



MYTHO-CULTURAL CONSCIOUSNESS AS THE CORNERSTONE OF EARLY INDIAN FICTIONS: A STUDY THROUGH THE FICTIONS OF RK NARAYAN AND RAJA RAO

Dr. SACHIDANANDA PANDA

Associate Professor of English

BIMIT, Bhubaneswar



Dr. SACHIDANANDA PANDA

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Abstract

Despite the availability of multiple channels of entertainment and overflow of varied contents, modern man is found to be tired of spurious contents of art and literature that spills the beans of negativity, often leading to a tacit glorification of it, resulting in a gradual transit to older scriptures and forms of art and literature that propagate unity and that preaches and teaches the vintage flavors of tradition, culture, ethics and above all tales of sanguinity. Today's India inherits a rich narrative traditions exemplified by works like the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the Puranas, the Panchatantra amongst many; where, Gods combine with human beings, clash or collide with demons in order to build a story. Thus the very awareness can best be called mytho-cultural consciousness which is all-encompassing in range carrying the symbolic representation of the solid foundation of a rich heritage. Indian novel in English, championed by Raja Rao, R.k.Narayanan makes explicit uses of the 'puranic' method where allegory and myth elicit layers of visionary consciousness. Thus, implicitly and explicitly they represent a historical or archetypal sequence which adheres to a continuity of literary tradition in keeping the bond between different stake holders ie: Individual, society and its rich heritage. The paper aims to highlight cultural and traditional substances despite their redundant appearances have not lost their relevance to guide and illuminate the reader; who, find refuse in these vintage substances since ages till date despite the availability of myriad cheap contents of entertainment and facets of art and literary forms.

Key words: Tradition, Culture, Ethics, Integration, Mythology, Pride

The literary history of India in relation to different branches of literature in general and fiction in particular, is replete with the richness, elements of cultural affluence, behavioral patterns and above all the habits and choices of common man that once dominated the social fabric, and such elements unequivocally appeared as proud claimants, in the pages of novels and fictions pioneered by R.K.Narayan and Raja Rao, besides other contemporary writers. They explicitly used the 'puranic' method where allegory and myth elevated

layers of visionary consciousness. Thus, implicitly and explicitly they took care to remind the readers, their connection with the contents which adhere to the continuity of a unique literary tradition in keeping the bond intact between different stake holders ie: Individual, society and its rich heritage. They never relented to raise their voices as well to call a spade a spade, in their purgative efforts, in cleansing the society and in the greater interest of a new India, as the 'Dream' they saw, free from the blemishes that plagued its identity as a Nation.

Worthwhile to mention that – since ages, India has been a multicultural and multi-ethnic melting pot with myriad language and practices and continues to remain so till date. In the given scenario, the task of keeping the diversified community within the ambit of unity becomes more difficult, barring the common heritage, history, and mythology, that had its role played vividly and possesses the same relevance even today, given the circumstances of current socio-economic situations around the globe and the geopolitical compulsiveness, which spreads its wings to encompass all within its omnivorous global culture, literature and all forms of art do reflect more of negative contents and the grim picture of life at large, with no solution even at the hindsight to trace a solace, creating a vacuum of moral guidance and direction. Added to the above, the commercial motif and inherent nefarious design of instant popularity are more perplexing and disturbing. The reader is left with limited choices and is utterly hard-pressed to find refuge in the older scriptures and pieces of literature to establish the connection, which speaks their language, their culture, their own story and are daubed with sympathy and empathy.

No society is free from negative elements, although the ratio or proportion may differ in statistics, yet; ill effects of such blemishes are well countered with the brighter sides of the ethical platform, which works as a guiding force, for a society to sustain. The said scholars of eminence necessarily relied heavily on the mythological elements and moral teachings and preachings of the then society, which worked as an adhesive or a bond between the dual pull of integration and disintegration. All of their writings though were aimed at social concerns that governed the common mass in different angles, needed the curative thrust of pleasant flavors of moral guidance in the form of citations and examples drawn directly from the holy books, religious scriptures, ethical teachings, and mythological hard balls to make a difference in shaping the course and direction of the society; as a result of which the disruptive forces were kept at bay, by all means. Apart from the reflective depiction of the society, these novelists too highlighted the contemporary society, its regulatory

patterns, comforts, and constraints, and were able to breed flairs of Nationalism amongst the common people, in arousing the sense of belongingness and oneness, with the help of prevalent commonalities; even the romantic mood of their writings were coloured with the shades of patriotism.

