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IMPACT OF *BHAGAVAD GITA* ON RAJA RAO'S *THE SERPENT AND THE ROPE*:  
A CRITICAL VIEW

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the profound influence of *Bhagavad Gita* on Raja Rao's novel, *The Serpent and the Rope*, exploring its thematic and narrative elements that reflect the teachings of *Gita*. *Bhagavad Gita*, a philosophical and spiritual text, has been widely regarded as a guiding force in Indian literature, philosophy, and cultural thought. Raja Rao, an acclaimed Indian writer, drew heavily from *Gita*'s teachings and themes in his works. The paper explores various philosophical concepts such as self-realization, *karma*, *dharma*, the impermanence of life, and the complexities of human relationships, which are seamlessly woven into the fabric of the novel. It highlights the presence of the Indian Vedantic vision and the wisdom of ancient scriptures, as well as the influence of the doctrine of Advaita and non-dualism, as exemplified by the novel's epigraph, "Waves are nothing, but water, so is the sea." Advaita emphasizes the ultimate unity of all existence, asserting that the apparent diversity and multiplicity in the world are mere illusions. They do not reflect the ultimate reality. Just as waves arise from and dissolve back into the ocean, the epigraph suggests that all forms in the world are ultimately composed of the same underlying reality. This epigraph reflects the influence of *Bhagavad Gita* and other ancient Indian scriptures on the novel. It teaches that the individual self (Atman) is inseparable from the universal self (Brahman), and realizing this unity is the path to spiritual enlightenment and liberation. The paper further analyzes the parallels between *Gita*'s philosophical concepts and the development of characters, plot progression, and thematic exploration in *The Serpent and the Rope*, emphasizing the enduring significance of *Gita*'s teachings in Indian literature.

Key words: *Bhagavad Gita*, Self-Realization, Spirituality, Identity and Human Relationship

*Bhagavad Gita*, often referred to as *Gita*, is a sacred Hindu scripture that holds a central place in Indian philosophy and spirituality. It is a 700-verse dialogue between Prince Arjuna and Lord Krishna, which takes place on the battlefield of Kurukshetra during the epic Mahabharata. *Gita* is a philosophical and spiritual guide that offers profound insights into various aspects of life, ethics and the nature of reality. It explores fundamental concepts such as dharma (duty), karma (action), yoga (the path to union with the divine), and moksha (liberation from the cycle of birth and death). It delves into the nature of the self, the interconnectedness of all beings, and the ultimate reality. Its teachings emphasize the importance of self-discipline, selfless action, and devotion to

the divine, encouraging individuals to strive for spiritual growth, inner peace, and harmony with the world around them.

*The Gita* itself declares that concentration of the mind in the term of Krishna constitutes the most confidential part of knowledge. The Lord clearly says:

मन्मना भव मद्भक्तो मद्याजी मां नमस्कुरु।  
मामेवैष्यसि सत्यं ते प्रतिजाने प्रियोऽसि मे॥ XVIII.65

[Always think of me, become my devotee, worship Me and offer your homage unto Me. Thus you will come to Me without fail. I promise you this because you are My very dear friend.]

Lord Krishna clearly tells Arjuna:

सर्वधर्मान्परित्यज्य मामेकं शरणं व्रज।  
अहं त्वा सर्वपापेभ्यो मोक्षयिष्यामि मा शुचः॥ XVIII.66

[Abandon all varieties of religion and just surrender unto Me. I shall deliver you from all sinful reactions. Do not fear.]

The particular words “Do not fear, don’t hesitate, don’t worry” are extremely significant because total surrender to the will of *God* is the only solution of all worldly problems.

Sri Aurobindo in his book *Essays on the Gita* has rightly observed:

The argument of the *Gita* resolves itself into three great steps by which action rises out of the human into the divine plane leaving the bondage of the lower for the liberty of a higher law. First, by the renunciation of desire and a perfect equality works have to be done as a sacrifice by man as the doer, a sacrifice to a deity who is the supreme and only self though by him not yet realized in his own being. This is the initial step. Secondly, not only the desire of fruit, but the claim to be the doer of works has to be renounced in the realization of the self as the equal, the inactive, the immutable principle and of all works as simply the operation of universal Force, of the Nature-Soul, Prakriti, the unequal, active, mutable power. Lastly, the supreme self has to be seen as the supreme Purusha governing the Prakriti, of when the soul in Nature is a partial manifestation, by whom all works are directed, in a perfect transcendence, through nature. (37-387)

Raja Rao uses these philosophical principles in his novel in a creative way to highlight the vision and design of his protagonist’s mind.

