CHAPTER III

RAJA RAJ AND THE IMPERIAL SELF
Krishnan, the protagonist of *The Dark Dancer*, says that "Wherever a Brahmin is, there is a temple."\(^1\) Krishnan is so self-conscious that he cannot unburden himself of his "Brahminhood." Ramaswamy, the protagonist of *The Serpent and the Rope*, appears to be more self-conscious than Krishnan. He begins his narration with a self-conscious assertion that "I was born a Brahmin—that is, devoted to Truth and all that. 'Brahmin is he who knows Brahman,' etc., etc. ..."\(^2\) Towards the end of the narrative, he tells Catherine that "A Brahmin is he who knows Brahman," and hastens to add that "There is another, a roguish definition. A Brahmin is he who loves a good banquet."\(^3\) Govindan Nair in *The Cat and Shakespeare* recites to his friend Ramakrishna Pai the *Astavakra Samhita*, and tells him:

"I have done a good job. I have explained to the Brahmin what Brahman is. 'Brahmin is he who knows Brahman,' etc., etc. Ruling princes

\(^1\) *The Dark Dancer*, p. 167.


taught sadhus the Truth in the Upanishadic times. Now Nairs alone can teach the Truth in the world."^{4}

The above passages, if placed in the context of Raja Rao's seminal themes in the entire corpus of his writing, exemplify the ironic perspective from which his texts are organized. Ramaswamy in *The Serpent and the Rope* talks about everything under the sun. He reflects on space, time and eternity, and illusion and reality, and ultimately announces his humble intention to seek the feet of his Guru in Travancore. The text doesn't say whether the Guru is a Brahmin or a Nair. But his second definition of a Brahmin as "he who loves a good banquet" perhaps suggests the kind of self-consciousness which makes one aware of one's own limitations.

Raja Rao's four novels to date—Kanthapura, *The Serpent and the Rope*, The Cat and Shakespeare, and Comrade Kirillov—dramatize the ways and means through which his protagonists evolve to that stage of awareness which consists in knowing and evaluating their limitations. It also consists in unburdening themselves of the aweful superiority and prestige associated with a Brahmin in a caste-ridden society. For

example, what is significant in *Kanthapura* is not the electrifying effect of the Gandhian ethic on a rural community but the transformation it brings in Moorthy, who comes from a higher caste.

Raja Rao has received extensive and varied critical attention in India and abroad. His narrative and linguistic innovations and his varied interests in philosophy, aesthetics, sociology, and politics have been explored and explicated. C.D. Narasimhaiah and M.K. Naik have written excellent monographs, which elucidate the complexities of the entire oeuvre. But the more relevant aspect in discussing a writer like Raja Rao seems to be the images of society that are foregrounded in his texts. In the following pages, an attempt is made to analyse the texts so as to bring out the aesthetic and the contextual relevance of the texts in terms of their sociocultural implications. For the sake of clarity of the argument, the most convenient point of entry into the fictional corpus of Raja Rao is *The Cat and Shakespeare*. Raja Rao calls it "A Tale of Modern India." One may doubt whether the Trivandrum of 1940s can be taken as an image of modern India. The nature of Raja Rao's achievement and its relevance to us largely depend on the means and the method we employ in answering the question posed earlier. The centre of the plot in *The Cat and Shakespeare* is Ration Office No. 66, in which Govindan
Nair is a clerk. He and the narrator, Ramakrishna Pai, who works in the Revenue Office, are neighbours. A long dilapidated wall divides the neighbours. Ramakrishna Pai, who is transferred from Pattanur to Trivandrum, is compelled to stay away from his wife and children. He finds in Govindan Nair a warm host and a generous friend, and in Shantha, a woman who wants him. We see the Nair through the eyes of a Brahmin, a Brahmin who is conscious of his caste. The Ration Office brings together characters who belong to various castes and communities. Bhoothalinga Iyer, the boss, is a Brahmin. John, Abraham, Syed Sahib, and Ramakrishna are Govindan Nair's colleagues. The narrator confesses that Govindan Nair knows Sanskrit and has read the basic texts on Hinduism and Hindu philosophy, of which, though a Brahmin, he himself is absolutely ignorant. The Ration Office and the people who run it may be taken as India in miniature. The British had the justification of organizing ration shops to achieve equitable distribution of food stuffs: they were financing a war against tyranny. What justification can one advance for continuing the British institution of rationing—with ration offices, ration shops, and ration cards—so many years after the British left India? Most people who work in the Ration Office build houses and acquire wealth and influence. John, for example, builds a
house. As Govindan Nair remarks humorously, "He built a
house, that is John did. He built a modest little house.
He said it was done from the proceeds of his wife's property
sale. Her grandmother had just died. Everybody has a grand-
mother, you know." This indicates that exploitation and
corruption always exist and make some people rich and some
people poor. Frequently, bags of rice suddenly disappear;
sometimes, they go unaccounted. A lot of faking goes on in
the issue of ration cards. False statistics are conveniently
used and numbers are manipulated, so that owners of hotels
thrive while the man in the street goes without food. Govindan
Nair is aware of what happens in the Ration Office. For
example, he says, "Rats eat up accounts. That is how we ex-
plained away the ration given to Kolliathur village. When
the big boss asked, 'Where are the files?' we made such a
grand search. First my boss said: 'We have misplaced it.'
Then he said: 'We do not think we have it in this office.'
Finally he wrote: 'Eaten away by rats. Please ask the Public
Works Department. Officer to come to Ration Office No.66
for inspection. Two reports on rat pest remain unanswered.'

