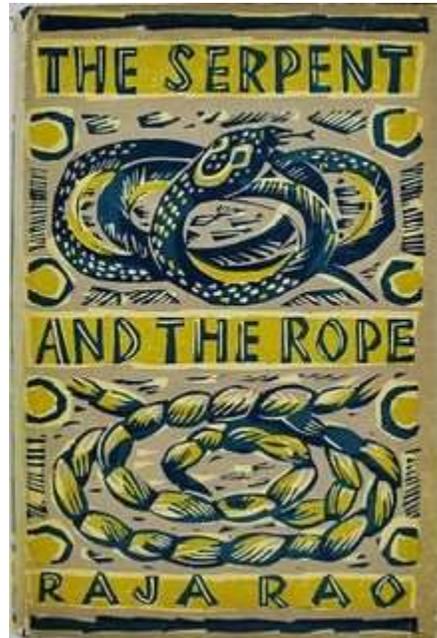


Of Innocence and Experience: Tracing the Journey of Ramaswamy in Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope*

Goutam Karmakar



Courtesy: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Serpent_and_the_Rope

Abstract

Being a true Advait Vedantin, Raja Rao remains a Sadhak (in the sense of quester) throughout his life. And by employing the spiritual space in his novels, he seeks to decode the truth coupled with mysticism and innocence. His protagonists never stop questioning their own perception and understanding of life and this self-introspection help them to get a holistic view of life. But in gaining this knowledge his protagonists have to undergo a journey from innocence to experience. By pointing out the deeper spiritual, moral, philosophical and existential issues, Rao shows his readers the way towards self-realization and this self-realization comes after the protagonists' confrontation with spiritual dilemmas, moral conflicts, inner turmoil, psychological anguish and identity crisis. His *The Serpent and the Rope* is bound to be counted in this context because in true sense of term the spiritual aspiration of Raja Rao is reflected in his Ramaswamy, the mystic-protagonist of *The Serpent and the Rope*. If Ramaswamy's marriage to Madeleine is an act of pure innocence and ignorance of his native trading and cultures, then the journey towards experience begins with his return to India and here his longing for a sense of belonging acts as a medium. If Ramaswamy's ritual marriage to Savithri paves the way for spiritual

salvation of him then his yearning for the guidance of a guru gives his journey a meaning which helps him to realize himself and this paper attempts to show this journey of ignorant and innocent Rama and how he realizes the experience.

Keywords: Raja Rao, *The Serpent and the Rope*, Education, Experience, Ignorance, Innocence, Salvation, Journey

Introduction

I had serious questions of my own and I could not name them. Something has just missed my life, some deep absence grew in me like a coconut on a young tree, that no love or learning could fulfill...I wondered where all this wandering would lead to. Life is a pilgrimage, I knew but pilgrimage to where and what? (*The Serpent and The Rope* 26)

The above quoted lines from Raja Rao's 'The Serpent and The Rope' carry within themselves the very essence of Rao's narrative technique which provide his readers the elements of truth of innocence and the ultimate experience issuing out from the journey of his mystic protagonists. This metaphorical journey has been shown here by Ramaswamy whose quest for the knowledge in a way reflects Rao's quest. And Rao has shown this journey with his Vedantic notions, Advait philosophy, realization of the self, notion of appearance and reality, Buddhist perceptions and ultimate salvation. The lines such as "there is no body to go now, no home, no city, no climate, no age...who are you? whose; whence have you come?" (402) vividly portray Rao's politics of truth and truth is nothing but the perpetual existential crisis and agony of mankind issuing out of his ignorance and innocence and all these result in the quest for Mukti, which is nothing but the realization and experience of one's own self. Ram's journey shows how he speculates on every event which in turn compels him to think on the nature of existence. Rao with his fictional space tries to show the subtle metaphysical problems and his Rama tries to show his eagerness to attain metaphysical wisdom. This attainment of wisdom and experience can be traced in the very title of the fiction which is highly symbolic in nature. While the serpent stands for illusion, the rope points out the eternal truth and both the serpent and the rope together pave the way for salvation and Tiwari aptly comments on this issue:

The logic is employed to illustrate the absolute reality of the *Brahma* as against the unreality of the visible universe. Even as a rope is mistaken for a serpent in the darkness, so also the phenomenal universe, which is false, is regarded as real for lack of accurate knowledge; *Brahma satyamjaganmithya*. That is, Brahman is the Single Reality and the visible world is an illusion which in fact is denied to our perception because of our psyche being enveloped in "Avidya" or "Ajnana." (158)

Individuation of Rama

Rama's journey is bound to happen for he himself considers life as illusion and for him true life can be understood in terms of true Brahminhood and "the true Brahminhood commences when you recognize yourself in eternity. At some moment you must stop life and look into it."

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(215) The process of individuation of Rama is something very essential for him because “it is absolutely fundamental to human beings to distinguish themselves from their surroundings. This is the essential nature of individual consciousness: to be itself, it must create distinctions and separateness. It is in accord with human nature, therefore, to seek individuation. Individuation is not optional, not conditional, not subject to vagaries of cultural differences. It is essential.” (Stein 3) In this process he realizes that he is not the individual soul but he is the supreme self and the soul of the individual is like the tip of the wave which ultimately submerges in its very source. Life is nothing but an illusion and the illusionary nature of the world places oneself in a dreamy world where unreal seems to be real. Only the experience can break this spell and an eternal fight to attain this experience gives the life an existence. Rama’s journey from innocence to experience is something like what Swami Amarananda opines in *Stories from Vedanta*:

Apprehension and anxiety are based on a kind of deception which is very much like thinking that a rope is a snake. We are basically perfect whole, and full of bliss. Yet we see ourselves as hapless mortals marching towards the grave. We are behaving as if we have been put under a magic spell, which is called maya in Vedanta. When maya’s spell is broken, we can no longer be fooled about our real nature.(43)

Rama’s Karma

Tracing the journey in ‘The Serpent and The Rope’ can’t be possible unless the readers get to know about his doings. His Karma or his doings out of sheer innocence create an existential crisis in his life. This crisis affects the psyche of the protagonist who seeks to attain wisdom and spiritual truth namely experience.

Orphanage, Profession and the Decision: Beginning of Rama’s Journey

The quest of Ramaswamy also begins in this way. From the very beginning he has the tendency of finding the truth not only of his religion and philosophy but also of others religions. His karma paves the way for him. He is a Brahmin who has a deep knowledge on Brahma Sutras and grammar. His thrust for knowledge compels him to study history and travel many countries to meet different kinds of people. At the age of seven he is given the holy thread which leaves a casting influence on his mind.

Besides being a lecturer in History, his love for Vedantic philosophy makes him a researcher of Albigenian Heresy. With a wish of establishing a connection between Eastern and Western thoughts, he goes to France and this journey which can be taken the beginning of his journey and his own comments on existence cast him a seeker of truth and wisdom: “Existence is a passage between life and death, and birth and death again, and what an accumulation of pain man has to bear. Is it wonder that the Buddha, with palaces and queens, with a kingdom and an heir, left his home to find that from which there is no returning? You could only live in Life, and to find that means is to know the whole wisdom.” (135). His orphan hood and ultimate realization in relationships add a sense of loneliness and identity crisis and his search for the roots begins.

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His mother's death and his father's marriage leave him nowhere and he utters: "I have wandered the world and have sobbed in hotel rooms and in trains, have looked at the old mountains and sobbed, for I had no mother." (6). Due to his orphanage and loneliness he makes relation with people of different cultures. His profession as a historian haunts him and he finds difficulty in assimilating his profession and his personal self. His karma becomes the cause of his crisis and his dream of mingling East and West seem to be an impossible task. As a result of these "he is torn between the concepts of timelessness-his Indian identity and a time bound historical existence- his other identity, that of the historian. The presence of two opposing forces in his psyche- the historical west and the traditional India- keep on warring within his quagmire self. They never reconcile." (Swain 150-151).

