III THE SERPENT AND THE ROPE AND COMRADE KIRILLOV

CHAPTER-III

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AND
COMRADE KIRILLOV

I

I intend to discuss The Serpent and the Rope and Comrade Kirillov, together in this chapter for both the novels have a common setting, i.e., Europe, and the heroines of both the novels happened to be Europeans. "There is more variety in female characterization here (The Serpent and the Rope) than in most other novels of India."[1] Thus Stephen Hemenway aptly comments on the galaxy of women characters in Raja Rao's second novel.

The Serpent and the Rope (1960), a Sahitya Akademi Award-winning novel (1963) by Raja Rao, is probably the most significant contribution to the Indian novel in English. On the basis of this novel, C.D. Narasimhaiah considers, "Raja Rao is the most significant Indian writer in English, and a major novelist of our age." He adds, the novel is "the finest and fullest possible expression of an essentially Indian sensibility."[2] The Serpent and the Rope is highly acclaimed both by the press and critics. "This unusually fine novel ... will undoubtedly take its place among the modern classics of Indian literature ... from two philosophies (Vedantin and Marxist) the rich theme is wrought making a superb, complex, many peopled tragedy,"[3] "where Raja Rao brings the cultures of France and India face to face, told in an original

English style, interwoven with poetry, Hindu stories, proverbs, philosophy and laughter."[4] Also, "in this beautiful, semi-autobiographical novel, Raja Rao presents a new and different kind of Hindu sage, a Brahmin who is equally attracted to East and West, commutes frequently between the two, and dramatizes in his own person their irreconcilable conflict. This new Vedantist talks well, but he is still more interesting for his private pathos. He is a man of our time, a victim who longs to be a hero."[5] This book, first published in the U.S.A., established favourable reputation among American readers. It portrays the meeting of East and West on the most intimate plane through the story of Rama, an Indian, and Madeleine, a French girl, who meets at a French University shortly after world war II. Their union is the central theme of the book, and it is in telling this story that Rama reveals much more deeply than most writers are able to suggest in their lifetime, the meaning of love.

Though The Serpent and the Rope is a highly complex work, and a saga of young Indian intellectual's quest for self-knowledge and self-fulfilment, one feels that it is extremely interesting for its rich art gallery of diverse and potentially interesting female figures of pre-and-post-independent India. All of them belong to the high stratum of society, i.e., Brahmin, rich or princely, educated and cultured. It is instructive to study them in juxtaposition with their Western-French counterparts.

However, David McCutchion denies the very foundation of novel by saying, "All the central concerns of the Western novel are absent - social relations, psychological motivation, characterization, judgement, a passion for the concrete."[6]

Further, David McCutchion strikes at the very roots of the Indian novel, as he remarks,

> Considering that the novel's chief concern is circumstantial reality ... 'the very web and texture of society as it really exists,' according to the well-known quote from Hazlitt ... and that the traditional view-point regards all this as tedious illusion, it may be questioned whether a truly Indian novel is at all possible.[7]

McCutchion takes, to say the least, an extreme position. The Serpent and the Rope is not all "tedious illusion"; on the contrary the novel does present the concrete reality of Ramaswamy's experiences in various vicissitudes. One aspect of the reality is the presence of extremely interesting women characters in the novel. Ramaswamy is philosophically inclined to view human life; but it is the women characters who are deeply rooted in "circumstantial reality", and who influence the hero's life.

The novel has first person narrator. Ramaswamy's relationship with the women characters is defined or primarily seen from his point of view. Hence the narrator says, 'I am not telling a

