

Narrative Voice and Linguistic Identity in the Fiction of Raja Rao

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Abstract

The fiction of Raja Rao occupies a distinctive and influential position in the landscape of Indian English literature, particularly for its innovative narrative voice and its profound engagement with linguistic identity. Writing at a time when Indian writers were negotiating the tensions between colonial inheritance and indigenous expression, Raja Rao consciously redefined the possibilities of the English language as a medium for articulating Indian thought, culture, and sensibility. His works, most notably *Kanchipuram*, *The Serpent and the Rope*, and *The Cat and Shakespeare*, exemplify a unique synthesis of oral tradition, philosophical depth, and linguistic experimentation. Central to Raja Rao's narrative art is his deliberate reshaping of English to suit the rhythms and idioms of Indian speech. Rather than adhering to conventional British literary norms, he indigenizes the language by incorporating vernacular expressions, mythic structures, and oral storytelling techniques. This stylistic choice not only challenges linguistic hierarchies but also asserts a distinct cultural identity. His narrative voice often mirrors the cadence of traditional Indian *katha* (storytelling), creating a sense of intimacy and immediacy that bridges the gap between the written and the spoken word.

Moreover, Raja Rao's fiction reflects a deeper philosophical inquiry into identity, selfhood, and cultural belonging. His linguistic strategies are inseparable from his exploration of metaphysical themes rooted in Indian traditions, particularly Vedantic thought. The narrative voice, therefore, becomes a vehicle for both cultural expression and philosophical reflection, embodying the complexities of a postcolonial consciousness. By blending English with Indian sensibilities, Raja Rao not only reclaims the language but also transforms it into a tool for representing the plurality of Indian experience.

Key words: Narrative Voice, Cultural Identity, Storytelling Technique, Stream of Consciousness, Indian Sensibility, Tradition and Modernity.

Introduction

Besides Mulk Raj Anand and R. K. Narayan, Raja Rao is one of the most significant writers of modern India who laid the foundation of the Indian novel in English in the pre-independence period. His personality as well as his works have received high praises all around the world. He is not a prolific writer of Indo-Anglian literature but his writing is full of profound ideas. In his death, in the recent past, India has lost a genius whose place can never be filled in by any other one.

Major Indian contemporary English novelists of the period are convinced that they write 'Indian English', which reflects the Indian character and that their English has the same status on other forms of world English, such as American and Australian English. Raja Rao says: -

"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. Our method of expression has to be a dialect which will someday prove to be as distinctive and colourful as the Irish or the American. The tempo of Indian life must be infused into our English expression, even as the tempo of American or Irish life has gone into the making of theirs".¹

This paper seeks to examine how narrative voice and linguistic identity intersect in Raja Rao's fiction, highlighting the ways in which his stylistic innovations contribute to the formation of a uniquely Indian English literary tradition. Through a close analysis of his major works, the study aims to demonstrate that Raja Rao's narrative technique is not merely aesthetic but deeply ideological, serving as a powerful medium for articulating cultural autonomy and intellectual self-definition.

Indian Sensibility and distinctive Style

Raja Rao mainly focused on a clash of sensibilities and life style in modern India. His achievements to some extent are different from other. According to Hemenway: "Raja Rao is Simultaneously the most original, fervent, frank, flowed, personal, universal, mythic, descriptive, verbose, philosophical, controversial and difficult novelist of India, British or India. He challenges the very range, substance and methodology of the traditional novel"².

