THE CRITICAL RESPONSES SHOWN TO THE NOVELS
OF RAJA RAO

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Principal Investigator:

Rajesh H. Mehta
Associate Professor,
Smt. J. J. Kundalia Commerce College,
Suchak Road,
Opp. Shastri Maidan,
Rajkot – 360001.
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This research critically endeavoured to study the views of the eminent Indian and Western critics on Raja Rao’s fictional works.

Raja Rao regards literature as ‘Sadhana’ – spiritual discipline. For him, writing is a consequence of his metaphysical life. His fictional works, hence, essentially represent a quest for the Absolute. From *Kanthapura* to *The Chessmaster and His Moves*, Raja Rao’s protagonists grapple with the same concerns – What is Truth? How one can find it? Their methods vary, as do their results, but they share the same preoccupations. His novels, thus, become chronicles of this archetypal search, the Absolute. Formally, too, all the novels share certain features. Plot is de-emphasized; the narrative, generally subjective, is not linear, but circular as in the Puranic style of storytelling which Raja Rao adapts to the form of the Western novel. There are digressions, stories within stories, songs, philosophical disquisition, debates and essays.

Raja Rao has declared his literary manifesto as ‘Foreword’ to his first novel *Kanthapura*:

> The telling has not been easy. One has to convey in a language that is not one’s own the spirit that is one’s own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought-movement that looks maltreated in an alien language. I use the word “alien,” yet English is not really an alien language to us. English is the language of our intellectual make-up – like Sanskrit or Persian was before – but not of our emotional make-up… We cannot write like English. We should not…

> After language the next problem is that of style. The tempo of Indian life must be infused into our English expression… We, in India, think quickly, we talk quickly, and when we move we move quickly… We have neither punctuation nor the treacherous “ats” and “ons” to bother us – we tell one interminable tale. Episode follows episode, and when our thoughts stop our breath stops, and we move on to another thought. This was and still is the ordinary style of our storytelling. I have tried to follow it myself in this story.

As a writer he has been innovative. He boldly departed from the European tradition of the novel, and has indigenized the novel form.
Raja Rao’s first novel, *Kanthapura* (1938), is the story of a small, sleepy, South Indian village as caught in the whirlpool of the Indian freedom struggle and comes to be completely destroyed. Moorthy is the leader of a political uprising, but for him as for Gandhi, whom he follows, politics provide a way of life indistinguishable from a spiritual quest. In fact, for Moorthy, Action is the way to the Absolute. In Gandhi, he finds what Right Action is. Thus, for him, becoming a “Gandhiman” is a deep spiritual experience which is appropriately characterized by the narrator as a “conversion”. At the culmination of this “conversion” is Sankaracharya’s ecstatic chant “Shivoham, Shivoham, Shivoham. I am Shiva. I am Shiva. Shiva am I,” means that Moorthy experiences blissful union with the Absolute. Moorthy, the man of action, thus practices Karm Yoga (the path of Action), One of the ways of reaching the Absolute as enunciated in the Bhagavad Gita.

Published twenty two years after *Kanthapura*, *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960) is Raja Rao’s most appreciated work. Ramaswamy, the protagonist of the novel is a seeker of Truth both by birth (a Brahmin) and by vocation (a researcher). As an Indian scholar in France, Rama is seeking truth in the form of the missing link in the puzzle of India’s influence on the West. According to Rama, this missing link is the Albigensian heresy; he thinks that the Cathars were driven to heresy by the influence of Buddhism which had left India.

Rama’s path to truth unlike Moorthy’s Karm Yoga is Jnan Yoga (the path of knowledge). He is not a man of action but an intellectual. Although he has accumulated knowledge, he still does not apprehend truth clearly; like the deluded seeker in the fable, he mistakes the rope for the serpent. Traditionally a Guru is necessary for the Jnan Yogi because only a Guru can cure his delusion by showing him that what appears to be a serpent is really a rope. Thus, in the end, Rama resolves to seek his Guru to be cured of his delusion.

*The Cat and Shakespeare* (1965) is Raja Rao’s sequel to *The Serpent and the Rope* in that he shows what happens after a seeker’s veil of illusion has been removed by the Guru. The novel describes the notion that just as the kitten is carried by the scruff of its neck by the mother cat, man is completely at the mercy of the Divine; consequently, the only way to live is to surrender oneself totally to divine grace, as the helpless kitten surrenders itself to the mother cat. Govnidan Nair lives this
philosophy and is responsible for teaching it to his ignorant neighbour, the narrator Ramkrishna Pai. Between Pai’s house and Nair’s is a wall over which Nair leaps every time he visits Pai. The wall is an important symbol because it represents the division between illusion and truth. Nair crosses it easily, but Pai has never gone across. Towards the end of the novel, following Nair’s cat, Pai accidentally crosses the wall. And he gets divine vision. Thus, the way to the Absolute here is not Karm Yoga or Jnan Yoga of the two previous novels, but Bhakti Yoga, or the path of devotion.

