

Mythical Elements and Vedanta Philosophy in

The Novels of Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan:

A Pilgrim's Progress

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ABSTRACT

Myths are an all-pervasive as well as a recurring motif in Indo-Anglian fiction and their importance cannot be undermined. Ours being an ancient culture with a rich mythology, most of the Indo-Anglian writers have made an extensive use of it. It has been a major source of inspiration to the Indian writers in English, such as Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and others in the 20th century. No doubt, they have all drawn from the same repertoire of classical myths, but their handling is diverse and personal. Critics have occasionally tried to reduce myths to very simplistic meanings. Bit more often myth is said to contain either the otherwise inexpressible insights or values of the individual or group conscious or the projections of group or individual felt needs or values. The purpose here is to examine some representative novels of Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan in the light of the ancient myths and Vedanta philosophy.

Keywords: *India, Mythology, Philosophy, Puranic, Vedanta*

I. INTRODUCTION

An ancient adage proclaims, "Art is seen through a temperament." The classic temperament in literature is, perhaps, the most cogent temperament as it helps in delving deep into one's rich cultural heritage. Through narration myths combine truth-telling with story-telling with the help of transcendental imagination; they also put what never was in time, make the old new, the past present, the ancient contemporary. In human culture, the beginnings of history are not in history but in myth, it symbolizes a conflict in the inner world of spirit between the ideals of truth and goodness and their opposites, the suras, gods, and the asuras, demons. As myth narrates the ultimate triumph of good over evil as if it had already happened so what happens in myth will happen in history. The Indian myths, like all other myths, have a tremendous significance in the contemporary time because of their universal appeal. One can, therefore, get an insight into the aesthetic as well as ethical philosophy of Indian culture. The Indian-English novelist works not only with immediate cultural situation but the various matrices are available to him, especially, the rich cultural heritage. In the contemporary milieu, the artist's vision encompasses the conventions, myths, legends and rituals of hoary Indian culture with which he sets up the social constructs, behavioral patterns, and highlights the peculiar problems that beset our contemporary society. The artists infuse the desire of certain ideals in the group-mind for the achievement of which these myths supply strategies to goad the society to determine its values by conditioned reflexes, attitudes and ideals.

II. CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Writing in the same milieu as that of the audience, the Indian-English novelist has got the advantage as it not only functions as a matrix for the novelist but also provides the common ground for evoking the common stock-responses and making communication facile. Myths offer readymade patterns of traditional motifs and symbols for communicating the conventional as well as new meanings. The Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the Puranas are the perennial sources from which our writers can fruitfully derive their thematic patterns in variegated ways to suit their purpose. Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan have made a substantial use of myths, legends and rituals, and woven them into the texture of their novels. All of them paint a tapestry uniquely Indian and, at the same time, speak of an India that has been relegated to the pages of history, a way of life that is almost non-existent today in the wondrous provinces of memory and dreams. The use of myth in the novels of Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan is significant as it helps perceive the human predicament of the modern man in the larger perspective of time.

In general, a myth is a form of verbal art whose principal characters are Gods or other supernatural beings more powerful than human beings. Usually, the action takes place in a historical time. On a deeper analysis, myths emerge as a complex cultural reality, and they are our greatest cultural heritage from the ancient world. Myth narrates a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in primordial time, the fabled time of the beginnings. In other words, a myth tells how, through the deeds of supernatural beings, a reality came into existence... and then is always an account of a 'creation', it relates to how something was produced. Myth is a true sacred story because it is associated with realities. It contains a model for all human acts of significance since it gives us an account of creation either of world or a particular institution. On the whole, mythology defines the religious beliefs, historical traditions as well as the cosmologic speculations of a society.

