

## Quest for the absolute: A study of Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope*


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### Abstract

*Raja Rao's novel The Serpent and the Rope (1960) delineates the theme of soul's progress from avidya to vidya (ignorance to knowledge) and a man's quest for the Absolute. Through the character portrayal of Ramaswamy, his encounter with assorted persons at different places, and the agonies and anguishes of his life, Rao takes his readers on the august mission of life. Ramaswamy, the protagonist of the novel, comes to the realization that it is mere absurdity to live in human form if one does not have the urge for the Absolute. Therefore, he decides to stop life and look into it. He casts away all material achievements of life and submerges himself in the spiritual world, meditating upon if the world we live in is real or unreal - the serpent or the rope. The objective of the paper is to analyze the novel in terms of its hero's quest for the Absolute, the path undertaken by him to reach the goal, and finally his realization of the Absolute. For this purpose, the study heavily draws upon various Tantric philosophical traditions as a tool to interpret the text.*

**Keywords:** Bondage, Tantra, Self-realization, Liberation, Absolute

### 1.0 Introduction

Raja Rao is unquestionably the greatest Indian novelist of philosophical tradition. All his novels, in one way or another, are the manifestations of Eastern and Western metaphysical traditions. His protagonists are in relentless search for the central meaning of existence, and their ceaseless aspirations for the Ultimate makes Rao's novels metaphysical in true sense. Dayal (1991) observes that "Raja Rao is a novelist of philosophical consciousness..., and his writings invariably manifest his quest for Truth" (p. 1). Rao considerably differs from his two contemporary stalwarts Mulk Raj Anand and R. K. Narayan in the sense that Anand and Narayan spilled their ink on socio-political realities, whereas Rao displayed his felicitous genius in pursuing the true philosophical values for existence through his writings. M. K. Naik's (1972) statement that "Raja Rao has lent a philosophical depth to Indian novel in English" rightly validates the theme explored in the novel under study (p. 160). The title of the novel implies the antithesis between Appearance and Reality. The serpent connotes Appearance, Illusion, *Maya*, or *Sansar*, and the rope evinces Reality, Truth, *Brahman*, or the Absolute. Mukherjee (1967) asserts that "As the title suggests, the novel involves two ways of apprehending reality: the recognition of the object as object and the recognition that the object exists because the perceiver perceives it" (p. 68). Ramaswamy, the protagonist of the novel, is on his journey from India to Europe on one level, and at the deeper level, he is on the pilgrimage from ignorance to wisdom, seeking for the Absolute. Dey (1992) observes: "The incessant repetition of *self* – 360 times in a novel of

406 pages - is pervasive. Ramaswamy's goal is to realize the *vedantic* concept of the Absolute” (p. 108). For this, he dwells upon Tantric means of *mokshha* (liberation). He adopts, celebrates, and lives Tantric life, finally illuminating himself in the Light of *Brahma* (Absolute). Before we delve deep into the textual analysis of the novel, it is imperative to have a short review of Tantric philosophy, and the meaning of the Absolute.

### **1.1 Tantric Philosophy**

Tantrism, which is a reconciliation of the absolute monism of the *Upanishads* and dualism or qualified monism preached by some of the *Puranas*, and methods of Bhakti and Yoga, can best be studied as the synthesis of all that was good in the various forms of *Sadhana*. Therefore, Tantra's claim to be the shortest route to the *summum bonum* (ultimate good), and its promise to its adherents of the easy and speedy attainment of the end are perhaps justified. Tantras hold the opinion that, “All persons without the distinctions of caste, creed, or color may draw inspiration and attain spiritual strength, wisdom and eternal bliss. They are Sadhna Sastras. They show the path to liberation, perfection, freedom and immortal bliss. Tantra is the saving wisdom. It is the marvelous boat which takes man safely to the other shore of fearlessness, immortality, freedom and perfection” (Sivanand, 2009, p. 5).

It is believed that the Tantric form of *Sadhna* came into prominence as a reaction to the elaborated details enjoined by the Vedic sacrifices, taking long time to be performed, eschewing short-lived people of feeble attainment on the one hand, and difficulty in acquisition of *Upanishad* method of transcendent knowledge on the other hand. In this context, Brahma (1932) writes, “Tantrism is suited to men of all equipments. It contains within it all forms of *Sadhna*. It promises to award to the *Sadhaka* not merely *mukti* (liberation) but also *bhukti* (enjoyment), not only final *nisreyasa* (beatitude) but also *abhyudaya* (progress)” (p. 275).

