

The Theme Of Quest In 'The Serpent And The Rope

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Received: 12 Jan 2020, Accepted: 19 Jan 2020, Published on line: 30 Jan 2020

Abstract

Raja Rao has brought India right from the Vedic period to the present-day with her internal essence in this novel. It delineates a realistic picture of Indian society, her ancient culture, traditions and civilization. The impressions of all these aspects bring about different types of quests in the novelist. Indian thoughts and tradition have the upper hand along with the quest of the writer. 'The Serpent and the Rope' presents India's vast heritage of philosophic thought and wisdom. Ramaswamy, the hero of the novel is a Brahmin. He descends from Yajnyavalkya, Sankaracharya- Madhava, Valmiki and Vyas etc. These ancient sages of India drifted from forest to forest, from mountains to mountains with a mind to see the Almighty face to face. Rao keeps the tradition alive and makes it more and more useful in applied life of the Modern Age also. Rao's own life is a perpetual Quest for self-realization and self-knowledge or 'Atmabodha'.

'The Serpent and the Rope' is universally admitted as a metaphysical novel. The pivotal theme of the novel is Sankara's 'Advait' or 'non-dualism' or 'oneness of all'. The whole novel is steeped in the 'Advaita philosophy. Hence, in this novel, India does not appear to be a geographical entity but as an idea. Rao is of the opinion that his whole being is India.

Key words: Culture, Traditions and Civilization & The Serpent and the Rope.

Introduction

Raja Rao has brought India right from the Vedic period to the present-day with her internal essence in this novel. It delineates a realistic picture of Indian society, her ancient culture, traditions and civilization. The impressions of all these aspects bring about different types of quests in the novelist. Indian thoughts and tradition have the upper hand along with the quest of the writer. The India that we come across in the novel is not the material one. Rao himself declares:

India is not a nation, like France or Italy or Germany: India is a state of being.....¹

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**My India I carried wheresoever I went India is the
Kingdom of God and it is within you. India is wheresoever you see, hear, touch,
and smell.²**

We cannot think of India without her gods and goddesses, myths and legends, thoughts and traditions that have been succeeding from generation to generation have so strong a hold on Indian mind that their lives cannot be separated from their thoughts. According to Rao, India is not a part of land; rather it is the name of philosophies and religions that flourished there. India is outside history because Truth cannot have any history.

Ramaswamy's sense of History shows his quest for knowing the ages-old traditions of India, her saints and sadhus, her philosophical thoughts and the Hindu culture in a chronological order. 'The Sarpajju-nanyah', a famous logic of 'Shankara' lends the very title to novel as 'The serpent and the Rope'. The Vedantic logic has been applied to illustrate the Absolute Reality of 'Brahman' as against unreality of the visible world. Very often, in the dark, we mistake a rope for a serpent. Exactly, the same is the case with the universe. For the lack of knowledge, we take the phenomenal universe as real, though, in fact, it is false. According to Shankara: '**Brahman Satyam Jaganmithya**'³ that is to say 'Brahman' is the only Reality and the visible world is merely an 'Illusion'. We fail to see the Reality because our psyche has got the darkness of 'Avidya' or Ignorance'. We people are confused. We move in the darkness and our blind efforts cast us into a deep pit of misery. The very title of the novel seems to be a compressed echo of the 'Kathopanishad':

Avidyayamantare vartmanah

Swayam Dheerah Panditam Mayamanah

Dandamanah pariyanti Mudhah

Andhenav Neeyamanah Yathandhah.⁴

vfo|k;ke~ vUrjç orZekuk%

Lo;a èkhjk iaf.Mra eU;ekuk%A

nUæE;ek.kk% ifj;fUr ew<k%

vUèkççuSo uh;ekuk ;FkkUèkk%A

Meaning: Ignorants leading ignorant as a blind being led by a blind.

Ramaswamy; the hero of the novel is a Brahmin by birth. He thinks of his glorious and hoary lineage. He develops a quest for the thoughts of the renowned Indian Rishi- Yajnyavalkya. He traces his lineage to the rishi and wants to dispel the incertitude going on in his mind. The incertitude or doubt in his mind is born of his Upanishadic Knowledge. He is not sure whether his ancestors really died or did not. He has a quest like that of Nachiketha:

Yeyam Prete Vichikitsa Manusye,

Astiti eke Nayamastiti Chaike.⁵

येयं प्रेते विचिकित्सा मनुष्ये,

अस्तीति एके नायं चैके ।

Meaning: Nachiketha wants to know the reality of soul. Some say that it (soul) exists after death whereas others say that it (soul) does not exist after death. In this way, Rama's thoughts and Quests are similar to those of Nachiketha in the Upanishad.

Rao's approach to the position of soul after death is, based on the Vedantic philosophy. According to the Vedantic philosophy, soul does not perish with material body. It is an absolute reality. Rama also believes that his ancestors are, therefore, not dead. Their souls have left their old bodies and entered new ones. Here, Rao shows his complete faith in the Geeta as it declares:

Vasansi Jeernani yatha Vihai,

Navani Grihnati Naroprani,

Tatha Sharirani Vihai Jeernani,

Anyani Samyati Navani Dehi.⁶

वसांसि जीर्णानि यथा विहाय,

न्वानि गृह्णाति नरोऽपराणि,

तथा शरीराणि विहाय जीर्णानि,

अन्यानि संयाति नवानि देहि।

Meaning: The soul relinquishes the tattered body, enters a new one even as one changes ragged cloths and puts on a new one.

