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**INTER-CULTURAL ENCOUNTER IN RAJA RAO'S LIFE AS WELL AS IN HIS
NOVELS WITH SPECIAL EMPHASIS ON 'KANTHAPURA' AND 'THE SERPENT
AND THE ROPE'**

Masoom Islam

Ph.D. Research Scholar

Dept. of English

L N Mithila University, Darbhanga, Bihar.

From West Bengal

Abstract: An inter-cultural encounter can be an experience between people from different countries/communities or it can be an-experience between individuals from other cultural backgrounds in the same countries. In the case of Raja Rao, his encounter to inter-cultural relationship started from his childhood or school days when he, being a BrahminHindu boy, was admitted in a Muslim public school and he was exposed to Urdu language and literature in his earlier boyhood period. As we all know that in Madrasah (a school in Arabic language), students from Muslim community tend to get admission and Islamic culture, language and identity is emphasized beside general studies of humanities, science and social sciences. So knowingly or unknowingly, Raja Rao had a chance to get familiarity with Islamic culture, customs, languages, traditions and thereby helping him to form a concept of intercultural mindset that have the very characteristics of gracefulness, respect, tolerance for other culturally and religiously different beliefs and bindings and have the

knowledge of diversity in Indian society, culture and identity.

Keywords: Inter-cultural encounter, Brahmin, Madrasah, Islamic culture, identity, diversity.

Raja Rao belongs to an ancient Hindu Brahmin family of Mysore, now part of the Karnataka state. After his birth on 8th November 1908 in Hassan (Karnataka) and after the sadly death of his mother when he was only four, he was brought up in Harihalli by his grandfather who was a Sanskrit-knowing scholar. Soon he was taken to the neighboring state of Hyderabad at his father's work-place, (now part of Telengana), where he was admitted to an elite madrasah and where he was exposed to two other Indian languages, Telegu and Urdu beside his childhood known Sanskrit language. He was reportedly the only Hindu student in the Muslim Public madrasah of Hyderabad where the only teachers to

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impress him were British as India was then under the British colonial rule. In school, the British teachers tend to give an idea of British society and culture to the students besides general syllabus' curriculum and studies. So, Rao was much impressed by the British teachers who further help him to shape his mind with a new kind of thoughts and dimensions. This further flourished in multiple frames with philosophical viewpoints and spectrums in his college days at Nizam College. So, at the very young age Rao came under the influence of the West or Western culture. In other way we can say that he was inclined to encounter to the intercultural relations from his school and college days. Later he went for higher education to Aligarh Muslim University, where one of his teachers was Eric Dickenson, a poet and a painter who taught him the appreciation of European art and philosophy which ultimately helped him to grow interests about intercultural relationship and made him see things in broader perspectives and perceptions.

It was due to his earlier so many encounters with so many intercultural activities as well as practices of the same in his daily practical livings and lifestyles that he loved to study further about peoples' history of origins and anthropology, culture and ethnicity. That is why, after graduating in English and History he went to France in 1929 for further studies and involved in research works at Montpellier and at the

University of Sorbonne in French Language and Literature as well as the influence of Indian culture in shaping reshaping to the world's culture and literature. His education and knowledge that he gained throughout his career was a perfect symphony of not only of East and West encounters or blending but also a hermeneutic understandings and practices of the North and South, of Hindu and Muslim as well as of marginalized and the privileges.

By the time, by virtue of his vast education and knowledge he was no longer prejudiced to his Brahmin conservatism culture and customs and he developed a universal citizenship mentality and fraternity by the time that he did not hesitate to propose a love offer first and then a marriage offer to a French woman Camille Mouly in 1931 from whose active inspiration and support, Rao started writing a on Indian culture and society during the British reign which ultimately took shape as an epoch making novel in the name of *Kanthapura*(1938). It is worth mentioning in this connection that with the publication of Rao's first novel *Kanthapura*, Indian English fiction writing took a sharp turn from immaturity to maturity as the already published debut novels of Mulk raj Anand's *Untouchable* and R K Narayan's *Swami and Friends* had a sensationalizing impact giving an impetus on the formation of Indian fiction writings from then onwards that these three novelists all set to constitute

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the Holy Trinity of Indian Fiction in English for the succeeding half-century. Makarand Paranjape's lines from his "Introduction" to *The Best of Raja Rao* here deserves worth mentioning:

Raja Rao is generally regarded as one of the most important Indian novelists. The reason for his pre-eminence are both historical because his first novel, *Kanthapura*, was published during the decade of the 1930s when Indian English fiction began to gain recognition...

