

## **Raja Rao's Philosophical Introspections**


Dr. Shubhra Gupta

Assistant Professor, Department of English  
Maharaja Harishchandra Degree College, Moradabad, U.P.

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**Abstract:** This study explores the spiritual and philosophical themes in Raja Rao's novels, focusing on how his work differs from other Indian writers like Mulk Raj Anand and R.K. Narayan. It examines how Rao's belief in Advaita Vedanta (non-dualism) shapes his stories and characters, who often seek spiritual truth. Unlike Anand and Narayan, who focus on social issues, Rao's work is deeply philosophical, blending Indian spirituality with literary art. The analysis shows Rao's unique approach offers valuable insights into the connection between spirituality and literature.

**Keywords** – Raja Rao, philosophy, spirituality, Indian literature.

**Introduction:** Indian philosophy talks about Moksha, the state of ultimate freedom. Moksha is beyond ordinary logic and needs a deeper spiritual understanding. The spiritual practice aims to change a person completely, making them truly themselves. This idea is fully expressed in Vedanta philosophy. Vedanta says the highest good has a cosmic purpose, set by God or built into reality, where all things aware or unaware try to fulfil it. “Indian philosophic thought does not lend itself to be characterized in a way that would apprehend all its diversity presented by its orthodox of these two broad divisions no longer get in their original form, for each has over the centuries controlled the other, modifying one another subtly and at times radically”(Hiriyanna 26) In Indian philosophical thought, knowledge was not just about understanding things in the mind. It meant achieving spiritual freedom, which is a special and difficult goal for people. The effort to get this freedom is so big that it cannot be finished in one life. So the idea of many lives (rebirths) is used.

The final aim is to get free from the cycle of birth and death and get eternal freedom. Philosophers asked deep questions about life as part of a bigger search for answers to human problems and challenges. They did not encourage people to seek knowledge only because they were curious. A person who wants wisdom should find a teacher (guru) who can remove their ignorance with the power of knowledge. The seeker must go to a guru who has calmness, self-control, love, etc. “He must necessarily approach a guru who is characterized by composure of mind, self-control, love cevanine that is well versed in the sastras, various branches of learning, should not see ultimate knowledge on his own. (Qtd. In Mundakopanishad 1.2). The seeker will gain a deeper understanding of truth with the help of a guru. Life is a journey of self-discovery that ends in realizing the ultimate truth. Indian philosophy has strongly influenced Raja Rao's writing style and artistic expression in his novels. As a Brahmin by birth, Raja Rao is very aware of his Brahmin responsibilities and duties, which are rooted in his Brahmin heritage. He believes that “Brahmin” is he who knows Brahman” (Niranjan25).

**Main Text:** His work shows a skilful mix of Tantrik ideas and literary art. Raja Rao's writing reflects the mythological and symbolic union of Shiva and Parvati, and the important role of shakti, in a beautiful and meaningful way. His literature says that the search for truth is not about denying desires, but about using the powerful, transformative energy of tantrik love in all its forms. The search for truth led Raja Rao to study ancient Indian philosophical texts. Raja Rao's journey of discovery took him to many ashrams, where he learned a lot. "I went back to what was my own self the philosophical. The philosophical was with me, always." (Rao 35)

Raja Rao is a novelist who writes about deep philosophical ideas. Some scholars say he is a Vedant's, while others see him as a Tantrism. Many Indians think his writing shows Gandhi's principles. His writing is about his philosophical nature and his search for truth. He wants to understand human life and reality. "I have abandoned literature for good and gone over to metaphysics." (Natwar Singh 17) his deep interest in Indian philosophy has had a profound impact on his literary work, shaping his approach to writing. Raja Rao says good literature should go beyond metaphysics. Indian philosophy has strongly influenced his writing. He looks at things from a metaphysical point of view, trying to understand the deeper nature of reality and human experience. He sees metaphysical ideas everywhere.

Raja Rao's way of writing is different from writers like Mulk Raj Anand and R.K. Narayan, who focus more on social reality and humanistic concerns. Anand's work shows emotional investment in people and their suffering. Narayan uses irony to comment on social issues of his time. Rao focuses on exploring metaphysical ideas, especially about the nature of the absolute. M.K. Naik holds the opinion that "Raja Rao has a lent of philosophical depth to Indian novel in English." (160) Philosophical reflections are a key element of *The Serpent and the Rope*, and Raja Rao is "brooding and human destiny and exhorting men and women to seek salvation" (Naik 119) Raja Rao has been influenced by Indian epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata, which he respects as sources of Indian wisdom. He was also inspired by Western writers like Charles Bodley, Roman Roland, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Andre Guide, and Paul Valley, who emphasize the beauty of human physicality and sensuality. Rao's first novel, *Kanthapura* (1938), is a masterpiece that captures India's struggle for independence, especially the freedom movement.