While talking of the importance of myth in the study of literature, some fundamental questions which come to our minds are: why are myths important in the study of literature? Why do writers draw towards myths? What have they achieved by incorporating myths in their writings? In answer to these questions, Meenakshi Mukherjee opines, "One reason may be their quality of timelessness". Myths, she says, "in spite of their distance from contemporary reality, do have, for that particular group of men to whom they are culturally relevant, a kind of fundamental significance."

Myths are not only fantastic stories but pragmatic embodiments of moral wisdom and primitive faith. They set exemplary patterns of behaviour and the scale of values and ideal goals. Thus, myths have the capacity to change one's life and behaviour. They express "the continuity between the structures of human existence and cosmic structures." Since literature of all kinds springs from myth, myth touches the deepest desires of man—his fears, his hopes, his passions, his sentiments as it validates the social scheme and ranges from expressions of sheer artistry to legalism. Richard Chase has emphasized the literary nature of all myths. He says, "Writers are attracted to myths mainly because myth is literature". At another place he says, "The fact that is that the simplest meaning of the Greek word myth is the right one; a myth is a story, myth is narrative or poetic literature. Myth is therefore art and must be studied as such. It is a mode of cognition, a system of thought, a way of life, only as art is. It can be opposed to science only as art is opposed to science, as art is no question of one defeating the other; they are complementary and fulfill different needs.

Thus, defining myth is a difficult task mainly because of the divergent views about it. The, diverse theories try to explain myth as well as "evaluate its place in the whole spectrum of human thought.... Yet however, different

the manner of it, for all of them, myth fulfils its role precisely because it is non rational, indeterminate, and uncertain in the nature of its ultimate claims". Today, people with a scientific bent of mind belittle the importance of myth, but the mythic element in our mental make-up is universal as well as inescapable. Myths are indispensable although today the religious myths are being replaced by scientific ones yet it seems for man there is a deep and compulsive drive to create myths, be they religious or scientific this stems from his psychological need to believe in something. Thus basically, myth creation has a psychological origin. Man's mental makeup is an admixture of historical as well as contemporary superstitions therefore, a study of myths is essential for an understanding of his whole thought pattern. Myths thus are partly the product of man's imagination and free association of ideas, but mainly man's thought pattern is guided by an unknown archetype which forms his mythic patterns.

Raja Rao makes a digressional use of myth as he employs the myths in a meandering fashion. Kanthapura is mainly a rendering of the localized myth which he calls sthalapurana. The central myth Raja Rao employs in Kanthapura is that of Rama and Ravana. The polarities between the good and the evil, as exemplified in Rama and Ravana, are dramatized against the backdrop of the Gandhian struggle against the brutal force of the British rule. In *The Serpent and the Rope*, the recurrent mythical allusion is the binary relationship of Radha-Krishna and Satyavan-Savitri which forms the dominant motif in the relationship between Ramaswamy and Savithri. Ramaswamy's quest for self-realization, gain an extension into infinity by being absorbed into the myth of Gautama Budha. Rites and rituals also provide a frame of reference in the case of certain characters and situations. The myth of hunter and bilva tree forms the central part to *The Cat and Shakespeare* which has been used for substantiating the metaphysical musings of Govindan Nair and Ramakrishna Pai. Raja Rao's is the method of mythologizing the contemporary reality, primarily through the digressional technique. The reflection and life-responses of the characters in his novels always correspond to some mythical pattern. His basic aim is to write on the pattern of the Puranas that are full of stories within the illustrative story.

Raja Rao has been able, through the use of myths and legends, to capture and convey the metaphysical musings for self-transcendence. Raja Rao treats metaphysical probing, the nature of Ultimate Reality, which does not leave him alone, he is obliged to couch them in our hoary tradition. His preoccupation with the problems of the nature of Ultimate Reality is evidenced in *The Serpent and the Rope*, *The Cat and Shakespeare* and even, to some extent, *Comrade Kirillov*. But he escapes his attention from the here-and-now immediacy of social, economic and political problems. The individual redemption, in the absence of social redemption, seems to be meaningless. Other numerous problems escape Raja Rao's vision, and his interest remains riveted on the metaphysical rather than the physical. In *The Serpent and the Rope*, Ramaswamy seeks individual redemption at the cost of his separation from Madeleine for which he alone is to be held responsible. Again, because of his individual quest, he snaps short his academic pursuit and social ties in search of spiritual enlightenment at the feet of his Guru Atmananda in India.

