



ZEROING IN ON SPIRITUAL ODYSSEY: AN EXPLORATION OF RAJA RAO'S SELECT SHORT STORIES.

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ABSTRACT

Raja Rao's creative journey as a writer is permeated with metaphysical and spiritual quests which are filtered through his novels and short stories. His literary outputs have the quaint motif of exploration of the self from the drab and illusory mundanity- the most cherished goal of life according to Indian philosophy. We can corroborate this fact for the esoteric intellectual thoughts of Advaitic Vedanta and Indian philosophy run parallel with the vaneer of ancient Indian mythology and legend in his works. In this research paper I shall try to elucidate Raja Rao's few selected short stories as an odyssey of spiritual and metaphysical exploration.

KEYWORDS : Spiritual, Metaphysical, Short Story, Journey, Quest.

Before starting our exploration on the philosophical and spiritual tenets gleaned from Upanishads, Vedanta, the rich treasury house of Indian scriptures as well as the western philosophy those saturating the whole wonderful corpus of Raja Rao we should mark the point that unlike any other Indian author, Rao declares himself as a 'sadhaka' to Shiva Niranjana:

If you mean sage in the sense that he has found the Truth, that would be correct. I think, I have. My 'guru' has the compassion to show me the Truth- its naked beauty. But if you mean by that, I am ultimately there already, that is not quite truth. I am trying to be what my 'guru' taught me. So I think, the best thing would be to call me a 'sadhaka' a very serious 'sadhaka' of course (Raja Rao 15).

The journey and quest for higher truth are inherent in Rao's life itself, if we analyze it in terms of the quest cycle that Joseph Campbell in his *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* reflects. This cycle incorporates separation, calling for forsaking the familial bond and repose of home in response to the call of mysterious and unknown, initiation that is marked by hero's encounter with novelty especially by a guide or mentor and discovery of the wide world view called *weltanschauung*, and finally the return to society with a discovery of the self to serve it for higher objectives. The author's spiritual journey can be traced in Campbellian quest cycle that the author left the comfort of home of his forebears for higher purpose; his initiation by 'guru' Atmananda who cleared away his spiritual and intellectual queries; and his return with enlightenment to disseminate his service through literature. The inheritance that was left by our ancient sages in their intellectual thought process and scriptures, Raja Rao has done that to a large extent in his rendition of those metaphysical and spiritual concerns through literature. In this sense he is a 'sadhaka', an ascetic in its true essence. This constant evolution of self into a higher perspective is one of the pertinent motives in Rao's literary career. It is a continual process of erasing the egotistical self to reaffirm the self in its merging into the light of the Absolute. That is why the author asserts in his *The Meaning of Life*:

That is what I have been trying to achieve. That I become no one, that no one shines but it...I would like to be completely nameless and just be that reality which is beyond all of us...that there be no one there but light (158-59).

Rao was well conversant with the philosophical and intellectual thoughts of the country. His stories are neither the delineation of linear events nor the photographic portrayal of reality, rather these are voyages into the subterranean region of super consciousness to discover the guiding principle of life that alone non-duality is the essence of this universe propounded in Advaitic Vedanta by Acharya Sankara. In a plethora of stories the writer traces out the evolution of self, a continuous journey of individual in quest of spiritual truth. The story "Companions" hinges round Moti Khan's journey in the discovery of the true nature of self crossing the earthly temptation; and his realization of God that beyond the veil of

'Maya', that constitute the nature itself dwells He. The serpent or the snake symbolically represents the serpent of inner-self of carnality; and one has to vanquish this serpent in the path of spiritual progress. Before the serpent of lust and sensual desires devours him Moti Khan has to reach his destination, so "he would sit down and meditate" (*Policeman* 32). Then after his enlightenment Moti Khan returns to serve the society for higher ends. Thus the journey and quest motives of the self are very beautifully handled in this story: Moti Khan's response to the call of the unknown, initiation by a torch-bearer, here in the form of the snake acting as a vigilant sentinel and checking the carnal urges; and his ultimate re-discovery of the self and return to society.

"India-A Fable" envisages the long imaginative journey of a five old French boy from Arabia to India-in a symbolic level tracing the metaphysical journey in the garb of folktale. The story focuses on the theme that the divine face of Truth is as crystal as the light itself to the guileless purity of children. The child in his imaginative journey reaches India and is mesmerized by awe and wonder of the country. In his ecstasy he beholds a fountain and plunges into it touching the bottom of it full of light. Thus his eternal quest for the country of wonder and beauty is quenched after this. Here the bottom of the fountain points to the bottom of mind full of divine light which an innocent child like the boy of the story can reach and perceive very easily in its all pervasive majesty. It is the interfusion of individual soul with the hallowed radiance of divinity when there is only single entity in its all permeating brilliance that Rao hammers home in his epigraph to the story that alone monism is 'auspicious' which finds a brilliant expression in Wordsworth's poem "Tintern Abbey":

And even the motion of our human blood
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
In body, and becomes a living soul:
While with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things. (Sinha 5. 45-50)

