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Reflection of Buddhist Philosophy in Raja Rao's *The Chessmaster and His*

Moves

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Abstract

Raja Rao, one of the most prominent and prolific writers among the trio of Indian Writing in English, explores the Indian spirit and thought in his novels. *The Chessmaster and His Moves* appears in the year 1988 and in the same year it was awarded the Neustadt International Prize for Literature by University of Oklahoma U.S.A. The novel is an exploration of the differences between the European and the Indian mind, the Indian and European attitudes to love. The novel is very rich not only in language and plot, but also in complexity. The reference of the Buddhist philosophy gets reflected right from the beginning of the novel. The present paper exposes the Buddhist philosophy reflected in *The Chessmaster and His Moves*.

Key Words

Philosophy, Spiritual, Absolute, Advaita, Buddhism, Metaphysical, Universal, Indianness

Main Article

Raja Rao, one of the most prominent and prolific writers among the trio of Indian Writing in English, deeply rooted in Indian culture, tradition and philosophy, explores the Indian spirit and thought in his novels. He has received several of India's highest honours: the Padma Bhushan, in 1969; a fellowship in the Sahitya Akademi, India's national academy of letters, in 1997; and the Padma Vibhushan, awarded posthumously in 2007. *The Chessmaster and His Moves* appears in the year 1988 and in the same year it was awarded the Neustadt International Prize for Literature by University of Oklahoma U.S.A. The book is a trilogy which contains 708 pages accompanied by 25 pages of Translations and Glossary. The novel is consisted of three parts namely The Turk and the Tiger Hunt, The Goblets of Shiraz, and The Brahmin and the Rabbi. The novel is an exploration of the differences between the European and the Indian mind, the Indian and European attitudes to love. The novel is very rich not only in language and plot, but also in complexity. It offers a large cast of characters; Indian, European, African and Jewish. Kaushal Sharma observes "The novelist deals very deftly with the serious thoughts on politics, history, religion, love, death, God, and non-duality". (pp. 88)

The novel also offers the broadest idea of internationalism and tells us not to confine ourselves within the narrow concept of Nationalism. Therefore, the present novel is an attempt to reveal the viability of a world view. Besides myth and metaphysics, the novel discloses philosophy. The major philosophical sources are the absolute monism of Sri Ramana Maharishi and the Sunyavada of the Buddhist philosopher,



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Nagarjuna. However, the present novel does not merely remain a piece of exploration into social reality. It becomes a medium like all other novels of Raja Rao to communicate something beyond and above routine existence. The present novel blends story with philosophy and religion and narrative is saturated with Sanskrit verses and sayings of Upanishada. The novel also makes use of devices such as letters and diary entries.

The title of the novel is symbolic. The chessmaster is an emblem of God, the creator and the game of chess is symbolic of the world, the *Sansar*. The moves made by the chessmaster are symbolic of the conduct of the drama of life (Lila). It is well-known fact that moves in the game of the chess cannot be predicted. Likewise, the ways of the chessmaster, the God is mysterious and inscrutable. It is beyond the rational understanding of man. Raja Rao's Vedantic concern, especially in the novel, has many major sources. He turns to the philosophy of Non duality as an answer to the problems of human suffering. The love relationship between Sivaram and Jaylakshmi which is the cause of his despair or *dukkha* and mental conflict helps Sivaram to take a voyage of self-discovery and to search the real meaning of the life. Actually this quest for Truth is of Raja Rao which leads him to approach his Guru Atmananda who enters into his life and destroys his ignorance and shows him right path that is "to know thy self", except you everything in the world is maya, an illusion. Sivaram, a profound young intellectual, recounts the sad and uneven chronicle of his life. The novel is called *Mahapurana*.

The philosophy of Advaita Vedanta as propounded by Sri Sankaracarya and Sri Ramana Maharishi becomes one of the sources, which is reflected throughout the novel. R. Subramony, in his article, remarks "Brahman is the only truth, the world is unreal, and there is ultimately no difference between Brahman and individual self." Raja Rao has gathered the philosophical practice of Sankara and Sri Ramana Maharishi from the philosophy of his Guru Shri Atmananda. The novel has an epigraph "I am the light in the perception of the world". This epigraph is very symbolic of the philosophy of Sankara. The protagonist, Sivaram's belief in Advaita Vedanta leads him to consider the non-dual form of Brahma.

The novel becomes a mode of Raja Rao's expression. It is very clear why he calls a literature *Sadhna*. Hence, the components of the novel such as characters, situations, incidents, and interrelationship become his experiment with the Truth. More specifically, it is a tradition of wisdom exemplified in the Vedas and Vedanta, which was later systematized and popularized by the great Sankara and into which Raja Rao was initiated by his Guru, Sri Atmananda. The purpose is to show that nothing else, no one else but the Guru, can remove the *dukkha* or sorrow that seems to permeate throughout human life. In addition to the



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vedant philosophy, the novel also explores the aspects of buddhist philosophy, especially the Sunyavada of the buddhist philosopher, Nagarjuna.