Tantra, however, is one of the most misunderstood thought systems often because it implies a state of intellectual and moral degenerations. In a sweeping generalization, it is believed that occult power and sex are the primary concerns of Tantrism. But Tantrism is more than this ritual of sensuous love. Swami Sivanand (2009), in his famous book *Tantra Yoga, Nada Yoga, and Kriya Yoga*, writes that, “Tantra explains (Tanoti) in great details the knowledge concerning *Tattva* (Truth or Brahman) and *Mantra* (mystic syllables). It saves (Tranat). Hence, it is called Tantra” (p. 5). In other words, it is justifiable to say that Tantra is a systematic thought system that requires certain discipline and dedication to realize the Self by awakening *Kundalini Sakti* (Serpent Power) and taking it to *sahsrar chakra* (thousand-petaled) at the crown of the head. Spiritual power, for which Tantric uses the expression *Kundalini Sakti*, remains in the state of slumber and dormant in human beings (*jiva*) unless it is awakened or made active through *sadhna* or regulated effort. The latent energy when realized fully, takes man on great spiritual ecstasy and one becomes the Absolute. The lower self unites with the Higher Self. Kaulism, the Tantra propounded by Abhinavagupta (950 - 1020 AD) believes that one of the means of *moksha* (liberation) is through *bhoga* (the pleasure of the world). In the Tantra *Sadhna*, any objects of attraction, whatever be their nature, are regarded as instruments, not to be rejected, but assimilated into and made part and parcel of one's own being, but with the intention of overcoming the consciousness that they are outside oneself as a sort of opposing object. Swami Sivananda (2009) writes:

The greatest obstacles to spiritual perfection are generally considered to be wealth, power and sex, and it is these that the Tantra intends to harness and overcome by the very means by which an untrained mind may head towards a fall. The Pasu, Vira and Divya Bhavas, corresponding to the animal, human and divine natures, take into consideration the gross, the subtle and the divine aspects of the things which are to be confronted as oppositions in one's spiritual life ...The Tantra holds that the impure, the ugly and the unholy things of

life are things which have been wrongly seen out of their context, and, from their own particular positions, or from the point of view of the things themselves, they are neither good nor bad, neither beautiful nor ugly, neither holy nor unholy. These are all suggestions given by the mind from the standpoint of the particular interest which refuses to take into consideration that there can be other interests than one's own. The universe is a multi-point of view, and not a single point of view; from the former one has to rise to the latter, by a systematic and progressive movement of the whole of one's being through the gross, the subtle and the divine compositions of things. (p. xii)

Tantra negates nothing; it affirms positivity. It teaches us that an attempt to get rid of obstacles and overcome one's negative forces is a futile task. Rather it teaches that desire can be overcome only by desire, and an object can be overcome only by object. The famous dictum of the Tantra, as quoted by Swami Sivanand (2009) "that by which one falls is also that by which one rises" (p. x) suggests that "a man ought to employ these poisons - wine, women, fish, meat, wealth, accessories - to eradicate the poison in the human system" (Woodroffe, 1975, p. 402).

Abhinavagupta (950-1020 AD) asserts that attainment of the occult, the worship of the mother goddess, the invocation of the gods and goddesses in the aspect of a father- mother relationship, the exaltation and appreciation of women and the identity-experience between man and woman, and the conjunction of all sorts of opposites are essential tenets of the Tantras.

The Absolute, in metaphysics, refers to the *Brahman*, the supreme principle that sustains the cosmos, and is self-sufficient reality that depends upon nothing external to itself. It is an impersonal, ultimate truth and power that life and all reality cannot exist outside. Abraham (1999) states that, "The Principle of the Absolute in Hindu view is both wholly other, transcendental Being, who is yet the immanent spirit and foundational substratum of individual beings" (p. 5). The Absolute is the universal soul that sustains all souls. Even the lowest of existence owes its being to the Absolute self. Radhakrishnan (1989), in his translation of Taittiriya Upanishad, quotes Varuna telling his son Bhrgu that even "matter is Brahman" (III 2.1). Every individual *jiva* (soul) strives to know the Supreme Soul. To know means to realise, and to realise means liberation. Individual soul ruptures the veil of separation, and is identified with reality, truth, and the Brahman, which according to Richards (1995), is "the Absolute" (pp. 117-127).