Thus Rama thinks that his ancestors' rather every one's soul is birthless and even deathless.

In this way it becomes obvious that Raja Rao depicts a conflict between 'Reality' and 'Illusion': 'Sarpa' and 'Rajju'. Indian thoughts and traditions bring about perpetual quest to the writer. He is in search of native ideology and customs.

The following passage has been often cited by Rao's critics and readers to show the quest of the writer that permeates the novel from the beginning to the end:

'The world is either real or unreal... the serpent or the rope. There is no in-between the two and all that's in-between is poetry, is sainthood. You might go on saying all the time, 'no, no,' it's the rope, and stand in the serpent. And looking at the rope, from the serpent is to see the paradise, saints, avatars, gods, heroes, and universe. For wheresoever you go, you see only with the serpent's eyes. Whether you call it duality or for modified duality. You invent a belvedere to heaven, you look at the rope from the posture of the serpent, you feel that you are the serpent... you are... the rope is. But in the true fact, with whatever eyes, you see, there is no serpent, there never was a serpent. You gave your own eyes to the falling evening and cried, 'Ayo! Oh it's a serpent' you run and roll and lament, and have compassion for fear of pain, others' or your own. You see the serpent and in fear, you feel you are at it, the serpent, and the saint. One the Guru, the Guru brings the lantern; the road is seen, the long white road, going with the statutory stars. It's only the rope. He shows it to you and you touch your eyes and know there never was the serpent. Where was it, where, I ask you? The poet who saw the rope as serpent, became the serpent, and so a saint. Now saint is shown that the sainthood was identification not realization. The actual, the real has no name.'⁷

The forerunning utterance is from the mouth of Rama who has been called '**a holy Vagabond**'⁸ by the novelist. He is a quester in the Albignansian heresy in France. When being asked by Madeleine- 'Then what is it?' Rama replies, 'The Rope.....not as opposed to the serpent but the rope just

‘is’.....’. And therefore, is no world’. Madeleine asks again, ‘But there can be a Beatrice’. After a long while Rama affirms, **Yes, where I am not. When I can love the self in Maitreyi, I can be yajnyavalkya.**⁹

Of course, Rao has shrouded the famous Vedantic concept in an undesirable rigmarole of apparently metaphysical verbage. The Upanishadic philosophy of ‘Advait’ or ‘Non-dualism’ shows very clearly that the Absolute Truth is- ‘Brahman’. It is symbolized by the Rope. There is no existence of the Serpent; it simply seems to be due to ignorance. Thus the ‘Serpent’ is the symbol of un-reality. But Rao runs a counter to the traditional concept of ‘sarpa-rajju-nanyah’ by writing as ‘The world is either real or unreal..... the serpent or the rope’. In the pronouncement of the Vedanta **Brahman Satyam Jagat Mithya**,¹⁰ there is no space for equivocation. At the same time, the fundamental unreality of the phenomenal universe also remains undisputedly admitted by the followers of Shankara. However, Rao has made a mess of the whole truth. No doubt, Rao is an author with so many quests, thoughts and traditions, but at several places, his quest confuses his readers. As the case in the passage that has been discussed. As regards the rigmarole of ‘either ‘Real’ or ‘Un-real’, Rao may be right only in the sense that he took the ‘Real’ i.e. ‘Brahman’ beyond words as the Upanishad declares ‘Neti-Neti’ about Him.

No doubt, Rao has excellent command over philosophy and so is his mouthpiece Rama. For his sound knowledge, Rama confounds readers and his wife Madeleine as well. He has tried to bring about a slight change in the Vedantic philosophy of India. For this, he has been criticized by several critics. But Prof. C.D. Narsimhaiah has tended his support to the author.

Hence, it is worthwhile to make our long established thought crystal clear in the light of the ‘Brihadaranyaka’ Upanishad. The conversation between the sage and his wife that is found in the second chapter of the Upanishad is interesting and apt in this connection. Maitreyi asks her husband Yajnyavalkya to tell the ways to immortality. The sage convinces her as follows:

*The husband is dear to the wife not for the sake of the husband, but for her own sake. The wife is dear to the husband not for the sake of the wife, but for his own sake. The sons are dear to the father not for the sake of the sons, but for his own sake. Riches are dear not for the sake of the riches, but for one's own sake.... O Maitreyi! The ‘Atman’ is worthy of seeing, hearing and contemplating and all this is inwardly brought home on acquiring jnana (Knowledge). Accordingly, all apparent perceptions are begotten of ‘Ajnana’.*¹¹

Herein the fore-running passage, the Upanishad evinces that the worldly relations or material possessions should not stand as obstacles against man's spiritual onward march. But all these should serve as supporters to individuals in their way for Self-realization.

It is, of course, unjust to say that Rao does not know the fundamental formulations of Shankara's 'Advaita' philosophy. He confounds his readers because Rao frequently applies mystification. Rama, the mouth piece of Raja Rao, believes that there are only two attitudes to life. And there is no compromise possible between the two. One approach to life is the Vedantic and the other one is the Marxist. These attitudes are irreconcilable. The two attitude to life stand poles apart. Even then, when Madeleine asks as what is there in between the two, Rama says that there are many poetic systems as 'non-dualistic modified monism', 'God', 'Islam' etc. Rao becomes very controversial while including 'God' and 'Islam' etc. in between the two. He oversteps the normal periphery of the philosophical tradition of India. The afore-said two attitudes towards life are, extremist ones. Raja Rao does not, but he ought to remember that applied life is a system of compromises.

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