



Indian Myths, legends and Folklore : A Study of Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope*

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Abstract : Human culture and society have the beginnings in myth and not in the history. This symbolizes a conflict between the inner world of spirit and the ideals of truth. As myth presents the ultimate triumph of good over evil as if it had already happened. So, what has happened in myth will happen in history. In the Indian myths, like all other myths has a significant time because of their universal appeal. So we can therefore, get an insight into the aesthetic as well as ethical philosophy of Indian culture. Explaining the mythical matrix of Raja Rao novels, he says, "The book that has filled my imagination and come to me for years at every crucial point of my life, to interpret and to help, is the Ramayana... Buddhist texts have deeply stirred me ...They did influence me at one time, with their poetry and rich humanity...but there is something of the Kshatriya in me and I always go back to the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. *The Serpent and the Rope* is full of myths, legends and folklore which establish the identity of Ramaswamy, Savithri, Madeleine, Lakshmi and a host of other characters, highlighting their situations as well as their relationships. In this novel, he has heavily drawn on the Mahabharata, the Ramayana; and his method of weaving stories within a story reminds one of the Puranas. In the novel, myths and legends not only establish a link between the contemporary and antiquity but also substantiate and concretize the spiritual probing of Ramaswamy. The myths of Radha-Krishna, Savitri-Satyavan play a dominant role in establishing a spiritual relationship between Savithri and Ramaswamy. These mythic figures has a human relationship which is elevated to the spiritual heights. Though the main myth presented in the novel is that of Radha and Krishna but there are references to the myth of Buddha also which symbolize Ramaswamy's quest for self-realization.

Key words: Myths, History, Quest, Mahabharata, Ramayana, Buddha.

The term 'myth' has been derived from the Greek word 'mythos' which literally translates to a word' or an 'account' i.e. a set of assumptions that have been rooted in the belief system of a particular generation. Therefore, myths are generally understood to be a collection of events or tales created by a group of people who relied not on facts or written texts but an oral tradition to understand the true nature of existence.

The present research paper discusses about the conceptual difference between what are considered to be the conventional definitions of myths and mythology and how they are dealt with by the Indian writers in English of the late 19th and early 20th century with specific focus on Raja Rao. Myths, instead of being regarded as a distortion of reality, were used to reinforce and validate the then current events which now form a significant part of history. By asserting myths and mythology in the English literature of India, the authors were able to preserve tradition while trying to break away from it and this was exactly what Raja Rao set out to do. It was him who almost single handedly in the 20th century brought about a change in the Indian thought process by insisting for English rather oriental education. Rao writes about the contemporary events and at the same time, it is evident that his works are deeply rooted in the Indian philosophical ideologies and culture. Raja Rao saw writing as his 'dharma' and literature as 'Isadhana', a form of spiritual growth. I would like to mention two of his novels, which shall serve as an exemplar for the research topic.

The novel, *The Serpent and the Rope* is often regarded as a semi — autobiographical story of Rao. The story revolves around Ramasawamy, a south Indian Brahmin married to Madeline, a French school teacher. The novel's central theme is marriage. Moreover, it explores the intersections of the Eastern and the Western cultural traditions. Spirituality too remains one of the concerns. To reiterate his themes, the novelist inculcates several myths and literary forms. For instance, Ramasawamy's spiritual quest resembles the story of the Upanishadic character Nachiketa. The novel also mentions the Mahabharata legend of Savitri and Satyavan among other references like the poetess Mira and Lord Shiva. According to some critics, influences of Vedantic philosophy and Adi Sankara's non-dualism can also be observed.

Thus, it can be said that Raja Rao portrays a milieu in his novels which is inseparable from myths and legends, whether it is while addressing national issues or questions of spirituality. He succeeds in his attempt to prove that epics like Mahabharata or Ramayana and several other folk tales which are etched in the Indian minds are not more stories but have the capability to serve a larger purpose.

Raja Rao is one of the greatest of Indian novelists writing in English language. Only two others Mulk Raj Anand and R.K.Narayan could come near him as Uma Parameswaran suggests this in her rigorous study titled *A Study of Representative Indo-English Novelists*, "Among the novelists one could narrow down the choice to Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao....Yet, in the final analysis Raja Rao comes out several steps ahead of Anand" (141). He hailed from a traditional South Indian Brahmin family and after having matriculated from Hyderabad, he went over to Aligarh for higher education and earned his graduate degree. Thenceforth, he proceeded to France on a scholarship awarded to him by government and studied at the universities of Montpellier and Sorbonne. Due to a streak of spiritual recluse in him, he returned India and visited the. Asharam of Sri Aurobindo, Pandit Taranath and Ramana Maharshi. Raja Rao was a prolific writer, though not in the sense that he wrote much but whatever he wrote was an outcome of his slow and earnest creative endeavor. He wrote slowly, revised frequently and got published his works at great intervals because he wanted to achieve perfection in his creative works: He wrote his first novel *Kanthapura* in 1938, and a collection of short stories. But he failed to produce any other piece of fiction immediately because at that time he was experiencing deep stirring of spiritual crisis, he emerged a changed man and a religion and philosophy have a prior claim on him now. After this spiritual metamorphosis, he wrote *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960), *The Cat and Shakespeare* (1965) and *Comrade Kirillov* (1976), *The Chess. Master and His Moves* (1988) and he appears in them as more of a religious philosopher (370)