## 2.0 Discussions

*The Serpent and the Rope* opens with a very mystifying statement of Ramaswamy, the protagonist. Meditating upon his present existence, he says, "I am an orphan. Am I always going to be an orphan?" (Rao, 1960, p. 10). This urge for the quest for self-knowledge sets the metaphysical tone of the novel. Ramaswamy is a Brahmin, and he believes that "A Brahmin is he who knows Brahman" (p. 5). He further says, "The Brahmin is never contemporary - he goes backwards and forwards in time, and so has a sage to begin the genealogical tree, and a Guru to end the cycle of birth and death" (p. 125). By birth Ramaswamy is a Brahmin, but he longs for the assertion of his true Brahmanhood through metaphysical exploration of his being. He is aware of the meaning of a true Brahmin when he says: "He indeed the Brahmin who turns the crest inward....The true life, the true Brahminhood commences when you recognise yourself in your eternity. At some moment you must stop life and look into.... And as you go on dipping and rising in your inner Ganges....You undo your knots" (pp. 215-216). This conscious goal of Ramaswamy makes him a spiritual vagabond, a true seeker seeking *moksha*. He goes on the august mission of his life, a metaphysical adventure, following the route of Tantras.

Ramaswamy is a young man of great literary cultures. He is a widely travelled and vastly read man. He speaks many languages, has knowledge of world philosophy, and is informed of all world class politicians, leaders, and philosophers. His mind is a seething whirlpool of cultural currents and cross currents. He is tired of intellectual journey, and therefore he finds solace in occult power of Tantra. We see that Ramaswamy is greatly moved by the Black Virgin of Saint-Ouen curing dreadful diseases “by three circumambulations with a stick of oak and recitation of *mantras*” (p. 388). Madeline, the wife of Ramaswamy, appeases Black Madona who answers all her questions. By meditations, she acquires the power of curing diseases and working miracles. She cures the son of Madame Fallandier by just giving him a piece of cloth which she had held in her hands for eight days during her meditation. Similarly, under the influence of his grandfather Kittanna, Ramaswamy dreams of miraculous performances:

I can think that a building may just decide to fly, or just Stalin may become a saint, or that all the Japanese have become Buddhist monks, or that Mahatma Gandhi is walking with us now. I sometimes feel I can make the railway line stand up or the elephant bear its young one in twenty- four days; I can see an aero plane float over a mountain and sit carefully on a peak, or I could go to Fetch-Pur-Sikri and speak to the Emperor Akbar. It would be difficult for me not to think, when I am in Versailles, that I hear the uncouth voice of Roi Soleil, or in Meaux that Bossuet rubs his snuff in the palm of his hand, as they still do in India, offers a pinch to me. I can sneeze with it, and hear Bossuet make one more of his funeral orations. (p. 6)

Ramaswamy performs other Tantric practices too when he talks to the dead such as Akbar, Gandhi, and others. He plans for eating herbs once Yogis used to eat to sate hunger, thereby embracing Tantric way of living.

The Tantras lay great emphasis on the worship of the mother goddess, and the recitation of hymns and *kavacas* (armour) in the honour of the deity form important elements in the process of self-realization. The Tantrika worshipper identifies himself in meditation with the Deity he worships and places himself before the fully blossomed condition represented by the deity as the ideal to be realized. Ramaswamy too, like a true Tantric, believes that through *Shakti* worship, he can achieve the Absolute. He visits a temple of the Devi and frequently sings hymns in her praise. The Devi is adorned in her saffron sari and bejewelled forehead. She showers strength and peace to Ramaswamy. He awaits the mercy and grace to be bestowed upon him. The hymns he sings celebrate the physical beauty of the goddess including her rounded breasts and fragrance-emitting body. This kind of glorification and beatification of the goddess's beauty is characteristically Tantric. Ramaswamy has his deep reverence for the goddess. His deep faith in the goddess is manifested when he says, “Not Ascension but Assumption is the true nature of the Mother of God” (p. 361). His assertion that woman is the earth, air, ether, and sound is a typical characteristic of *Mahanirvana Tantra*.

