

East-West Philosophical Encounter in Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope*

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Indian novelists writing in English have from the beginning attempted to reconcile East-West in terms of their sensibility, refuting the common place dictum that the twain cannot meet. Raja Rao is one of those pioneers who attempted such an interface, of the East and the West, philosophically, with reference to his *The Serpent and the Rope* (1975). Normally the novel is read in the context of Indian Vedanta more especially Advaita Vedanta propounded by Samkara. The title of the novel takes us straight to reading it in Samkara's conception of the illusion of the serpent in the rope caused by Maya or Avidya. The central character in the novel Ramaswamy swears by this concept of Maya, as he claims to be versed in the school of Samkara. He is not only a born brahmin, but has read Samkara's Brahmsutra and the Upanishads quite early in his life.

However, this reading of the novel is too narrow to give us the whole view of the text. Raja Rao finds that the western thinkers have also tried to grapple with the question of reality and appearance. One such western philosopher who comes closer to tackling the problem is F.H. Bradley. He is of the view that appearance is after all the appearance of reality. Of course when we use the intellectual apparatus of things, qualities and relations, we move inevitably with in the world of appearances, the world of contradictions. But when we experience things in which thought and feeling become one, we transcend to world of reality, in which plurality turns into unity.

Raja Rao finds that if one arrangement has made Ramaswamy and Madeleine opposites, that is, they belong to different cultures; a wider arrangement can harmonize them, Madeleine adopting Indian ways of life and turning a Buddhist, might perhaps have unmade their oppositions, except for Ramaswamy's dogmatism.

The present paper thus attempts with comprehensive details of Raja Rao's wider vision of two cultures from within the novel itself as underlines that Samkara's appearances thus are transcended in the Absolute.

Ramaswamy is mistaken in his wife's turning Buddhist as if Buddhism were a religion opposed to Hinduism. It is not only part of the evolutionary process in order to reform Hinduism of its ritualism through Buddhism, as Dr. Radhakrishnan says in his **Hindu View of Life** but also it is said that Samkara was himself a disguised Buddhist, because both accept Maya. Thus the central principle of Buddhism comes at par with Hinduism as far as the reality of the world is concerned.

Raja Rao is not as narrow as his character is. Ramaswamy's marriage to Madeleine attests that some reconciliation between the two cultures is always possible. She was almost a Brahmin. Indeed when a German officer tried to touch her, she smiled and he could do nothing. It is then she says,

It was the Brahmin in me, she said, the sense that touch and untouch are so important; which she sensed; and she sensed; and she would let me touch her.

Raja Rao traces unity, where others see duality. For him, there is no difference between illusion and reality, except that of degree. Appearances are, after all appearances of reality. Reality, taken as the totality of all that exists, is which Bradley calls the absolute. The wider our vision the less the contradictions. There

must be such a reality because something can be an appearance only if it is the appearance of something real. But our Ramaswamy would not understand the holistic view of reality. He goes to France as a research fellow, takes up history as his special subject. He chooses to work on Albigensian Heresy. As per his own words :

I was trying to up the Bogomilites and the Druges, and thus search back for the Indian background-Jain or may be Buddhist-of the Cathars.

The irony of it is that he has chosen to link the East and the West in his research, though he is still caught up in his narrow vision of illusion and reality. Once he introduced Madeleine to Indian history she was happy to know it and in fact started researching on the idea of the Holy Grail as if it were the Mendicant bowl. Thus the Holy Grail, as she traced in an old theory, was a Buddhist conception- that the cup of Christ was Buddhist relic which the Nestorians took over abroad to Persia; there the legend mingled with the Manichaeism and became towards the end of the Middle Ages the strange story of the Holy Grail. The Holy Grail also gives Madeleine's sense of geography as a natural movement.

As Raja Rao writes about Ramaswamy's reaction, that he was born to India, where the past and the present are forever knit into one whole experience - going down the Ganges which could not imagine the Compassionate One Himself coming down the foothpath, by the Saraju river, to wash the Mendicant bowl - and so for Ramaswamy time and space had very relative importance.

Raja Rao seems to agree with Bradley that space and time are relative because both can be divided into smaller and wider time and space. The world seems to be made of smaller wholes and larger wholes. The same is the case with the self. Reality completely divorced from appearance would have no meaning. We must look for some way,

as Bradley says in *Appearance and Reality*, in which appearance and reality can be joined, Raja Rao attempts a similar unity in **The Serpent and the Rope**. The novel is full of his philosophical musings on the subject of unity. Indeed he says through Ramaswamy :

The unreal is possible because the real is but if you want to go from the unreal to the real, it would be like a man trying to walk into a road that he sees a hall of mirrors. Dushasana is none other than the ohmme moyen sensual.