5. The Cat and Shakespeare, p. 27.
6. Ibid., p. 27.
The passage under review may be construed as a fine satire on the way in which most government departments function in India. But the point that has to be emphasized is that Govindan Nair's knowledge of the corrupt practices of his colleagues doesn't make him a cynic. In other words, it doesn't in any way affect his warmth and goodwill towards his colleagues. His attitude towards human weakness and frailty is more charitable than his attitude towards corruption. In order to fulfil an obligation of his boss to a woman with whom he (the boss) had a clandestine relationship, Govindan Nair courts arrest and imprisonment. Bhoothalinga Iyer, his boss, places a rupee in the treasure pitcher of the sanctorum every time he commits a sin. In order to avoid any fuss about his activities, he tells his wife that the treasure pitcher contains money that would one day help him go to Benares. He requests Govindan Nair to go to Mutthalinga Nayak Street and give the treasure pitcher to a widow called Minakshamma. This is twisted as evidence against Govindan Nair that he took a bribe from a widow whose son owns a ration shop. He seems to have a marvellous sobriety that stands him in good stead in negotiating with all inconceivable situations. M.K.Naik thinks that "Though The Cat and Shakespeare can be enjoyed simply as a comic extravaganza and a realistic tale, it is, at the same time, a very ambitious exercise in meta-
It may not be easy to unravel the significance of the author's "ambitious exercise in metaphysical speculation," but it is possible to explicate the semantic structure of the tale by invoking the Lawrentian dictum, "Let me hear what the novel says." Govindan Nair himself is a good guide—better than any commentator—in showing the path that leads to an innate confidence in the self. He tells the judge, "Your Lordship, I speak only the truth. If the world of man does not conform to truth, should truth suffer for that reason? If only you knew how I pray every night and say: 'Mother, keep me at the lotus feet of Truth.' The judge can give a judgment. The Government Advocate can accuse. Police Inspector Rama Iyer can muster evidence. But the accused alone knows the truth." In the passage just cited, the word "truth" is so emphasized that the speaker may be misconstrued as one who protests but is not interested in practising what he says. It is precisely here that the comic sense of life and humour come to the rescue.


9 The Cat and Shakespeare, p. 103.
of Govindan Nair. Of the many instances that are available in Shakespeare's plays, there is an apt instance in Much Ado About Nothing, in which Hero's innocence and chastity are vindicated and her betrothal to Claudio is saved from certain ruin by the innocuous and unpremeditated act of Dogberry and Verges. After arresting Don John's men, Borachio and Conrade, and bringing them to Don Pedro, Dogberry says, "Marry, sir... they have spoken untruths; secondarily, they are slanders; sixth and lastly, they have belied a lady; thirdly, they have verified unjust things; and, to conclude, they are lying knaves." The cat that John presents to Govindan Nair to mock him saves him by making the court clerk trace the paper in which Bhoothalinga Iyer's signature is clearly visible. As the narrator comments,

It was all due to Govindan Nair. He had, while in prison, written out a whole story to himself. Bhoothalinga Iyer had signed the paper. It had nothing to do with ration permits. It had to do with Bhoothalinga Iyer's extramarital propensities. In this business he came across virtue. So instead of going to Benares he gave the money to the widow of a Brahmin, an Iyengar woman in fact. (The breasts and other things were added to make the story comply with film stories.)

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The story came true as he wrote it. He was sure that it was a fact. He told himself again and again and told it in court again and again. At night the prison wardens were surprised to see him talking to himself. Actually he thought he was addressing the court. He even made and re-made the necessary gestures. Wardens could think he was practising acting. He recited his prose precisely till he knew every situation by heart. That is why he was so cocksure in open court. After all, only a story that you write yourself from nowhere can be perfect. You can do with it what you want to do with it. (Abraham wrote romantic poetry and he said it did with him what it wanted. So, eventually, he married Myriam, etc.) But Govindan Nair had the liberty the judge did not have. Only the Government Advocate knew everything. A fact is a prisoner. You are free, or you become the prisoner, and the fact is free, etc., etc. So the Government Advocate knew the accused was no accused. He was one with the accused. That showed why the cat went to the Government Advocate first. The cat also kissed the clerk on the neck.\footnote{The Cat and Shakespeare, pp. 107-108.}

The above crucial passage demonstrates Govindan Nair's implicit confidence in the self. The key sentence in the passage appears to be "In this business he came across
Virtue. " Virtue consists in helping people who are in need, not in going to Benares to expiate one's sins. Perhaps it is this conviction that propels him to write about the entire mess in which he is involved. In writing the story, Nair seems to detach himself from the fact that he is subordinate to his boss and focus his imagination on the method of dramatizing it in the court. As the passage under consideration says, "He even made and remade the necessary gestures." The total import of the passage is suggested by the narrator's mature reflection that "only a story that you write yourself from nowhere can be perfect." Moreover, the passage juxtaposes fact, fiction, and truth. Truth is not something that is there to be seized and exhibited.

What is a fact may appear as a fiction. For example, Bhoothalinga Iyer's sudden death caused by the cat landing on his head may appear as a fiction, just as an elderly advocate in the court considers his relationship with the Brahmin widow "sheer pornography." But the point to be noted in the context of the text is that fictions are not truths but they bring home to men's bosoms and business truths which the self always confirms and authenticates.

From the foregoing analysis, it may be possible to interpret the two major symbols in the text, the cat and Shakespeare. These two symbols are reinforced by another symbol, the house that the narrator dreams of building. A careful perusal of the text suggests that the word "mystery" is associated with Shakespeare. Govindan Nair tells John that "Shakespeare knew every mystery of the ration shop." Just before he makes this statement, Govindan Nair draws a comparison between the Kingdom of Denmark and the Ration Office, making us remember the words of Marcellus to Horatio: "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark." What Govindan Nair seems to suggest is not a parallel between Hamlet and what goes on inside the Ration office but that in Shakespearian imagination everything is possible. As Theseus says in A Midsummer-Night's Dream,

The Poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,  
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;  
And as imagination bodies forth  
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen  
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing  
A local habitation and a name.  
Such tricks hath strong imagination

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That, if it would but apprehend some joy,
It comprehends some bringer of that joy;
Or in the night, imagining some fear,
How easy is a bush suppos'd a bear!  

Govindan Nair has fertile imagination and a refined sense for language, so that he can not only parody a Shakespearian passage but can eloquently talk about the cat in the cage in Malayalam, Sanskrit, Latin, and English. Imagination and empathy made Shakespeare everything and nothing. Jorge Luis Borges, in a brilliant sketch entitled "Everything and Nothing," makes the following comment:

History adds that before or after dying he found himself in the presence of God and told him: 'I who have been so many men in vain want to be one and myself.' The voice of the Lord answered from a whirlwind: 'Neither am I any one; I have dreamt the world as you dreamt your work, my Shakespeare, and among the forms in my dream are you, who like myself are many and no one.'

