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Email : [editor@expressionjournal.com](mailto:editor@expressionjournal.com)

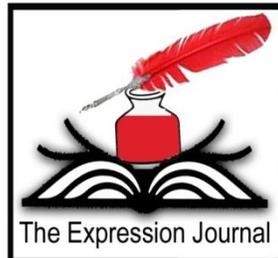
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## **RAJA RAO AS AN ADEPT IN VISUALIZING A GOLDEN ERA OF EAST-WEST ENCOUNTER WITH AN EXCEPTIONAL LITERARY INSIGHT IN HIS *THE SERPENT AND THE ROPE: AN APPRAISAL***

**Dr. S. Chelliah, M.A., Ph.D.,  
Professor, Head & Chairperson,  
School of English & Foreign Languages,  
Department of English & Comparative Literature,  
Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai – 625021**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines how the study of English literature inspired the love of freedom among the Indians and opened their eyes to the miserable condition of their motherland shaking off the foreign yoke and as well as liberating their country with an emphasis on the freedom movement of Mahatma Gandhi whose dignity came to be realised by the distinguished writers like Mulk Raj Anand, R.K.Narayan and Raja Rao who appeared on the literary scene so as to deal with India's multifarious problems in social, political, economic and religious arenas laying focus on the problems of poverty, hunger, dirt and disease and east-western encounter. It particularly examines the fictional art of Raja Rao who is projected here in this paper as an adept in visualizing a golden era of East-West Encounter with an exceptional literary insight in his *The Serpent and the Rope*.

### **Keywords**

Incident, Literary Insight, Encounter, Psychological Truth, Multifarious Problem, Human Reality, Oriental Patriot, Spiritual.

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Indo-Anglian fiction stems from the condition that had arisen as a historical incident, the British rulers becoming conscious of the necessity of imparting English education to the natives of the country. Indo-Anglian literature on the whole sprung from it. It was Lord Macaulay who had introduced the English language and literature for the benefit of the subjects under the British Crown. It is understood rather universally that Lord Macaulay did a great service to India by making English as the medium of our education. As a result, Lord Bentinck's Government fully subscribed to the view of Macaulay and English became the official language of India. The need for the English language was boosted up by some of the eminent and enlightened reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Prince Dwaraka Nath and Rabindranath Tagore, who all started schools in which English was the medium of instruction. The Indians started learning English very enthusiastically. The acquaintance with English language and literature broadened the outlook of the Indian students and English became a window to western ideas and influences.

English Literature inspired the love of freedom and opened their eyes to the miserable condition of their motherland. People started feeling that they must shake off the foreign yoke and liberate their country. A tremendous progress was found to be noticed in every sphere of activity. There emerged a multiplicity of writers who began to write English poetry, drama and fiction. The most remarkable of the Indian poets who developed Indo-Anglian poetry was Toru Dutt and Aurobindo Ghosh made a significant achievement in Indo-Anglian drama. The novel was a late comer in Indo-Anglian literature but it is in this sphere a significant progress was really made. Indo-Anglian fiction got enriched by such writers of eminence as R.C.Dutt, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and Rabindranath Tagore, out of whom Tagore was a literary giant among the Indian writers imparting a psychological touch to fiction. Then, Indo-Anglian fiction struck a new field

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and the conscience of the writers got touched with a new stirring. The freedom movement of Mahatma Gandhi made them look in a new way. Paving the way for the theme of the novel being evidently charged. The dignity of man came to be realised by them. The writers like Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, and Raja Rao appeared on the scene, whose novels came to be read and popularized all over the world.

India with her infinite variety and her multifarious problems in social, political, economic and religious arenas has served as a spawning ground for the growth of fiction. The problems of poverty, hunger, dirt and disease, patriotic fervor was brought out as major themes in Bhabani Bhattacharya's *So Many Hungers*. Indian English fiction is said to have come to its own dignity with the advent of the Gandhian Era (1920-1947). K.S. Venkatramani's *Murugan, the Tiller* (1927) and *Kandan The Patriot* (1932), Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935) and *Coolie* (1936) and Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938) are considered remarkable novels of the Gandhian Era.

