



**READING INDIA IN
A TRANSNATIONAL ERA**

THE WORKS OF RAJA RAO

Edited by
Rumina Sethi and Letizia Alterno



READING INDIA IN A TRANSNATIONAL ERA

This anthology demonstrates the significance of Raja Rao's writing in the broader spectrum of anti-colonial, postcolonial, and diasporic writing in the 20th century. In addition to highlighting Rao's significant presence in Indian writing, the volume presents a range of previously unpublished material which contextualises Rao's work within 20th-century modernist, postmodernist, and postcolonial trends. Exploring both his fictional and non-fictional works, *Reading India in a Transnational Era* engages with issues of subaltern agency and national belonging, authenticity, subjectivity, internationalism, multicultural politics, postcolonialism, and literary and cultural representation through language and translation.

A literary volume that discusses gender and identity on socio-political grounds, apart from dealing with Rao's linguistic experimentations in a transnational era, will be of interest among scholars and researchers of English, postcolonial and world literature, cultural theory, and Asian studies.

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The Works of Raja Rao

*Edited by Rumina Sethi
and Letizia Alterno*

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FOREWORD

Harish Trivedi

Indian fiction in English is famously called the ‘twice-born’ fiction, a term often (mis)understood to mean a high-caste, privileged, Brahmanical literature. If this is indeed so, then it was Raja Rao who performed for it the sacred-thread ceremony, thus conducting a ritual of *shuddhi* [purification] for this hybrid, mixed-blood offspring of the liaison between the English language and an Indian sensibility. It was Raja Rao who gave to the theme of the East–West encounter—which Ruth Jhabvala and Anita Desai were content to explore on social, cultural, or racial terms—a deeper spiritual dimension.

Raja Rao, who passed away on 8 July 2006 at Austin, Texas, at the age of 97, was born on 8 November 1908 in Hassan (Karnataka). After the death of his mother when he was four, he was brought up in Harihalli by his grandfather who was a Sanskrit-knowing Vedantin, conversant with the philosophy of the Vedas and the Upanishads, which Raja Rao himself grew a fascination for, as reflected in several of his novels. He went to an elite Islamic school or *madrasa* in Hyderabad (where his father worked) and then to the Nizam College, later moving on to the Aligarh Muslim University where he was reportedly the only Hindu boy in his class. Next, he was off on a scholarship to Montpellier and then to the Sorbonne, where he researched the Indian influence on Irish literature. His education was thus a blend not only of East and West (which has since become common enough in modern India), but also, so to say, of South and North and of Hindu and Muslim. Jawaharlal Nehru was to tease Raja Rao about his imperfect Hindustani (presumably acquired at Aligarh) during a meeting in Switzerland, while Nehru’s terminally ailing wife Kamala, whose Hindi incidentally was better than Jawaharlal’s, kindly sought to defend and protect Rao. This occasion is recounted by Rao with gentle humour in his book of essays and sketches, *The Meaning of India* (2007: 40–1).

Meanwhile, in Paris, Raja Rao had in 1931 married a French woman, Camille Mouly, and encouraged and supported by her, put his PhD aside and launched on his first novel in English. This was *Kanthapura* (1938), which appeared by coincidence at about the same time as the first works of fiction

by Mulk Raj Anand and R. K. Narayan, who had both made their fictional debut in 1935, with *Untouchable* and *Swami and Friends*, respectively. These three novelists were to go on to constitute the Holy Trinity of Indian Fiction in English for the succeeding half-century.

Kanthapura begins with the kind of breathtaking artistic boldness and ambition that no Indian writer of English was to match until *Midnight's Children* 40 years later. Its short 'Foreword' has been quoted so frequently in critical discussions of the Indian novel in English that it has become, in effect, the manifesto of all Indian Writing in English. 'The telling has not been easy', Raja Rao here said with fetching honesty—and then explained the nature of the creative difficulty, in terms so simple and true that they still have not been improved upon: 'One has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit which is one's own' (1938: 5). He predicted that with constant use, Indian English will emerge as a distinct if not autonomous variety, like American English or Irish English.

Kanthapura is a stirring depiction of how the Gandhian nationalist movement of 1930–31 reaches out to permeate a remote and supposedly 'unchanging' village in Karnataka and to transform it radically. As a result of the impact of 'Gandhi Mahatma', the pariahs are no longer treated as untouchables, and even pious, illiterate grandmothers are motivated to go on a march to picket toddy shops and to protest against the cruel injustice of 'Hunter sahib', the owner of a neighbouring coffee estate. Gandhi is deified and taken by the simple villagers to be an avatar of Krishna; in fact, the first edition of the novel carried an epigraph on the title page citing Krishna's assurance from *The Bhagavadgita*: 'Whenever there is misery and ignorance, I come' (The name that they share, 'Mohana', is exploited by Raja Rao to reinforce the conflation). In recent years, the subaltern historians have often denigrated Gandhi by alleging that his message was no less religious than it was political. *Kanthapura* offers proof positive that this was indeed so and that this was precisely where Gandhi's irresistible and incomparable appeal lay.¹

In any case, it is not as if Gandhi is sentimentally and uncritically iconised in this novel. In the end, the *satyagrahis* have been brutally pulped into defeat; they must retreat even from their village Kanthapura to go and settle elsewhere, and their leader, the young Moorthy, who was the first among them to have been fired up by the Gandhian message, now turns away from Gandhi and feels more drawn to the socialist, 'equal-distributionist' Nehru (Rao 1938: 183).