As we know, besides the spirit of patriotism that figured prominently in the works of, R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao. The socio-political situation of India is portrayed poignantly in the novels of these writers. While R.K. Narayan's writings focused on myriad problems of India and its people in Some of his works like *Swami and Friends* (1935), *The Bachelor of Arts* (1937) and *The Dark Room* (1938), at the same time, Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938) *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960) *The Cat and Shakespeare* (1965) drew attention explicitly towards the social structure of India. Prof. V. K. Gokak writes: "An Indian, then, is a person who owns up the entire Indian heritage and not merely a portion of it. This cultural awareness is an indispensable feature of Indianness" (Gokak 24). An Indian writer is naturally influenced and inspired by a contemporary Indian context and the socio-cultural milieu. Hence, it creates an opportunity for any reader of such fictions; to gather extensive information about the typical Indian characteristics, its foundations of faith and belief, mysticism or traditional lenience when combined, comprise an Indian, and not an individual engrossed in the vicious cycle of mere commercial and economic activities for sustenance. Irrespective of the content, and the subject chosen by these novelists, the central idea that dictated the theme line or the message relied heavily on the aspects of human dignity and self-respect, which is the most important, and bears the relevance even today. People are ready to compromise with all sorts of social slurs and evils, even co-operate with the practices, for pretty economic reasons. Ethics and morality, forget about human dignity, that is best left to the mercy of the rich and privileged. In this context, we may say that human dignity is a subject we learn from the stories and mytho-contents of '*Rama*' *Abhimanyu*' or *Ekalabya*' from early childhood and the stories are widespread on common lips. That is; how one

wishes to uphold one's own dignity and identity despite the parity of Economics.

Ace critic M.K Naik observes, that- "*The Serpent and the Rope*" is no less than a 'Modern Indian Mahapurana'. In our reading of the novel 'on the level 'of narrative', that tells us the story of Rama and Madeleine, which gradually leads the theme of mere man and woman relationship to the larger theme of the quest for self-knowledge and in the process; It further takes us to the very heart of the novel. Rama's transformation from the worldly affairs- to the quest for self-knowledge is found to be quite remarkable. Naik is perhaps the first critic who considers the relevance of the main theme of Rama's evolution, as he analyses the sustained symbolism of 'Adwaita' behind it. Worthwhile to mention here that- The Term 'Adwaita' of Adi Sankara reflects the reality of the world and life as an illusion. The theme of 'Maya', which finds its fuller expression in the repeated utterances of Rama in "*The Serpent and the Rope*", gives the necessary strength and momentum to the novel and its distinctive Indian character. The title of the novel, "*The Serpent and the Rope*" alludes to Sri Shankara-Charya's non-dualistic philosophy and the analogies of the serpent and the rope, embodying respectively the illusion and the reality are derived from his famous '*Bhashy*' of the '*Brahma Sutras of Baddarayan*' in which he has elaborated his philosophy. The importance of such rich texts and citations from Indian mythological, and cultural heritage, spell only one thing, that- whenever; one is in need of pursuit of Knowledge and in need of churning out the intricacies of life, the old scriptures are cited, as they are the storehouse of knowledge and wisdom to guide us in the vicious cycle of life and death, as well as directing us for living a meaningful life.

It is essential to note here that the writer tries to put forth before us a unique blending of western and Indian elements through an encyclopedic presentation of the totality of human experience' which is intricately woven around the narrative method of western, and the '*puranic*' tradition that is predominantly Indian. The way the narrative is presented, is as timeless as India itself, with the familiar blend of fact and fable. The novel tells the

story of Rama and particularly his marriage while reflecting on the flavor and tradition of India. The critic analyses in detail how '*purana*' which was a 'blend of history, literature, philosophy, and religion of the novel can become the torch-bearer for the modern man. This also illustrates how Raja Rao's prose style is based on an adaptation of the features of Sanskrit rhythm to the needs of a narrative of modern life; In a way justifying the relevance of Mytho-cultural consciousness in every sphere of our life, in our quest for knowledge and wisdom.