The Borgesian text we have just cited reinforces the idea that poetic imagination and divine imagination are not two

15 A Midsummer Night's Dream, V. i. 12-22.

different things; in a way, they are one. When an interlocutor asked Raja Rao, "What is the justification of the name of Shakespeare in the title of The Cat and Shakespeare?" Raja Rao said, "Because of the fact that Shakespeare is a sage."¹⁷ A sage is one whose doors of perception are open and refined, so that he can behold the forms of things unknown. Govindan Nair seems to have developed his imagination and sensibility to such a refined degree that he can see the mystery associated with existence in its natural and supernatural dimensions. His message that one ought to trust the mother cat like a kitten may appear cryptic at the human level, but is definitely profound at the divine level. A kitten has implicit faith in the mother cat when it shifts the kitten from place to place. The relationship between the mother cat and the kitten may also be interpreted from the point of view of the Advaita, Visishtadvaita and Dvaita tenets in Indian philosophy, which we shall elaborately discuss with reference to The Serpent and the Rope. But here, it can only be pointed out that when we say that existence is a mystery, we are only saying that however much one tries to squeeze the meaning of existence, something or the other would remain unaccounted for and unexplained.

The narrator of the tale, Ramakrishna Pai, always thinks of building a house. Govindan Nair encourages him, because in the traditional view of Hindu society a man who builds his own house is a man of achievement. This traditional view of life, though gives more importance to the spiritual aspect of human life, does not ignore its material aspect. If one worships Lord Siva by offering *bilva* leaves to the deity, it is assumed that one's material and spiritual needs are taken care of. Even if the deity is propitiated unconsciously, just as a hunter hiding in ambush to shoot a deer or a porcupine made the *bilva* leaves fall on the image of Siva which was there, the consequence will be similar. As the narrator reflects, "it's not the way you worship that is important but what you adore. Even an accidental fall of leaves on Shiva's head got the wicked hunter his vision. And thus the stump of a tree became sacred—and its trefoil sacred, for all that is sacred to God. So when I look from my window eastward, just by the garden wall, I see the stump of *bilva* tree, thorns visible in the morning sun. And I wonder if God will ever bless me, just like that."

Perhaps his association with Govindan Nair has impregnated the mind of the

18 The Cat and Shakespeare, p. 9.
narrator in such a way that his constant prayer is: "Lord, let me build the house." His prayer is answered in the form of Shantha, with whose money he buys the house in which he has been staying. His promotion and prosperity seem to be the blessing for which he has been praying, so that he finally considers that "Truth is such a beautiful thing—a beautiful woman like Shantha loves to hear the truth talked, because it explains her beauty and takes away her responsibility." This metaphysical truth is elaborated by making use of the image of stairs, as in the following passage:

So that day I walked behind the cat. It went down into the kitchen of the White House and left the litter in the corner of the granary room. Then it went up a series of stone steps. Up and up it went, up the staircase. Everybody bowed as if awed. Then I, too, followed it. This time I would not be defeated. I must win, I said. The winning was easy, for I heard a very lovely music. I was breathless. The staircase suddenly turned, and in went the cat. I stood there white as marble. I looked in and saw everything.

I saw nose (not the nose) and eyes seeing eyes seeing, I saw ears curved to make sound visible, and face and limbs rising in perfection of per-

19 The Cat and Shakespeare, p. 13.
20 Ibid., p. 115.
fection, for form was it. I saw love yet knew not its name but heard it as sound, I saw truth not as fact but as ignition. I could walk into fire and be cool, I could sing and be silent, I could hold myself and yet not be there. I saw feet. They made flowers on stems and the curved hands of children. I smelled a breath that was of nowhere but rising in my nostrils sank back into me, and found death was at my door. I woke up and found death had passed by, telling me I had no business to be there. Then where was I? Death said it had died. I had killed death. When you see death as death, you kill it. When you say, I am so and so, and you say, I am such and such, you have killed yourself. I remain over, having killed myself. The passage under critical focus defies analysis and explication. The vision that Ramakrishna Pai earns for himself dissolves all dualities. Not only does it dissolve all dualities, but it also dissolves ego-consciousness. Death is meaningful only in terms of the ego. To the naked vision death appears only as the collapse of the body and the annihilation of the body-consciousness. When one kills oneself, it only means that one has made a leap, a leap into the forms

21 The Cat and Shakespeare, pp.115-116.
unknown. This inference is something that one can draw solely with reference to the text under review. If, as Raja Rao puts it, "writing is a sadhana," which means a mode of prayer, The Cat and Shakespeare is a tale that dramatizes the efficacy of training oneself to achieve the kind of anonymity Borges noticed in Shakespearian imagination and, at the same time, establish and nourish one's roots in the traditional social forms, which authenticate and vitalize the image of God in man and the image of man in God. Ramaswamy's discursive attempts at and non-discursive modes of apprehending reality constitute a sadhana which doesn't achieve any kind of ultimate spiritual fruition but suggests ways and means of achieving it. In The Serpent and the Rope, there are innumerable passages which are discursive, in the sense that they make a point which has a metaphysical connotation rather than a psychic suggestion. For example, the following passage:

Destiny is, I think, nothing but a series of psychic knots that we tie with our own fears. The stars are but efforts made indeterminate. To act, then, is to be proscribed to yourself. Freedom is to leave nothing of yourself outside. The whole of event is the eye of life, and eternity the

22Shiva Niranjan, "Interview," p. 20.
"I". Never can you escape eternity, for never can you escape that "I." Even when you say you can, it is the "I" saying it. Can the "I" say anything? No, it cannot, no more than eternity can be seen in time. But time seeing itself is eternity, just as wave seeing itself is water. Meanwhile the winds lift and the monsoon blows, and white flakes of wavelets curve and rise, dash and demonstrate, and from crest to crest they cavalcade processioning to the shore. Not wavelets or crest, however breathless with foam, is life: water is the meaning of life, or rather the meaning of life is līla, play.

Not achievement but self-recognition is pure significance. The extrovert confederates of action must stop, then we leap back to our own safety, our own desperation. The knots are thus undone, and calm as the Mediterranean is the effortless sea.