This coming of age was heralded by the publication of Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935), R K Narayan's *Swami and Friends* (1935), and Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938).(i-ii)

Meanwhile, the marriage between Raja Rao and Camille Mouly lasted till 1939 because Rao's Brahmin Hindu family being very orthodox and conservatist, made a rebellion against the marriage from the beginning as Rao's wife Camille was a western cultured Christian woman and she was not supported or allowed by Rao's family. This event affects a lot on Rao's literary career. So far Rao had developed a mind through his several encounters and mixing with differently cultural background peoples and their cultural practices across the world which ultimately helped him to adopt a mind free from all the bondages and shackles of boundaries, borders, nations,

cultures, ethnicities and which helped to instill in him a notion that is universally affiliated and appropriated, got a challenge from his own family and that is too only for the reasons of a woman's identity and affinity with a culture different from the Indian point of view or different from the Rao's family point of view. Rao was totally shocked and misbalanced at this stark and unwanted confrontation. From this period onwards, his broad and bias less mindset was greatly disturbed.

Back to India in 1940 from France, Raja Rao spent the war years searching for a spiritual quest in ashrams and gurus who would lead him to the Truth and Salvation as well as make sooth to his perturbed mind. He visited a number of spiritual ashrams including those of Ramana Maharishi and Sri Aurobindo. In 1941, he spent some time with Gandhi at Sevagram Ashram. After strayed away directionless for some times in so many places in India, he finally found his desired 'guru' in Swami Atmanand in Thiruvananthapuram where he devoted himself totally in studying Indian Philosophy and acquiring knowledges in metaphysics as a part of his spiritual quest which subsequently has reflected in his later literary works. However, in the meantime "when E. M Forster, who had acclaimed *Kanthapura* as 'the best novel to come out of India', visited Jaipur in 1945 to attend a writers' conference and wondered why Raja Rao

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was missing, Raja Rao wrote to explain: “I have abandoned literature for good and gone over to metaphysics.” (qtd in Trivedi 10/235).

After remaining silence and inactive or in other way it can be said remaining oblivious to the then exiting scenes and scenarios as well as remaining aloof from literary cultures and creations barring his solely devotional dedicated and medicated times in studying Indian philosophy and metaphysics for almost 22 years since the publication of *Kanthapura*, Raja Rao’s gained vast knowledge’s in the meantime and seer like attitude no longer let him remained inactive or aloof from literary world and creational activities. He resumed his literary creations with a novel titled *The Serpent and the Rope* in 1960 which delineates with the theme of ignorance and reality as the title indicates. The novel also takes its shadow from Advaita Philosophy. However, the novel is autobiographical as it depicts the mismatches and misunderstandings between the Indian character Ramaswamy and his French wife Madeliene with two other Indian women playing as foils in between.

The Cat and Shakespeare (1965) is Rao’s sequel to *The Serpent and the Rope* in which Rao draws the illusions and false propositions that have finally been removed through the truth-seeking tryst. The bearing of the name Shakespeare in the title serves

as a symbol for the universal truth as same as the fame of Shakespeare irrespective of time and space. The revelation of truth and ignorance is revealed through the two main characters namely Nair and Pai respectively. The ‘cat’ metaphor is used here to simply mean the notion that just as the kitten is surrendering to its mother cat who carried the kitten by the scruff of its neck, the human being is completely at the mercy of the divine grace. Nair holds this philosophical truth and also tries to impart this teaching to his ignorant neighbour, the narrator Pai. His next novel, a comparatively minor work *Comrade Kirillov* (in French in 1965 and in English in 1976) is a character-sketch story of an Indian man namely Kirillov alias PadmanabhaIyer who leaves India for truth but after a series of events he becomes a communist and is increasingly revealed by the novelist to be caught in a system that curtails his access to truth which eventually leads him in a confused bundle of contradictions.

