

HIS SECOND NOVEL : THE SERPENT AND THE ROPE VIEWD IN THIS LIGHT

'The Serpent and the Rope' (1960), which fetched a Sahitya Akademi award for Raja Rao is one of the finest novels written in English after 1945. The novel has far more complex fabric than that of *'Kanthapura'*. It is a 'classic', not merely by national but by the most exacting international standards. The noted critics like Prabhakar Machva, C.D. Narasimhaiah and E.M. Forster called it the best novel not only in Indian-English literature, but in Indian literature in general. K.R.S. Iyengar says, "If *Kanthapura* is Raja Rao's *Ramayana*, then *The Serpent and the Rope* is his *'Mahabharatha'*."¹ The novel is a work of complex amalgamation of the cultures and religions of the East and the West, full of religious and philosophical symbolism.

The novel is largely autobiographical and refers to the early period of 1950's and occurrences of the places and spread over India, France and England. The central character of the novel is a young historian, Ramaswamy (Rama), who is narrator of the story. The son of a professor, he can read Kannada and Sanskrit at the age of just four years, and in his youth he passed M.A. in English and French. At the age of 22, he is sent to France to study the history of Europe. Rama is handsome and

intelligent. He loves poetry and frequently quotes Baudelaire, Valerie, Rilke, Thoreau, Emerson and Whitman. He meets a lady teacher of ancient history, Madeleine Russelin in the campus of University and this meeting soon turns into a love affair. Rama is younger to Madeleine by five years. But neither the difference of age, nor the difference of nationality or religion deter the young Rama entering into a wedlock with the lady. The marriage, however, brings bad luck for Rama. His first child dies in early age and the second is still unborn. Thereafter, Rama's father in India passes away. The responsibilities of four sisters and brothers and step mother fall on the shoulder of Rama. He suffers from T.B. and the infection of his lungs gradually becomes more acute. Rama and Madeleine fail to sustain the sudden befallen burden of challenges in life on them. Their just few years old union breaks. Madeleine on separation becomes engaged in religious works. Rama returns to his native country. Thus, the novel passes through a number of complex problems through the difficulties of Rama.

When Rama has been in Europe for about a year, his father dies, and he has to hurry back home. He carries Little Mother (the third wife of his father) and his baby brother, Sridhara, to Benaras for the last rites of his father. From Benaras they go over to Allahabad where he meets Pratap Singh who is betrothed to Savithri, the young western educated daughter of the Raja of

Surajpur. She does not want to marry him. She is back home from Cambridge. Rama is fascinated by her, and the meeting is far-reaching in its consequences.

An account is given of Rama's two sisters-Saroja and Sukumari—and other members of the household. Saroja, a young educated lady of progressive views, is dissatisfied with their conventional life and orthodox ways. She longs for the freedom which they enjoy in the west. Rama is intoxicated with her womanhood and regards her as the very embodiment of the Feminine Principle. Sukumari is an ordinary, school-going girl, contented and happy.

Having settled affairs at home, Rama returns to France to complete his work on the thesis which it is expected would take one year more. Georges is a frequent visitor to their home, and Lezo also comes thrice a week to give Madeleine lessons in Pali so that she may study Buddhism at first hand. He tries to make love to her, but is firmly and sternly rebuffed and rebuked. They visit uncle Charles and aunt Zoubie, and then Catherine (the cousin of Madeleine) comes to stay with them for sometime. Georges and she are soon in love, and some time later are happily married. Savithri also comes to them on a short visit on her way to Cambridge from India. Rama also visits Cambridge in connection with his research work, and comes in close contact with Savithri. He is passionately in love with her. He tries to

think of Madeleine but finds himself thinking of Savithri. Rama gives her the toe-rings which Little Mother had given to him for Madeleine but which were still in his possession. Savithri is ready to run away with him, but he advises her to the contrary. Savithri eventually marries Pratap Singh, and it is hoped she was a good wife to him.

Rama constantly receives letters from Saroja, Little Mother and Sukumari and is thus kept informed of affairs at home. When Saroja's marriage is fixed up he has to come back to India to supervise the arrangements as head of the family and give away the bride. He goes for the wedding, even though Madeleine is in the family way at the time. He expected to return to her in time for the delivery, but is prevented from doing so by his illness. During this time, Madeleine has to undergo a Caesarian operation. Her life is saved, but their second child too dies.

As soon as the doctors permit, Rama comes back to Madeleine. He finds that a great change has come over her. She has become a devout Buddhist, and is gradually moving along the eight-fold path of the lord. She keeps fasts frequently, and passes most of her time in prayer and meditation. Normal life with her is no longer possible, and it is obvious that they must separate.

Then Rama goes to London to look up certain references. He falls ill there, is hospitalized, and one of his lungs has to be taken out. Savithri who is in London frequently visits him. He is also visited by Lakshmi, a young lady who he had met at Cambridge. On his discharge from the hospital, he comes to Paris. He visits Madeleine and finds her changed. She has become a Sanyasni, though she still keeps up her job. After a brief stay, Rama returns to his apartment. It is their last meeting. Soon after, at Madeleine's instance, divorce proceedings are initiated and they are duly divorced.

Letters from home indicate that he has lost his moonings there also. Little Mother lives with Saroja and her husband, and Sukumari has also married and gone away. However Catherine and Georges, who live in Paris, befriend him and try to make him comfortable in every way. He visits them frequently and is soon deeply attached to Vera, their only child. Georges revises his thesis. After the work is over, he plans to go to Travancore where he hops to find a Guru.

The novel presents a vast social canvas and traces the spiritual pilgrimage of the central character Rama against this background. This is the story of a 'Holy Vagabond, a European Brahmin, a French Vedantine the Neo-Trestan and the pseudo-Satyavan' as Rama himself puts it.

'The Serpent and The Rope' presents the veritable sea of humanity. The experience of this multifaceted, multilayered reality is particularized in the sensibility of the protagonist, Rama. All colours merge in the prism of Rama's consciousness, only to emit the spotless white light of Ramaswamy's self realization.

The epic dimension of the novel offers the writer scope to reflect on various aspects of social life. These include the social structure in India, familial relationship, widespread malaise of corruption eating even into the roots of religious institutions. This apart, the status of Indian women, the conflict between tradition and modernity, the impact of Western education on the Indian elite, East-West encounter and a host of other issues constitute to make the novel a confluence of many realities. The novel does not read like a mere sociological account. The observations of the novelist take their place in the panoramic vision of the story and unobtrusively merge into the fictional fabric of the novel. Furthermore, the social and spiritual realms of experience blend with each other in such harmony that one cannot see where the social ends and the spiritual begins, or where the secular yields place to the sacred.

In order to understand Rao's attitude towards woman, it would be pertinent to examine the various female characters of *'The Serpent and The Rope'*.

Madeleine is a complex, many-sided character and the novelist has portrayed her both from within and without. She has a charming, fascinating personality. Her hair was gold, and her skin for an Indian was like the unearthed marble with which we built our winter palaces. There is an air of unreality about her. To Rama, she seems to be altogether unreal. Madeleine's parents died leaving her some property, and she has been brought up by her uncle Charles. She has a strange horror of being touched. She did not allow anyone, except Rama to touch her, and she allowed Rama to do so only because he was an Indian and a Brahmin.

