



# **WOMEN AS DIVINE POWERS: WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO RAJA RAO'S *THE SERPENT AND THE ROPE***

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## **Abstract:**

Raja Rao has occupied a unique style that tries to blend Indian philosophy, metaphysics and religious beliefs with everyday living. Nominated for a Sahitya Akademi Award in 1963, his late-coming work *The Serpent and the Rope* focuses on Vedanta and Metaphysical fiction. *The Serpent and the Rope* portrays Ramaswamy's quest for self-realization. On his way to Ultimate, Ramaswamy needs a true woman who is essential for man's spiritual development. My paper focuses on how Raja Rao portrays different female characters and proves them to have divine power to guide a man towards the Ultimate reality.

## **Key Words:**

Quest for Guru, True woman, women as 'divine powers'

## **Introduction:**

Raja Rao is a well known as a novelist of philosophical consciousness. He has fascinated so many critics in both India and abroad with his philosophical knowledge. Raja Rao signs a different tune from the rest of the Indian novelists in English in several aspects. He has a rare quality of literary character in so far as he is symbolic, poetic and metaphysical. Critics have seen Rao's attempt to reveal the 'very essence' of India as indicative of his metaphysical quest. The novels of Raja Rao colour and enrich his devotion, metaphysics and fiction narrative, therefore can not be understood in isolation. They are inevitably linked to each other. Rao felt that the Indian novel genre could not exist in a valueless void. Hence he interlaces Indian metaphysics with a fictional framework and the novel genre serves the purpose of embellishing as otherwise obscure and abstract theme.

Raja Rao has occupied a unique style that tries to blend Indian philosophy, metaphysics and religious beliefs with everyday living. Eulogizing the greatness of Rao as a *Sadhaka*, Sachdev Medha has said,

Rao is essentially a ‘thinker’ living in his own private world of religious ideologies. A genuine sadhaka, his entire work traces his spiritual wandering. The sadhana is no more collection of words, but an act and process of ‘growth within himself’ to attain the state of ‘oneness’ with Brahman. The journey is ‘herculean’ and Rao takes years to reach a milestone that each novel becomes. [Sachdev – 164]

Nominated for a Sahitya Akademi Award in 1963, his late-coming work *The Serpent and the Rope* focuses on Vedanta and Metaphysical fiction. Though *The Serpent and the Rope* is different from Rao’s earlier fiction, it is a continuation of his complex experiments with form and cultural transition, successfully blending elements of European novel with those of the Indian epic. In this connection Srinivasa Iyengar says,

To compare the small with the great (in terms of quality, that is not of quantity) 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. [Iyengar – 397]

### Quest For Guru

*The Serpent and the Rope*, is the story of Ramaswamy, a young Hindu, who goes to France to do research in history. He meets and marries Madeleine, a lecturer in history, but they soon drift apart gradually as Ramaswamy comes to realize the gulf between the Indian and Western conception of love, marriage and family – particularly after he meets Savithri, a Cambridge – educated and militantly modern girl, who is yet Indian to the core. Madeleine finally withdraws not only from Ramaswamy but also from the world; and Ramaswamy realizes that his love for Savithri, far from being of the kind that would find fulfillment in physical union of the soul with god. The novel ends with Ramaswamy setting out to go to his guru, who alone can destroy his ego and make him fit for the great consummation.

*The Serpent and the Rope* portrays Ramaswamy’s quest for self-realization. The protagonist, Ramaswamy, a holy traveler – engaged in a journey of self-discovery. Throughout his journey he rigorously quests for a Guru to vouchsafe to him the vision of Truth. The whole novel is about man’s existence on earth, personal and metaphysical.

### Illusion

Ramaswamy, on his journey to the ultimate first meets Madeleine. With the hope of a lovely and happy married life with an intellectual companion, he gets attracted to her outer and external appearance. He considers her an ideal and perfect companion. Rama believes that he and Madeleine together can create a new and separate world. The idea of the coming together of two different cultures from east and west further fascinates him and he accepts her as his spouse. But illusion does not long last, when Ramaswamy realizes that Madeleine is not that *Shakti* who would lead him towards his goal – that is Ultimate. He realizes that his love to Madeleine was just the reaction of bodily attraction, his love was immature, as he says,

You discover the nature of love as you grow older. What does one know of love at nineteen? The fresh scent of eau-de-cologne on the hair of Madeleine, or may be the shy, as yet unformed curve of her breast. Can one really love lips or limbs? – no, that could never, never be complete, and a sin it would be. Love demands nothing, it says nothing, it knows nothing, it lives for itself ... [*The Serpent and the Rope* - 229]

