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The Serpent and the Rope as the Sacred Sojourn

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Abstract:

This paper explores how the knowledge of the *Upanishads* and the works of Adi Shankaracharya form the foundation of the protagonist's spiritual odyssey in Raja Rao's novel, *'The Serpent and the Rope'*. This novel emphasizes key spiritual principles such as discrimination (*nitya-anitya Viveka*), detachment, and an intense yearning for liberation (*moksha*). By interweaving these elements into his narrative, Raja Rao presents the sacred sojourn that mirrors the timeless quest for self-realization, guided by the Guru's wisdom. Rao aligns this yearning with the Upanishadic call for self-realization, achieved through inquiry and discernment, invoking the cyclical and transcendental nature of existence with surrender to a guru.

The Mundaka Upanishad aptly declares: "*Tad vijñānārthaṁ sa gurum evābhigacchet*" (*To realize the Truth, one must approach a guru with humility and devotion.*) Through Ramaswamy's spiritual quest, Raja Rao skilfully crafted his spiritual odyssey, guided by the highest spiritual wisdom embedded in the Upanishads and the works of Sri Shankaracharya. In the novel, Raja Rao masterfully illustrates the transformative power of self-inquiry with the guru's guidance, capturing the essence of the Upanishadic and Advaitic quest for the ultimate truth.

Keywords: real and the unreal, illusion, detachment, and spiritual odyssey.

Introduction

The phrase “*Brahma Satyam Jagat Mithya*”—translated as “Brahman (the ultimate truth or consciousness) is real, and the world is illusory”—serves as the foundation of Raja Rao’s novel, ‘*The Serpent and The Rope*’. In this title, the serpent symbolizes the illusory, the unreal, while the rope represents the truth—the reality hidden beneath the layers of illusion. Right from the novel’s beginning, the author subtly hints at the distinction between the true nature of existence and the misperceptions that lead to confusion and suffering, ultimately trapping us in cycles of bondage. From the title itself, the author reveals the truth about the reality and the misperception of this reality, which leads to chaos in life and ultimately binds one.

Raja Rao’s second novel, *The Serpent and the Rope*, is highly autobiographical and narrates the protagonist, Ramaswamy’s quest for self-knowledge and truth. Ramaswamy, the protagonist of the novel, seeks to realize the truth. It is reflected in his words when he says, “*I had a serious question of my own... I wondered where all this wandering would lead to. Life is a Pilgrimage, I know, but a Pilgrimage to where- and of what?*” (Rao). Rao defines the major theme of all his fiction as the search for the truth, man’s search for ultimate values. It is a search that has consumed much of his life.” (Alterno). This novel explores how the knowledge of the Upanishads and the works of Adi Shankaracharya act as a foundation for Raja Rao’s spiritual odyssey.

Fortunate are those who are eager to know the truth to understand the reason behind our existence and the existence of this world. This enduring scrutiny is needed to find answers to all the fundamental questions of existence. According to Vedanta, the one who has this quality of seeking the truth is called *jijnasu* “... ‘*jijnasu*’ one who desires to know the answers to fundamental existential questions of life like ‘What is the goal of human life?’ ‘Why am I

going through all this suffering? Why am I born? Wouldn't it be better if I were not born? Is there someone called God, or is it only some fancy notion? Am I just this body and mind, or is there a divine component?" (Yuktatmananda). Where do we find answers to all these questions? As Arthur Schopenhauer, a German philosopher, says, "In the whole world, there is no study so beneficial and so elevating as that of the Upanishads. It has been the solace of my life; it will be the solace of my death." Also, Neils Bohr, a Danish theoretical physicist, said, "I go into the Upanishads to ask questions." Thus, the highest spiritual wisdom embedded in the Upanishads acts as a guiding light in helping the spiritual seeker in his sojourn.

