

**Symbols and Their Thematic Significance in the Novels of Raja Rao****Dr. Sunil Kumar**

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**DOI: 10.53032/tcl.2019.4.4.02****Abstract**

This article tries to study objects, symbols and their thematic significance in the novels of Raja Rao. Raja Rao has generously made use of symbols generously in his works. Studying his symbols is vital to understand his artistic accomplishments. Since symbols are inevitably intertwined with themes of a work of art, their analysis for a better appreciation of the work becomes essential. However, in view of the fact that symbols are apt to yield a wide range of meanings, the study has been focused on the thematic functions of the symbols in the novels of Raja Rao.

**Keywords-** Symbols, Images, Themes, Indianness, Indian Tradition and Culture

The use of the word Symbolism is used to indicate some qualities, thoughts, ideas and miseries by giving them some symbolic interpretation or meaning that are different from their literal meaning. Symbolism can take various forms. Basically, it is an object that depicts other things by offering them different meaning that is more vivid and deep. In fact, an action can be described differently by using different symbols.

In considering the symbols as used by Raja Rao the very first question that raises itself is why should Rao use symbols? Rao also helped to construct a bridge between the East and West. In this process he became a seeker, a traveler in the real spirit, where he discovers man's inner sense, to seek the truth and strive to unite with it. The employment of symbol can be seen most accurately from an examination of his fiction 'The Serpent and The Rope'.

*The Cow of the Barricades* (1947) is a collection of nine short stories which were published in various journals from 1946 to 1993. In acknowledging their authorship, Raja Rao reveals a degree of self consciousness. "Historically (and how long, long ago it was) I wrote the stories and I must own them. I own them".<sup>1</sup>

The short stories assume considerable relevance in the sense that the many themes sketched out in them are later elaborated in the novels. Raja Rao's stories are woven around the seemingly simple and unsophisticated lives of rural, household characters against a social setting which unfolds an uneasy tension between dreams associated with the past and realities related to the present. Trapped in the sterility of tradition and the coarseness of custom, the individuals struggle for some comprehension of their destiny, some discovery of personality

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and some metaphor of meaningful selfhood as a foil to the withering anonymity and impersonality of Indian life. In such a situation, values get blurred and life becomes uncertain and agonizing. Javni, the disinherited wife, Akkayya, the childless widow, Motilal the inconsequential “gram-vendor, Narsiga the listless shepherd boy, and others emerge out of a landscape which is at once symbolic and realistic. Raja Rao’s primary interest lies in the nature and quality of the human consciousness and hence there is non-conspicuous emphasis in the stories on the steady flow of outward circumstances, or in the intrepid clash among naturalistic forces. We are made conscious not so much of a changing reality as the very process of change, viewed from an internal rather than external focus. Raja Rao abstracts the temporal canvas of the Indian life into a kind of still-life picture made luminous in the consciousness of a single person who frequently happens to be the narrator himself endowed with special gifts of lyric insight and imaginative sympathy. Through this narrative emphasis on the individual’s inner psyche, we are launched into an existentialistic wilderness of mirrors, as it was, in which we find the images and glimpses of our true nature. Raja Rao’s stories do not deal with cumulative and massive sequence of life; they affect individual destinies and build up a fairly consistent view of man and his universe. In using the short stories as epiphanies rather than slice of life, Raja Rao anticipates the symbolic and metaphysical tendencies in his novels.

‘Javni’ and ‘Akkayya’ relate the predicament of the Indian woman in terms of a cultural and social situation in which the human personality is forced to seek strange and unsuspected subterfuges to arrest itself in a hostile and inimical world. The outstanding impression we get, however, is not so much of social malaise as of human wreckage. Javni rises like the lotus from the mud, a mysterious emanation of the human spirit, and yet perfectly adjusted to the confusing contradictions of culture in transition. Going unconcerned about her daily round of duties and even feeling the agony and misery of a low-caste widow in a village life with rumor and scandal, she consistently maintains her poise and her innocent faith in the indisputable power of Talakamma. Living like a hermit among householders, she sums up the poignancy of human suffering, a suffering alleviated by her attitude of resignation almost akin to heroic fortitude. She symbolizes the ancient sorrow of an ancient land whose cultural compulsions are brought into question by her very acceptance of them. When the family leaves her, she is left alone. But all her life, as her tale reveals, she has learnt to keep her tryst with loneliness. The final impression that Ramappa has of her is that of an Earth-Mother whose face is furrowed with sorrow, but mellowed by suffering. The last glimpse of her as a ghost, sitting under a ghost-like tree, conjures up the image and symbol of an ancient land.