Kanthapura remains Rao's most widely read novel in India and abroad, both generally and in college classrooms, mainly because its early and extensive treatment of Gandhian nationalism and the stylistic experimentation through which Rao sought to give his English a Kannada–Sanskritic flavour and cadence are both concerns that tie in aptly with the current postcolonial modes of reading literature. Indeed, *Kanthapura* is one of the most evocative

and nuanced novels about Gandhian nationalism not only in English but in any Indian language, with only Premchand's great Gandhian epic *Rangabhumi* (1925) preceding and excelling it in scope and political radicalism. At the same time, the eponymous village in which *Kanthapura* is set is infinitely more remote than the village in which Premchand had partially set *Rangabhumi*. The process of indirect patriotic filtration through which this village at the back of the beyond gets caught up in the nationalist mainstream is one of the aptest illustrations of the notion of the nation as an 'imagined community', in not a sceptical and negative but in a positive and enabling sense.

After this stunning debut novel, Raja Rao moved resolutely away from literature. Turning his back on France and his French wife, he returned to India to launch on a long quest for a guru who would lead him to the Truth, no less. His quest took him to many *ashramas* including Gandhi's Sevagram; his account of the power of Gandhi's ascetic personality, including his intense silences, is rendered with a novelist's delicate suggestiveness. Ultimately, Raja Rao found the guru he sought in Swami Atmananda, in Thiruvananthapuram. When E. M. Forster, who had acclaimed *Kanthapura* as 'the finest novel to come out of India in recent years',² visited Jaipur in 1945 to attend a writer's conference and wondered why Raja Rao was missing, Rao wrote to explain: 'I have abandoned literature for good and gone over to metaphysics.'

Fortunately for literature, this did not quite prove to be so. In 1960, after a 22-year silence, Raja Rao returned to fiction with a novel titled *The Serpent and the Rope*—a metaphor which harks back to the great exponent of the *advaita* philosophy, Sankaracharya. As an ignorant man mistakes a piece of rope to be a serpent, so he mistakes this world, which is merely *maya*, to be the reality. This foundational Hindu world-view is fleshed out in this clearly autobiographical novel through the attraction and love as well as conflict between the Indian hero Ramaswamy and his French wife Madeleine, with two other Indian women playing supportive allegorical roles.

Raja Rao's next work of fiction, *The Cat and Shakespeare*, published in 1965, again evokes a metaphor from Sankara recommending that one should surrender oneself totally to Providence, as a kitten does to the mother cat, which carries it around in its mouth with the most tender care. It is a gently humorous and whimsical novella set in Thiruvananthapuram, and both the tone and the locale are in some ways reminiscent of Malgudi: 'Our Revenue Board Third Member, Kunni Kutta Nair, fell with a thud into his courtyard, and blood came out of his nose. It was diagnosed as one thing, and he died of another' (1971: 15). The humour seems a bit forced and the touch less sure, however, in Rao's other novella from this period, *Comrade Kirillov* (published in French in 1965, in English in 1976), in which an Indian Marxist rails against Gandhi and Vedanta and is in turn trenchantly satirised by the novelist.

Raja Rao had meanwhile moved to America and, from 1966 to 1980, taught at the University of Texas in Austin, where enrolment in his classes often exceeded 200. Honours and awards multiplied: the Padma Bhushan in 1969, the Neustadt Prize in 1988 (the so-called pre-Nobel or alternative Nobel, also won by Marquez, Milosz, and Paz but by no other Indian), and at home, the Sahitya Akademi prize in 1964 and then its Life Fellowship, a far rarer honour, in 1997. Meanwhile, true to pattern, Raja Rao broke another two-decade long silence to publish in 1988 his longest and most ambitious novel, *The Chessmaster and His Moves*, in which the chessmaster is God himself and his moves are the *leela* or play through which the cosmos is created and sustained. The novel appeared to be either his life's crowning achievement or essentially a fond elaboration of *The Serpent and the Rope*, and evoked widely varying responses.³

Though Raja Rao has, with Anand and Narayan, been canonised as one of the three founding fathers of the Indian novel in English, it is doubtful whether he saw himself primarily as a novelist. The courses he taught in America were not in literature but in Indian philosophy, and he spoke of the act of writing fiction as a form of *sadhana* or spiritual discipline and striving. In one of the last public speeches of his life, delivered when the fellowship of the Sahitya Akademi was conferred on him in 1997 at a special ceremony in Austin, Texas, he referred to India as a '*punya-bhumi*', a sacred land, and said: 'To have been born in India and not have written in Sanskrit, or at least in Kannada is, believe me, an acute humiliation' (1998: 175). Such a nativist cry of the heart may in the present times sound a little embarrassing if not politically incorrect, but it does perhaps represent an act of resistance to a real cultural threat in this age of Anglophone cosmopolitanism and monolingual globalisation.