The invocation of male female deities is yet another tantric element we find imported in the novel. Tantra subscribes to the opinion of worshipping the gods and their consort together. Tsong-ka-pa (1977) writes, “In Tibetan Tantrism, the representation of the god and the goddess in the aspect of a father-mother relationship is a method of heightening wisdom or realizing *sunyata*, the emptiness or *nirvana*, the enlightenment” (p. 158). In the novel, we find that Ramaswamy is greatly influenced by this principle, and he often invokes Siva and Parvati together. He has completely given himself to the Tantric view that “Unless the masculine principle absorbs the feminine, the world cannot be annihilated, and so there can be no joy” (p. 189). The song sung by Ramaswamy in Saroja’s marriage signals the heightened celebration of conjugal union of the gods and the goddess. The song goes like:

I am He,  
 Thou art She,  
 I am the Harmony,  
 Thou the Words.  
 I am the Sky,  
 Thou art Earth,  
 Let us twain become One,  
 Let us bring forth offspring. (p. 272)

There are many situations where we find Ramaswamy calling upon the gods and the goddesses together. He holds the view that if Parvati had not prayed to Siva, the god would not have opened his eyes and there would never have been a world. This philosophy of Ramaswamy is the manifestation of the Tantras' doctrine that Sakti and Siva are the twin bases of the Creation.

Ramaswamy has great affinity with his step-mother, with his sister Saroja, and Savithri. He realizes different dimensions of the feminine - mother, sister, and concubine. It is this feminine principle that connects him with his mother, sister and concubines, and absence of this alienates him from Madeline. When she asks Ramaswamy what separates them apart, he tells her, "India" (p. 331). He is a relational feminist, advocating women's rights as women in terms of their nurturing capacities in relation to men. Madeline is an individual feminist, concerned with the abstract concept of human rights. The marriage with Madeline fails, and he commences his search for a true woman. In Tantric cult, it is asserted that woman is meant for both *bhoga* and *moksha* (worldly pleasure and liberation). He contemplates, "I need the other in order to realize fully all the structure of my being" (p. 190). He needs a woman who liberates him, and Savithri is the one for him. Ramaswamy idealizes Savithri and calls her "the priestess of God" (p. 57). Savithri is a goddess incarnate because she is "the source of which words were made, the Mother of Sound, Akshara-Lakshmi, divinity of the syllable" (p. 167). Woman epitomizes the 'Self'. Ramaswamy's statement, "a husband loves his wife for the sake of the Self in her" (p. 24) is the exaltation of women, or "personification of women as goddess, typically prescribed in the Buddhist Tantric tradition" (qtd. in Dayal, 36). Ramaswamy alienates himself from Buddhism mainly because it derides woman. He is a true Tantric as he deifies women and holds them in great esteem. Sakta Tantra believes that women are the earthly representatives of the goddess Amba, and therefore it forbids us from harming women. Ramaswamy's statement, "I pressed Madeline, on those nights, with the warmth and tenderness of a mother for her child - I could have sucked her if I could" (p. 241) depicts woman as mother-bride-mistress, coalesced in a single being.

Kaulism admits and endorse the sensuous enjoyment to be a means to the realization of the Absolute. For Ramaswamy, woman is a source of sensuous and aesthetic pleasure. Without bothering about social inhibitions, Ramaswamy, fascinated by the beauty of his half-sister Saroja, utters, "Saroja's presence now obsessed me sometimes, like one of those nights with the perfume of magnolia...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" (pp. 49-50). Saroja's beauty is a source of bliss for Ramaswamy. His description of Saroja's beauty, which arouses 'something of the Ganges and the Jamuna' in his very being ends with his remark, "Benares was indeed nowhere but inside oneself. And I knew: all brides be Benares born" (p. 50). He seeks liberation through the love of a Benares-born bride and he finds her in Savithri. For him marriage is a bond, and he liberates by having extra-marital affair with Savithri.