story here, I am writing the sad and uneven chronicle of a life, my life, with no art or decoration, but with the 'objectivity', the discipline of the 'historical science', for by taste and tradition I am only 'an historian'.[8] Thus the novel has an autobiographical element and the narrator, Ramaswamy, is related to different women in different situations. The women Rama loves and befriends help to keep the novel on the human plane, though he naturally intellectualizes all his experiences with them. Love scenes are often beautiful, even sensuous, but Rao is thoroughly tasteful and does more with poetic suggestion than with explicit statement. Raja Rao equals Forster with some amazingly deep and tantalizing portraits, Forster's Mrs Moore sheds some light on Raja Rao's technique which he often uses. Forster's Mrs Moore is reduced from substance to shadow to spiritual presence in A Passage to India. Several of Raja Rao's women characters follow this same pattern, though the reasons are varied. Rama finally says, there is only one woman, not for one life, but for all lives; indeed the earth is created ... that we might seek her. Rama's search for Woman is synonymous with his quest for self-knowledge. The particular women in this novel, finally, become abstractions, they are linked with archetypal images i.e., Mother Ganga, Mother Rhone, India, Notre Dame, Black Mad Madonna and Queen. This technique does not come in the way of describing individual French and Indian women skillfully, though their flesh and blood appearance is not there.

For instance Ramaswamy meditates on the occasion of Queen Elizabeth's coronation, in The Serpent and the Rope in the following manner,

> Woman is the earth, air, ether, sound; 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 aginst that which is sought. To Mitra she is Varuna, to Indra she is Agni, to Rama she is Sita, to Krishna she is Radha. Woman is the meaning of the word, the breath, touch, act; woman that which reminds man of which he is, and reminds herself through him of that which she be. Woman is Kingdom, Solitude, time; woman is growth, the gods, inherence; woman is death, for it is through woman that one is born; woman rules, for it is she the universe ...[9]

Thus Raja Rao glorifies and idealises woman or the feminine principle. Though at places it reminds us of the Prakriti of the Samkhya school of philosophy, it is Sankara's Advaita, employing the aphorism of the serpent and the rope, which is central to the novel. According to Advaita, Maya, the feminine principle, is an eternal falsity (mithyabhuta Sanatani); she is neither identical with Brahman nor separate; she is unthinkable, alogical, unexplainable mystery. Rao's glorification of the feminine is more in line with tantric philosophy. Maya to the tantric worshipper is the Divine Mother, Shakthi 'Mahamaya' the great illusion.

For Ramaswamy womanhood is sacred, 'a deep and reverential

mystery', 'Life is made for woman', 'all women have the womb of poetry', 'Man is incomplete without woman'. 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. If it is not his wife, then for an Indian it may be a sister in Mysore, or Little Mother in Benares. He says, 'Man must wed to know this earth', 'The woman needs our worship for fulfilment, for in worshipping her we know the world and annihilate it, absorbing it into ourself'.

There are a number of marriages in The Serpent and the Rope, presenting the man-woman relationship. Rama's marriage to Madeleine; his father's three marriages; Saroja's arranged marriage to a man fifteen years her senior, with whom she has nothing in common; the marriages of Oncle Charles, first, to a staid, unintellectual woman who bears him Catherine, and, then, Zoubie, a divorcee who is as unconventional as her name; Catherine's marriage to Georges, Julietta's to Stephen. There is Sham Sunder, the army man in Bombay who cruely declares, 'Since my return from Europe I prefer white flesh to brown',[10] and neglects his wife Lakshmi. All these relationships help Rama to realise 'Man is a stranger to this earth'. True marriage for Rama is a step towards self-realisation, he says, "you can marry when there is no one to marry another ... when the ego is dead is marriage true."[11]

The novel is set in three countries, France, India and England. There are two kinds of feminine principle - Catholic France which has cherished womanhood as mother, wife, sister and sustainer of the universe, and a visible concretization of Absolute Truth.

II

The ideal of womanhood in India is motherhood, Raja Rao has idealised and glorified the archetype of India, of Indian motherhood in The Serpent and the Rope. Once, Swami Vivekanand pointed out to an audience of American women,

> 'In the West the woman is wife'. 'The ideal womanhood in India is motherhood ... that marvellous, unselfish, all suffering, ever forgiving mother. The wife walks behind the shadow'.[12]

Indian traditional wifehood becomes reverential only if she is the mother of son and ultimately achieves prominence in the family. The mother is worshipped like the goddess in the family, even the grownup sons touch the feet of mother for blessings while they go out for some adventure.

Religion also expects a woman to be a mother of sons. The Hindu blessing is a woman to be the mother of eight sons. A wife finds fulfilment by becoming mother who is the protector and life-giver in Indian tradition. The mother image is prevalent in

Indian culture and reflected in Indo-Anglian fiction. It is found in the village, home, rivers, temples.