For the sheer weight of wisdom and the adroit concealment in the realm of art, there is hardly anyone to equal Raja Rao in the whole range of Indo-Anglian fiction. In *The Serpent and the Rope*, the orient and the occidental motifs fuse with a brilliance and design which one scarcely finds in a literature of this kind. Mulk Raj Anand has written with credit about the underdog and the persons insulted and injured by the white Sahebs, the Zamindars, the money lenders and the businessmen'. In him, one can see the life of 'the Sweeper, the peasant, the plantation labour, the city drudge, the sepoy' and others. R.K.Narayan has created the regional novel in India with the interesting topography of Malgudi. He is capable of both psychic and terrestrial expansion throwing into the orbit a planet as large as life itself – spiritual, mundane, mental, intellectual, of low and high spirits, sexual, ceremonial and what not. As an artist, he changes into a new design – the ordinary, the mediocre, the sordid and things of pure existence. He seems to have proceeded from idealism to the characteristic human reality, a feat which only few are capable of showing. The 'spiritual turmoil' gets depicted with its finer stirrings. "The echoes of this spiritual conflict of Raja Rao are found in his great novel namely *The Serpent and the Rope*. Commenting on the greatness of Raja Rao, Narsingh Srivastava observes:

"One of the greatest Indo-Anglian novelists, Raja Rao is a genius who can talk of Nirvana – Astakam of Sankara, Dakshinamurti Stotram; Pascal, Albigenian heresy and the civilization of the Cathars, and of Advaita, Buddhism and Christianity in the same breath. He has gathered in him the traditional wisdom of Indian Rishis (Holy Seers) and has combined it with his intimate knowledge of the western religion and philosophy. Further, his amazing erudition is embellished by a brilliance of wit and analysis. He is endowed with a broad vision of human civilization which has enabled him to focus a synthetic view of values of various cultures of the world" (P 2).

Raja Rao, the eldest among his two brothers and seven sisters, was born on November 5, 1908 at Hassan, a small town in Mysore State now known as Karnataka. He was born in an orthodox Brahmin family and his Brahmin descent and the family environment as well as the traditions have gone a long way in the making of the man in him and in shaping the type of mind he has. He had his school education from Salar Jung's Madarsae-Aliya and was graduated in 1928 from Nizam's College, Hyderabad. Then he proceeded to France for his proposed research on

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“Mysticism of the West”, though soon he drifted to literature. In 1931, Raja Rao shifted to the University of Paris where he conducted research on “The Influence of India on Irish Literature” under the guidance of Professor Cazamian for about two years. Since the early sixties, he has made the USA his second home and has lectured on Indian philosophy for years at the University of Texas. Wearing a Jodhpur close-collar coat, Raja Rao would appear to the westerners a traditional Indian scholar of the old school or a veritable learned orientalist even as he appears to his countrymen as a cosmopolitan expatriate who retains within the deepest layers of his heart a true love for India and Indian values. Truly, he went abroad with a sense of disgust for India but after being disappointed in his hopes of finding France a land of Truth, he became again an Indian with a revived fervor for spiritual matters to the extent that he wanted to become a ‘sanyasi’ even at that stage. This happy combination of the orientalist patriot and the cosmopolitan occidentalist has enabled Raja Rao to depict in *The Serpent and the Rope* the life and culture of Europe for his Indian readers as forcefully as he evokes the Indian life and interprets its values for the Western ones. No doubt, Raja Rao has tried his level best to show in this great novel the reactions of characters of two different cultural roots to each other’s ways of living and thinking when they interact as human beings and not as political antagonists.

