

# Raja Rao's '*The Serpent and the Rope*': The Language & Style

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**Abstract**—Raja Rao in one of the most prominent novelists of Indian writing in English. Kanthapura has presented a complex story in which the political, religious and social stands of experience were woven in an artistic whole for it and Raja opted a new style which has “the intensity and precision of French, the essential understatement of English, He is perhaps the first Indian, who bring to the business of novel writing a wide intellectual culture. The *Serpent and the Rope* is undoubtedly one of the finest novels written in English during pre-independence days. Raja Rao lays emphasis on the universality of themes by presenting the contemporary and remotely historical or mythological events together. Another significant linguistic device which is exploited meaningfully by Raja Rao is the use of recurrent words. Some words like Haemoglobules and ‘eighteen aggregates’ occur again and again and they are close to becoming symbols. While the marriage of sister is being described by Raja Rao, the word haemoglobules occur frequently. The use of large chunks of philosophical observations is another device of Raja Rao. Raja Rao is a great artist of language.

**Keywords**— Raja Rao, Language, Style.

## I. INTRODUCTION

**R**AJA Rao in one of the most prominent novelists of Indian writing in English. Raja Rao has successfully achieved the feat of using an alien language. English for expression of creative urge. Rao's *The Serpant and the Rope* has own prestigious Sahitya Academy Award in 1964. The novelist has used English for expression of complex emotion, ideas and sentiments. Raja Rao is fully aware of the artistic possibilities of his linguistic medium and takes painstaking task to enrich the same. The language and style of *The Serpent and the Rope* gives the impression of spontaneity. Another device which provides the novels its unique identity is the use of a very large number of quotations.

*Kanthapura* has presented a complex story in which the political, religious and social stands of experience were woven in an artistic whole for it and Raja opted a new style which has “the intensity and precision of French, the essential understatement of English, the resonance of Sanskrit.” [1] However, *The Serpent and the Rope* has a far more complex fabric than that of *Kanthapura*. It is a “classic, not merely by national but the most exacting international standard.” [2] Its literary qualities, superb style and catchy language, yet C.D.

Narshimhaiah has admirably explained its qualities in the following words:

*“It has not one story, but many, woven round one and often into it, one theme at different levels; mingling of many cultures; many nationalities (chiefly Indian, French and English though there are also Russian, Spanish and Italian nationalities as well); at least there language-English French and Sanskrit. Add to it myth; legal, philosophy, poetry and history- all this rich material has been beautifully and most successfully organised and fused into a single theme by the symbolic imagination of the novelist. It is a novel, but conceived as dramatic poem.*

*He is perhaps the first Indian, who bring to the business of novel writing a wide intellectual culture- Vedas, Upanishads Buddha, Shankara and Comaraswamy/jostle with Cathars, the Holy Grail, Dante, Rilke, Paul Vavlery, Cexanne, Maxx, Gide and Roman Rolland. All this surprising range of knowledge –knowledge alive with understanding becomes the marvellously felt through and to the reader it feels like lived experience ... there civilization- French, English and of course Indian have been penetrated with admirable insight and brought to life with sympathy, understanding and yet a high degree of impartiality.[3]*

*The Serpent and the Rope* is undoubtedly one of the finest novels written in English during pre-independence days. It attempts to concretize the metaphysical structure of thought. It is a novel of ideas and at the same time a symbolic novel and yet it defies those categories as they are known in English literature. It is an excellent blend of those two modes into a unique and satisfying artistic whole. The novel has complex structure and contains a number of themes of central concern to the East and West. The author goes deep into the surface and is unlike Kipling who is not able to penetrate into the catchy and colourful surface of the East. The style adopted by Raja Rao resembles that of Salman Rushdie, who too uses the style of story concept. Raja Rao's story takes place in the post Second World War Europe and India but he transcends the local and his characters and themes achieve Universality. Some of the themes which give universal value to *The Serpant and the Rope* are exploration of reality, quest of identity, marriage, confrontation of the East and the West, the mystery of death and continuation of human existence, futility and men's desire to achieve significance. The characters

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emerge out of their local contexts, become symbolic and echo in the passage of time. The novel, like a symphony having unique structure of a large number of notes, resembles an Indian classical song which manages to achieve variation on a theme. Although it does not present animated pictures of outer reality which abound in the novels of Mulk Raj Anand and Nayantara Sehgal. It aims at different kinds of grandeur and achieves it. These themes are armed with great resource of language and technique. Raja Rao uses these literary resources to give consummate expression to his design and creative urge. He uses unique linguistic medium which creates marries sound and sense thereby makes vocal different areas of the narrative skill.