Raja Rao thus suggests that we should first have the conception of the real so that we are not deceived, as Dushasana was deceived taking the path to be watery. Therefore he suggests that Ramaswamy misses the absolute and therefore wanders in the illusions, which otherwise are appearances of the same absolute. At this point it will be relevant to quote an instance of Yagnyavalkya who asked Maitrery as to why a husband loves his wife and himself replied that he loves his wife for the sake of self, that is, the absolute in her. It means this self includes both husband and wife. But Ramaswamy missed this point when he questioned whether the little mother loved the self in his father or did he love the self in Madeleine or for that matter he loved Pierre. It is perhaps beyond him to transcend his narrow self, although he capitalized on this self.

We have had an occasion to refer to Bradley. Bradley's view of reality suggests that Raja Rao's metaphysics is Bradleyen, in that the real contains diversity, the diversity which is prior to relations. Bradley makes his way to the conclusion that a relational way of thought must give appearance and not truth. Ramaswamy sticks only to his relation with Madeleine and not to here his diversity - her whole self and his whole self, with all their diverse cultural and racial differences.

Thus his relation with Madeleine is nothing but a makeshift, a mere practical compromise, though at times necessary, but in the end

most indefensible. This relationship, as was expected, breaks down, after the death of Pierre, more especially after her conversion to Buddhism. Ramaswamy, as a Brahmin, feels odd in the company of his Buddhist wife. This is not that he is not a Vedantian, one who believes in the whole: when you take away whole from the whole Purnam, what remains the whole, he says, but when it comes accepting his wife, his Vedantin fails in him. He moves in a world of self-contradiction. He is too much of an intellectual ; therefore he clings to half-truths. While he grows weak as result of his half-truths, Madeleine grows stronger. The yogic **assans** helped her, as did other exercises, such as lying on her right side. Her classes began brilliant as she was in a position to advice people around her. She told him that she, being a Buddhist, was virtually an Indian, but in reply, Ramaswamy betrayed his narrow vision of India. He told her that Buddhism being non-Indian left India. For him a Christian and a Muslim can become Buddhist, not a Hindu. To be an Indian, for him, was to be a born Brahmin. In an ironic tone, Madeleine said that Ramaswamy's India was in time and space.

Both Vedant and Bradley's metaphysics have higher ambitious. According to Bradley the object of metaphysics is to find a general view which will satisfy the intellect. Only what fully satisfies the intellect can be real or true, that is, what can be satisfied only when there are no contradictions. Ramaswamy, on the other hand, lives in contradictions. He does nowhere come to envision the Absolute. The Absolute cannot of course be thought, for all thinking is self contradictory. We can only dimly realize what the Absolute must be like. Ramaswamy's failure in this regard is not his alone; it is the failure of most of us.

Raja Rao wished Ramaswamy to feel the sense of the absolute, howsover dimly, though our hero does not lose his author's

sympathy for all his dogmatism. Ramaswamy still believes in Samkara's Advaita that the world is an illusion ; the world is either real or unreal. Raja Rao, however, corrects him at places that the real is all inclusive, completely systematic, and harmonious. It can be realized from the side of will and our feeling. Only in such an Absolute in which appearances are not illusions, but part of the same, in more or less degree of reality, can we realize oneness, containing all diversity. This is how, Ramaswamy, failing to rise above his limited view, loses Madeleine, He sees only the self as real and the nonself as nonreal. It is strange that his own thesis on the Holy Grail contradicted his view. Similarly, he found it difficult to deal with the metaphysical symbolism of paradise. According to the Hindu concept, there is not only satya and asatya, Truth and Untruth, but also Mithya, illusion - like the horns on the head of a rabbit or the son of a barren woman. But for him orthodoxy of this kind was a smartha. Stalin was orthodox. But in contrast Trotsky, as also Napoleon, offered revolutionary consolations. He is an orthodox Hindu himself. Hence his praise for Stalin. He was equally averse to the worship of the woman. It is here that the ignorance of Radha fits in when Krishna told her that he was a Brahmchari and Durvasa that he was ever in Upvasa. His Absolute is pure, beyond the body and beyond the mind; it is Platonic idea or Form.

Raja Rao is closer to Bradley's Absolute, in that it includes all diversity, of the mind and the body, of the red and the green, because it is ever widening and therefore unmakes all oppositions. Appearances, then, are transcended in this Absolute. The evil, the ugly, the false, in short, the serpent as well the rope have their right as appearances respected; somehow the Absolute finds a place for them. Of course, the rope seen as serpent, as sand seen as water in a desert strikes as illusions - nonreal therefore deceptions but they are

only less real, needing a more supplementation in order to pass into the Absolute. Such errors obviously need supplementation of a serious kind. But for that reason, no error is utterly without reality. It is simply more false than other judgements.

We can say that the book is read but not Absolutely read. Ramaswamy has no vision of this Absolute which includes all diverse stages of reality; that is why, he fails to stay with Madeleine. She also realizes it by seeking divorce from him. He comes back to India and seeks his Guru, his real home.

Work Cited

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