

# Spiritual Discipline in Raja Rao's Novels

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## ABSTRACT

*Born in a Brahmin family, Raja Rao is concerned with metaphysical explorations. He introduced philosophy in his novels. The philosophy in Raja Rao's novels is generally construed to be Vedantic. His novels have attracted much critical attention because they have spiritual discipline. His writings invariably manifest his quest for Truth. Born a Brahmin, he is aware of his Brahminical obligations. He believes that Brahmin is he who knows Brahman. His intense predilection for Indian philosophy has provided a philosophical ethos to all his literary creations which he calls a spiritual discipline. Raja Rao spent the formative years of his childhood with his spiritually advanced grandfather, hence he is fervently engaged in the pursuit of Truth. His quest for Truth impelled him to make an intensive study of the ancient Indian philosophy and literature that provided Raja Rao spiritual discipline to decorate his literary works with. He visited several ashrams of modern Indian sages to gain knowledge for knowing oneness. He frequently refers to the ideas enshrined in the Upanisads and the Bhagavad Gita. He draws on Vedantic and non-Vedantic doctrines, such as the Advaita Vedanta of Sankara, Nagarjun's theory of emptiness of self and the Buddhist and Hindu Tantric thought with ease and authority. The novels of Raja Rao display his interest in Gandhism, Communism, Vedanta and Tantra. Raja Rao is distinguished from his well-known contemporaries such as - Mulk Raj Anand and R.K. Narayan. While Anand and Narayan stick to social reality, Raja Rao projects Indian philosophy in his novels. He is concerned more with man's spiritual quest for liberation.*

**Key Words:** *spiritual discipline, spiritual quest, metaphysical rigour, meditation, Jiva, incarnation, Tripurasundari, socio-spiritual, Sivoham, philosophical discourse, filarial treatment, nirvana.*

## Introduction:

Raja Rao's innovations as a novelist are significant. The structural frame work of his fiction points that he is conducting means experiments in the presentation of theme and philosophy of novel. He possesses philosophical sensibility and spiritual discipline. His novels are characterized by his continuing interest in philosophy making him a philosophically complex novelist. He has brought to the Indian novel in English "an epic breath of

vision, a metaphysical rigour and philosophical depth, a symbolic richness, a lyrical fervour and an essential Indianness."

Raja Rao has been influenced by the ancient Indian epics such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. The Western writers whose influences on Raja Rao are much are- Charles Baudelare, Fyodor Dostoeve sky, Romain Rolland, Andre Guide and Paul Valery. Inspired

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by the expatriate Raja Rao speaks for the affirmation of the flesh. However, it may be pointed out that his expatriation to the West is merely an accident; he is essentially an Indian as regards his personal propensities and artistic preferences and his novels primarily revolve round Gandhism, Vedanta and Tantra.

The Gandhism portrayed in Raja Rao's works pertains only to the non-violent freedom struggle of pre-independence era as he deals with it mostly in *Kanthapura*. Influenced by the Gandhian notion of the purity of means and ends, Raja Rao primarily advocates non-violence as he projects the Indians' struggle for independence under the impact of Gandhi in his fiction. The philosophical dimensions of Gandhian philosophy are, therefore, limited in his works.

The three strands of Vedanta postulate different theories about Jiva-Brahman relationship and prescribe separate paths for man's spiritual elevation. Vedanta, in general, recommends devotion, surrender of the self, meditation, sexual abstinence and ascetic rigour reflected in non-attachment to worldly possessions and annihilation of the ego for the liberation of man from the cycle of birth and death. In Vedanta, Brahman, who is supreme, is the material and efficient cause of the world. He alone is the creator, ruler and destroyer of the universe. Raja Rao follows these theories of Vedanta as spiritual discipline in his works.

Raja Rao's novels reveal several characteristics of Tantra. Tantra recommends the worship of the mother goddess, invoked by various names such as Lakshmi, Sarasvati, Maha Kali, Durga or Tripurasundari. Devotion to the goddess is a potent instrument for the transcendence of several desires as the aspirant perceives the divine Mother in every woman. The

Worship of the goddess is, however, synthesized with the adoration of the god as father. The invocation of the goddess and the god in the aspects of a mother and father relationship such as Sita-Ram, and Radha-Krishna, is an established characteristic of Tantric Sadhana. Tantra prescribes Kundali Yoga by which a Tantrist, through the control of his senses, may realize God in Sahasrar known as the thousand petalled chakra. Tantra is, therefore defined as spiritual discipline of a technical nature to attain immortality.

