Nature and Landscape

An Evolutionary Psychological Analysis of Raja Rao's Writing

Since S. Menon Marath's brief reference to *Kanthapura* in 1948[1] more than five hundred critical studies[2] — book reviews, essays and books — have been published on Raja Rao's literary oeuvre manifesting the writer's important contribution to Indian English writing during the second half of the 20th century. As I have shown elsewhere,[3] critical studies have been overwhelmingly concerned with the Indian writer's engagement with the Hindu philosophical school of Advaita Vedanta and possibilities of its literary-narrative representation both through the genre of the novel and an adopted language, English. Yet, the question which role nature and landscape play in Rao's writing has never been asked seriously although the foregrounding of localities in titles like *Kanthapura* or *On the Ganga Ghat* suggests connotations beyond mere naming. No doubt, critical silence has been so because the modern Indian English novel in general has not been particularly attentive to the representation of nature or landscape, and only a few examples come to mind: an important scene in G.V. Desani's *All about H Hatterr*,[4] Saleem Sinai's experience of the Sundarbans in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*,[5] or Amitav Ghosh's respect for and engagement with ecological concerns in *The Hungry Tide*.[6] But these are exceptions and Raja Rao's work confirms the rare occurrence of passages focusing on nature and

1 S. Menon Marath, "Three Indian Novelists", *Life and Letters* 59 (1948/49), 187-92

2 See Dieter Riemenschneider, "Bibliography", *The Indian Novel in English: Its Critical Discourse 1934-2004*, Jaipur: Rawat Publications 2005, 346-375

3 Riemenschneider, "Literature as Sādhāna: The Reception of Raja Rao's Novels," *op.cit.*, 289-380

4 G.V. Desani, *All about H Hatterr — a gesture*, London: The Saturn Press 1949, 100-101; 104-106

5 Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, London: Picador Edition 1982, 360-366

6 Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*, Delhi: Ravi Dayal Publishers 2004

landscape. However, the ones we encounter are sufficiently significant to deserve being studied more closely; the more so since to my knowledge only Gerhard Stilz's "Return to the Jungle? Colonial and Post-colonial Landscapes in Indian English Literature"[7] has focused on this topic from a cultural perspective which I would like to question for this very reason. Judging the function of nature in *Kanthapura* (and in Mulk Raj Anand's *Two Leaves and a Bud*), he says: "Indian writers do carry on presenting Indian nature in the colonialist tradition with its culturalists concerns"[8] — a judgement echoing his earlier conclusion that "the colonizers were both physically and mentally threatened by the colonized and his, her or its dark nature. Landscape, climate, flora and fauna have come to play a dominant role in the impersonal variants of this conflict."[9]

I shall not address the culturalists concerns in *Kanthapura*, *The Serpent and the Rope, The Cat and Shakespeare* and *On the Ganga Ghat* but would like to pursue my thesis that the perception and creative representation of landscape in literature — as in the arts generally — is also grounded in genetically evolved adaptations of man facing his environment. Studies in Social Biology and Evolutionary Psychology have proposed that *homo sapiens*, for ever on the move and in search of an environment that grants him survival and protection, has learned to discern landscape features that promise him safety and nourishment from those that do not. For example, discussing habitat selection theory and "environmental aesthetics from an evolutionary and ecological perspective",[10] Gordon H. Orians and Judith H. Heerwagen[11] as well as Jay Appleton[12] have pursued the question of why certain stretches of nature or landscapes strike the observer as beautiful or ugly or evoke mixed feelings. They propose the thesis substantiated by research[13] that savanna-like habitats evoked positive responses in *homo*

7 Gerhard Stilz, "Return to the Jungle? Colonial and Post-Colonial Landscapes in Indian English Fiction", eds. Hena Maes-Jelinek and Geoff Davis, *A Talent(ed) Digger*, Cross/Cultures, vol. 20, Amsterdam/Atlanta G.A.: Rodopi 1995, 324-334

8 Ibid., 330

9 Ibid., 334

10 Jerome H. Barkow, "Environmental Aesthetics", ed. Jerome H. Barkow, *The Adapted Mind: Evolutionary Psychology and the Generation of Culture,* New York/Oxford: OUP 1992, 551-553; here 551

11 Gordon H. Orians and Judith Heerwagen, "Evolved Responses to Landscapes", ed. Jerome H. Barkow, *op.cit*., 556-579

12 Jay Appleton, *The Symbolism of Habitat: An Interpretation of Landscape in the Arts*, Seattle and London: University of Washington Press 1990