At the novel's beginning, the protagonist, Rama Swamy, admits his knowledge of Upanishads. *"For withal, I was a good Brahmin. I even knew grammar and the Brahma sutras, read the Upanishads at the age of four..."* (Rao). Ramaswamy is a spiritual seeker who seeks the ultimate truth beyond all existence. The sign of his yearning is mirrored when he says, *"everyone...feels that something is just being missed. One in ten million perhaps knows what it is, and like the Buddha goes out seeking that from which there is no returning...."* (Rao). This yearning of him hints that Ramaswamy presumably understood what Sri Krishna said in Bhagavad Gita in chapter 7, verse 3

मनुष्याणां सहस्रेषु कश्चिद्यतति सिद्धये ।

यततामपि सिद्धानां कश्चिन्मां वेत्ति तत्त्वतः ॥ 3॥

The meaning of this verse is that amongst thousands of persons, hardly one strives for perfection, and amongst those who have achieved perfection, hardly one knows Me in truth. Moreover, despite knowing the Upanishads, he feels that something is being missed while seeking to experience the truth. Here, Raja Rao, through Ramaswamy, conveys the most significant role of a Guru in one's spiritual journey. This is substantiated by Sri Shankara in his Guru Ashtakam, verse 3,

षडङ्गादिवेदो मुखे शास्त्रविद्या कवित्वादि गद्यं सुपद्यं करोति ।

गुरोरङ्घ्रिपद्मे मनश्चेन लग्नं ततः किं ततः किं ततः किं ततः किं ॥ ३॥

This verse tells that the Vedas with their six limbs and the knowledge of all sciences may be in one's lips; one may possess the poetic gift and compose fine poetry and prose; yet if one's mind is not centred or surrendered at the feet of Guru, then what is the use? What is the use? What is the use? In this world with rampant materialism and many distractions, it is difficult for a spiritual seeker to move forward in his journey despite developing specific spiritual values without the guidance and the grace of a Guru, which is paramount for one to gear up his spiritual evolution. Also, the direct experience of the truth depends on the seeker and his surrender to one's Guru, whose grace removes ignorance. Nevertheless, the knowledge of the scriptures like the Upanishads plays a significant role as it can make one understand the ultimate destiny in the spiritual path. Raja Rao has beautifully shown those qualities essential for one's spiritual journey through the protagonist, Ramaswamy, who embodies those qualities that he has gained through the knowledge of Upanishads.

Adi Shankaracharya, in his work, *Vivekachudamani*, explains the four most essential qualities a spiritual seeker should possess to pursue the truth.

“आदौ नित्यानित्यवस्तुविवेकः परिगम्यते ।

इहामुत्रफलभोगविरागस्तदनन्तरम्

शमादिषट्कसम्पत्तिर्मुमुक्षुत्वमिति स्फुटम् ॥ १९ ॥“

“ādaū nityānityavastuvivekaḥ parigamyate |

ihāmutraphalabhogavirāgastadanantaram

śamādiṣaṭkasampattirmumukṣutvamiti sphuṭam || 19 ||”

First is enumerated the discrimination between the Real and the unreal, next comes the aversion to the enjoyment of fruits (of one's actions) here and hereafter, (next is) the group of six attributes, viz., calmness and the rest, and (last) is clearly the yearning for Liberation. (Madhavananda).

The first and foremost quality of a seeker, which Shankara talks about here, is the discrimination between the real and the unreal (nitya anitya viveka), which the protagonist, Ramaswamy, possesses. He exhibits this when he says, "Seeing oneself is what we always seek; the world, as the Great Sage Sankara said, is like a city seen in a mirror" (Rao). This particular statement shows his knowledge of discriminating between the real and unreal, stating that the world is not real but an illusion reflected like a city in the mirror. As he mentioned, it also reflects the meaning of the first verse in Dakshinamurthy Stotram by Adi Shankaracharya.

