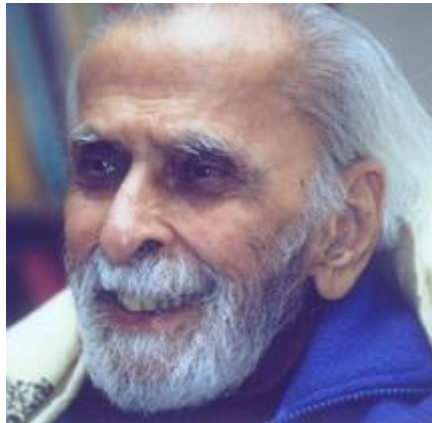


Raja Rao's Social Concerns in His Early Stories

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Raja Rao (1908-2006)

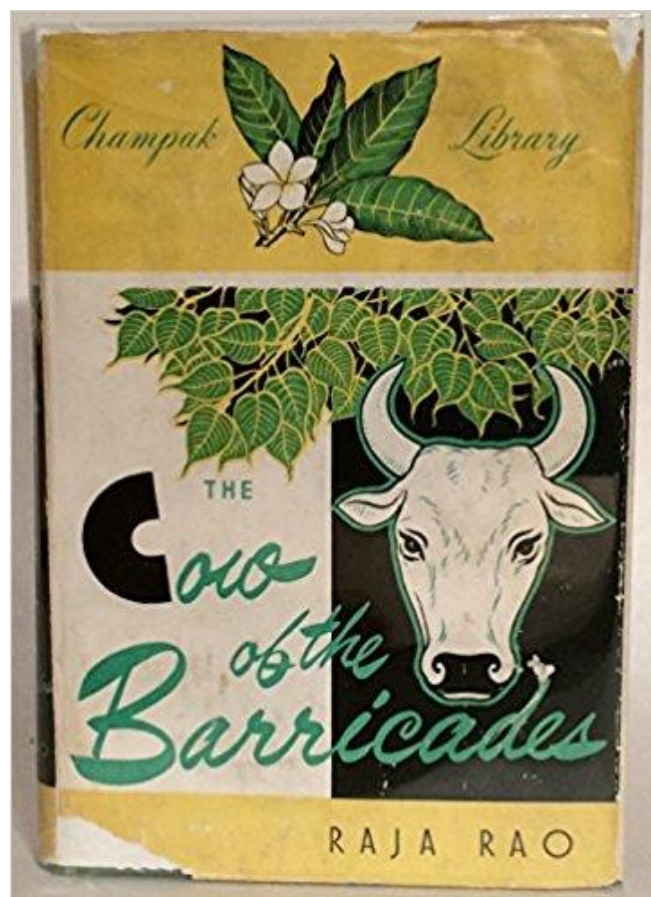
Courtesy: <http://www.therajaraoendowment.org/>

Abstract

This paper presents before the literary world a review kind of investigation in the stories of Raja Rao. There has always been lack of literary pursuits to explore the different layers of Rao's stories. To awaken from the slumbering negligence towards the stories of Raja Rao, and to reexamine his stories as the aid to understand his literary world better, is the edifice of the arguments of this paper. His stories are few in number and narrow in range but in impact and depth. The methodology used is analytical and comparative to shed light on the main arguments of the paper. Social and moral issues in his stories are pertinent, relevant and valuable in understanding the human conditions particularly in the middle of the last century. The study gets its thrust from the awareness that there is need to realize the significance of the intellectual encounter which takes place in early English writing.