13 Stephen Kaplan, "Environmental Preferences in a Knowledge-Seeking, Knowledge-Using Organism", ed. Jerome H. Barkow, *op.cit*., 581-598; here 586

sapiens by offering unimpeded views, easy orientation and movement as well as trees to protect him and grant him a lookout. Accordingly, habitat selection theory postulates that such a preferred environment affected human responses and became part of our genetic make-up; a condition that has survived over millennia till the present and in spite of man's transformation from nomadic to sedentary life during the 'Neolithic Revolution' around 10 000 years ago.[14] To these critics then the study of human responses to nature and landscape went along studying the evolution of aesthetic tastes as well. Landscapes, seascapes, even urban scapes and architecture, they say, evoke emotional and, subsequently, cognitive responses due to our genetic heritage. As Orians and Heerwagen maintain, "evidence of aesthetic responses attuned to the savanna environment can be found in our manipulations of landscapes for aesthetic purposes,"[15] and they point at landscape features such as hills and mountains, rivers, valleys and open spaces, the sea and the horizon, as having been used by painters, photographers, landscape (!) gardeners, architects <u>and</u> writers to evoke and/or manipulate our sensation and our perceptions.[16] However, both authors qualify their thesis by warning us that the evaluation of the artistic achievement of landscape representations merely from "an evolutionary-adaptive approach to environmental aesthetics", must not be considered self-sufficient, let alone inclusive, yet it will invigorate our interpretation. Besides, it will make us aware of a cross-cultural universal in spite of the fact that "ecological signals have been transformed, over time"[17] into culture specific events and artefacts.

Similarly, in his study *The Symbolism of Habitat — An Interpretation of Landscape in the Arts*, the British geographer Jay Appleton has also argued — and illustrated his thesis with examples taken from literature — that human beings experience landscape in ways that are based on our environmental adaptations, an "environment visually perceived"[18] and composed of single features such as hills, mountains, rivers. Singly or as a 'composition', these ecological signals evoke emotional as well as cognitive responses, sensations and perceptions which Appleton relates to three "features that increase the likelihood of survival" he calls prospect, refuge and hazard. Prospect allows us to survey the environment from

14 Allan H. Simmons, *The Neolithic Revolution in the Near East: Transforming the Human Landscape*, Tucson: The University of Arizona Press 2007

15 Orians, Heerwegen, 551

16 Ibid, 570

17 Ibid., 571

18 Appleton, 22

an elevated place, refuge to find protection and hide; and hazard "stirs a feeling of being threatened and of wanting to escape."[19]

How would Rao have responded to the concept of environmental aesthetics? I imagine having discussed it with him during one of our early morning constitutionals at C.D. Narasimhaiah's Dhvanya Loka in Mysore. Visualizing him raising a polite eyebrow and remarking quietly that man's realization of the world quite generally was to be understood less along the hypothesized evidence of a doubtful scientific discipline such as Evolutionary Psychology than along those lines of thinking put forward by his narrator Rama in *The Serpent and the Rope*. In answer to Madeleine, his wife's question, "what is it separated us, Rama?" he responded: "India believes that to prove the world as being real or unreal is being really objective". And that is the actual meaning of

> hav[ing] a scientific outlook. […] The world is either unreal or real — the serpent or the rope […], there is no in-between-the-two — and all that's in-between is poetry, is sainthood. (332)

Man's cognition of the real world is achieved when he comes to know that the "actual, the real has no name [because] [t]he rope is no rope to itself." (332) Rama's, and by implication Rao's understanding of nature and landscape then could be defined as arriving at a point of unnaming what has been named/ is being named, and thereby of having been made actual; in other words: to recognize the world from a metaphysical instead of a natural scientific angle. If so, does Rao's creative literary handling of nature and landscape bear this out?

Kanthapura is an old woman's story about the fate of her village and its inhabitants in the political turmoil of the 1930s; and in spite of the author's sophistication (unmistakeably conveyed through his "Foreword"), he succeeds in creating a credible, simple-minded narrator. Here *Kanthapura* clearly differs from Rao's later work where learned, sophisticated, even puzzling minds tell their stories and demonstrate their varying approaches to landscape and its features. The opening scene of *Kanthapura* is not merely memorable for the old woman's story-telling style but also for possessing almost all the ingredients of landscape presentation that are taken up again in the course of the narration. For example, by merely naming topographical features of the village surroundings such as mountains, forests, gorges, valleys and roads, the narrator largely refrains from embellishing, let alone from ascribing metaphorical or allegorical