“विश्वं दर्पण-दृश्यमान-नगरी तुल्यं निजान्तर्गतं

पश्यन्नात्मनि मायया बहिरिवोद्भूतं यथा निद्रया ।

The meaning of this verse is- similar to the image of a town as seen in the mirror, when one sees the image of the world within him, the world appears as if it is outside. It is similar to his seeing due to illusion during sleep.” So, the question here is what is real and what is unreal. To this, Shankara answers his work, ‘Brahmajnanavalimala’ which states, "ब्रह्म सत्यं जगन्मिथ्या" which translates as ‘Brahman (or the ultimate truth or consciousness) is real and the world is unreal.’ Emphasizing this quality of discrimination, Raja Rao has named the novel, ‘*The Serpent and The Rope*’, where the serpent indicates the unreal born out of illusion and the rope is real. From the title itself, the author tells the reader, the truth about the reality and misperception of this reality which leads to all the chaos in the life leading one to bondage. Thus, he reminds the reader that a spiritual seeker should have the quality of discrimination between the real and the unreal to walk on the spiritual path.

Having known the difference between the real and the unreal, it is evident that one needs to put sincere effort into realizing it. How can it be achieved? The protagonist answers this when he says, “*The road to the infinite is luminous if you see it as a city lit in a mirror. If you want to live in it, you break the glass. The unreal is possible because the real is.*” (Rao) He says that if we want to become one with the infinity or the divinity, we must break the glass. The glass is a symbol here that represents the attachment and ignorance shattering in which one can realize one’s unity with the ultimate. Ignorance of one’s true self paves the way for one’s attachment to this material world, which is unreal, leads one to be selfish and desirous, resulting in bondage of one’s self. So, when can one be free from this bondage? The solution to this is given in the Katopanishad, which declares thus.

“यदा सर्वे प्रमुच्यन्ते कामा येऽस्य हृदि श्रिताः ।

अथ मर्त्योऽमृतो भवत्यत्र ब्रह्म समश्नुते ॥ १४ ॥

yadā sarve pramucyante kāmā ye’sya hṛdi śritāḥ .

atha martyo’mṛto bhavatyatra brahma samaśnute

The meaning is that when all the desires that dwell in the heart are renounced, the mortal becomes immortal and here he attains Brahman or the ultimate. Thus, breaking the glass symbolizes overcoming ignorance and all the desires born out of attachment. This is reiterated time and again when Ramaswamy says the following: “*The third eye opens when the attraction has ended... Peace comes with the annihilation of acquired positions... Truth only dawns when you know you can possess nothing...*” (Rao). Possessing nothing does not mean one has to renounce everything and become penniless. It is about living in the world yet not attached to anything and not having a sense of entitlement and belongingness.

Attachment can often lead to dependency, stress, jealousy, anxiety since the root of it lies deep in the perception of ‘I’ and ‘mine’. The person attached to ‘I’ and ‘mine’ always wants to own

people and things, whereas the one who loves and respects freedom seldom thinks of 'I' as it is all about the other. Thus, detachment and love; go together irrespective of the conventional way of thinking. The protagonist demonstrates this knowledge of him when he says, "*And Yagnavalkya had said to Maitreyi. 'For whose sake, verily, does a husband love his wife? Not for the sake of his wife, but verily for the sake of the Self in her.'*" (Rao) which he refers to from the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, chapter 4 section 3 verse 5. In addition, Ramaswamy has truly understood the meaning of love, which is detached and associated with the Self, as he says, *Love demands nothing, it says nothing, it knows nothing, it lives for itself... Love, my love, is the self. Love is the loving of love... Love has nothing to do with loving, for I itself is love.*" (Rao) The love which he has for his wife Madeline, is also of this kind where he loves her because of the Self in her. He is not attached to her as he is balanced even when he is divorced by her.

