



## RAJA RAO'S EFFECTIVE MANIFESTATION OF THE CHARACTERS OF EAST AND WEST TO VISUALIZE THE CULTURES OF TWO DIFFERENT MOULDS AS PICTURED IN HIS THE SERPENT AND THE ROPE: AN APPRAISAL

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### **Abstract**

*This research paper attempts to project Raja Rao as one of India's three outstanding English language novelists, the others being R.K.Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand, whose works still open up fresh and fruitful grounds for studying man who has become one with his vision of India and Indian life and tradition making attempts to alter the expression to accommodate an essential Indian sensibility with a focus on a synthetic view of values of various cultures of the world. It neatly examines how his endeavour for cultural rapprochement brings into its fold a kaleidoscopic feature of a socially wide ramification with its customs, conventions, food habits, sex, marriage, the value systems and the social gathering of the characters of the East and the West to visualize the cultures of two different moulds as pictured in *The Serpent and the Rope*.*

**Key Words:** *Outstanding, Spiritual Heritage, International Fame, Critical Examination, Indian Sensibility, Authentic Portrayal, Ramification, Culture, Civilization.*

Raja Rao, who with R.K.Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand, is considered as one of India's three outstanding English language novelists, was born at Hassan in the Mysore State in 1909. He came of a Brahmin family of Mysore. Having matriculated from Saler Jung's Madarsae-Aliya, he studied at the Nizam college, Hyderabad and took a degree in History from the Madras University in 1928. He left India for Europe immediately and did Post-graduate research in literature first at the Montpellier University and then at Sorbonne under Prof.Louis Cazamian. But soon he gave up research for the purpose of writing. His first short stories published in French and English were warmly praised by masters like Romain Rolland and Stefan Zweing. After a decade in Europe, he returned to India. He spent the war-years in a quest of his spiritual heritage. He travelled the whole length of the country from the Himalayas to Kanyakumari. The result of his experiences was the celebrated novel, *The Serpent and the Rope*. He has earned some valued encomiums from eminent critics of international fame and won the Sahitya Academy Award for his novel *The Serpent and the Rope*.

It is generally held that Raja Rao's works still open up fresh and fruitful grounds for further critical examination of their themes and techniques as well as for greater clarifications of metaphysical view-points involved in them. Any examination or analysis of his work is intended to reveal the man who has become one with his vision of India and Indian life and tradition. Rao's own mental makeup, his family background and his wide readings have all gone a long way into the making of his novels and short stories as also in the shaping of his vision. He is said to have gathered in him the traditional wisdom of Indian Rishis (Holly Seers) and has combined it with his intimate knowledge of the Western religion and philosophy. Being a pioneer of Indian writing in English, Raja Rao, more than anyone else writing in the English language today, has helped to alter the expression to accommodate an essential Indian sensibility. He is rather undoubtedly a writer being endowed with a broad vision of human civilization which has enabled him to focus a synthetic view of values of various cultures of the world.

Raja Rao wanted **The Serpent and the Rope** to be real in India as well as in the West. His purpose is to interpret India to the West and the West to India. Some Indo-Anglian writers idealize India and show the superiority of Indian culture and civilization over that of the West, while some others show the stern realities of the Indian scene and contrast these with the glories of western civilization. But Raja Rao does not belong to either of the above, for he has taken a balanced view of East-West relations. M.K.Naik observes:

"I recommend the books for a young French man. He went into raptures over the depiction of his country in its. He felt that the difference between the North and the South of France was evocatively brought out in this book" (P287).

The novelist is, therefore, in a position to give realistic and authentic pictures of life in India and France and Britain. His endeavour for cultural rapprochement brings into its fold a kaleidoscopic feature of a socially wide ramification with its customs, conventions, food habits, sex, marriage, the value systems and the social gathering of the characters of the East and the West. The reciprocal influence between East and West has been still going on. The form and the light in which west is presented in Indian novels does not have the same portrayed in all the novels. "The definition of East as well as of West varies from novel to novel, and each tries to grapple the problem in its own way" (Mukherjee 45).



Raja Rao spent quite a lot of time witnessing the culture and civilization of the European countries. Ramaswamy represents Raja Rao's consciousness of the culture of the European countries, exhaustively about France and its culture. The first thing which strikes the author as far as France is concerned in its richness and wealth both natural and man-made. Raja Rao writes:

“France seemed such a rolling garden of carrots and turnips, of plane trees that made diagonal approaches to river and castle, end of long, white roads that went to the infinity of the three seas. For all roads in France, I remembered started from Notre-Dame” (SR 52).

France has been proclaimed to be a country of peace and courtesy. Madeleine declares that Ramaswamy can never understand French people who are pious and compassionate but calculating. But Rama differs from her saying that “To belong for ever to this Christian earth, of this Christian land were no doubt a privilege and a mark of honour” (SR 28).

