

## FROM INDIANNESS TO HUMANNESS: RAJA RAO AND THE POLITICS OF TRUTH

STEFANO MERCANTI  
UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI UDINE

**Abstract** – Raja Rao is not merely a metaphysical writer, as many scholars of the first Commonwealth generation depict him as being, but rather a much more complex one whose literary dimensions transcend the commonplace essentializing ‘Hinduness’ projected by many critics over three decades. I thus suggest instead an amplification of Rao’s idea of India by framing his novels in a cross-cultural space which evolves during the course of his entire oeuvre on both philosophical and political levels. This dynamic ambivalence has its foremost predecessor in Mahatma Gandhi’s politico-spiritual legacy, *Satyagraha* (‘the force of Truth’) which becomes the centripetal and cohesive force of Raja Rao’s fiction.

**Keywords:** Indianness; partnership model; Mahatma Gandhi; Indian English literature.

Raja Rao is known to have given birth to the Indian English novel as an expression of a precise ideological re-construction of India’s racial, philosophical, cultural and linguistic specificities. His work asserted itself on the inter-national scene, and especially in a trans-national way, due to the originality of an idea of India capable of communicating with the West even through images and life styles distinctively indigenous. However, because of this extraordinary celebration of India’s native cultural distinctiveness, Raja Rao has been often ossified within the cultural construct of a universalistic Indian identity, an Indianness quintessentially and metaphysically Hindu, thus blurring the complexities and making exotic Indian geography and culture. This burden of Indianness, seen as an undifferentiated pan-Indian sensibility rigidly counteracting a supposed ‘Westernness’, and constructed on a set of generalized Oriental(ist) local colours and values, is even more pressing in Raja Rao’s fiction as he visibly meets and continues to satisfy the expectations of a traditional and timeless idea of India. In fact, whereas M.K. Naik observes that Raja Rao himself remains virtually untouched by his long sojourn in France and America (Naik 1972, p. 22), C.D. Narasimhaiah finds *Kanthapura* “India in microcosm” (Narasimhaiah 2000, p. 45). The writer was thus categorised as the religious and philosophical novelist, along with “Anand the Marxist, progressive and committed writer; Narayan the comic genius or writer pure and simple” (Narasimhaiah 1999, p. 148) readily assessed also in the West by William Walsh as “Anand the novelist as reformer, Raja Rao the novelist as metaphysical poet, and Narayan simply the novelist as novelist” (Walsh 1983, p. 6).

Conversely, my evaluation of Raja Rao’s fiction evolves from the desire to emphasise the original dialogic interaction – ‘the partnership’ – between East and West cultural traditions to better understand the philosophical, linguistic and multi-cultural complexity through which the Indian identity is woven.<sup>1</sup> His novels are deeply grounded

<sup>1</sup> Riane Eisler’s partnership model aims at building new cohesive contexts in which ‘dimensions of diversity’ are fundamental to the creation of a harmonious interwoven evolution amongst different cultures. See:

in the socio-political phases of India's history and represent a wider discursive dimension than the usual metaphysical progression abundantly singled out by the opinion of too many scholars.<sup>2</sup> By moving away from what critics often see as Rao's commonplace essentializing 'Hinduness'<sup>3</sup> along with their militant insularity of traditionalist nativism, I suggest instead an amplification of his idea of India which evolves during the course of his entire oeuvre on both philosophical and political levels.