Raja Rao's third novel '*The Cat and Shakespeare*' (1965) is like a sequel to '*The Serpent and the Rope*'. While the second novel shows the young man struggling for illumination, '*The Cat and Shakespeare*' shows the grace of the guru in operation. In this brief novel, with its enigmatic title, Raja Rao once again pursues the metaphysical vein. He goes beyond the "anguish of ambivalence" to explore reality, and thereby creates what he calls an ontological comedy. The troubled feelings of failure and frustration and the wounded tenderness of spirit which had underlined '*The Serpent and the Rope*' are well embedded in Rao's experience, including the rediscovery of metaphysics of life. As K. R. Rao says, "*The Cat and Shakespeare* presents the next step in his spiritual progression, culminating with an expression of joy and an awareness of the mirthful absurdity of existence" Similarly another critic, K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar calls '*The Cat and Shakespeare*' an "*Upanishadic*" novel, where we could hear the voices of the '*Upanishads*' in a highly compact and economical structure."

The study of *The Cat and Shakespeare* as a '*puranic* parable' again demonstrates Raja Rao's manifold levels of reflection in a single work: the social scene portrayed in a realistic manner, 'a comic extravaganza' coupled with philosophical implications that carries a direct bearing in lives of people. We too find in our reading that-the novel is a very ambitious exercise in metaphysical speculation imparting *Visishtadwaita* philosophy besides its narrative projection it can be enjoyed on the narrative as a social comedy. *Vishisht Advaita* literally "*Adwaita* with uniqueness; qualifications" that is a non-dualistic school of Vedanta philosophy. It is non-dualism of the

qualified whole, in which 'Brahman' alone exists, but is characterized by multiplicity. In the cat and Shakespeare, the myths and symbols emerge as the creative mode of his technique to convey *Advaita-Vedanta*—the total surrender and resignation to the will of God to achieve the ideal of knowledge.

An extensive investigation of Raja Rao's 'The Cat and Shakespeare' reveals a variety of critical elements, with an almost constant and appropriate emphasis on its Indian specificity of Hindu thought, without which the story makes little sense. This in many respects, an actual narrative of Indian speculative paradigms and categories, because of its all-pervasive influence of a number of "Sanskrit philosophic" texts, its far-reaching dimension, and the complexity of the message it imparts, as well as its universal significance. The novel deals with the theme of the quest for Reality in a manner, which is different from that of the earlier novels. 'The Cat and Shakespeare' carries the theme of the metaphysical quest, a step forward in a new direction. The novel is stuffed with real-life situations, metaphysics, irony, fantasy and fact, digressions, tragic and comic situations. As we know 'Indians are seekers' which is elementary to 'vedantic' philosophy. This concept of seeking knowledge and wisdom is also part of metaphysics which is again emphasized here. Raja Rao uses myths, legends, fables and symbols to substantiate the metaphysical utterances of some characters, to establish the identity, which has deep philosophical implications, for the readers' particularly non-native readers, who have no background-knowledge of Vedanta; non-dualism, or an iota of Hindu scriptures, it is bound to baffle them, for its illusory non-plot, held together only by-mystifying points of extreme intensity.

The most significant aspect of Raja Rao as a master of Indian English fiction could be, his keen perception and intense awareness of the guru principle/ 'Parampara' which operates in the Indian social psyche. The Guru-disciple relationship is a dominant aspect and a shaping force of the hereditary mental disposition or it may be termed as the rudimentary concept of Indian ethos. Govindan Nair, in "The Cat and Shakespeare" is a guru figure who initiates Pai, into the world of Ultimate Truth. This Symbolizes, the importance Rao wants to

percolate amongst the readers and never misses an opportunity to incorporate the intricate cultural and ethical elements that comprise the bone and marrow of India as a Nation. In the digital age; adherence to this 'Guru Parampara' though still prevalent in thinner pockets yet are becoming leaner with days that pass by, because of non-adherence to such rich heritage and absence of such influential scripts that once was. An air of disinterested practices, faintly though; still makes its voice heard bleak, despite the erroneous text that seldom guides the readership on the right path sans these cultural contents.