For the going inward is the true birth. He indeed the Brahmin who turns the crest inward; even if you are a pandit great as Jagannatha Bhatta or learned in logic as Kapila-charya, the true life, the true Brahminhood commences when you recognise yourself in your eternity. At some moment you must stop life and look into it. Marriage or maternity, pain or the intimacy of success—love—may dip you into yourself. And as you go on dipping and rising in your inner Ganges murmuring,
Kashi Kshetram Shariram
Tribhuvana jananim vayapim gyana Ganga
My body, the holy site, is Benares,
Spreading within me as knowledge, the Ganges,
Mother of the three worlds,
you undo your knots. It is thus Benares is
sacred, and Mother Ganga the absolver of sins.
Sin is to think that in acting you are the
actor: freedom, that you never could be the
doer or enjoyer of an act. In the Ganges of
such a life destiny dissolves—and you sail
down to your own ocean ... 23

The passage just cited makes one think that it is a
prose poem. But on re-reading it, we find that the wave and
sea imagery is more rhetorical than poetic. The passage in
a way suggests the difference between self-introversion
and self-extroversion. The "I" in the context of the entire
text refers to the transcendent subject. But this transcen­
dental subject becomes the object when the eye turns inward.
The cryptic image "time seeing itself is eternity, just as
wave seeing itself is water" signifies the perennial act of
seeing, which helps one recognize oneself in one's eternity.
In all social activity and intellectual perception, the self
dips into itself. The Ganges murmurs that the body itself
is Benares and the Ganges flows inside it, spreading know-

23 The Serpent and the Rope, pp. 215-216.
Knowledge consists in attaining freedom. Freedom consists in getting over the illusion that you are the doer or enjoyer of an act. On the other hand, it is a sin to think that in acting you are the actor. Bondage or freedom "in marriage or maternity, pain or the intimacy of success—love"—is eternally intransitive, in the sense that it suggests a state of mind which is discursive and dualistic. Destiny as "a series of psychic knots that we tie with our own fears" suggests a state of bondage. The Ganges in the sense of knowledge can dissolve all fears, in other words, contradiction and duality. Whatever one does dips one into the self. There alone action, social or intellectual, becomes meaningful. It appears as though the self has the kind of perfection which is absolute and incontrovertible. One may, borrowing a phrase from Quentin Anderson, call the self "the imperial self." The text under review and the speaker's tone suggest a non-dualistic view of the self and reality, Advaita, the corner stone of the BhagavadGita. As Swami Chidbhavananda says, "Advaita literally means non-dualism. What are termed Jagat and Jiva and Brahman are not really separate entities. Reality is one without a second. It is Existence-Knowledge-Bliss Infinite. It has intrinsic power to manifest Itself as the Jagat and the Jiva. This inherent power is called Maya. Brahman and
Maya are inseparable. This is the implication of the word Advaita. It is because of his ignorance that the Jiva fancies that he is separate from the universe and the Substratum behind it. With a dawn of knowledge this feeling of difference vanishes. The Reality alone exists. Because of Its Mayasakti It manifests Itself as the Jiva and the Jagat. Resolving this sakti into Itself, It also remains unmanifest. In Its kinetic state it is Saguna Brahman (Conditioned Reality), in the static Nirguna (Absolute Reality). As the wave subsides into the ocean the individual soul dissolves into the Absolute. This is emancipation according to the Advaita system of philosophy.  

The text under review also makes use of the images of the wave and the sea. When the wave subsides into the ocean, there is no sound or friction. Every thing is calm as the Mediterranean. What is noticeable here is the secularization of the scripture. Ramaswamy tries to interpret the sacred in a secular context, that is, in terms of his relationship with his wife, Madeleine, and Savithri (family), and his commitment to India (society).

If we look at the mode of narration employed in The Serpent and the Rope, we may gain a perspective that would

help us in clarifying a number of knotty problems it presents. The narrative presents the consciousness of a single character who also happens to be the protagonist, Ramaswamy. This can be called self-narration, which Proust employs in *A la Recherche du temps perdu* (Rememberance of the Things Past). This mode of narration, that is, self-narration, has certain creative possibilities and, at the same time, certain limitations. As Dorrit Cohn cogently remarks, "Contrary to what one might have expected ... the first-person narrator has less free access to his own past psyche than the omniscient narrator of third-person fiction has to the psyches of his characters. His retrospection depends on a fundamentally different optics: there is no magic mirror corresponding to the magic lens, only the 'telescope levelled at time' of which Proust speaks, and by which he means a 'real' psychological vision conditioned by memory. This frequently prompts a first-person narrator to mention the plausibility of his cognition, particularly when it involves the most inchoate moments of his past" (emphasis added). In *The Serpent and the Rope*, Ramaswamy narrates his own story and, while narrating, collapses the chronology in order to give an inclusive vision. But when he claims

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himself to be a historian, he is not very certain of what he is doing. The novel is not divided into chapters or sections, which suggests that it is a continuous flow, now and then interrupted by innumerable discursive comments on every form of social and spiritual activity. The following passage very well illustrates the significance of the foregoing comments:

The rest of the story is easily told. In a classical novel it might have ended in palace and palanquin and howdah, or in the high Himalayas, but I am not telling a story here, I am writing the sad and uneven chronicle of a life, my life, with no art or decoration, but with "objectivity," the discipline of the "historical sciences," for by taste and tradition I am only a historian.26

The above passage exemplifies the truth of Raja Rao's own remarks on the aesthetic of *The Serpent and the Rope*. He tells an interlocutor: "The aesthetic is that, sometimes, I like to write like a *Purana*. I like the *Puranic* conception. That is the only conception of novel for me. I don't want to compare my novel with any foreign novel. I don't like to write like a foreign novelist. I am very much an Indian and the Indian form is the *Puranic* form. Form comes naturally

26 *The Serpent and the Rope*, p. 231.
to me. Hence, it is wrong to study my novels in the light of the Western conception of a well-made novel."

