

# Man–woman relationship in Raja Rao’s ‘The Serpent and The Rope’

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**Abstract:** - Raja Rao is one of the three founding pillars of Indian writing in English, along with R.K. Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand. But, Rao's brilliance as an author is not limited to this genre. His writing was distinct from his contemporaries because he attempted not only to translate Indian sensibilities into English but also tried to incorporate Indian metaphysics, philosophy, etc., into his fictional work.

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Raja Rao's 'The Serpent and the Rope' has received high critical praise. Dr. Iyengar admires the book in the following manner ----

**“If ‘Kanthapura’ is Raja Rao’s Ramayana then ‘The Serpent and the Rope’ is his Mahabharata. If ‘Kanthapura’ has a recognizable epic quality, ‘The Serpent and the Rope’ is more than a miniature epic - it is almost encyclopedic in its scope.” 1**

Similarly, M.K. Naik admires the novel in the following manner ----

**“If ‘Kanthapura’ is the Indo-Anglian novel as modern *Shthalapurana*, or legendary history of a place, ‘The Serpent and the Rope’ -- a far more complex work -- is the novel as a modern Indian *Mahapurana* (a major epic legend) in miniature.” 2**

The reason for these words of admiration are not far to seek. First of all, this novel has achieved wide popularity because of the treatment of East - West theme. Next major point about this novel is that in it, like D.H. Lawrence, Raja Rao is deeply concerned with one of the fundamental realities of human life, viz. the man - woman relationship. In the novel, he has portrayed this theme of man - woman relationship through marriage of the South Indian Brahmin with a French woman. This theme of attraction between man and woman of diverse cultural background is a very popular theme for a number of Indo - Anglian novelists. For instance, Kamala Markandaya portrays this theme in 'Some Inner Fury'. In B. Rajan's 'The Dark Dancer', a South Indian Brahmin is attracted towards Cynthia, whom he met at Cambridge. Like these novelists, Raja Rao has also portrayed this cross-cultural marriage between Ramaswamy and Madeleine.

The novel artistically describes the relationship of Ramaswamy with Madeleine and Savithri. In 1946, in his twenty-first year, he goes to France with a Government scholarship to pursue a course of research in European history, and meets at the University of Cain his future wife,

Madeleine, a teacher of history, five years senior in age. They marry nearly three years later on 10 February 1949, and a child is born whom they call Krishna; but the child dies of broncho-pneumonia within a year of his birth. Initially, relationship between Rama and Madeleine was fruitful. Both of them value the cultures of the partners. To Quote V. A. Shahane in this regard ----

**“The union of Rama and Madeleine in wedlock is a marriage of minds and souls rather than mere bodies.” 3**

In fact, their marriage assumes an international, spiritual dimension rather than the dimension of a purely personal or individual relationship. It is not privately cherished bond of two individual minds, but rather the mutual coexistence of two cultures with their distinctive philosophies of life. Rama and Madeleine represent two world- views, and their relationship is the union of these two - diverse cultures. In spite of, the diversity of cultural backgrounds, they are initially able to maintain a vigorous relationship between them.

However, this relationship between Rama and Madeleine is not eternal. And, finally, there is a breakdown of marriage, because both the partners were unable to adjust due to diverse cultural roots. Then, Rama's meeting with Savithri, the fiancé of his friend Pratap, highlights what he misses in Madeleine. Rama realizes that the true woman for him is Savithri. Thus, the rift widens between Rama and Madeleine. Many critics have written about the relationship between Ramaswamy and Madeleine. But, he does not know that Madeleine has more Indian virtues than the Westernized Savithri. In his zeal towards Indian sensibility, he rejects Madeleine; and turns towards Savithri. Vimala Rao stresses the essential Indianness of Madeleine in these words ----

**“When Rama falls ill, she (Madeleine) undertakes a fast in all**

**her devoutness to pray for the well- being of her husband.” 4**

Woman plays a very important role in man's life. It is through a woman that man fully knows and realizes himself. In Intimate moments, Ramaswamy feels that Madeleine is the very essence of his life. 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 passionate 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.” 5**

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. Ramaswamy the protagonist narrator, in an interior monologue ruminates ---- **"What a deep and reverential mystery womanhood is !"** (6) 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.” 7**

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.” 8**

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.’ 9**

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. Thus, it can be said that Raja Rao is a champion of Man-woman relationship theme. And ‘*The Serpent and The Rope*’ is its fine example.

#### REFERENCES

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- [5] M.K.Naik, ‘Raja Rao’, pp. 160-61.
- [6] *Ibid.*, p.50.
- [7] *Ibid.*, p.167.
- [8] *Ibid.*, p.230.
- [9] *Ibid.*, p.139.