Raja Rao is deeply influenced by Buddha's philosophy. The Buddhist philosophy is also reflected in Raja Rao's second and most popular novel, *The Serpent and the Rope*. Raja Rao seems to have a wide knowledge of myth, culture and philosophy of the world. Therefore, the reader finds difficulty in reading of his novels. In order to express complex ideas, he has mentioned Sanskrit texts and has tried to translate them into English. As A. Kala has observes,

Raja Rao, being intent in his search for Truth has read widely and brings in a lot of analogies from different fields- from myths, history, mathematics and so on. There are a number of Hindu, Buddhist and European mythical analogies like the Satyavan-Savitri myth and the Radha-Krishna myth and the renunciation of The Buddha that recur in his novels. (pp. 185)

The reference of the Buddhist philosophy gets reflected right from the beginning of the novel. The protagonist, Sivaram utters words addressing Jayalakshmi... "I need you now, you know what I mean. I do not truly need you. Yet I need you. Would you therefore come? Would you return as parrot, betel vine or bodhisattva" (Rao, *The Chess* 3). Siva uses the word "bodhisattva" who once incarnated on the earth as the Buddha. Bodhisattva was born in the Tusita Heaven, where he was known as Santusita. He was conceived in the womb of Mahamaya, the wife of Suddhodana. He appears in her dream like a moonlight cloud, coming from the north, holding a lotus in his hand, as some say, in the form of a white elephant. Santusita, the bodhisattva disappears from the heaven and enters the womb of Mahamaya, she gives birth to that child who becomes the Supreme Buddha. Thus, the Buddha was the incarnation of bodhisattva. According to Oxford Dictionary, the word "bodhisattva" is originated from Sanskrit which means a person whose essence is perfect knowledge. Therefore Siva, expecting Jayalakshmi to come through the way bodhisattva had come, uses the word bodhisattva.

All objects of the world have their names. Each person has a name. Sivaram being of the same mind, when he was asked by a fellow at the Institute in Paris, where he was working, what are you called? Responding to that fellow he replied: "I don't know". Further he states: "But to be nameless is to be so true. Zero should really be one's name. The Buddha, had he not said? There is nothing behind one. So sunya is my name. Zero my name" (Rao, *The Chess* 8). According to Nagarjuna's theory of the Void, Sunya is constant, eternal, unchangeable and indestructible. So Siva's intention is to convey that the *Sunyata*, the Void, in the truest sense, is the Ultimate reality and that what he is looking for. Void has been used as a



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synonym for zero at various places. As in *A Companion to Buddhist Philosophy*, Perry assert,

“If religion is necessarily connected with the idea of Ultimate Reality, in a profoundly intimate way, “ then Buddhism certainly does not qualify as a religion, since it eschews such a concept. The closest runner would be the concept of emptiness (sunyata), which is itself empty and thus ultimately not Ultimate at all.” (pp. 661).

Sivaram is very powerful conversationalist. Thoughts are always ready in his mind to come out as if they rest on his lips. While interacting with Madame X, Suzanne and Mireille, he points out that the “Zero” is “Nirvan”. Again replying Mireille’s curiousness to know what is “Nirvan”, he says “Nirvan” is Happiness and quotes: “All men come to him who keep to the one. For there lays rest and happiness and peace.” (Rao, *The Chess* 39). The state which is realized when all desires are eliminated is called Nirvana. It occupies the central place in Buddhist thought. But Buddha does not attempt to define it, since it is the root principle of all, it is indefinable. But he is intended to mean, union with Brahma”. In a state of Nirvana Man loses his individuality. As S. Radhakrishnan observes:

Nirvana is neither annihilation nor existence as we perceive it, but is becoming one with the eternal reality. Which Buddha does not explicitly admit. Only since it is beyond the horizon of human thought we are obliged to employ negative terms to describe it. It is a condition transcending subject-object relation. In it there is no trace of self-consciousness (pp. 450).

In the novel, Suzanne wants a child from Siva. Therefore she is always ready to offer her body to him. While interacting with Suzanne on sexual intercourse, Siva suggests her to read the Indian text Kamasutra. He adds Further: “There is a Buddhist text that says somewhere, you know, The Semen is Nirvan. And Nirvan is Sunya. And Sunya, zero” (Rao, *The Chess* 77). The word “semen” comes from the Latin word “serer” means “to saw”. Therefore, the sexual process is an act of sawing seed into the womb of woman. When Sivaram thinks of his sister, Uma, again he gets reminded of Nagarjuna. Sivaram asserts:

If the sperm is nirvana, the child too is nirvana, and she who bears the child too is nirvana, made of the same stuff as herself, and thus on, the whole world-from anywhere you start you come to the same final - from nothingness arose fullness, made of nothingness of itself, thus all of essence made, hence the nothingness of me, would comprehend this other fullness, as it were, and since they comprehend each other, they are the same-thus nirvana is samsara, and samsara nirvana, as said Nagarjuna (Rao, *The Chess* 268).