The Western critics show a surprisingly uncertain attitude towards the novels of Raja Rao because of its "Indian Sensibility". **William Walse writes**, "*As readers of the Indian novel we in this country (Britain) have our deficiencies. It is hard for us to take up the references to the Indian scene, the agricultural tradition, the vast distance, the terrible poverty, the profoundly significant religion*" 3

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Raja Rao is the pride of India, though he is better known and appreciated abroad than in his own country. His root is firmly fixed in India, not only emotional but also spiritual. Raja Rao's themes cover too wide a canvas and enfold such a vast variety of affirmations, politics, history, philosophy, religion and metaphysics that an attempt to trace his sources may not always meet with success. Raja Rao himself has said that since the 'unconscious' 'subconscious' and the 'superconscious' all go to 'make a writer good', it is 'very difficult to name any one'.⁴

Raja Rao belongs to a very old orthodox South Indian Brahmin family. He was born on 5th November, 1908, in the village of Hassan in Mysore. His father was a professor of Canaries in Hyderabad. The family consisted of scholars and philosophers. Among his ancestors was Vidyavanya Swamy who was perhaps the greatest teacher of Advaita philosophy after Shankaracharya. Raja Rao in his autobiographical 'preface' to his collection of short stories *The Policeman of the Rose*, reveals his spiritual genealogy and speaks of his family as one which can 'boast of having been Vedanta's at least since the thirteenth century'. His own grandfather was a 'Convinced Vedantin'. He learnt Hindu religion and philosophy from his grandfather at an early age of five.

Raja Rao's all piece of art shows its root deeper into Indian culture and contain vivid pictures of Indian rural households, customs and mythology of Hindu Puranas. He is poetic and metaphysical, sensitive to the day-to-day common problems. He is, however, not at all politically committed but is a metaphysical man. Raja Rao's work is totally a typical and has a definite edge which deals with the east-west encounter. This theme acquires the quality of a metaphysical and dialectic tested and formulated by a deepening sense of crisis in human relationship. Raja Rao's writings gained high popularity and praise among the western people and critics. **Meenakshi Mukherjee** holds the opinion that "*Raja Rao cannot properly be evaluated by western criteria, since he has created a new literary genre based on a concept of reality different from that of the India-Christian tradition*".⁵

Before undertaking a study of Raja Rao's work, it would be prudent to keep in mind what he himself has to say about them: "All writers write only autobiography Certain aspects of my life are emphasized in each book, so they are a fairly accurate statement of my life, though not so far as facts are concerned"⁶. He has clarified the matter further: "I can say that all write is for myself. If I were to live in a forest, I would still go on writing. I don't know myself. I don't invent, I am interested in precision"⁷

His four novels and three short stories collection up to date are: (1) Kanthapura (1938), (2) The Serpent and The rope (1960), (3) The Cat and Shakespeare (1965), (4) Comrade Kirlov (1976), (5) The Cow of The Barricades (1947), (6) The Policeman and The Rose (1978), (7) On the Ganga Ghat.

Man is the style himself endowed with one tongue and two hands, and has proved as best creative creature in the universe. He can think and perform anything freely coping with the systems and traditions deep rooted in the society and culture. In particular, every man or woman is different from other men and women. This individual difference can be attested in all walks of life among members of the same family, students of the same teachers or speakers of the same language and they undoubtedly share the general characteristic but while performing or behaving they differ from other in certain amount.

Style has been defined in different ways by critics and linguists. In **Swift's opinion** "*proper words in proper places make the true definition of style.*" **A critic thinks** that "*Style is both form and content. It is the combination of artistic method, theme and idea in all their uniqueness, and united and determined by artist's world view and the social realities of his age*". Sometime the linguistic propose are of linguistic modes for defining the nature of style in literature. Sometimes context is taken into consideration while defining style. But other thinkers pay more attention to the individual's art and craft. In **Murray's view** "*Style is the writer's individual way of seeing things*". It is individual's way of feeling and seeing things that shape the use of language. In **Enkuist and Gregory's opinion**, "*Style is a link between context and linguistic form*".

Russian Formalism

Formalism developed in Russia during 1915-30. The linguists Shklovsky, Ejxcubaum Tynyanov, Boris Tomasvskiy, Vinokar, Jefferson, Jakunskiy and other contributed to its development. Russian Formalism gives importance to form and content becomes important in its way of presentation. For them, "literature is nothing but form and content is merely an effect of form".⁸ Literature makes use of language that is different from the ordinary language. The readers know such usages as clicks, stock responses and automatized perceptions. Such ordinary language is changed by introducing defamiliarized elements into the language of literature.

