

# *Ramaswamy's Erudition: A Note on Raja Rao's "The Serpent and the Rope"*

SHYAMALA A. NARAYAN

R\_AJA RAO'S *The Serpent and the Rope* was hailed as a truly Indian novel when it was published in 1960. Few Indian-English novels have expressed the Indian sensibility with as much authenticity and power. *The Serpent and the Rope* which has a strong autobiographical colouring is the story of Ramaswamy, a young Brahmin, who goes to France to do research in history. He marries a Frenchwoman, but slowly realizes the gulf between Indian and Western concepts of love, marriage and family; in the end he leaves for India to go to his Guru, his marriage having broken down. Rao has forged a style which owes more to Indian traditional story-telling than to the traditional novel, and freely quotes from Sanskrit (and French) to recreate the hero's cultural ambience. As Naik puts it: "Its philosophical profundity and symbolic richness, its lyrical beauty and descriptive power, and its daring experimentation with form and style make a major achievement."<sup>1</sup> Rao's writing is so persuasive that critics have generally tended to take Ramaswamy as a truly learned Indian, and a Sanskrit scholar. An attempt is made here to examine Ramaswamy's knowledge of Sanskrit and Indian philosophy.

The novel is full of philosophical disquisitions, many of them dramatically appropriate, for Ramaswamy's closest friends abroad are the newly converted Russian Georges Khuschbertieff, the Spaniard Lezo, who knows seventeen languages, and the Cambridge friends of Savithri. Ramaswamy himself is much given to philosophical musings — his comments on Communism, Nietzsche, Marx, Nazism, Dostoevsky, American civilization,

etc., occur throughout the book. But Raja Rao is not expounding any system of philosophy, as a brief look at one of the passages will show :

To be orthodox, to be a *smartha*, I said to myself, is to accept the real. Stalin is orthodox; he is crude and smelly like some Jesuit father, he the product of a seminary. But Trotsky promised us beauty, promised us paradise. There is a saying that when Trotsky was talking of the beautiful world revolution, Stalin was making statistics of the bovine riches of Soviet Russia. . . . But the *smartha* — some Innocent III — knows this world is intangible, and all worlds therefore are intangible, and turns his vision inwards. . . .<sup>2</sup>

The long passage meanders on, through Napoleon, Beatrice, Eva Braun and that "Cathar" Hitler; but is merely a reflection of Ramaswamy's mind — an illustration of the way it works, seeing parallels in the most disparate characters and incidents of history. The passage above is not a definition of the meaning of *smartha* which is what one would expect if it were to be read as a philosophical treatise — in fact he completely skips over the root meaning of the word (a *smartha* is literally one who follows the *smrithis*, the traditional laws; followers of Sankaracharya call themselves *smarthas*). One notices that such passages do not build up to any conclusion; they only vaguely formulate the dichotomy between Communism, Tantra, the Jewish acceptance of the reality of the world on the one hand, and Nietzsche, the Superman and the Cathar rejection of the world on the other.

Ramaswamy does not follow Sankara to the exclusion of other systems of Indian philosophy, though he time and again proclaims his faith in Advaita-vedanta and Sankara. A consideration of the way he approaches the Feminine Principle makes this clear. For Ramaswamy, the Feminine is not only the *Maya* of Advaita; it is also the *Sakti* of Tantric philosophy, the *Prakriti* of the Samkhya system of Indian philosophy and the unattainable Mother Church of the Cathars. When Ramaswamy says that the world is for annihilation, one feels that he is expressing the *mayavada* (theory of *Maya*) that the serpent-and-rope analogy suggests; at other places, he stresses the independent importance of woman, and this resembles the Samkhyan viewpoint. Most schools of Indian philosophy believe in two prin-