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Sivaram makes very interesting observation by linking spirituality to *Sansara*. In the novel, we always find Sivaram in the company of one or another woman. Jayalakshmi, the only woman he loves is already married, so his love remains unfulfilled. Suzanne and Mireille provide relief both sexual and emotional, from the torment of love to Sivaram. With Uma, the sister who adores him, he is neither here nor there. The four women only heighten Sivaram's sense of isolation. In a way, Suzanne and Mireille are objects of sexual gratification for Sivaram. He seeks his answer in them that makes the novel complex, a metaphysical one. He is of the opinion by referring Buddhism that the attainment of nirvana is also possible, as Nagarjuna said, if you are Sansari, because the Sansar is nirvana. He asserts it is true that both women give him pleasure and peace in his solitude. So that is the fact which cannot be ignored.

The first part of the novel presents a great deal of Buddhist Philosophy. In the second and third part, there are some reflections on, specially, not pertaining to philosophy, rather historical facts of Buddhism. In the third part there is an interesting and impressive discussion between Sivaram and Michel, the Jew. As Kaushal Sharma remarks,

There are many aphoristic expressions and metaphysical cogitations interpreted in the mathematical terms. There the narrator makes very interesting observations about zero. He says that Sunya is the great light whereby the whole world is illuminated for „all is light, all is fullness; thus essence, thus absolute. (pp. 105)

According to Buddhist philosophy, all objects which we see around us including ourselves are void, from void, with void and in void. Therefore, Sivaram asserts very confidently that everything exists in Zero, because Zero is the womb of humanity. As the Buddha says unless you become zero nirvana is not possible. Siva muses: “Where was I then? And I was reminded again of what Gautama Buddha had said: Only he that is empty within himself can accept the perfect gifts” (Rao, *The Chess* 700). There are several key ideas that signal a Buddhist philosophical system as belonging to the Mahayana. Perhaps foremost among these and the central subject is the notion that all persons and phenomena are properly characterized by the term “emptiness”. Emptiness is of course always the emptiness of something, and the something is denoted by the Sanskrit term *svabhava*, inherent existence. Thus, in real sense emptiness means the absence of *svabhava*. It is human *svabhava* which is responsible behind all the reaction of man against the world. Therefore, Raja Rao, through the character of Sivaram, tends to convey that man can attain a state of happiness, a perfect gift, the Truth only when he is unconditioned with his personal *svabhava*. Thus, the human nature is the root of all human conflicts. Therefore, one should not blame others thinking as if they were responsible behind



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the awful or terrible situation. Buddhist philosophy teaches one to see inward and find the remedy of the pain or suffering.

Thus, an enormous influence of the Buddhist Philosophy on Raja Rao is seen throughout the novel. His quest for searching the Truth must have led him to read the Buddhist texts. However he is not satisfied with it and therefore he moves to read Upanishadas and the Philosophy of Sankara. But his knowledge on Buddhism is of benefit to his writing. He makes an excellent and an outstanding observation on Buddhist Philosophy at various places along with some glimpses on Buddhist history, metaphysics and psychology. Specially, all the mentions he makes regarding Buddhism in the novel are emptiness, metta, suchness and void, the zero. Apart from this, there is a mention of Nagarjuna's theory of void, a dialogue between King Milinda and Nagasena, a conversation of the Buddha and Siana and the German Philosopher Schopenhauer's theory of psychology.

Thus, Raja Rao's seems attempting to illustrate that nothing else, no one else but the Guru, can remove the *dukkha* or sorrow that seems to permeate throughout human life. As a matter of fact, the realization felt by author in his real life is reflected in all his writing. He chooses a literature to communicate his ideas, thoughts, and feelings before people. The novel form thus becomes a vehicle for him to present his belief patterns. He has highlighted the most important components of Buddhist philosophy by fictionalizing them. Giving this basic perception and inclination towards philosophy, Raja Rao could have become a model philosopher had he not chosen literature as a mode of expression.

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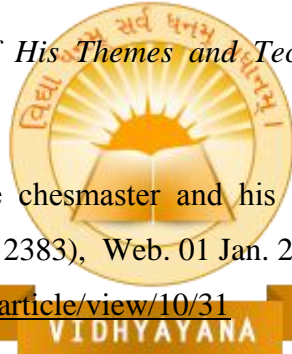
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