Comrade Kirillov, published in English in 1976, is generally recognized as Raja Rao’s least ambitious novel; it is clearly a minor work compared to its three illustrious predecessors. The main story, narrated by R, is a print in mere ninety three pages in large type to which are appended twenty seven pages of the diary of Kirillov’s wife, Irene, and a concluding seven pages by the narrator; the effect is of a slight, sketchy novella. Kirillov, alias Padmanabhan Iyer, leaves India for California to propagate Theosophy but, after a period of disillusionment, becomes a communist. From California he moves to London where, marrying a Czech immigrant, Irene, he settles down to the life of an expatriate intellectual. Like Rao’s other protagonists, Kirillov starts as a seeker of truth, but after becoming a communist, he is increasingly revealed by the narrator to be caught in a system which curtails his access to Truth. Thus, Kirillov continuously rationalizes the major events in the world to suit his perspective. Nevertheless, following a visit to India several years after he has left, he realizes that his communism is only a thin upper layer in an essentially Indian psyche. Irene also recognizes in her diary that he is almost biologically an Indian Brahmin and only intellectually a Marxist. By the end of the book, Kirillov is shown to be a man of contradictions: attacking and worshipping Gandhi simultaneously, deeply loving traditional India but campaigning for a communist revolution, reciting Sanskrit shlokas but professing communism.

Raja Rao’s widely awaited magnum opus, The Chessmaster and His Moves, was finally released in June, 1988. The appearance of The Chessmaster was certainly a major literary event in the world of Indian English literature. In this novel, it is not the realization of the self that is sought as in the earlier works, but dissolution of self. While Moorthy through right action illustrates Karma Yoga; Rama tries to seek the
Absolute through Jnan Yoga or the path of knowledge; and Govindan Nair with the help of Bhakti Yoga, a complete self-surrender to the Divine; Sivarama Sastri represents the power of negative dialectics, the attempt not to achieve something, but to vaporize one’s self into nothing. The Judeo – Christian tradition in shown to represent the quest for perfect society here on earth, while India is seen as denying the validity of the world itself. The way out, for Raja Rao, is not to improve things as the saint soldier does, but to dissolve contradictions completely. One can never become perfect in time, but attain perfection only by negating time.

As a short story writer, Raja Rao has produced only twenty three short stories through three different short story collections. *The Cow of the Barricades and Other Stories* (1947), *The Policeman and the Rose* (1978) and *On the Ganga Ghat* (1989). He deals with a variety of themes, issues in the corpus of his short stories. His stories are truly representative of the Indian life and attitudes, both at the social and the metaphysical planes. He makes remarkable experiments with the style, technique and language which make him an interesting short story writer. His stories are essentially Indian in tempo, tone and texture. He has painted the Indian life in such a realistic and forceful manner that one cannot but marvel at his intimate knowledge of this traditional Indian wisdom.

For his creative contribution Raja Rao has earned the attention of different academic institutions from the country and abroad. He had been awarded with the Sahitya Akadami Award (1964), the Padma Bhushan (1969), a fellowship of the Woodrow Wilson International Centre – Washington D.C. (1973), Honorary fellowship of the Modern Language Association of America (1984), the Neustadt International Prize for Literature (1988), a fellowship of Sahitya Akademi (1997) and the Padma Vibhushan (2007 – Posthumously).

With his corpus of fictional and non-fictional writings Raja Rao attracted the attention of critics and scholars from the different parts of the country and the world as well. I propose to make a humble endeavour in my dissertation to study Raja Rao’s fiction in a systematic manner in the light of critical responses given to his works by various critics. Further in the course of studying Raja Rao’s fictional works I would aim at studying thematic preoccupations of Rao, examining his craftsmanship and discussing his vision of life revealed as it is in his works.
This research is divided into four chapters.

Chapter – 1.

Introduction

My focus in the chapter is directed to provide a detailed note on Indian writing in English in general and Raja Rao in particular. His mission as started through Kanthapura and his gradual progress towards the target.

Raja Rao is popularly known as one of the most important Indian English novelists. The reasons for his pre-eminence are both historical and artistic. Historically, he is important because his first novel Kanthapura was published during the decade of the 1930s, when Indian fiction first began to gain recognition. Although Bankim Chandra Chatterjee’s incomplete romance Rajmohan’s Wife (1864) is considered to be the first Indian English novel, it was only in the 1930s that this genre began to demonstrate the maturity and accomplishment of a major literary mode. This phenomenon was heralded by the publication of Mulk Raj Anand’s Untouchable (1935), R. K. Narayan’s Swamy and Friends (1935), and Raja Rao’s Kanthapura (1938).

