



## AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ELEMENTS IN RAJA RAO'S *COMRADE KIRILLOV*

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### Abstract

Raja Rao, one of the harbinger of the true Indo-English novel; tried his best to give new identity to Indian English novels. He is the most widely acclaimed Indian English novelist. His reputation rests on a wide range of his intellectual, spiritual, national, political and social thought content. *Comrade Kirillov*, a unique creation of Raja Rao is an ironical sketch of an Indian communist. It covers the period of 1930s and 1940s, to Indian independence and beyond. It is essentially an autobiographical novel. Raja Rao used the protagonist to present a satiric picture of pre-Independence and early post-Independence Indian socio-political scenario. Alias, Padmanabha Iyer, the protagonist of the novel can easily be identified with the author himself. Most of the time through protagonist Raja Rao portrays his inner self and his desire to serve the people of the country. Present study attempts to pick up the elements of the author's personal life illustrating the events and thought process of the narrator.

**Keywords** - an autobiographical element, communism, protagonist, Socialist movement, resemblance.

Raja Rao was born in an ancient, orthodox, and respected Brahmin family in Hassan, a small town in the state of Mysore (now called Karnataka) on 5, November 1908. He was educated at Muslim schools. He studied at the Madarsa-i-Aliya. His father was a Professor of Kannada at Nizam's College in Hyderabad. He was then sent to the Aligarh Muslim University for his higher education. In 1927, Rao returned to Hyderabad to enroll as a student for the B.A. at Nizam's College. Two years later, he graduated, having majored in English and History. Raja Rao began his literary career in the thirties. It was the time when the country was struggling to free itself from the clutches of the British. Raja Rao was born and brought up in this period. He has faithfully portrayed socio-political situations and problems of the period in his novels. He attempted to explore contemporary Indian society without

distorting the reality. He has played a major role in the evolution of Indian writing in English and has given it an identity. Raja Rao has written in various forms of literature which include novels, stories, anthologies and non-fiction. He is famous especially as a novelist. *Kanthapura*, *The Serpent and the Rope*, *The Cat and the Shakespeare*, *Comrade Kirillov* and *The Chessmaster and His Moves* novels have a peculiar place in Indo-English fiction. His novels present pictures of real life, manners and the time in which it is written.

*Comrade Kirillov*, a unique creation of Raja Rao, a thin novelette, is an ironical sketch of the self-contradictory Indian communist; whose real name is Padmanabha Iyer. The epigraph of the novel reveals that the treatment of theme and the portrayal of the protagonist are directly derived from Raja Rao's fascination for Dostoevsky. Rao's *Kirillov* has

Dostoevsky's Kirillov as an archetype. He has many of the traits of Shatov and Kirillov of Dostoevsky's *The Possessed*. This research paper attempts to bring out his autobiographical elements. The title of the novel reflects the name of the central character of the story. The story is on the version of this person. The name aptly represents the title of the story. Comrade Kirillov, actually is an Indian named Padmanabha Iyer, seems to be the Marxist alter ego of the novelist. In this novel there are numerous interesting discussions on Communism in the novel, which add to its value as a social document, capturing the life of Indian expatriate intellectuals between 1920 and 1950.

It is essentially an autobiographical novel that delved into the tensions between Indian and Western cultures in political terms. It is an encounter of East and West in political terms. As the narrator recognises, Kirillov is torn between the Indian tradition that remains a part of him and the newfound ideology that he has embraced. In the consciousness of the central character, Comrade Kirillov, Alias, Padmanabha Iyer's ideological conflict gets internalized. A modern educated Indian is a victim of a crisis of identity. Raja Rao loses no opportunity to satirize the divided loyalties of the Indian communists. The novel presents the conflict. The conflict is three fold: between tradition and modernity; the colonial subject and the colonizer; the Mahatma and the Marx. Raja Rao authentically presents a realistic picture of political participation of today's man. It presents a confused mind of today's political supporters. One gets confused, which political party is the best.

The narrator (I) who is no other than Raja Rao tells almost his own story, with modifications. It includes as much as possible in telling the whole truth. The narrator recounts the events of life. It also tries to find the truth that lies behind them. So instead of a straightforward narration of events in their chronological order the narrator leads us through the introspective, enters inmost thoughts and feelings, analyses of human relations, Irene's diary, quotations and tales from the Upanishads and the Vedas and discussion of political systems. There seems to be a close resemblance between the hero, Comrade Kirillov, and the novelist. Though virtually

settled in France, Raja Rao never lost contact with his motherland, and thus he escaped the fate of the typical emigrant who, severing his roots in the land of his birth, lives as a stranger in a strange land, becoming in the process a stranger to his native land. Raja Rao appears to have discovered India in the true sense only after going abroad. His stay in a foreign country, punctuated by his periodic visits to his motherland, enabled him to replenish his inner resources by vitalizing contacts with his motherland and its traditional values. This quest took him from one visiting ashrams but also participating in underground activities of the young socialist leaders. He discovered answers to all questions when in 1943 he met Sri Krishna Menon and his quest seemed to be over. Raja Rao went back to France again in 1959 after the death of the Guru. In 1965, Raja Rao's long connection with France came to an end when he accepted the invitation of the University of Texas to deliver lectures on Indian philosophy.