There are some internal characteristics which make Narayan's novels distinctly Indian. He generally reflects in his novels a typical Indian attitude to life and very often this is done by him in terms of Indian myths. Narayan feels that the basic conflicts in life belong to a remoter past—perhaps the time of *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*; children revolt against parents and the old ways, husbands betray their wives, men are dazzled by the false glitter of actresses and swayed by the conflicting claims of the world and the spirit, and in the end there

is always hope, for the world seems to be directed towards order and order is finally restored. Narayan's Malgudi has an oral traditional history that goes back to epic times. The town's past is indelibly involved with the past of India, crossed by the legendary or historical activities of Rama, Sita, Gods and goddesses, rakshasas and asuras.

The material R.K. Narayan works with is rich in myths and legends, but his technique is different from that of Raja Rao. He has made a sustained use of myth in his novels. He has utilized not only the literary myth i.e. tales from the Ramayana, the Mahabharata but has also tapped the tradition by making use of local legends, folklore as well as primitive rituals like the ritual for rain, for harvest or ritual for fertility, for land or for a woman. The imaginative treatment of mythological incidents and situations is discernible in almost all of his novels. In *The English Teacher*, after observing Krishnan's relentless efforts to establish a psychical contact with the spirit of his dead wife, Susila, one can easily discover links with the story of Savitri's efforts to win back her Satyavan from the clutches of Yama, the God of Death, but the roles of husband and wife are reversed in the novel.

Sankara's instance of serpent and rope is well known to reveal the character of manifestation and certainty. This pluralistic creation is a mistake of opinion; the rectification of this miscalculation means the change of opinion. The rope materializes as a snake due to counterfeit comprehension and when the delusion is ended, one is competent to identify the veracity. Sankara does not counteract the creation. He states that when one attains the understanding of exact nature of one's organism, the entire design of cosmos is re-interpreted. The deliverance is to revolutionize the approach of a person towards the world. The ephemeral stuff of the world loses its charisma for the enlightened spirit. The world stays behind and no transformation comes in the world, simply our judgment regarding the world is refurbished.

Subsequently there appeared many scholars who were not pleased with Sankara's elucidation and clarification of Vedanta philosophy. The famous among them are Ramanuja and Madhva. The main divergence between the analysis of Ramanuja and Sankara is that while Sankara believes that there is nothing excluding Brahman and on the realization of true awareness Atman and Brahman is one. Ramanuja believes that there is an indispensable distinction between the Jiva and Brahman. Jiva and World are parts of Brahman; they jointly form the organization of Brahman but are basically dissimilar from Brahman.

The purpose of creation of this world is Lila of world soul. It is projection of divine will, the expression of Brahman. To remain devoted to this divine will, and act accordingly is Bhakti yoga. Bhakti is love, devotion and dedication to God. This devotion and love brings liberation from the bondage of sensual desires (*visays*). The same universal essence pervades through all the creation, and the physical world is an expression of Brahman. The real nature of soul's existence can be experienced by the soul through knowledge, "Vidya is the immediate knowledge of that infinite and what appears to be separate existence is the appearance only".