Structuralism

Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of signs exerted tremendous influence on the Linguistic circle of Prague. The members of this circle reshaped the formalist approach and developed structural stylistics. The members of this group were renowned linguists and literary critics such as Roman Jakobson, Jan Mukarovsky and Rene Wellek who paid attention to the properties of language used in literature. Their argument was that language may be studied in cultural terms so that the formal features of utterances may be analysed for understanding their operation in the creative work.

Literary Structuralism

The origin of literary structuralism goes to Vladimir Propp (1928) whose *Morphology of Russian Folk Tales* became very popular. After studying Russian folk tales, he identified 'seven spares of actions and thirty-one fixed functions'. He also identified hero, opponent or rival, villain, helper, king, princess and other characters and actions such as the arrival or departure of the hero, the revelation of the villain, series of adventures and return or reward of the hero following this model. Tzvetan Todorov (1960) made a grammatical analysis of Boccaccio's *Decameron*. He analysed characters as nouns, their attributes as adjectives and actions as verbs.

Functional Structuralism

The linguistics belonging to 'The Prague School' focused on 'function' rather than 'form of language'. Jan Mukarovsky and Jakobson contributed more to the development of this approach. The linguistics went beyond Saussure's concept of 'sign' and 'structure'.

The British Approach

The British linguist M. A. K. Halliday has added different perspectives to stylistics. He proposed statistical and descriptive mode of analysis of a text. His concepts of functions of language as presented in 'Linguistic Function and Literary Style' influenced approaches to Style studies. He has discussed the functions of language 'ideational', 'interpersonal' and textual elaborately and also discussed literary devices used in a work of art.

G. N. Leech brings together linguistic description and literary interpretation and establishes close relationship between them for creation of meaning. He points out three dimensions of meaning viz 'cohesion', 'foregrounding' and 'cohesion of foregrounding' these are achieved by the lexical and grammatical devices operative in a text.

The Generative Approach

American Structuralist Noam Chomsky introduced new concept in 1960s and influenced linguistic approaches to the study of language and literature. In 'Stylistic Structures' (1957) he proposed 'Transformational Generative Grammar' (TG). He proposed mentalistic theory against behaviorism in psychology. His concept of competence and performance became guideline for further research.

The Pragmatic Approach

Communication takes place through verbal utterances. These verbal utterances become meaningful through the investment of speaker, listener, context, goal and speech situation. J. L. Austin has introduced 'Speech act theory' in 'How to Do Things with Words' (1962). In his view there are three acts a speaker performs: a locutionary act, an illocutionary act and a perlocutionary act. Austin has pointed out the difference between constative and performative that is 'saying' and 'doing' respectively. For example, statement and description are 'saying' and promises, orders, suggestion, warning etc. are acts. Searle and other pragmatists accepted Austin's speech act theory but suggested some modifications. Searle is of the opinion that a speaker performs different acts when he utters sentences for example, declarations, asking, requesting, commanding, promising, etc. Grice has modified the pragmatic theory further with conversational principles:

Semiotic Approach

Semiotics is the study of signs, their meanings and signification: This approach has been enriched by Saussure and Pierce. Saussure considers language as a system of signs and a sign as a composition of signifier and signified. The relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary and conventional. His other concepts such as language and parole, synchronic and diachronic and paradigmatic and syntagmatic also helped to develop literary semiotics.

Reader Response Theory

For a long time, author-work relationship was considered more important and an analysis of the text. Formalistic approach and new criticism concentrated on text. As a reaction to these theories a new approach called reader-response arrived on the horizon. The role of the reader was ignored and not accounted for in the analysis of a work of art. Ilayne Booth in 'Rhetoric of Fiction' and I.A. Richards provided basic understanding for the role of the reader to be taken for interpretation.