Since the publication of his short-stories during the 1930's, subsequently collected in *The Cow of the Barricades and Other Stories* (1947), Rao appears painfully conscious of the violent alienation by certain marginalized individuals from family life and society. The fact that he gave expression to a series of Indian realities such as the possibility of a Hindu-Muslim connivance, the patriarchal domestic violence and the human degradation accorded to widowhood, women and low-caste peasants, strongly suggest a more complex nature of his brahminical conservatism. As he has once admitted:

I went to Europe thinking that I would never come back, because my country was corrupt and I was disgusted. I thought I would never come back to fall at the feet of potbellied Brahmins. At the time of a *sraddha* [religious ceremony performed in honour of dead relatives] they are very greedy. To think that my ancestors would give food to these! Whenever I had to perform the *sraddha* I used to make fun of the Brahmins. (Naik 1972, pp. 19-20)

Raja Rao's idea of India does not merely find expression in the closed circle of metaphysical detachment and unworldly ethos, but in an open one in which a penetrating socio-political insight of India is continuously interwoven upon the complexities of human nature in order to extend the horizons of the spiritual potential of all humanity. His originality lays in the way he fuses the political and the spiritual by creating a reliable bridge between the earthly sense-experience and the continual rediscovery of the purpose of living, the 'time-bound' seeking the "timeless' [...] The Ego seeking its own dissolution" as he declared in an interview (Kaushik 1983, p. 33). The two strands of politics and spirituality are so inextricably blended into the texture of his work that it would be a mistake to see them as separate for, as he wrote in *The Great Indian Way*, the universe grows with one's growth and dissolves with the ego's dissolution. The inner and the outer pilgrimages thus are one" (Rao 1998, p. 121). In fact, whereas the *yogi* tries to bring happiness by bringing a change from within 'outside history', the historically bound revolutionary and the politician try to bring change from outside, confronting mundane injustice and social welfare. The fusion of these two aspects of life, the spiritual ethics and the actual social pathway, are found together in the figure of the sage, the *karma yogin*, who is neither 'a saint nor a politician', yet the synthesis of both who assiduously translates his spiritual knowledge into the concrete discipline of moral conduct. In *The Meaning of India* Rao states: "the saint is a man who would be perfect. The politician one who would make the world wholesome, whole [...] The sage is the liberated one, a being who has transcended both, the ego and the world" (Rao 1996, pp. 60-61). In this wide perspective, the political becomes spiritual as it is directed towards resolving the pain of

Eisler 1988, 1996, 1998. For a discussion of the partnership paradigm as a literary critical model in World literatures in English see: S. Mercanti (2009, 2014) and A. Riem *et al.* (2007, 2010, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> See for instance Iyengar's classic analysis of Rao's novels: "from *karma* in *Kanthapura* to *jnana* in *The Serpent and the Rope*, and on to *bhakti-prapatti* in *The Cat and Shakespeare* (Iyengar 2001, p. 410).

<sup>3</sup> This is even more so in the numerous critical appraisals on *The Serpent and the Rope* through which the novel is stubbornly seen as projecting both a quintessential pan-Indian identity and an exclusive Hindu traditional orthodoxy.

human beings by leading them towards the Ultimate Truth. This synthesis has its foremost predecessor in *Mahatma* Gandhi's politico-spiritual legacy,<sup>4</sup> *Satyagraha* ('the force of Truth'), used, as Rao points out, "not for a political but a metaphysical change" (Rao 1996, p. 68) for the sake of all (*sarvodaya*). As Gandhi states in his autobiography:

To see the universal all-pervading Spirit of Truth face to face one must be able to love the meanest of creation as oneself. And a man who aspires after that cannot afford to keep out of any field of life. That is why my devotion to Truth has drawn me into the field of politics; and I can say without the slightest hesitation, and yet with all humility, that those who say that religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion means. (Gandhi 2002, p. 420)

Gandhi denied being a politician in the traditional sense of the word. He was, he said, a politician trying to introduce religion to politics as Gokhale, another 'saintly politician', taught him in order to find no ego (Iyer 2004: 108-10). Gandhi was deeply convinced that political power had to be understood as a 'means' for universal welfare (*lokasangraha*) which implied both a radical refusal of the idea that the ends justify the means and an inviolable faith in the spiritual and ethical potential of all humanity. Interestingly, his theology of non-violence and his search for Truth have too many significant similarities with Raja Rao's politico-spiritual penchant to be dismissed. They not only share a humanistic politico-spiritual vocabulary and a subverting resistance<sup>5</sup> to British colonialism, but they are also motivated by a staunch commitment, on the one hand, to attain self-realization (*moksha*), and on the other in scratching off the superficial veneer of 'modern civilization' matched with a nostalgic return to the ancient roots of Indian heterogeneous civilization. Their struggle between tradition and modernity is not one endorsed with unflinching confidence joyfully directed towards the Ultimate Truth, but a troubled and sacrificial one, heavily burdened by social and moral tribulations.