The Serpent and the Rope is the most prominent literary work that came into existence with the maturity of Raja Rao and is generally known as the spiritual and philosophical autobiography of the novelist containing metaphysical undertone running parallel throughout the novel. "The Serpent and the Rope is the most mature of Raja Rao's works. It took ten years in shaping itself . . ." (Raziada 164). Similarly C.D. Narasimhaiah has appreciated this novel saying, "Let me at once admit that I have, ever since, I first read *The Serpent and the Rope* in 1962 considered Raja Rao the most significant Indian writer in English and a major novelist of our age" (68). For this novel he won the Sahitya Akadami Award in 1966 and Padam Bhusan was awarded to him in 1969 by the President of India. World attention at once focused on it and it won enormous critical and literary appreciation and it is still praised for its magnificent creative undertone and achievement.

The Serpent and the Rope is a complex and multifarious work of art and hence can be studied at various levels. On narrative ground, it is named as an account of Ramaswamy's quest for self

realization and transcendence which enables a man to distinguish between 'illusion' and 'reality.' This self realization can be acquired through Vedantic Philosophy according to which dualism is 'illusion' and the conviction in 'non-dualism' is true enlightenment [Cyan]. Ramaswamy calls himself as a holy vagabond as he wanders in search of this enlightenment. He also realizes that in this spiritual pursuit, a Guru's role is of utter significance and the mode which he adopts for realization of this is not a complete detachment rather he tries to acquire this by remaining an integral part of world and for him marriage, the union of two souls, assists a man to acquire this salvation. He believes in the detached Karmic journey of a man. The novel is embedded with highly metaphysical and sublime thoughts. Harish Raizada suggests: In *The Serpent and the Rope*, he has extended the scope of the novel by giving it new subject matter, the quest for metaphysical wisdom or meditation on the nature of existence from Indian point of view 11. . . 1 based on the tradition of philosophic India of Vedas., Upanishadas, Brahm Sutra, the Gita, Yagnyavalkya, Sankara, Madhya and their descendents who left hearth and riverside fields and wandered to distant mountains and hermitage to see God face to face. (164) As the subject matter of the novel is philosophical, it requires an intellectual and sophisticated narrator and Ramaswamy is an apt protagonist for this possessing great knowledge of different cultures, philosophies and religions. Through his character, Raja Rao has successfully interwoven Vedantic vision and wisdom of age old Indian scriptures by adopting the mythic and archetypal pattern of narration. The very theme of novel is the knowledge of the 'self,' so a straightforward and descriptive narrative technique would have been inappropriate to explore the philosophical thoughts and meditation which transcends the limitations of time and space to carry universal appeal which may be yardstick to the whole modern generation. In order to serve this purpose, Raja Rao has employed the mythic and archetypal images with their symbolic undertones to highlight the theme of this novel so as to place it to the epical grandeur. Iyenger states in this regard that "*The Serpent and the Rope* — a far more complex work — is a novel as a modern Indian Mahapurana (major epic legend) in miniature" (397). Hence, before mythic and symbolic study of *The Serpent and the Rope*, it is essential to be well acquainted with the nature, significance and relevance of mythical pattern in modern literature. Charis Baldiek points out: Myth is a kind of story or rudimentary narrative sequence normally traditional, through which a given culture ratifies its social customs or accounts for the origin of human and natural phenomena, usually is supernatural or boldly imaginative terms. . . . In most literary context, myths are regarded as fictional stories containing deeper truths, expressing collective attitudes to fundamental matter of life, death, divinity and existence.

Owing to universal appeal and everlasting prospective, myths are conveying those things and actions which find no other expressive mode. Modern writers have, therefore, found in them a useful media of communicating the predicament of contemporary people as well as their outlook and view of human life. By employing mythical situations and characters in modern context, they can ponder over human situation with a broader perspective of time and space. Myths are to link modern situations, characters, images and thoughts with archetypes and those archetypes play a significant role in literature.