Raja Rao was a deeply contemplative and charismatically attractive man. Though of slight build, he looked like 'part Hamlet and part Krishna', as the British critic Alastair Niven fancifully described him in an obituary tribute (2006)! He married three times, and when he once went to give a lecture to the students of the MA class in English in Mysore, the women students had a look at his American wife and wondered what she saw in him—but as the literary historian Shyamala Narayan (who was one of the students present) recalls, when Raja Rao had finished speaking, all the women wondered what Rao saw in her, for each of them wanted to marry Rao herself.⁴

Raja Rao believed in austere living and high thinking. His novels are not everyone's cup of tea, and some readers have found him affected, pretentious, and exasperating. But he had a sense of comic enjoyment—of *rasa* and *leela*, in his own favoured terms—and like a true creative writer (or even a true seeker of the Truth), he spoke not of certainty of belief but of constant search and doubt and conflict. The clearly autobiographical hero of *The Serpent and the Rope* says in the very opening sentence of the novel: 'I was born a Brahmin—that is, devoted to Truth and all that' (1960: 5). As

the wry tone indicates, high metaphysical Truth in Raja Rao came always wrapped up in plenty of fictional and imaginative ‘all that’, and that is what makes for the rich humanity of his work.

With the passing away within the last few years of Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan, and then Raja Rao, each in their 90s, an era of Indian writing in English came to an end. Like the Trimurti, each of them faced in a different direction: Anand with his explicit political radicalism, Narayan with his gentle comedy and tolerance, and Raja Rao with his spiritual consciousness and questing. While they were great contemporaries who were often bracketed together and mentioned in the same breath, they could not have been more different temperamentally even if they had tried.

As with the Triveni or the confluence of three rivers at the *sangam* in Allahabad, Narayan in his vision was the vast and serene Ganga, Anand the darker and more turbulent Yamuna, and Raja Rao the invisible but subterranean (*antahsalila*) Saraswati, best seen through the eye of faith. In their style and idiom too, Narayan wrote English as if it was unself-consciously and unproblematically his own language, Anand rode this foreign beast roughshod, prodding it along with earthy exhortations of four-letter words in Punjabi, while Raja Rao sought harmoniously to domesticate English under the same roof as Kannada as if they were co-wives. Towards the end of their lives, all these three writers were somewhat eclipsed in these market-driven ‘liberalised’ times by a younger generation of Indian novelists in English, but that does not take away from the fact that they were the brave pioneers of the genre at a time when many thought it lacked credibility and viability. Anand, Narayan, and Rao each became a classic in their own lifetimes, and now that all three are gone, we are left with mere contemporaries.⁵

Notes

This is a revised and augmented version of an obituary note on Raja Rao, first published as ‘Raja Rao: The Twice-Born Novelist’, in *Indian Literature*, 235 (Sept–Oct 2006): 8–12.

- 1 For a discussion, see Trivedi (2000: 107–20).
- 2 *Kanthapura*, cited on the front cover (1938).
- 3 For a comprehensive and sympathetic discussion, see Paranjape (1998:108–32).
- 4 Personal information, from Professor Shyamala Narayan.
- 5 For a thoughtful discussion of Raja Rao vis-à-vis Salman Rushdie in terms of their surprisingly similar approaches to the issue of writing in English, see Kachru (1998: 60–87).

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INTRODUCTION

Rumina Sethi and Letizia Alterno

Recently, while preparing a list of Modern Classics in the English language, the Sahitya Akademi at New Delhi found it impossible to ignore Raja Rao's writing despite severe competition from the post-1980 writers. This might come as a surprise to the new generation of readers that Raja Rao continues to be celebrated despite being identified as a writer belonging to the 20th century when every literary anthology could begin only by invoking his name. But perplexingly, the existing criticism of his fiction, prose, and short stories has congregated more conspicuously on metaphysical and national Indian themes. To this day, literary criticism has approached Rao's work primarily from the national perspective: right from *Kanthapura*, his first novel, to his short stories such as *The Cow of the Barricades* to his magisterial *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960), readers and critics have not been able to prize apart Rao's slant towards a national metaphysic from the literary worth of his writings. Rao's criticism has so deeply been enshrined in a strongly guarded Indian ethos, it has made post-national thinking about his themes almost irrelevant. When we read Rao again in a different historical milieu with a new conceptual outlook, in a transnational era so to speak, should we continue to work within that one-dimensional focus or facilitate alternative readings to yield different insights? The anthology was conceptualised within the ambit of this primary question: whether readers would persist in thinking unilaterally about this author and see only a Hindu-Indian thematic or whether they could conceive of Rao's work beyond this accepted and well-entrenched threshold. As its editors, we wish to emphasise the critically underestimated complexity of Rao's post-independence work that emerges from its intertextuality and postcolonial setting. In our view, Rao moves from the oppositional agency of the Indian peasant-subaltern emerging in *Kanthapura* towards a representation of the self-expressing middle-upper-class diasporic, cosmopolitan, Indian migrants of the 1950s and 1960s who populate his later novels. As contemporary India surges ahead to a closer embrace of Hindu ideology, and simultaneously becomes part of a growing market capitalism, it becomes necessary to revisit Raja Rao's writing, especially in the first half of the 21st century, and ascertain whether Rao could

be read against the grain and how his work still continues to hold the thrust it enjoyed in the past.