Rama in The Serpent and the Rope is an orphan who is in search of mother. He sobs in hotel rooms and trains looking at the mountains in Europe for he has no mother. His mother Gauri who had 'a voice like the Vina playing to itself after evensong' had died when he was seven. He sublimates his unsatisfied hunger for maternal love in mother India. 'She was my mother ... Beautiful, beautiful mother, my land'. Rama's search for mother principle is unending. Dr. M.K. Naik comments, 'His unsatisfied hunger for maternal love has left an indelible stamp on his view of woman'.[13] His marriage to a French woman six years his senior is perhaps to satisfy his maternal hunger. Rama exults in Madeleine's pregnancy and worships mother in her, he senses something splenderous, mysterious in her. "She was not mine, maternity had given her an otherness - She seemed secretive, whole, incommunicable."[14] His perfect woman is who has mother-principle in her. 'All women are perfect women, for they have the feminine principle in them, Yang, the Prakriti'. He adores creative womanhood calling Saroja the queen, he realises symbols, myths, legends around the lovely ancient names of women which are connected to fertility. "How Malavika when she poured water made the Asoka flower or Shakunthala the Karnika blossom."[15] Rama is fascinated by Saroja's youth; nature crowns and prepares her for feminine creation. The ultimate goal and fulfilment of Raja

Rao's woman is motherhood; and girlhood, puberty, wifehood are the phases to reach the destination of motherhood.

Once again we meet Raja Rao's traditional childwidows in The Serpent and the Rope; they accept their pathetic plight and miserable lot and reconcile themselves to the situation by cursing fate and karma. They are not rebels like Rangamma or Ratna. Great Aunt Lakshamma is a childwidow, who finds fulfilment in looking after the children and grandchildren in the family.

Little Mother is a significant creation of Raja Rao in The Serpent and the Rope. Rama's sensitive mind registers the impact of separate glimpses of Indian womanhood. The first change he notes in little mother, his young step-mother, recently widowed. She exemplifies the mother principle, and is synonymous with mother land. So much so that her name Vishalakshi is totally forgotten. Meenakshi Mukharjee significantly remarks, "Little Mother's whole strength lies in her unconscious and unquestioning identification with a set of ancient values."[16] Being the fifth child of a poor court clerk, her life at her father's house is miserable and pathetic, she gets nothing except abuses and insults. She has meagre education but plays on vina and sings beautifully. She is a shy and silent person but her voice is infinite in accent and tone; her 'smile shone like the copper vessels, when she smiled her mouth touched her ears'.

Rama's father marries second and third times; the second

wife leaving three girls; Kapila, Saroja and Sukumari. The third wife is little mother, widowed at twenty-one with a baby son, Sridhara, only of eleven months. The loss of a 'loved one' shatters her. Rama, the devoted son, takes her on a pilgrimage to Benares to perform obsequies to immerse the ashes of his father in the Ganges. The pilgrimage matures and spiritualises her; her study of the shastras, the vedic scriptures helps her to face her lot. She learns to realise the transient nature of life on earth. She experiences in Benares that death is as illusory as the mist in the morning. She says, 'Birth and death are illusion of the nonself'. She precipitates much of his self-analysis when she accompanies Rama to the Ganges at Benares, foothills of the Himalayas, indirectly acquainting her with the timeless aspects of India's symbols.

Little mother's deep and firm belief in ancient religion and spiritual heritage offers her inner strength and moral courage to surmount her misfortune and miseries. She reconciles herself to the situation with resignation and sublimates her personal loss by accepting her duties and responsibilities. Rama compares her inner harmony with mother Ganges and thinks of primordial earth mother. In spite of her own plight and sorrow, she takes care of Rama, though he is her stepson. She wishes that Rama should perform his father's funeral rites. She is worried about Rama's health and cough in Allahabad on pilgrimage. The weather is damp, the mosquitoes are worse and she is frightened

for his lungs and offers him her mosquito-curtain. Dr. M.K. Naik aptly points out, "Her sudden growth in mental and moral stature is the result of the combined impact of suffering and its alleviation ... and to her conviction that though she has lost her husband, far from losing her place in the joint family, she is now the local representative of the head of the family who will soon return to Europe."[17] Little mother starts a new life as mother to her son and step children. Returning from the pilgrimage, she looks younger and Saroja praises her, calling her Rama's sister rather than their mother. They rejoice the home-coming, the travelogue and strange stories of 'the vegetable of the sea'. Stephen Hemenway offers his best compliments to Little Mother, saying,