Like myths, symbols are used as visible sign to suggest something invisible and are capable of evoking indefinite suggestiveness which becomes a very useful tool for a writer to comprehend and communicate his profound vision of reality. Charged with the writer's imagination, symbols acquire greater evocative and perceptive power. M.H.Abrams remarks, "In the broadest sense a symbol is anything which signifies something In discussing literature, however, the term symbol is only applied only to a word or phrase that signifies an object or event" (Def 22s). Baldick also suggests that

"a symbol is specifically evocative kind of image; that is, a word or phrase referring to a concrete object, scene, or action which also has some further significance associated with it. . . ." Moreover, charged with the imaginative and creative faculty of the writer, symbols acquire evocative and perceptive power. Symbols may be called mythic because symbols are derived from a myth and emerges as an archetypal image and evokes deep emotional response on the part of reader because it resonates with an image already existing in his / her unconscious mind. This connotation of symbol has led Cassier to describe them as the best media which helps man to participate both in the realm of the spirit and that of matter and made Jung consider them as means of uniting the conscious with the unconscious. Thus, symbols render great service by creating a frill vision of reality "CO. Jung proposed that certain symbols in dreams and myths were residue of ancestral memory preserved in collective unconscious." (Baldick Def.79A)

Because of his preoccupation with the metaphysical issues of nature of ultimate reality and epistemological problem of human comprehension of that reality, Raja Rao finds myth and symbolism as the most appropriate mode. He possesses an encyclopedic knowledge as to draw material from Indian mythology as well as from history and culture of the whole world. He has employed various myths in the very texture of this novel. The ritual marriage of Ramaswaymy and Savithri is the suitable example in this concern as Savithri (modern Savithri) comes to worship him, her lord, her Shiva, her Krishna to perform aarthi and in this way to accept him as her husband: "She took flower and kunkum and mum ling some song to herself, anointed my feet with them. Now she lift a camphor and placing the censer in the middle of kunkum water she waved the flame before my face once, twice and three times in aarthi" (The Serpent and the Rope 213). Som P. Rancham denotes that this worship of Ramaswamy by Savithri holds great significance, "Ramaswamy Savithri relation under the archetypal sign of Shiv and Parvati; Radha and Krishna has cast spell on countless readers of The Serpent and the Rope" (102-103). Moreover, the very name of Savithri reminds a sincere and devoted wife in one of the stories of the Mahabharata: "Savithri is one of the prototypes of wifely devotion, and Hindu brides even today are blessed with the benediction that they may be like Savithri. Sometimes it is known as the Dish-Gauri ritual (Vrata) with a different story to justify its observance by all married women" (Nagrajan 106).

That Indian people are religious and attaches significance to their rituals and archetypal figures hailing from mythology. Little Mother tells Rama the story of Sri Rama, the mythical figure of the Ramayana, the holy epic to acquire the blessings of Sri Rama: Rama, Rama, Sri Ram, give us wealth, and give us splendour; give us the right riches auspicious, give us an heir, give us a home and sanctuary, give us earth and gardens; those who to lands distant, may they return, may the body be firm and innocent; give eyes to the blind, give legs to the lame, give speech to the dumb. Rama, Sri Rama, Rama, give us Thy Holy Presence . . . (The Serpent and the Rope 257)

Myth emerges from collective unconscious of mankind. Rama and Savithri are contemporary prototypes of archetypal Prakrati and Purusa, Krishna and Radha, Shiv and Parvati because their experience of love is akin to that of their original archetypal figures. As Nagrajan has remarked: "Man is Purusa, the lord of creation and woman is Prakrati, the inherent power of Purusa, whereby Purusa creates. Woman's function is to give herself as Prakrati to man as Purusa so that man may know that is his true self is Purusa himself (80). Hence, Rama and Savithri are the symbols of creative power of the universe. All men and women are one and Savithri merges into Radha and Krishna and the two then into Shiva and Parvati and ultimately in all such figures. At last there is no dualism but 'Om.' Rama says that "there never was anything but Shivoam-Shivoam. I am Shiva, I am Absolute" (The Serpent and the Rope 197) Collective unconscious shows that the experience of whole humanity is one and the same.

Thus, through the collective experience of Rama and Savithri, the novelist has successfully manifested Advaitic philosophy of non-dualism charged with mythic symbolism. Savithri says to Ramaswamy "I have known my lord for thousand lives; from Janam to Janam, I have known my Krishna" (The Serpent and the Rope 224).

