

## **A Critique on the Brahminical Quest for Absolute in**

### *The Serpent and the Rope*

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#### **Abstract**

Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope* portrays the quest for absolute truth or reality in life. But the entire novel moves along with the brahminic philosophy of metaphysics. It neglects other philosophies and place Sanskrit elite reflections as ultimate. How does the brahminic philosophy get prominence in the novel? Why the philosophies of dalits are not discussed? Can't the hero find the final truth through dalit philosophy? *The serpent and the rope* discusses *advaita Vedanta*, *samkhya* philosophies and the novel finally reaches the need of a *guru* to the ultimate truth. By analyzing the novel, I reach in a conclusion that Raja Rao intentionally place brahminic philosophies as elite and neglects other streams. His brahminic protagonist follows only sankara's philosophy and thinks that which is the only way to the reality. The following finding has implications on many other Indian English works which deliberately tries to establish the *Vedantic* philosophy as great.

## Paper

We all have an urge for the absolute truth within us. We may feel it as curiosity to know the world, meaning of life, meaning in life after death, meaning of God. It differs religion to religion and caste to caste. Raja Rao's *The sSerpent and the rope* employs Sankaracharya's Brahminic philosophy to reveal the metaphysics of the world. We all are engaged in a search for the absolute truth and nobody has ever got the answers to these questions. Quest for identity is one of the constant themes in Indian English fictions. In Raja Rao, this quest takes a further deviation and becomes a quest for the absolute through Indian social cultural elite.

Kancha Illaiah in his book *Post Hindu India* says that the dalits should feel self-respect. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar tried to bring social justice in India where primacy of equality is the essence of society supported by fraternity and liberty. He spoke against injustice and challenged brahminical hegemony. He succeeded to bring the self confidence in many dalits. *The serpent and the rope* portrays the story of Rama, an Indian student, and Madeleine, a French girl, who meet at a French university. The *vedantic* philosophy of *Advaita*, oneness of all (non duality) is woven in to the very texture of the novel. Adi Sankaracharya was its most forceful exponent. Rama soaked in Sankara's philosophy, constantly seeks sameness, unity and the impersonality in his life. The whole novel is an elaboration of Sankara's views on life. The symbols serpent and rope are so cleverly used as metaphors for illusion and reality. This novel records the disintegration of a marriage, mainly on Sankara's philosophical grounds. But Adi Sankara is not the only philosopher in India. We had plenty of thoughts and all of them were suppressed by the brahminism. And one of the prominent thoughts was that of Charvaka'. Charvaka theory was suppressed by the *vedantic* heritage and the people in India believe that Sankara is the only traditional Indian philosopher.

Ramaswami's brahminic philosophy is revealed in the opening sentence of *The serpent and the rope*: "I was born a Brahmin-that is, devoted to Truth and all that 'Brahmin is he who knows Brahmin' etc" (5). Ramaswamy is concerned with the meaning of true Brahmin and it influences him. Raja Rao ponders over Brahminic philosophy in his book and he does not use any dalit philosophies and philosophers in his books. Ancient India witnessed the classification

of people on the basis of work but those who got knowledge, weapons, wealth and land became powerful in the society. Later it became the caste system and from which the misconception aroused that Brahmins were superior and dalits were inferior.

In the novel Rama's wife Madeleine is a follower of Buddhism. She also converts to Buddhism and searches of her soul but even then she believes in the pragmatic tradition and takes people as real and concrete and not as illusions. On the contrary, Ramaswamy believes that the self alone is real and the world is an illusion. In the imagery of the title, the serpent represents the illusion and rope represents reality. "The world is either unreal or real-the serpent or the rope" (*The serpent and the rope*340).

All brahminic philosophies are based on *Gurus* and saints and the hero in the novel, Rama is helpless without *Guru*. *Guru* is the only guide who can lead his disciple to the absolute. Throughout a novel Raja Rao uses Adi Sankara's metaphors and *advaitic* concepts. In *The serpent and the rope*, hero believes that *Brahmam* is real and absolute. The whole world is illusory, the individual and universal souls are one. The rich and vital Indian tradition has been forcefully evoked in Raja Rao's novels. Yajnyavalkya, Sankara, Madhava did not die but living in Indian hearts. Rama is a character who follows Indian Brahminic philosophy and it is depicted as Indian culture or tradition. India is a land of multiple philosophies, culture and tradition and brahminical culture is just one among them.

Indian *vedantic* vision and the wisdom of age-old Indian scriptures like *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, and *Gita* are woven into the fabric novel. In this novel, India is represented as something that goes beyond any formulation of conflicting polarities of good and evil. Rama is a seeker after this India, or the eternal truth and for him it is true joy and true freedom. But for the non-Brahmin, Madeleine, India is not so. This gap between these two attitudes is never abridged. Rama wants to prove that he is metaphysically correct and he defines his identity at this stage in relation to the absolute. Madeleine's spiritual satisfaction lies in Buddhist renunciation, austerity and compassion. To Rama, it is self-destructive: "the anthropocentric civilization, whether it be the purist (or protestant) or the Buddhist (or Jain), must be self-destructive"(307).

