

Raja Rao's Political and Metaphysical Concerns in His Early Stories

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Raja Rao (1908-2006)

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

Abstract

This paper presents before the literary world a review kind of investigation in some of the early stories of Raja Rao. There has always been lack of literary pursuits to explore the different layers of Rao's stories. To wake from the slumbering negligence towards the stories of Raja Rao and to re-examine his stories as the aid to understand his literary world better, forms 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. This paper discusses the Political Resurgence and Metaphysical Symbolism as the undercurrent waves of some of his stories. These issues in his stories are pertinent, relevant and valuable in understanding the human conditions particularly of his era. 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.

Metaphysical and Political

The idea that the short stories of Raja Rao are to be understood through political and metaphysical perspectives in his early story collections forms the edifice of the arguments of this paper. His stories are partly political, partly metaphysical, partly philosophical and even partly autobiographical. The overriding moral and spiritual imperatives are equally important. His story collections, in its received form, thus combines above said threads to make a rope generating a discourse of expansive ambiguity for the critics to play around and re-inscribe new meanings.

It is significant to note that metaphysics is the cream of knowledge. It is here that an Indian writer, more than most writers elsewhere, has the advantages of abundance of resources for his writing. Thoreau said, 'a fact should flower into truth in the hands of a writer', similarly should do metaphysical attainments. And Raja Rao was a safe apt hand for this genre of writing.

Metaphysical Principles and Indian Psyche

One of the most significant aspects of Raja Rao as a master of Indian English fiction is his keen perception of the metaphysical principles operating in the Indian social psyche. The metaphysical relationship is a dominating shaping force of the hereditary mental disposition in India. This relationship is a part of the rhythm of Indian life and thought.

Metaphysical aspects are pervasive influence in the collective unconscious of a tradition bound society like the Indian. The epics have helped society transmit traditional wisdom to posterity. It serves as a symbol in the form of patterns or themes evoking the values of the Indian cultural tradition. And these metaphysical influences remain a source of inspiration and a pervasive influence in some of Raja Rao's stories and in all his novels from *Kanthapura* to *The Chessmaster and His Moves*.



Courtesy: <https://www.amazon.com/Raja-Rao-Collected-Stories/dp/0143422316>

Protagonists

The archetypal pattern of metaphysical preferences is shared by all the protagonists of Raja Rao's novels. Moorthy in *Kanthapura*, Ramaswamy in *The Serpent and the Rope*, the narrator 'R' in *Comrade Kirillov*, Ramakrishna Pai in *The Cat and Shakespeare*, Sivarama Sastri in *The Chessmaster and His Moves* all are having metaphysical quest. These figures are symbols of the struggling human soul, like Arjuna, yet to reach the Absolute.

The Policeman and the Rose

In the short story of Raja Rao, *The Policeman and the Rose*, we find the metaphysical aspect elaborated but in symbolic language.

Every living *man* has a policeman and his
name is your name, his address your address,
his dreams your dreams...in the last life too he
was a policeman. He always was a policeman.¹

I, that is the policeman was born...that is some
Thirty-three years ago, he that is the Police
child, cried like every child...I was arrested immediately...
when I was born he said: I am a big Policeman for a
small child, you are free and grow and become free...²

The new born is attached to the body as he was arrested immediately. There the Policeman corresponds to the Guru and the child is the disciple, the helpless struggling seeker. The idea that the essential meaning of the India is in the Guru-Sishya relationship can be traced to the early story. The Cow of the Barricades and other stories where the cow symbolizes the true spirit of India, which ambles round the Guru figure, the Master, "to be born a sage in the next"³

India as Mythical Force

India is a mythical force for Raja Rao. It provides nurture to the spiritual wanderings of his characters either living in exile or living in India. India in Raja Rao's fiction is not a geographical area. India is an idea, a myth, at times a tradition also. The image of India as the Guru of the world helps in the spiritual progress of almost all Raja Rao's characters. He has provided a paradigm in his fictional world which determines the form and content of his text. The paradox of duality and its desolation, rendered possible with the grace of the Guru, constitutes a major thematic concern in his metaphysical-cum-philosophical novels. Raja Rao was the safe apt hand to deal with such themes is to be explored fully.