The death of Ramaswamy – Madeleine’s two children is symbolic one, which suggests that though they both, Ramaswamy and Madeleine, try a lot to save their married life and to have a good union of east-west customs, cultures, religion and thoughts, but they can’t last it long and their symbolic union, with the birth of two children vanishes with their death. And so for their failure in marriage, no one can blame either of them because both of them belong to two different cultures, customs and religion. In this connection S. Krishnaswamy observes,

Aware of the differences in the epistemologies they represent, aware of their respective Indianness and Frenchness, Rama and Madeleine attempt a synthesis of the values of the dissimilar traditions they sprung from. [Krishnaswamy – 36]

Madeleine seeks the truth on her own terms. She refuses to merge her personality with that of her husband’s. Commenting on Madeleine’s character Celly Anu has said,

Madeleine is a finely realized character, with all the independence of her spirit, her ambiguity, her humanity, her wisdom and even her asceticism, “Let me follow my own Gods” [*The Serpent and the Rope* – 326]” [Celly – 53]

### **True Woman**

On his way to Ultimate, Ramaswamy needs a true woman who is essential for man’s spiritual development. “*To Mitra she is Varuna, to Indra she is Agni, to Rama she is Sita, to Krishan she is Radha.*” [*The Serpent and the Rope* - 352] But for Ramaswamy Madeleine does not prove to be that ‘true woman’.

Ramaswamy’s relation with Savithri is based on spirituality and divinity therefore it does not end in sadness. She becomes the sole inspiration in the life of the protagonist. He proudly identifies himself with his grandmother’s fairy tale prince who married the beautiful princess emerging from the pumpkin. Like princess emerging out of pumpkin, Savithri has come to lead Rama to his goal of self-realization, the real spiritual height. It is in the company of Savithri that Rama experiences a vastness growing within him.

It is through Radha-Krishna myth that the hero-narrator communicates his point of view on the realization of the Absolute. Rama draws great satisfaction from his symbolic marriage with Savithri. The myth is symbolic of an individual’s attempt to realize the Divine: Rama advises Savithri to go back to her husband Pratap. The advice is reminiscent of the mythical parallel of Krishna’s advice to ‘gopies’ to rejoin their abandoned, household duties and remain content as his disciples. Thus, Savithri is asked to go back to Pratap. Spiritually she is Rama’s wife, Radha married to her Krishna. Savithri is a symbol of Metaphysical counterpart of man. It is through the correct understanding of the Female Principle, one can kill one’s ego and achieve self-realization. Rama’s relationship with Savithri illuminates his self and makes him realize the importance of Female Principle. Their union is the union of two souls for achieving the Ultimate Truth.

Ramaswamy interacts with yet another woman in his ascent towards Truth, that is Lakshmi. Ramaswamy's love-affairs with Lakshmi, Savithri and Madeleine are designed to illustrate how liberation from the bondage of love of various kinds is to be sought through rejection, detachment and acceptance of separation for complete self-realization. His detachment is best exemplified in his much resented separation from Lakshmi. Lakshmi's love is purely sensual – the urge of a hungry body. Passion therefore has to be met with passion and that is what Ramaswamy does in response to Lakshmi's amorous invitation. He thus experiences the lower nature of man through Lakshmi and leaves her even in face of abuses hurled at him by still dissatisfied Lakshmi, quite unmoved and unconcerned as if nothing had happened. This presents an account of love as an illusion that blinds the human beings to the reality of love.

Little Mother also occupies a significant place in the young quester's life. Tender and an ideal portrait of warmth, dignity, devotion and endurance, she possesses deep intelligence. Though younger to him, the feminine trait is well ingrained in her psyche and she possesses boundless capacity to love and care for household. *Shakti* appears in Little Mother in its passive and gentle form. Ramaswamy considers his mother as a woman extraordinaire but also values her as a powerful manifestation of *Shakti*.

Saroja is *Shakti* in her most primordial form – the Waiting Womb. In her presence Ramaswamy feels as though he were in a temple sanctuary, as though Saroja carried within her the sacred rivers, Ganga and Jamuna, at the touch of which golden wheat would sprout on barren fields.