ciples underlying the universe: the active, the dynamic, the Feminine, which is the material cause of the universe, and the passive, the transcendental, the Masculine Absolute. Samkhya philosophy is dualistic: *prakriti*, the Feminine, is an independent real principle; it is, however, without consciousness, and the universe appears because of the reflection of the conscious *Purusa* (the Masculine principle); all creation is the result of the interaction of the two principles. Advaita (Sankara's non-dualism) differs from Samkhya in denying independent reality to the Feminine Principle *Maya*, the cause of the universe. According to Sankara, *Brahman*, the Absolute, has two aspects: the transcendent *Nirgunabrahman*, and the creative *Isvara*, in which he is associated with *Maya*. *Maya* is neither identical with *Brahman* nor separate; she is an unthinkable, alogical, unexplainable mystery. She is an eternal falsity owing whatever false appearance of reality she possesses to her association with *Brahman* on whom she is dependent. Ramaswamy's glorification of the Feminine (the Queen's Coronation occasions a veritable hymn to the Feminine, pp. 357-58) is more in line with the Tantric concept of the Feminine. *Maya* to the Tantric worshipper is the Divine Mother *Mahamaya*, *Shakti* ("power, energy"). Siva and Sakti are two aspects of *Brahman*, and both are equally real, the Absolute and the Creative. The world is accepted as *Sakti*, not as an unconscious principle dependent on the Masculine. "In the *Sakta* method, it is not by denial of the world, but by and through the world, when known as the Mother, that liberation is attained. World enjoyment is made the means and instrument of liberation."<sup>3</sup> It is obvious that Raja Rao has great sympathy for the *Sakta* philosophy, which like Ramanuja's school of *Visistadvaita*, believes in the absolute reality of the Feminine. His next novel, *The Cat and Shakespeare*, has a hero who believes in worship of the Feminine; the cat of the title is taken from Ramanuja's philosophy, which advocates total surrender to the Mother who will come to our rescue even as the passive kitten is lifted up and carried by the cat. It is interesting that some of the most beautiful hymns to the Mother in Sanskrit have been ascribed to Sankaracharya — one can worship the Mother even when believing that the world is an illusion.

"India," observes Heinrich Zimmer, "is one of the great homes of the popular fable. . . . The vividness and simple aptness of the images drive home the points of the teaching; they are like pegs to which can be attached no end of abstract reasoning."<sup>4</sup> And it is through the fables that Ramaswamy's Vedanta is best expressed. The nature of *Maya* as cosmic illusion which ceases to exist only for the person in a state of illumination is brought out well by the story of Radha, Krishna's beloved, and her crossing the rain-swollen Jamuna river. Krishna tells her to repeat the formula: "Krishna, the *brahmachari* (celibate), wishes that way be made." The river makes way for her, and she returns after feeding the sage Durvasa on the other bank by saying: "Durvasa, who is ever in *upavasa* (on fast) says open and let me pass." And Radha began to sob, "What a lie the world is, what a lie." And Krishna comforts her, saying, "The world, my dear, is not a lie, it is an illusion."

Unfortunately, Ramaswamy does not leave his comments on Advaita at the level of the fable; he plunges into direct exposition. He claims to present Sankara's school of thought, and scoffs at new interpretations, as his remarks on Sri Aurobindo show: "Aurobindo wanted, if you please, to improve upon the Advaita of Sri Sankara — which was like trying to improve on the numerical status of zero . . . you can no more improve on Vedanta than improve on zero" (*The Serpent and the Rope*, p. 297). Ramaswamy does not pay sufficient attention to the texts, and presents an inaccurate account of Advaita, as the passage explaining the title shows:

The world is either unreal or real — the serpent or the rope. There is no in-between-the-two — and all that's in-between is poetry, is sainthood. You might go on saying all the time, "No, no, it's the rope," and stand in the serpent. And looking at the rope from the serpent is to see paradises, saints, avatars, gods, heroes, universes. For wheresoever you go, you see only with the serpent's eyes. Whether you call it duality or modified duality, you invent a belvedere to heaven, you look at the rope from the posture of the serpent, you feel you are the serpent — you are — the rope is. But in true fact, with whatever eyes you see there is no serpent, there never was a serpent. (*The Serpent and the Rope*, p. 340)

The key concept of Sankara's advaita is *Maya*, the in-between-the-two which Ramaswamy disowns. Sankaracharya did not consider the world unreal — he postulated three kinds of being: the real (*sat*), the unreal (*asat*), and *maya* or *mithya* (illusion). Sankara considered the world the realm of *maya*, something which defies strict classification into real or unreal (*sad-asad-vilakṣaṇā*). His poem *Vivekacudamani* ("The Crest Jewel of Discrimination") sums up the ideas expressed in his various commentaries. He expresses the concept of *maya* quite clearly in verses 108 and 109 of that work:

*Avidya* or *Maya* called also the undifferentiated, is the power of the lord. She is without beginning, is made up of the three *gunas* and is superior to the effects. She is to be inferred by one of clear intellect only from the effects She produces. It is She who brings forth the whole universe. She is neither existent (*sat*) nor non-existent (*asat*) nor partaking of both characters; neither same nor different nor both; neither composed of parts nor an indivisible whole nor both. She is most wonderful and cannot be described in words.<sup>5</sup>

Ramaswamy's exposition overlooks this third key category, "neither real nor unreal" in Sankara's words. David McCutcheon can hardly be blamed when he misunderstands Vedanta and says: "Raja Rao's serpent and rope are Shakespeare's bush and bear."<sup>6</sup> The rope, for Sankara is not simply illusion; it is Cosmic Illusion which is universal and without a beginning, and which ends only for the person who reaches a state of illumination. For the rest of humanity, there is a serpent, and always was a serpent. Swami Prabhavananda explains the concept thus: "*Maya*, says Sankara, is not only universal but beginningless and endless. A distinction must be made, however, between *maya* as a universal principle and ignorance (*avidya*) which is individual. Individual ignorance is beginningless, but it can end at any moment; it is lost when a man achieves spiritual illumination. Thus the world may vanish from the consciousness of an individual and yet continue to exist for the rest of mankind."<sup>7</sup>

Some justification could be found for the oversimplification evident in the exposition of the title, because it is addressed to Madeleine, a Frenchwoman. When the same phraseology is put into the mouth of Rama's scholarly grandfather, Ramanna, the

reader conversant with Advaita feels uncomfortable. Rama talks of his grandfather with great respect: "Grandfather Ramanna taught me this or that, of Amaru, Nirukta, the Isa and Kena upanisads" (p. 284). Rama thinks nostalgically of the simple village Brahmin's life, who would read "the Mandukya Upanisad with Gaudapada's *Karika*, and then Sankara's commentary on it." Gaudapada's *Karika* has been hailed as a basic text of Advaita by Sankara; he says that it "embodies in itself the quintessence of the substance of the authentic philosophy of Vedanta."<sup>8</sup> This is what the *Karika* has to say about *Maya*:

The unreal cannot be born either really or through *Maya*. For the son of a barren woman is born neither in reality nor in illusion. (Gaudapada's *Karika*, III, 28)

Throughout the novel, Ramaswamy confuses the state of *maya* with the unreal — analogies like the horns on the head of a hare or the barren woman's son, applied by Sankara to the unreal (*asat*) are used by Ramaswamy for *Maya*. This is how his scholarly grandfather explains the doctrine of *Maya*:

... and Grandfather Ramanna reading the Upanishads to old fogeys, who come and listen, afternoon after afternoon, saying, "Oh yes, *Maya*, it's like the son of a barren woman or the horns on the head of a hare," and the shaven widows and the tufted heads saying, "So it is indeed, Rammanore." (*The Serpent and the Rope*, p. 150)

Ramaswamy hardly ever talks about the three states of being postulated by Sankara; when he does mention the central doctrine of Sankara, he uses the wrong analogy for it:

According to the Hindu concept there is not only *satya* and *asatya*, Truth and Untruth, but also *mitya* (sic), illusion — like the horns on the head of a rabbit or the son of a barren woman. Paradise, I argued, was the inversion of Truth. . . . So does the deer drink water of the mirage or the barren woman have her son. (*The Serpent and the Rope*, p. 382)

The analogy of the mirage, which depends on the real desert, is used, like the serpent based on the rope, for *mithya* — this is quite different from the square circle or the barren woman's son, analogies for *asatya*, "ideas which are altogether unreal and

imaginary, which represent a total impossibility or a flat contradiction in terms."<sup>9</sup>