Artistically, Raja Rao is important because of his unique formal and thematic accomplishments. Although his five novels seem modest in comparison to Anand’s or Narayan’s more prolific output, Rao’s achievement is probably more impressive. Formally and stylistically, he is the most adventurous of the three.

Thematically, too, Raja Rao is somewhat different from Anand and Narayan. Rao is a metaphysical novelist whose concerns are primarily religious and philosophical. His first novel, Kanthapura, shows a strong Gandhian influence and an impact of freedom struggle in a remote South Indian village. The serpent and the Rope and The Cat and Shakespeare are expositions of the ancient Indian Philosophical outlook, Vedant. Comrade Kirillov is an evaluation of the efficacy of communism. The Chessmaster and His Moves, his magnum opus, in fact surpasses all his earlier works in its sweep. It beautifully portrays an examination into the entirety of the modern human condition. Both stylistically and thematically Raja Rao succeeds in capturing the spirit of India in his works.
Chapter – 2.

**Critical Responses of Indian Critics**

This chapter explores the responses given to the fictional works of Raja Rao by Indian critics like M. K. Naik, C. D. Narasimhaiah, Esha Dey, Shyamala Narayan and Makarand Paranjape among others.

M. K. Naik elaborates in his monograph *Raja Rao* (1972) that Raja Rao has consistently tried to modify the western form of the novel to suit his Indian subject matter. He has Indianized the novel form. He achieves the goal by using traditional Indian genres such as the Purana, the Sthalakatha and the beast fable to structure his works. Further, they are written in uniquely Indian English in style, tone, mood and rhythm. The Indianness is achieved by relying heavily on translation, quotation, the use of Indian proverbs, idioms and colloquial patterns. Raja Rao adroitly maneuvers vocabulary and syntax to enhance the Indian flavour of his English. The result is distinct Indianness, which is evocative and intelligible to western readers.

His innovations with form and style have expanded the expressive range of English and have influenced other writers who share the same plight, the task of writing about a culture in a language that is not native to it. This way Raja Rao has tried to portray and justify the wisdom of traditional India to the modern world. C. D. Narasimhaiah’s claim that Raja Rao is the greatest Indian English novelist is as true today as when it was first made, thirty five years ago.

Chapter – 3.

**Critical Responses of Non-Indian Critics**

The chapter includes western responses to Raja Rao. The leading critics on Raja Rao from the West are Letizia Alterno, Stefano Mercanti, Kathleen Raine, and Winfred Lehmann among others. Unlike many Indian critics, most of the Western critics powerfully deviate from the long held perception of Raja Rao as a mere metaphysical writer and the true bard of quintessential Indianness.

Letizia Alterno incisively and rigorously examines the diverse and complex Raja Rao canon, including some of his lesser known short fiction. She critically incorporates
that Raja Rao’s works exhibit a deep engagement with Psychology, mysticism, spiritualism, and Philosophy. His narratives became cultural as well as individual chronicles, and very often draw implicitly or explicitly upon various aspects – the freedom movement to Gandhi to myths – of the Indian ethos.

Stefano Mercanti posits Rao’s fiction in terms of its dialogic interaction – the ‘partnership’ – between Western and Eastern cultural traditions. He demonstrates how it evolves during the course of his oeuvre on both the levels, philosophical and political. He draws on non-binary and multi-disciplinary paradigms signaling the complex transformations and multiple negotiations of a polyglot India caught between the cultural twilight of the modern and the traditional. He offers an invaluable linguistic analysis of Raja Rao’s experiments with the English Language.

Chapter – 4.

Conclusion

In the form of conclusion, it would be apt to provide essential points of the preceding chapters and the ending remarks on fictional works of Raja Rao. He suggested his concern and interest towards literature, in an interview to R. Parthasarathy, in the following words:

One of the disciplines that has interested me in Indian literature is its sense of sadhana (exercitia spiritualia) – a form of spiritual growth. In that sense, one is alone in the world. I can say that all I write is for myself. If I were to live in a forest, I would still go on writing. If I were to live anywhere else, I would still go on writing, because I enjoy the magic of the word. That magic is cultivated mainly by inner silence, one that is cultivated not by associating oneself with society but often by being away from it. I think I try to belong to the great Indian tradition of the past when literature was considered a sadhana. In fact, I wanted to publish my books anonymously because I think they do not belong to me. But my publisher refused.

Thus he explored the metaphysical basis of writing itself and of the world through his works of fiction.
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