A protest was started by Mahatma Gandhi in 1920 to free India from British rule. The ideas of Gandhi are shown in Raja Rao's writing, which focuses on non-violent resistance before India got independence. In his novel *Kanthapura*, the main focus is the office and the philosophical parts of Gandhi's ideas are limited. Writers work on these ideas. We see that philosophical themes are woven into Raja Rao's novels.' K. Naik remarks "Raja Rao has lent of philosophical death to Indian novel in English." (Naik 160) The idea of India's independence struggle and Gandhism is shown in the writings of Narayan and Anand. Narayan's novel *Waiting for Mahatma* (1955) and Anand's *Untouchable* (1935) present Gandhism as clearly as Rao's *Kanthapura*. Similarly, K. A. Abbas talks about the Jallianwala Bagh tragedy, Salt Satyagraha and the Gandhi-Irvin pact in his novel *Inqilab* (1955). But Raja Rao brings out the spirit of Gandhism more clearly in his work. Raja Rao treats Mahatma Gandhi like a divine figure, comparing him to Krishna and seeing him as an incarnation of God. Rao's version of Gandhism focuses only on the non-violent freedom fight before India's independence. He shows Gandhi's belief in the purity of means and ends, promoting non-violence and the struggle for freedom. Rao gives his novels a philosophical depth, making the Indian English novel more thoughtful. Inspired by Gandhi's principles of truth, non-violence and the Harijan movement, Rao joins the independence struggle without believing in superstition or material greed. A traditional minded Brahmin also urges his people to tell the truth and stop doing violent acts. Because of his

reform of the Hindu Harijan (Dalit) relationship, a family disaster happens to him. This reform hurts orthodox Hindus, and the leading Brahmins threaten to excommunicate him. E.M. Forster, a famous writer, admired Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, especially its style and themes. He called “*Kanthapura* is a finest novel to come out of India in recent years” (*Kanthapura*, Forset, FrontPage). The novel is a highly regarded work of Indian literature. It has a poetic and mythological story that talks about India's cultural rebirth.

The author studied at the University of Montpellier in France. When he returned to India, he went through deep spiritual and religious changes. Raja Rao was already a successful writer and got spiritual guidance and mentorship from Swami Atmanand, a respected Vedantic philosopher. This spiritual crisis changed his life, making him focus on spirituality and philosophy instead of just literary art. Later in his career, he became more of a religious philosopher. Although *Kanthapura* is a metaphysical novel, Western critics have used historical, comparative, and analytical ways to study it, focusing only on its surface features. But the novel is rooted in ancient and oral Indian traditions.

Western critics find it hard to understand its full meaning because they are not familiar with traditional Indian methods. Only a few scholars have tried to unlock the novel's dynamics using Indian ways of study. “Some were Apologetic about Indian English as it was not British English or BBC English. Others asserted that Indian English was Indian English with a distinct vocabulary, phonology, and syntax and not a pale imitation of British. English, Indian English writing, one said, should not be judged by British standards, but by Indian standards”. (Preface, xv.) *Kanthapura* draws on India's philosophical and religious heritage and Indian mythology. The epigraph before the novel is very suggestive and complex. The ideas in the novel show an interplay of complex thoughts Mahatma Gandhi in the novel is shown as a modern version of divine wisdom. The story and message are told by J. Paramacharya Harikatha, who uses the classical Indian storytelling style.

“In the great heavens, Brahma the creator was lying on a serpent when the sage Valmiki entered. The two door-keepers announced him. Learn, sir, what brings you into this strange word? Ask Brahma and offer the sage a seat beside him, fell at his feet. Rise up. Oh God of gods, I have come to bring you semester news.” (*Kanthapura*, p10) The novel “*The Serpent and the Rope*” by Raja Rao, published in 1960, was an important step in his career. It shows his skill in mixing complex Indian philosophy and Tantrism. The book makes him a major literary figure. The novel explores the universal human wish for self-discovery and spiritual light with Raja Rao. He says the book's main theme is the uselessness and emptiness of man's life when a man has no deep quest and no trust in the ultimate meaning of life. Noting that he underlines theme of the book is “the futility and Baroness of man in human existence, when man has no deep quest and no trust for the ultimate men ‘life. Herein some Sara is an August mission to find the absolute” (letter, M. K. Naik,) Here, Sara's journey is a mission to find the absolute. Through Ramaswamy's journey, the novel shows a strong spiritual connection and suggests that embracing Vedanta philosophy, rooted in eternal truth, can light the path to realise this quest.