Raja Rao has very successfully used Sanskrit to build up the Indian atmosphere of the novel. Many of the Sanskrit quotations in *The Serpent and the Rope* are from Sankaracharya's advaitic hymns, thus reinforcing the suggestion of "the serpent and the rope" of the title. Ramaswamy loves the language, and it is clear from the novel that the stotras of the *Brihadstotraratnakara* are a part of his consciousness. Raja Rao himself mentions this book of Sanskrit hymns as next only to the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* in the influence it has had on him. Rao admits that Sanskrit is a language which he "knows poorly but understands deeply."<sup>10</sup> Professor M. K. Naik has noted the "numerous errors in Sanskrit quotations,"<sup>11</sup> but he stops with citing a mistake of transliteration. Raja Rao must have laboured under a great disadvantage in publishing such passages of Sanskrit transliterated into English, and perhaps mistakes in printing could not be avoided. But no attempt has been made to correct these mistakes in the second (Indian) edition. At places, the translation does not correspond with the transliterated passage. For instance, towards the end of the novel, Ramaswamy turns to Sanskrit to express his sense of alienation from the world:

*Kashvam koham kutha āyatha ka mē janani ko mē tatah?*

Who are you and whose; whence have you come?

(*The Serpent and the Rope*, p. 407)

Verse 23 of Sankara's famous chant *Bhaja-Govindam* starts *kastvam koham kuta āyātaḥ kā me janani ko me tātaḥ* (Who are you? Who am I? Whence have I come? Who is my mother and who is my father?). The passage artistically suggests Ramaswamy's *vairagya* (disenchantment with the world), but the Sanskrit-knowing reader is distracted by the poor translation. At another point, the translation is wholly unrelated to the Sanskrit. In the first chapter, Ramaswamy talks of chanting the *Gangastakam* to Little Mother, "very sensitive to Sanskrit hymns," but what has been published is a transliteration of Rama's oft-repeated (and consistently misprinted) words of Sankara's *Kasipancakam*:

'*Kashi kshetram, shariram tribhuvana jananim . . .*  
 And nigh the river-bank Thy water is strewn  
 With kusha grass and flowers,  
 There thrown by Sages at morn and even.  
 May the waters of the Ganges protect us,  
 (*The Serpent and the Rope*, p. 36)

These mistakes may be ascribed to the difficulties inherent in publishing a complex book. But there is one inexplicable slip — Rao's rendering of the *Gayatri mantra* :

"I had said it day after day, almost for twenty years; I must have said it a million million times: 'OM, O face of Truth with a disk of Gold, remove the mist (of ignorance) that I may see you face to face.' But this time I said it quietly, tenderly, as one speaks to something near, breathful, intimate. . . ." (*The Serpent and the Rope*, p. 248)

This is not a misprint as its repetition a few pages ahead shows :

. . . Grandfather Ramanna . . . who had first whispered unto my ear the Gayathri, 'OM, O face of Truth . . .' (*The Serpent and the Rope*, p. 251)

It is this version which Raja Rao uses in a footnote to the original edition of *Kanthapura*, and his notes to the American edition (1963) repeat the mistake :

The Gayathri mantra runs as follows: "O face of the True Sun, now hidden by a disc of gold, may we know the Reality, and see thee face to face."<sup>12</sup>

This is not a translation of the *Gayathri*, however free. Various translations are given below :

We meditate on the adorable glory of the radiant sun. May he direct our intellect.  
 Swami Madhavananda<sup>13</sup>

May we meditate on the Adorable Light of that Divine Generator who quickens our understanding.  
 Swami Vimalananda<sup>14</sup>

We meditate on that excellent light of the Sun. May he illuminate our minds.  
 J. L. Shastri<sup>15</sup>

Let us meditate on the Divine Brilliance. May its light inspire who quickens our understanding.  
 P. Lal<sup>16</sup>



In fact, no word in the original corresponds with a single word of Rao's. We suspect that Raja Rao is translating not the *Gayathri*, but this hymn from the *Brhadaranyaka Upanisad*:

The Face of Truth is hidden with a disc (vessel) of gold. O Pusan (Sun) remove it, so that I, whose reality is Truth, may see (the face)

(*Brhadaranyaka Upanisad*, Book V, section xv, 1)

The *Gayathri* is not just a hymn; it is considered the greatest of mantras, and the first thing the *dvija* (twice-born) boy is taught during his initiation ceremony. Thereafter, orthodox brahmins recite it at least thrice a day, at sunrise, noon and sunset. The *Gayathri* can be considered *the* Hindu mantra; it is said that the violent Hindu mobs during the Partition of India in 1947 used to test any man who claimed to be a Hindu by asking him to recite the *Gayathri*. One is inclined to suspect that Raja Rao would have failed and been thrown to the wolves.