The author's direction, suggesting the method a reader should adopt in discussing his texts, may not be acceptable to a thorough-going formalist, who swears by the intentional fallacy. In considering a text, one has to go beyond formalism, if it helps in unravelling the intricacies of the text. In Sanskrit sacred literature, there are eighteen Puranas (Ashtadasa Puranas). The authorship of these Puranas is attributed to the sage Vyasa, the author of the Mahabharata. Most of the Puranas have socio-cultural significance, in the sense that they convey a message concerning the way the self should seek dharma, artha, kama, and moksha. Moksha is the ultimate end, the integration of the self and reality, which would dissolve maya. A Purana contains not one story but a number of stories loosely connected by the purposive narration that conveys a message. It conforms to the Horatian pattern of art providing, at one and the same time, profit and delight. In other words, they exemplify an aesthetic which Abrams called pragmatic. Most Puranic stories have a happy blend of realism and fantasy, so that we see in them a fusion of the Barthesian codes and the incomparable

27Shiva Niranjan, "Interview," p. 20.
metaphysical and philosophical insights. While the first-person narration helps Ramaswamy keep his narration episodic and discursive, his constant preoccupation with the sources of illumination helps him make the narration run like the flow of the Ganges. The various characters that appear and disappear in the narrative contribute a great deal not only in creating diversity but in explicating the meaning and the significance of that diversity, which is a characteristic of Puranic narration. There are five significant women characters in the text, whose relationship with the narrator provides a consciousness which is expanding and which, at the same time, differentiates the socio-cultural milieus of the characters themselves. The image of his stepmother, humorously christened Little Mother, with her infant son, Sridhara, on her lap, makes the narrator think of his French wife, Madeleine. He reflects on the various motives which might have propelled her to marry him, and says, "What I think Madeleine really cared for was a disinterested devotion to any cause, and she loved me partly because she felt India had been wronged by the British, and because she would, in marrying me, know and identify herself with a great people." Whether he loved Madeleine or not, the word "love" seems to earn a multiple meaning, as in the following passage:

\(^{28}\) The Serpent and the Rope, p. 18.
To me difference was inborn—like my being the eldest son of my father, or like my grandfather being the Eight-pillared House Ramakrishnayya, and you had just to mention his name anywhere in Mysore State, even to the Maharaja, and you were offered a seat, a wash and a meal, and a coconut-and-shawl adieu. To me difference was self-created, and so I accepted that Madeleine was different. That is why I loved her so. In fact, even Little Mother, who sat in front of me—how could I not love her, though she was so different from my own mother? In difference there is the acceptance of one's self as a reality—and the perspective gives the space for love.

The above passage enlarges the meaning of love, which makes it possible for the narrator to differentiate between one character and the other and, at the same time, discover a network of relations that makes the difference, paradoxically, a kind of resemblance, as the following passage unmistakably suggests:

In some ways—I thought that day, as the boat, now that evening was soon going to fall, was moving upstream, with a fine, clear wind sailing against us—in some ways how like Madeleine was Little Mother. They both had the same shy pre-

29 The Serpent and the Rope, pp. 19-20.
sence, both rather silent and remembering everything; they loved, too, more than is customary. Both knew by birth that life is no song but a brave suffering, and that at best there are moments of bridal joy with occasionally a drive over a bridge--and then the return to the earth and maybe to widowhood.  

When he meets Savithri on his way back from Benares, he feels that "Her presence never said anything, but her absence spoke. Even when she went to speak on the telephone one felt she had a rich, natural grace, and one longed for her to be back. I felt I did not like her, she was too modern for me; she had already started smoking." The phrase "one longed for her to be back" suggests the first impression, which immediately gets itself corrected. He doesn't like the girl because she is too modern when compared to Little Mother. When he meets Savithri again in Paris, he tries again to analyse the difference and the similarity between Savithri and the other women he met, in order to specify what Savithri means to him. That Savithri has a mind that is always absorbed, serious, and sad, but capable of seeing the truth in all its radiance and majesty is the inference he draws from his intimate contact with her. The following passage seems to affirm this inference:

30 The Serpent and the Rope, p. 20.
31 Ibid., p. 31.
For her, I could see, everything was gesture and symbol, and time had been abolished, that the river might run through the night, the tree rise high, the mountains move as on themselves; that words be spoken as though left behind, and the body itself be a casket in which one sees oneself, not as limb and form, but as light cooled into space, as a gift, an object, a truth. All was secret to her but herself—so all was a legend, and every event a wonder.32

When he meets her again, in London, she performs a simple ceremony of devotion. She kneels and places her head on his feet. On that occasion he offers her the toe-rings given by Little Mother as a gift to Madeleine, her daughter-in-law. This symbolic act creates another meaning for love, it is "like a sacred text, a cryptogram, with different meanings at different hierarchies of awareness."33 When he thinks of his sister, Saroja, the perspective doesn't alter. When he beholds her at the age of seventeen, he wonders and feels that she "would never say anything important to any one, and yet by some abrupt inconsequentiality she would say something you had been waiting to name."34

32 The Serpent and the Rope, p. 126.
33 Ibid., p. 213.
34 Ibid., p. 49.
From the foregoing analysis, a significant point emerges. In Hindu society, women have a significant place. It is not a question of equality of rights and privileges between men and women but a question of the place of women in the awareness of the self, in the network of familial relations and in the social organisation as a whole. The following passage amply illustrates the point:

Woman is the earth, air, ether, sound; woman is the microcosm of the mind, the articulations of space, the knowing in knowledge; the woman is fire, movement clear and rapid as the mountain stream; the woman is that which seeks against that which is sought. To Mitra she is Varuna, to Indra she is Agni, to Rama she is Sita, to Krishna she is Radha. Woman is the meaning of the word, the breath, touch, act; woman, that which reminds man of that which he is, and reminds herself through him of that which she is. Woman is kingdom, solitude, time; woman is growth, the gods, inherence; the woman is death, for it is through woman that one is born; woman rules, for it is she, the universe.³⁵

In Hindu mythology, which is largely drawn from the Puranas, there is a cult of worship associated with the Mother, the consort of Lord Siva. This is specifically indi-