19 Appleton, cover flap blurb

meaning to the landscape. Further, once the environment has been re-created imaginatively, it is made to serve as the setting for action: carts and lights move, voices, singing and cattle bells can be heard as well as "the soft hiss of the Himavathy:" (*Kanthapura*, 1) The scene is rounded off by the narrator's remark that people believe, "the Goddess of the River plays through the night with the Goddess of the Hill", and with an invocation to the goddess to be blessed. All in all then, a perception of landscape is transmitted where the villagers are supplied with their means of survival: that is, products to be traded, peace ruling among the people and protection guaranteed by the goddesses. The landscape of Kanthapura is painted as a safe habitat, and the more so when the narrator details its mythological genesis emitted through Kenchamma hill and its red colour. Not only will it remind the villagers of a demon's bloody defeat by the goddess but the choice of a hill as battleground is itself significant in terms of evolutionary psychology since an elevation in nature offers man the chance to survey his surroundings as well as to protect him.

Rao's narrative procedure then consists of listing physical features of a landscape; relate them to movement, to human life, and embed both of them in their mythological context. It is a pattern we encounter again when the carts that had earlier left the village return (42–43), or when Moorthy's mother Narsamma dies outside the village by the river (46), and finally when the villagers experience the rains in the month of Vaisakh. (114)

A similarly patterned landscape description also assumes the meaning of a hazard, and here we come across examples when the villagers' fate has turned around, when they are dropped on the Ghats and feel like being in a jungle and are only relieved when "on the top of the hill we see the dangling light of a cart" (136); or when we turn at Kanthapura's opponent: the partly cultivated, partly uncultivated landscape of the Skeffington Coffee Estate, and here especially during the rainy season. Nature is perceived as an unsafe place with its snakes (52-53), its lack of protection against the rain (54-55) and ensuing illness and death. (57) Initially though, the Estate had seemed to offer an abode to the coolies because its landscape features held this promise (48-50) evoked by the old woman's description of the landscape and the movement of people. Yet in comparison to Kanthapura it lacks two essential elements: people's free choice of a habitat and its divinely guaranteed protection. Economic need enforces the coolies' choice of their habitat and in place of Kenchamma there is the unlikely god-like figure of the Sahib, "a tall, fat man with golden hair." (50)

Rao's radical move from a political to a philosophical perspective finds

expression also in his landscape presentation in *The Serpent and the Rope*. Here, infrequent references basically relate to five or six topographical clusters, i.e. rivers, mountains, sea, regions, cities, and the world, but rarely to specific features such as a rock, a tree or a road. We do not encounter extended, detailed, let alone poetically rendered representations. Importantly though, as Rama travels in France, India and England, his sensitive experiences of local landscapes — Mont Sainte-Victoire, The Pyrenees, the Alps, the Himalayas, Ganges, Cam, Thames and Rhone — and cities — Benares, London, Paris, Aix — gradually merge into and create a comprehensive understanding of nature that foregrounds the general — the mountain, the river, the sea, the city and finally, the land. In the end, his travelling through space and time mirrors the narrator's increasing awareness of his need for a guru and an early return to India. The function of landscape, I would like to propose, lies in permitting Rama to affirm the existence of the world both as a tangible and a transcendental reality. How then does Rao invoke landscape and evoke responses of an aesthetic nature in his narrator?

At the end of his stay in Europe Rama's often quoted words, "India is not a country like France is, or like England. India is an idea, a metaphysic" (*The Serpent and the Rope*, 376), summarize his experiences of Europe, including its landscapes, in comparison to those of his homeland. Yet it is important to note that both equally evoke positive responses throughout. At the most, mountains and rivers are awe inspiring but never hazardous, let alone threatening. It is their beauty and their power, their age and continuity that impress the mind, the safety they promise and the nourishment and sustenance they provide that assures man. Looked at from an evolutionary angle, these landscapes promise man an abode — and yet they differ by degree as a comparison between European and Indian mountains illustrates:

> one saw on a day of the mistral the beautiful Mont Sainte-Victoire […] clear as though you could talk to it. The mistral blew and blew so vigorously: one could see one's body float away, like pantaloon, vest and scarf, and one's soul sit and shine on the top of Mont Sainte-Victoire. (14)

And further:

> Mont Sainte-Victoire itself. There was sainthood about that elevation of the mountain […] because the good Cézanne saw it day after day; and it carried such a message of strength, and of the possible, that it was something of a Kailās for us. (54)

As to the "noble Pyrenees", "you could look at [them] and know to be strong one must be pure as snow" (95), while the

> marital air of the mountains, the convexity of spring; the anemones and the blue irises of the Alps; the lavender, the thyme and the rosemary; they seemed like death become white, like blood in the limbs and freshness in one's eyes. (364)