Madeleine is the most important female character in *The Serpent and the Rope* and occupies a central position in the metaphysical and structural matrix of the novel. Rama, the protagonist, meets Madeleine a lecturer in history, at the French University of Caen, they fall in love and eventually get married. She likes the purity and perfectionism of the untouching Cathars and she even implores Rama to practice celibacy. Her emotionalism and sensitiveness which is a contrast with the matter-of-fact attitude of Tante Zoubie and Catherine, is balanced by her intellectualism and rationalism. Madeleine, with her strong sense of loyalties and integrity of character, always wants a cause to love, support and stand by. India, for her, represents a cause, because it has been wronged by the British.

She hates tyranny and injustice of any kind, and is compassionate towards the cause of humanity. Her sympathies with the downtrodden and the exploited masses, make her lean towards Communism, like Savithri.

In order to acquaint ourselves fully with all the nuances of Madeleine's character, it is essential to examine all facets of the Rama-Madeleine relationship, as Madeleine's character is built around the paradigms of love, marriage and then ultimately, religion. In the words of Shantha Krishnaswamy, "Their marriage begins on a basis of profound friendship transcending racial, sexual and cultural barriers."² In the first instance, it is Madeleine's similarity with Little Mother, which attracts him towards her. "They both had the same shy presence, both rather silent and remembering everything; they loved, too, more than is customary" (p.20), observes Rama. Paul Sharrad goes to the extent of saying that "Madeleine is not so much a wife as a mother-substitute who enables Rama to objectify a traumatic experience."³

It is once again Raja Rao's vision of the ethereal and the earthly in woman, which make Rama associate Madeleine with the memories of mother Gauri, the presence of Little Mother, as well as the concubines of Benaras. Rama's pseudo-philosophical view of considering the world as an illusion comes into a direct clash with Madeleine's pragmatic way of thinking. And yet, she,

with her Catholicism, turns to a study of the Oriental religions, which does not remain merely to be an academic exercise for her, while trying to sympathize with Rama's Vedantin notion of non-duality. He, in turn, turns to a study of the French medieval history, researching on the Albigensian heresy. According to S. Nagarajan, "In the marriage of Rama and Madeleine, two contrary world-views, two contrary epistemologies come together, and the novel is a study of that encounter."⁴

Madeleine has a fascination for history and antiquity and for countries and epochs not her own. She thinks of herself as a pagan who loves ancient civilizations; intimacy with Rama, meant for her the chance of acquaintance with a great country of rich heritage. For her, having rice with Rama is a simple way of recognizing India. She is even too shy to address Rama by name, because it goes against the Indian tradition. On hearing about the illness of Rama's father, Madeleine urges Rama to go to India. In the Rama-Madeleine relationship, it is Madeleine who makes all the necessary adjustments and compromises. She tries to be a good wife to Rama, cooking Indian meals for him, respecting his Brahminic desire for cleanliness, playing the tender mother to him in his-illness and being attentive to his little needs, even keeping sharpened pencils ready to facilitate his study. She also tries her best to participate in his Hindu beliefs, by considering the rock-elephant and the flagstone

Nandi bull as sacred. She takes in her stride the fluctuations of his mood, his childish irresponsibility, his Brahminic asceticism, as well as his passionate sensuality. However, Madeleine in her spirit of warmth, affection and compassion, is not able to understand Rama's detached and aloof response to the death of their first child. Pierre, while she is struck with inconsolable grief and is unable to cope with it.

Madeleine has a naturally benign disposition and a same sightedness towards everyone who comes within the circle of her acquaintance. Be it George, Lezo or Savithri, all are at the receiving end of her warmth and kindness. Thus, on viewing the practical side of Rama Madeleine marriage, one realizes that Madeleine at her best, tries to be genteel, courteous and understanding towards Rama, notwithstanding her refusal to adopt and assimilate certain values of his culture which come into a direct clash with her western sensibility and threaten to undermine her feminine identity. Rama, on the other hand, fails to be a conscientious husband in many instances. He fails to be by her side, when she needs him most. On losing her first born, Pierre, Madeleine has to bear her sorrow alone because Rama is away in India and does not make any efforts to be beside her.

During the time of her second pregnancy, Medeleine is suffused with a feeling of ecstasy. Here, Raja Rao romanticizes motherhood and reveals that he holds maternity to be sacrosanct.

He believes that woman it is, who teems with fertility and vitality, leading to the continuity of human race, and man it is, whose physical and spiritual barrenness leads to her sorrow. “The sorrow of woman be indeed to barrenness of man” (p.236), he says. Rama thinks that the prospect of becoming the mother of a child has invested her with a certain mysterious “otherness”. Ironically, it is Madeleine’s imminent motherhood which confirms her status as a renewer of the human race which makes Rama extend to her a respect, consideration and even an awed worship, which might be otherwise denied to her as a mere wife.

Raja Rao does realize the importance of the supportive strength provided by womanhood without which manhood is forlorn and incomplete. “It makes all the difference in the world whether the woman of your life is with you or not; she alone enables you to be in a world that is familiar and whole”⁵ (p.57), surmises Rama. Here, Raja Rao explores the tender area of man-woman relationship and makes a discovery of human nature, both masculine and feminine.

Despite the oneness of spirit which Rama and Madeleine try to achieve at the intellectual and passionate level, a subconscious process of disintegration does set in, in their marriage, vitiating their relationship and permeating their lives with a natural and inadvertent antipathy. Madeleine, at this stage, is torn apart by mixed feelings and contradictory

reactions. The ambiguity of her response to want freedom and self-assertion on the one hand and on the other, expresses her readiness to be his tortured slave.

Their reunion is not what they had expected it to be. Kathleen Raine has pointed out that “each is both rope and serpent – illusion and reality to the other, a mutual illusion as of two people who try to meet in a mirror.”⁶ Rama is at a loss to understand the real cause of the rift in their relationship. “What after all was the problem? Where exactly did it begin? For Madeleine had never been sweeter..... Yet she herself was not there. She was nowhere” (p.77).

Madeleine confesses her bitterness about the Indian caste system and practice of untouchability and at the same time confesses, “Everything good for me has only come from India” and “I am happy I shall die in India” (p.68).

For all her belief in the equality of sexes, she can still make such a statement about woman: “Without a man she can see nothing great or holy. There the Hindus are right. Man must lead woman to the altar of God” (p.40). This is a direct contrast to the opinion and attitude expressed by her later on, during the course of her religious quest. The complex contradictions in Madeleine’s character can be judged from the fact that she professes to hate all religions apart from that of humanity and simply wants Man to live intelligently, and at the same time, one

can discern her unmistakable leaning towards religion, particularly Buddhism.

Yet, Madeleine's instinctive possessiveness about her loved ones is revealed from the fact that she has a feeling of dislike for Rama's father because she wanted the whole of Rama to herself, without wanting to share him with anybody. Although she encourages Rama to visit India and be with his family occasionally, she herself refuses to accompany him, irrespective of Rama's belief that his father would have been cured on being visited by his daughter-in-law. This is her western attitude which cannot conceive of blood-relations as being a part of the filial kinship, as is her fear of bacteria.