Raja Rao’s novel *The Serpent and the Rope* was published in 1960 and is considered to be a milestone in Indian literature. The novel follows the journey of its protagonist, Rama, an Indian intellectual living in Europe, as he grapples with existential questions and searches for meaning in life. It examines his relationships with his wife, Savitri, and his American lover, Madeleine, and the challenges posed by societal expectations and personal desires. Through Rama’s introspection and encounters with various characters, the novel presents his trials and tribulations, his spiritual doubts and uncertainties. M. K. Naik points out, “he is eminently fitted for the task by his cultural heritage, and his early upbringing. He could recite the scriptures at the age of four and got the holy thread at the age of seven. He is able to face death philosophically, - even the death of his first son fails to shake him- because the basic Vedantic conception of the unreality of death is a part of his cultural heritage.” (124)

The novel incorporates philosophical and metaphysical discussions, reflecting the author’s deep engagement with Indian philosophical traditions, particularly Vedanta. *The Serpent and the Rope* stands as a testament to Raja Rao’s contribution to Indian literature. The way Raja Rao uses the philosophical concepts enshrined in *Gita* shows how the novelist is preoccupied with the fundamental principles of reality and illusion.

In *Bhagavad Gita*, Lord Krishna instructs Arjuna on the nature of the self, urging him to recognize the eternal soul that transcends the temporary physical body:

वासांसि जीर्णानि यथा विहाय  
नवानि गृह्णाति नरोऽपराणि।  
तथा शरीराणि विहाय जीर्णा-  
न्यन्यानि संयाति नवानि देही॥ (II.22)

[As a person puts on new garments, giving up old ones, the soul similarly accepts new material bodies, giving up the old and useless ones.]

But the fact remains that the transference of the atomic individual soul to another body is made possible by the grace of the Super Soul. Both the *Mundaka Upanishad* (3.1.2.) and *Svetasvatara Upanishad* (4.7.) confirm this: “Although the two birds are in the same tree, the eating bird is fully engrossed with anxiety and moroseness as the enjoyer of the fruits of the tree. But if in some way or other he turns his face to his friend the Lord and knows His glories – at once the suffering bird becomes free from all anxieties.”

*The Serpent and the Rope* uses the analogy to highlight the dilemma of Ramaswamy. Rama faces a crisis of identity and struggles to understand his true self amidst the conflicting influences of his Indian heritage and the Western culture he encounters in Europe. Rama’s journey can be seen as a parallel to *Gita’s* teachings on self-realization. As he moves through various experiences and encounters, he gradually becomes aware of the illusory nature of the external world and begins to seek a deeper understanding of his own being. This quest for self-realization involves questioning societal norms, cultural expectations, and personal desires.

*Bhagavad Gita* emphasizes the concepts of *karma* and *dharma*. *Karma* refers to the law of cause and effect, stating that every action has consequences. *Gita* emphasizes that every individual is bound by their actions and their subsequent outcomes. It teaches that one should perform their duties diligently and selflessly, without attachment to the results. This concept is known as *karma yoga*, the path of selfless action. *Dharma*, on the other hand, pertains to one’s duty or righteous path in life. These concepts are intertwined with the transient nature of the physical world, highlighting the impermanence of everything material. In *Bhagavad Gita*, *dharma* is seen as a guiding principle for ethical living and personal growth. It encompasses various aspects, including one’s social, familial, and occupational responsibilities.

The concepts of *karma* and *dharma* are explored in various ways, reflecting their significance in Hindu philosophy. The novel delves into the notion of *karma* and its consequences on individual lives. The protagonist, Rama, undergoes a journey of self-discovery and self-realization, which involves facing the consequences of his past actions (*karma*). Through introspection and contemplation, Rama reflects on the impact of his choices and actions, ultimately seeking to find inner harmony and liberation from the cycle of *karma*.

The concept of *dharma* is intricately woven into the narrative of the novel. Rama, as a young Indian intellectual living in Europe, grapples with questions of identity, cultural belonging, and the conflict between Western influences and his Indian heritage. His journey can be seen as an exploration of his *dharma*, as he seeks to understand and fulfill his duties and responsibilities as an individual rooted in his cultural and spiritual background.

Rama’s search for meaning and truth involves a deep engagement with Indian philosophical and spiritual traditions, including Vedantic teachings and the exploration of *dharma* as a guiding principle. The novel explores the complexities of *dharma* in a multicultural and changing world, highlighting the challenges faced by individuals in maintaining a sense of identity and fulfilling their moral responsibilities. Rama grapples with existential dilemmas and contemplates the nature of existence. He questions the purpose of his own life, the significance of his actions, and the consequences they might entail. Rama’s contemplation is deeply influenced by *Gita’s* teachings on *karma*, as he becomes aware of the interconnectedness of actions and their impact on his personal growth and the world around him.