³⁵The Serpent and the Rope, p. 352.
cated in one of the Puranas called Sri Devipurana. (This has been elaborately discussed in the chapter on Rajan.) Sankara, the celebrated theorist of Advaita, has written a number of hymns on the Divine Mother, which the narrator quotes often. It appears as though absolute reality can be envisioned and known either as the Father or as the Mother. All virility and fecundity, and peace and joy that she sacred texts enunciate is based on the principle of unity in diversity, just as India itself could be comprehended only in terms of unity in diversity. The narrator seems to have considered the philosophical cruxes in the Hindu vision of life and arrived at the following metaphysical formulation, which, as we have noted earlier, secularizes the scripture:

"The world is either unreal or real—the serpent or the rope. There is no in-between-the-two—and all that is that's in-between is poetry, is saint-hood. You might go on saying all the time, 'No, no, it's the rope,' and stand in the serpent. And looking at the rope from the serpent is to see paradises, saints, avatars, gods, heroes, universes. For wheresoever you go, you see only with the serpent's eyes. Whether you call it duality or modified duality, you invent a belvedere to heaven, you look at the rope from the posture of the serpent, you feel you are the serpent—you are—the rope is. But in true fact, whatever eyes you see there is no serpent, there never was a serpent. You gave your own eyes to the falling evening and cried,
'Ayyo! Oh! It's the serpent!' You run and role and lament, and have compassion for fear of pain, other's or your own. You see the serpent and in fear you feel you are it, the serpent, the saint. One—the Guru—brings you the lantern; the road is seen, the long, white road, going with the statutory stars. 'It's only the rope.' He shows it to you. And you touch your eyes and know there never was a serpent. Where was it, where, I ask you? The poet who saw the rope as serpent became the serpent, and so a saint. Now, the saint is shown that his sainthood was identification, not realization. The actual, the real has no name. The rope is no rope to itself.36

If we juxtapose the above metaphysical formulation with what Ramaswamy writes in the tenth chapter of his thesis, we can see a sort of consistency in the narrative focus and the thematic alignment in the text. Ramaswamy writes,

My tenth chapter was especially difficult because it was going to deal with the metaphysical symbolism of paradise. According to the Hindu concept there is not only satya and asatya, Truth and untruth, but also mitya, illusion—like the horns on the head of a rabbit, or the son of a barren woman. To see

36 The Serpent and the Rope, p. 335.
Paradise, I argued, was the inversion of Truth. To see frankly is not necessarily to see fairly--you can look at a thing upside down. After all, the deer went to drink water at the mirage. The Impossible becomes the beautiful. 37

A close look at the metaphysical vocabulary of the two passages just cited suggests to us the narrative constraints and the limits of logic when the narrator-protagonist tries to describe the ineffable. In the first passage, the world is either unreal or real, the serpent or the rope. Ramaswamy doesn't conceive of any middle term. In the second passage, there are three concepts: truth, untruth, and illusion. The serpent is associated, in the first passage, with Paradise, saints, avatars, gods, heroes, and universes. Moreover, the serpent is something that creates a sense of fear. The Guru alone, with his knowledge (lantern), can show to the disciple that there never was any serpent. It is just a rope. As Shyamala A. Narayan has points out, "The key concept of Sankara's advaita is maya, the in-between-the-two which Ramaswamy disowns. Sankaracharya did not consider the world unreal--he postulated three kinds of being: the real (sat), the unreal (asat), and maya or mithya (illusion).

37 The Serpent and the Rope, p. 377.
Sankara considered the world the realm of *māya*, something which defies strict classification into real or unreal (*sad-asad-vilaksana*). Ramaswamy's deviations from Sankara's Advaita need not detain us here; what is interesting from our point of view is the way in which Ramaswamy uses the metaphysical idiom to enlarge the narrative context. The first passage occurs when he and Madeleine are sorting out their differences. When she asks him, "What is it separates us, Rama?" he tells her, "India." Making a brave attempt to convince her, he tells her, "Love is not a feeling; it is, you might say, a stateless state, the whole condition of oneself." In order to emphasize the significance of the Vedanta in terms of the Hindu view of life as against the Buddhist view, with which Madeleine tries to entangle him once again in the familial groove, Ramaswamy expounds the serpent-and-the-rope problematic. But what appears to be uppermost in his mind is the master-idea of the Guru. In the second passage (No.37), which we have earlier considered,

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39 *The Serpent and the Rope*, p. 331.

we find him intellectualizing and shaping the problem at hand, the Albigensian heresy. The first passage (No.36) has a rhetorical flourish, and the second passage, intellectual rigour. When we look at the narrative as a whole, it appears that the serpent-and-the-rope problematic doesn't in any way mitigate the suffering, the pain, the dislocation of human relationships, the social encumberances, and the intellectual embarrassments the protagonist tries to organize within the framework of his narration. For example, he resorts to the use of a diary, which has some significance in the organization of the text. The following excerpt from a note in his diary amply demonstrates the tension that exists between him and Madeleine after the loss of their first child:

"A woman hates a male when he withdraws. She cannot accept his defeat—his defeat is the defeat of her womanhood. She must be the juice of his love, she must give him again and again that which he asks for, till his asking itself becomes a disgust. Then the woman has contempt for him, she rubs her breast on his back, she whispers sweet things to his ears, her body speaks where no words could speak, and she lifts him up and takes him into herself, like a mother a child. Then you want to take a cactus branch
and beat her and scratch her all over. You want to bite her lip and pull the breast away from her chest, and taste the good blood of her wounds. You want her to be young and new and never named. You want her to be your first love, your first woman, you want her to be the whole of the earth. She knows it—for every woman is a concubine, a mistress of passion, a dompter of man's condition—and she becomes virginal and simple and, Lord, so new, so perfumed, that the ichor rises in the elephant, and you are at it again.  

The preceding passage is the most sensual in the text. Woman as "a concubine, a mistress of passion, a dompter of man's condition" is a complete contrast to woman as Sita to Rama, Radha to Krishna, and woman as the meaning of the word, the breath, touch and act. These disparate views about the place of a woman in a man's life need not be construed as a kind of mess in which the narrator gets stuck. If we invoke the non dualistic perspective from which Ramaswamy evaluates his experience, we may say that he is in a state of illusion. He talks about the eternity, the absolute, and the ineffable. His relationship with his wife, with Savithri, with Lakshmi, with Little Mother, and with Saroja lands him in a paradox, which he explains to Savithri:

41 The Serpent and the Rope, p. 163.
"... Krishna is not Krishna yet. And when he is Krishna there is no Radha as Radha, but Radha is himself. That is the paradox, Savithri, the mortal paradox of man."