In *The Great Indian Way*, Rao's striving for spiritual liberation reveals his strict adherence to the same luminous principle of Truth (*sat*) diligently pursued by the *Mahatma*. He states "A fact may be confusing, never a principle. A principle is only the law behind events – it makes the concrete abstract, and thus intelligible. And from law to law is a leap that takes us straight to the truth" (Rao 1998: 46). The implications of this statement are enormous. Truth, the highest ontological reality, permeates the entire cosmos and each individual has the opportunity to view the world according to his/her uniqueness. This quest for truth is the journey for the inner essence of the human being: it is not so much to defend the truth as to incessantly discover it. It is essentially within and

<sup>4</sup> Gandhi posited "an 'alternative', not a 'counter', modernity, a belief system which was not dismissive of the emotion/mind combine, and demonstrated his modernity through flexibility of approach, openness of mind, willingness to step into other positions and foregrounding of the human" (Jain 2006, pp. 37-38).

<sup>5</sup> As P.T. Raju maintains, *Satyagraha* (*satya* – truth, *agraha* – attachment, adherence, sticking to) is the philosophy of truth in action which is misleadingly translated as passive resistance: "the original basic word has neither the meaning of 'passive' or 'non-violent' nor that of 'resistance'. Indeed, resistance and non-violence are important for Gandhi, but they are derivatives from the original idea in its application to action" (1998, pp. 222-23).

hardly elsewhere, an inner experience of the self – ‘the inner voice within’ – which ultimately merges in the Absolute: “thus you can get out of your pen your own way, as Rao says, There is no other way. Your way is the all – for you” (1998, p. 139).

With the publication of *Kanthapura*, Rao’s creative re-discovering of his roots and his true self, begins with the engaging portrayal of a pre-Independence village set during the thirties against India’s political background which fuses traditional religious faith and the intensely political truth-force of the Gandhian non-violent movement. A narration so uniquely interwoven with the factual, the mythical and the poetical vision of *Kanthapura*’s dramatic events that we are gradually pulled into a complex matrix radiating at multiple levels: the mythical experience, the spiritual transformation of the villagers and their political struggle with both the external ‘colonizer’ and the internal corruption of the village which embraces the problem of marriage, dowry, widows, caste and untouchability. Moreover, the pitiless industrialisation, particularly the Lancashire textile manufacturers which reserved the Indian market for English machine-made cloth, and the other colonial economic policies of the British empire – such as the new land revenue system, the colonial administrative and judicial systems – deeply affected India’s agrarian structure and impoverished the peasantry. The consequential poverty, famine and ever-increasing neglect of the landlords made village life particularly harsh and at times unbearable, as Raja Rao vividly shows in this passage about the migrant labourers working at the Skeffington Coffee Estate:

Armies of coolies marched past the Kenchamma Temple, half-naked, starving, spitting, weeping, vomiting, coughing, shivering, squeaking, shouting, moaning, coolies – coolies after coolies passed by the Kenchamma Temple, the maistri before them, while the children clung to their mothers’ breasts, the old men to their son’s arms, and bundles hung over shoulder and arm and arm and shoulder and head [...]. (1997, p. 48)

It is remarkable that *Kanthapura* is conceived as a sensitive ground in which political slavery, economic exploitation and social backwardness are not seen merely as perpetrated by the colonizers but also fostered by indigenous forces.