Comrade Kirillov and Raja Rao had many points of resemblance between their life and temperament. Comrade Kirillov is to a considerable extent a copy of Raja Rao. Comrade Kirillov has been an ardent lover and reader of books. Books had been one of the dominant passions of his life. Being an expatriate like Raja Rao, he never lost sight or recollection of India: on the other hand his love for India, its tradition, real social life and literature became all the more intense as he continued to live in foreign countries. Kirillov like Raja Rao has faith that Indians will not betray their land. The mother is bigger than politics, all economics, all castes, all philosophies, and that India is of every Indian. Like Raja Rao Comrade Kirillov is an heir to the two worlds, one, the world of his birth and parentage and the other is the world where he has passed the major part of his adult life. He has been influenced by the best in both Eastern and Western thoughts. Thus *Comrade Kirillov* is the story of an intellectual who turns Communist, suggesting that Raja Rao had close relations with the Socialist movement in Paris.

The novel covers the period of 1930s and 1940s, to Indian independence and beyond. To present a satiric picture of pre-Independence and early post-Independence Indian political scenario,

Raja Rao used the protagonist. As the narrator recognises, Kirillov is torn between the Indian tradition that remains a part of him and the newfound ideology that he has embraced. R. Rao writes:

“*Comrade Kirillov* is certainly Raja Rao’s most fascinating, if only a bafflingly erudite, novel, defying any cogent analysis or critical interpretation, perhaps a characteristic which it shares with its predecessors.”

In this novel Raja Rao employs the narrative device of the witness-narrator technique and makes references to the Theosophical movement, Gandhian Buddhism and Vedantic philosophy. But what distinguishes it from other novels is that it has two witness-narrators and not one. The first and main witness-narrator is ‘R’ (Raja Rao himself) who is a true Vedantist and a Gandhian. The second is Irene, the Czech wife of Kirillov. These two witness-narrators are complementary to each other. They help the reader to comprehend the meaning of Kirillov’s life and his ideological urging. What is extraordinary about this novel is that unlike the earlier novels it does not attempt to present any sustained mystic parallels. But some of them have been employed with a view to highlighting, modifying and expounding the salient traits of the protagonist’s mind.

As suggested earlier, in the portrayal of the theme and characters Raja Rao seems to have been influenced in this work by the Great Russian novelist, Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881). Dostoevsky’s Kirillov is an atheist. Raja Rao’s Kirillov, too, considers God as “the fiction of the lazy”. While he admits his interest in communism is common with Dostoevsky’s Kirillov, he shares with Shatov the love for his national heritage which is reflected in his recitation of Sanskrit verses from Indian classics. His deep inborn love for India is of a piece with Shatov’s fervent love for Russia. It is obvious that Rao’s Kirillov is a composite of Dostoevsky and Shatov. In one of his letters to Prof. M.K. Naik, Raja Rao has gone on record, saying:

“The use of Kirillov from Dostoevsky is to show how one is a prisoner of ideology.”

The Indian Kirillov is a clear parallel to the Russian in being something of an undetermined character. M.K. Naik rightly points out that these:

“numerous affiliations between *The Possessed* and *Comrade Kirillov* should not... make one hastily conclude that Raja Rao’s sole aim in the novel is to offer an ironical portrait of an Indian communist on the line of the exposure of Russian radicalism in Dostoevsky’s novel.”

In political terms *Comrade Kirillov* displays an encounter of East and West. ‘Repression leads to resistance and resistance to rebellion’, this communist theory gets internalized in the consciousness of the central character, Comrade Kirillov, Alias, Padmanabha Iyer. This ideological conflict is three fold: between tradition and modernity; the colonial subject and the colonizer; the Mahatma and the Marx.