Never at Ease

Rama is never at ease with his relationships and his own doings. He leaves India but his arrival in his native country to visit his father who is on the verge of breathing his last, again gives him a sense of loneliness. He feels a strong bond for his roots and here comes his anxiety over his identity and the journey in his starts from that moment. So, for him anxiety and angst create a feeling which has been stated vividly by Steiner: "Anxiety is that which makes problematic, which makes worthy of our questioning our Being-in-the-world. Angst is one of the primary instruments through which the ontic character and context of everyday existence is made inescapably aware of, is rendered naked to, the pressure of the ontological. And, further, angst is the mark of authenticity." (78). Rama begins to experience the fear and this fear reminds him of all the inauthentic doings in the world and so he eagerly wants to give life an authentic meaning. He begins to question himself: "I had a serious of questions of my own and I could not name them. Something has just missed me in life." (26).

Marriage with Madeleine: A Sheer Act of Ignorance and Innocence

At the University of Cacn Rama meets Madeleine which is five years older than him. They feel in love and get married. The reasons behind this marriage are Ram's attraction towards the physical beauty and virtue of Madeleine and Madeleine's eagerness "to know and identify herself with a great people." (18) Ramaswamy is fascinated by the beauty of Madeleine and his innocence is coupled with sensuousness which makes him ignorant of their different cultures. Regarding this act of innocence Narsingh Shrivastav aptly comments: "Truly, their love in spite of the innocence in their relationship was in the beginning full of all sensuous charms and physical attraction without which love between man and woman is incomplete." (75) While Madeleine gives her efforts to make the marriage successful and a lasting one, Rama dreams of returning to India with his wife for he wants to teach there in any University as a professor. Furthermore, Ramaswamy believes in non-duality while Madeleine believes in duality and two opposite philosophies fail to give each other spiritual solace and the marriage ends in divorce.

Inclination towards Saroja and Lakshmi: An Act of Ignorance

Not only Madeleine but also towards Saroja and Lakshmi Ramaswamy feels attracted. This attraction is nothing but his ignorance of ethics and morals of Hindu religion. After his return from pilgrimage with his stepmother, he is intoxicated seeing the physical beauty of Saroja and his saying proves this. He confesses: I was intoxicated with Saroja's presence, like a deer could

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be before a waterfall, or an elephant before a mountain peak; something primordial was awakening in a creature, and I felt that maturity in a girl was like the new moon or the change of equinox, it had polar affinities . . . What a deep and reverential mystery womanhood is. I could bow before Saroja and call her Queen.” (50) He is ignorant and rigid and inflexible principles of the Hindu religion are completely ignored by him. Regarding this inclination Dayal aptly comments: “Ramaswamy, desiring such a relation with Saroja, therefore criticizes his own heritage which prohibits endogenous relationships. He feels aggrieved that the Brahmin’s despite their metaphysical wisdom, lack the courage to rebel against the outmoded orthodoxy Indian morality that still holds on to fidelity in love.” (30)

Losing Control of Mind

Rama’s journey is a journey of a man who does the faults and then tries to derive lessons from it. When Savithri is married to Pratap, Rama feels a sense of loneliness and depression and these make his senses numb and dull. He loses the control of mind and again ignores the truth. He makes an attempt to make a relation with Laxmi, the wife of Captain Sham Sunder. He becomes shameless and sensuousness engrosses him in such a way that he even says: “In a day or two Laxmi yielded to me. I thought to myself it was like eating a pickle. My days and nights would be spent in luxurious enjoyment.” (295) But he realizes his mistake and returns to France for his spiritual enlightenment and realization of true self.