While *Kanthapura* is the first and perfect work of Raja Rao which is a valid, graphic and realistic portrayal of the Gandhian struggle for India’s freedom, *The Serpent and the Rope* may be called the fruit of Raja Rao’s maturity, which is certainly ‘an epic’. If *Kanthapura* is Raja Rao’s Ramayana then *The Serpent and the Rope* is his Mahabharata. If *Kanthapura* has a recognizable epic quality, *The Serpent and the Rope* is more than a miniature epic. It is almost encyclopedic in its scope reflecting Rao’s stupendous learning, his mastery over a number of literatures, mythologies, philosophies and regions. Through this novel, Raja Rao founded a new genre – the philosophical novel and has vividly and forcefully realised the confrontation of Eastern and western cultures. The novel is regarded as the spiritual autobiography of the novelist. Rao has his roots in Indian life, culture, philosophy and religion and he has passed most of his life in the West. When he describes the hero’s life in India, France and England, the readers can be sure that it is out and out authentic, that too, based on his own experiences. Raja Rao is an interpreter as well as a constructive critic of the cultures of the East and the West.

Raja Rao is an expert in creating living characters. His characters are creatures of flesh and blood. With a single stroke of the pen, he can bring a character to life and make him real. In the novel, *The Serpent and the Rope*, the characters are taken from different races and nations and they are more intellectual and more complex than the simple villagers of *Kanthapura*. Here in this novel, Raja Rao is less interested in the delineation of the surface personality of the characters and more in their relations to philosophy and religion. The hero-narrator of the novel is well-versed in Vedantic philosophy and is at home in the philosophies and mythologies of the East and the West. One can see all the persons and places through his mind. In *The Serpent and the Rope*, the narrative technique of Raja Rao changes completely from the previous novel *Kanthapura*. His description and reportage, his recitation and speculation, his aphorisms and witticisms and his irrepressible loquacity give his novel a unique charm. His hero claims that he has been objective in describing the story of his life but the fact is that he is wholly subjective. The external action has a ‘Global

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Sweep' and takes the readers from kasha to Allahabad, Hardwar and Hyderabad and then to France and Britain and ends up at the feet of the 'Guru' who is in Travancore.

Raja Rao has successfully portrayed the life-styles and cultures of various countries and cities enriching his accounts with well-documented details. Besides, he unifies them all into a meaningful whole treating them as several manifestations of one and the same divine spirit. Rao's great achievement is that he has evolved a new art form by fusing the western type of novel with an Indian theme and Indian tradition of storytelling. In *The Serpent and the Rope*, the narrator is a highly educated philosopher whose mind is a whirlpool of cultural, philosophical and religious currents and cross-currents. Though the novel has been written according to the Western agnosticism by Raja Rao's projection of encyclopedic scope in its lively narration. Of all the novels, this novel is a mature revelation of his philosophical thinking. Besides, a kind of cultural rapprochement has been made in the novel. Hinduism and Buddhism penetrate into the western fiber. The novelist has tried to fuse the occidental strain into the oriental one. This novel sets out to present a meeting of India and Europe. To quote T.D.Brunton, "It should be evident that the novel is adapted to any culture which shares some of the rational, scientific, inquisitive tendencies of the West, and also the modern, almost world-wide, curiosity about society. In the modern world, all these interests develop with education and literacy. So, the novel is becoming international" (214).

A thorough and intensive study of the novel hints at the possible synthesis between the two cultures. The reciprocal influence between the cultures of the East and the West can be felt by the readers. The hero, Ramaswamy is a South Indian, while his spouse, Madeleine, is of French extraction. Ranchan and Razdam observe;

"In the marriage of Rama and Madaleine, two contrary epistemologies come together and the novel is a study of that encounter" (8).

Both through his life and literature, Raja Rao has fulfilled the mission of a cultural ambassador of India to the west even as he has proved himself to be a philosophical interpreter of Indian tradition and thought in a western medium of expression which he has naturalised as his own for himself as much as for millions of his readers in India. Even during his stay in France, Raja Rao had never lost contact with events in India and as M.K.Naik puts it, "he appears to have discovered India only after going abroad" (P19). One might rather say that his nationalist sentiments got a spur only after he found himself physically away from the motherland. In fact, Raja Rao, keeping up his Indian ways and wearing the look of a contemplative Indian mystic, is the least westernized Indian settled in the west. In the words of Narsingh Srivastava,

"Of all the Indo-Anglian novelists, Raja Rao happens to be the greatest interpreter of Indian thought and culture, the revelation of the very essence of Indian life and character being his chief object as a novelist. Far from a nostalgic admiration or a sentimental outburst, his praise of India takes the form of self-understanding for himself and interpretation of its values for others, particularly the people of the West" (P 15).