In the last several decades, 'Commonwealth Literature' in the former colonies blossomed into 'Postcolonial Studies' as the desire to shed the connection with the colonial past became strong and binding. The 'postcolonial' tag, however, factored in a variety of subjects from marginality to diasporic studies in the United States, some usages pertinent and others indiscriminate. Though the term 'postcolonial' paradoxically also continued the connection with the past, one major contribution of postcolonial readings, for better or worse, was the interrogation and re-interpretation of the nation-state, which became necessary in the transnational era. The 'nation' would now be regarded as a cultural imaginary, whereas the 'nation-state' that was the prized inheritance of decolonisation struggles would become obsolete with increasing emphasis on globalisation. Globalisation itself would be elevated to a prime focus of postcolonial studies in academic circles, including recent theorisations favouring or questioning world system theory, pushing the nation towards its decline, at least in the academy.¹

Yet, in real terms, the global sweep of the economy does not necessarily coincide with a corresponding tolerance and broadmindedness. In India, for example, right-wing forces are considerably on the rise even as economic liberalisation is well underway. Regardless of the governments in power, we observe staunch declarations of nativism with equally strong investments in foreign technology. Ideological purism seems to run hand in hand with an increasing nation-scale corporatisation. In this climate of ideological ambiguity, one can no longer speak of one culture or one nation. It is within this scenario of the virtual absence of the nation at a global level and the strength of nativism locally that we would like to situate Raja Rao, to examine how one can continue to engage with his literary corpus in productive ways. When we decided to explore the representation of India in the writings of Raja Rao in a transnational era, the idea was to shed traditional criticism and focus instead on pushing the boundaries. Since the nation-state has been used as a self-evident overriding focus in Rao's criticism by so many scholars, it became important to question and re-examine his writing with the view that enduring work emerges not merely for the sake of the greater national good but takes cognisance of the dynamism of history as well. Albeit struggling to define themselves in relation to modern ideas of nation, history, language, and culture, Rao's anguished characters equally negotiate elements of constructedness, artificiality, elusiveness, and undefinability in their postmodern identities.

Transnationalism and the nation

Partha Chatterjee's view that nationalism in postcolonial countries is characterised by its variance from the existing ideology or 'modular' form of the

national society, which underlines the historical experience of nationalism in western Europe, is evinced in virtually all of Raja Rao's body of work (1993: 4–5). As Chatterjee argues, nationalism would be a mere 'caricature' of itself if the indigenous elite were to not create an ideological division between the spiritual and the material (5). Ignoring the imitations that exist on the material plane from which borrowing cannot be avoided, the nation declares itself 'sovereign' on the spiritual level with the painful awareness that the state remains in control of the colonial machinery (6). Whereas it can be challenged that the categories of spiritual/material are quite obviously orientalist, even essentialist, Chatterjee through his argument throws light on the marvellous possibilities that exist for invention and imagination even within oppositional categories, which can be extended to include Rao's literary production.

If we were to advance the argument of an East–West divide in Rao's writing, we would risk creating a culture of timeless romantic typologies, which could conveniently be termed mythical and ahistorical—as a view of the 'real' abstracted from history. Contrarily, if we were to speak from an alternative standpoint to dispel the notion of this non-western 'realism', which Rao might himself have championed his readers to experience, we are no closer to the writer's meaning. Notwithstanding the dilemmas of reading Raja Rao, his novels are evidence of a lifelong investment in Indian history, colonialism, and decolonisation within which the writer is as much a participant as he is a resisting subject. His characters' constructions of India as 'timeless' must strategically mediate between a western teleology of progress and the alleged 'irrationality' of the East so that Rao might be evaluated on his grounds alone from a standpoint where indigenous categories of narrative are equally significant as the historically material. Suffice it to say that the complexity of such intermingling must be kept in mind while reading Rao's works.

Since borders and binaries have been challenged by contemporary post-modern theory, an interrogation of polemic forces becomes urgent. Indeed, the abundance of terms such as diaspora, hybridity, difference, migrancy, alterity, ambivalence, and metropolis in the academy, which can be both limiting and enabling, underscore the crisscrossing of 'roots' and 'routes', as Gilroy so appropriately put it (1999: 19). Within such problematics and the rising cosmopolitanism and creation of global markets in the world, the issue of national identity and metaphysics, authenticity and purity, which are uppermost in Raja Rao's theory of the novel, must be both situated *and* transcended without mandating either position.