However, Rao’s next most ambitious and longest novel, *The Chessmaster and his Moves* came in 1988, again after a long gap of more than two decades. In between the gap, he moved to America and started teaching at the University of Texas from 1966 to 1980. Meanwhile, his works and his philosophical outputs came to get recognized through the conferment of various national-international

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awards and honors. Among them the most glaring are: the Padma-Bhushan in 1969, the Sahitya Akademi Prize in 1964, the Neustaldt prize in 1988 and many more. However, with the publication of his last novel, *The Chessmaster and his Moves*, Rao returns to the theme of multi-cultural confrontation. This work of Rao is actually a combination of three interrelated novellas that too have combined more than one hundred named characters have taken place on three different continents and also have drawn on both Eastern and Western religious philosophies which altogether “serves as occasion for a metaphysical investigation into the pilgrim road to Absolute Truth itself.” (Mambrol online).

Raja Rao’s novels serve as a metaphor of his life and interactions with the life-force from different aspects and angles occurred in time to time and in space to space that altogether feature in his novels and that too seemingly generates through his encounter to various inter-cultural activities and practical experiences gained throughout his life. However, it is due to his encounter to western culture and activities for a long period of time, he knows well that the western educated mind thinks of India as a representation of spirituality and Raja Rao too supports this outlook through his words and deeds. Therefore, he projects such a point of view in his fictions for the benefit of western readers. At the same time, he asserts the superiority of Indian

Philosophy, culture, traditions and thoughts over others, though he believes in cultural diversity and individuality for the good cause and influence irrespectively. That’s why Rao does not hesitate to draw inspiration from Indian as well as world’s philosophy and doctrines, Among the Indian works that have influenced him are the two classical epics—the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, the Buddhist text in English translation, medieval Kannada poetry, the autobiography of Mahatma Gandhi and the philosophy of Ananda Choomaraswami. Among the western influences on him, Rao himself mentions the Bible, Plato, Shakespeare, Dostoevsky, Gorky, Malraux, Kafka, Rilke and Andre Gide.

Raja Rao’s Indian background does not provide him with a model for his fiction. The literary models that he seems to follow are all European. His life long struggle to come to grips with a foreign medium and literary form inevitably chains to his European - mainly French background. The quest for identity that runs through his works is, in fact, a quest for form. This is what he writes about himself in the preface to *The Policeman and the Rose*. “A South Indian Brahmin, nineteen, spoon-fed on English, with just enough Sanskrit to know. I knew so little, with an indiscreet education in Kannada, the French literary scene over-powered me.” (xv).

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Raja Rao's mind is firmly rooted in the Hindu culture and philosophy, but he is not averse to receiving ideas from the western thinkers. His sense of nationalism does not prevent him from assessing the narrowness and limitations of some of his countrymen. Being a product of the Gandhian age, he believes in the free exchange of ideas between India and the West. For the readers it is hard to remain unaffected by the sincerity of purpose and authenticity of statement; the message comes out bright and clear in all his writings - essays, short stories and novels. Ultimately, however, as Makarand Paranjape avers:

Raja Rao is an artist, not a philosopher. It is an artist he is to be judged and understood. And as such he has been true to his callings. In terms of language, style and theme, he has been perfectly consistent fulfilling the promise he made in his *Foreword to Kanthapura*. It is this consistency, this integrity of purpose, this concern with the ultimate reality coupled with stylistic innovation and an inspired use of language that makes him one of the most significant and interesting writers of the world. (xxv).

A theme that has dominated the Indian novel in English is the contrast of cultures between East and West. Those who

have written works dealing with this theme include Raja Rao, BalachandraRajan, Kamala Markandaya and Shantha Rama Rau. While Rajan explores the theme of alienation, Shantha Rama Rau examines the conflict of attitudes and values. Kamala Markandaya, on the other hand, depicts the East-West encounter as an inevitable accident of history, and passes no judgment on it. Raja Rao's work is a class apart from that of the other novelists writing on the same theme, for his examination of the East-West dilemma is characterized by a deep sense of crisis in human relationships. In *The Serpent and the Rope* and other novels that he wrote after *Kanthapura*, he lays stress on this very aspect of the crisis. He believes that individuals are conditioned by religious and cultural diversity, and, therefore, they fail to recognize the essential oneness of the human spirit, which is the same everywhere.