A huge papal rose behind her, and, across the blue waters of the river and the vast, vast sky above her, she seemed so small, so insignificant. And yet, she was one of them, much more at least, dear reader, than you and I.<sup>2</sup>

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The story of 'Akkayya' offers a counterpoint to that of 'Javni'. While Javni ostensibly suffers from social ostracism, Akkayya falls a victim to the destructive insularity of the puritanical tradition. While Javni seeks to sublimate her tormenting sense of isolation by cultivating a naive and innocent faith in her gods and goddesses, Akkayya antagonises her gods by a tradition of religiosity which cannot offer her such a simple faith. Consequently, she cracks up from within and the rumblings of her inner disintegration and heard all around in the household. Her love turns into hate and she directs the hate with a subconscious fury towards the family which, in treating her like a parasite, becomes parasitical itself. Akkayya's loneliness is the product of conventional femininity which cuts her off from shared life. The hardening of the human heart within her results in indifference and hostility and a neurotic self hatred. n she had always enough children to take care of and even liked them after her own fashion, when they left her, "she forgets them as the cow forgets her young one"<sup>3</sup>. She is a person without a role, and when a role is thrust on her, she fails as a person. As the narrator observes:

And thinking of Akkayya, I had a sudden vision of the black, moss-grown rock that hung over the Nandi precipice, firm, but insecure; it would fall now or it would never; and the winds would rise and the tempests toss it over into the great mouth below, it would be no more, no more and all its hardships spent and lost... The sky was gathering clouds.<sup>4</sup>

The terrible insecurity of her state in the house expresses itself in furtive blackmail and open abuse, and it is clear that she cannot retrieve her lost self. The better part of her humanity gone awry, a thousand curses settle upon her lips und this nightmarish transformation of an Indian woman into a shouting vampire is described in terms of the traumatic cleavage in her personality.

You see, my son that is my life. At this age-I am sixty two now-I cannot say I shall go on pilgrimage and lead a pious life. Nothing but curses in my ears, instead of Ram. Ram, and nothing but washing filth the whole day instead of sacred baths in the Ganges and the Jamuna.<sup>5</sup>

If Javni anticipates Savithri in *The Serpent and the Rope*, Akkayya in a way foreshadows Madeleine.

'Narsiga' represents an unspoilt shepherd boy's life-abiding with loyalties with a streak of obstinate fortitude underlying the orphan boy's dreams and hopes. Raja Rao lets fantasy control both the physical events and the mental states presented in the narrative. Our view of reality is continually altered through shifting angles of perception. Narsiga becomes the serpent-garlanded Shiva and the knotted grass becomes the serpent. In this kind of non-sequential world, every physical phenomenon is limned into a high-pitched fantasy. Narsiga, in his capacity for weaving around him a net of illusions, anticipates protagonists in *The Serpent and the Rope* and *The Cat and Shakespeare*. The poetry of Narsiga's personality is turned into the physical world of natural events. He regards Gandhi's presence as an 'Avatar'

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and the metamorphic conception of 'Avatar' is dramatized by Narsiga's own myth-altered consciousness. Narsiga's mirage like reality moves in a waviness of line, separating dream from appearance, and again blending an idea and its embodiment into an intimate personal experience. Undoubtedly, Narsiga's response to the Gandhian myth is typical of many nationalists who had come under the influence of Gandhi when the patriotic movement was at its peak. Raja Rao's handling of the Gandhian theme in *Kanthapura* is clearly forecast in the story.

The Mahatma is going in the air, with his wife Sita... and in a flower chariot drawn by sixteen steeds, each one more beautiful than the other. And they will fly through the air and the heavens will let fall a rain of flowers. The Mahatma will have the Mother on his right, and our Master at his foot, and they will go across the clouds and the stars. And we shall gaze at them.<sup>6</sup>

In the title story, *The Cow of the Barricades*, the Gandhian theme is developed much more fully and the interlocking planes of reality are further explored. The transformations of Gauri, the cow of the barricades, sustain the complexity of the plot-structure in the story. Gauri is like the Mahatma, a ubiquitous presence, an embodiment of everything that is lovable and compassionate, glorious and powerful, in the universe. "And Gauri was no doubt a fervent soul who had sought the paths of this world to be borne a sage in the next, for she was so compassionate and true."<sup>7</sup>

As the Great Mother's vehicle, she is always there whenever her comforting presence is needed. Whenever there is a physical struggle between the workers and the 'red-men,' she rushes to the spot and through her own self-sacrifice dramatizes the sacredness and sanctity of freedom. The Master of the Ashram observes, "Gauri is waiting in the Middle Heavens to be born. She will be reborn when India sorrows again before she is free".<sup>8</sup>