Raja Rao was fully acquainted with Sanskrit literature and Hindu philosophy and culture. He is

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perfectly at home in the language, literature and culture of England. He is able to enrich *The Serpent and the Rope* with the myths and legends drawn from three cultures. In describing the coronation of the British queen, he combines the events of one country with the beliefs of another culture. The title of the novel itself refers to a Hindu philosophical myth in which the serpent stands for illusion and the rope stands for reality. The myths forge links between the past and the present and between the cultures of different countries. The novelist has shown to the western world through his mouth piece, Ramaswamy, that his Albigenses were probably inspired by the Buddhist or Jain philosophy. He wants to bring home the point that the principles of the Albigenses of Cathars owed their origin to India. Raja Rao has deep roots in Indian culture and philosophy and has a vast experience of life in the West. He praises the West for the practical things of life and praises India for her ancient philosophy and wisdom. He fixes his attention on the philosophy and religion of India and their impact on the thought and culture of the West.

Religion is an important part of an Indian's life. But people in the West do not normally care much for religion. The Vedic culture is essentially oriental. The hero who is of Indian origin tries to inject the Vedic cult into his wife of French extraction. The novel highlights India's vast heritage of learning and wisdom Indians are generally God-fearing and God-conscious. They are inclined to live a sinless and spiritual life. The Gita and the other Indian scriptures bring out a lot of qualities and values for leading a cultured life. Indian culture has successfully resisted and rejected the forces of disintegration, internal and external, in spite of the repeated threats to shatter the ancient culture of the Indian society. Indian culture has continued to steadily proceed along its own definite path. The uniqueness of Indian culture lies in its strong spirituality and universal love and tolerance. The Hindu tradition emphasizes the role of the Guru, in order to get an effective spiritual knowledge.

The quest for self-knowledge is the central theme of the novel and it is explored and enacted in the novel as the hero goes through life. There are two ways of self-realization. One way is "niurittimarge" or "renunciation" and the other is "Paurittimarge" or "life of activity". Both ways lead to the same destination. Rama takes the way of active life which his French counterpart, Madeleine takes the other way. Rama, the hero of the novel, seeks salvation through the "Pravartimarge" of life of activity. Through this philosophy of the hero, Raja Rao drives home the message that that from very ancient times, Indian thoughts, culture and spiritual visions have been reaching the shores of foreign nations. Diverse alien lands, with widely varying traditions and cultures, shared India's realizations, offering in return their own highest gifts of wisdom and inspiration. K.K. Datta has mentioned the words of Swami Vivekananda in the lectures delivered in India and abroad thus:

"Those that tell you that Indian thoughts never went outside India, those that tell you that I am the first Sanyasin who went to foreign lands to preach, do not know the history of their own race. Again and again this phenomenon has happened. Manu claimed intellectual leadership of the world for India when he wrote that all the people of the world would come to this country to learn from her intellectuals the lessons of moral behaviour" (P2).

The words of Swami Vivekananda as quoted by Dr. Datta shows how history has recorded the

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Europeans' acquisition of knowledge through Indian religion, philosophy, medicine, mathematics, astronomy and folklore. There is no denying the fact that the West has been much benefited by the Eastern influence in all respects. Though some critics are of the opinion that Raja Rao's attempt in this novel *The Serpent and the Rope* is only to show his hero attained self-realization, there certainly arises a question if the novelist does not try to attain the universal Hindu vision that all cultures and all people in the world are after all parts of the divine scheme of oneness of all. Ramaswamy's doctoral thesis was intended also to be an "Indian's attempt at philosophy of history" (SR 103). Nowhere else do we find Christianity, Catholicism and Hinduism brought so close as in *The Serpent and the Rope*. One can witness have a curious assembly of the enlightened flowers of the three great religions of the world as one meets staunch Christians in father Zenobias and Georges, a learned Buddhist in Lezo and a Vedantin in Ramaswamy. Madeleine exhibits a practical synthesis of three religions by undergoing a consistent profession through her understanding of these religious beliefs. Their discussion proceed from the conviction that "... life is so much more intelligent than we care to understand" and also "Marxism, Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, Hitlerism, the British Commonwealth, the Republic of the United States of America, all are so many voices for some unknown principles, which we feel, but cannot name. For all the rivers, as the Gita says, lead but to the Absolute. That is why the novelist, through Ramaswamy, wants to build up a synthesis of truths and ideals of several religions and cultures" (Srivastava 66). The novelist has studied rather deeply the philosophy and religions of Europe as well as those of India and pointed out their significance and meaning and the visions of truth of life they contain. In a sense, the novel is an attempt to understand and truths and aims of human life through the study of real life and of the philosophy and theology of the world. In order to present his visions of modern Europe and of the world at large, Raja Rao has depended on the philosophy of Europe.

