

**The Serpent and The Rope and The Cat and Shakespeare: The Journey from Sadhak to Bhakta**

Dr. Darshita Dave  
M. Phil, B.Ed., Ph.D.  
Asst. Professor  
V.V.P. Engineering College, Rajkot.

**Abstract**

*The importance of inquiry into the nature of the Atman has been felt by many Indian English writers, and has also changed their lives. One prominent name among such Indian-English writers is Raja Rao (1908-2006). Raja Rao a thinker lives in his own private world of religious ideologies. He, a genuine sadhaka, reflects his own spiritual wanderings through his entire work. The sadhana is an act and process of 'growth within himself' to attain the state of 'oneness' with Brahman. Rao depicts his own journey to salvation by portraying his protagonists-Moorthy, Kirillov, Ramaswamy and Pai. The focus of my paper is how Raja Rao has shown the protagonists' transition from a Sadhak to Bhakta with reference to his two novels.*

**Key Words:** Quest for self, illusion, guru- the torch bearer, surrender

The search for one's own identity is a common and recurrent theme in Indian English fiction. It has taken two main directions – philosophical and sociological. The philosophical quest involves a web of dualisms from which the protagonist must disentangle his complex identity. One of the chief opponents of this approach is Raja Rao. Literature and philosophy have always worked hand in hand, the end of both being transcendence of the egocentric predicament of man. The difference, however, lies in the treatment. Philosophy adopts the mode of intellectual inquiry and literature does it through aesthetic means.

Rao's novels examine aspects of the sensibility which involved being, faith and belief. His writings invariably manifest his quest for truth. The novelist realized that literature is also a spiritual experience as it is an extension of his *sadhana*. Therefore his writings stem from his total dedication to metaphysics. The writer, according to him, is essentially a man who strives for metaphysical experience. After spiritual realization, the writer – *sadhaka* is compelled to express it with his creative abilities. Novel is written for the sake of the writer himself. Firmly committed to the task of fulfilling his *sadhana* through spiritual discipline, ardour and self-surrender, he does not practice writing as a profession. He attains sublimity

through guidance from a guru capable of imparting 'drishti' to him – the *sadhaka*. In his quest for spirituality, Raja Rao visited Aurobindo's Ashram in Pondichery, Ramana Maharshi at Tiruvannamala, Narayana Maharaj at Kedgaon, and Gandhi's Ashram at Sevagram. Finally he landed in Trivandrum and met his guru sage Atmananda Guru. Raja Rao has confessed to Shiva Niranjana that his own guru had helped him glimpse spiritual glory:

If you mean sage in the sense that he has found the Truth that would be correct. I think, I have. My 'Guru' has the compassion to show me the Truth – its naked beauty. But if you mean by that, I am ultimately there already that is not quite true. I am trying to be what my 'Guru' taught me. So I think, the best thing would be to call me a 'sadhaka', a very serious 'sadhaka' of course. [Niranjana – 15]

Raja Rao started his literary career with the first novel – *Kanthapura*. Apparently dealing with Indian freedom struggle, the novel explores one of the most significant subjects of philosophy – the quest for Self. The action and theme of this book and the fortune of the village Kanthapura determines the fate of the succeeding generations of Rao's protagonists also. The multidimensional struggle depicted serves as a recurrent motif in the later novels because this phenomenon underlies the conflicts of subsequent protagonists, Ramaswamy and finally Ramkrishna fight emotional and psychological battles in their respective fictional domain for the attainment of their own *truths*.

*The Serpent and the Rope* followed by a novel of slender bulk, *The Cat and Shakespeare* [1965; an earlier version called 'The Cat' (1959)] is a sequel to *The Serpent and the Rope*. The novel too deals with the theme of Metaphysical quest on a plane (from *karma* to *sadhana*, *sadhana* to *bhakti*) different from that of earlier novels. In Rao's own words, as Medha Sachdev has quoted,

*The Cat and Shakespeare* is a sequel to *The Serpent and the Rope* ... it takes up the theme of Metaphysical quest at the point at which Rama's story has carried it, and showed the next step in this quest. [Sachdev – 132]

With *The Cat and Shakespeare* Rao moves even further away from the protocols of realism and deeper into the difficult region of philosophical fiction. Written as a sort of conclusion to *The Serpent and the Rope* this novel purports to elaborate yet another stage in mythical self-understanding. Raja Rao wrote to a correspondent, as quoted by Srinivasa Iyengar,

I wanted to publish the book with about 300 blank pages at the end, to show that the real book is five hundred and odd pages and the reader must fill in the vacant spaces. [Iyengar – 406]

*The Serpent and the Rope*, which has a strong autobiographic colouring, is the story of Ramaswamy, a young Hindu, who goes to France to do research in history. He meets and marries Madeleine, a lecturer in history, but they soon drift apart gradually as Ramaswamy comes to realize the gulf between the Indian and Western conception of love, marriage and family – particularly after he meets Savithri, a Cambridge – educated and militantly modern girl, who is yet Indian to the core. Madeleine finally withdraws not only from Ramaswamy but also from the world; and Ramaswamy realizes that his love for Savithri, far from being of the kind that would find fulfillment in physical union of the soul with god. The novel ends with Ramaswamy setting out to go to his guru, who alone can destroy his ego and make him fit for the great consummation.