Rao’s progressive politico-spiritual vision expressed in *Kanthapura* finds a further development in *Comrade Kirillov* which becomes articulated both as an ‘affectionate criticism of Gandhism’ from a Marxist point of view and a sharp ironic critique of the blind materialism professed by Marx and other Western philosophies. Exploiting to the full the contradictions arising from Kirillov’s socialist atheism, Rao weaves a kind of expository narrative aimed at showing ‘the venoms’ of Soviet Marxism by making it coincide with the un-harmful spiritual blindness of his protagonist. The novel is also connected to those political events which took place in India during the 40’s before his return to France in 1948. Makarand Paranjape rightly argues that when Gandhi and the entire leadership of the Congress were arrested and imprisoned in 1942, six political prisoners managed to escape and continued their struggle against the British in ‘underground’ activities in which Rao was also presumably involved (Pandey *et al.* 1983, p. 71). In this unstable social and political situation, the rising of Indian nationalism and democracy witnessed the growth of two powerful left-wing groups, the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Congress Socialist Party (CSP) which acquired roots in the subcontinent on the backlash of the Russian Revolution. As Makarand Paranjape rightly points out, *Comrade Kirillov* reflects the same politics and attitudes of the CPI, thus offering not only “an ironic portrait of a conflict-ridden Indian expatriate intellectual [but] also a critique of the political fluctuations and manoeuvres of the CPI during the 1930’s and the 1940’s” (1993, p. 78). Considering that the novel was written soon after the years following Indian independence, it is highly probable that Rao has projected his anxieties

and perplexities of a world acutely shaken by wars and political struggles. Accordingly, *Comrade Kirillov* becomes to a large extent an ideological reading of those years through which Rao seeks not only to confute the solid truths of Marxism – probably embraced by him at first hand at the very beginning of his socialist underground activity – but also to re-cover those traditional Indian values that have been obscured as a result of India’s internal historical changes and ongoing westernisation. We thus have access to Rao’s ideological stance concerning specific issues and historical events which contribute in creating further multi-cultural configurations like the partition of India and Pakistan seen as ‘the Ulsterization of India’, or the Albigensians – ‘some European incarnation of the Hindu’ – which threatened the Church, “a vested interest [...] like Washington is today. So they gave chase to the Albigensians, called them heretics, hence worthy of divine extermination” (Rao 1976, p. 79). And also the theory of the *Sphota* juxtaposed with Kirillov’s Marxist readings along with Rao’s many blunt critiques on Indian politics – ‘a good masala’ – orthodox *Brahmanism*, Buddhism and Islamism. Especially the multi-cultural fantasy of Kirillov/Buddha dealing with the devilish forces of Marxism/Mara deserves the full quotation:

But, what a beautiful thing it would be if, yellow robe in hand, I stood at the bottom on the staircase, a Kanthaka under the porch [...] And there once his hair has been cut and thrown into the high air, his Bristol shoes under the cactus, his glasses let sail on the river Niranjana, Kirillov walks up to the lonely Bo-tree and sits looking at his navel. “Until *that* be found, I shall not arise”. Such should be his Indian decision. The earth trembles, and Mara himself appears in fearful fascination. “Here be the Urals for your Iron, here the Dnieper for your bounty, here the song of Marshal Stalin for your slumber, and here the Lenin institute of Agronomy for your rice fields”. “Go, go, Mara”, Kirillov would say, “I know of your doings. I know the dialectic of Feuerbach, and the State and the Revolution of Lenin. Marx has been suppressed by hagiography, and Lenin is in his tomb. Go, you many-mouthed, many-harmed, you multiple monster, Mara!”. (Rao, 1976, pp. 91-92)

If this co-existence of different world-logics constitutes the main force of Rao’s artistry, it is also true that with such an unbalanced array of the novelist’s personal world-views, the story strives to become something more than a satirical novella. Not surprisingly Janet M. Powers affirms that “the novelist has erred in not allowing enough distance between himself and the character who bears his initial” (1988, p. 616). However, despite Rao’s predominant *Vedantic* streak, Kirillov remains a convincing and unforgettable character animated by a sincerity that makes him regard his Socialist commitment as a sacrifice to the truth. In this sense the novel expressly conveys a feeling of sympathy toward Kirillov – a ‘satyadhir, the hero-of-truth’ (1976: 77) – at the same time denouncing what other converted Communists were doing during those years between the Two World Wars by sacrificing everything for their version of the truth.