Caught up in the cross-currents of a trans-cultural marriage, inevitably, Rama and Madeleine commit the cardinal mistake of being supremely self-conscious about the respective cultures they represent. Both of them are in a way, unsuccessful in imposing themselves on each other's culture. In the words of Paul Sharrad, "The two have a lot to live upto, and every disappointment in each other carries presages of greater disaster....."⁷ Even inconsequential failings on one's part become a tool of representative burden for the other. As pointed out by Meenakshi Mukherjee, "Hardly ever do they regard themselves or each other simply as individual human beings. Instead, they are constantly interpreting their own and each

other's actions in terms of their national and cultural differences..."⁸ The toe-rings represent loyalties of kinship. According to Punim Juneja, "Marriage", for Rama, "is much more than a personal bond between a man and a woman. It involves family ties and loyalties."⁹

Though they can still meet each other on the intellectual plane, yet Madeleine's inability of total surrender, her increasing religious inclinations, and Rama's male arrogance, his callous indifferences and his infidelity in emotions, widens the yawning gulf of spiritual alienation between them. They try to fall back on the physical union, but it wears off in a waste of sexual lust, all the more so, because of Madeleine's inconstant shift from passionate sensuality to an ascetic aloofness.

Rama's Brahminic Advaitic belief in the Impersonal principle makes him expect self-transcendence from his wife. He cites a reference from the Upanishads to Madeleine and affirms his belief in what the legendary saint Yagnyavalkya had said to his wife Maiteryi about loving a wife for the sake of the Self in her. To quote what the saint has said to his wife, from the original sources of Brihadranyaka Upanishad:

It is not for the sake of the husband, my beloved, that the husband is dear, but for the sake of the Self.

It is not for the sake of wife, my beloved, that the wife is dear, but for the sake of the Self.¹⁰

Madeleine partakes of a value-system, which, in the words of Meenakshi Mukherjee, may be regarded as”.... ‘western’ in its insistence on the particular and the concrete, on the personal and the immediate-in other words, in its recognition of the object as something outside, oneself”¹¹. Madeleine, with her belief in “person,” refuses to transcend the subject-object dichotomy and is at a loss to understand Rama’s metaphysical predilections. For her, everything has to be clothed in the visible to become real, while Rama, according to her, made the simple too big and too high.

Rama expects Madeleine to be his companion in his search for the Absolute. From this point of view, in the words of Claudio Gorlier, “....she potentially embodies the feminine principle, and Rama fancies that she may possess the functioning of an intercessor, guide, conducive to the absolute, though in a vicarious, concurrent way.”¹² Madeleine’s conception of self and reality, however, is radically different from that of Rama. She, with her pragmatic vision and her practical-minded determinism, refuses to consider marriage as a means of self- realization. If at all she seeks the truth, it has to be on her own terms and for her own self. According to Shyamala A. Narayan, “For Ramaswamy, the function of the Feminine is to make man realize his goal, and through serving him, fulfil herself. “For his woman’s salvation lies through man

and the world, not be moving away from the world approaching the Absolute directly.”¹³ The difference between Rama and Madeleine is what G.S. Amur says in this regard, “What separates Rama and Madeleine in the final analysis therefore is.....a basic metaphysical difference in their conceptions of Self and Reality.”¹⁴

The marital relationship of Rama and Madeleine and its culmination in a divorce, thus brings home to us the full implication of an East-West encounter, in terms of psychological and cultural differences, containing in it numerous other dualities. K.R. Rao underscores the significance of their cultural and personal differences, “Rama and Madeleine succumb to the characteristic determinisms of their individual cultures, despite their endeavours to transcend them and achieve a mutual equation.”¹⁵

The Rama-Madeleine relationship represents the conformation of two different modes of thinking which has sharp differences on cultural as well as individualistic ground. There is a divergence in their views regarding the comprehension of a woman’s place in society and family. Love and marriage spell different connotations for them. Rama sums up his definition of love, thus, “Love is a way of looking at things. If you love, you forget yourself, and receive the object not as you see it, but rather as the seen. The woman therefore is

the priestess of God” (p.57). Rama can think of love only in terms of self-effacement, sublimation of the ego, and surrender to the other, Madeleine with her belief in assertive individualism, can never come to terms with a philosophical definition of love and marriage, which negates the value of the woman’s self. S.Nagarajan says, that, “Madeleine’s conception of love and marriage is based on the modern western view.....that each of us has the right to achieve and develop a distinct personality, otherwise we cannot be moral agents.”¹⁶

Madeleine had first appealed to Rama, the Vedantin Brahmin, due to her Puritanism and “mystical attraction.” Rama had considered her to be an ideal vehicle for the fulfillment of all his needs, whether worldly or spiritual. As per the norm of Hindu marriage, she has got to surrender herself to the will of her husband and find fulfillment in self-effacement, thereby achieving self-transcendence. Madeleine could never bring herself up to do this because, “To her, marriage was like a pair of parallel rails on which runs the life’s train. She had accepted Rama, she wanted to possess him wholly but she could never merge her identity with that of his....”¹⁷

In Rama’s view, then, Madeleine has failed him in the three traditional norms of a Hindu marriage, Dharma, Praja and Rati.

Instead of considering his “real” relationship with Madeleine as viable, Rama goes in quest of another woman to be his companion on the path to salvation. Considering his liaison with Savithri as an instance of the transcendental union of lovers, Rama falls back on philosophical catechisms to justify his “mystical” marriage with Savithri as existing on the hypothetical plane of mythical reality. While Rama turns to his metaphysical world of abstraction in moments of crisis, Madeleine’s sensitive psyche is hurt enough to make her cry out in agony, “Lord, leave me alone. I do not belong to the man kingdom. I’m torn apart as by a porcupine inside. I am finished, I am aghast” (p.162). Her feminine sensibility is in a tortuous state of injured pride. Madeleine being her truly frank and honest self, admits that it is woman’s weakness and her emotional dependence on man which makes her defend herself against the strength of man by protesting against his inconsiderate attitude.

Madeleine tries to drown her frustration and disillusionment by aggravating her existent religious tendencies into a full-fledged recourse to the religion of Buddhism. The death of her second child steers her towards the course of religious asceticism with an overzealous practice of austerities.

Perhaps, it is Rama’s one-sided definition of India, which Madeleine is unable to adhere to and it is the narrowness of his

attitude which is partially responsible for making Madeleine a victim of cross-cultural and psychological conflict. As opposed to Rama's Brahminic elusiveness, for Madeleine, love of all humanity is the manifestation of her spiritual essence.

Towards the end of the novel, Rama himself sums up the situation and admits uncannily, in a simple but wistful statement, that his own cultural and racial predilections were responsible for the failure of his human relationship. "Had I been less of a Brahmin, I might have known more of love" (p.400).

The circle of Madeleine's compassion and affection widens now to include all forms of existence....human beings, birds, insects and plants. Her conception of love goes beyond its conjugal definition to think of it as a force of humanitarianism, which, in her own words, entails this principle:

To help others 'be' – to let the flower, let the water flow, to accept that birth and death are cycles, the affirmation of something; that is what love should be. Love should not be different from truth (p.261).

Madeleine's growing disenchantment with worldly and material pursuits can be judged from the fact that she mostly keeps confined to her room. Now and then, she becomes subject to despair, but her yogic asanas and long hours of meditation

help her in overcoming this and in acquiring a sense of serenity and inner calm.

As she withdraws more and more into the cocoon of her inner self, she seems to have reached a new pinnacle of wisdom. According to Rama, “Her face shone as if she had come nearer death, and there was a glow of truth between her eyes” (p.315). Here, Raja Rao wants to project Madeleine as an Indian saint. With her new-found wisdom, and the inherent simplicity and truthfulness of her temperament, she is considered to be a venerable figure in social circles, and is even considered capable of offering sane advice to people who are in trouble. She drifts completely away from Rama, who observes “There was a clear, a pure space between us. Something had happened to Madeleine, I knew it, but I could not name it” (p.312).