Raja Rao lays emphasis on the universality of themes by presenting the contemporary and remotely historical or mythological events together. The contemporary scenes presented by him are vivid and character are like real one. The following lines show a vivid picture:

*"I saw the yellow and white of the kite and shake like tail that the windswept, curling, whirling on itself and leaping up back against the sun. The wind blew cool and fresh. I laughed as child laughs, playing with the subtleties of the breeze. I was happy. The world is happy place for everyone to live in: look at the arts in the Lal Bagh,"*[4] (P.207)

In another paragraph, Raja Rao begins with the contemporary and ends with the remotely historical and, thus, weaves the past and present together in one meaningful whole. Raja Rao writes:

*"The wind rose over the asoka tress I read it (Savitri's letter) a send time, at the Lal Bagh. On the other side of the lake, five or six men were taking both. If was just before dusk; they must have come after some cremation. Beyond the crema torium was the mad house; Dr. Appaswamy. Who was a friend of mine, once told me that some of the inmates were quite extra ordinary in moments of lucidity there was one, professor of Mathematics, who solved many problems there that he could not in his native town of trichnapoly. Death, madness; pratap marriage haemoglobules. Telegraph wires above and stars beyond. Benares is everywhere you are; says a vedantic text; kapilvastu is the true some of mankind; each one of us has a Kanthaka at his door."* (P. 289)

There are some passage where the contemporary in only a faint echo. The following passage shows us contemporary details only at end of the passage:

*"of course, there was a charger waiting for me. It would take me to the trunks. Its name would be kanthaka and I would change my royal garments by the genges, admonish him to return and lit the people of kapilvastu know that he kanthaka was a noble steel that had led Gautam, the Sakyan to the banks of Ganges, and thus started him on the pilgrimage from which there is no returing. There was no need to go to the banks of Niranjana for the Bodhi treel there were many by the lake in Kodai."*

The following lines show us about the pansy Madeleine planted in her garden:

*"oh, be good! Prayed Madeline, like a child; gave him (to Rama, her husband) water again. We made a small canal ground him, and as often as possible we gave him water. Madeleine they went into her room, and brought the sacral ater of Budha. This is the best Ganges water, she proclaimed. The pansy was bright, and we were happy with it."* (P.322)

The lines quoted above clearly show us that Raj Rao does not use this linguistic device in a wooden and unvarying manner. In the first two, the contemporary is in the foreground; in the third, the contemporary details come only at the end; in the last passage there is a happy balance. This device has been used at many places and it always impregnated the local and merely contemporary with universal significance.

Another significant linguistic device which is exploited meaningfully by Raja Rao is the use of recurrent words. Some words like Haemoglobules and 'eighteen aggregates' occur again and again and they are close to becoming symbols. Such use of device is found in Shakespeare, where the recurrent words and details gets symbolic significance, and in Dickens, where they become part of the frame works of rhetoric; and in Raj Rao they usually become echoes which give an impression of continuity.

While the marriage of sister is being described by Raja Rao, the word haemoglobules occur frequently. It is one of the novels with superb presentation of the events connected with a typical Indian wedding. The narrative is presented in a language which has a quickened rhythm. It is in fact one the major variation on the major theme which is marriage. Rama's marriage with Madeline is barren because both the song of the couple died; it is also a failure because it does not give the couple 'happiness', temporal or spiritual. The marriage between Saroja and the ugly, big lieutenant-looking Subramanya has many details but the most significant is as below:

*"Saroja was like a filly dancing about the mother elephant.*

*'Brother, what shall I do, what shall I do?'*

*'Do about what Saroja?'* oh brother, I want to run away, run away anywhere.

*'I cannot marry him, I must marry him. It is selfish of me marry a man whom I detest.'* I look down upon. I think I only like his car, his position, and the feeling that is like father." (P.264-265)

The marriage of Saroja and Subramanya, therefore, is only a variation of the central theme marriage its sacredness, its baroness, its futility and final disillusionment, the realization that it cannot be a 'companion of pilgrimage'. It has a function which is similar to that of sub-plot in the dramas of Shakespeare. This story with the story has been described in quickened rhythm which enact the mood of joy. It reminds us the deram-withindream concept as adopted by Salman Ruhsdie in *Midnights children*.

Another device which provides the novels its unique identity is the use of a very large number of quotations. There are, in fact, 75 quotations in the novel of 404 pages.

The works of Sankaram Bhavabhuti, Mira, Dante, Baudelaire, Paul Valery, Berdiaeb, Anglo-Saxon texts etc. are some of the sources. They stress the universality of the themes. They also make us conscious of the fact that the past and the present are parts of a complex, organic fabric. When the narrative becomes quicker in pace and rhythm, the quotation retard the moment of the narrative and bring it back to the serene key. One quotation from *Bhavabhuti's Uttara Ram Charita* serves unique artists function. The Sanskrit verses occur on pages 331-332 and English translation is given on page 333. Bhavabhuti's *Uttara Ram Charita* is the story of last part of Rama's life when he banished Sita, his wife Rama is the king of Ayodhya and the guardian of law. Rama's marriage to Sita fails like the marriage between Rama and Madeleine. There are moments of bliss and happiness in *panchvati* but the shadows of two separations one, that Sita was taken away by Ravana, and the other, when she was banished by Rama himself and a fire-ordeal taint the relationship between the two. They are also symbols; the one symbolizes the earth, the other the light of the sun, in the other words, one may be called the symbol the Rope, the other the symbol of the serpent. Geographically they come close to each other during summer, and go away from each other during winter.