The sensual perception of Mont Sainte-Victoire, the Pyrenees and the Alps proves less of an aesthetic than a cognitive experience that indicates the speaker's outer and inner distance, a detachment conveyed through relativizing comparisons — "as though you could talk", "something of a Kailās", "they seemed like death" — , or assumptions: "one could see", "you could look." The observing subject and the observed object remain apart, an insight that questions the function of the mountain as an abode advantageous to man's survival. The references to "sainthood" and "Cézanne" underline Mont Sainte-Victoire's "in-between-the-two"-status referred to earlier. The closest to transcend this subject-object split occurs at the time of Madeleine's forty-one day fast when "one heard strange musical sounds […] and as each sound ended another more powerful one rose as if creating mountains, rivers, seas, roads, man." (323–4) Indeed, the assumed birth of such tangible objects from sound takes us to Rama's experience of India's landscape, especially the Himalayas.

From the train window on his way to Hardwar Rama watches "the birds and the deodhars of the Himalayas, […] a whole tribe of deer [that] jumped across the pools of the forest", and the parrots with "very lovely yellow rings round their throats", and he feels "the Himalayas shone above them, simple, aware, vibrant with sound." And he concludes that somewhere "between the interstices of those trees, somewhere in the movement of the hinds, in the mountain stillness of Hardwar did I feel a new knowledge. I felt *absence* […]. The mountain echoed an absence that seemed primordial, a syllable, a name." (40–41) Years later and one night in Paris Rama recollects virtually the same landscape to which he wants to return now, to the "deodhars of the Himalayas, […] the deer in the forests, [… and] the keen call of the elephant in the grave ocellate [sic!] silence of the forests." (376) Here, landscape is experienced — and recreated in the mind — through details in nature that merge into a living entity where sound and stillness, presence and absence conflate and create "a new knowledge". From the perspective of evolutionary psychology the Himalayas are experienced as the observer's transcendental home or abode, a place which does not so much guarantee man's physical than his spiritual survival in the sense of leading him to *moksha*.

Having so far focused solely on Rama's experiences of mountains I should add that rivers often are part of them with the Ganges being of prime importance. Again, his responses are always positive and his descriptions consist of merely a few (topographical) features combined with reading them or reflecting upon their meaning. The Ganges with its flowers, fish and logs the boat occasional hits is a "grave and knowing river" (23) that invokes Rama the observer's worship. The experience of such unequivocal subject-object relationship is not yet overcome when he speaks of her motherliness, of her "who had born the sorrows of our sorrowful land" and of the impurity "we made her bear." (33) Yet, the "ashes and bones let down into the Ganges in Benares" letting her know of "our secret" and patrimony shifts the subject-object relationship towards the river's ability to merge presence and absence, much the same way the Himalayas do. Finally, Rama's own dipping into the Ganges makes him realize her knowing, her wisdom and a feeling of purity. It is an act of expiation for the "kidnapped and forsaken […] and for the dead" that lets him conclude that there "is no absence if you have the feel of your own presence" (41); the duality of subject and object has been realized as non-duality. Again, the river does not so much stand for man's physical protection or his sustenance, but it is a transcendental abode; and everlasting at that, since the Ganges waters flow into the sea, return as snowflakes that melt and turn again into Ganges water. (170) Recollected many years later in Paris, Rama is anxious to return to India hoping and wishing "I could be a river, a tree, an aptitude of incumbent silence". (376)

By contrast, European rivers like the Cam, the Thames or the Rhône fail him, the first because it is embedded in time, in history, while the Rhone — not unlike Mont Saint-Victoire — "somewhere […] must know the mysteries of Mother Ganga." (245) But it does not and instead takes up that in-between position that separates Petit Avignon and Avignon des Papes, preventing us to cross "the broken bridge of Saint-Bénézet." (377) At the most you can evoke Mother Rhône to go to India. (389) Finally, Cam and Thames remain mere tangible objects, the one silent, self-reflective and outside history, teaching you "that history is made by others and not by oneself" (168), the other imperial, mature with a knowledge of herself that occasionally makes history so intimately connected with the river, and stop to look at itself when "two lovers hooked arm to arm" look at it. (199)

Throughout, Rama projects his meanings on the landscapes he encounters, seemingly anthropomorphizing them but in reality conceiving of his European mountains and rivers as tangible objects and of his Indian ones as the transcendental abode he wishes to make his home. Yet there

can be no doubt that his culturally moulded aesthetic sensation and cognitive perception of landscape is rooted in man's perception of his environment as a result of his adaptation to a habitat that offers him the chance to survive.