The current of androgyny runs all through Tantras conceptualized by Abhinavagupta (950-1020). He deals with the problem of contrariety between the male and the female by the androgyne of Siva and *Sakti* suggesting thereby, what Singh and Maheshvarananda (2015) term, “the solution of attraction between the two sides through recourse to the Self as the way not only for relief from the tension but also as the source of immeasurable delight as Siva as the representative of the Self is” (p. xxix). For Ramaswamy, the truth is in union of man and woman. His ontological discussion with Savithri culminates his Tantric quest for androgyny. His remark, “We lie by each other, clasped in each other's arms, breathing each other, sucking each other, as though Truth was in the instant of that conjointhood” (p. 230) assumes that to be androgynous is to be identical with Truth. His hypothesis runs parallel to the Tantric concept of androgyny. Kakar (1982) writes:

Tantric philosophy claims that a person can become a "whole" (liberated) only when he annuls sexual differentiation and dissolves his gender identity into a certain kind of bisexuality. The realization of both masculinity and femininity within the tantrik's own body, the experience of a constant, doubled joy of two-in-one, the recreation of a primordial androgyny, looms large as the goal of a bulk of tantrik practices (p. 156).

Ramaswamy opines that a man must absorb a woman into himself, thereby experiencing androgyny. His allusion to the binominal cohabitation of Siva and Parvati, and his reference to the coronation of the Queen of England reflect his quest for androgyny. When he says, “Everybody was born a King, and became a Queen that instant the second hand had moved on itself - for nothing ever moves, nothing is ever said, one is oneself the Truth ...Lord, such a Queen shall be crowned” (p. 358), it hints at Ramaswamy's urge to experience androgyny by enjoining Savithri. There are ample of evidences and occasions that epitomize his yearning for androgyny. The myth of Radha and Krishna, Siva and Parvati, Satyavan and Savithri are some of the myths discussed in the novels. All these myths go parallel with Celly Anu's (1995) remarks that, “*Prakriti* needs *Purusha* in order to be known, to be seen, to be enjoyed, and *Purusha* needs *Prakriti* to enjoy and to attain liberation” (p. 95).

Ramaswamy's refrain of *Sivoham*, his notion of purity, and his references to the worship of naked woman and naked virgin's *mantra* have tantric connotation. As he is still not initiated, he longs for a Guru. He states that “he will not return and he has gone whence there is no returning. The guru is synonymous with the truth” (p. 405). This kind of proclamation signals the unity of a seeker with the Brahman - the Absolute. Khuman (2020) observes:

Knowing the self has always been a fascinating subject for Indian sages and seekers from time immemorial. Rama represents that Indian psyche. The suffering of Rama is universal suffering. The only remedy is self-realization. In order to attain self realization, Rama has tried various paths but finally he realizes only Guru can help to reach the Absolute, which is the state of peace of mind and far away from miseries and sorrows. (p.

6)

### **3.0 Conclusion**

Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope*, thus, is an intellectual's search for the Absolute, following the route of the Tantras. Ramaswamy, the seeker, is a staunch follower of the Tantric cults. Facing numerous trials and tribulations, he achieves the annihilation of the world and attains a full recognition of his self. His experience is beyond time and space. He says, “I do not know where I went, but I was happy there for it was free and abroad like a sunny day and like a single broad white river it was. I had reached Benares - Benares. I had risen from the Ganges, and saw the luminous world, my home” (p. 403). Ramaswamy has transcended both time and space, and

has union with the Absolute. The ritual marriage between Ramaswamy and Savithri, in the Tantric tradition, symbolizes the unity of individual self (Ramaswamy) with purity and power of devotion (Savithri), or the wedding of masculine principle with feminine principle. The result of this union is illumination and self-realization. He undergoes a sea-change. He reaches that state of mind where it is “independent of the spatio-temporal contingencies” (Abraham, 1999, p. 7), and realizes “*tat tvam asi* (thou art to be aware of the identity of thine inmost essence with the invisible substance of all and everything)” (Zimmer, 1951, p. 361). Ramaswamy undergoes a spiritual transformation that leads him to a deeper understanding of life and fulfillment. J. P. Thripathi opines, “The novel seems to convey the old Indian belief that love of God is the source of all joy and prosperity. And whosoever expresses love to God devotedly will be rewarded with all blessings” (p. 244). Summing up, it can be asseverated that themes of self-awareness, self-transcendence, self-fulfillment, and search for the Absolute are deliberately emphasized in *The Serpent and the Rope* that “examines the essence of conceptual and metaphysical inquiry in some of its more complex implications” (Jagadeesh & Beulah, 2022, p. 4905).

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