Ram Charita or the life of Rama is the story of bliss, battle, separation and reveals the pattern of life itself. As most people know, there are thousands of versions of Rama's story and in almost everyone there is the interpenetration of the divine and the human. In some versions occupies the centre of the stage. Bhavabhuti's *Uttara Ram Charita* is a moving human document and the *The Serpent and the Rope* which tells the story of a marriage or rather so many marriages and their failure it the modern version of that ancient story. Madeleine goes on a fact for 41 days, performs Buddhist Tantrik writes for the health and well being of her husband, Rama. But has reputed the world and also Rama is aware of this facts and charts verses from *Uttara Ram Charita* to Madeleine. Raja Rao gives English translation of in the following words:

*This, then is the forest- I see if now both as hermits and householder here we lived for a long, long while, performing our sacred acts and knowing the juices of the joys of existence. This, then the mountain where the peacocks cry and here the valleys with antelope wooded; there with bamboos softly murmuring in dark blue tufts, the bank of rivers. There, where mount pasravan like as garland of cloud soars, flows the river Godaweri...*

The quotations from *Bhavabhuti* and the reference to the 'legionaries of marius' give the relation between Rama and Madeleine an element quality and a universal dimension. And the communication takes place even when no syllable is understood in the normal sense. In the paragraph that follows Raja Rao says: the Dictionary of often the bible of the inarticulate. In his essay on 'the writer and the word', Raja Rao clarifies the concept further when he says: "the word as pure sound is but a communication that comes from silence. The word is but vibrate silence compounded into a

momentary act,"[5] In the same essay "he says, he who says the word enunciates the word, and he who hears it has to have the eternal part awakened in him so that there could be right communication. If the transient speaks to the transient it becomes a cacophony. But if the eternal, the unchanging, speaks to the unchanging we have one language.[6] When Rama charts the verses of Bhavabhuti, he communicates the eternal to Madeleine and Madeleine understands him.

The use of large chunks of philosophical observations is another devise of Raja Rao. They occur after every four or five pages except in the portion devoted to Saroja's marriage where they are very short often sentences or two. As already stated earlier the episode connected with Saroja's marriage enacts the central theme of the novel in more intimate and down to earth terms, the place of the philosophical observation is taken by the word *haemoglobules* which occurs against and again. On other portions, the philosophical observation about truth, life, significance, identity, time, existence, religion, the unconscious and the occult give the novel a metaphysical dimension. However, these observations are not dry and monotonous like the language of most philosophical discourse. They are characterised by the unconventionality of observation. For example:-

*The God that resides in us is of an ancient making; ages after our ancestors have couped, and a bit more of each god grew in us as we grew up. Like someone in rance saying; I'm a Montmorency makes you think at once of st. Louis and Templers of Melta. He was taking of the great tracts of the unknown in the recesses of our being, postures of the invisible in which we the familiar, the sons of the family go driving our cattle. (P.92)*

Usually the philosophical discourses are uninteresting but these passages are exception due to touch of poetry. They are absorbed in the linguistic fabric of the novel. There are certain incidents which are in contact to the tone adopted by Raja Rao in the philosophical passage. This is reflected from a scene of meal being taken in a restaurant at Calcutta.

*"Do you remember, Rama that meal in Calcutta? You know that they did Saroja? We bought meal tickets at the station Hindu restaurant. Brahmin or non Brahmin? They asked Brahmin section the whole place looked funny. It was not that I have not been to restaurants before I have even eaten in Brahmin hotels at Banglore but there it was different. They started serving. I put my hand into the curry. It seemed very soft to touch, but yielded with such difficulty. 'Brinjal it must be', I said and looked at Rama. Rama who has been all over the world, also proceeded with care. Saroja, thanks God I did not put it into my mouth. You know what it was- if was fish. 'Ayyappeal', I said and rose hastily. I would have thrown the whole of my stomach out. They laughed at us and explained that in Bengal, Brahmin do eat fish; they call it the vegetable of the sea. 'Ayyoyya said little mother, I could have put my hand into fire, as we do impure vessels, to get touch of it out of my skin. Thoo; spot little mother; I could have put my hand into fire; as we do impur vessels, to get the touch of it out of my skin. Thoo; spat little mother, and how Saroja laughed."* (P.49-50)

Raja Rao, thus, ironically satirizes the caste ridden Hindu society and prevailing feeling of untouchability. Metaphors and image used by Raja Rao are metaphysical in the manner of Donne, e.g. The golden hair of Madeleine fell out of the window like a bunch of grapes. (P.88) thus, Raja Rao is a great artist of language.

-: Notes :-

1. C.D. Narshimhaiah, '*Raja Rao's Kanthapura*', Critical Essays on Indian Writing in English, ed. M.K. Naik et al (Dharwar, 1971, P.290-91)
2. C.D. Narshimhaish, 'Raja Rao: *The Serpent and the Rope*', Literary Criterion, Vol. V No. 4 (Sept., 1963) P.392
3. Ibid. PP. 62-63
4. Raja Rao, '*The Serpent and the Rope*' (London, 1960), P.207 All subsequent references are from this book.
5. Raja Rao '*The writer and the word*', Critical Essays on Indian Writing in English, P.361
6. Ibid. P. 360
7. Ibid.

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