Stories and Novels are Connected

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, political, and metaphysical plains. Besides, they help Indian narrative in English evolve as he intended to. Some of the short stories of Raja Rao, having a contemporary metaphysical and political relevance are quite representative of Indian life at the material plane even as the others. They unfold a metaphysical truth or

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embodying a symbolic reality. They also contribute to the image of India at metaphysical and the 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 folk load technique in others also contribute to the obvious Indianness of his stories. He has mastered in evocating the villager's 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.

Identity of Essential Culture through All Indian Languages

It's easy to present the Indian life in any one of the Indian languages because language and culture are the twin product of the single growing and living soul of the nation. But it's difficult to reincarnate the Indian life and sensibility in a language of remoter 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"⁴ through the medium of the English language. Raja Rao adopted English as his medium because the French he could not for "its delicacy needed and excellence of instinct and knowledge that seemed well-nigh terrifying"⁵ 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."⁶ 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"⁷ 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.

Focus on Revealing the Suffering and Woes of Village Folk

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".⁸

National Resurgence

The theme of national resurgence has been the most favorite subject of Indo-Anglian fiction during the 1930s and the 1940s of last century. Raja Rao has been a pioneer in this respect. Also, 'Narsiga' is one of his earliest stories which presents quite realistically the profound influence that Gandhi and Gandhian movements. Gandhi had a hold over the innocent minds of the ignorant villagers. Nargisa was always eager to know, "who was this Gandhi?" and he was told by his aunt that Gandhi was "An old man, a bewitching man, a saint."⁹ Narsiga was an orphan child whose father had died of cholera and mother of famine. He was brought up by an aunt of his who had

married a pariah in another village. In the Master's house he got the first taste of true love and affection that were denied to him in life so far. Nargisa grazed the sheep of the Master along with those of his uncle and others on the hillside. The Master was the leader of the Mahatma's men in the remote village. He inflamed Nargisa's nationalistic zeal and occasionally apprised him of the activities and movements of national resurgence. As a good disciple he reacts. He shows his nationalistic sentiments and his anger against the alien ruler. His passionate love for the motherland is depicted. He expresses his joy at the release of Mahatma does. Gandhi becomes a God, the very incarnation of Shri Rama, for Narsiga who visualizes that the "Mahatma... is going to fly in the air today like Goddess Sita when she was going back from Lanka with her husband Rama"¹⁰. The story presents the socio-political realism at the national level and the emotional realism in the context of a single character.

Khandesh

No doubt, the national resurgence is thematically connected and is depicted on a much broader canvas in *Kanthapura*., But in *Khandesh* also he presents a condition of a feudal and slave India within its limited compass. The difference is only that the locale in the story has been shifted northward from Karnataka to Maharashtra. The opening of the story with the sounds of drum- "Tom-Tom-Tom-Tom-Tira-Tira-Tira..., asking the villagers to assemble for an important business and the account of Dattopant's sleepless night evidences the narrator's power as a mature artist. The references to the auction of the land evokes the state of rural peasantry in the pre-Independence days. Successive stokes of pen makes the topographical details of the region and the color and light to the scenic background:

In khandesh the earth is black. Black and grey as the buffalo, and twisted like an endless line of loamy python's wriggling and stretching beneath of the awful heat of the sun between a python and python is a crevice deep as hell's depth, and black and greedy and forbidding as demons' mouths. 11

The Maharaja's visit was kind of a great event for the village-folk. It could bring a furor in the village. It was so because the Maharaja was accompanied by the Viceroy-His Majesty's representative in India. The villagers had to honor him by standing by the railway line. It showed them how loyal and faithful the subjects were to their Sovereign: "For every four telegraph poles there will be one man on foot, and for every four men on foot, there will be a man on horse-back"¹². This slavish degradation had the funny element also in it. They had to stand with their backs to the train and they would not move even the smallest hair on their body as the train passed by. This grand show of loyalty had to be safeguarded against any kind of suspected treason. No show of rebellion could be tolerated because it was discovered before "how some devilish, prostitute-born scoundrels tried to put a bomb beneath the train of the Representative of the Most High across the seas..."¹². This story represents a transitional state of the modern India. It records the first waves of the force of resurgence just in the offing. The tragic end in the death of Dattopant who was squashed by the ballast train that laid the Viceroy's special adds a note of pathos to the whole situation. The end turns out to be highly symbolic, making the funeral to symbolize the funeral of the British Raj and the slavish loyalty of the Indians to it and the fire to embody the fire of resurgence: "In khandesh the fire burns as elsewhere" 14.