The inevitable interaction in late capitalist society with the forces of globalisation today compels us to examine the uncharted space beyond centre–periphery models, towards what Vertovec calls the 'most globally transformative processes and developments of our time' (1999: 459) from which detachment is impossible. Vertovec identifies six primary concepts

of the current transnational climate: social morphology and the influence of new technology networks, gradually increasing hyphenated communities or a diasporic consciousness, a carefully selected cultural production of identities enabled through media, the investment of economic capital in the home country by non-resident nationals, the distribution of resources by non-governmental organisations involved in addressing the rights of the marginalised as well as environmental concerns, and finally, the recuperation of nostalgia and its grafting on to a new locale (1999: 449–56).

So how does the notion of strongly guarded national boundaries witnessed in Raja Rao's writing tie up with a more globalised world view? We witness the staunch connection with the land of one's birth, and simultaneously a challenge to that very concept of origins by the flexibility of border crossing and migration. Rao's position is peculiar. Having lived in both Europe and America, he qualifies as a transnational hybrid, but he has also remained utterly loyal to his soil, culture, and metaphysics. If we were to follow Vertovec's six-tier recognition of the paradigm of transnationalism, Rao's reach would approximate to either all or none of those categories. In Vertovec's scheme, contemporary civilisation is characterised by living 'dual lives', which implies being 'both here and there' or '*neither* here nor there' (Munro 2015: 4). It is difficult to slot Rao as living within or outside such a dualism, especially in view of his strong repudiation of a characteristic diasporic sensibility and deliberate choice of an India-centric national identity. Rao's life outside India finds few parallels with those individuals whose travel or migration is dictated by the rise of global capital or the compelling nature of market forces. Travelling across nations as a result of market impetus is common among migrants who are looking for opportunity and the accumulation of wealth. But such a perspective does not define Rao as he cannot be assumed to have travelled overseas out of economic necessity.

Despite his migration initially to France and later to the United States, Rao has scarcely ever been able to disconnect from his attachment to India and its traditions. Correspondingly, his novels can be seen not simply as cultural affirmations of an India-centric identity but also as political testaments of their time in resisting colonialism and thus becoming historically empowering. One can go even further and suggest that in his early writing especially, Rao invokes popular memory and recuperates the history of resistance which contributes to the production of a transformative history. If we were to follow the trajectory of heterogeneity, the issue of rescuing the nation-state *politically*—and not just culturally—that plays an important part in the formation of national identities would be sacrificed. A dismantling of the historical material rootedness of national identity would achieve, at best, only a discursively constructed nation (Sethi 1999). The advocates of transnationalism and globalisation have no doubt offered persuasive arguments by asserting that nationalism is more cultural than political, or

that it is derivative of western ideologies, and hence lacking in *national* consciousness. To dispel the first argument, it is important to state that cultural artefacts are often summoned to secure a sense of sovereignty since the state continues to be subordinated to colonial power (Chatterjee 1993). The second argument—that the nation is a consequence of ideas imported or derived by the nation’s elite from the West—cannot be sustained with much conviction either because nationalist sentiment generated by a western-educated intelligentsia is not necessarily part of mass mobilisation movements. Examples range from the Bardoli struggle in Gujarat in 1927–29—a decade prior to the publication of *Kanthapura*—to the long march by the farmers of Andhra Pradesh in 1938, the same year that *Kanthapura* was published. The former, which cannot be called a protest serviced by nationalist intellectuals, was undoubtedly linked with *swaraj* or home rule, which in turn took off from extremely rooted constructive activities widespread in the area. The latter was backed by the initiatives of protest among the peasants rather than by nationalist sentiment. While the stirring up of nationalist sentiment is often traced to leaders and intellectuals, nationalism is a very mixed bag of ‘enmeshed, intertwined and imbricated web of narratives’ (Amin 1996: 194) of which cultural construction or derivativeness forms only a small part. Thus, transnational themes, despite the loosening of national frontiers, obstruct the ideology—indeed the necessity—of resistance that could lead to the formation of nation-states or, for that matter, to the significance of location. Even though the nation is virtually missing in a globalised world we live in, it is ‘still the category with which concepts of identity must first contend (although ethnicity and religion have seen a rapid rise in importance in identitarian politics)’ (Ashcroft 2017: 6). Aijaz Ahmad has stridently critiqued those theorists who suggest unmooring the nation from its third-world location and thus from a commitment to radical alternatives (1993, 1995).