*The Serpent and the Rope* portrays Ramaswamy's quest for self-realization. The protagonist, Ramaswamy, a holy vagabond – engaged in a voyage of self-discovery. One follows him through the twists and turns of his quest which culminates in his poignant cry not for a god but for a guru to vouchsafe to him the vision of Truth. The whole novel is about man's existence on earth, personal and metaphysical.

The novel projects an implicit account of a quester's search for his guru. Hinduism mentions two paths for a seeker of Truth – '*nivrutti – marga*' and '*pravritti – marga*'. *Pravritti* is the path involving worldly affairs. It propels the *jivatman* in the wheel of birth and death. *Nivrutti* is the route of renunciation or freedom from mundane existence and transcendence into beyond. Ramaswamy unintentionally adopts the route of world experience. He wanders in search of a spiritual preceptor who could lead him over the threshold of immortality. In this sojourn, he comes across many people, mainly women, who appear to his young, dispassionate, discriminating and perceptive psyche as various manifestations of the omnipotent God. Ramaswamy's faith is born out of self effort (*purushartha*). Being a scholar an intellectual and a metaphysician, he realizes that he has to do all by himself, though he clue to get out of the labyrinths of maya will be shown by the mentor whom he seeks. Only the spiritual guide can help him out of the darkness of ignorance, releasing with him, the light of knowledge. The young intellectual, Ramaswamy, is one such seeker after knowledge, a '*jignyasu*' who treads the path of '*jnana*' or spiritual insight to reach his goal.

Throughout the novel, Ramaswamy is seen to be dissatisfied with the world. There is a lingering void in his life. He comes to know that sensual pleasure is not the highest form of happiness and that pure eternal bliss, the truly spiritual experience can only be felt within the psyche. In this respect, the Brahmin – *Vedantin* and young Indian scholar – Ramaswamy, resembles Uddhava who got wisdom from Lord Krishna. At the end of the novel, the quester perceives a ray of hope that his guru may impart wisdom and thus enlighten his path towards self-realization.

Rao's protagonist, having experienced manifold associations, finally realizes the 'snaky' image and discovers the 'rope'. To truly live such a spiritual life, he begins on the journey in search of a guide. He realizes that the apparent 'rope' of his vision was non-existent. The fault of double perception lay within his own psyche; the cause for his misapprehension was not the rope but his own non-recognition. He becomes aware of the reality that man is never alienated from his source but only needs to 'identify' himself with the Supreme Being.

*The Cat and Shakespeare* emphasizes the importance and necessity of surrender. On the simple narrative level the novel is an uproariously funny story, but has a deep philosophical meaning. It is a story of Govindan Nair, a clerk in the Ration office and Ramkrishna Pai, also a clerk in the Revenue office; in Trivendrum, the capital city of Kerala. The story is set against the background of Kerala during the period of World-War II. Ramkrishna Pai, the narrator, is an innocuous little man, who loves the beautiful Shantha and dreams of building a big house; his neighbour Govindan Nair is a genial soul and a man built on a large scale, whose philosophy of life is that one should surrender oneself completely to the supreme energizing principle in the universe which he symbolically calls 'Mother Cat'. This tenet is assiduously woven into the fabric of the story. Roughly rooted in Ramanujacharya's *bhakti - marga*, the novel exhibits the significance of a mentor - medium to guide the quester on the path of Truth. Having recognized the impermanence and non-existence of *maya*, Ramkrishna Pai seeks help from a liberated stage - Govindan Nair. The rapport and deep bond between them enables this *sadhaka* to reach his aspired goal. The prominent symbols of the novel are profoundly suggestive.