The novel was published in 1966 in French under the title *Le Comrade Kirillov*, and not until 1976 the English version reached the literary circles, though Raja Rao was reported to have confessed that it was written first in English (vide *Raja Rao* by M. K. Naik, Twayne’s World Author Series, 1972). The novel was written obviously under the influence of Socialist movement in Paris. Those were the days when Raja Rao encouraged communism and had even some liaison with the French trade unionists and Trotskyists. This sets the tone and texture of the novel. There is a significant difference between the Russian and the Indian novels in terms of the treatment of themes. The Indian Kirillov sustains his faith in communism while the Russian loses his faith in Russian radicalism. The theme of *Comrade Kirillov* is indicative of the disapproval of communism as it is represented by an Indian. Kirillov’s faithfulness to communism in respect of his attachment to Theosophy and Gandhism reveals him as something of an ideological chaos. Raja Rao has skilfully employed a unique artistic technique of presenting a single personality cleft in two—Kirillov and ‘R’—by exaggerating the typical aspects of a vertical Brahmin in ‘R’ (actually Raja Rao himself) and of an ‘inverted’ one in Kirillov. Arguably, Kirillov may be an externalization of a suppressed element existing in

Raja Rao's own mental make-up. It has deeply inspired him during his stay in France to be closely associated with the Socialist movement in Paris, particularly with French trade union leaders and Trotskyites. But unlike Kirillov, Rao never turned a Marxist. Their logics belong to different dimensions, but their sentiments meet on the point of identity. Besides his innate love of Sanskrit and India, Comrade Kirillov has visited the ashram of Sri Ramana Maharshi as did Rao and thereupon retrieves the lost ground to retain the Indian moorings. Kirillov's personality is a strange mixture of conflicting elements whereas Raja Rao ('R') (a cousin to Kirillov as described in *Comrade Kirillov*) is a staunch Brahmin keeping the unmixed values and ideals of an orthodox traditionalist. In Raja Rao's personality the saintly metaphysician and the progressive liberal are not as quarrelling as they are in that of Kirillov. Rao is endowed with the perfectly balanced attitude of a highly enlightened intellectual who can arrange the things in his mind in their right places even as he imagined them in the right perspective linking them to some metaphysical truths.

Even though Kirillov's ideological commitments are not quite marked by categorical convictions, the novel remains a parody of Indian protestations of communism. A typical South Indian Brahmin: Padmanabha Iyer displays his great interest in the metaphysical tradition of India. As he points out: "P is an inverted Brahmin". This seems to be supported by Naik when he observed:

"While his intellect subscribes to Marxism, his heart obstinately continues to wear its Brahmanical sacred thread though he hates to admit the fact."

Kirillov is deeply rooted in the Brahminic culture of his land and the narrator R. is right when he points out that his Indian hood would put an end to his faith in communism. R ridicules Kirillov's communist stance because he possesses Brahminic habits and the compassion of a Catholic priest. Comrade Kirillov is an ambivalent character like Raja Rao. As he says:

"I know only one God, and that is the common man.

I know only worship and that is the Party meeting. I know only one morality and that is a classless society."

Through the diary Rao builds up a unique thematic design and uses it in a way that the two warring aspects of the hero's self are brought out into sharper relief. The communist strain in the mind of Raja Rao was too much of a strain for him to carry into a fictional fulfilment and fruition is evident from the restlessness dogged in the mind of Comrade Kirillov right till the end. Very much like Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Comrade Kirillov found himself to be homeless at home, belonging neither to this world nor to that— something of an intellectual Trishanku.

### Conclusion

After analyzing Raja Rao's novel *Comrade Kirillov* through the eyes and mind of its protagonist, it is clear that his protagonist is his mouth piece to bring out the true picture of a confused politician. Through the intermediate of the novel; Raja Rao depicted the awful dilemma of innumerable young people who were distressed and puzzled by these situations. Like Kirillov, they too were penetrating for moorings and support. The novel might also be seen as a passage of bewilderment and despair in the life of Raja Rao. After the meeting with his guru Swami Atmananda he got peace and lined the way for mental lucidity and broadening of religious vision. Raja Rao loses no opportunity to satirize the divided loyalties of the Indian communists. They are always on the horns of dilemma. Mr. Kirillov's love for India is that of an innocent child, who naturally imbibes certain habits, aptitudes from his own mother. Here is a textual quote:

Present study brings out the autobiographical elements in the novel *Comrade Kirillov*; which helps to understand the realistic picture of political participation of today's man. Various political parties are there. One gets confused which one is the best. Not only in the world but also in India we find it difficult while voting or supporting. To which political party we should vote and support the campaign is the big question before us. If we join one political party for one reason the next minute we feel to join the other. Today's political supporter

faces this question of whether to take this party's flag in hand or that one. Raja Rao ridicules the extreme postures taken by Indian communists to maintain originality of the imitated demeanour of Russian ideology. Indian communists are die-hard rationalists.

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