Social Relationship

Social concerns in Raja Rao's creative works are an important part of Raja Rao's literary achievements. One of the most significant aspects of Raja Rao, as a master of Indian English fiction, is his keen perception of the social principles operating in the Indian social psyche of the pre- and post- independence period. The social relationship has had been a dominating shaping force of the hereditary mental disposition in India. This relationship is a part of the rhythm of Indian life and thought. Social ties are pervasive influences in the collective unconscious of a tradition-bound society like the Indian Society. Social values are recurrent in the Indian epics also. The epics have helped society transmit traditional wisdom to posterity. Epics serve as a symbol in the form of patterns or themes evoking the values of the Indian cultural tradition. And this image of social impact remains a source of inspiration and a pervasive influence in Raja Rao's stories in general and in his novel *Kanthapura* in particular.



Focus on Two Short Story Collections

Here the focus is on the first two short story collections of Raja Rao, namely, *The Cow of the Barricades* and *The Policeman and the Rose*. There are only twelve stories, and yet, as C.D.

Narasimhaiah remarks, “ [These stories] Have yet to receive critical attention” chiefly because they are “ the products of an inevitable stage in the growth of a mind, in the evolution of a major novelist who was cultivating his craft with the utmost care....”¹

Portrayal of Village Life, Beliefs and Practices

Raja Rao’s stories are integral part of his total vision of life. His stories are both thematically and technically connected with his novels. Quite like his novels, the stories are as much representative of Indian life and attitudes, at the social and metaphysical plains. Besides, they help Indian narrative in English evolve as he intended to. Some of the short stories of Raja Rao offer a contemporary social and political relevance, and these are quite representative of Indian life at the material plane. They unfold a metaphysical truth or embody a symbolic reality. They also contribute to the image of India at the metaphysical and spiritual planes and evoke India’s cultural past with its continuing impact on the present custom, conventions and attitudes. No doubt, the mythological framework in some and the folklore technique in others also contribute to the obvious Indianness of his stories. He has identified the villagers’ sacrosanct belief in rigid caste system, in legends and superstitions, and in the theory of karma and transmigration of soul. He has also depicted the sway of religion and god over their minds and above all their ignorance, simplicity and credulity. He has painted the village life in such a realistic and forceful manner that one cannot but marvel at his intimate knowledge of Indian life as well as his power of recreating that life within the limited compass of a short story and through the medium of foreign language.

Easy and Eloquent Presentation in a Foreign Language

It’s easy to present the Indian life in anyone of the Indian languages because language and culture are the twin products of the growing and living soul of the nation. But it is difficult to recreate the Indian life and sensibility in a language of remote origin and development. Yet, as stated by the publishers of *The Cow and the Barricades*, Raja Rao “seeks to communicate Indian modes of feeling and expressions”² through the medium of the English language. Raja Rao adopted English as his medium because in French he could not do this for “its delicacy needed an excellence of instinct and knowledge that seemed well-nigh terrifying” ³ and the English remained, as he puts it, “the one language with its great tradition and its unexplored riches capable of catalyzing my impulses, and giving them a native sound and structure.”⁴

Raja Rao has tried to recapture the very spirit of Indian life in his stories which as he says are the “fruits of such an experiment” 5 both in terms of language and structure. He invents a popular form of narration, essentially Indian in tempo, tone and texture. He creates new similes and native terms of expression in order to add an Indian color to his techniques. Besides he creates new myths out of the old ones and lends a legendary structure to his themes for the same purpose.

Never Didactic

Seldom or never didactic, Raja Rao’s intention is always to reveal the woes and sufferings of the village-folks. He tries and exposes in his stories the social evils and idiosyncrasies, oddities and weakness of human character. The power of his stories lies in the things which is born of one or the other kind of suffering having particular relevance to Indian things and yet remaining universal in significance. He has written fewer stories than his contemporaries but a significant variety of themes and techniques can still be discovered in his stories. Although the fewer number of stories narrows his range, yet, as Mr Venugopal observes “what he loses in range, he achieves in depth”. 6

Early Stories – A Client

Among his early stories, both “A Client” and “Javni” are specimens of his early style of story writing. These rely on a simple and straightforward pattern of narrative and dialogue. It largely lacks the touches of his familiar style of the later stories and novels. Both the stories are the testimony to the writer’s objective, social concern which is free from any radicalism or ideological commitment. The thematic development of “A Client” centers in Hosakere Nanjundia’s persuasive efforts to win the consent of Ramu - a plain-hearted school boy for marriage. The blow of realism hits at the institution of marriage. It exposes simultaneously the evils of child marriage and unmatched marriage settlements. The success of the tale lies in the suspense which is consistently maintained till the end when the embarrassed adolescent is taken, much against his wishes, to Vishweshwara’s house and is dramatically apprised of his benefactor’s intentions.