Rama is a brahmin in France, who is a pilgrim who prays on the ghats of the Ganga at Varanasi and meditates on the river side of the Siene in Paris. A Brahmin, a self-proclaimed one,

is a Brahmin, be it in Banglore or Banares, Paris or Boston. He is the changeless India where he is the one and all is well with the world because he has God in heaven and Guru with him. He sees India everywhere. And being a Brahmin he thinks “Life in this universe must ensure a perennial life in the other world, that is, in heaven”(Illiaiah 103). He neglects pleasures in earth to enjoy the eternal pleasures in another world. Kancha Illaiah ridicules brahminic philosophy as “He believes he is eating not for his own sake but eating for God who alone can ensure him moksha, or release from worldly life”(104).

*The serpent and the rope* is not a complete novel in its metaphysical quest. At the end of the novel the hero finds a way to self-realization that is Guru. The opening passage itself of *The serpent and the rope* shows how Rao uses the many allusions not to exhibit the erudition of his central character. He uses Sanskrit and Indian philosophy to create an atmosphere for Rama’s metaphysical quest. Raja Rao’s writing is persuasive that critics have generally tended to take Ramaswamy as truly learned Indian, and a Sanskrit scholar which is more important. The protagonist concerned with ultimate reality and the title itself makes the reader expect an exposition of *Advaita Vedanta*. Ramaswamy does not follow Sankara to the exclusion of other systems of Indian philosophy, though he time and again proclaims his faith in *advaita Vedanta* and Sankara. A consideration of the way he approaches the feminine principle makes this clear. For Ramaswamy, the feminine is not only the *maya or advaita*, but it is also a *shakti or prakriti* of *samkhya* system of Indian philosophy. When Ramaswamy says that the world is for annihilation, one feels that he is expressing the *mayavada* (theory of *maya* or illusion). The analogy of serpent and rope suggests that the world is illusory and only the *Guru* can lead you to the absolute.

For the dalits there is no heaven after their life. “In a Dalitbahujan view, life here must be lived for life's sake. Further, life here is related to work. The more it works, the more sacred that life becomes”(Illiah 108). This is the essence of the *charvaka darshanam lokayuta* but none of these philosophies flourished in India due to the prominence of Sanskrit scholars like Sankara. When the novelist like Raja Rao writes about a hero, Ramaswamy who lives in a belief that the whole world is illusion and *maya* the reader also misses the different philosophical approaches to life.

Raja Rao uses *samkhya* philosophy which is dualistic: *prakriti*, the feminine, is an independent real principle and the universe appears because of the reflection of the conscious *purusa* (masculine principle). And all creation is the result of the interaction of the two principles. But *advaita* differs from *samkhya* in denying independent reality to the feminine principle of *maya*. According to Sankara, the Brahman or the absolute has two aspects: the transcendent *nirgunabrahman*, and the creative *iswara*, in which he is associated with *maya* which is neither identical nor separate from *Brahman*. Siva and shakti are another aspects of *brahman* and almost all the philosophical background of the novel is Sanskrit elite philosophy. Shiva and Shakti are two among the plenty of Hindu gods which also unknowingly gives the deep sense of supremacy of Hindu culture over other beliefs in metaphysical quest.

Rama's vital relationship with Madeleine and Savitri are controlled by his brahminic identity and his conscious quest of knowledge through brahminic philosophy. Indian is the cause of the parting of Rama and Madeleine. Each tried to adopt other's world view and too divergent to permit a fruitful sharing of life. Rama believes that: "You see the serpent and in fear you feel you are it, the serpent, the saint. One- the Guru- brings the lantern; the road is seen, the long white road, going with the stars. 'It is only the rope'. He shows it to you. And you touch your eyes and know that there never was a serpent"(340). After the quality of brahminness by birth comes the need of a *Guru* to light the seeker's path. At the end, the hero cries out, in utter helplessness for the *Guru*, who is nowhere near. "No, not a God but a Guru is what I need, "Oh Lord, My Guru, My Lord. .... Lord, My Guru come to me, tell me; give me thy touch, vouchsafe," I cried, 'the vision of Truth, Lord, My Lord'"(408). But I want to propose an idea that the *Guru* is also a human who are capable of committing mistakes.

At the end of the novel, he finds his Guru in Trivandrum and *advaita* emphasizes the role of the *Guru* in removing ignorance of the nature of reality. Raja Rao's personal life has some similarities with the novel because he himself was a disciple of Atmananda guru. Rama believes that only the *Guru* can help and answer to the questions so he decided to come back to Trivandrum or Travancore India, in search of a spiritual guru who will be able to help him to find absolute truth.

The novel praises the holiness of Banares and the Ganga, which are mentioned often in the novel; also have many metaphysical and mythical associations with both life and death. Being the holy river of Hindus, he respects Ganga and believes in its purity that the water can purify all his sins. Raja Rao consciously tries to prove that Indian culture is brahminical and it is elite unlike any other beliefs. The dignity of the great philosophers used as an instrument to highlight the philosophical insight of the narration. And it completely neglects the pragmatic dalitbahujan views on life.

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