Having said that, we are simultaneously aware that Raja Rao’s espousal of nationalist consciousness, or even striving for the political nation, is often interpreted as a kind of overvaluation of Indian sentimentality or even essentialism. Despite arguing and giving evidence that nationalism is a reality and nation formation a movement, it cannot be denied that Rao’s representation of the East and the West often appear to be polemical categories in his novels and short stories where the difference between the Indian metaphysical tradition and the absence of that rich potential in countries outside India is easily discernable. *The Serpent and the Rope*, of all his writing, places Rao squarely as a representative of an ‘intuitive’ Indian tradition in opposition to a ‘western’ intellectual one. Even *Kanthapura*, the most politically radical of Rao’s novels, imparts the Indian struggle for independence from the British an almost heavenly sanction from the gods so that the country’s freedom becomes a reverential mission. In quite a similar way, Rao’s short stories, particularly ‘Narsiga’ and ‘The Cow of the Barricades’, are overtly

symbolic: the Hindu iconography of symbols such as the cow are kept alive through the confluence of history and myth.

Can we say, then, that Rao's writing is an orientalised image of India? Except that, if we were to reverse the argument, Rao's essentialising of the East, however problematic, signals a strategic response to the western colonising power which had denied and repressed its cultural and historical worth. Read differently, outside allegations of polemics, Rao's post-independence work is also, to use Stuart Hall's terms, *positioned* directly in relation to his evolving ideas on identity, history, and the nation (1993). *The Serpent and the Rope*, *The Cat and Shakespeare*, and *The Chessmaster and His Moves*, written in and from an historically postcolonial context, suggest a change of positioning in the writer's engagement with history, detectable through the efforts of their protagonists to come to terms with their self-definition, cultural hybridity, and national belonging. Sivarama's sense of dislocation from any sort of national 'belonging' in *The Chessmaster and His Moves*, for instance, is evidence of an identity negotiation process that goes beyond the reductive geography of confined national borders,² hence becoming transnational: 'To what country did I belong? And to whom, lord, to whom? I felt no orphan but a man lost in space, in the immensity of such silence, the eardrums would tear' (Rao 1988: 247). Rao's transnational imagining may appear as utopian thinking, but it crucially locates a state of in-betweenness which addresses the confining boundaries of postmodern identity formation in national and cultural discourse (Alterno 2011: 162).

Thus, we can argue with conviction that Raja Rao's India does not come 'to the service of Orientalism's broadly imperialist view of the world', which would otherwise underline India's 'eccentricity, its backwardness, its silent indifference, its feminine penetrability, its supine malleability' (Said 1978: 15, 206), but is construed precisely to counter-argue such a view. Rao's is in some ways a sort of reversed Orientalism which responds with a depiction of a civilisationally dignified India.³ Despite having been accused (together with other expatriate writers) of projecting the image of an idealised country which may be far from the everyday India or as ordinarily experienced by its citizens (hence by its 'insiders', not 'exiles' like Rao), his entire work has always remained focused on a more metaphysical exploration of India, strategically demanding the reader—the one who 'has to apprehend' (Rao 1996: 153)—to make an effort in understanding its difference. Yet it is precisely the encounter between Hindu mythologies from the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, the tradition of the self expounded in the philosophy of non-dualism or *advaita vedanta*, and modernist concerns about alienation and the changing relationship between the individual and how he or she is positioned in time and space that constantly problematise the shaping of the identities of Rao's protagonists. Their self-interrogations and their identity negotiations permeate his later narratives and are expressed through

anxious questions, which make a reading of his work relevant for current postcolonial theory and criticism.

What the author seems to offer his readers through his writing—and this is what contributes to justify the unique style of this writer, to whom the issue of being published has always proved extremely difficult—are the numerous accompanying hints and keys for an understanding of his ‘authentic’ India. Though this could risk being read as an elite writer’s move to secure a restricted, elect public for his writing, it can also be interpreted as part of Rao’s strategy of refusing western cultural translation and assimilation. In one of his last interviews in 1997 with Austin American-Statesman journalist Anne Morris, Rao replied in the negative to the question whether he translated India for the West: ‘No. I just do it for myself. I make no concession to the West’ (1998: 194).

What appears to be a sign of elitism or even contradiction in Rao is his resistance to the putative, time-honoured view of modernisation, which is nationalism’s other face. It is nationalism-without-modernisation that creates the paradox of embracing antiquity over newness. Partha Chatterjee’s *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World* precisely sums up this dichotomy or ‘unresolved contradiction’ in all nationalist thought (1986: 80) by citing the difference of perspective between Bankimchandra Chatterjee and Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, India’s first prime minister. Partha Chatterjee invokes the categories of the ‘problematic’ and ‘thematic’ in a nation-state (36–9), the former, in what is our context here, being the conundrum of reconciling tradition with modernity, whereas the latter would have to be its presentation in ideological terms; whereas Bankim feels ‘compelled to backtrack’ into tradition, Nehru represents the ‘moment of arrival’ which embraces progress, reason, and rationality (65; 51). It would not be off the mark to find parallels between Bankim and Raja Rao and provide an explanation for Rao’s endeavours to appropriate a cultural distinctness which remains at variance with the western as well as the modern. Rao’s recollections on first meeting Nehru in a sanatorium in Germany, where his wife Kamala was convalescing, so fascinatingly gives evidence of this contradiction. The section is quoted at some length from his essay ‘My First Meeting with Pandit Jawaharlal’ and is part of his collection of essays, *The Meaning of India*:

So there was the lunch, the thickening of outside air, the hushed temper of a pension where the parents and friends of the sick stay visiting those at the sanatoria. . . . But we were high up, in the nowhere which is India.

