CHAPTER VI
MINOR CHARACTERS
The fictional world of Raja Rao is dense with innumerable variety of characters, and this variety is as colourful and fascinating as any Indian country fair. There are all types of people in this fair, good and bad, cruel and kind, dedicated and selfish, illiterate and qualified, dull and bright, who make this world as panoramic and life-like as the one in which we live. Raja Rao has covered practically the entire gamut of social and political life of India over a period of more than forty years, before and after Independence.

In each of Raja Rao’s novel we meet a crowd of characters. The central male and female characters in all the four novels do hold a very prominent place in Raja Rao’s novel, at the same time the minor characters also play an important part. Each character whether a male or a female plays his or her role significantly without which the novel cannot complete itself. Raja Rao’s keen vision helps to create the portraiture of characters who resemble people in real life. Never do they become shadowy or lifeless. Each one differs from the other in physique, temperament, status or even in their personal habits, ideas and faith. It reminds us of the gallery of characters seen in The Canterbury Tales by Chaucer. Chaucer with an illuminating and shrewd observation and a tolerant humour was able to paint the band of pilgrims as he saw
them in real life.

Raja Rao's range of characterisation is very vast and he creates a large number of people differing from each other. We have Postmaster Suryanarayana, Barber Channav, drunkard Dhirappa, Patwari Nanjundia, Left-handed Madanna, Corner-House Moorthy, Patel Range Gowda, Fig-tree House Ramu, Beadle Timmaya, One-eyed Linga, Jack-tree Tippa, Cardamom-field Ramachandra, Gold-bangle Somanna, Snuff-Sastri, Pandit Venkateshia, Bhatta, Ratna, Advocate Senappa, Waterfall Venkamma, Nose-scratching Nanjamma, Achakka, Temple Lakshamma, Coffee-planter Ramayya, Post-office House young Chinnamma, Puttamma, Temple Lakshamma, Rangamma, Narsamma and many more. The above are the characters living in the village Kanthapura and in one way or the other take part in the Freedom movement. It seems as if Raja Rao tries to name all the Kanthapurians irrespective of caste and creed for nowhere else do we notice such a chain of names clustered in a single novel.

Raja Rao studies each character minutely and their actions are noted. For example, Waterfall Venkamma roared day and night against Rangamma, a widow, who owns a big house, gold belt and dharmawaram sari. This she shouts and says to Temple Lakshamma or Bhatta's wife, Chinnamma, whenever they return from the river. Corner House Narsamma, Moorthy's mother, does play a minor role, she is seen
abusing her son to keep him away from the Pariah people. Ramakrishnayya is a learned man, hence, takes up the duty of reading the Sankara Vijaya to the people. Trumpet Lingayya blows his trumphet in the temple for the evening prayers after the bhajans are over.

Bhatta is a Brahmin who is a money-lender. He owns thirty seven acres of wet land and ninety acres of dry land in all the villages namely, Kanthapura, Santur, Puttur and Honnalli. Every person, be it a pariah or a Brahmin owes him something. By nature he is very good and smiling. The interest he charges is not much, whereas, Rama Chetty and Subba Chetty on the other hand, charge a greater rate of interest and are the cause of the ruin of the village. To Bhatta Gandhiji’s ideals are nothing but:

wearing coarse hand-made cloth, not fit for a mop, and bellowing out bhajans and bhajans, and mixing with the Pariahs."

Kudos! to Jayaramachar who takes up the mission of spreading Gandhi’s message to the villagers and succeeds in it. He is a very active man and plays a vital role in injecting politics into the minds of the orthodox illiterate peasants. Since he relates ‘Harikathas’ to the peasants he is known as the ‘Harikatha Man’ or a man who

says the story of God. People gather everyday to listen to the Harikathas and it is through these mythical stories he spreads the message like a Freedom-Struggle Messiah. His appearance is somewhat like the prophets who act as the messenger of God and instil faith into the hearts of his hearers. Thus, Jayaramachar is a prominent figure and the main source through whom politics enters Kanthapura and the result one can see towards the close of the novel.

Another character is Patel Range Gowda who is also known as the 'Tiger' and his words are law in the village. He holds Moorthy in high regard in all matters except his meddling with politics and the Gandhi business. It is only Patel who courageously faces the policeman Badé Khan who is sent to this village to look into any untoward happening that may take place. The villagers do not entangle themselves with Badé Khan as he is a government official of the British. When Moorthy approaches Patel and enlists his active support and sympathy for the cause the latter speaks with an authoritative voice:

If you are the sons of your fathers, Stand up and do what this learned boy says. 2

In a meeting Patel himself proposes Moorthy as the President of the village panchayat. A few more

2. Kanthapura, p.107
members like Rangamma, Seenu, Rachanna and others form the Congress Panchayat Committee of Kanthapura. Towards the end the attack of the policemen on the villagers, displaces them completely, hence they are seen crawling, wailing in huge numbers and moving towards a nearby village, Kashipura. Only Range Gowda returns to Kanthapura and curses on seeing the village completely demolished but cannot leave before drinking three handfuls of Himavathy river's water thrice. He also spits three times each to the West and South.