Similarly, the other novel *Kanthapura* too has the touch of *Puranic* philosophy; a philosophy that is to say, pre-dominantly upholds a religious world view. The incarnation of God at the time of misery and ignorance that is referred to in the novel is central to the 'Puranas'. Here Raja Rao attempts to create a 'Sthala-Purana', a legendary tale of a specific locality. Every village in India has its own 'Sthala-Purana' or legendary history, and *Kanthapura* is no exception to this. It has a legend concerning the local goddess 'Kenchamma' who protects the villagers from harm and presides over their destiny. Raja Rao's profound knowledge of Indian socio-philosophic life, his passionate involvement with the Indian freedom struggle under the ace leadership of Mahatma Gandhi and his literary quest to search a soothing, seductive and creative language for delineating his thoughts and ideas having their roots in Indianness have got expression in 'Kanthapura'.

The novel projects a deeply rooted philosophy of man's position in society both spiritual as well as political. It's a combination of Politics, religion, Indian myths and philosophical strains which are mated together in the novel. The novel has all the content of an ancient Indian classic, combined with a sharp, satirical art and mythical characteristics. The primary motive behind incorporating the 'puranic' and mythological contents that once governed the local mass here is aimed at sensitizing the readers about the quintessence of Indian culture and tradition, which are part and parcel of everyday life. To understand India and its multiplicity of culture and varied

colours of faith beliefs and habits are just inseparable from its identity, from which the modern generation is gradually drifting away in the digital age.

In the history of Indian English fiction this is a common noticeable factor, that irrespective of the language it is written, it has to deal with the cultural and ethical contours of the soil, its heritage and the social practices both good and bad. What strikes our mind is a shared tradition, a set of interests and values that people live by, all of which give a sense of identity to individuals and a nation. Although any talented writer can bend the language to suit his/her purpose, to communicate the texture of the novel and create the native atmosphere of his/her own, yet is bound by the ingrained commitment to remain within the ambit of the shared culture and get inspired by it. Literature carries the reflections of the society; Let's Say- it's a society in miniature itself; Characters, images, themes, beliefs, form and style, assumptions, etc. are determined by the socio-cultural forces that shape the world in which the writer lives. As Robert Weimann observes: "... literature and society seem to be interrelated in the sense that literary values are social values, if they are to be values" (Weimann 237). The changing socio-political, mytho-religious, philosophical or cultural contexts do form the bulk of its themes, since settings and characters are drawn from society. The role, Fiction is concerned with, is the projection of such social conditions, and its morals values. Thus it is not merely a question of the raw materials of novels - character or story, content or style, form or sensibility, theme or philosophy, rather it is clubbed with the factors, that the readers attempt to consume, digest and share, the very essence of the society, and to live up to it. In such a scenario the onus rests on the piece of art or the artist, to reflect the behavioral aspects along with the Mytho – cultural elements, so as to keep the reader connected to the antiquity and oriental roots, and still be in consonance with the changing panorama of life in every sphere, in recent times.

In this context it may be said that the fictional world of India is enriched with the contributions of the famous scholars, 'The Trio of Indian English Fiction' - R. K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Raj Rao,

who used 'novel' as a medium to establish such connectivity, while highlighting and revolting against the ills and evils, orthodoxy and blind believes, which can be termed as Modernist approach while being rooted in ancestry and Mytho-cultural elements as feeders of inspiration and guidance. The trends and tastes, rituals and practices, pragmatism or realism get their strength from the same society we live in; and to forget the root by being swayed away by the cheap contents of commercial worth acts as a disconnecting force to the very basics of life. Hence the pieces of art or literature that promote such things can be termed as rootless and are substantially hollow. Such contents are littered everywhere now a day in a sharp contrast to the earlier times of Narayan, Anand or Rao.