‘You certainly believe in something, Panditji? In some form of Deity, in philosophy?’

‘Deity, what Deity?’ He twitched angrily.

‘Why, Siva and Parvati, Sri Krishna!’

‘Three thousand years of that and where’s that got us—slavery, poverty.’

‘And incomparable splendour, even today.’

‘What, with twenty-two and a half years of life-expectancy and five pice per person per day of national income? We’ve had enough of Rama and Krishna. Not that I do not admire these great figures of our traditions, but there’s work to be done. And not to clasp hands before idols while misery and slavery beleaguer us.’

‘Yes, and after that?’ I asked, as if to myself, somewhat timidly.

He seemed angry, ‘Now, now, don’t make me say this matter is matter,’ he said, touching the table. . . .

‘There’s an intelligence about the world. There’s harmony. I am convinced we’re linked to that harmony. Individually linked,’ he added with deliberation. . . .

‘So God is mathematical.’

‘Well, perhaps. Why worry? And man is not just a . . .’

‘Just what? . . .’

‘A biological phenomenon.’

‘A creature of the “eighteen aggregates”.’

‘Yes, Buddhism comes quite near it; that is, there is something which must be, and which connects and sustains.’

‘But that’s Vedanta,’ I interrupted. ‘The Buddha was a phenomenologist. Beyond manifestation, the void.’

The meat by now had become cold. So had my spinach.

(Rao 1996: 36–8)

While the dialogue above seems to encapsulate the concerns of the entirety of Raja Rao’s writing, one of the predicaments arising from their interaction that upsets Nehru is best summed up in the question Partha Chatterjee raises: ‘why is it that non-European colonial countries have no historical alternative but to try to approximate the given attributes of modernity when that very process of approximation means their continued subjection under a world order which only sets their tasks for them and over which they have no control?’ (1986: 10). This is the particular problem of bourgeois-rationalist thought, outlines Chatterjee, that ‘simultaneously rejects and accepts the dominance, both epistemic and moral, of an alien culture’ (11). Rao’s insistence on a national culture, from this point of view, would be nothing but the playing out of an innate desire to repudiate western superiority. While for Chatterjee, native subordination and inferiority are internalised, for Rao there appears to be a way out of this entrapment: he liberates cultural pride from national progress. Just as Bankimchandra transforms Spinoza and Spencer into ‘European Hindus’ in *Dharmatattva* while attempting to harmonise Vedanta with European philosophy (Mukherjee and Mad-dern 1986: 170), Rao too constructs human universals, which are timeless

but necessarily Indian. If for Partha Chatterjee the ‘bourgeois-rationalist’ thought ‘prevented a truly autonomous discourse from taking shape’ (Chibber 2013), for Rao that autonomy can be seized in the ‘eighteen aggregates’ contained in India.

Discerning critics and readers who are willing to explore Rao’s otherness in his writing are hence invited to discover his India together with the author—the one, for Rao, who ‘has to indicate’ (1996: 153)—throughout the pages of his writings. The choice is ultimately left to the reader to decide whether or not to accompany Rao on such explorative journey. Metaphorically, such a journey is also an Indian writer’s pilgrimage towards re-appropriation, one which—as Edward Said reminds us—subverts Orientalism and its ‘*will* or *intention* to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different (or alternative and novel) world’ (1978: 12).

Transnationalism and language

Despite Raja Rao’s engagement with rootedness and authenticity, one of his greatest experiments in ‘cultural blending’⁴ or transcending this vexed notion of national identity might be evinced in the flexibility he introduced in the English language to carry out his experiment with indigenisation. In the specific case of Rao’s writing, most of his critics have recognised the fundamental role he played in the establishment—as early as November 1937, when formulating his foreword to *Kanthapura* while India was still under the British colonial government—to enable a strategic appropriation of the English language, not as an alien language any longer but as one of the Indian languages. Often referred to as the ‘hybridisation’ of English, Rao was among the earliest writers of the English language in India to create what Salman Rushdie would later call ‘chutnification’. Although Rao attempts to create, in his own words, an ‘Indian’ expression and style (1938: 5–6), his narrative betrays his intention. His Indian expressions do not—indeed cannot—remain pure and unaltered. While we cannot deny that Rao is subverting the English language, we also cannot accept the oversimplified rationality of having evolved an autochthonous style of storytelling. We cannot bypass the insistence upon bilingualism in the foreword, a term that is reiterated forcefully through the use of a prefix—‘instinctively’ (1938: 5). This interdependence with English is nothing but a sign of cultural exchange, perhaps even cosmopolitanism, marked by a dynamic complexity, a mix of identities that cannot be compromised by the acceptance of restrictive binaries like coloniser and colonised. Rao’s hybrid experiment with language departs from the centre–periphery distinction and undergoes a process of creolisation.