To complete the picture Raja Rao introduces as many female characters as males maybe even more. A typical village woman tends to her domestic duties and cares for her husband and children. Though conservative and ignorant the women gather for meetings and discuss political matters. Like their men folk they all unite and participate in the national movement. Many of them are jailed but released soon and they return with a stronger will-power and determination to stand with the Mahatma. In the name of the Mahatma they bear the atrocities inflicted on them by the policemen as they shout 'Vande Mataram' and 'Mahatma Gandhi Ki Jai'. It is Seethamma, Lingamma, Lakshamma, Madamamma and many more who courageously bear the lathi-charge on themselves. The teachings of the Mahatma bring about a great change in the rural, timid and innocent women folks of the village.
By attending meetings they talk about Kamala devi, Rani Lakshmi Bai, Annie Besant and Sarojini Naidu, they feel challenged by the high standards set by them. Earlier their thoughts and actions are limited to the broom stick, blowpipe and the milking of cows only, it is politics which enlightens them and gives them courage to participate and fight in the National Movement.

Raja Rao thus possesses a keen eye to note a character's every little inch of detail and a sensitive ear to hear all the peculiar sounds made by animals and villagers.

Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope* too has several minor male and female characters who play their role effectively and each contribute in one way or the other in building up the structure of the novel. A mention of Rama's mother is made, she is dead but it is said that she was beautiful and holy and had a voice like the vina playing even after the instrument was left leaning beside a pillar of the temple. Another person we encounter is Grandfather Kittanna, "a noble type, a heroic figure" and it is from him Rama learns to have a natural love for the impossible. Grandfather could manage the fiercest horse and take him where he never wants to. He is never afraid of gun

or sword, his prayers have depth as Aunt Seethamma remarks:

He has the shine of a Dharmaraja.

It is in his guardianship that Rama learns the philosophy of death. The Grandfather always told him that there is no death. He loves Rama a lot and becomes the chief source of learning the Vedas and of guidance. On the death of Rama's father it is Grandfather who advises him to perform the ceremony in Benares in Rama's brother's name. Not that he loves Rama less but that is what is to be done and handed over from generation to generation. He convinces Rama by saying:

Why give importance to unimportant things? God is not hidden in a formula, nor is affection confined to funeral ceremonies. Be what you are. I like the way you go about thinking on the more serious things of Vedanta. Leave religion to smelly old fogeys like me.

Such a noble and humble nature the Grandfather possesses though he makes his appearance for a very short time, he in fact, instils confidence in Rama about the philosophy of life and death. Besides Grandfather

4. Ibid., p. 7
5. Ibid., p. 17
there is Little Mother, Rama's second Step-mother Vishalakshi who visits Benares with Rama and Sridhara—eleven months old—soon after father's death. Vishalakshi, widowed at a very early age recovers soon and looks after her babe Sridhara and her husband's grown—up children with all the maternal care. There is Lakshamma, Grandfather Kittanna's sister, who looks after the orphans of the family, for every family has great aunts who go on changing from orphan to orphan—that they ever remain young. Aunt Lakshamma would never complain or sigh or weep and it seems as if she would live for three hundred years. Rama's step sister Saroja has great affection for Rama and it is to him she confides that the man she wishes to marry is not a South Indian Brahmin. Saroja sends a sari to Madeleine with due regards. Saroja's marriage is the first marriage after the father's death and hence Rama comes to attend his sister's wedding and gives an invitation for her to come to Aix in France. Saroja has great regard for her brother Rama and is quite upset on seeing Rama unwell.

The minor Western characters are Georges, Oncle Charles, Tante Zoubie and Catherine. To begin with, Georges is an intelligent man and a linguist knowing several European languages and at present is busy studying Chinese and Sanskrit. He involves himself in Catholicism, just like his father who embraces Christianity and from
time to time we see Madeleine discussing the Holy Grail
with Georges. It is in Georges's speech that Madeleine
finds herself engrossed and sits still and listens as
though to a saint or a hero. Georges always speaks:

with the noble anguish of the
believer, with the feeling that
if God is not true he must be
made true, and that if God
could not be made true then
must impious man be made to go
through hellfire so that God
might be, and in the image
Georges had given the Supreme
Being.