Experiencing the Longingness for the Roots: Ramaswamy’s Visit to India and the Outcome of the Marriage

He comes to India to visit his dying father who eventually dies. His son Pierre dies of bronchial pneumonia and he receives this news while staying in India. These incidents mark the beginning of his spiritual quest and his stay in India allows him to ponder over things. His attachment to his step mother, to Indian culture, to Holy River, to his sister Saroja provide him the homely atmosphere as prevalent in an Indian family and his attitude towards Madeleine changes and he says:

Living in the intimacy of my own family-where every gesture, idiosyncrasy, or mole mark was traced back to some cousin, aunt, or grandmother, where there was subtle understanding of half said things, of acts that were respected...gave a feeling of complex oneness, from which one could never get out save by death, even after that one could get into it again in the next life, and so on till the wheel of existence were ended. (277)

This visit gives Rama so much love and affection that he takes his stepmother’s ancestral toe-rings and Saroja’s one sari for Madeleine. After returning from India he finds Madeleine’s different attitude and he feels like he is in some unknown land with an unknown lady and he says: “For once I felt a stranger in France.” (59). It seems that India is the cause of separation of this once happily lived couple. And it is a naked truth because for Madeleine “marriage was like a pair of parallel rails on which runs the life’s train. She had accepted Rama, she wanted to possess him wholly, but she could never merge her identity with that of his, she could never become a member of his larger family, accepting his tradition as her own and continuing with

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that tradition in future; she could never be like the Brahmaputra that merges with the Ganga and conjointly flows to sea.” (Bhattacharya 292). Madeleine frees him and tells him to marry an ideal Hindu girl. While Madeleine takes the death of Pierre as the end of all, Rama takes death in an easy way for he believes death to be a continuation of life and his evolving maturity can be seen here. Rama’s feeling of loneliness becomes more prominent with the death of his second child and retrieval of Madeleine from worldly affairs. And at this point he begins to involve himself actively on human life and activity and he tries to give his life a meaning. So the existential crisis paves the way for Rama and when “the absurdity of life fully recognized, the dread converted, the choice made and the responsibility assumed, existence is felt as a value in itself. Existentialism thus becomes an active way of life to be practiced and lived through effort and achievement.” (Chatterji 81) Rama begins to discover a meaning in everything and spirituality here helps him.

Experiencing the Ritual Marriage with Savithri and the Journey Towards Spiritual Salvation

Spiritual incompatibility becomes the main reason behind the separation of Rama and Madeleine. Here Savithri, the daughter of raja of Surajpur, comes to fill the gap and helps Rama to find his true self. In India Rama meets Savithri who is a betrothed of Pratap. But she doesn’t love him. They both know Sanskrit and they begin to like each other. She seems to be a perfect match for Rama and he observes her carefully. He says: “Savithri gave one the sense that, do what you would, you could only be, and since you could only be, nothing could happen to you. Virtue for her was not a principal, a discipline; it was the acceptance that whether she married Pratap or ‘liked’ that Muslim in London-she vaguely referred to both - they were both instants of an experience, always happening to itself. For her truth was not tomorrow or yesterday-that is why she scarcely ever referred to India; the truth was wherever one is-for there is no anybody or any when, but all is, for one is not.” (128). A kind of spiritual love develops in them and they begin to feel the existence of their soul. He says: “Saint I had to become if I would know, not a saint of ochre and done-bowl, but one which had known the extinction of the ego...to know Savithri was to wake into the truth of Life, to be remembered-unto God.” (169) They conform to the principle of Advaitic philosophy where both the soul merge into one. Rama describes this beautifully when he tells Georges: “She became the awareness behind my awareness, the leap of my understanding. I lost the world and she became it. For whatever I gave her she accepted, as the Ganges receives the waters of the Himalayas, that go on down to the sea and come again as white flakes of snow, then blue, then very green; and as the sun comes northward again, the ice melts and once more the Ganges takes the water to the sea-so we gave love to each other, as though it did not belong to us but a principle, another, an impersonal reality, from which we saw gifts emerge in each of us.” (159)

Savithri is a modern woman educated at Cambridge but wears traditional Indian choli, kumkum, black beads. These Indian ethos and sensibility attracts Rama. She loves to do philosophical discussions with Rama. It is she who brings out comments like “you can love; or rather you can be love” (176) from Rama. He gradually develops his own self and his mystical marriage proves this. Savithri accepts Rama as her lord, her Siva. She even performs *arti* before accepting him as her husband. But in later she marries Pratap and ‘both Rama and Savithri