According to Vedanta philosophy the freedom from bondage is Mukti. This bondage occurs due to man's unfulfilled desires; it results in birth and rebirth. With self-knowledge, liberation from the cycle of birth and rebirth can be attained. The Vedanta suggests various paths to this effect. These are: the path of devotion (Bhakti yoga), the path of selfless action (Karma yoga), and the path of knowledge (Jnana yoga). All the paths are described in detail in *The Gita* and these paths are complementary. However, one cannot tread these paths on his own. The holy scriptures prescribe the need of Guru to initiate one on the path of self-realization. After attaining self-realization, one may choose to lead an active life in the world in a spirit of detachment. To lead an

active life does not mean involvement in the world like ignorant men and women of the world. It means that one resorts to the path of action without any desire. Such a person does not need any denouncement of the world. Such a person becomes endowed with a keen discriminatory power, which helps in finding the true nature of the things. It is The Gita's message. Krishna emphasizes on right action. Here, he describes Karma yoga in detail. According to Swami Tapsyananda, all Vedanta is a quest for discovering the unity of all existence in the non-dual Sat-Chit-Ananda. The schools of Vedanta differ only in their conception of the nature of that unity and the relationship of this unity with diversity. Each school of Vedanta propounds its own notion of relationship of this unity with the notion of diversity.

To transcend the illusion, divine grace is needed which is again the expression of divine love. Consciousness moves to higher stages of awareness step by step. To achieve this highest stage of realization is a herculean task. Finally, after purification of mind and with the help of good karma transition is affected. Vedanta believes in unlimited potential of mind and up to a point it is capable of helping an individual in realizing his true self. Ignorance of mind and its attraction towards needs and desires are the impediments in the path of realizing one's true self. The consciousness is thus trapped by its bondage to the desires aroused by the senses and is thus not free to expand. The mind resists the process of self-realization as it instinctively knows that the process may result in its annihilation. To reach higher level of consciousness one has to acquire mental strength by mastering the mind. This can be done by leading a selfless life and resorting to good karma. This requires the purification of character through acquiring superior mentality. This is only the preparatory stage, the final stage requires the detachment and renunciation of mind as well as the outer world. It means giving up attachment to sense objects. This is easier said than done, that is why Ramanuja's view is that the final steps cannot be carried out without divine grace which is called *kripa* by him.

R.K. Narayan has not brought all these Vedantic references consciously in his fiction but we gather his views about his philosophy of life in his non-fictional writings. He has never asserted that he was writing about Vedanta philosophy in his novels on the contrary he denies any spiritual significance of his writings. Also in his essay "Reluctant Guru" he comments about his novel *The Guide*. My novel *The Guide* was not about saints or pseudo saints of India, but about a particular person. We also find comments about his other novels in his travelogue and his autobiography.

This self-enlightenment and revival is possible through knowledge of the Upanishads. *Avidya* draws a veil upon the soul and this world seems to be true due to the effect of *avidya*. The function of knowledge or *vidya* is to lift this veil to illumine the consciousness. When consciousness is illuminated, the mind struggles upwards to attain the state of self-realization. This process is not sudden, it is gradual, and the individual consciousness, after passing through various stages, realizes the reality of the world, i.e., the world is an illusion. It is *maya*, the creative power of Brahman which makes the world seem true. When a person attains supreme knowledge or Brahman *Vidya*; the veil of *avidya* is lifted, *maya* is annihilated and the person is face to face with the truth. This truth is to be searched for and this painful climb upwards is possible only with the help of guru according to various scriptures. The guru guides the seeker of the truth on way to self-realization.

Each school of Vedanta propounds its own notion of relationship of unity with diversity. *The Gita* stresses that every human being is a complete and adequate self. The sense of inadequacy arises from the ignorance of the real self. Man's journey through life and the world is a solitary affair. Man is alone in the painful climb upwards.

He may be participating in the mundane affairs of the world but the soul is always at variance with sub-celestial occurrences. Hence the knowledge of the self alone can eliminate the sense of inadequacy. When the individual discovers him self to be full and adequate; all mental conflict and grief vanishes and happiness becomes natural and effortless. This is the ultimate endeavor of the human being, the eternal quest of human mind to know the secret of life and death. This is an integral part of Vedantic culture and heritage

Raja Rao is universally acknowledged as a novelist of philosophical consciousness. The metaphysics in his novels which is generally construed to be Vedantic, led a number of scholars to interpret his works from an exclusively Vedantic point of view.