The marriage of Rama and Madeleine is a confrontation of the East and the West on the social-personal plane. This relationship causes tensions but the tensions are not due to any pro-west slant of Madeleine. There is no pull of the West in her. She had great respect for the ancient civilizations of Greece and the Orient. The moment she sees Savithri, she immediately says that she is the product of three thousand years of civilization. She consciously attempts to give up all connection with the West. Ramaswamy once tells Catherine that Madeleine has become more of an Indian than himself. She and Catherine are all praise for the Indian custom of sisters tying the ‘rakhi’ on the wrists of their brothers as a bond of brother-sister affection. She has heard that Indian women are worshipped but they are also tortured as slaves. Her surrender to India is so complete that she is prepared to become Rama's slave. It is quite surprising to see through the novelist's craftsmanship that a French girl has even participated in the superstitions of her Eastern husband. One round stone at the top of the hill becomes “The Elephant” and they used to take all the problems to him;

“A huge, gently curved rock lay almost flat on the ground, and if you sat on him of an evening, very still you could hear him move. You could actually feel him shake and change sides. One foot first and then the other”. When Madeleine and I had questions, we could not solve, and she wished to avoid getting irritable and angry, she would say, “I will go and consult the elephant” (SR 55).

These words of Rama show the significance that Madeleine has given to the rock. One stone near the gate of their house became Shiva's bull, Nandi and they offer to him fresh grass whenever they pass that way. Though Savithri is a thoroughly westernized girl, this Hindu concept of the relationship of a wife with her husband is ingrained in her. She calls him ‘the lord’ and during the marriage ritual that she has with Rama, she makes a good. She does an ‘arthy’ as is done in a temple and then she places her head on his feet and sobs. But Madeleine does not understand the symbolic significance of kumkum and toe-rings. When Rama comes from India, Saroja sends a sari as a present for Madeleine. In the way, some ‘kumkum’ falls on it. Rama says,

“The customs officials had wanted to see whether being an oriental, I did not carry opium, ‘he took the lid off the kumkum, and the powder fell on the sari.... “(SR 61).

Rama thinks that this is very auspicious and so he gives that to Madeleine first. But Madeleine is annoyed because the present is from his sister and not from him. He does not give her the toe-rings which Little Mother has sent for her because he feels that she will never understand their symbolic significance. He gives them to Savithri instead. In this, context, the reader come to know that Raja Rao has tried by all means to introduce the rituals and customs of the East to the West. Madeleine's idea of marital loyalty is like that of Hindu wife. Rama justifies polygamy and falls in love with Savithri and has sexual relations with Lakshmi in Bombay while Madeleine is his wife. But Madeleine resists the advances of George and Lezo and also remains loyal to her husband. This exceptional trait of Madeleine should have been the result of the impact of an ideal womanhood of India. Raja Rao has highlighted this noble virtue of the Indian woman through the character of a girl of French extraction. Madeleine's ideas on purity are closer to India than those of Rama. She has the Brahminical idea that the touch of an impure person would pollute her. When she shakes hands with Lezo to say ‘good-bye’ to him, she goes and has a bath afterwards.

If one closely examines Madeleine's spirit and habits, one finds that she is basically a Hindu by temperament. There is no pull of the West in her constitution. Their marriage is a great failure because of Rama's perverted ideas. There is a great pull of the East in his mind which makes him idealize the chain-smoking, jaze-dancing Savithri and reject the pure and sincere love of Madeleine. But Madeleine regards Savithri as the embodiment of the Hindu ideal of womanhood. In this novel, Savithri represents ‘Sakthi’ and Rama is her ‘Shiva’. Savithri comes to the London hospital when the queen was expected to come. The



queen and Savithri, a western and an eastern woman both are symbols of the Feminine principle which stands for the Absolute.

Raja Rao has highlighted some significant aspects of the life of India in relation to the social customs and habits prevalent among the people of India. He has also given the customs and social habits practiced by the Westerners (The tradition of rakhri tying by a woman is considered to be sacred in India. Sex, love and marriage among the characters of the East and the West have been delineated with the skill of his wide knowledge of the East and West as well. It cannot be denied that East has been very much benefited by Western influence. The powerful western impact upon Indian culture and social life has paved the way for the creation of a new generation which has undergone many changes. The people in towns and cities have completely anglicized in outlook. The conditions of Indians living under the impact of the Western outlook have been described by Dr.Srinivasa Iyengar in his book, *The Adventure of Criticism*:

“Wandering between two worlds, the dead past and the unborn future, the really educated Indian became, for all his aims of superiority and self-assurance, an utterly rootless creature without conditions, without regulating frames of reference. It was mostly tinsel, not gold” (P 282).