"And the paradox is the fever. Lord, what would I not give that this fever should go, this fever that is me ... Lord, take me, and let me forget the world."

"Savithri, who can take whom? As I once told Madeleine, there where we take there is no love, and there where we love there is no taking. You can but take yourself."

"Quickly then. How can it be achieved?"

"By--by discipleship," I answered, as though I was communicating my ultimate secret.

"Discipleship of what--to whom?"

"Discipleship of Krishna, of the Truth." 42

The passage cited above clearly dramatizes the ambivalence that is ubiquitous in the text. The ambivalence consists in the narrator's lack of confidence to affirm or deny. This amounts to a simple acceptance of one's dependence on a Guru, whose lantern shows the "long, white road." 43

42 The Serpent and the Rope, p. 363
43 Ibid., p. 335.
We may make use of the usual critical cliches like the quest for identity, the East-West encounter, the image of India, and so on in our eagerness to squeeze the essence of The Serpent and the Rope. When an interlocutor asked Raja Rao, "In The Serpent And The Rope one of the central concerns seems to be 'the quest for identity'. Is it an existentialist influence?" Raja Rao replied, "No, The Serpent And The Rope is, primarily, a novel of 'quest for the absolute'." The quest for the absolute doesn't reach any consummation. On the other hand, we only see the continents combining and shifting, a sort of cross cultural current flowing as if to no destination, while memory recalls and repeats the past experiences of the narrator, sometimes evaluating the experience and sometimes processing it through a paradox. In other words, the narrator talking about illusion makes it a problematic—the serpent or the rope. It is only towards the end that we notice, in one of the excerpts of his diary, the narrator saying that

"This happened, this happened so long ago--
Oh, as long ago as I have known myself be.
Ever since being has known itself as being I have known it. It is the gift that Yagnyavalkya

44 Asha Kaushik, "Meeting Raja Rao," The Literary Criterion (Mysore), XVIII, No. 3 (1983), 36.
made to Maiteryi, it is the gift Govinda made to Sri Sankara. It is the gift He made to me, my Lord. May I be worthy of the Lord. Lord, my Master! O thou abode of Truth."  

The narrator's discursive meditations end. The serpent and the rope disappear. The illusion that it is a quest in which he is involved melts, and the self beholds the vast space and the inexplicable silence.

If we compare Ramakrishna Pai of The Cat and Shakespeare with Ramaswamy, we can notice a subtle contrast. The vision that Ramakrishna Pai earns towards the end is characterized by the dissolution of the serpent and the rope, so that he could sing and be silent at one and the same time. The image of the cat carrying its kitten from place to place is significatory of marjara nyaya, according to which the absolute and the individual are two different spiritual entities and it is only implicit devotion and faith that would place the individual in the joyous realm of the absolute. Ramaswamy's Advaita, on the other hand, waits for the gift a master may give to the disciple. The Cat and Shakespeare and The Serpent and the Rope present a world which is not unreal but which is subject to a constant

45 The Serpent and the Rope, p. 403.
change. As a Western critic rightly points out, "What Shankara means ... is that the world is an illusion in that it changes. God is not subject to change and thus is not an illusion in that Being is a constant (energy is conserved), though it is arguable that God's self-knowledge is capable of some undiscussable quality of process. To be illusory means to change, and to change means to exist in time. To be illusory, then, means to exist in time. Absolute Being must be extra-temporal. Obviously, our world is temporal, although the infinitesimal instant may somehow be congruent with eternity. We cannot say (in terms; that is, with inherently temporal fragments; that is, from a mortal perspective) just how the unillusory eternal is with us, unchanging, 'while' we are in time—but it is entirely possible that that is the case."  

Making use of the brilliant insight embodied in the preceding citation, we may say that the texts we have been discussing, while dramatizing the on-going socio-political and cultural changes that are generated by various ideologies and a fusion of cultures, make it possible for the reader to see what is constant and unchanging in terms of the self. The truth of this

observation can easily be illustrated by analysing Kanthapura.

No doubt, Kanthapura captures the quintessence of India's rural life and its socio-cultural milieu. But the story of the village folk is narrated by an old lady, who often makes use of the plural "we," suggesting, thereby, the importance of the community and not the individual. The village has a Brahmin quarter, a Potters' quarter, a Weavers' quarter, a Sudra quarter, and a Pariah quarter. The inhabitants of the Brahmin quarter generally don't visit the Pariah quarter. The narrator tells us, "Of course you wouldn't expect me to go to the Pariah quarter, but I have seen from the street-corner Beadle Timmayya's hut." Before the advent of the Gandhian social revolution, caste system dominates the village life. How rigid it is we can infer from the following passage:

...as he goes up the steps something in him says 'Nay,' and his hair stands on end as he remembers the tumbler of milk and the Pariah home, and so he calls out, 'Rangamma, Rangamma!' and Rangamma says, 'I'm coming,' and when she is at the threshold, he says he has for the first time entered a pariah house and asks if he is permitted to enter; and Rangamma says,

'Just come the other way round, Moorthy, and there's still hot water in the cauldron and fresh clothes for the meal.' So Moorthy goes by the backyard, and when he has taken his bath and clothed himself, Rangamma says, 'May be you'd better change your holy thread,' but Moorthy says, 'Now that I must go there every day, I cannot change my holy thread every day, can I?' and Rangamma says only, 'I shall at least give you a little Ganges water, and you can take a spoonful of it each time you've touched them, can't you?' So Moorthy says, 'As you will,' and taking the Ganges water he feels a fresher breath flowing through him, and lest anyone should ask about his new adventure, he goes to the riverside after dinner to sit and think and pray. After all a brahmin is a brahmin, sister.' (Emphasis added)

From our point of view, the above passage brings to a central focus the sociological forces that have generated the Indian novel in English. Would a Brahmin lose his Brahminhood if he touches a pariah? Or, if a pariah touches a Brahmin, what would happen to the pariah and the Brahmin? These are the questions that have brought into Indian writing in English a novel like Untouchable and a poem like M.Krishna Murthi's "The Harijan." We may include