*Comrade Kirillov* seems to be firmly bridged to *The Serpent and the Rope* in the passage from the thematic Marxist negation of the Absolute to its poignant acknowledgment. As Rao states: “There can be only two attitudes to life. Either you believe the world exists and so – you. Or you believe that you exist – and so the world [...] The first is the Vedantin’s position – the second is the Marxist’s – and they are irreconcilable” (1995, p. 333). *The Serpent and the Rope* particularly reflects the very difficult time Rao experienced during one of the most unsettled periods of world history, ravaged by conflicts and imperialist changes. Parallel to those political and social transformations, he felt the urge to discover a deeper meaning to existence to the extent that he wished for a while to seclude himself in an *ashram* in his favourite city, Benares, and become a *sannyasin*. Yet, during World War II, he decided to travel a great deal in the

subcontinent, “discovering India with passion and devotion, almost as a pilgrim” (1979, pp. 48-49). In the same manner, the central character of the novel, Ramaswamy, in his individual self-discovery is projected on an historical plane of a larger time scale which embraces the British Raj, the Spanish Empire in fascist Spain, the Avignon Popes, Muslim separatists, the Cathars and the Albigenian history, up until the contemporary status of modern Indian politics as seen clearly operating for instance in such a statement:

The Brahmins sold India through the backdoor – remember Devagiri – and the Muslims came through the front. Purnayya sold the secrets of Tippu Sultan and the British entered through the main gateway of Seringapatam. Truth that is without courage can only be the virtue of slave or widow. Non-violence said Gandhi, is active, heroic. We must always conquer some land, some country. Ignorance, pusillanimity, ostrich-virtue is the land we shall liberate. That is true swaraj. The means is Satyagraha. Come. (Rao 1995, pp. 350-51)

Soon after having met his Guru in Travancore, Rao’s subsequent novels, *The Cat and Shakespeare* and *The Chessmaster and His Moves*, are characterized by a consciousness poignantly steeped in the experience of the Absolute, a state of serenity in which the shadow of the egoistic self is dissolved. Again, parallel to this profound spiritual realisation achieved by Rao within the incongruous and tormented contemporary world, we observe in *The Cat and Shakespeare* the sharp denouncement of India’s increasing level of exploitation and corruption which followed the years of Nehru’s prime ministership seen through the lenses of a small South Indian Ration Office. In this novella, on both a realistic and metaphysical level, ‘life is a ration shop’ and the corrupt Rationing Office becomes the pivot around which the fraudulent practices affect the lives of all the characters: “Two rupees a ration card is the official black-market price, if you want to know. If you have children you can have ten cards. To have ten children is permitted by law. And the doctors have no objections. So we have ten children. Look how well fed they look. My wife has a ruby earring. Look, look at her” (Rao 1992, p. 42). Rao also imparts on the story a metaphysical dimension which gradually becomes supernatural, almost magical, as the novella unfolds, bestowing a higher philosophical and religious significance upon mundane human baseness. All the realism and metaphysical arguments eventually converge toward an understanding of the ways in which the Ultimate Reality of life (*Prakṛti*, the ways of the Mother Cat) works: “Happiness is so simple. You just have to know footpaths. I ask you, does the water ever change?” (Rao 1992, p. 15). By going beyond both the gross back-ground perceived by the sense-organs and the subtle forms of the mind, the protagonist, Ramakrishna, at the end of the story intuits the substratum which underlies the duality of existence.