As she starts living in her self-created and inaccessible domain of spiritual isolation, she becomes increasingly impervious to the needs and demands of the flesh. She resorts to severe practices of constant fasting, praying and keeping night long vigils. She doesn't hesitate from indulging in self-mortification because she realizes the fact of mortality. As Paul Sharrad says, “Unfortunately, the religion she chooses admits the reality of death and adopts an ascetic indifference to its importance in the scheme of things.”¹⁸ Estrangement with Rama is complete and at this stage, Rama thinks of her as Dante's

Beatrice who has turned tyrannical and wants to be seen for what she is. “She who should see the light through him, now wants to show the light to him. It is the inversion of Truth”, proclaims Rama dolefully. Their relationship ends in divorce.

Thus Madeleine is a finely realized character, with all the independence of her spirit, her cross-cultural dualities, her ambiguity, her humanity, her wisdom, and even her asceticism. S. Krishnaswamy says that, “she does not need a mediator to reach her god nor does she feel she ought to be a medium to enable her husband to reach Moksa.”¹⁹ Finally, K.R.S. Iyengar has argued, “Madeleine experiences the glory and agony of love and marriage and motherhood-and races beyond them through aspiration and asceticism to sainthood or at least near sainthood; yet she remains human and lovable and understanding till the last.”²⁰

Two more glimpses of the Western women in *The Serpent and the Rope* are those of Catherine and Tante Zoubie. Catherine is the young cousin of Madeleine who is attracted towards Lezo, the pedantic scholar. She is shy as well as jovial, and has a natural sense of mirth and gaiety. She has a “natural affection for all men and things” (p.138). She has maternal instincts and could prove to be a good housewife according to Uncle Charles. He wants her to learn much from the example of

Rama and Madeleine as a couple, because, to him, they seem to be ideal couple, whose happiness reflects all round.

Rama thinks that it is Catherine's lack of metaphysical education which makes her so simple and innocent. She is happy in the happiness of others and after getting married with Georges is quite happy to be a wife and an impending mother. "I saw how silent Catherine was, how devoted and almost like an Indian wife with Georges" (p.308).

Catherine is the prototype of a woman for whom happiness lies in a home and a hearth, and who derives true happiness by making undemanding efforts for the happiness of others. According to K. R. Rao "Catherine, with her engaging naivete, contrasts with Madeleine who is a complex individual with incompatible interests, and as against Madeleine's psychological and spiritual isolation, Catherine finds solace in her married life and motherhood, simply and naturally."²¹ Catherine does appear to be quite an endearing figure, especially in contrast with the contradictions and complexities of other female characters in the novel. Even the Georges-Catherine marriage comes as a refreshing change from the tumultuous course of disharmony in the other marriages.

Tante Zoubie is the sophisticated and voluble wife of Uncle Charles. She is a romantic and is intelligent as well as materialistic in her outlook. According to her husband, "Zoubie

has not a particularly loving nature. She's more like a man, fond of ideas, of poetry, of music..." (p.226).

Tante Zoubie is quite articulate about feminine experience and the notion of male superiority prevalent in east as well as west. She says bitterly to Oncle Charies, "Tell me, Charles, did you marry me because you were alone? Speak. You married me because you wanted a wife, somebody to sew on your buttons, and wipe your mouth when your saliva ran down your face. Oh, la, la marriage is a grand institution" (p.374). This indicates her sarcasm about the role of ministering agent designed by man for woman. She is irked by man's assumption that woman exists as his appendage, in order to run errands for satisfying all his worldly needs.

Keeping in view Tante Zoubie's remarks about Oncle Charies' attitude, one feels that Raja Rao does make an effort to criticize his male presumptuousness in expecting female servitude.

Savithri is the woman who inspires Rama with the evocation of the Feminine Principle. Along with Madeleine, she plays the most important part in the earthly preoccupations as well as the metaphysical quest of the protagonist, Ramaswamy. Raja Rao makes her a combination of the ethereal and the earthly, the real and the unreal, and sometimes displays such a sensitive and feminine touch on the delineation of her

demeanour that he almost succeeds in bringing her to the brink of being a fascinating abstraction and yet she comes across as a living and breathing entity, appealing to the reader with all her complex simplicity, her assertive intelligence and her aggressive stance. As Kathleen Raine says, “Savithri is a character painted with all the touches of love.... is happy wherever and with whomever she happens to be.....for she is herself and in herself at all times.”²² Her political views and leanings towards Communism are an act of faith for humanity, against the injustices of the established system.

Being the product of decadent aristocracy, her character has none of the drawbacks which are usually considered consequential and natural on belonging to an aristocratic background. Gentle and polite, she is the daughter of a Raja who is notorious for his tyrannical cruelty and a mother who is all pious and saintly. She is sent to England for her college education, where she tries to imbibe in her character all the freedom and sense of purposefulness of the empirical west. She does not shun smoking, drinking and dancing with men as being taboo, as one might have expected from a girl with a conservative background from India. Exposure to the cross-cultural tenets and trends, however, does not deprive her completely of her patriotic Indianness. She is well-versed in Sanskrit and has an aversion to the British rule in India.

On their first meeting, Savithri strike Rama as being a very clever, knowledgeable and graceful person, but somehow too modern. At this point, as pointed out by M.K. Naik, “Little does he realize that beneath Savithri’s militant modernism lies a spirit kindred to his own – a spirit Indian to the core.”²³ Yet, Madeleine’s remark rings true when she says, “It’s three thousand years of civilization that produce a thing like her” (p.142). There is a certain primal innocence and a natural gaiety about her character which makes her laughter so natural. To Rama, “She seemed, so innocent and true and free” (p.122). She has a rich knowledge of the Brij language and quotes the French poet Paul Valery with equal elan.

Savithri is ordinary to look at, with her plump figure and short sightedness, but there is a certain auspiciousness about her appearance and attire, and in spite of an occasional clumsiness, every action of hers bespeaks of a certain reverence for things. She is like a dream-picture and her sincerity, intuited vision of truth and humility do not fail to impress anybody, including Madeleine, who accords her a welcome at her house in France. Madeleine finds her as being true to the image of a gentle, simple and silent Indian.

Savithri establishes an immediate affinity with the surroundings in France and feels quite at home. The essence of purity in her own spirit makes her perceive all things around her

as being mysteriously loaded with significance. It is this philosophical bent of mind which differentiates her from the down-to-earth and logical pragmatism of Madeleine for whom nothing is illusory and every fact and aspect of life has to be understood in the concrete and rational terms of black and white. As Rama observes later on, with Savithri, everything was a “recognition”, while with Madeleine, it was an “explanation” (p.340).

Even love is an intuitive experience for her and not a premeditated course of emotion. As Rama says to her, “For you love is not a system-a canalization of emotion, an idea. For you love is a fact, an immediate experience like an intuition” (p.176). Nevertheless, the natural warmth and cordiality of her disposition makes her mete out equal treatment to everybody who comes within the circle of her daily existence, be it Catherine, for whom she is thoughtful enough to send a red rose even on short acquaintance, to the old bull and the lame horse at the palace who are treated compassionately by her.