Raja Rao has brought into limelight that all cultures and all phenomena in the world are expression of the same universal soul, the Supreme Being. Rao is all praise in the minds of the readers while, looking at the elements from Easterners and Westerners’. Cultures are contained to an extreme delight of the Easterners and Westerners. In the beginning, the British attitude towards Indians was marked by snobbery, racial pride and prejudice whereas the Indian mentality is reflected in Indo-Anglian novels in the form of genuine understanding of the British. The character, attitude and behavior of Rama seem to be ever in conflict with the character, attitude and behavior of Madeleine and of the other western characters in the novel. Though the novelist has pointed out the difference here and there between the European sense of values, he is bent on spreading the cultural habitants of the East to the West. In the very first chapter of the novel, Raja Rao has aired his East-West cohesive temperament through Madeleine who said, “My son, Krishna must go to an Engineering Institute and build bridges for India when he grew up” (SR 12). Under the British rule and influence, Indian life, culture and civilization received a number of changes. Thanks to the Western system of education, Indians became more enlightened patriots and lovers of freedom. It is interesting to note what the great thinkers say about the legacy of West to India. Srinivasa Iyengar writes:

“.... the searchlight of Western thought has proved no mean factor in awakening our social conscience, crystallizing our reactions to our abuses in our midst and devising the means necessary to eliminate them” (P 248).

In *The Serpent and the Rope*, Rama has interpreted the physical phenomena of Europe in spiritual as well as intellectual terms. When Rama speaks about Oxford and Cambridge, he is full of praise for the intellectual tradition of the two universal centres of learning. Social themes such as love of language, the joint-family system, modernism and tradition, death, love, sex and marriage have been abundantly used by Raja Rao, perhaps with the sole intention of making the Westerners aware of their Eastern counterpart. To quote K.S.Ramamoorthy,

“The Indo-Anglian novels visualize a golden age of East-West relationship in which two cultures will blend under the overwhelming influence of pure human feelings, feelings of love and understanding which will transcend all imaginable barriers and inhabitations.” (197).

Raja Rao speaks about the above themes with reference to the cultural background in India. The novelist explicates them and points out the common points between them and the Indian cultural tradition. This attempt of his gives the novel a global dimension and a universal appeal.

Rama is of a synthetic culture. He is a liberal Brahmin of South India, but he does not always carry the social modes of his country. Madeline, on the other hand, is different from him. She used to remark that she was a part of the ancient Indian vegetarian Brahmin like him. She hated killing animals and so she readily took to a vegetarian diet. She had probably married an Indian because the Indians had been oppressed by the British. The West in the novel represents not merely Madeleine, but her cousin, Catherine, her uncle Charles, Aunt Zobia, Lezo, the exile from Spain and the religious Russian, George. The novel provides the readers with graphic pictures of the culture and life of the people of Europe, especially of the people of France. In European countries, women are dynamic and advanced in their views. They believe in change and welcome new values of life in preference to the old ones, whereas Indian women are bound to old traditions and as a result, they do not easily become susceptible to the change in the culture and values of life. Though some ladies in India may tend to change their traditional attitudes, they can be seen eventually returning to their original old tradition. The experience of Savithri and Saroja are illustrative of this fact about Indian ladies. They are unable to marry persons of their choice because they blindly accept the



traditional values of Indian society. They do not have the necessary courage to fulfill their ambition. Saroja wishes she were a European girl; if so, it would have given her so much brightness. The marriage of Rama and Madeline is in a way the union of the East and the West on a social-personal plane. Through their union, two contrary world views come together. Thus, both Rama and Madeleine are constantly interesting their own and each other's actions in terms of their national and cultural differences invariably ending up with generalizations about Indian and western traits of characters. The marriage of Rama and Madeleine is a union of two cultures, two philosophies, two religions, and two points of view towards life. Uma Parameswaran observes:

“.... the theme of love and marriage has been handled by Raja Rao in *The Serpent and the Rope* in much the same way as the themes of loneliness, death, Brahminism, have been treated, that is, it is also treated on a metaphysical plane. To Madeleine, Rama is a symbol of India. She seems to have loved the symbol and not the men” (156).

No doubt, Raja Rao's great achievement lies in the fact that he has western type of novel with the Indian theme and Indian tradition of storytelling. It is understand that to Madeleine, the ageless greatness and time-honoured wisdom of India are embodied in Rama. “Through Madeleine, Rama comes near experiencing man's highest state – that of self-realization” (Parameswaran 155). It is through a French character that the hero, an Indian, whose spiritual resourcefulness comes surging up, gets at the Zenith of spiritual enlightenment. The women characters of Indian origin have also contributed to the cause of cultural unity between two different Polar Regions. Dr. C.Paul Varghese comments:

“In his delineation of little mother, Saroja and Savithri, Raja Rao uses the traditional conception of Indian womanhood in varying degrees” (150).

Through an effective manifestation of the characters of the East and the West and an interesting presentation of the locales of the occidental and the oriental regions, Raja Rao has visualized in his minds' eye that the later-time readers of the two different zones will taste and relish the niceties of the cultures of two different moulds.

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