In 'The Death of the Author' Roland Barthes proposed the role of the reader at the centre. This concept was further fortified by the phenomenologists. Wolfgang Iser advocated strongly for perceiver's or reader role in the interpretation of a verbal artifact. Hans Robert Jauss developed the reception theory. Holland values the readers and their psychology and regards the text as most important. Stanley Fish is surprised by Searle asks the readers to negotiate meaning of the text. Is there a text in this class? He modified his views expressed earlier. He argues, "our perceptions of the stylistic character of literature are due to as much to our acquired grammar of interpretation as they are to features that are empirically present within texts"⁹

Monist, Dualist and Pluralist Approaches

Taking into consideration 'form and meaning' relationship these monists, the dualist and the pluralist view are expressed. While discussing poetry it is said that form and content are fused together and they cannot be separated. Archibald Mackintosh observed that 'A poem should not mean but be'. The dualism approach considers that form and

content are different. Richard Ohman (1970) considers style as 'a way of writing' and excludes content from consideration. As compared with these two, the plurist concept is more significant. It is pointed out by Leech and Short that "any piece of language is likely to be the result of choices made on different functional levels." 10

In the conclusion, it can safely be said that style is a phenomenon differing from person to person, place to place, time to time, genre to genre and language to language. It is that specific or unique quality which cannot be shared and limited by others, because 'style' is the sum total of all specific features vested in the work of art. It is that creative individuality which spreads over all that a person does. Just as personality cannot be precisely defined or analyzed, likewise, 'Style' also cannot be precisely defined or analyzed. It can be just realized or experienced and creative literature as such is sharing of experience both by the author and by the reader by way of different techniques – symbolism, imagery, fantasy, etc. all writhed in common code known as language. In brief, it is very difficult to delineate all types of styles and ultimately it is wise to say that style is not a static entity rather it is a dynamic one, which goes on changing according to the need of situation. Not only this but also it takes its shape in different readers as the impression or effect on them. The same mark read by the same person at different times implants differently and therefore the dynamism of style is there.

It is obvious that the main purpose of stylistics is to highlight those features that make a discourse distinct and impressive and in doing so the critic or the stylistician is nobody to separate the quality (known as 'style') from rest of the creative work, since style is the impression on the reader of the viewer drawn from the work as a whole. **H.G. Widdowson**, therefore, has a broad opinion on this matter. He writes, "by stylistics I mean the study of literary discourse from a linguistics orientation and I shall take the view that what distinguishes stylistics from literary criticism on the one hand and linguistic on the other is that it is essentially a means of linking the two and has (as yet at least) no autonomous domain of its own." 11

The same scholar is of the view that "impressionism, those responsible for many a shortcoming in criticism, cannot be totally eliminated, we can only make it a controlled and verifiable activity by means of an approach to literature, and alone this can help us. Language in Literature is a special use, related to the total product – a literary work – in a way as to be responsible for realization of a particular configuration of aesthetic qualities that a work of art symbolizes in itself. Stylistics investigates patterns of correlations between linguistics and literary categories in all their aspects. 12

In the present style important aspects of most of the approaches discussed here are brought together to develop a holistic approach and adopted during the objective analysis of Raja Rao's novels.

Major Themes

Raja Rao is not a prolific writer like Mulk Raj Anand and R.K. Narayana but he has delineated many themes in his novels. These themes are universal in application and local also for they represent the Indian society and culture and its traditional people **Srinivas Iyengar**, in his often-quoted passage, observes: "All Raja Rao's writing is a part of *Sadhna* or spiritual experience, and so *Kanthapura*, 'The Serpent and the Rope' and 'The Cat and Shakespeare' should be viewed as steps or paths towards realization. If *Kanthapura* can be described as *Purana*, as *Gandhi Purana*, and *The Serpent and The Rope* as an epic, a *Mini-Mahabharat* in the idiom of our age, then *The Cat and Shakespeare* is more like one of the longer *Upnishads*, part narrative, part speculative and part dialogue or discussion".