Granting that Rao's remarks on Advaita (which he always refers to as Vedanta, as if it were the *only* system of Vedanta) and his Sanskrit are incorrect, the question arises how far it affects the novel. If we look for an erudite Advaita scholar in the character of Ramaswamy, we shall be disappointed. The many allusions in the novel have another function to perform, for the novel is to be read not as philosophy but as poetry. The novel has been compared to T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, and I. A. Richards' comments on the many allusions in Eliot's poems are equally true of Raja Rao's novel:

These things come in, not that the reader may be ingenious or admire the writer's erudition but for the sake of the emotional aura which they bring and the attitudes they incite.<sup>17</sup>

The ideas are of all kinds, abstract and concrete, general and particular, and, like the musician's phrase, they are arranged, not that they may tell something, but that their effects in us may combine into a coherent whole of feeling and attitude and produce a peculiar liberation of the will. They are there to be responded to, not to be pondered or worked out.<sup>18</sup>

The opening passage itself of *The Serpent and the Rope* shows how Rao uses the many allusions not to exhibit the erudition of his central character but for the atmosphere they generate; an

infinitude of time and distance is evoked by the references to Indian sages and contemporary Europe all together.

Scholarly inaccuracy in writing about Advaita or quoting Sanskrit does not detract much from the merit of the work, for we have to judge it as fiction, not as a scholarly thesis. But the fact remains that a person ignorant of Sanskrit and Indian philosophy can respond to the novel better than someone with a deep knowledge of Sanskrit, who would find the frequent mistakes jarring.

## NOTES

- 1 M. K. Naik, *A History of Indian English Literature* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1982), p. 170.
- 2 Raja Rao, *The Serpent and the Rope* (John Murray, 1960), pp. 383-85. All further page references are to this edition.
- 3 John Woodroffe, *Shakti and Shakta* (Madras: Ganesh & Co., 1951), p. 240.
- 4 Heinrich Zimmer, *Philosophies of India* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951), p. 5.
- 5 *Vivekacudamani*, trans. Swami Madhavananda (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1957), pp. 40-41.
- 6 David McCutcheon, *Indian Writing in English* (Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1969), p. 80.
- 7 Prabhavananda, *The Spiritual Heritage of India* (George Allen and Unwin, 1962), p. 288.
- 8 *Mandukya Upanisad* with Gaudapada's *Karika* and Sankara's Commentary, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Mysore: Sri Ramakrishna Ashrama, 1955), epigraph.
- 9 Swami Prabhavananda, *op. cit.*, p. 284.
- 10 Raja Rao, "Books Which Have Influenced Me," *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, February 10, 1963, p. 45.
- 11 M. K. Naik, "The Indo-Anglian Novel as Epic Legend," *Critical Essays on Indian Writing in English*, ed. M. K. Naik *et al.* (Dharwar: Karnatak University, 1968), p. 245.
- 12 Raja Rao, *Kanthapura*, "Notes" (New York: New Directions, 1963), p. 214.
- 13 *The Brhadaranyaka Upanisad*, trans. Swami Madhavananda (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1965), p. 846.
- 14 *The Mahanarayana Upanisad*, trans. with introduction and notes by Swami Vimalananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1967), pp. 241-42.
- 15 *The Siva Purana*, trans. by a Board of Scholars, edited with notes by J. L. Shastri (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1970), p. 81.
- 16 *The Mahanarayana Upanisad*, transcribed by P. Lal, *Indian Literature*, Vol. XIII, No. 2 (March 1970), p. 38.
- 17 I. A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), p. 290.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 293.