At the back of his writing are a mind and vision of life that are concrete yet elusive. All his heroes are in one way or another involved with the problem of knowing God and thereby realizing themselves. To fully understand what Raja Rao says in his short stories and novels requires some knowledge of the philosophy and metaphysics of Hinduism. This guide line also applies to his two early novels- *Kanthapura* and *The Serpent and the Rope* – and later works like *The Cat and Shakespeare*, *Comrade Kirillov* and *The*

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Chessmaster and his Moves. Yet Raja Rao deliberately writes in English for a Western audience and exclusive English knowing Indian reading public. For Rao believes in giving priorities to the expressive quality of his soul and psyche in whatever languages. Another reason in choosing English as his medium is to find in a foreign language the stylistic equivalent of the Indian experience. Rao's *Foreword to Kanthapura*, thus contains significant comment on his literary style and diction. He says:

one has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought movement that looks maltreated in an alien language...English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up – like Sanskrit or Persian was before – but of our emotional make-up. We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians. We have grown to look at the large world as part of us. (v)

Now, as far as Raja Rao's writings in depicting and describing the intercultural encounter is concerned, his intercultural mentality is clearly seen in almost his every writings specially his novels. We have focused and given emphasis here onto his

first two most important novels—*Kanthapura*(1938) and *The Serpent and the Rope*(1960). His first novel that made people take note of him was *Kanthapura* which is about Gandhian satyagraha movement in a south Indian village.

When Raja Rao wrote *Kanthapura*, the intoxication of Gandhism and the national movement had shaken the Indian sensibility to its roots, and the young novelist was no less passionately moved than the others. The war of Independence required not only passionate involvement and great sacrifice but also the end of every kind of social discrimination based on caste and custom. Raja Rao could not have remained untouched by this feeling, and therefore it was through his mouthpiece, Moorthy, Rao shows here his intercultural encountering mentality when Moorthy invokes all Indian irrespective of caste, creed, colour, gender, religion to join the movement against the British rulers. Moorthy deviated from his truly Brahminic vocation and had a general conception of universal brotherhood after seeing Mahatma Gandhi in a vision. Gandhi said to him, "there is but one force in life, and that is truth, and there is but one love in life and that is the love of mankind and there is but one god in life and that is the god of all." (qtd. In *Kanthapura*).

And he adopted the Mahatma's preaching and the ultimate goal of his life without

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realizing that it went against the traditional Brahminic ideals. But Soon Moorthy loses his caste—he is excommunicated by the swami, one of the guardians of Hinduism because he works for the dumb millions of the country and eats and drinks with the untouchables. But he refuses to give up the fight for justice for the dumb millions. He runs neither after gurus nor after gods. And the common people start looking at him as a god. Paria Rachana's wife offers him milk in a tumbler and says "touch it Moorthappa, touch it as though it were offered to the gods we shall sanctified." (105) And even after the village 'Kantahpura' is destroyed "with neither a man nor a mosquito there", the Kanthapurians are undefeated in spirits; they have turned into greater man and woman; there is something that has entered their hearts, "an abundant like Himavati or Gouri's night..."

Raja Rao integrates broad Indian experiences multiculturalism and Gandhian philosophy into the destiny of the village community of 'Kanthapura'. As A. K. Rao writes in his book *The Fiction of Raja Rao*,

Kanthapur does not project the Indian spirit isolatively, but as a living experience moving in time and space. The three levels of action in the novel—political, socio-cultural and religious are all related to unified concept of India both as a tradition and as a living culture as a

magnificent past to be rediscovered in the enormous present. (49)