As stated above in the Vivekachudamani, the second quality -viraga (also known as vairagya) which translates into detachment is one of the most important virtues or quality of a spiritual seeker to move forward in his journey. Because, in the first place many don't take to the spiritual path and one should be courageous and fearless to stride this path, and this detachment offers this fearlessness as said in Bhartrhari's Vairagya Shatakam, verse 31,

भोगे रोगभयं कुले च्युतिभयं वित्ते नृपालाद्भयं
 माने दैन्यभयं बले रिपुभयं रूपे जराया भयम् ।
 शास्त्रे वादिभयं गुणे खलभयं काये कृतान्ताद्भयं
 सर्वं वस्तु भयान्वितं भुवि नृणां वैराग्यमेवाभयम् ॥

Meaning- "In sensual enjoyment, there is the fear of disease; in social status, the fear of a downfall; in wealth, the fear of (hostile) kings; in honour, the fear of humiliation; in power, the fear of enemies; in beauty, the fear of ageing, in scholarship, the fear of opponents; in virtue,

the fear of slanderers; in body, the fear of death. Everything in this world of humans is smeared with fear. Detachment alone brings fearlessness.” (Tyagananda). Ramaswamy manifests this quality of detachment in the novel.

The novel starts with the news of his father’s death and the proceedings of the rituals taking place in Beneras. There, he gives an important remark. *“For I must first believe there is death. And that is the central fact- I do not believe that death is. So, for whom shall I repent?”* (Rao). He does not believe that death exists because he firmly believes that the real Self, who we truly are, is beyond birth and death. Thus, he is not affected by his father’s death and even his son’s too. This virtue of detachment helps him to overcome many challenges in his later life with grace and equanimity.

For a spiritual seeker, it is not just about having the purpose to realize the truth, but more importantly not losing sight of the purpose and constantly working towards it. This constant effort of detaching oneself from the world and his individuality is seen when Ramaswamy often reminds himself of the truth of who he is amidst the chaotic world around him by chanting and contemplating on the most powerful hymn written by Sri Shankara, that is, Nirvana Shatakam. For this reason, Raja Rao makes his protagonist chant this particular verse composed by Sri Shankara is because it captures the essence of who we truly are and it negates all that which is not real. So, time and again, Raja Rao urges the readers constantly to remind themselves of the difference between the real and the unreal.

“...started reciting as at home Sankara’s Nirvana Shatakam. I have loved it...I would start on ‘Mano-Buddhi Ahankara...’ with a deep and learned voice...The brahmin, the brahmin, I said to myself- and to convince myself of familiarity with myself I chanted Sri Sankara again... ‘Mano Buddhi Ahankara Chittani Naham’...I was almost in tears... ‘Shivoham Shivoham’: I sang it as never I had chanted with the full breath in my lungs.

Natovyoma bhumir natejo navayur;

Chidananda Rupah Shivoham Shivoham

Not hearing, nor tasting, nor smelling, nor seeing,

But form of consciousness and bliss.

Shiva, I am, I am Shiva.

The noble periods rolled over the hills and to the valley with the assurance of the truth.

Aham nirvikalpi nirakara rupih

Chidananda Rupah Shivoham Shivoham

I am beyond imagination, form of the formless,

Form of consciousness and bliss.

Shiva, I am, I am Shiva.” (Rao)

Interestingly, the protagonist is not even attached to the idea of God that he worships because even the form and the names of the Gods are created by the mind, as he says, *“I told her the gods were neither Hindu nor Greek; being creations of your own mind they behaved as you made them...”* (Rao). He is very clear in his understanding of the ultimate truth that is the Self is beyond even the name and the form, which is the creation of the mind. The knowledge of the true nature of the Self helps him to discriminate and detach in his journey as he remarks, *“There is no absence if you feel the presence of your own presence.*

Ultimately the far and the awesome is Divine, it destroys the barriers of body and mind, no, rather of mind and body, and reveals the background of our unborn immaculate being.” (Rao)

Thus, discrimination and detachment are inseparable in one’s spiritual journey. By practising these qualities with the knowledge of the Upanishads, Ramaswamy appears to have the theoretical knowledge of how it feels to be united with one’s Self when he mentions, *Man is isolate, and in his singleness is unanimity of the whole: When you take away the whole from the whole, Purnam, what remains is the whole...and ultimately you are alone with silence.*