Just like Shatav, Georges too could have said,

"I must, must believe in God." 7

As Raja Rao says Georges is a very sincere man and his
bent back gives the look as bearing the burden of the
history of mankind:

He carried our sorrows and our
stupidities, rags that we threw
on his back, as he went along
the street; the more you threw,
the more he blessed, for in the
earth, deep in the mud, in the
shine of the dung-lice and in
the wound of the dog, in
spittle and in dustbin -bone,
in the face of a wriggling pink
prostitute, would Georges find

6. Ibid., p. 72
7. Ibid.
his proof of God. For him, to be was to know evil existed, to acknowledge sin was to be already at the ladder of the divine.

Such is Georges's character. In every thing he tries to have a vision of God. Madeleine takes Georges into confidence and discusses all her problems with him. Madeleine did hate him for being so impervious. It looks as though Georges's interests are confined to metaphysical level only. But at the same time she respects Georges a lot for she feels that:

he was a man that possessed a secret knowledge of something, some magic that could make mountains move, or the seas recede.

Rama may misunderstand Madeleine for showering so much affection on Georges, but Georges has only the most brotherly or paternal affection for her. Since she is innocent and childish, Georges regards her. He knows that God lives wherever there is innocence. She always enjoys his company and occasionally his argument continues about something that is unnameable. Georges is to be married soon to Catherine, cousin sister of Madeleine. He is a man

8. The Serpent and the Rope, p. 72
9. Ibid., p. 73
who cares for all and wants to be cared for. Nobody can say whether he loved someone in his life, for he never ever mentions it. On the other hand Catherine is truly a Christian a good Catholic and possessed all the feminine qualities needed in a woman. She is the right choice for Georges, and even if:

she had nothing in her, atleast
she would never be an emotional problem for Georges. 10

He needs calm and rest in order to concentrate on work and prayer. She knows all that Georges needs and tends to his needs at the right time too.

Catherine's heart is in the right place, only it has to be metaphysically educated. 11

and being a true Catholic she knows the saying of Saint John ; "For love is of God and he that loveth but touch God." 12

The other two characters are Oncle Charles and Tante Zoubie, Catherine's parents. Oncle Charles is a very cheerful man, "He is the whole of himself, in whatever

10. Ibid., p. 151
11. Ibid., p. 152
12. Ibid.
he does". 13

He loves music but fortune is not so kind on him, so whenever an organist of the cathedral fell ill, he went there to play the organ. He was fifty seven years of age but seems fifteen years younger and always impeccably dressed. In contrast Zoubie is fat and her full name is Zoubelda. She was once divorced as her husband ran off with a younger girl. Zoubie was in fact seven years older to her previous husband. Oncle Charles too is a third widower and after a courtship of five or six years, they decided to marry. Tante Zoubie's generosity is seen when she welcomes Madeleine back to the family. Oncle Charles has great regard for his aged mother and the shock of the return of Madeleine in the family is to be kept a secret, for his mother was, "so near the Grave. Let her die in peace." 14 he thought and did not wish to hurt her in anyway. He is in the grips of fright whenever he speaks about his mother. Zoubie always makes Rama happy, her opinion about men is that:

Man is such a frail, such a foolish creature. If you respect him too much, he will cheat you. If you treat him with condescension, he will

13. Ibid., p.85
14. Ibid., p.86
obey and insult you. 15

Though she speaks in such a manner about men she cares a lot for Oncle Charles. A difference of opinion in every aspect is noticeable in Tante Zoubie and Oncle Charles but surprisingly they both lived happily together.

Lezo, who is often seen in the company of Rama, Catherine, Madeleine, Charles, Zoubie and Georges, is an incorrigible cynic. To him the history of mankind is confusing and believes only, like the Spaniards, that man is a fine animal. Lezo sees life differently and divides life into enjoyment and God. He dreams a lot and often discusses about it with Mari, his maid, she in return tells him her dreams which are similar. Marie had her young man who comes on Sunday afternoons and in between Lezo took the advantage to enjoy her. Every girl he sees he either sings or says something to them. As he is isolated his vulgarity seems to increase too. On one occasion he happens to say some crude things to Madeleine and she seems quite annoyed. Besides his flirtish nature, he is well-versed in Tibetan and Chinese and teaches Madeleine, who in order to read the Chinese Buddhism ought to know the script. Lezo enjoys the quarrels on dogmas, as "his

15. Ibid., p. 374
linguistic help was more often in demand" 16 thus increasing his importance.

Madeleine often begged him to stay on weekend days when they needed refreshment and repose. Discussions in the presence of Lezo were only superficial and shallow. Madeleine always had questions to ask on Pali or Sanskrit, immediately Lezo is seen discussing Pali, Sanskrit or Chinese with the dexterity of an Indian Pandit. Rama often called Lezo 'Lakshmana Bhatta' in fun which means a 'Brahmin'. Whenever Lezo increased at the waist and on getting his trousers altered always got entangled with the seamstress. Such a character is Lezo.