There, however, appears to be a centre–periphery politics at work even in the representation of Indian Anglophone writing. The very absence of

Raja Rao's name from some existing 'histories' conceals an unjustifiable lacuna as well as a measure of western cultural imperialism, as for instance in Salman Rushdie's two well-known critical surveys, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981–1991* (1992) and *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing: 1947–1997*, which he co-edited with Elizabeth West. The way Rushdie deliberately excludes Rao's work from 'the best Indian writing of the half-century since the country's independence' is quite remarkable (Rushdie and West 1997: ix). In the preface to the volume, Rushdie argues that Indian fiction in English has proven to be 'the most valuable contribution India has yet made to the world of books' (x). His claim is supported not only by the 'burgeoning' of this kind of literature, but also by its unique way of treating and working with the English language. Explaining why Indian fiction in English has been called 'twice-born' by Meenakshi Mukherjee, Rushdie affirms authoritatively that such a view rests 'on the false premise that English, having arrived from outside India, is and must necessarily remain an *alien* there' (xii; emphasis added). Like Urdu, he continues, English has become 'naturalised' and can now be called an 'Indian language' (xii–xiii). What is dangerously at stake in Rushdie's claim here is not that his views might echo his thoughts on the English language, but that he 'forgets' to acknowledge that this type of *raisonnement*, not an 'original' claim by Rushdie in 1997, was in fact theorised by Raja Rao 60 years earlier in his foreword to *Kanthapura*:

Our method of expression therefore has to be a dialect which will some day prove to be as distinctive and colourful as the Irish or the American. Time alone will justify it.

(Rao 1938: 5–6)

It may appear as strategically dismissive then that Rushdie goes so far as to paraphrase the exact words Rao had used in *Kanthapura* with regard to the originality and distinctiveness of other 'englishes', such as the Irish and the American, employed thereafter by various communities in the world:

Indian English, sometimes unattractively called 'Hinglish', is not 'English' English, to be sure, any more than Irish or American or Caribbean English is. And it is a part of the achievement of the writers of this volume to have found literary voices as distinctively Indian . . . as those other Englishes forged in Ireland, Africa, the West Indies and the United States.

(Rushdie 1997: xiii)

It is unfortunate that Rushdie skilfully formulates his argument on the Indian writer's strategic appropriation of English without acknowledging its copyright author. The only hint to Rushdie's awareness of Rao's impact

on the issue of Indian English language in the 1930s is provided—very briefly—in a one-sentence proleptic accusation a few pages later. Rushdie turns Rao’s early ‘midnight parenting’ of a new tradition of good-‘quality’ English-language fiction into an outdated intervention, now relegated to the philological (hence ‘non-literary’?) field: ‘Raja Rao, a scholarly Sanskritist, wrote determinedly of the need to make an Indian English for himself, but even his much-praised portrait of village life, *Kanthapura*, seems dated, its approach at once grandiloquent and archaic’ (1997: xvii).

The issue of English in India is as significant today as it was when Raja Rao wrote *Kanthapura*. The latest injunction comes from the National Education Policy (NEP) released in 2020. The document mandates that a three-language formula be followed in the country while leaving the decision of the precise languages to the individual states which are part of India’s federal structure (NEP 2020: 13). Whereas Rao spoke of the instinctive nature of bilingualism in India, leaving the reader as the final arbiter of the choice of native Indian language which will combine with English in this bilingual alliance, the current policy ambitiously invokes a trilingualism. Again, it is assumed that Indian citizens will have the prowess to be skilful in three languages. Significantly, the languages remain unnamed in the document except that English is mentioned as one of the languages in which science and mathematics would be taught (14). Although Rao had spoken of the use of English openly in the foreword, though in a hybridised form, the NEP tacitly follows the same dictum by stating that at least two of the three languages should be native to India, thereby tactically leaving a niche vacant for English. Such a directive appears to have a twofold purpose. It strategically balances the employment of the mother tongue with the use of the English language as much as it dispenses with the antagonism between public and private education in schools and institutes of higher learning (Mehta 2020). Elite private institutions will be allowed to carry on using the medium of English, thereby linguistically marginalising the majority of the people in the country who are not fluent in English. At the same time, by not mentioning any of the three languages, it remains unclear whether mother tongues would indeed be included in every case and whether the private exclusive English-medium schools will be at all checked for making the learning of English obligatory. As always in its historical chronology, the policy neither sanctions nor disapproves of English as one of the languages of currency in the country. But at the same time, the status of English becomes non-native or foreign even though it is regarded as one of India’s own languages in many quarters such as the Sahitya Akademi, India’s national academy of letters, which is committed to advancing literature in *all* the Indian languages.

In the decades that followed India’s independence in 1947, English remained integral to the tradition of bilingualism (or even trilingualism in some cases) in the country, despite the insistent clamour for the imposition of Hindi as the national language. It appears that the same ambiguity is