Moreover, she says: I would go round you three times, once, twice, thrice and fall at your ash-coloured feet, beginning that the lord might absorb me into herself . . . I am a woman, she added hesitatingly,

Me'retho Girdhara Gopal

Mine the mountain-bearing Krishna

My Lord none else than He. (The Serpent and the Rope 211)

It shows that in 'spiritual union,' there are not 'you' and 'I,' but only 1, "Om." This is what Yagnavalkya tells Maitreya: "Not for the sake of the husband is the husband loved, but for the sake of the self in him. Not for the sake of the self in her" (The Serpent and the Rope 34). Rama seems like Tiresias who is an archetypal figure and has the experience of both man and woman. His personality is fluid and he is capable of transcending the limitations of time and space. The protagonist of this novel Ramaswamy is the symbol of the human consciousness of mankind. Rama visualizes:

I could see in myself a vastness as it were, a change of psychic dimension of a more ancient in me Brother, have you seen my brother? I had asked: from kings, and going beyond the Ganges or the Cauvery, from saints and sages I had asked, backward in history to times of Upanishads and even unto Yagnavalkya and Maitreya and as though at each epoch, with each person, I had left a knowledge of myself, a remembered affirmation of myself, and in this affirmation had been the awareness of the Presence that I am, that I am brother. Thus it was I walked about in Kensington room (The Serpent and the Rope 197). Myths are also used as digressional technique. The most important is the myth of Budumekaye. In this myth a young prince Satyakama, exiled through the machination of his step mother, follows a rolling pumpkin through a forest. The pumpkin clashes against a rock and out comes a beautiful princess named Ramadevi, who leads the young prince to his glorious destiny which is to be a king. This digressional myth is closely related to the very narrative technology employed by the novelist as Rama recalls this story when he goes from India to France for the first time: "Savithri was a real princess by birth, but what must have brought the story back to me was that as I stood at the bottom of gangway this somewhat round and shy thing rolled down as she ran . . . I had almost to catch her by hand lest she fell against some trunk or cargo, as it on the pier" (The Serpent and the Rope 123).

Rama is a highly sensitive and imaginative Indian whose mind is a seething whirlpool of culture and cross culture. He is familiar with the myths and legends of a number of countries ranging from east along with west: "Rama is familiar with myths and legends of different civilizations and he can discern parallel between them and forge link between the past and the present by comprehending oneness" (Raziada 166). On the one hand, there are the myths of Satyakama and Ramadevi, Radha and Krishna, Shiva and Parvati; on the other, the fable of Wang Cha and Chang Yi and the tale of Tristan and Isult.

The Serpent and the Rope is a sustained and highly symbolic piece of writing. If myths are employed with an aim to explain human situations and relations, symbols are applied to highlight the theme of the quest for and apprehension of 'Ultimate reality.' They also help to serve the technical function in order to organize experiences into a kind of order and reveal the complex relationship among divided things. The title of the novel The Serpent and the Rope is symbolic as the serpent symbolizes 'appearances,' illusion,' and 'unreality' and the rope symbolizes 'reality.' But in truth there is no such duality, the serpent and the rope are one and same. In this way Raja Rao seeks to convey the Advaitic

doctrine of oneness of all, of the identity of Viva' and 'Siva' forms: "The Rope (reality) is misconstrued as the serpent (unreality) whereas it is only the rope in actuality. This is due to the darkness of ignorance (avidya), the cloud of unknowing and when the light (vidya) is brought the darkness is dispelled and the object is perceived in the true nature" (Rao 82).

The theme of the novel is again symbolized by the epigraph of the novel, "waves are nothing but water / So is the river" (The Serpent and the Rope 5). Sea symbolizes the 'Ultimate reality' and a wave symbolizes individual soul. Both are one and the same "[Not the sea is not ultimate word: it still signifies separateness of duality. The ultimate word is water, and when the water is realized, waves and sea vanish" (Bhattacharya 286). Ramaswamy, the hero narrator, is basically Advaitic, the follower of Hindu creed and believes in Vivekananda's word: "As a man you are separate from woman, as human being you are one with the woman; as a man you are separate from the animal but as living being the man, woman, the animal, the plants are all in one; and as existence you are one with the whole universe. That existence is God, in Him we are all one" (Parameswaran 144).

Apart from this, the myths are also used with symbolic overtone in this novel to highlight the situation or relationship between characters. Her (Savithri's) love for Rama represents Radha-Krishna relation and is symbolic of the seeker's unrealized longing for the 'Absolute' and her ritual marriage with him is also symbolic as it represents the union of feminine principle with that of masculine or of Prakriti (nature) with Purusa as S.Nagrajan remarks that "the Purusha himself knows only in knowing his power of Prakriti" (81).

Thus it can be said that the novel is highly symbolic as it is replete with myths charged with symbolic significance. Sometimes the reader finds himself or herself bewildered in the labyrinth of too much philosophy with symbolic cross current of myths, but this would be an injustice with the very nature of this novel because these myths provides this work with high richness and literary grandeur and also facilitates the reader to understand the very theme of this novel.

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