Rk Narayan, as said earlier, one amongst the eminent 'Trio', intended to unveil the grotesque mythical realities of common lives of contemporary society. On like the other two Narayan too realistically projected the rural Indian life with its issues and problems, dreams and aspirations, beliefs and values to address the core concerns of the then society with an inherent and ostensible message that are relevant till today, and attracts much readership. All of them kept an ordinary Man/woman at the helm of affairs in the novels. M. K. Naik says: "Mulk Raj Anand is the novelist of the social man, whereas R. K. Narayan is the novelist of the individual man and Raja Rao that of the metaphysical man" (Naik 1983). K. R. S. Iyengar remarks: "... of the Indo-Anglican novelists, only Mulk Raj Anand and R. K. Narayan have shown anything like stamina and stern consistency of purpose"(Iyengar-1985). The eminent 'Trio' R. K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao basically remained concerned with the common mass, and the deprived, their novels are replete with expressions of the traditional, spiritual, cultural and philosophical ethos of India. Narayan's women characters are often drawn from mytho-religious entities of society both conventional and nonconventional. The conventional types carry - traditional feminine values and sensibilities and are the followers of Sita, Damyanti and Savitri, the mythological female characters that are household names of Indian mythological and religious

highways. On the contrary, his women protagonists who are unconventional show courage and confidence in raising a voice of protest against orthodox beliefs, superstitions, customs, conventions and traditions prevalent in the society.

Narayan incorporates various myths and legends drawn from the classical Indian traditional literature, epics and tales such as the *Mahabharata*, the *Bhagavata*, *Jataka tales* and the *Panchatantra*, into modern fiction. Taken from these various traditional sources the myths and legends are improved and improvised to suit the modern times and contemporary situation. Through these stories, Narayan tries to present a view of life and a moral vision, though not either didactic or instructive anywhere; yet with the august intention of imbibing the readers about the morals with the citations drawn from Mytho' contents of oriental India in those stories and scriptures. The ancient Indian myths which he read as a learner in his middle years not only contributed to the plots for his novels; rather they are well recreated to appear in newer manifestations. Therefore one can notice that Narayan's view of life is essentially oriental in nature, yet he could master the art of recreating the same to match the individual consciousness of contemporary society. What is characteristically great about him is that, he could successfully tap the essence, which is Indian. Narayan's vision is characterized by a unique Indian sensibility, and as a vocal exponent of the ancient Indian tradition; a tradition which is deeply rooted in the beliefs of the transmigration of the 'soul, karma, reincarnation and renunciation', are visibly clear by means of a perceptive study of his fiction. "The Bachelor of Arts"

It reflects Narayan's deep understanding and insight into the rituals, culture, and tradition of India, whether consciously or unconsciously these myths made their way into the structural pattern of his novel, except in *The Man Eater of Malgudi* or *The Tiger for Malgudi*, The use of myth, is quite frequent to explain Narayan's views of life. Narayan skillfully avoided politics and polemics of any kind. The themes he chooses for his novel are of perennial interest, especially to a sensitive mind interested in human beings. Worthwhile to mention here that- It

is not only the writer's creative frame of mind that rebuilds his historical or mythological experience, it is also the reader's pragmatism, which realizes the work of art at the level of his own conclusions on the anvils of inheritance and historical precedence.

The protagonists are time and again brought back to their senses by the wisdom of our ancient way of life to seek solace from the hard realities of our increasingly modern materialistic and commercial society. Putting a Modern Grab to the ancient tales and fables is the hallmark of Narayan's style of writing and hardly escapes his attention at any given circumstance if need be. The clash of the 'sura' and 'asura', the clash of good versus evil with the triumph of the former, can be interpreted in modern context as well, for example; as we see in one of the article - "R.K. Narayan: A Return to Ritual and Folklore" by Rama Kundu, where she says, "It is an excellent and sometimes hilarious re-enactment of age-old Indian myths in the modern context that account for the special flavor of much of R.K. Narayan's writing."(Bhatnagar 23)

In novels like *Mr. Sampath*, or *The Financial Expert*, *The Guide*, *The Man Eater of Malgudi* and *The Painter of Signs* we see how corruption and blind pursuit of materialism have eaten into the core of the serene and pastoral innocence of Malgudi. Narayan was a realist, who strongly believed that the way to deal with the stark unpleasant reality is possible only if we stay connected to the roots of our ethical lanes of consciousness or mytho- religious contents, and take care to get back to the values and customs of our ancient past, to bring about a resolution. It is through the character of Raju that he has come to a certain solution that probably has to do with self-realization as do some of his other characters like Chandran in *The Bachelor of Arts*, Krishna in *The English Teacher* and Srinivas in *Mr. Sampath*; else it becomes an obvious question before us to ask- what would happen to such a society that has surrendered itself to the vicious circle of corruption, commercialization, moral annihilation and that has lost touch with its glorious past?.