The selection and development of major thematic concerns, philosophy of life and religion and selection of form of the novel as a suitable means for him is based on his explicit concepts: It is through 'Sadhana' that Raja Rao try to accomplish the ultimate reality in his life. He writes "Sadhana means to try to be in contact with the ultimate reality. It has been my endeavour all my life to be face to face with ultimate." 13

Raja Rao's first novel 'Kanthapura' is a fusion of poetry and politics, religion and social reforms. It is the story of the Independence movement led by Gandhiji and its impact on the people in a remote village of South India. Though the traditional Indian practice of storytelling, the story of freedom movement is told by a grandmother, who herself had participated in this political movement. Her presence makes the story very lively. Apart from this national movement, various other aspects are also discussed.

In 'Kanthapura', Raja Rao has created a mythical but living microcosm of rural India, newly awakened by the Gandhian impact, concretised in terms of the story of the Gandhiman, Moorthy. The village comes under the impact of Gandhian ideas of social change of moral regeneration and of political liberation, through Moorthy, who is loved by all except a few reactionary elements of religious orthodoxy. However, Gandhian thoughts and his ideas take roots slowly in the minds of vast majority of the people of the village who interpret and understand them in the light of their traditional wisdom, derived from the ancient Scriptures and traditions

The title 'The Serpent and the Rope' is very apt and accurate as it gives a clear idea of the theme or themes developed in the novel. The theme of the novel is antithesis between Appearance and Reality. Here the 'Serpent' is the symbol of appearance or illusion or *sansar*, while 'Rope' is the symbol of Reality or truth or absolute. The novel is an evidence of Raja Rao's maturity and pioneering work in the realm of Indian English fiction. Both the novels 'Kanthapura' and 'The Serpent and The Rope' reflect the novelist's great learning in the realm of philosophy, religion and mythology. "Indian's quest for truth in his encounter with the spatio-temporal reality, growing into an acute crisis of identity because the hero, an orthodox Brahman who claims to belong to a timeless ethos, is found however immersed in the modern Western cultures dominated by historicity.

The 'The Serpent and The Rope' has been followed by a novel of slender size *The Cat and Shakespeare*, Raja Rao wrote to a correspondent, 'I wanted to publish the book with about 300 blank pages at the end, to show that the real book is of five hundred and odd pages, and the reader must fill in the vacant spaces.' 14 Here is the role for the

reader, the reader a collaborator! According to the publisher's blurb'. He considers '*The Cat and Shakespeare*' to be a metaphysical comedy, in the Christian sense, the term "comedy" implies the formulation of salvation.

'*The Cat and Shakespeare*' (1945) initially appeared as *The Cat* in the *Chelsea Review* of New York in 1959. The word 'Shakespeare' was added to the title later on after a second thought and was enlarged and published on its present form in 1965. Rao perhaps wanted to make it more metaphysical. Raja Rao accepted the word 'Shakespeare' because of the fact 'Shakespeare is a sage'. Only someone who knows not only the play Hamlet but also Shakespeare as a thinker will be able to get beyond the drab details of this discussion. Perhaps Govindan Nair's sense of humour, his detached interests in everything, his non-chalant excursions and incursion into legends and literature all these support the addition of the word 'Shakespeare'. Many explanations have been offered to make the concept clear. It is enough, perhaps, to say that a Shakespearian ambience interpenetrates the very profundity of the novel.

Conclusion:

A critical evaluation of Raja Rao's fiction reveals that while his thematic concerns are philosophically profound and rooted in Indian spiritual traditions, they often challenge conventional narrative expectations. Unlike the social realism of Mulk Raj Anand or the simplicity of R. K. Narayan, Rao's works tend to privilege metaphysical exploration over plot and character development. This can make his novels intellectually demanding and less accessible to general readers. However, it is precisely this complexity his blending of myth, philosophy, and narrative experimentation that secures his distinctive place in Indian English literature. His fiction, therefore, must be appreciated not merely as storytelling but as a form of spiritual and philosophical discourse

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The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper

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