



**Heritage and Western thought: A study of Influences in the works of
Raja Rao**

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Abstract

Raja Rao often startles one with his extraordinary style of blending the East and the West. His works are impregnate with philosophical, religious and historical contexts of both the worlds. However, as it is known that Rao passed major part of his adult life in the West, there needs to be an understanding of who and what influenced Rao. Excellently blended worlds of modern Western thoughts and age-old Hindu techniques have been portrayed in his works. Unlike other Indian authors writing in English, he retained the ancient form of writing, the traditional form. There must have been certain deeply rooted influences that brought him to write in a very unique yet very Indian way of writing. This paper attempts to study the influences that led Rao to write in the style that he has been writing thereby trying to understand the thought process that yielded the East a gem to provide the idea of India in true sense.

Keywords: *Hindu, western thought, influence, India, two worlds.*

Introduction

Raja Rao has been concerned with the metaphysical explorations in his writing. In the Forward of the book 'Raja Rao: A Study of His Novels', Mohindar Pal Kohli mentions that '...Raja Rao has lent originality and distinctive identity to Indian fiction.' In order to become aware about the originality and identity in works of Rao, one needs to dive deep into the influences that has led him to produce such works in Indian English writing. As an avowed Vedantin, Rao has been averse to the materialism of Marxism and many other western philosophies. On the other hand, he has the intellectual affinity with some of the Western writers such as Baudelaire, Dostoevsky, Romain Rolland and Valery to name a few.

Raja Rao's works have been largely interpreted on the philosophical grounds, sometimes exclusively from Vedantic point of view. Agreeably he has been a Vedantin, but in addition to that there are multiple strands to his writing which will be studied here. Through his time in Indian and France Rao has acquired the best of both the worlds, the eastern and the western.



The study here will aid in the further knowledge of Raja Rao's one of a kind Indian writings in English that will give a true sense to the idea of India to the Eastern as well as Western counterparts.

Two worlds

Iyengar in his chapter 'Raja Rao' remarks '... though the action of one of his novels strays far afield- as far, indeed, as France and England- his heart is effectively tethered to his immutable ancient moorings with the strong invisible strings of his traditional Hindu culture.' Despite spending a huge chunk of his life in the West, his urge to carry forward the Sanskrit tradition is witnessed in his novels. Through his work he indirectly makes a subtle juxtaposition between logic and feeling. The juxtaposition becomes a representation of his thoughts over the East and the West. Interestingly Perry D. Westbrook and Raja Rao's article mentions '...the thematic center of the novel, which has to do not so much with the tensions between Eastern and Western thought as with the tensions between logic, on the one hand, and feeling intuition, and spirituality on the other.'

Rao's approach to his fictional writings successfully and imaginatively appropriated English for the Indian narrative. The well-known Foreword from 'Kanthapura' begins with 'There is no village in India, however mean, that has not a rich *sthala-purana*, or legendary history, of its own.' Rao has put emphasis on appropriately conveying the spirit which is one's own through a language that is alien.

A study of influences in works of Raja Rao

The very roots of his influence go back to the ancient Indian epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. Both the epics are epitome of Indian culture. The characters that serves as a symbol on one hand and are a living human being on the other such as Draupadi from the *Mahabharata* and Sita from *Ramayana* are perfect examples of the sacred womanhood. Similarly Savitri in the novel *The Serpent and the Rope* is portrayed in the same traditional light. Other influence in the same novel can be seen based on the style of Indian epics and Puranas. Though on a smaller scale, *The Serpent and the Rope* follows the Puranic style of medley of narration, history, description and philosophical and religious discourse.

On *Ramayana*, Rao quotes "What could be more glorious, more sacred, more fantastic, a book of books—showing every beauty and treachery of this our tragic-comic existence, absurd, inhuman, gentle, devout, noble, cruel, yet not altogether felt as of this world, described for our terror and our joy, and final wisdom—than the *Ramayana*...The book that has filled my imagination and come to me for years at every crucial point of my life, to interpret and to help, is the *Ramayana*."

At a later stage, Sanskrit verses from Brihatstotraratnakara also happens to have a great influence on Rao. These devotional verses too appear in The Serpent and the Rope. Verses from the collection were recited on



regular basis in orthodox Brahmin families, Raja Rao too comes from such a family and thus it appears in his works too. Such influences gives one an idea about Rao's thoughts on preserving the heritage that has always been there for centuries.