Savithri takes delight in her own existential identity and to her the sense of “being” is of paramount importance. On Savithri’s part, perhaps it is this insight into the nature of the self, which finds a parallel response in Rama’s mind and unites them in a bond of shared experience. “She became the awareness behind my awareness, the leap of my understanding. I

lost the world and she became it” (p.169), confesses Rama. He seeks to acquire salvation through her and, in the words of Shantha Krishnaswamy, Savithri is “the woman gives him knowledge. She shows him the bridal path to God. She is the server of happiness, not the served.”²⁴ This is true, in spite of her asserting that she looks upon Rama as a guru. Raja Rao spiritualizes the love-relationship between Rama and Savithri, in order to work out the way of salvation for his protagonist. Ananda Coomaraswamy, who refers to the practice of Sahaja as mentioned in the Vedas, says: “In Sahaja the adoration of young and beautiful girls was made the path of spiritual evolution and ultimately emancipation. By this adoration we must understand not merely ritual worship (the Kumaripuja), but also ‘romantic love’.”²⁵

Raja Rao, the thinker-philosopher, has ideas which are deeply rooted in the mythical, religious and literary tradition of his culture. In keeping with the legendary and mythical image of a woman, she has been allotted the duty of role fulfillment, to work in unison with her “Lord” for his benefit. Meenakshi Mukherjee is quite right when she observes, “Ramaswamy’s entire life is based on a role-expectation that operates on the impersonal principle.”²⁶ According to the formula of fixed roles man has ordained for woman, Rama expects Savithri, the “other Woman” to fulfill the role of saviour-cum-companion, the ideal

Hindu woman who is going to usher him into the world of salvation. Raja Rao suffuses the description of Ramaswamy-Savithri relationship with allusions to the mythical and archetypal relationship between Shiva and Shakti, Krishna and Radha, Satyavan and Savitri and Tristan and Iseult. According to the cult of Shaivism in Indian Philosophy, “Shiva is the pure indeterminate Brahman, while Shakti, the power of Maya, makes him determinate endowed with the attribute of knowledge, will and action”²⁷ and “The relationship of Shiva and Shakti is that of identity (tadatmya), though it is the power of Lord.”²⁸ At the cosmic level, Shiva and Shakti unite in an indissoluble union to continue the cycle of the creation and dissolution of the world. “Shiva without Shakti is unable to create and is a shava or a corpse”.²⁹ According to Uma Parameswaran:

At the cosmic level, in each cycle, Shiva is the stasis of meditation, comes out of meditation, and unites with Shakti, giving rise to infinite movement in eternal harmony. Part of this phase is the world, the earth with its teeming life forms. Then Shiva absorbs Shakti within itself, the world is dissolved and, once more is in stasis of mediation.³⁰

Savithri’s ritualistic worship of Rama with incense and lamplight and the washing of his feet, is an episode which can

be dismissed in terms of its metaphysical context. According to Uma Parameswaran, “The ritualistic washing of Rama’s feet by Savitri is one of the more explicit statements on woman’s position vis-à-vis men.”³¹

In metaphysical terms, Raja Rao looks at their relationship as that of the Purusha and Prakriti. To trace it back to the Sankhya school of Indian Philosophy, which says that “Prakriti is the root-cause of the world of objects,”³² while about Purusha, it says, “It is itself pure and transcendental consciousness. It is the ultimate knower which is the foundation of all knowledge.”³³ As for the relationship between them, it says, “Prakriti needs Purusha in order to be known, to be seen, to be enjoyed, and Purusha needs Prakriti in order to enjoy, and also in order to attain liberation....”³⁴ In metaphysical terms, thus, the Rama-Savithri relationship could be viewed as a union of the sensibilities of the masculine principle and the feminine principle, whereby “...both the spouse and espoused become anointed into godhead”³⁵ (p.212). A philosopher and critic as learned as Dr.Radhakrishnan interprets the relationship of Purusha with Prakriti. He says, “Prakriti evolves under the influence of Purusha. The fulfillment of the ends of the Purusha is the cause of the manifestation of Prakriti in three specialized states.”³⁶ He says further, “Serviceability of Purusha is acknowledged to be the end of the activities of Prakriti, though

Prakriti is not conscious of this end.” According to the tenets of Indian philosophy, woman it is, who acts as the server of knowledge and salvation for man, whose entire life is a spiritual quest, searching for such a woman. Madeleine, having sought the truth on her own terms and for her own sake, has presumably failed him in this purpose, and hence this “spiritual” affair with Savithri. (One cannot resist speculating whether it is purely “spiritual” and strictly platonic).

Raja Rao, thus, tries to project Rama in an image which has mythical trappings and the Rama-Savithri affair is made to have idealistic and transcendental dimensions. However, there are some basic and inherent contradictions which reveal that Rama is not able to rise above the mundane aspect of living. His unabashed contrivance for the satiety of his carnal desire, culminates in a purely physical affair with Lakshmi. It is an instance of his selfish, unbridled indulgence in pleasures which signify casual lust, without any fear of moral reprehension. This episode along with his other failings, highlight the ordinary aspect of his personality and discourages an exclusively full-blooded metaphysical interpretation of many a “spiritual” situation in the novel.

Rama, the spiritual seeker, idealizes Savithri as the primal power who shall be his companion in life’s pilgrimage. This has been derided by S. Krishnaswamy when she says, “However the

woman's power is illusory, she is reduced to a symbol and loses direct power. She is put on a pedestal as a goddess and worshipped only to be presently brought down..... The doomed woman as always, lets someone else be the master of her destiny.”³⁷ Savithri herself echoes this sentiment when she writes to Rama, “No woman who's a woman can choose her destiny. Men make her destiny. For a woman to choose is to betray her biology” (pp.291-292). Another mythological parallel to the Savithri-Rama relationship, offered by Raja Rao, is that of the Savitri-Satyavan episode from the Mahabharata. Savitri is the ideal prototype of a woman who is steadfastly devoted to her husband unto and beyond death. In spite of being the non-wife, the other woman, Savithri, in all her chaste “wifely” devotion to Rama, had been deigned to act as his saviour, like her namesake ancestor. “A marriage between them in the worldly sense is ruled out completely,” says Kathleen Raine. Marriage, in a worldly sense, implies no more than a physical union, while they aspire to enter the realm of spirituality by transcending the limits of corporeal life. Their affair culminates with a “mystical” marriage in London. Rama has no need to break his existing marriage with Madeleine and Savithri decides to marry Pratap.

Savithri has to marry someone and Pratap is as good as any other match for her. Rama thinks it his assumed right to dictate terms to Savithri, who like all the other women of the

family coming within the orbit of his life, have got to obey him. Being torn apart by the conflicting pulls of love and duty, she chooses latter, in order to come up to the familial expectations and to obey Rama. She has to adhere to a traditional image which expects compliance from woman. According to C.D. Narasimhaiah, “It is Raja Rao’s image, which in the context means that as a Hindu woman she has to respect the values that have come down from immemorial antiquity, according to which, in the last analysis, it matters little whom you marry, and so why not marry Pratap who is decent, civilized and chosen by the parents.”³⁸

Despite her earlier independent way of thinking, her educational background and her exposure to the western culture, she makes a fatalistic resignation to circumstances all her life, even after marriage. S.Krishnawamy observes,

For all her modernity, in moment of stress, her emotionally rooted attitude surface to guide her behaviour. Thereby she affirms the familiar pattern of doomed females and saved males.³⁹

Rama, at one time, had expressed his displeasure at Savithri’s attitude, “To speak the truth, I hated this attitude of Savithri’s. I felt she was so truly indifferent, so completely resigned to her fate like all Hindu women-that for her, life was like a bullock

cart wheel: it was round, and so it had to move on night after night, and day after day....” (p.197).