> Dignified and serene, little mother will not interfere with Rama's wanderlust. In accepting Rama's independence, she paradoxically binds his loyalty to her and to his mother India she represents. She dwells in the novels as a breath, as essential silence beckoning Rama to come find the truth in India.[18]

Whatever her husband respected, she respects too and never interferes in the life of an independent child of her husband. She accepts without disapproval her foreigner daughter-in-law Madeleine. She offers her toe-rings, the family heirloom to her which comes from Rama's mother.

Little mother is concerned about the marriage of her

stepdaughters. After these marriages the family responsibilities are over and Little Mother settles wholly to spiritual life in Allahabad with Saroja's family, going and dipping in the Ganges. In spite of her young age, she transcends the petty considerations of jealousy, envy of her stepchildren who are quite grown up and mature. Though her appearance is simple and unsophisticated, she has wisdom of her ancestors and respect from youngsters as well as elders in the family like Seetharamu.

According to Manu, the famous codifier of Hindu laws, the woman, like the lowest caste, the Sudras, must not perform any ritual before the sacrifical fire without her husband. Manu says: 'In childhood a woman must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband and when her lord is dead, to her sons. A woman must never be independent'. Little mother's entire life is meant as it were to fulfil this traditional role sanctioned by Manu. In this respect Raja Rao has created the epitome of an ideal, glorified Indian woman.

Little mother's belief in orthodox Hindu culture and religion provides her tremendous inner strength and courage to surmount the crisis and to confront life, while highly intellectual, emancipated western Madeleine never recovers from the shock of death of her two children; and to escape from personal frustration embraces Buddhism, a denial, a negation of life.

Rani Saheba of Surajpur is Raja Rao's another woman in

The Serpent and the Rope, who spiritualises and sublimates her sorrows into devotion to god. 'The gentlest creature ever bent over her Ramayana and Gita, Her fasts and kirtans were known every where!' She is the mother of Savitri, an unhappy wife neglected by Raja Sahib. But these characters, Little Mother and Rani Sahiba belong to an older generation who are not influenced by western education and modern ideas of feminism. And Raja Rao's attitude to them is one of appreciation and utmost reverence. The other women characters, Indian as well as western, belong to a new generation. Of these (among Indian women characters) Savitri is the first and most important.

Savitri is Raja Rao's triumph of creation of character, who is 'the other woman' in The Serpent and the Rope and another encounter of Rama's Indian womanhood. She is a young Cambridge (Griton) educated Rajput princess, daughter of Raja Raghubir Singh of Surajpur. She 'smokes like a chimney', 'sings jazz', 'dances boogie-woogie', and 'flirts at Cambridge'. Srinivasa Iyengar aptly comments, "She is one of the 'emancipated' girls who smoke and talk freely, and she even carries on a vague flirtation with communism."[19] The experience of meeting her first time is no more significant to Rama than a passing episode of social acquaintance. He feels her to be 'too modern'. He wonders how these Northerners go from strict purdah to this extreme modernism with unholy haste. Dr. M.K. Naik aptly comments, "Little does he realize that beneath Savitri's militant modernism lies

a spirit kindered to his own - a spirit Indian to the core."[20] He has only a vague glimpse of the truth and he grudgingly admits, "Her presence never said anything, but her absence spoke. Even when she went to speak on the telephone one felt she had a rich, natural grace and one longed for her to be back."[21] She is to make a greater impact on his life than he realizes at that moment.

Rama's strange fascination for Savitri turns to be mutual and reciprocal love and reverence for each other. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar rightly comments, "The attraction between Savitri and Rama is obviously mutual, each has a catalytic effect upon the other, each grows upon the other's consciousness - Yet the impression is conveyed that it is a spiritual rather than a physical affinity that draws them together."[22] But she is not the third point in a triangular love as in a conventional novel. Madeleine and Savitri are not rivals, jealous and envious for Rama's love. On the contrary, Madeleine is happy to welcome her and says, 'She is the product of three thousand years civilization.'