Death is our friend in that sense; life after life it phases us with the meaning of the ultimate. To be is to recognize integrity. That dhira, hero, of whom the Upanishads speak, enters into himself and knows he has never gone anywhere. There is nowhere to go, where there is nowhere-ness. Alas, that is the beautiful truth, and man must learn it. Beautiful it is because you see yourself true.” (Rao) The Purnam which he talks about refers to the Shanti mantra of several Upanishads-

ॐ पूर्णमदः पूर्णमिदम् पूर्णात् पूर्णमुदच्यते ।

पूर्णस्य पूर्णमादाय पूर्णमेवावशिष्यते ॥

ॐ शान्तिः शान्तिः शान्तिः ॥

Meaning: That is Whole and this is Whole, the perfect has come out of the perfect; having taken the perfect from the perfect, and only the perfect remains. Let there be Peace, Peace, Peace. (Purnamadha). This shanti mantra illustrates that the ultimate consciousness or the Self is complete, perfect and having realized that one sees the perfection everywhere as he sees himself in everything. That ‘dhira’ which Ramaswamy speaks about, is from the Katopanishad, chapter 2, valli 1, verse 1, which states.

पराञ्चि खानि व्यतृणत् स्वयम्भू-

स्तस्मात्पराङ्पश्यति नान्तरात्मन् ।

कश्चिद्धीरः प्रत्यगात्मानमैक्ष-

दावृत्तचक्षुरमृतत्वमिच्छन् ॥ १ ॥

The meaning of this verse is that the self-existent created the senses so they are always outgoing. So, one sees the outside and not the self within. However, a discriminating one, desiring immortality, turns his gaze inwards and sees the atman or the Self within.

The protagonist desires immortality that is he wants to know the truth. This burning desire to know the Self is called 'Mumukshatvam', which Sri Shankara speaks of as the fourth major quality in the above-stated verse from Vivekachudamani. It is Raja Rao whose burning desire to know the truth, is manifested artistically, in the protagonist. Indian scriptures consistently uphold the guru, as an essential figure in the journey toward self-knowledge, spiritual growth, and liberation. The Upanishads and other scriptures emphasize the importance of a guru for attaining liberation (moksha). The Mundaka Upanishad declares: *"Tad vijñānārtham sa gurum evābhigacchet"* (To realize the Truth, one must approach a guru with humility and devotion.) The word "guru" is derived from Sanskrit, where "gu" means darkness or ignorance, and "ru" means remover. Thus, a guru is seen as the one who removes darkness (ignorance) and brings light (knowledge).

Finally, towards the end of the novel, Ramaswamy feels the need and guidance of a Guru, which is very crucial in one's spiritual journey as he yearns, *"A guru is a real teacher, the one who shows you the way to truth... No, not a God but a guru is what I need, "Oh Lord, my guru, my Lord" ... "Lord, Lord, my guru, come to me, tell me; give thy touch, vouch-safe," I cried, "the vision of Truth. Lord, my Lord."* (Rao). As Sri Shankara said in the ending verse of Bhaja Govindam, which tells the essence of one's spiritual realization, as it says

गुरु चरणाम्बुज निर्भरभक्तः

संसाराद्-अचिराद्-भव मुक्तः ।

सेन्दिय मानस नियमादेवं

द्रक्ष्यसि निज हृदयस्थं देवम् ॥ 32 ॥

The meaning of this verse is, the one who sincerely dedicates and surrenders at the feet of Guru, is redeemed from the Samsara, the cycle of birth and death through the controlled mind and senses and he experiences the truth as the indwelling Self in the spiritual heart.

Thus, in conclusion, it can be said that through the protagonist Ramaswamy, Raja Rao skilfully crafted his spiritual journey guided by the highest spiritual wisdom embedded in the Upanishads and the works of Sri Shankara. Moreover, as it is aptly and explicitly pointed out here that only the Guru can ultimately help one to redeem himself even though he is a scholar of all the scriptures.

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