Raja Rao's characters in one way or the other depend on one another though each possesses a diverse nature. Several incidents happening to these minor characters make up the novel. The only character who vacillates between the East and the West is Rama, who physically and mentally comes to India then returns to France. The minor characters do hold India in high esteem but only on a metaphysical level.

Again a galaxy of characters are portrayed in The Cat and Shakespeare belonging to different religions and status. In the ration office, Velayudhan Nair manipulates ration cards, the card is sold for Rupees two,

16. Ibid., p. 304
the official black market rate, Rupees ten for duplicate cards given to hotels. The corrupt officers of the ration office are aptly described by Raja Rao. John, a Christian, plays the role of a priest, after Govindan Nair makes the Cat holy and ready for the consecration ceremony. Another character is, Abraham, who gets an unexpected promotion and remains in the office. He explains his Muslim theology and proves the cat to be sacred to the Muslims. Though Muslim religion prohibits smoking, he smokes incessantly and is diabetic. This is the reason why Govindan Nair foregoes his own promotion and gives it to Abraham.

Bhoothalinga Iyer, a brahmin, is rather a superstitious man. If a cat is seen by him in the morning it brings him evil, if it crosses from right to left while going to office it is inauspicious. To make his day lucky after this evil occurrence he returns home and prays to God and ask their blessings. A rat is considered auspicious as it is the vehicle of Lord Ganesh. Bhoothalinga Iyer and Velayudhan Nair represent the cruder side of sex whereas Govindan Nair, the protagonist's Guru, represents the saner side. Hence the ration office comprises of the male characters. Murugan Mudali owns a house, to own a house is like a dream come true, Govindan purchases the house of Mudali for Usha (Pai's daughter). We see three children Usha and Vithal (Pai's children) and Sridhar (Nair's son), and they being neighbours play about freely. A female
character Lakshmi is seen at the brothel who strips off her clothes to be enjoyed by Nair but surprisingly he asks her to dress herself.

In this novel the characters portrayed by Raja Rao do not develop into fullness through intense and dramatic conflicts which are necessary for the structure of the novel. The characters we see are static and mere types unlike Ramaswamy or Moorthy or Madeleine or even Kirillov for that matter. Raja Rao in _Comrade Kirillov_ introduces his characters by mere initials of S and R and that too in Irene's diary. It is the diary which acts as an eye-opener to the individual characters of Kirillov, R probably Raja Rao himself and S. S. is a shorn sikh and an unrepentant widower who, "chased girls by the wayside and abandoned them pregnant." ¹⁷

S. has great regard for Marx and D. H. Lawrence. He sports a Lawrencian beard and wears a red scarf. Irene writes that S works at the Censor's office, reading Punjabi letters to folks at home. On 14th October he comes to say goodbye to Irene, as he had requested for an outstation service, hence was proceeding to Devonshire where he would teach arithmetic and drawing to children. But the next time he returns with Peggy, an Irish woman, a

¹⁷ Raja Rao, _Comrade Kirillov_, (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1976), p. 28
school teacher whom he intends to marry. After this nothing much is written in Irene's diary. The mention of the Sikh's name in Irene's diary shows his closeness to Kirillov's family. R a friend of S and cousin to Kirillov writes a letter from India. He has lived in Germany as well as in Italy, yet, he is an Indian. His English is not good but has a good hold on metaphysics. He is very simple and straight like a child and "Like most Indians magniloquent."  

R. is knowledgeable and speaks of aesthetics and Sanskrit with great ease. He wears 'Vedic clothes, with becoming modernity..."  

By this one can infer that he is an Indian, and a true Indian to the core. Earlier Irene seems to hate him but later develops a liking for him. He is said to be effeminate and has a romanesque charm about him. R. is a brahmin, childlike clinging to the abstract and also a verbose. These are few of the typical qualities we find in R. In fact Kirillov envies him for being so sincere to his mother country, unlike himself, who abandons her in search of Truth.

Raja Rao, thus, creates characters not of wood or stone but real life-like characters. None of them, be they major or minor in nature, can escape from

18. Ibid., p. 108

19. Ibid., p. 116
committing the fallacies humans commit. At times they may be contradictory in themselves but they fully contribute and express the metaphysical and philosophical wisdom of India. Raja Rao is superb in presenting characters of such diverse nature as seen in this chapter.

Indeed the author offers a rich galaxy of characters; minor they may be in the context of a novel, but they are extremely revealing and life-like in portraiture.