The symbolic grafting of the 'Kamadhenu' motif to the national theme in *The Cow of the Barricades*, anticipates Raja Rao's metaphysical use of the animal motif in *The Cat and Shakespeare*. "The Mahatma may be all wrong about politics, but he is fight about the fullness of love in all creatures-the speechful and the mute".<sup>9</sup>

Throughout Raja Rao's stories, the natural world assumes the mystery of the supernatural by the penetration into human lives of the awesome but objectifying presence of the mute and speechless animals. The landscape teems with endless metamorphoses or animal, insect, bird and reptilian life. Folk-lore, legend, fantasy and racial memory are evoked to deepen the reality of the earth with the mystery of evolutionary life. 'Kanakpala' is a story of the decline and fall of a family ruined by the lure of gold and the contending greed and jealousies it brings about. The gold collected by the ancestor for the worship of God is zealously protected by the serpent which changes from a benign into an indignant creature as the legatees of the sacred gold lose sight of the, divine purpose. In the end, the survivors are left with a curse of sterility and death, and sin and guilt as a retribution for their violation of the sacred decree. Raja Rao contrasts the rich texture of Indian folk experience with the

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sterile, demythicized reality of modern urban life. The use of anecdote and episode, involved narration and multiple perspectives impart to Raja Rao's short story the flavor of Sanskrit and vernacular narrative idioms.

"Companions" makes a similar effective use of folk-fantasy raised to the level of allegory and symbolism. Motikhan is the eternal wanderer, the picaro and the pilgrim doubled into one. The secret mutual vow binding serpent and man is related to the cycle of birth and death; and the juxtaposition of appearance and reality connects time and eternity. Motikhan and the serpent are involved in a common doom as well as a common salvation, for the liberation of one is, by divine dispensation, the absolution of the other. Motikhan, the juggler, goes from place to place in search of God, so that he may vanquish the festering demon within himself, and find his ultimate peace. Clearly he can achieve this only by stepping out of his own confused self-hood with the grace of a 'Guru' (a conclusion also reached by the protagonist of *The Serpent and the Rope*). The experience of vision through the ordeal of the flesh and the creative suspension of the self is vividly focused.

But even as he prayed he saw snakes sprout though his head, fountains splashed and snakes fell gently to the sides like the waters by the Taj, and through them came women, soft women, dancing women, round hips, betel chewed lips, round breasts-shy some were, while some were only minxes-and they came from the right and went to the left, and they pulled at his beard, and suddenly white serpents burst through the earth and enveloped them all, but Motikhan would not move.<sup>10</sup>

Raja Rao hints at the mysterious adjacent and interaction of facts and experiences mutually incongruous and incompatible in themselves, but unified at the moment of spiritual realization. In the result, the narrative gains in its dialectical, metaphysical stridency.

The stories, 'The Little 'Gram Shop', 'A Client' and 'In Khandesh,' reveal Raja Rao's ability to handle his thematic materials in the simple but subtly varied keys of realism, humour and pathos. 'The Little Gram Shop' is a story of Motilal, the small-town shop-keeper, who along with his wife, has dreams of affluence and glory, but lacks horse-sense and ingenuity. The decline and fall of the brittle dream of Motilal is projected through the experience of Ananda, the curious but understanding young boy. Raja Rao fills the physical frame-work of the narrative with circumstantial detail which lends a sense of solidity and density to the background. The contrasts and the parallelism between the dreams of the wife and those of the husband are deftly drawn such that the two dreams are related to the transitional flow of events affecting the life of the small rural community. In exploiting the materials of regional life, Raja Rao revels an ability (which he shares with R.K. Narayan) to reconstitute elements of experience into a single focus without attempting any overtly transcendental flights. The change of ownership of the little gram shop from Motilal to Chota, his truant and unreconciled son, and that of the household from Beti Bai to Rati, and finally to Mithu the mistress, is poignantly drawn. In itself the pattern of reversal affords a naturalistic

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commentary on the fate of the whole community. The last sentence of the narrative produces a poignant imagistic effect and establishes the circular movement of fortune and offers a feeling of disturbed equilibrium in which trivialities of human motion are placed against the vast impersonality or cosmic routine. The rhetoric of the sentence bounce back to the first statement in the story: “Everybody hated him, hated him,”<sup>11</sup> The hatred and dislocation brought about by it are lost in the whirl of the cosmic law hinted at towards the end. “In the street, the dust rose and fell”<sup>12</sup>

In ‘In Khandesh,’ Raja Rao blends the esoteric mysticism or Indian rural life with modern expressionistic techniques. The restless ‘Tom-Tom’ announcing the arrival of the Prince as a terrible reminder of the unbearable pressure of cosmic mystery which is woven into the very texture of the soil of Khandesh inhabited by the superstitious and fear ridden villagers. The “tremendous” surrounding in which Dattopant and his village mates live are resonant with the rolling of the drums announcing important business, shaking them out of their lethargic existence and hypnotizing them with the ominous portents of an undisclosed destiny. The ravens, criss-crossing the lunar terrain of Khandesh are almost symbolically described by Raja Rao, and their presence imparts a sense of awe in which the natural is pervaded by the supernatural.