After marriage, life becomes a drudgery for Savithri and she has to be content in giving away prizes at football finals, because marriage is an indissoluble tie.

In the ultimate analysis, Savithri’s personality thus seems to acquire significance for Rama only in its mythical and spiritual dimensions. Her importance lies in entering the pure realm of love, where the ego is dead and man achieved salvation. To recount what is said by K. R. Rao, “Savithri becomes the ‘hypostatic presence’ which he had been looking for....”⁴⁰ Never-the-less, in spite of raja Rao’s best efforts to make her conform closely to the mythic ideal of a woman who shall work for man’s salvation, such a portraiture does not seem to be convincingly real. Far from being just a philosophically variable construct, a spiritual ideal or an immutable essence, Savithri comes across in many instances as being a full-blooded character, with her sensitive, intelligent mind and her aggressive vitality, although she is once again led to fight a losing battle in life.

Savithri appears pathetically human when she beseeches Rama to “take” her as a wife, she is ready to leave her husband for his sake, but Rama shirks from giving a proper answer and

takes her once again on what has been called by Ediriwira Sarach-chandra, as the “devious path of myth and mysticism.”⁴¹

To analyse and view the Rama-Savithri relationship in context of human terms, one has to agree with the words of Punim Juneja, “The bond that exists between Rama and Savithri is based on a commonly shared spiritual and a cultural ethos.”⁴² On the other hand, G.S. Amur views their relationship as a communion of thought and experience based on the sharing of life at profound levels of being. This may be idealistically true in the realm of spirituality but actuality has other real truths to tell. The prospect of leading a mundane existence on becoming Mrs. Pratap Singh does not bother Savithri at all and she goes away, promising to come back to Rama when he would not need her.

Love, professes Rama, is not just a physical, but a spiritual concept. Rama, the protagonist of *The Serpent and the Rope* might try to live up to that admirable ideal in the realm of his thoughts, but his practical behaviour proves otherwise. Rama considers woman to be the alluring temptress of man, and man on his part takes it for granted that woman exists for satisfying his periodic urge for carnal pleasure.

Even if one were to consider his relationship with Savithri as a platonic one, by taking into account only its spiritual dimensions of being just a quest for the acquisition of higher

truth, one would have to overlook temporal ethics for the sake of transcendental profligacy. In the course of his brief, lecherous affair with Lakshmi, the spiritual mask of Rama is blown aside to reveal momentarily, the face of a sensual libertine, for whom the concept of fidelity holds no importance. Lakshmi, his friend's wife and his hostess is easily available to him. He admits that he wants to save his manhood from dehydrating, so, without any qualms of conscience, he proceeds to commit adultery with a woman who is a faceless toy of pleasure for him.

Rama gives evidence of being perversely possessive when he speculates thus about a man's mistress. "Then you want to take a cactus branch and beat her and scratch away from her chest, and taste the good blood of her wound" (p.163). Rama admits that "Man in his flesh is unutterably weak...." (p.218). He finds a quizzical and paradoxical way of defending himself by saying "you should know a woman and not understand her for if you understand her, then you can never be a pilgrim to knowledge" (p.219).

Little Mother is the most pathetic figure in the novel. She is the third wife of Rama's father, and she became a widow at a very tender age. She is a flower which withered even before it could bloom. As a widow she leads a life of devotion, piety and self-effacement. She is well read in the scriptures, and performs the sacred rites punctiliously. She is tolerant, gentle and soft

spoken even to those who, like Saroja, may doubt her motives, and be harsh and unjust to her.

She bears a son, and within a year is widowed. With childlike trust she consigns her husband's ashes into Mother Ganga's hands, and it is only when she crosses the bridge that takes her away from the sacred river that she feels widowed and weeps for herself and her orphaned child. But not for long does she despair. Her husband has left her with certain responsibilities and she feels she can revere his memory only by shouldering them bravely. Rama says about her, "What sweetness flowed from Little Mother to me. She, it seemed, was my inmost centre, the mirror of my life" (p.234) as he is impressed by her quiet intensity and unassuming simplicity. She accepts the fact of her husband's death with equanimity and a kind of philosophical resignation to the inevitability of a fateful event. On her return home from Benaras, everyone notices the new dignity of her stance and the enhancement of her moral stature. Rama compares her to the Ganges, that grave and knowing river which hides the sorrow and impurity of mankind since times immemorial. But, philosophical musings apart, one has to acknowledge at the realistic level, that Little Mother's shy presence envelops in its folds an introspective persona whose thoughts and gestures overflow with a profusion of benevolence for others, Raja Rao projects her as an idealistic character who

does not make any conscious effort to further her own interest, while being committed to the cause of others welfare.

Little Mother is proud of her Brahminic heritage, her caste and her religion. But she gives ample evidence of the qualities of tolerance and liberal-mindedness. This is clear from her open hearted acceptance of Madeleine, a French girl, as a daughter-in-law. She gives fifty rupees to the Brahmin to make everything holy because Rama has married a European wife and had no sacred thread. But this gesture, along with all the others, whether it is the presentation of toe-rings for Madeleine, or keeping flowers for her on the Ramayana, are an expression of her sincere wish for Rama's conjugal happiness. She extorts a promise from Rama that he will always lead an independent life and will not let his father's family interfere in his married life. This makes her different from a typical Indian mother-in-law of those times.

Little Mother has a natural sense of affinity with Rama whom she treats as her own son. On Rama's departure to France, she gains responsibility of the household and is prepared to do all she can for the happiness and welfare of her children. At the same time, she once again displays a high level of mental maturity. "How can men understand the pained heart of woman? (p.45), is a cry of anguish and dilemma, from one whose love and consideration, perhaps, goes unrecognized, due to the gap in

generation as well as norms of tradition. She is worried about the fact that Saroja seemed so lonely and sad and is elated over the academic success of Sukumari. Initially, Little Mother is quite upset over Saroja's decision to marry Subramanya Sastri, who may be a nice man, but who might be unsuitable for a sensible and sensitive girl like Saroja. Little Mother finds herself in an unsure position about this liaison which might bring material prosperity to Saroja, but which could also lead to her misery. This shows that in order to judge the worth of a person, she does not take his earthly possessions into account. In context of increasingly avaricious nature of man, mankind, today, is in dire-need of this sane and humane approach to marriage. She has treated all her children alike and at the age of twenty-six herself, is large-hearted enough to pardon Saroja's prejudiced attitude towards her, as being a consequence of latter's young age and immature mind. This makes her character much ahead of her times.