Pratap or that Muslim Hussain Hamdani are both instances of transitory experience for her. Savitri instinctively realises that her duty is to marry Pratap, an I.C.S. officer who is bound to occupy some very high government position in future. She detests him being one who faithfully served the Britishers to whom

she has an aversion. At the same time, compelled by circumstances, she finds 'such a goodness in him which is not found in any one, Pratap is the best husband.' Rama is irritated by her resignation to fate and calm acceptance; he hates this attitude of Savitri. Rama has an instinctive perception of Savitri's character as he says, "Nobody could marry Savitri. ... no body could marry a soul, so why not marry anyone. And why should not that anyone be stump Pratap?"[23] In fact, this shows that Raja Rao intends to present Savitri as a product of transitional as well as modern womanhood. This ambivalence of the character marks, in a sense, a transitional phase in the progress of Indian womanhood. Rama also advises and persuades her to follow Dharma by accepting arranged marriage to Pratap, though it is painful to him. One can imagine the conflict in Savitri's mind who is torn between her love for Rama and her duty of marrying Pratap on the one hand and between her modern education with all its implications of feminism and the traditional code of Manu on the other.

Like Mirabai, Savitri should go through her life as Mrs Pratap on a worldly level to a path of duty, but will sing her bhajans or devotional songs to her Lord Krishna - Rama. She transforms Rama's romantic impulses into a metaphysical love that leads him on the higher consciousness of a Vedantin. Savitri symbolises as Radha who vows to follow her Lord Krishna, here Ramaswamy from birth to birth. 'A Hindu woman', says Savitri, 'knows how to worship her Krishna, her lord', 'she worships Rama

ritualistically washing his feet with 'Kumkum' water and offering him 'Arathi' with camphor censer, placing her head on his feet; he, in turn, places the 'Kumkum' on her brow offering her the coconut, the betel nuts, which Little Mother had laid aside for her daughter-in-law, and the toe-rings. The symbolic process of mystical marriage in London transforms the corporal human beings into the mystic Radha and Krishna. They become the archetypal symbols of the seeker and the sought, the soul and the absolute. Thus, symbolic marriage of Radha Krishna is platonic.

Dr. M.K. Naik has quoted Raja Rao's letter which beautifully explains the meaning of Prema (Platonic love),

> Love may or may not have any physical expression - for love as Prema transcends the body. The true woman of Rama therefore is Savitri, what if she married his friend Pratap? And in such a love Savitri's fulfilment with Pratap is Rama's fulfilment as well (The Gita-Govinda may be of help ... in this connection. Tradition says that Radha called Krishna Gopika-priya, thus transcending all jealousy). The west is Romantic, and as such historical (The Holy Grail, etc. being a search beyond History). Hence the western man and woman's love for love as passion, as attraction of the other etc. India is classical, that is traditional, in which the woman being in her true and own place inherits the world (as queen, hence the coronation of the queen of England, etc.). The man then must resolutely turn away to the Absolute. The man who seeks, the pilgrim of the Absolute, is a lonely man, ever lonely. Woman seeks this man for her own

> fulfilment and for her inheritance, the world. The Devi swings because Shiva dances in the crematorium. And that is civilization.[24]

Thus Raja Rao idealizes and glorifies love between Rama and Savitri which is described as 'Prema' and which is possible only in the Indian context. Rama echoes Raja Rao, as it were, when he says that the way to true love is not the path of ego assertion, but the extinction of ego. Rama tells Savitri, 'For you love is not a system - a canalisation of emotion, an idea. For you love is a fact, an immediate experience, like an intuition.' Rama can say with assurance, 'Love my love, is the self. Love is the loving of love'.