Ramaswamy's philosophy in the opening says the word is a big outward show. Life is temporary and only the divine holds the true essence and reality. He often thinks about death but stays unaffected, believing in the soul's immortality. Ramaswamy says the soul and God are the same, a united eternal essence. In *The Serpent and the Rope*, the author explores the East-West divide, with the East showing the rich cultural and philosophical tradition of Brahminical India. India is shown as very pure. The message is of Advaita philosophy, but a narrow view cannot capture the full human experience. “I hated this moral India. Lakshmi Bose not. India Lakshmi was the India that accepted Invaders. Come Muslim, come British with size and

salvations. Lakshmi would not read the Mahabharata the whole night, cutting her finger and annoy knitting her Lord with her young blood, burnt herself alive” (Rao 354)

Despite their different personalities, Ramaswamy (a French wife) and the characters share a common value system that stresses individualism and accepting the external world as separate from one. As a scholar, interpreter of Hinduism, historian and Vaidyantham, Ramaswamy is driven by a passion for metaphysical truth, seeking answers to ultimate human existence questions, including discovering oneself. God is the head and the Enigmas of Birth and death. Doctor Paul Vargus says that in “The Serpent and the Rope”, Raja Rao shows Hinduism as a bridge between scientific ideas and basic religious beliefs, helping to bring together two opposite world views. “It may also be pointed out that his success in the novel is mainly due to the fact that the spiritual autobiography of Ramaswamy is indeed an expression of Raja Rao's own spiritual autobiography quest.” (volume VII) Ramaswamy, a Brahmic thinker, wants to go beyond the limits of history. He tries to fit himself into the big picture of existence. He says you don't need a special guru. He knows that Rama can end the cycle of rebirth and give freedom. A main fact is that life is a deep pilgrimage, a journey of self-discovery and growth. He wants to recite the sacred words to himself instead of Sonkar Raj Mahamudra Stotra, which mixes holy words with dreams. He asks, “Who am I? And who are you? What is the place from which I come? who is my mother? Who, my Sayer? Pondering this, perceive them all as fences only without substance. Give up the word as an ideal dream (Bhajagovindam 25) He is called to live the steady wisdom of the Upanishads and have the qualities of a dheera (brave person) and seek the ultimate truth. These needs understanding what is eternal, firmly based in knowledge. The scary serpent is just a harmless row that goes beyond the illusion of Maya described in Vedanta as the ultimate experience. “This exemplifies what Sankara said indirect realisation” (Rao 88)

Just as a confused mind mistakes a rope for a serpent, ignoring its true nature, a misguided mind sees the universe without understanding its real base. But when the true form of the road is seen, the illusion disappears, revealing the truth that was hidden. “So too when the ultimate reality is realised the universe vanishes”. (Natesan68) In this novel, the author explores the philosophical ideas of Karma and Vairagya, which are part of the Vedantic view of Jeevan Mukti or liberation in this life. It gives insights into human condition and the quest for spiritual freedom, showing the big impact of Indian philosophical thought, which is often featured in “Isolated existence.” Of India, India is remembered as tradition, as truth. Prof. F. Narsingh says this unique character, spoken of a “The Serpent and the Rope” as an evocation of this tooth. The tradition of India and its vitality, especially in its encounter with the West. India seen as an idea, not as an area on the map” (New Delhi, OUP, 1978)

“The Serpent and the Rope” focuses on the philosophical and religious aspects of India and Hinduism for artistic treatment. Everything else, even the characters' actions, supports this philosophical idea of Ramaswamy's Vedant-based vision. Ramaswamy looks at human life and says, “Existence is a passage between life and death, birth and death again. Is it then an accumulation of pain man has to bear! Is it then a wonder The Buddha, with palaces and queens, with a Kingdom and heir, left his home to find that from which there is no returning? You could only live in life, and to find what the means is to know the whole of wisdom” (S.R. 35) He refers to Buddha, who left his palace, queen, kingdom, and heir to find a life with no return, asking if you can only live in life like that.