The spontaneity and intensity of Little Mother's affection of Rama, makes her anxiously await his return from France. Her letters indicate her emotional dependence on Rama. There is a link of mutual amity which unites them together. Rama confesses, "She understood the curvatures of my silences and thoughts. She seemed to have borne me without bearing me" (p.234). On the other hand, Little Mother looks upto Rama as

the patriarchal head of the family because he is the only adult male figure in the family. She implores him not to abandon them, for after all, according to her “A man at home is like a god in the temple” (p.259). While practically running the house almost single-handedly, she still looks upto Rama, who is far away in France, for ensuring the welfare and happiness of the family. In keeping with the traditional view, she thinks that their entire life will be in shambles without his supportive strength. To quote a statement by Ashish Nandy, “The mother-son relationship, is thus the basic nexus and the ultimate paradigm of human social relationship in India.”⁴³

She is well-versed in Sanskrit and whenever moved greatly by anything, she resorts to the recitation of shlokas and the chanting of Shivoham (I am Shiva). This indicates that like Rama, she too is trying to arrive at a metaphysical definition of the self. She shares with him his metaphysical stance regarding the place of woman in society and Rama’s belief that, “Man must wed to know this earth. The womb (bhaga) is the great Prakriti (nature), and the possessor of the womb (Bhagavsan) is Shiva” (p.370). This is in keeping with Raja Rao’s evocation of the feminine principle as Prakriti or Shakti, her male consort being Purusha or Shiva who will absorb her into him, for both of them to revert back to formlessness.

Yet, after all she is mindful of tradition and so Little Mother's view of womanhood envisages only the twin roles of a dutiful wife and a caring mother for a young girl precluding any other course leading to self-fulfilment. "A woman has to marry, whether she be blind, deaf, mute or tuberculous. Her womb is her life, and we cannot choose our men" (p.258-59), she says. Such an assertion on the part of Little Mother springs from her implicit faith in those tenets of tradition which accord separate roles to a person during the different phases of life and which regard obedience and compliance with others' wishes to be exemplary qualities of a married woman. Little Mother tells Rama, "After all, Rama, what more happiness does a woman need than a home, and a husband? The temple needs a bell, and the girl a husband, to make the four walls shine" (p.276). Thus, in her view, the only happiness that woman can and must strive for is that which can be achieved within the confines of her home, for the benefit of her husband and family. She seems to be one of those women, about whom it is their nature, to live for others, to make complete self-abnegation of themselves, and to have no life but in their affections."⁴⁴

For Little Mother, the very thought of rebellion against the superimposed mores of society, would be blasphemous. She can never afford to think of herself as an individual, because the code of self-effacement and submission has been ingrained into

her right since her childhood. She has to uphold those values of the Indian tradition cherished by society, which expect transcendence of the petty self from an individual. The portrait of Little Mother is one which enshrines those qualities for which women have always been valued-their services, their devotion and also their acknowledgement of man's superiority.

Another glimpse of Indian womanhood in *'The Serpent and the Rope'* is that of the sister. Rama has two step sisters, Saroja and Sukumari. According to Rama, the sister is".....she with the woman in her without the woman's demands, she in whom family pride and devotion made of you a god, she could make the understandable known, the mysterious simple and reverential" (p.105-6). A sister in India has always been an integral part of the matrix of joint family system. Her steadiness and her reliability, her simple unassuming strength, her caring and her support make her assume a pivotal role in the ethos of social relationships.

Saroja, the beautiful, intelligent and sensitive sister of Ramaswamy, has a certain intensity and integrity of character which attracts one towards her right from the beginning. In fact, she is one of the first recipients of a string of paeans sung by Raja Rao in praise of womanhood "What a deep and reverential mystery womanhood is. I could bow before Saroja and call her Queen" (p.50), says Rama in a rapturous rhapsody. In a poetic,

albeit erotic and hyperbolic language, Rama describes the enchanting looks of Saroja, who has a mesmerizing effect on his mind and senses. At seventeen, Saroja is going through that phase of life where girlhood ripens into womanhood. Raja Rao invests Saroja's personality and character with a certain amount of mystery and an undecipherable unwordliness at this stage. Her stability, the innate wisdom of her character and her profound sense of empathy with all things around her makes her a reverential figure. "Her silence had a quality that made living corvine" (pp.48-49), says Rama.

She expresses her wish to join her brother in Europe and pursue higher studies. Rama would welcome her warmly as he is confident that she would prove to be a good sister-in-law to Madeleine. He is happy at the prospect of Saroja's visit, perhaps because he is in emotional need of the balancing strength of a sister, who is one of the pillars in the pyramid of joint-family system, wherein, "...We equalize each other's vagaries with our own steadiness" (p.105).

Saroja's wish to continue with her studies remains unfulfilled as her fate is sealed in an arranged marriage with Subramanya Sastri. She is forced to sacrifice her aspirations to the will of the elders. "A woman is a woman and she must obey, even if she's got a first-class University degree. I've done my job with Saroja. Now, you take charge of her"(p.269), says

Uncle Seetharamu, while handing over the “charge” of Saroja to Rama. In laying down the norm of obedience as the ideal code of conduct for young women, he also aptly sums up the predicament of many a intelligent and educated young girls, however, free-thinking and enterprising they might be.

In depicting this Raja Rao was depicting the changing times. Both Saroja and Sukumari have been depicted as ambitious young women who have potential of blossoming into self-reliant and forceful personages with a mind and will of their own. Their adolescence is a troubled phase of their life, because their modern outlook doesn't permit them to follow a traditional set of values without questioning the validity of the same. The level of education they have received and the independence of their spirit makes them misfit in a family and a social set-up which expects unquestioning and implicit compromise from them. Thus, they become prototypes of the characters who are victims of the conflicting polarities of tradition vs. modernity and social order vs. personal happiness.

Saroja then makes up her mind to marry Subramanya Sastri, even though she is doubtful about his suitability and is apprehensive about the prospect of her own misery after marriage. In her moment of despair and doubt, she looks upto her elder brother Rama, for advice and comfort. Rama, however, cites the importance of tradition and asks her to merge her will

with that of the family. She accepts him as a husband, though there is every chance that they will be incompatible. Does she commit the cardinal mistake of nursing a fear about turning into a frustrated and unwanted old maid? One wonders.

Saroja fights a losing battle not just because her circumstances can't permit her to win, but because she is not strong enough in herself. In keeping with the conservative expectations, she makes a listless surrender to a situation which cannot be termed as being pre-ordained. Saroja like many other characters of Raja Rao, is one of those persons who are "...both progressive and traditional and are thus a type of social or conservative rebels without having the courage to flout the social conventions completely."⁴⁵ It is not difficult to agree with Meenakshi Mukherjee when she says that it would be wrong to eulogize her decision as being a surrender to the impersonal principle for the sustenance of the world, as has been done by many a critic.⁴⁶

She has never tried deliberately to live upto the ideals of any particular culture, and yet, "she wished she had been a European woman; it would have given her so much brightness" (p.257). An argument ensues between Saroja and Rama, and she remains unconvinced by Rama's rejoinder that the freedom in the west is that of foolishness. She is very much aware of the cross-cultural, psychological and sociological differences

between the conditions of the western woman and the woman in the east. According to her, the “freedom” and “brightness” of the western woman’s condition, makes her capable of being a rich giver as well recipient of love and happiness, while the Indian woman is a child-bearing automation who has little chance of leading a self-fulfilling life.