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realize ultimately that their ‘marriage’ is only spiritual and should never be corrupted by physical desire. He reveals to her the true nature of love... He accepts her as principle; his Queen Savithri achieves her happiness in life as a true wife.” (Sastry 62)

Yearning for the Guidance of a Guru and the Process of Enlightenment: Entering the Last Stage Towards Experience and the Education of Ramaswamy

Rama enters into a stage where the various aspects of his personality mingle into one harmonious whole and the dilemmas and conflicts are interfaced with collective consciousness and this fusion holds an importance “since the individual is not only a single, separate being but, by his very existence, also presupposes a collective relationship, the process of individuation must clearly lead to a more intensive and universal collective solidarity, and not to mere isolation.” (Jung 562-563). Rama is found in the final stage of transformation. His innocence is now shaped and modified, and he is experiencing the life.

The process of enlightenment begins and for Rama the term signifies a “clear and intuitive perception (‘appreciation’) or intuitive understanding (not just belief or intellectual comprehension) of the entire situation, that is, of the unity of consciousness and absence of the ‘me’ or ‘I’ as a separate autonomous entity.” (qtd. in Sharma, Raja 20). Rama experiences illumination regarding the history and the mystery which hold the truth of human existence. With strict social codes and moral disciplines, an experience can be achieved.

Here his journey towards enlightenment throws light on the Advait philosophy in which enlightenment means being one with Brahmin. And to search the root of oneness with Brahmin, the journey must be completed. Samadhi can take place when the seen and the seer become one with Brahmin who is the cause of his consciousness. Rama’s ego, material greed and questionable innocence become the cause of his suffering. By developing compassion, habit of sacrifice and compassion one can attain peace and the path towards experience which is for him Nirvana. Here he confirms the Buddhist view of Nirvana which focuses on a goal and “the goal is to transcend the sense of self and the attachment it spawns and to realize one’s true nature as part of the harmonious, compassionate and interdependent reality that is the universe (sometimes referred to as the “Buddha Nature”). This is the perfected state of realization that Buddha call nirvana.” (Coward 4)

For attaining eternal bliss Rama has to leave worldly desires and only by this he can attain peace, Mukti, Moksa, Nirvana, Salvation, Knowledge and the journey from ignorance to experience can be completed. Saroj Kulshreshtha aptly comments on the last stage of the journey. Regarding Mukti he opines: “In Sanskrit terminology, Mukti, Moksa, Kaivalya, Brahma-Samsaparsha, Nirvana etc., are synonyms of the English word ‘Salvation’ or ‘Release’. Of course, the connotations of all these terms differ from one another. Literal meaning of all these terms taken in general sense is ‘release from bondage to the sensuous and individual, the narrow and the finite.’ It also means release from worldly affairs, including man’s desires, attachments and sufferings.” (8)

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In the case of Rama, the process of detachment occurred in a gradual way. Different types of thinking between Rama and Madeleine, Rama's futile search of his self in Madeleine, his visit to some significantly holy places and good-hearted people in India make him aware of his ignorance and he begins to realize himself. The process is aggravated by Madeleine's Buddhist ascetic principles. Madeleine keeps herself busy in meditation and Japa and Rama's journey towards experience is fastened by her compassion, austerity, renunciation and voluntary aloofness. At this moment Savithri appears to be his spiritual companion and the torch bearer of his journey. Rama acquires a lot from her and advises her to marry Pratap for he wants to detach himself from all Maya. Towards the end he feels a sense of alienation when he finds Savithri happily married, Madeleine spiritually elevated, Saroja unhappy yet settled and little mother's stay at home. Only he remains a wanderer and "his agonizing sense of alienation reduces him to a mere thing, a cipher. He becomes a pray to incertitude and anxiety. The traumatic memories of the past crystalising creep into his sense and intensify his affection." (Swain 154).