The protagonists are the externalization of Rao's own *sadhana* and move in accordance with the wishes of the novelist. Their struggle, dilemmas, choices and experiences, spiritual or otherwise, denote the novelist's own strife to reach goals and attain answers to issues to metaphysical significance. Fiction, for Rao, was a mode of prayer and the protagonists represented a part of his own self. He confesses:

... Ramaswamy is myself: Rama Moorthy is myself;  
Ramkrishna Pai is myself. The author, some authors, I would  
say, write autobiographically. So each one is an aspect of  
myself. I don't think you can say – this is me, this is not me.  
[Niranjan – 36]

Raja Rao, who claims to be a *Sadhaka* and *Vedantin*, has an unflinching faith in *Advaita*, the Indian religious – philosophical tradition in which there is no antagonism between man and God. For him literature is *Sadhana*, a vocation, a quest. The highest state of spiritual consciousness is the state of *Ananda*, the state of bliss which can not be reached through intellect. For Rao this state of bliss is intuitional. In the *anubhava* of *Ananda*, all dualities between the subject and the object, knower and the known are transcended.

Ramaswamy's quest shows the step in which he starts questioning about life, love and real aim of man. In the beginning of the novel one finds him confused about many things. Ramaswamy, in the beginning knows that life is a pilgrimage but he does not know that it is a pilgrimage of where and of what? He feels that there is some absence in his life that no love or learning can fulfil. Gradually, Ramaswamy starts recognizing the truth and finds that all men are but the pilgrims to the Tree from where there is no returning, the end of quest, the Truth.

According to Ramaswamy to find what life means is to find the whole wisdom. He starts understanding that life is not real as human beings wrongly believe, but really it is an illusion. He recognizes the truth. It is said that recognition of evil is the beginning of sainthood. When one is able to recognize what is good and evil, what is the difference between them, then one has started becoming a Saint. So, we can say that Ramaswamy has started becoming a saint but he is in search of guru who can lead him to the God.

Ramaswamy understands that Brahman can be attained only if the seeker undauntingly moves through the fetters of *maya*. The illusory world has no metaphysical value and is based solely upon convenient groupings of phenomena. When all the views superimposed upon reality are negated or transcended, reality reveals itself in its true objective nature. *Maya* thus exists merely as a reflection of Brahman. To know reality as God or Ishwara, is to superimpose upon it, individual conceptions with a subtle hankering for Indian identity forming the backdrop, Ramaswamy's tale relates the history of a seeker, assiduously involved in the process of purification of his soul.

The hero needs self-identification and therefore he wanders in search of a spiritual guide who can lead him over the threshold of Immortality. Ramaswamy's faith is born out of self effort. Being a scholar, an intellectual and metaphysicians he realizes that he has to do all by himself, though the clue to get out of the labyrinths of *maya* will be shown by the mentor he seeks. Only a spiritual guide can help him out of the darkness of ignorance, releasing within him, the light of knowledge. In a spiritual life, a guru is not merely a teacher but a role model who dispels inner darkness by opening the flood gates of enlightenment. It is only through guru that a *sadhaka* may acquire the light of Truth. He is the first step in a quester's journey towards the Absolute. Thus Ramaswamy tries to step this first step and searches for the Guru.

Ramkrishna Pai, the protagonist of *The Cat and Shakespeare* has passed the first step of finding a guru in the journey of quest for the Absolute. Ramkrishna Pai ascends the second step of total surrender to the god, the Mother Cat, like a kitten. It is a well known fact that a seeker can not attain realization unless he is ushered into the world of spirit by a realized guru who may bear the responsibility of acting as a lighthouse to the lost wanderers on the path of Truth. In Govindan Nair, Raja Rao builds the portrait of such an instructor. Ramkrishna Pai, the ignorant quester realizes that he is actually a mythical hunter who was

blessed by the vision of Shiva. He too is unaware of where the leaves dropped. His guru Govindan Nair leads him to salvation. In the words of Sridhar Rao,

The image of the mother cat carrying its kitten grows into a complex symbol embodying in itself the theme of the woman, and the theme of gradual surrender to experience which leads to a gradual realization of Truth. The knowledge of Truth provides a proper perspective by which one views the complex problems of life and death. [Rao Sridhar – 40]

The seeker, when he confronts Reality, knows no fear. As Nachiketa was liberated and Yama ushered him into the nature of the self, likewise Ramkrishna Pai attains salvation. Here too, when the quester crosses the barriers of finite knowledge, there is an elevation in spirit. Even death could not frighten the aspirant at that point of time. The mystical experience permeates his being as he learns the lesson of renunciation. It involves his transformation into a *bhakta* with the added knowledge that intuition is superior to intellect. For Nair “the whole world was one living organism”, the same education is imparted to the disciple. He learns that the real understanding implies a merger of the self with the object of perception. Even Govindan Nair in *The Cat and Shakespeare* declares,