On the eve of her wedding, she feels entrapped, isolated and fearful of the future. But there is no other way out for her. In keeping with the norms of orthodoxy, she like many other young women of our society, has to seek marriage in order to attain social prestige and economic prosperity, even though a part of her may die in the process. According to Kathleen Raine, “Saroja’s story is indeed a grave criticism of the position of woman in India.....her sad choice is a blend of youthful perversity and acceptance of the role of woman within Indian society.”⁴⁷

It must be mentioned that Raja Rao has faithfully painted the plight of many Indian girls. Saroja too, like Little Mother, has a possessive and protective motherly instinct. The amount of love she has for Rama, can be judged from the fact that she keeps awake the whole night to attend on him because he is sick. She makes him promise to come and stay with her in future, so that she could care for him properly and restore him to good health and well-being. Setting aside the doubts and conflicts

which beset her mind, Saroja assures Rama, “Brother I shall bring a fair name to the household. Do not worry” (271). Rama, the protector-figure is conscious of having let her down, by failing to betray her” (p.263), admits Rama, simply and wistfully. This statement speaks volumes, and come from the mind of Raja Rao who visualizes the woman’s conflict with sympathy. Saroja is one of the best drawn characters of Raja Rao, who gives evidence of his psychological insight by realistically portraying in her character the predicament of many a young woman. Unlike Madeleine and Savithri, she is perfectly recognizable as a character with all her intelligence and sensitiveness, and there is no ambiguity about her. One can experience to the full, the anguish and the anxiety felt by her, as well as recognize the fatalistic helplessness of her situation.

A new chapter of life awaits Saroja after marriage and Rama discerns that, “So much gravity, decision and responsibility had come into her that already she looked a woman” (p.275). Overnight, she had undergone a metamorphosis from a bright, zestful and aspiring youngster into a mature, adult young woman, who has inculcated the standard ideal qualities of a married woman in her character.

With reference to Little Mother and Saroja, R.S.Singh says, “Since these women were dependents they had developed a fatalistic attitude. They were circumstantially compelled to

compromise with life. It was not their sacrifice, it was their helplessness.”⁴⁸ Whether it is Little Mother, Saroja, or Savithri, all are dependent on Rama’s decision about the course their life should take. Rama, however, fails them, by refusing to do anything concrete in order to bail them out of their misery. He is mostly involved in a vain spiritual and metaphysical rigmarole, according to which, the value of an individual lies in the fulfillment of the role allotted to him.

One need to mull over this question and decide whether Saroja was deprived of an opportunity to chalk out the course of her life or whether she was not strong enough to face and resist a repressive social order. A balanced and realistic answer to this query warrants a combination of the two factors.

Sukumari, the youngest girl in the family, is the prototype of a spirited and rebellious youngster who is all set to change to established norms of society. She has a volatile personality, a sprightly, vivacious temperament, and vigorous way of living, whereby she deviated from the expected and accepted pattern of feminine behaviour, and repudiates the standards which society has set for her. She is voluble enough in not hesitating to register her feelings of protest about the place of submission which women occupy in man’s world right since childhood.

Right since her school days, Sukumari has been an ardent supporter of Communism. She is unfettered by the bonds of

artifice and refuses to conform to the traditionally meek role of surrender to other's wishes. It is an exalted position of self-respect which she wants to strive for in life. "Oh, Little Mother, you want to tie me to a quern-handle and get rid of me too. Let me study medicine---oh, please, Brother?" (p.294), she begs of Rama and Little Mother, Howsoever spirited and independent she might be in her thinking, inevitably, she too, is expected to follow the advice of others, before taking a decision about her own life. Generations of outlook separate her from Little Mother who preaches to her, thus, "And for a woman the sacred feet of her husband be Paradise" (p.294). On the occasion of Saroja's wedding, she does not mince words while talking about the institution of marriage, "Ah, till the tali is tied all is sweetness; afterwards it's the festival of the bitter neem leaf" (p.275).

Sukumari's character, though briefly sketched by the author, remains to be one of the most interesting portrayals in the novel. Among all the characters in *'The Serpent and the Rope'* perhaps, Sukumari alone succeeds to some extent in breaking the vicious circle of orthodox tradition.

Love "connects" man and woman: Rama's father and Little Mother, Rama and Madeleine, Rama and Savithri, Uncle Charles and Tante Zoubie, Catherine and Georges, to list but the few that are more specifically described, are all happy or sad protagonists of love stories. These relationships constitute the

very structure of the plot of the novel *Raja Rao* makes it eminently clear how important it is for him to find the element of connection between the two opposites. Writing about Catherine and Georges, he thus comments: “Georges’s dominion is the Heaven and Catherine’s the earth. All that one needs is a ladder, a golden ladder.” As a result, love not only bridges Georges and Catherine? Man and woman, male and female principles but also Heaven and earth. As far as the relationship of Rama-Madeleine is concerned, love is symbolized by Pierre (or Krishna, as he was called at the beginning), their first son, who, emblematically enough, will die very young. It is in Krishna, in fact, that both Madeleine and Rama dissolve to give life to love. Love, like any in-between, is dissolution itself-or sunya, to say it in Raja Rao’s words – “Love demands nothing, it says nothing, it knows nothing; it lives for itself,” and further “Love is not a feeling: it is, as you might say, a stateless state, the whole condition of oneself.”

The theme of true marriage leading to self-knowledge is the core of this novel. Man’s life is barren and futile if he does not make incessant effort for the quest of the Absolute. Dwelling on the importance of the Guru, in man’s thirst for the ultimate and the significance of the title, Raja Rao observes:

The world is either unreal or real—the serpent or the rope, there is not between the two—and all that’s in-

between is poetry, is sainthood.....You see the serpent and in fear you feel you are it, the serpent, the saint-One-the Guru-brings you lantern; the road is seen... He shows it to you. And you touch your eyes and know there never was a serpent.⁴⁹

Woman plays a very important role in man's life. It is through a woman that a man fully knows and realizes himself. In intimate moments, Ramawamy feels that Madeleine is the very essence of his life.

Rama, the hero-narrator feels that Madeleine is inseparable from him. He loves her so deeply that he finds him, his ownself, deeply reflected in her. Rama passes through wonderful experience in his intimate moments. He is filled with insatiable lust. He unlocks his heart to her with the following prassionate outburst:

I give it to you, Madeleine, but you are where you are, I am but nowhere.....Madeleine let me squeeze the juice out of you...let me smell you, smell the you of me and the I in you. Oh, I would smother your sobs, Madeleine, I would die with you pain.⁵⁰

Madeleine has also shown a very interesting and wonderful aspect of this man-woman relationship. Woman becomes with her man like a mother to a child. She takes care of her man, gives him comfort and protects him.

It is through man's intimate physical union with his woman that he can spiritually realize the great harmony that pervades all aspects of the universe.

Rama's hunger for maternal love has tremendously influenced his view of woman and her principle on earth. Man-woman relationship has been extensively explored in modern fiction. D.H.Lawrence has deeply probed this relationship. Among the Indian English novelists, Raja Rao has delved deep into the changing colours of this relationship, the mysteries of the Female Principle. 'The Serpent and the Rope' is an excellent probe in its basic nature and its various facets. Ramaswamy the protagonist narrator, in an interior monologue ruminates: "what a deep and reverential mystery womanhood is,"⁵¹ after his meeting with Saroja, the step-sister. In his unique experience with Savithri, he finds the real woman, a never changing truth, the abiding reality. In a flash-back he recollects:

.....in that blank, the silent was blank between books and behind them, I felt the presence, the truth, the formula of Savithri.⁵²

Rama's attitude to this theme can be discerned in his relation to various women whom he encounters in one capacity or another-mother, sister, wife and beloved. Speaking about the pre-eminent place of woman on earth the narrator remarks: "There is only one woman, not for one life, but for all lives;

indeed, the earth was created—with trees, seas, boats, buildings, books, rivers, towers, aeroplanes—that we might seek her.”⁵³

Ramaswamy, in a very reflective mood, realizes man is incomplete without woman and “life is made for woman—man is a stranger to this earth.”⁵⁴

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