Thematically and in its narrative manner Rao's novella *The Cat and Shakespeare* relates to the *Serpent and the Rope* and has evoked perhaps even more disparate critical reactions than his novel. Not unlike Rama, its first-person narrator Ramakrishna Pai is an inward-looking, self-centred and highly speculative person also preoccupied with love, woman and truth, but for him landscape plays a minor role if we perceive of it in its natural state. However, as indicated already, landscape features have been employed by man to create parks, gardens and buildings, and it is here where Pai's repeated references especially to house but also to wall and garden come in. Attended to briefly at the beginning of his narrative they gradually accumulate weight and eventually merge in a revelatory experience that basically closes the story. The author employs very much the same manner of describing and creating a landscape as in his previous writing. Having been instigated on the idea of building a house of three stories by his neighbour Govindan Nair (*The Cat and Shakespeare*, 10), Pai looks at the boundary wall which, tile-covered, bulging and obstreperous, runs along, dips and rises "on its wild, vicarious course." (11) Characteristically, observations of movement and life complement the picture: leaves are falling, fruit is dropping and cattle are rising. And again, a reflection and an invocation round it off: "Purity is so near, so concrete. Let us build the house. Lord, let me build the house." (11) This by now familiar manner of drawing a landscape recurs when Pai imagines the house he will give Shanta, "a house three stories high", with a tamarind tree in the back yard, dahlias, a mango tree with fruit and a koel singing and mango fruit ripe like Shanta's womb "that has grown round." (51) Having eventually built "a house two stories high [to prove the world is]" (108), Pai then wishes to add the third storey "so that I could see up to the end of the sea" (111): a notion now laughed at and rejected by Nair who had originally spoken of three stories. Yet Pai realizes the truth of his neighbour's reaction once he has crossed the wall, walked through a garden landscape of plants and people — again drawn in simple terms — and steps up inside a house where he does not see the sea "but eyes seeing eyes seeing" (113); where "if I go on seeing a point, I become the point"; where opposites cease and subject and object coalesce. It is an experience that once and for all tells Pai to "never build a house three stories high." (116)

Analysed from the perspective of evolutionary psychology, climbing to the top of the house promises man, not unlike climbing the tree in the savannah or the top of a mountain, prospect: to see, explore and understand his surroundings and to safeguard himself against danger. For Rao and his narrator the cultural transformation of this genetically evolved adaptation to one's environment lies in man's realization of his and the world's transcendental non-dual nature. Nair's "third storey" initially taken literally by Pai, reveals itself as a metaphor of the elevation you have to climb to see not "up to the end of the sea", or in the words of Rama, the horizon falsely taken for the rope from the angle of the serpent, but for what language cannot name and what Pai calls "nose (not the nose) and eyes seeing eyes […] love yet knew not its name but heard it as sound …." (113) Unlike Rama who arrives at this truth cognitively, Pai experiences it, confirming K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar's view that Rao has moved from *jñana* in *The Serpent and the Rope* […] on to *bhakti-prapatti* in *The Cat and Shakespeare*."[20]

The most important landscape scene in the final text, *On the Ganga Ghat*, occurs at the very end of the last story and here it is less the narrator's sensual-aesthetic sensation of the river than his cognitive perception of its flowing that triggers his philosophical reflections upon flowing and unflowing, death and truth, place and time. Asking whether death has a meaning, the Ganga answers that death is as much of a superstition as the probability of the river growing dry. What one must learn though is to see through movement as no movement, through space as no space in order to understand that "where there is no end there is no beginning" (*On the Ganga Ghat*, 127), and that this is the simple truth "if only we listen to ourselves." Eventually returning to his sensation of the river he concludes, "if you dare have a deep look on the Ganges evenings, and see the Ganges unflowing, then you know there is no Ganges. Water is just water…" (127) As we have noted often, Rao's landscape representation ends with an aphorism and an invocation, a paradoxical one as it seems, when the speaker pleads with Mother Ganga, "please be gracious, and, — flow." (127) It is his admission of being able only to take the in-between-stance of the poet who needs words to speak to express the unsayable. Yet such culturally evolved perception is grounded in the genetically evolved adaptation to a habitat that signals safety and survival to the mind of the viewer both in the sense of his material and his spiritual well-being.

20 K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, "Literature as Sadhana: A Note on *The Cat and Shakespeare*," *Aryan Path* 40, 6 (1969), 301-305; here 305

In substance landscape representations in Rao's works do not change. Their features are neither sensed negatively nor are they without bearing on the perceiver. Judged from a cultural perspective these sensory signals are cognitively perceived as embedded in the specific memetic heritage of Brahminic India, yet viewed from an evolutionary psychological angle they are also grounded in man's genetically evolved responses to his habitat — and thus cross-culturally significant as universals of human nature.

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