Just like the creator of the novel, Ramaswamy too was born in orthodox family in the State of Mysore. He lived long in the West and married an European girl. He is an intellectual of high caliber who is inordinately interested in Metaphysics. He is a sensitive intellectual. He faithfully records his understanding and contemplation in his diary. He has inherited a deep respect for the Indian tradition and culture. His long stay in Europe and his encounter with his French wife, Madeleine, the Russian Professor Georges and Lezo, help him arrive at a critical understanding of the western culture and values in all their wide ramifications. George is keenly interested in India and Indian philosophy. He learns Sanskrit in order to understand Indian philosophy better. He studies the Vedas and wishes the westerners to read some books on the saints of modern India like Ramakrishna Paramansa, Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo and Swami Dayananda. He has a desire in that Indians all become Roman Catholics. But contrary to his desire, the Western character Madeleine became a Buddhist Sadhaka. She starts doing all those things advocated by Tibetan Buddhists. She stops considering Rama as her husband. When Rama is seriously ill in London, she does not go to see him and does not even write a letter to him to enquire about his health. Thus, Madeleine gradually renounces her comforts in life. She learns Chinese and Tibetan to understand Buddhism better. She speaks with greater and greater authority on Buddhism. She undertakes the forty one day fast and that transforms her into a Buddhist nun. It is really amazing

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to see how a European girl completely drifts apart from Roman Catholicism and adopts Buddhism, a religion of Eastern genesis. Though Rama is in France, he feels as if he was in Haridwar, when he is woken up early in the morning by the loud recitation of the mantras by his French wife, Madeleine. She feels that the intellectual brilliance of Buddhism has no parallel in the world.

The main movements in the novel are the protagonist's quest for self-realization, an attempt on his part to solve the earthly dilemma, his elevation into the realm of reality culminating in the final promise of monistic vision. The fulfillment of the promise comes at the end of a long journey, a journey which makes the protagonist come into contact with various countries and cultures and meet with experiences which involve interactions with various types of individuals drawn from diverse geographical and cultural orientation. Rama believes that Advaita (Non-dualism) is an essential part of Hinduism. This is the ideology of Shankara and his disciples. The contrary view that God and man are separate entities was, according to Rama, repugnant to Hinduism and to India. He has collected evidences from the Vedas, Puranas, the Gita and myths and legends to prove his point. He becomes interested in the Albigensian heresy due to philosophical reasons. The Hindus and the Catholics believe in non-dualism while the Buddhists and the Cathars believe in dualism.

Ramaswamy wants to prove in his thesis that the Cathars are inspired by the Buddhist beliefs. He says that he studies the Albigensians to prove that he is metaphysically right. The Cathars or Albigensians were a religious sect which flourished in Western Europe in the twelfth and the thirteenth centuries. They believed in dualism that goodness was created by God and the evil world was created by Satan – man must free his spirit from the evil world and restore it to communion with God by renouncing the world. They practiced mortification of the body, celibacy and asceticism. Ramaswamy sees that there is much in common between the principles of the Cathars and those of Buddhism. He wants to prove in his thesis that the beliefs of the Cathars owe their origin to Indian Buddhism. Being a scholar of European history, he is well-versed in the philosophical systems of the East and the West. He is ready to study, analyse and discuss philosophical systems and religious beliefs with the people of all types in India, England and France in order to arrive at the truth. Thus, Raja Rao brings out to the Westerners through *The Serpent and the Rope* that the Advaita Vedanta and French Culture go so intimately into the working of the book. The 'Rope' in the title and 'Sea' in the epigraph as given by Atmananda Guru, stand for the 'Ultimate Reality'. Rama sees the world, at first, as an illusion (Serpent), while his wife, Madeleine, later regards the world as real (Rope). Raja Rao skillfully brings together Rama of the East and the Madeleine of the West into Wedlock and this solemnity of the occasion points to the novelist's endeavour for cultural rapprochement not only through religion but also through philosophical concepts.