In *The Chessmaster and His Moves*, Rao ventures further to include Europeans, Africans and Jews along with Indians in his cast of characters. These are all seen to progress through a great diversity of discussions on topics ranging from the ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman empires to Marx, Gandhi, the Nazi Holocaust – discussed particularly as an exploration of reasons for its occurrence and a powerful attempt to expiate it – the Algerian revolution, De Gaulle’s France, Nehru’s India, Communist China and the materialistic American civilization. Interestingly, we have glimpses of an India animated by strong under-currents (communal, caste, social, political and economic) mainly reassumed under the figure of Nehru, like in this passage:

Whoever said in India we have no decent bureaucracy. Of course we have. Only the new bureaucrats functioned according to other rules. Under the British you followed (mostly) the rule of the law. Under Nehru the clerks increasingly practised the rule of the rupee. Dharma was not a question of metaphysics – it’s a question of how much ‘you can grease the bureaucratic machine. (Rao 2001, p. 122)

There are many other references to Nehru's India which pinpoint the disappointment of many people by the failure to re-establish, as Gandhi wished, Indian cultural and social traditions and to get rid of Western cultural models:

Politics therefore revealed Gandhi's truth and Nehru's socialist dreams. You cannot have it both ways. Either you accept the world, and build a human empire, accepting death and, therefore the pyramids [...] or you transcend the world and as such death itself, and find the Truth of Shankara's 'Sivoham, Sivoham.' [...] and there is no half-way house to it. But we lived in Nehru's half-way house, and saw hope and despair everywhere. (2001, p. 145)

Soon after independence, although Nehru was the new hero of the masses, he remained aloof from them mentally as he maintained and indeed cultivated an attraction for the political and economical examples of the modern West, an English man in Indian skin:

[...] Nehru had become their Prince of Wales (or so it seemed) – and with him in their cabinet, as it were, the empire continued, like the buses in London, rich in colour, heavy in weight, going to Kilburn or to Putney Bridge with absolute self-knowledge. (2001, p. 166)

Whereas Gandhi turned to religious traditions to make himself 'truly' Indian, Nehru discovered India and himself through the medium of history, hence the idea of India as a palimpsest having a layered past and 'the national planning' both accommodating all the significant internal diversity of the subcontinent within the inherited "form of the new nation state" (Chatterjee 2001, p. 202). As Partha Chatterjee aptly points out, it was the very institution of a process of planning which became "a means for the determination of priorities on behalf of the 'nation'. The debate on the need for industrialisation, it might be said, was politically resolved by successfully constituting planning as a domain outside 'the squabbles and conflicts of politics'" (ibid., p. 202). Rao's political awareness of India is even further enriched by parallels and connections with the world history. The examples of his multi-cultural connections with different contemporary civilizations are so numerous that for reasons of time I shall just quote the following significant one: "De Gaulle wanted to set history back behind time, Chartres behind the Elysées. Gandhi wanted the British to remain a thousand years, were Truth hurt even once by Indian freedom. Chiang Kai-Shek wanted to rule China, that the world be China. Gandhi preferred to die that Truth be" (Rao 2001, p. 45).

As we have observed, the meditative quality of Rao's fiction unfolds itself in its deeper concerns for human beings spiritual existence and sets his characters on both political and spiritual planes in order to progress towards the Absolute: "unless you grow you cannot give. And growth needs search. And search fearlessness. And all search is inward – the outer leads one to repetition" (2001, p. 110). Just as the force of spiritual light dispels violence and becomes the stimulus for social reform, in literature, the very act of marrying political events to spiritual ideas does not only embellish and structure the setting, action and characters of the story, but also succeeds in Rao's works in getting away from a unique racial (nationalist) frame by developing an all-encompassing frame of humanism, as Gandhi did, capable of accommodating a dynamic tapestry of cultural traditions. The development of his fiction over six decades cannot be fully understood except in its interdependence with the socio-political and spiritual dimensions which he personally lived, and experienced through a series of cultural traditions and values both Western and Eastern, exemplarily connected through bridges "not of stone or girders, for that would prove the permanence of the objective, but like the rope bridges in the Himalayas, you build temporary suspensions over green and gurgling space" (Rao 1995, p. 302).

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