There had been changes in the patterns of marriage-settlement in the last few decades of the previous century, but the settlement of a daughter's marriage among the “high-caste” Hindus has always been a great social problem. It’s a prolonged battle between the unwilling simple youth and the crooked marriage-broker. It symbolizes the problem of our society in a certain historical context. In this story this has been presented quite like the clever moves and counter-moves in a game of chess. It is like a patient hunter luring his prey into his trap. Nanjundia wins over the simple mind of

the boy, Ramu, who begins to think at last: "After all, perhaps the old man is right. Old men are always so full of ripe wisdom... Why not marry? Sofas... Hot coffee... Electric light."7 The clever marriage-agent wins and Ramu finally falls into his trap.

Javni

"Javni" presents the pathetic tale of a "low caste" widow who, neglected and ill treated by her own brother, works in a middle class Brahmin family more for the affection she gets than for the bread she earns. Javni and her mistress are bound by such a bond of love which admits no caste and creed barrier for its reciprocal give and take. "Good like a cow" as she is reported to be, she presents the image of an illiterate simple and credulous woman of an Indian village in the pre-independence days. Her faith too has both aspects of the superstition and a true belief in a benign deity. Believing in the existence of Evil spirits in the village which is according to her, a haunted place, she is also of firm faith in the grace of goddess Talakamma who "moved on reigned" above all and that is why she is thankful to the goddess for all that she gets.

Like the mind of Javni, everything in the story is simple - the narrative, the dialogue, the characterization and the moral. The simplicity of the story too has a power of its own which makes it so moving with enduring significance. The social realism of the story centres on a world in which human relations were still unaffected by the individualistic trends of the materialistic civilization. But the social realism soon develops into the emotional realism of the bond of love between one man or woman and the other. And the portrayal of Javni becomes the central point of a touching story, thus more than the tale of a widow or a woman from the so-called low caste. Javni becomes an unforgettable sketch of a woman of simple living and total emotional dedication who can love her mistress as much as the son of her selfish and cruel brother as also the lamb she has. The story of Javni presents the possibility of mutual love and regard among the people of various castes of Hindus. Javni herself grows bigger than a mere victim of caste-ridden social structure. She becomes an embodiment of devoted service and unconditional love.

Akkayya

Raja Rao employs a powerful narrating technique in "Akkayya" that evokes a child's reaction and responses to an old lady's love and affection. It also unfolds the psychology of neglected old widow. By the force of its pathos and realism it reminds us of Munshi Premchand's "**Boorhi Kaki**". Akkayya, quite like Javni, represents a class of widows or uncared women living with some of their

close relatives. She has a singularity of her own and her character is portrayed more as an individual than as a type. Yet, as Venugopal points, "...Akkayya, though loving, is only tolerated, whereas Javni is loving and is loved". 8 But even the sympathetic tolerance she receives is rare and can be taken for an idealistic portrayal of a humanitarian attitude so much desirable in human relationship. It also becomes the sentimental core of the realistic presentation which is the basis of characterization in this story. The story successfully depicts the life of the traditional joint Hindu families in the villages in the early 20th century in India. However, its main emphasis is on the realism of an unforgettable character.