The Cow of the Barricades

The Cow of the Barricades presents a unique combination of symbol and reality. The cow has two interpretations. First, being the symbol of country's soul- the very incarnation of Bharat Mata. Second, as actual cow of mysterious nature. Gauri is a "strange creature" in her ways and preferences. She was seen only on Tuesdays and she refused the grains, grass and rice-water gathered for her by the Master's disciples and accepted only the handful of grains offered by the Master who described her, among other things, as "the great Mother's vehicle" 15. She was assumed divine for all those who sought fulfillment of their hopes and aspirations by touching her tail or by falling at her feet. The cow was a pure soul. She was compassionate and true. Her very presence created the environment of perfect harmony wherever she went. Particularly in the Ashram of the Master who one fine morning "woke in his bed to hear a snake and rat playing under him for when the seeker finds harmony the jackal and the deer and the rat and the serpent becomes friend" 16. The Master is obviously a self-realized soul like Mahatma Gandhi. He was rather a local Gandhi like Moorthy in *Kanthapura*. The religious spirit of non-violence is powerfully combined with fervent nationalism in "The Cow of the Barricades" also. When the people of the town began building barricades after barricades, the Master came and said: "No barricades in the name of Mahatma, for much blood will be spilt" 17, and seeing their enthusiasm he further warned them, '...there will be no battle, brothers" 18. Yet, the whole situation remained fraught with terror and panic. Even Gauri-the embodiment of non-violence and truth- came every evening to the Master and "looked very sad, and somebody had even seen a tear, clear as the drop of the Ganges, rundown her cheeks, for she was of compassion infinite and true" 19.

This story presents the Indian way of thinking about war and peace. It's not only the fight between the foreign ruler and the Indian subjects but also a fight between the two ways of winning the freedom- the violent and the non-violent. Failing to convince the spirited freedom-fighters the Master resigned from the Presidentship and sat in meditation so that the city might be saved from blood-shed. At last, Gauri herself appeared on the scene of confrontation between the forces of the rulers and the ruled. Her presence had such an impact upon both that the workmen laid down their arms and the Indian soldiers from the other side joined her followers across the barricades crying "Victory to the Mahatma! Mahatma Gandhi ki Jai!". Gauri's venture ultimately ended in self-sacrifice as she was shot by the chief of the Red-men and "she fell, a vehicle of God among lowly men" 20. The barricades too become a symbol of division of Indians into followers of rulers and the rebels against them. But both were joined together by the inspiring figure of Gauri who herself becomes an embodiment of the spirit of self-sacrifice, compassion and non-violence, though remaining an unforgettable character in a memory.

Rich and the Age-Old, Yet Vital and Living

Raja Rao's short stories have a unity of vision of the rich and the age-old, yet vital and living Indian tradition. The typical political and metaphysical concerns of the thirty's and the forty's describing the events of national significance are well expressed in some of his stories. No doubt, the progressive in Raja Rao is always subservient to the philosophically-oriented humanist in him. He exhibits also a remarkable power of myth-making and use of a forceful narrative. He creates as in "The Cow of the Barricades" or "Companions" new myths respectively out of the contemporary history or the legendary tales. The form in most of his stories as Prof. M.K.Naik

puts it, is that of “Folk-tale or a popular legend with all its simplicity, credulity, its myth-making power, and the strong moralistic substratum on which it is, in its popular wisdom often grounded.”
21 A full size portrait of Mother India adds uniqueness to his short stories. They evoke a reverence for all that is noble and vital in Indian culture even as they arouse our disapproval of all that is rotten in it.

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