. The love for the cow is the love for Mother India.

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