Kanakpal

"The true story of Kanakpal, protector of gold" is a realistic story of a serpent when it is a friend. This story was narrated to the author by old Venkamma. She is Plantation Subbayya's sick mother. Employing folklore style, it begins with such touches which reinforce folklore trait of narrative: "May those who read this, be beloved of naga King of serpents, destroyer of ills" 9 Based on the myth of the snakes, it is a true story as the title emphasizes. This story judges both human elevation and degradation. It tells how money may be saved for a pious use by a man like visionary Rangappa and how it can be criminally grabbed by the evil ones like his own descendants. Kanakpal - the snake protector of gold becomes a veritable embodiment of gold itself both as a sacred family-treasure and an object of greed and a source of evil. It is in this respect that the serpent is both a friend and an enemy.

Quite in the style of Puranic tales and folklore, Raja Rao weaves a forceful description of a flow of time through all sorts of changes, births and deaths, elopements and marriages, epidemics and floods, during a whole century or so. The folktale style adds life to the narrative even as the whole account illumines the life in the Indian villages of more than half a century ago.

NIMKA

A story of realism and pathos, "NIMKA" is another instance of a domestic tragedy which shows how Raja Rao's emotional cosmopolitanism is shaped into art. NIMKA - A beautiful Caucasian girl "with green mongoloid eyes and a soft lolling tongue that contains rounded sweetness"10 and also a warm heart, looked like a young princess. "Nimotchka was good, very good, and of a simple true beauty, as though you cannot efface it even were you to cut her face with many crosses. Her beauty has certainty; it had a rare equilibrium and a naughtiness that was feminine

and very innocent.”¹¹ Raja Rao implies in this story a unique poetic style which relishes a happy blend of emerging sentiments of the moment and the dazzling ideas; for instance: “it was beauty - it always will be, and you can’t take it, and as such you can’t soil yourself. How could you, for when you contemplate beauty, you end in contemplation...”¹² The story grows quite like the carving of an image or a little statue out of a piece of pure-white marble. Each stroke of the chisel reveals a reality hidden in the apparent blackness of the soft and smooth stone or exposing some hidden nerve of the beauty. It reveals some concealed muscle of goodness. Taken as whole the story foreshadows the typical narrative style of *The Serpent and the Rope*; and developing sometimes into a riddling one it reminds us also of the style of *The Cat and Shakespeare*. The failure of the narrator, a typical Indian, in winning the love of NIMKA is narrated very suggestively in a riddling style:

The Indian is too simple in his depth-if there is no concierge
and the cat, there is no goodness. Success is sin. Gandhi
is poverty. The maharaja is proof of truth. Truth is unnaked.
Love is unsaid. So Nimotchka fell in love with Michel.¹³

The story presents the tragedy of Nimka's life and love; she was successful neither in life nor in love. Her remarkable goodness of soul and matchless physical beauty did not get her success in life. Having gone bankrupt, her husband left her and ran to Monte Carlo to make money, leaving their little son Boris to her care for ever. It was for her son's sake that she had to be a mannequin during the war but even he, when he grew older, left for Russia leaving her helpless all alone. The account of Mahatma Gandhi's murder is joined with her own woeful tale simply in order to lend an added pathos to the story as also to suggest the tragedy of a life of righteousness. The cardinal message of the story being the truth that "the good is what had distinction, and the bad what is successful".¹⁴ The end succeeds in producing a cathartic effect as we are told that "Nimka was not sad. Her heart contained an intimacy of sorrow that was almost kin of joy... Nimka asked nothing of life. She asked nothing of me... She knew the life that has ended is eternal"¹⁵

Social and Mythical Force of India

India is a social and mythical force for Raja Rao. It provides nurture to the social explorations of his characters either living in any pedestal of social strata. He has great concerns about the social hemisphere of India, its ideas, myths and traditions. He has provided a true picture of Indian social life in his fictional world which determines the form and content of his text. Last but not the least,

perhaps more critical attention is needed for an in-depth analysis of these archetypal situations and patterns as expressions of social consciousness.

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