Have you ever seen a kitten fall? You could fall. I could fall. But the kitten walk on the wall. They are so deft. They are so young. They are so white. The mother can watch them. And when they are about to fall, there she is, her head in the air, and she picks you up by the scruff of your neck. You never know where she is (who has ever seen her? Noboday has). To know where she is, you have to be the mother’s mother. And how could that be? Mother I worship you. [*The Cat and Shakespeare* – 68]

*The Cat and Shakespeare* ends on an optimistic note as the seeker hears the music of marriage. This motif of ‘marriage’ recurs in *The Cat and Shakespeare* denoting a new mysterious world. The seeker of quest is unaware of what lies beyond, though the audible sounds are full of hope and expectation, yet the protagonist faces an uncertain future. Raja Rao rejects institutionalized marriage. In *The Serpent and the Rope*, he played with the illusion of Ramaswamy – Madeleine marriage, but it is the spiritual union of the hero with Savithri that is made to succeed in *The Cat and Shakespeare*.

Govindan Nair in *The Cat and Shakespeare* is the Guru figure who initiates Pai into the world of ultimate Truth. India is a mythical force providing nurture to the spiritual wonderings of Raja Rao’s protagonists either living in exile or living in India. India for Ramaswamy is the Guru of the world. India in Raja Rao’s fiction is not a geographical area but an idea, a myth, at once a tradition, metaphysical rather than historical. The image of



India as the Guru of the world helps in the spiritual progress of the characters in Raja Rao's fiction.

*The Cat and Shakespeare* projects its protagonist *bhakta* who, having recognized the impermanence and non-existence of *maya*, seeks help from a liberated sage. The journey from Moorthy to Ramaswamy and from Ramaswamy to Ramkrishna Pai is the journey of Raja Rao being *Karmayogi* to *jnanayogi* and from *jnanayogi* to *bhakta*, the three Yogas (Paths) preached by Jagath Guru Krishna in Shrimad Bhagvata Gita. We can say that the journey that Raja Rao shows from Ramaswamy to Ramkrishna Pai is really a journey of a person transforming from *sadhaka* to *bhakta*. Ramaswamy too experiences oneness with nature at certain places but these experiences gained by the previous hero was ephemeral. They were like flashes of lightening providing only a glimpse of a higher principle which was far removed from him. Ramkrishna Pai, the blessed hero, achieves this state of illumination. His ego merges in the 'divine'. Rajesh K. Pallan remarks,

In *The Cat and Shakespeare* the myths, and symbols emerge as the creative mode of his technique to convey. *Advaita* – *Vedanta* – the total surrender and resignation to the will of god to achieve the ideal of knowledge. [Pallan – 62]

*Kanthapura* can be regarded as the stepping stone in the journey of the protagonist's spiritual life. *The Serpent and the Rope* displays a balance between illusion and reality – 'Serpent' and the 'Rope'. The complexity of motifs of this novel is perpetuated in *The Cat and Shakespeare*. The strife and emotional agony gets its just reward in the enlightenment and perception attained at the end of this book. It must be remembered that the ideological and spiritual journey from Moorthy to Pai is in reality the progress that Rao himself, the actual *sadhaka* makes. The dilemmas of faith; efforts to comprehend vital issues; understanding the secret of *maya*; shedding duality; awareness of the self and merger with Brahman or Absolute Reality constitute the course run by Raja Rao himself. His protagonists are the artistic projection of self. Rao accepts *The Cat and Shakespeare* as the 'conclusion' of *The Serpent and the Rope*. Thematically succeeding the novel, it forms yet another landmark in the spiritual journey of the novelist. Ramaswamy's protracted adventure in the Absolute culminates in his successor – Pai's encounter with a guru in Govindan Nair. Both the protagonists, Ramaswamy and Ramkrishna Pai, are in search of the Absolute

**Works Cited:**

- Iyengar, K. R. Srinivasa.(2007) *Indian Writing in English*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Private Limited, 2007.
- Niranjan, Shiva.(1985) *Raja Rao: Novelist as Sadhaka*. Ghaziabad: Vimal Prakashan, 1985.
- Palan, Rajesh K.(1984) *Myths and Symbols in Raja Rao and R. K. Narayan*. Jalandhar: ABS Publications, 1994.
- Rao, Raja.(1992) *The Cat and Shakespeare*. Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1971, Reprinted in 1992.
- Rao, Sridhar J.(1977) "Images of Truth: A Study of Raja Rao's *The Cat and Shakespeare*", *Journal of Indian Writing in English*. Vol. V. January, 1977.
- Sachdev, Medha.(2005) *Raja Rao's Novels: Indian Philosophy Fictionalized*. Delhi: Indian Publishers Distributors: 2005.