48Kanthapura, p. 107.
Raja Rao's Kanthapura in this category. Moorthy, the central character in Kanthapura, cannot change his holy thread everyday and cannot wash himself with the Ganges water because he has taken upon himself the task of spreading the gospel of Gandhi, which dissolves all castes into one caste. In this respect, Moorthy's opponent is Bhatta, the Brahmin money-lender, who opposes any truck with the pariahs. He tells Rangamma,

'...Listen! Do you know Advocate Rama Sastri, the son of the old, orthodox Ranga Sastri, has now been talking of throwing open his temple to the pariahs? "The public temples are under the Government," he says, "but this one was built by my ancestors and I shall let the pariahs in, and which bastard of his father will say No?" I hope, however, the father will have croaked before that. But really, aunt, we live in a strange age. What with their modern education and their modern women. Do you know, in the city they already have grown-up girls, fit enough to be mothers of two or three children, going to the Universities? And they talk to this boy and that boy; and what they do amongst themselves, heaven alone knows. And one, too, I heard, went and married a Mohomedan. Really, aunt, that is horrible!' 50

50 Kanthapura, p. 43.
The above crucial passage suggests the fears of orthodox Brahmins like Bhatta that social changes would not only pollute society but may destroy the sanctity of the Hindu dharma. When Bhatta visits the city, Seetharamu tells him,

"The Swami is worried over this pariah movement, and he wants to crush it in its seed, before its cactus-roots have spread far and wide. You are a Bhatta and your voice is not a sparrow voice in your village, and you should speak to your people and organize a brahmin party. Otherwise brahminism is as good as kitchen ashes. The Mahatma is a good man and a simple man. But he is making too much of these carcass-eating pariahs. Today it will be the pariahs, tomorrow it will be the Mohomedans, and the day after the Europeans.... We must stop this. The Swami says he will outcaste every brahmin who has touched a pariah. That is the right way to begin...."\(^{51}\)

Not only do the Brahmins oppose the pariahs, but they rebuke Moorthy for his familiarity with Ratna, because Ratna is a young widow and her place is in the kitchen. As we read the narrative, we notice that Brahmin orthodoxy slowly but steadily loses ground and the spirit of Gandhi's gosoel gains an upper hand. When the satyagraha movement

\(^{51}\) *Kanthapura*, pp. 44-45.
is in full swing, Ratna's place in society as a freedom fighter is fully acknowledged, and all the women of Kanthapura say, "she is our chief now." As satyagrahis, the women of Kanthapura break the age-old restrictions and taboos and become one, as the following passage amply demonstrates:

Ratna blew the conch from the top of the Promontory, and with the blowing of the conch rose the Satyanarayan Maharaj ki jai! Satyanarayan Maharaj ki jai! from Sami's courtyard, and the throne was lifted up, and we marched through the Brahmin Street and the Potters' Street and the Pariah Street and the Weavers's Street, and doors creaked and children ran down the steps, and trays were in their hands, and the camphor was lit and the coconuts broken and the fruits offered, and one by one behind the children came their mothers, and behind their mothers their grandmothers and grand-aunts, and people said, 'Sister, let me hold the torch. Sister, let me hold the sacred fan.' And shoulder after shoulder changed beneath the procession-throne, and the cries of 'Satyanarayan Maharaj ki jai! Satyanarayan Maharaj ki jai!' leapt into the air. And somebody said, 'Let's sing "The Road to the City of Love",' and we said 'That's beautiful,' and we clapped our

52 Kanthapura, p. 225.
hands and we sang, 'The road to the City of Love is hard, brother.'

All have a place in the City of Love but the road to the City of Love is hard. The socio-cultural change that *Kanthapura* dramatizes is to be construed as a sort of liberation of the spirit. It is in this context that Ramaswamy's definition of a Brahmin as one who knows Brahman becomes meaningful; a Brahmin is not simply one who wears a holy thread but a pilgrim to the City of Love. Moorthy makes a beginning and the pilgrimage ends in the vision of Ramakrishna Pai in *The Cat* and *Shakespeare*.

Padmanabha Iyer alias Comrade Kirillov seeks liberation through the Marxian dialectic. He learns German to read Marx and Engels. Though he has no faith in the gospel of Gandhi, Kirillov owes his innate honesty to his ancient tradition and culture. The narrator of *Comrade Kirillov* wonders, "How alike, I thought to myself, my Sanyasi of Benares, and this Sadhu of Communism." But the explanation for the fusion of the Sadhu and the Communist in Kirillov the narrator himself gives at a later point. When the narrator asks him

53 *Kanthapura*, pp. 234-235.

the reason for reciting a verse from Sankara, he says that
"just as St. Francis was a great poet, Sankara was a greater
one. I think Rajasekhara in the ninth-century quotes Sankara
to prove some abstruse theory in poetics. I have forgotten
the exact text. I love Sankara. I love his Nirvana Astaka.
Come, come, let us sing it together.'/Manobuddhi ahankara
cittani naham/ cidananda rupah shivoham - Shivoham ( I am not
the mind, I am neither intelligence nor egoism,/ I am joy of
intelligence--I am Shiva, I am Shiva...).”

From the foregoing analysis, a few interesting points
emerge. Raja Rao's fictions by and large have metaphysical
overtones. His protagonists--Moorthy, Ramaswamy, Ramakrishna
Pai, and Kirillov alias Padmanabha Iyer--are all Brahmins.
Their awareness of the sanctity and the profundity of the
Brahmin (the Vedic) view of life is indisputable. Their degree
and level of awareness differ, but their constant preoccupa-
tion seems to be to earn and evaluate sometimes a glimpse and
sometimes a vision of the ineffable ("I am joy of intelli-
gence--I am Siva, I am Siva"). They strive to authenticate
this experience of the self not as isolated or self-exiled
individuals (as the nineteenth century American transcendentalists, especially Emerson and Whitman, did) but as members

55 Comrade Kirillov, p. 86.
of a society nourished and nurtured by a metaphysic which consists in a realization that smashes all categories and transcends political, national, and linguistic limitations.