"The Policeman and the Rose" is a finest example of Rao's magnum opus of unravelling of Advaitic Vedanta. Rao artistically handles here the complex philosophy of monism. The policeman in the story becomes bodily existence arrested by birth through "the chain of Karmic evolution based on the principle of metempsychosis." (Srivastava 162). It is only when the difference between the 'known' and the 'knower' is completely wiped out, when there is no affiliation to self that the Absolute can be realized. The protagonist's journey to France, Japan and America and his return to Travancore with his red rose present his eternal quest for self realization. The transformation of the red rose into white and its culmination in the form of lotus symbolically portray the metaphysical odyssey of the narrator from worldly attachment towards non-attachment; and his final fusion into lotus, the seat of Brahma. In his *The Meaning of Life* Rao registers this experience very exquisitely:

When the ego is dissolved, who are you? There is no one there:
Yet the "I" is there. The ego's death is the revelation of the "I". (192)

This quest motif also moulds the fabric of the story "The True Story of Kanakpala" in which Hosakere Rangapa undertakes the arduous pilgrimage to Kashi Vishweshwara far away from his abode; finds enlightenment in a vision of Lord Shiva and Mother Parvathi; and returns home to serve the society in a more substantial way.

One of the memorable stories of Chandogya Upanishad in which Satyakama after his initiation from Acharya Gautam was given four hundred tenuous cows to look after; when he vowed not to meet his master until the cows multiply into thousand. In course of time he being passed his test of perseverance and dedication Acharya bestowed him enlightenment. This story rings in "Narsiga" in which Narsiga's spiritual germination starts at Master's monastery where the Master's brother gave him sheep to tend to make this orphan boy self-dependant, and save him from his termagant aunts. Narsiga takes delight in his job; and thus being emancipated from the clutches of his relatives his spirituality blooms gradually. Before the onslaughts of torments from the callous society Javni's resilience to sufferings and stoic acceptance of her circumstances without cursing or blaming anybody transports her to a Christ like figure in the story of same title.

In "The Cow in the Barricade" the mysterious cow is the incarnation of divinity: a seeker of salvation and Truth. Behind the political contours the story sketches the karmic evolution its resultant birth and release from the fetters of flesh and blood. The cow here is the spiritual seeker visiting the self-realized master. Perchance by karmic evolution the cow has to come in this earth in the form of animal; and through salvation and penance it has to release itself. Her presence brings forth unity in nature as the master visualize "the snake and rat playing under him for when the seeker finds harmony, the jackal and the deer and the rat and the serpent become friends" (*Policeman* 37). At last she gives up her ghost for a greater purpose of unity among the mob; and thus her salvation in the way of spiritual quest is complete; and through this self-sacrifice she frees herself from the karmic evolution of life and death. Rao in his collection *On the Ganga Ghat* powerfully sketches death as the threshold to cross the barrier of earthly existence that rings so majestically in Tennyson's memorable poem "Crossing the Bar":

For tho' from out our bourne of Time
and Place
The flood may bear me far,
I hope to see my Pilot face to face
When I have crost the bar. (www.poetryfoundation.org)

Beyond the death of physicality there emerges the aroma of eternal life when one meets with his 'Pilot' or discovers the transcendental, the true nature of self, as death is like the tattered garment left behind, the soul remaining unchanged wears the new garment of flesh and blood as the Bhagavad Gita underscores. The first untitled story of this collection points out Moti Ram's philosophical intuition regarding the enigma of life and death that though the corporeal frame may depart, the soul remains unchanged and unmoved by the flux of time like a constant burning lamp with its radiance existing forever. He takes his son's death as the inevitable law of nature:

"Well Sir, we must all die of something. Does it matter
the manner he was taken away? His time was come
and he was taken away" (*Ganga Ghat* 14).

Moti Ram is a devotee of Lord Shiva; and he believes that by the grace of 'Mother Parvathi' the dark veil of ignorance will vanish. Our Vedantic philosophy underscores this fact that when the Divine Mother clears away the clouds of 'Maya', illusion by Her grace one can realize the true nature of self. Through the complete eradication of ego one's way to divinity is paved out. Moti Ram's metaphysical yearning is the abolition of self in his way of mystical realization, "He

alone beats the drum true who knows he is never there" (ibid 18). Moti Ram's beating of the drum insinuates his devotion to Lord Shiva.

So from the above discussion we can conclude that Rao's short stories envisage the odyssey of the individual towards the Absolute, the guiding principle of the universe. In place of morals the metaphysical reality takes precedence in his stories. We shall conclude quoting few word of Letizia Alverno's column that appeared in *The Guardian*:

Rao viewed his writing as sadhana, a quest for truth; his stories never narrate events, but their protagonists' inner evolution self-analysis. Their surrounding reality is always filtered through the author's Vedantic lenses: Advaita Vedanta, or non-dualism, one of the six main schools of Hindu philosophy, holds that the world is the expression of an all-encompassing unity- Brahman-- the ultimate and impersonal principle of the universe, from which all being originates, and to which it returns. ("Raja Rao")

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