The novel uses philosophical thoughts, diary entries, quotes, and letters to explain a Hindu (Vedantic) way of looking at life and India. The author focuses on the philosophical and religious ideas of Hinduism in India. All characters and actions serve this philosophical view of Ramaswamy. He says life is a cycle of birth and

death and asks if life is just a collection of pain, like Buddha who left his royal life to seek true meaning. In “Cat and Shakespeare” Raja Rao keeps exploring the mysteries of Tantrism, building on ideas from his earlier novels. The story is told by Rama Krishna Pipe, a simple clerk in the revenue department of Trivandrum. Another important character, Govindan Nair, a clerk in a local ration office, becomes a champion of the Kitten principle, trying to live by this spiritual idea in his daily life.

This novel looks at the theme of grace using Shree Ramanujan’s philosophical idea of qualified monism. It gives a new way of examining this concept in relation to old philosophers. The book teaches the symbolic meaning of the cat, the wall and the 3-story house, which are explored a lot in human terms. Commentaries show a deep metaphysical background that gets inspiration from Vishwas Nagar schools and a devotion cult that finally turned into the radical idea of self-surrender. Northern scholars who started the Weather Gallai School of Thought based on Sri Ramanuja’s principles say that self-surrender should balance self-effort, not replace it. “One party asserts that soul must excerpt itself to get saved as the young monkey actively seizes its mother when she jumps from tree to tree. This is the well-known Markandeya analogy of the monkey. The other party results that God’s grace is like the care of the mother cat for its young which is independent of all efforts on the part of the letter, this is the known as marjara naya analogy of the cat” (178)

The criticism on Raja Rao’s novel is very interesting. Many critics such as C.Q. Narasimhaiah and others find it fascinating and M.K. Naik says the novel makes the reader think deeply about philosophy. C.D. Narasimhaiah says the novel shows the three qualities (gunas) from the Gita – ego and delusion. M.K. Naik says Ramanuja’s non-dualistic philosophy is in the novel. Others explain the cat-kitten idea in the novel as a symbol of prapatti (self-surrender) in Visistadvaita. But the novel also uses the Tantric cult, like in “The cat and Shakespeare” Raja Rao talks about self-surrender. Govindan Nair in the novel knows only a few people understand prapatti. God’s wish to save man is shown through the fable of the renter and the bilva tree. When men surrender totally to God, they feel happy and stay detached.

In the novel, Ramakrishna Pai is the main character. Saroj is his wife. They are not happy together. Because of this, he lives with Shanta, a school teacher, and is not afraid of society. He is a radical, a believer in the Tantric cult, and a womaniser. He wants to live as happily as he can. He doesn’t bother about the ‘means and ends’ theory.

Raja Rao shows the novel as a celebration of the supreme goddess. Most characters like Govindan Nair, Shantha, Shridhar, Usha, Mudali and Ramakrishna Pai are worshippers of this goddess, who is the main deity of the Hindu Tantric cult. The cat in the novel stands for the female deity. It isn’t an ordinary cat because it knows right from wrong in its mysterious feline way. The title word ‘Shakespeare’ isn’t hinted at in the novel. This has confused readers. Those who love and praise the cat feel bliss, while those who disagree feel unsatisfied. When the deity blesses men, they experience clear joy. The child Shridhar affirms his faith in the goddess and talks with Usha over the wall. The cat carries him into a three-storey house, which symbolizes nirvana – release from earthly ties. In contrast, characters like Bhoothalinga Iyer, who lack faith, lead a miserable life.

**Conclusion:** In “The Cat and Shakespeare” the character Shanta is seen as a goddess in the Shakti cult, representing a woman in different forms—mother, daughter, wife, etc. Ramakrishna Pai treats Shanta as an embodiment of love, beauty, and truth, calling her a symbolic goddess. P. Dayal says the novel “The Cat and Shakespeare” “shows a woman as wife, mother, and deity, merging all forms of womanhood into one, following Tantric ideas that every woman is a form of the supreme goddess.

As a novelist, Raja Rao is known for his deep and complex exploration of themes and characters. The Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita are rich sources of inspiration for his literary work. His writings draw on many philosophical influences, including Gandhian thought, Vedanta, and Tantra. Philosophy is his true passion, and literature is just a way for him to express his debts to ancient Indian philosophy, which shapes the core of his fictional work.

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