The Serpent and the Rope (1960) was published over a decade after Raja Rao's first novel, and during that period the novelist pre-occupation had changed. In this novel, Rao explored the meaning of his own selfhood in its encounter with experience in broad metaphysical and philosophical terms and, in the process, expounded an image of India somewhat different from that projected in *Kanthapura*. He was now more interested in the pursuit of 'Truth' through a guru and his own spiritual enlightenment, than in the life of the dumb millions, their ordeal and suffering, their dreams and inspirations. His personal as well as spiritual crisis were depicted in this novel which was actually drawn from his life experiences. His direct or indirect connection and assimilation with various castes, cultures, customs, languages and religions throughout his life across the globe and his practical knowledge and relationship drawn them helped him to generate a new kind of contrasting mentality which eventually took shape altogether in a gripped form expressing out spontaneously through his writings. Jagdish Prasad Singh rightly said in his *The Fictional World of Raja Rao* about the life-phase of Rao during this time:

A new tendency grew up in him: he became a poseur in his writings,

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both fictional and non-fictional, making statements, himself or through his characters, which made little sense, but which raised him very high in his own eyes, and also in the eyes of some other people. He started talking like a seer who had found answers to most of the complex questions concerning life. His views on these questions are expressed through his heroes and also other characters...(3)

The Serpent and the Rope is Raja Rao's most elaborately discussed novel. Its scope is almost encyclopedic and it has a touch of autobiography in it. If *Kanthapura* is Raja Rao's Ramayan, *The Serpent and the Rope* is his Mahabharata. The word 'serpent' and the 'rope' of the title are the symbols of 'illusion' and 'reality' or '*maya*' and '*brahma*' in Indian tradition. Thus, Raja Rao attempts to make a Vedanta Philosophy a subject of the novel proper.

In this novel Rao dramatized the relationship between Indian and the Western culture. The novel is a fine example of his exploration of intercultural encounter. The central character of the novel is Ramaswami who is a South Indian Brahmin and residing in France for a doctoral thesis. His is trying to connect the Albegensian Heresy with Brahmanical influences. He marries a French girl Madeline. They are blessed with a child who dies while Ramaswami is on a visit to

India. He meets Savitri and they become lovers while he is researching in London and Cambridge University. But Savitri marries a govt official. While Rama is on a second visit to India, Madeline's second child is born dead. He returns to France and finds that she has already taken up Buddhist penances for purification. His thesis completed by the time. He applies for divorce and sets out for Travancore in search of 'him' without knowing 'his' name.

Thus, the novel is a vehicle of examining Rao's complex spiritual and philosophical ideas. His complex relationship with his French wife Camille Mouly, his own Brahmin identity, his belief of Indian philosophy and its truth, his association with gurus and ashramas and finally spiritual enlightenment are revealed in the novel.

Towards the end of the novel, Raja Rao, through the mouth of the hero, Ramaswami says:

The world is either unreal or real - the 'serpent' or the 'rope'. There is no in-between the two, and all that is in-between is poetry, is sainthood. You might go on saying all the time 'no, no it's the rope', and stand on the serpent. And looking at the rope from the serpent is to see paradise, saints, gods, heroes, universes, avatars. For whomsoever you go,

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you see only with the serpent's eyes. whether you call it duality or modified duality, you invent a belvedere to heaven; you look at the rope from the posture of the serpent; you feel you are the serpent - you are the rope. But in fact, with whatever eyes you see there is no serpent, there never was a serpent - only a guru-brings you the lantern It is only the rope. He shows it to you and you touch your eyes and know there never was a serpent.(335)

The Indian novelists in English have experimented with the foreign medium that they have adopted for their literary expression. Their style and language bear the influence of the regions and cultures to which the individual writer belong and almost all of them have experienced and experimented a sort of encounter to intercultural activities and practices in their lives in home or abroad. The big three contemporary novelists i.e. Mulk Raj Anand, R K Narayan and Raja Rao have mastered on this art and proved them through their diverse writings drawn from diversities and directions of their contemporary societies. Of them K R S Iyenger writes in his *Indian Writings in English*: "Between them they comprise as it were the North and the South, extension and concentration, vigour and urbanity, vitality and artistic reticence." (331).

Among them Raja Rao is important because of his unique formal and thematic accomplishments. All his writings in some way relate with the theme of intercultural encounter through which he tends to establish a unique relationship with man to man irrespective of time and space. At the end of each novel, the main characters riches a transcendental level of experience that is universal beyond cultural barriers or boundaries.

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