*Bhagavad Gita* emphasizes the importance of performing one’s duties selflessly, without attachment to the results of one’s actions:

कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्ते मा फलेषु कदाचन ।  
मा कर्मफलहेतुर्भूर्मा ते संगोऽस्त्वकर्मणि ॥ (2.47.)

[The Lord clearly says that work with results becomes the cause of bondage; therefore such work is not auspicious.] “You have the right to perform your prescribed duty, but you are not entitled to the fruits of your actions. Never consider yourself the cause of the results of your activities, and never be attached to not doing your duty.” It encourages individuals to maintain equability in relationships and to recognize the interconnectedness of all beings. These teachings find resonance in the novel as Rama navigates his relationships with his wife, Savitri, and his American lover, Madeleine.

Rama's relationship with Savitri reflects *Gita's* emphasis on duty and societal expectations. Savitri represents the traditional Indian wife, and Rama is torn between his love for her and his desire for intellectual and personal freedom. He grapples with the conflict between his duty as a husband and his yearning for a different kind of fulfillment. Rama's struggle echoes *Gita's* teachings on the complexities of duty and the challenge of balancing personal desires with societal obligations.

Ultimately, Rama's exploration of love, marriage, and societal expectations mirrors *Gita's* teachings on the intricacies of human attachments and the importance of selfless action. The novel prompts readers to reflect on the challenges of maintaining equanimity, balancing personal desires and societal expectations, and navigating the complexities of human relationships. Through Rama's experiences, Raja Rao highlights the tension between tradition and modernity and invites readers to contemplate the nature of duty, desire, and the pursuit of spiritual fulfillment.

The novel can be considered autobiographical in the sense that it reflects the writer's own spiritual yearnings and his quest for supreme realization. As Makarand Paranjape observes in his introduction, "Rama's path to Truth, unlike Moorthy's Karma Yoga is Janan Yoga (the Path of Knowledge) also enunciated in *Bhagavad Gita*. Rama is not a man of action but an intellectual. Although he has accumulated knowledge, he still does not apprehend Truth clearly; like the deluded seeker in the fable, he mistakes the rope for the serpent, failing to see himself, unlike Savitri, as already united with Truth. Traditionally, a Guru is necessary for Jan Yogi because only a Guru can cure his delusion by showing him that what appears to be a serpent is really a rope. Thus, in the end, Rama resolves to seek his Guru to be cured of his delusion." (pp. xii)

In conclusion, the influence of *Bhagavad Gita* on Raja Rao's novel *The Serpent and the Rope* is evident in several key aspects. *Gita's* teachings on self-realization, existential dilemmas, *karma*, *dharma*, the impermanence of life, selfless action, and the complexities of human relationships deeply inform the narrative and thematic exploration in the novel.

Through the character of Rama, the novel reflects *Gita's* teachings on self-realization, as he embarks on a journey to understand his true nature and purpose in life. Rama's contemplation of existence and the inevitability of death echoes *Gita's* emphasis on the impermanence of the physical world and the need to look beyond it for spiritual fulfillment. As Ramaswamy states, "Seeing oneself what we always seek; the world, as the great sage Sankara said, is like a city seen in mirror." (pp. 13-14). Raja Rao has creatively blended the complex philosophical queries in this novel. Knowing the self has always been a fascinating subject for Indian sages and seekers from time immemorial.

The novel's exploration of human relationships, such as Rama's relationships with Savitri and Madeleine, parallels *Gita's* teachings on duty, desire, and the complexities of attachments. Rama's struggles reflect the challenges of balancing societal expectations, personal desires, and the pursuit of self-realization.

The enduring significance of *Gita's* teachings in literature is evident in Raja Rao's work. Through *The Serpent and the Rope*, he explores certain profound spiritual themes and the complexities of human existence, incorporating *Gita's* philosophical ideas and narrative structure to craft a narrative that highlights the necessity of spiritual values.

Raja Rao's novel demonstrates the timeless relevance of *Gita's* teachings, which transcend religious boundaries and continue to inspire readers and writers across different cultures. The exploration of self-realization, existential dilemmas, human relationships, and the impermanence of life in *The Serpent and the Rope* showcases the enduring impact of *Gita's* profound insights and its ability to offer guidance on the universal quest for meaning and spiritual growth. It exemplifies the rich tradition of Indian literature and its ability to integrate philosophical teachings into compelling narratives that resonate with readers across time and cultures. Thus, the world is the illusion and the self is the truth. Once the truth is known then sorrows and miseries cannot affect the man.

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