For Rao, the Buddhist texts inspired him with the rich humanity and the poetry. This influence and that of the Buddhist ideal has been rightly stated in the article by Westbrook and Rao where they write, "the Communist and the Sadhu have spiritual equivalences that made me... feel that were Kirillov capable of free thinking and not tied to dogma, would not his sensibility have found radiance in the Buddhist Path of Non-Becoming."

Indian philosophical and religious thought has deeply influenced all works of Raja Rao. Pandit Taranath was a remarkable social reformer, writer, freedom-fighter, philosopher and a yogi among other things also had his share of influence on Rao. In the short story collection called *The Cow of the Barricades and other Stories*, the Master in the short story *Narsigain* is perhaps Pandit Taranath. The analysis of the relation between writer and the word seems similar to the views of Taranath, which later also joined hands with the notion of Sri Atmanand Guru. Those sayings appear in the epigraph of the novel *The Serpent and the Rope*- 'Waves are nothing but water. So is the Sea', parallel to which Pandit Taranath writes: 'The wave is in the ocean, of the ocean and the ocean too.'

Shakespeare appears in the title of one of the novels of Rao hence proving a direct influence. He says this regarding Shakespeare, "is almost an Indian of my India- so he too has influenced me fundamentally- Hamlet, first and foremost, then King Lear, and finally The Tempest."

Adding to the above list, W.B. Yeats and Rainer Maria Rilke had great influence over Raja Rao. Rao writes for Yeats, "His autobiography I consider one of the most beautiful books in the English tongue." Both Rilke and Rao admired Paul Valery and both of them are deeply philosophical writers. Again, for both the writers, Art has been a sacred activity. Another curious bond of kinship between the Indian writer the Austrian poet is the fascination which woman exercises over them. A reference to this has already been made in the pen-portrait of Rao given earlier; and the glorification of the feminine principle will be seen to have been one of the leading themes in his fiction. Rilke accounts the following in one of his letters: "It is so natural for me to understand girls and women; the deepest experience of the creator is feminine—for it is experience of receiving and bearing. The poet Obstfelder once wrote, when describing the face of a strange man: 'it was' (when he began to speak) 'as if there were a woman in him'—it seems to me that would fit every poet who begins to speak." It can hence be seen that Rilke was a major Western influence on Raja Rao.

The combination of legendary history or as Rao writes it *sthala-purana* and politics which can be seen in his novel *Kanthapura* has been imbibed in his writings through getting influenced by Italian writer Ignazio Silone.



Silone in his novel *Fontamara* combines folklore and politics that gave a new level of poetic experience which inspired Rao to write his very first novel.

French writers have played a significant role in influencing Rao. Raja Rao mentions that, “While still a student...I had discovered Romain Rolland’s *Jean Christophe*, in that extraordinarily poetical unfrench French, and it had left a deep intellectual mark on me.” One of the reasons Rao developed affinity for the French writers especially Rolland was his understanding of Indian philosophy and culture, and his interest in the Indian freedom struggle. Paul Valery and Andre Gide cannot go amiss. Gide’s novel *Porte Etroite* has many similarities to Rao’s *The Serpent and the Rope*. Gide’s novel is a story of love between Jerome and Alissa which resembles to the story of Rama and Savitri in Rao’s novel. The technique as well as the story portrays a great similarity. A very important French writer Andre Malraux influenced Rao not only through his writings but also through his aesthetic essays. Despite their vividly different temperaments, Malraux and Rao’s friendship has been admirable.

The above accounts of specific influences on Raja Rao helps one in understanding the panorama of contexts and referencing that are portrayed in his works. Some of his works might have a little more influence over others, but broadly Rao has tried and has remained faithful to his roots. As Braj Kachru excellently points out in his article that, ‘...the attempt is toward universalization. After all, the themes Rao treats are human ones, philosophical and metaphysical.’

Conclusion

Raja Rao in an interview says: “From the French language I learnt discipline and grace. From the English language I learnt not to take it at its face value but to mould it, to transmute it into the sublimity and music of the Sanskrit language.” In the classic Foreword to *Kanthapura* Rao wrote, ‘We cannot write like English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians. We have grown to look at the large world as part of us.’

It shall be swiftly pointed out that the influences that Rao portrays in his works are both Indian and Western. However, Raja Rao’s urge to bring forth the true Indian sense to readers through his works is noteworthy. There may be a few Western writers who have influenced him through their writings but his passion and devotion is towards discovering India and not vice versa. Rao quested for the Truth, and Indianness helped him through that journey. Thus, his works are a true epitome of showcasing the true sense of India, which dares to be inclusive, which stands upright for the doctrines it has yielded and that which has imparted the world with so much more than merely limited to one-sided interpretations.



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