The modern cult of unabashed consumerism and materialism that gave rise to self-centered individualism could be balanced by taking refuge in our ancient way of life. The corruption and selfish existence into which Raju in "The guide" was because of the self-centered approach that he had fallen trapped which could only be salvaged if he devotes his thought for the community rather than the self-goal. Thus Raju spends his days muttering prayers and hymns as a result of his unquestionable liberation from his ego, and it is revealed by his words-"I am only doing what I have to do; that is all. My likes and dislikes do not count"-until the eleventh day when he collapses with the prophetic declaration that it is raining in the hills. The novel thus concludes "in the magnitude of his spiritual gain". The central theme of the novel 'The Guide'- is the transformation of Raju from his role as a tour guide to that of a spiritual guide. Narayan here hints at the ideology of selfless pursuit of the goal that is the very foundation of Indian Mythology and Vedic principle. Non-attachment and selfless 'Karma' is what Narayan's message is, and should be the guiding principle of every human being; and in its absence, a fall from grace becomes imminent.

Thus Narayan uses myths and tales to set contemporary issues of Malgudi and his readers' familiarity with these tales, helps the author to express his views about unique characters of India's glorious past. Although, the innocence of Malgudi that we see in *Swami and Friends* never returns in *The Painter of Signs*; Narayan presents Malgudi, as a microcosm of India, and shows how we are madly aping a disruptive way of life, devoid of the goodness and ethics that once characterized our country. Narayan's faith in the goodness of human beings, the principles of non-violence, certain universal and timeless values and the ultimate annihilation of evil not by any divine force but by a certain natural force is always reiterated. This is best illustrated in Narayan's vision of Malgudi. Whether it is the physically imposing Vasu in *The Man Eater of Malgudi* who terrorizes both man and beast alike or Sampath in *Mr. Sampath* who loses all sense of balance or Margayya in *The Financial Expert* whose love for money is only second to his love for his only son, they are all destroyed by their evil dispensation.

Vasu in *The Man Eater of Malgudi*, by his physical appearance and behaviour, reminds us of ancient monsters like *Bhasmasura*, [a mythical character of devilish forces] to highlight the theme of the victory of moral over the amoral, in the modern sense- the good over the bad.

There is however certain philosophy upheld by all Indians, like those in our *Upanishads* and 'The *Bhagwat Gita*'. Such philosophy is time and again, found in the works of Narayan and other Indian writers. "A *Tiger For Malgudi* where he deals with the core issues related to Hindu philosophy like the themes of birth and rebirth, the desire for all beings to find solace in the 'master' who acts as a guide and mentor towards salvation, the enlightenment and detachment from the continuous cycle of desire, pain, disease and death by self-realization. In *Swami and Friends* this theme of self-realization is beautifully interwoven into the story of the novel. Narayan believed that a strong tie with one's family and religion is important for self-development, and all his characters possess these traits as well.

From the above studies, it becomes evident that in this time of the generation, modern/twenty-first century, when man is drifting away under various intruding provocations from its roots, cultural heritage, its glorious past that once was the cornerstone of life at large; the source of knowledge and moral guidance, the backbone of one's civilization he/she hails, the mythology that nourished the fabric of upbringing of a society, or the fables, lores, stories that once acted as an antidote against all odds as a mother's lap in the making of a child to grow up with all the moral teachings, the typicality of language or vernacular, faith belief or dogmas, the religion of the land or its myriad practices all combine to form the mytho-cultural contents, which can't be ignored despite the surge of cheap contents, and spurious commercial intents in art and literature. The onus lies on the writers to be insistent and persistent to keep the reader and the human race in general stay connected to their respective roots and such consciousness; when kept abreast, a society grows up with pride and dignity.

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