In Khandesh the earth is black. Black and grey as the buffalo and twisted like an endless line of loamy pythons, ‘wriggling and stretching beneath the awful beat of the sun. Between a python and python is a crevice deep as hell’s depths, and black and greedy and forbidding as demon’s mouth. They seem to gape their mouths to gobble you... to grapple you like crocodiles on a blazing day and drag you to the bottom of cavernous depths.’<sup>13</sup>

Life is not bought at the market place, but at the terrifying counter of death which purveys ecstasy at the price of despair, and peace at the price of terror. Raja Rao’s story is almost ‘Kafkaesque’ in its manipulation of the surrealistic insubstantiality and inconsequentiality of ‘being’ and ‘becoming,’ a trap out of which there seems to be hardly any escape for man. The metaphysical poise between movement and stillness, hinted at in the following passage, reveals Raja Rao’s predilection for analogical metaphors of experience and feeling which characterize the discourse in *The Serpent and the Rope* and in *The Cat and Shakespeare*.

In Khandesh the earth floats. Heaving and quivering, rising and shriveling, the earth floats in a flood of heat. Men don’t walk in Khandesh. They swirl round mid round upon their feet and move forward. Birds don’t fly in Khandesh. They are carried on the billows of heat. Horses don’t move in Khandesh, the earth moves to them.<sup>14</sup>

The stories reveal Raja Rao’s capacity to transmute commonplace objects and ordinary experience derived from the natural and the human worlds into symbols and metaphors of a deeper metaphysical meaning. For example, the two symbols which occur repeatedly in the stories are the symbols of the cow and the prince. The cow stands for the

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eternal endurance and patience of India, her gentleness, compassion and mother-love. Javni is “good like a cow”. Akkayya too, is cow-like in her uncomplaining acceptance and tenderness. The cow, conceived as a matriarchal figure also appears in the descriptions of the Little Mother of *The Serpent and the Rope* ‘and Shantha of *The Cat and Shakespeare*. The cow emerges as an apotheosis of Indian history and culture in “The Cow of the Barricades’. Ramaswamy in *The Serpent and the Rope* describes the cow, “What wonderful animals these be in our sacred land such maternal and ancient looks they have. One can understand why we worship them”.<sup>15</sup> Nair in *The Cat and Shakespeare* observes in a similar tone, “That which feeds the thirsty is sacred. So the Ganges is sacred. That is why we worship the cow”.<sup>16</sup> The cow stands out as Vishwa-Dhenu (the Cosmic Principle)

The prince symbol is another recurring motif. The prince stands for the superior and the mysterious, the noble exalted to the level of the sacred. Moorthy, Ramaswamy and Govindan Nair and Michel are all Vedantins capable of living in life, and yet lifted above and out of it. The description of Moorthy in *Kanthapura* reveals the aptness of the symbol. “He was not like corner-house Moorthy, who had gone through life like a noble cow, generous serene, deferent and brahmanic, a very prince, I tell you”.<sup>17</sup>

In *The Serpent and the Rope*, Ramaswamy’s father tells him ‘I want you to be a hero and a prince’.<sup>18</sup> Nair, in *The Cat and Shakespeare*, observes, “He who gives is a prince. I give rations or rather ration cards, so I give food, I am a prince”.<sup>19</sup>

Similarly, Nimka, speaking about her necklace, observes, “The Indian is too simple in his depth – if there is no concierge and cat, there is no goodness. Success is sin Gandhi is poverty. The Maharaja is a proof of truth”.<sup>20</sup>

Raja Rao’s short stories seek to trace human experience, whether individual or collective, to truth, which is the source, of reality. The characters experience the epiphanies of truth in those moments of consciousness when the real world bars and void revealing the generic loneliness of man and the creative matrix of being. After the mystic shock or recognition, they are once again reverted to the complex order of apparent reality, but now gifted with a sense or renewed personal equilibrium. The short stories of It Raja Rao thus project, in their lyric focus, the writer’s quest for identity and order in a world of change and transformation.

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