Though Narayan's novels cannot be said to portray a completely Vedantic view of life, the urge and effort towards the goal cannot be denied. One cannot deny the presence of the philosophy merely on the ground that the protagonist has not been able to realize his goal fully. The scriptures tell us that devotion to God is a means to liberation. This requires the surrender of self to the will of God. This surrender of self results in divine grace. While actively participating in mundane affairs of life, man's inner self is always at variance with outward activity; it is always in a state of dissatisfaction and is always striving to know the ultimate truth. Ignorance of the real self is the cause of this suffering. Real bliss can be attained only through the knowledge of the self. The evolution of self from ignorance to bliss is a steady process. One has to progress from awareness to awareness point-by-point. Every soul has the inherent potential to work its own way to its divine nature. The novels of R.K. Narayan also delineate this quest of self to eternal bliss. The author is rooted in Indian sensibilities and value system and it is difficult for him to ignore the Vedantic way of life due to Hindu consciousness embedded in subterranean. So, Vedantic values are likely to creep into his works. Though Vedanta philosophy is not apparent and the author does not consciously tilt in favour of a particular school of Vedanta in his novels, the philosophy can be perceived in his novels. To some critics it appears as Gandhian ideals, to others *The Gita's* philosophy, and to still others Hindu metaphysics.

On deeper analysis, we can find subdued, silent, subterranean flow of Vedanta thought underneath. This thought does not pertain to a particular school of Vedanta; it is rather a Vedantic view of life, which emerges when we study *The Gita*, the philosophy of Sankara, Ramanuja, Madhva and the Upanishads already discussed. In *The Gita*, we find compromise of various thoughts. In the novels of R.K. Narayan also we find the values accepted by the various schools of Vedanta. This philosophy of Indian middle class cultural and social milieu constitutes an Indian view of life and an Indian way of life.

The first reading of R.K. Narayan's novels may not reveal any Vedantic view on the part of the author. But when we read the novels carefully, a hidden meaning is revealed; a silent stream of Vedanta philosophy is flowing underneath. There are indications that R.K. Narayan's attitude towards life was greatly influenced by a certain crisis in his personal life. It was the death of his wife whom he had married in defiance of customs and adverse astrological warnings. He did not believe in superstitions. His Western education had given him a practical outlook but the traditional environment at home also influenced him. His uncle's encouraging him to study Hindu scriptures, made a considerable impact on his mind.

His novel *The English Teacher* shows the deep influence of his feelings and philosophy on his writings. When he was passing through this crisis, his feelings were no different from the hero of the novel. The antidote for grief is the same for both—the author and the protagonist. He was confronted with the mysteries of life and

death and his comments in his autobiography about this betray his belief in this regard. He chose ironic mode of writing, and his vision of the world is comic. This makes his novels more complicated. On one hand, he portrays his characters with a gentle touch of irony, and on the other he incorporates the theme of self-development.

The heroes of his later novels, *The English Teacher* and *Mr. Sampath*, which he wrote after the death of his wife, progress towards the spiritual poise. His protagonists resort to self-analysis becoming gradually more aware of their shortcomings. The sprinkling of good humor makes his protagonists look more human and they remain creatures of flesh and blood with human failings, thus more convincing.

Narayan's philosophical tilt becomes more evident with the passage of time and this religious temper becomes clearer. The protagonists of R.K. Narayan's novels are continuously involved in self search. In some of these, this is achieved by using the technique of flashback while in others it is through self-criticism and self-evaluation. Every appraisal gives them a new insight into the reality of life and self. This summary attempt was to indicate that Vedanta philosophy—in its some facet or the other— does give shape to the final personality of a character here and a character there in his novels.

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