The young Brahmin's journey towards the Absolute is directed through a profound and sensitive probe into the meaning of womanhood. He does not hold women as mere objects of love. His psyche projects them as 'divine powers' of God. Singing the eternal glory of womanhood he says,

Woman is the earth, air, ether, fire, water: woman is the microcosm of the mind, the articulations of space, the knowing in knowledge; the woman is fire, movement clear and rapid as the mountain stream; the woman is that which seeks against that which is sought ...; woman is the meaning of that world, the breath, touch, act; woman, that which reminds man of that which he is, and reminds herself through him of that which she is. Woman is kingdom, solitude, time; woman is growth, the gods, inherence; the woman is death, for it is through woman that one is born; woman rules for it is she, the universe. [*The Serpent and the Rope* - 352]

The different hues of experience from each singular woman in his life help him distinguish between illusion and reality. Ramaswamy develops relationship with Savithri, Madeleine and Lakshmi, but remains detached from them, as he realizes,

To be free is to know one is free, beyond the body, and beyond the mind; to love is to know one is love, to be pure is to know one is purity. Impurity is in action and reaction. What is born must die, what has form must vanish and stink. [*The Serpent and the Rope* – 382]

To Ramaswamy love is impersonal, beyond the body and beyond the mind. To make his point clear he narrates a parable which goes like this that Radha becomes highly possessive of Krishna. Krishna wants to enlighten her

and looks for an opportunity. In the meantime as story goes, Durvasa Rishi comes and pitches himself across the river Yamuna. Krishna asks Radha to cook some food and take it over to the Rishi. Radha asks Krishna how to cross the swollen river. He asks her to tell the river that Krishna, the 'Brahmachari', has asked the river to give way to Radha. Radha doubts that Krishna is telling a lie. How could he be Brahmachari? I know him more than anybody else. Anyhow the river gives way on hearing Krishna's command. She feeds the Rishi and when she is leaving, the Rishi asks her to tell the river that Durvasa, the 'Upvasi', wants the river to give way to Radha. Radha thinks, 'The Rishi is also telling a lie. How could he be an 'Upvasi' when he has fed himself with such utter satisfaction?' The river however gives way to her on hearing the Rishi's command. Radha is completely baffled by this new reality. And on returning home, she questions Krishna. He asks her who is the Krishna she loves? Is that body or his mind? And tells her that if she does not love Krishna beyond his body and beyond his mind, then it is just an illusion. Raja Rao, talking about his concept of love says,

Love is beyond Rama and Madeleine. Love is a state ... By beyond body and beyond mind I mean, being completely impersonal, beyond one's personality i.e. beyond *Mana*, *Buddhi* and *Ahamkara*. [Ranga – 115]

The concept of '*ardhanarishwara*' or '*Shiva-Shakti*' principle is deeply rooted in the Indian ethos. It is known as the '*Prakriti-Purusha*' principles. School of Indian Philosophy interprets the belief differently. *Samkhya* believes in dualism, accepting *Prakriti* as independent, real and capable of creation and existence. *Advaita* differs from *Samkhya* in denying independent reality to the *prakriti* or feminine principle, *maya*. Though essentially single, *Shiva* and *Shakti* are two faces of *Brahman*. *Shiva* is unchanging consciousness. *Shakti* is his power appearing as mind. She is the active aspect of immanent God who is the embodiment of power and supreme supporter of Vast Universe.

Undergoing a process of perception, cognizance and purification Ramaswamy confesses that it is Savithri who became the awareness behind his awareness, the leap of his understanding. She stands as the ultimate paragon of wifely devotion, representing also the legendary Savithri who rescued her husband Satyvan from the clutches of death. Savithri performs the same role for Ramaswamy. She brings enlightenment to Ramaswamy and saves him from drawing into a 'purely worldly life.'

Rama and Savithri surrender themselves to the divine, becoming part of the myth of eternal love, exemplified by Shiva and Parvathi, Krishna and Radha. Their relation progresses through an enchanting path until she finds her 'god' through him and he finds his goddess and the 'world' through her. In their relationship the 'Feminine Principle' is united with the Masculine principle in order to get true perspective of quest for wholeness. In this connection Chandra Dhar Sharma says, as Celly Anu quotes,

*Prakriti* needs *Purusha* in order to be known, to be seen, to be enjoyed, and *Purusha* needs *Prakriti* in order to enjoy and in order to attain liberation. [Celly – 95]

## Conclusion

According to the tenets of Indian philosophy woman is one, who acts as the server of knowledge and salvation for man, whose entire life is a spiritual quest, searching for such a woman. According to Ramaswamy, "*There is only one woman not for one life, but world was created ... that we might seek her ...*" [The Serpent and the Rope – 230] Madeleine, having sought the truth on her own terms and for her own sake, has presumably failed him in this purpose. Rama, the spiritual seeker, idealizes Savithri as the primal power who shall be his companion in life's pilgrimage.

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