In *Knathapura*, Mahatma Gandhi is portrayed as a symbol of divine power as well as a tangible reality. He is thought to be an incarnation of Krishna and, therefore, he will remove the suffering of the Indians. Gandhi would slay, the serpent of the foreign rule as Krishna had killed the serpent Kalya. But the *Kanthapurians* are to follow the non-violent philosophy of Gandhi to remove the British ruler from India as a moral discipline.

Moorthy's austere practice of the Gandhian philosophy creates a stir in the village, *Kanthapura*. All the orthodox men and women raise such a hue and cry against Moorthy's way of doing things, that the Swami the custodian of the Sanathana Dharma, threatens to excommunicate the whole Brahmin community of the village. Only Radha, the young widowed daughter of *Kanthapura* turns out to be the spiritual helpmate of Moorthy.

In *Kanthapura* religious fervour is blended with social realism in such a way that the ideas of Gandhi are easily comprehended by the villagers. The impact of Harikathas is ennobling and innovating and even the old women cannot remain detached. Raja Rao's spiritual doctrine presented in *Kanthapura* has a Puranic pattern fundamentally

suits the socio- spiritual cosmic insight articulated in the novel.

Raja Rao's "The Serpent and the Rope" is deeply rooted in Indian philosophy. It depicts man's quest for self-realization. The theme of the novel is the futility and barrenness of man in human existence when man or woman has no deep quest, and no thirst for the ultimate. Man's life here in this world is an august mission to find the Absolute.

In 'The Serpent and the Rope' Ramaswamy's views on death have been derived from the Upanishads. He says nobody has died because birth and death are the illusions of the non-self. In the Upanishads, death is meaningless and so it is in the Bhagwad Gita. Srimad Bhagwad Gita affirms that when an individual dies, the Atman just changes its garment. Guided by these Vedantic percepts Ramaswamy understands that his son Pierre, his mother Gaurie and his father are not really dead because the 'soul' in them is eternal and imperishable. On the eve of his father's death, he gives his opinion that he cannot repent because he does not believe there is death.

In The Serpent and The Rope, Ramaswamy professes to see the immanent self everywhere. He is so enamoured of the idea of all pervading Universal Self that he hears the mystic sound of Shiva-Shiva, Hara -Hara even in the running of Indian trains. It is also true that on occasions, he tries to witness the pure consciousness in the Indian princess Savithri owing primarily to his intellectual affinity with her. He attempts to extend his individual self to the extent of seizing "I" both in the animate and the inanimate objects of the world. In his philosophical discourse with Savithri, he makes her aware of the presence of the immanent soul in all the objects of the world. Savithri understands

the idea so well that she sings - "Mano-budhi Ahankara" with deep emotions and closing her eyes enters into meditation. Undoubtedly, she is alive to the significance of Sivoham.

The Serpent and The Rope depicts the predicament of modern man, who lured by the worldly pleasures, finds it hard to observe severe austerities and spiritual discipline of Vedanta. Raja Rao suggests that Truth can also be sought by following the Tantric discipline under the supervision of a guru.

In The Cat and Shakespeare, Raja Rao represents an indulgent glorification of the supreme goddess. Most of the characters in the novel are the worshipers of the goddess who is the supreme deity of the Hindu Tantra. The Great Liberation: Mahanirvana Tantra describes the goddess as the Sovereign Prakriti that is the material cause of the world. The idea of Shridhar's salvation through the kindness of the goddess appears to be drawn from Tantra which lays down that the Mother's grace and blessings alone can free man from the bondage of this samsara.

In this novel, the male and female deities are often involved together by the novelist. Ramkrishna Pai recalls the tribes man saying that the goddess has sacred trysting place- with Lord Shiva. The novelist's motto in this novel is that according to the Hevajra Tantra all women should be honoured for they are the mother- goddess. Hence the woman in the novel is delineated as wife, mother and deity; all the diverse forms of womanhood coalesce into a single being. This treatment of the woman in the novel is connected with the Tantric faith which considers all women earthly representatives of the supreme goddess.