The novel also reflects Raja Rao's stupendous learning, his mastery over a number of mythologies, philosophies and religions. The Indian vedantic vision and the wisdom of age-old Indian scriptures – the Vedas, the Upanishads and the Gita are woven into the very fabric of the novel. *The Serpent and the Rope* is no doubt, a complex work of art and as such, it can be read at various levels. M.V. Bharathalakshmi comments:

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‘It contains so many strands – religion, philosophy, politics, history and science. *The Serpent and the Rope* becomes, in consequence, multi-dimensional, and as a Mahapurana or ‘epic legend’, it is filled with parables, anecdotes, mythology, philosophical and religious discourses and visions” (P 151).

The Characters of the West adopt a new religion which has its genesis in India. They practice it with due reverence. Buddhism has become their favourite religion. Savitri is a Westernised girl who has come prepared for a ritual of marriage with Rama. She performed ‘Puja’ of Rama. She laid her head at his feet and performed his ‘Arthi’. Rama applied kumkum on Savithri’s brow between the partings of her hair. He gave her the ritual coconuts and the toe-rings which Little Mother had sent for Madeleine. Savithri says that he has been her lord from janam to janam. The hero observes:

“We had one thing in common: we both knew Sanskrit, and could entertain each other with *uttara Rama Charita* or *Raghuvamsa*” (SR 31).

Savithri gets appreciation from the heroine, Madeleine. When Savithri comes to Aix, Madeleine says that she is a product of three thousand years of civilization. This French lady regards Savithri as the embodiment of the Hindu ideal of womanhood. It is noteworthy to point out Raja Rao’s delineation of the character, Savithri, whose western features like chain-smoking and Jazz-dancing turn out to be a modern womanhood doing ‘Arthy’ of her lord, Rama. Rama’s relationship with Savithri leads him towards further self-realisation. As M.K. Naik observes, “It is his encounter with Savithri that makes Rama fully and truly conscious of his spiritual heritage and his love for her becomes a stepping-stone to his ultimate realization of Truth” (270). In this sense, Savithri becomes a Guru to him, before he sets out to seek his proper Guru in the end. In the end, he seeks the feet of his Guru at Travancore. Starting his moorings from Harisharapura, moving on to the various countries in the West. Ramaswamy feels that he could find his salvation only in the orient. He realizes, “Truth is the only substance India can offer and that Truth is metaphysical and not moral” (SR 354). Raja Rao, has, at last, succeeded in making a dint into the western agnosticism. Raja Rao has also made a powerful impact on the Catholicism of the Westerners. In the words of Narasimhaiah, Raja Rao shows to the Westerners, the end of all earthly endeavour is that knowledge of the self” (P 165).

To conclude, our society is always in a state of flux, because the minds of the people are always in a state of flux. The cultural life, the food habits, and the mode of living differ from country to country. Today, all over the world, a new kind of culture gets developed. It may be termed as ‘synthetic culture’. Our hero, Rama, is of the synthetic culture. He absorbs not the influence of the people where he moves but the general current mode of life. He is described as a European Brahmin and a French Vedantin. No doubt, Raja Rao has visualized a golden age of East-West relationship in which the two cultures will blend under the overwhelming influence of pure human feelings and understanding so as to transcend all imaginable barriers and inhibitions. Thus, the readers may invariably find a sort of rapprochement between different cultural values with an effective and all-pervasive manifestation of Raja Rao’s exceptional insight being reflected through his Vedic wisdom and the wisdom of the Upanishads.

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