Need for Some Unseen Blessed Forces – Surrender to Guru and God

This is the time he realizes the need of some unseen blessed forces in his life and only God or his presence can do good and show him the path of experience and salvation. But again, he questions the very absence of god also. He questions himself: "Do I long for God? God is an object and I cannot long for a round, red thing, the one calls god, and he becomes god." (402) After a long pause and thinking he comes to realize that he needs a Guru who can explicate the truth from the age old holy manuscripts and Rama is in need of the truths. So, his long search is fulfilled by the Guru and his blissful guidance. Regarding the Guru he says: Such a sun I have seen; it is more splendid than a million suns. It sits on a river bank, it sits as the formless form of truth; it walks without walking, speaks without talking, moves without gesticulating, shows without naming, reveals what is known. To such truth I was taken, and became a servant, I kissed the perfume of its holy feet, and called myself a disciple. (403)

The role of a Guru is enormous and man like Rama needs the guidance of a Guru very much. As he is a Brahmin he believes in rich Indian tradition which always gives emphasis on the Mukti of the soul and this Mukti comes after a long experience. And the Guru works as a medium in this journey from ignorance and innocence to experience. Rama realises that if he wants to surrender himself to the God then he has to surrender himself to his Guru and his thinking resembles the sayings of Sri Aurobindo: "In surrendering to the Guru is to the divine in him that one surrenders-if it were only to a human entity it would be ineffective. But it is the consciousness of the divine presence that makes the Guru a real Guru, so that even if the disciple surrenders to him thinking of the human being to whom he surrenders that presence will make it effective." (615) In course of this journey Rama learns to hear the voice of his soul and he starts to respond. The submission of his thesis gives him a relief and, he finds more time to self-introspect himself. He attains a new height and he learns to handle situation peacefully. His maturity can be seen and although his journey from innocence to experience is not completed in true sense of the term, but he learns to make the difference between illusion and reality. And now he is not an ignorant or innocent one but a matured person with right perception. Now he knows the importance of Guru and can think beyond the illusion and see the reality. Now his words not only bear a deep meaning but also compel people to realize that "The world is either unreal or

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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 . . . You see the serpent and in fear you feel you are it, the serpent, the saint. One — the Guru— brings you the lantern; the road is seen, the long, white road, going with the statutory stars. 'It's only the rope.' He shows it to you. And you touch your eyes and *know* there never was a serpent. Where was it, where, I ask you? The poet who saw the rope as serpent became the serpent, and so a saint. Now, the saint is shown that his sainthood was identification, not realization. The actual, the real has no name. The rope is no rope to itself (335)

Conclusion

Considering the above discussion, it can be said that Raja Rao in an efficient creates uses spirituality as a medium through which he shows the gradual journey of his protagonists towards the self-realization. With his use of local and global thoughts, he gives his protagonists different perceptions and meanings which in return compels them to question their given role and existence. By placing Rama at the centre of his story, he shows how inner turmoil, existential angst, anxiety and spiritual conflicts help Rama to understand himself and his education is done in this process. In order to find himself, Rama ultimately frees himself from the materialistic clutches of a society governed by fake traditions and cultures. Rama finds himself spiritually alienated and this awareness initiated his journey and here education and elucidation in the individuation process are started. Here Rama's detachment from Madeleine and spiritual passion for Savithri give him a new way to view life and his ritual marriage with Savithri paves the way for his spiritual salvation. Finally, by showing the traditional Indian vedantic philosophy associated with the guidance and blessings of Guru, Rao shows the way of salvation for Rama. Ramaswamy doesn't experience the knowledge and enlightenment in true sense of the term but definitely becomes a self-actualized being after finding the Guru and he attains the Hindu concept of Mukti and Moksa and it is proved that one has to go through different phases of life to attain the experience. Roy R. Rad aptly explains this and the conclusion can be summed up with what he opines regarding the journey:

Encountering birth, death, marriage or relationships, interactions, childhood, maturation, transformation; roles like mother, father, lover, hero, servant and so on, are all aspects of life. The more roles we take, the more we learn through experience. The more we learn, the closer we get to our wholeness...we cannot do something just for us; we have to experience it in connection with others to get to our fullest and give meaning to our life and our experience of it. (6-7)

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