The novel also depicts the non-dualistic affinity between Ramkrishna Pai and Shantha. Raja

Rao dwells upon the interaction between man and woman as he perceives the dependence of one on the other. He believes that the male attains awareness only through his affinity with the female.

In *The Cat and Shakespeare*, Govindan Nair's meeting with a naked woman is saturated with Tantric discipline. When he visits a pediatrician for the filarial treatment of his son, he is introduced to the doctor incharge of the clinic Shiv Shankar Pillai who is surrounded by young women. As one of the women enters the apartment, Pillai commands her to strip herself for medical examination. Govindan Nair draws the chair nearer to look minutely at the beautiful woman who now lies stripped naked in the bed. The gold necklace falls on her rich bosom and her shape is comely. Nair, who is the sage or the Shakespeare of India, does not feel sexually tempted although the woman is willing. He admires her that has afflicted her and regrets why man should make a woman suffer. The woman then covers herself and stands up like a daughter before a father. The naked woman in Tantrism is regarded with the same adoration that one shows while contemplating the inscrutable secrets of nature.

As Govindan Nair is an initiated person, he has the privilege of worshipping the naked woman. He has attained self realization because sexual enjoyment no longer tempts him. Vamamara Tantra says that Parakiye and concubines are ceremonially prepared for Tnatric worship. The Hevajra Tantra, too, mentions of worshipping of the consecrated maidens who are young and beautiful. It is thus obvious that Govinda Nair's meeting with the naked woman culminating in his reverence for the woman prakrti is closely related with the Hindu and the Buddhist Tantric thought

of spiritual discipline.

*The Chessmaster and His Moves* is the story of unfulfilled love between Sivaram Sastri an Indian mathematician and Jayalakshmi a Rajput princess, married to Raja Surendra Singh. Siva is haunted by reverances of love and the narrative unfolds itself in the manner of retrospective flash-backs. However, the non-fulfilment of love between Siva and Jaya gives way to frustration and evokes metaphysical deliberations on love, death, time, Truth and God. Siva reverses Jaya as if she were a goddess. He considers her a saint who gives him strength. The love between the two is not physical but spiritual one.

The novel follows the theory of Buddha philosophy. Sunya (zero) is defined in this novel. Siva says that sunya (zero) is not nothingness or emptiness. Zero has been called void at several places in this novel. Siva contends that nirvana and sunya are the same and sunya is the same as the zero. His concept of sunya is derived from Buddhism. Mahayana Buddhism equates sunya with nirvana. Sunya in Buddhist philosophy is constant, eternal, unchangeable and indestructible; hence it is called nirvana. Sunya for Siva is the great light where by the entire universe is illuminated. Hence, no one can possess it, not even the sage.

Sivaram asserts that all the events of our life are governed by the rules of the game of chess. He believes that the god Siva runs the world from his mountain retreat and the world dances to his tune like a monkey. God, the master chess-player, makes us jump, move and run forward and never allows us rest. The novel also portrays Siva's quest for Truth and his intense predilection for Buddhism, Vedanta and Tantra.

Comrade Krillov by Raja Rao is a novel of communism. The theme of the novel is indicative of the disapprobation of communism as it is represented by an Indian. Padamanabha believes that the regeneration of India depends on the outcome of Theosophy. The parody of communism is heightened as Kirillov is projected as a hypothetical Buddha.

The novel is also interpreted as a commentary on the Indian and the Russian ideologies represented simultaneously by Kirillov who vacillates between his love for the spiritual heritage of India. The novel also contains casual references to Vedantic and Tantric philosophies. Several characters in the novel are influenced by the non-dualistic philosophy of Sankara. Raja Rao holds that it is not material prosperity but spiritual enrichment that grants happiness to man.

### **Conclusion:**

A detail study of Raja Rao's novels shows that his novels contain legends, philosophical reflections on Christianity, Buddhism, Gandhism, Vedanta, Upanishad and Tantra. As a real Brahmin,

Raja Rao makes a quest for searching the Brahman (Truth or God). As a realist he has tried to prove that without knowing the Truth (God), man cannot enjoy the real enjoyment of life (Paramanand). To know the Brahman, observation of morality, feeling of spirituality, practice of religion and ethics are essential. Raja Rao's novels portray all these things and carry a flavour of spiritual discipline in the real sense. His novels are totally philosophical.

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