Meenakshi Mukherjee, however, does not accept this interpretation of Savitri's character, as she comments,

> This act of worship, however, does not seem quite natural to the character as Savitri, who has been depicted as a nonconformist, somewhat rebellious girl. Unlike the traditionally brought up Indian woman, she is fond of asserting her own will, and has, earlier in the novel resisted an arranged marriage. It is arguable, therefore, that the fond description of these rituals has its birth in the sentimental longing of the writer himself, an expatriate Indian, who sees all traditionally, Indian actions enveloped in a mist of nostalgia.[25]

To this Raja Rao replies in the interview with Asha Kaushik,

> Even in London she (Savitri) remains an Indian. It is an emotional situation. When she meets Rama, she becomes herself. And she behaves in that manner. It is peffectly natural. I have experienced that. It is very authentic.[26]

"India is abstract and metaphysical". I think this is quite acceptable since the contradictions in the character are resolved later when Savitri settles down to be a dignified wife who cherishes in her innermost soul her relationship of pure love with Rama. Back in India, Savitri writes to Rama, "I love you, I love you, Protect me."[27] There are of course, moments of panic, as her wedding day approaches, she appeals to Rama, "I feel besieged ... the Turk is at the door. Help me to jump into the pyre. Lord, my Master, of this life and of all the lives to come. Help me."[28] Rama's reply to her pathetic dilemma and desperate cry is not practical but philosophical. 'You can marry when you are one ... when the ego is dead is marriage true'. When the marriage actually takes place, Rama is pained, he is only trying to hide his 'Knowledgement and pain', and turns to Captain Sham Sander's wife for consolation, "There was not going to be Savitri anyway. I slipped slowly and deliberately into Laxmi's bed."[29]

But finally, Savitri, the typically Westernized, modern Indian girl, has, without her knowing it, such firm roots in her ancient tradition that at the time of crisis, she gets the strength

from the spiritual heritage which helps her and makes her true to her name - Savitri - a revered name for every Hindu. She sublimates her personal frustration into a love which is a step to self-realization and firmly settles down to her duties and responsibilities to this world.

Rama now comes to terms with Savitri's mundane relationship with her husband Pratap which need not clash with the spiritual bond between himself and her: 'Rejoice in the rejoicement of others. That is the Truth ... Love is rejoicing in the rejoicing of the other'.

Savitri comes to London at the auspicious time of the coronation of Queen Elizabeth-II to see Ramaswamy when he has undergone an operation for thoraco-plastic surgery, as he suffers from phthisis, tuberculosis of the lungs. The coronation in London is symbolic of the glorification of the Feminine Principle, incarnated in the mythological Savitri, who saved her husband from death. Rama promises 'Satyavan will not die, Savitri'. They have long philosophical discussions. Rama admonishes her 'Don't say, 'that man, my husband'. He is your husband, and you are mine'. He finally advises her that she must follow Pratap, "The plane must accept the direction of the radar, that there be no accident ..."[30] In the final farewell, in last meeting, they realise the real nature of their relationship and Rama calls her queen and observes, "She touched me with the tip of her lips as

though Truth had been there ... the whole of Truth ... The queen has been crowned."[31]

Savitri, after the initial rebellion, shock and paralysis of will, tries to find some security, comfort and hope in the traditional role-fulfilment of a wife. She writes, "Surajpur Palace. This evening, at four forty-seven, I entered into the state of matrimony. I married Pratap at last. I shall be a good wife to him. Bless me."[32] The social order is placed before the happiness of the man or the woman in marriage. The formula is predetermined; since both the husband and wife have fixed roles to perform, chances of friction are minimised.

Raja Rao's characters participate in an Indian mythology unfamiliar to most non-Indians. This juxtaposition or mingling of legendary, religious heroine of the past with real and fictional figures of the present is fruitful only if one's concept of the relationship of individual characters to plot and structure in the novel is clear. The myth of Radha and Krishna is well known. This mythicized worship of husband and wife has its parallel in an actual ritual which is still widely practised in India, though it goes under different names. Sometimes it is known after Savitri, the legendary heroine who wins her husband back from death after pleading with the God of Death, who also restores her husband's lost kingdom to him. Savitri is one of the prototypes of wifely devotion, and Hindu brides even today are blessed with benediction

that they may be like Savitri. Shyamala Narayan comments,

> Though Raja Rao might not have meant it that, this is an ironical comment on her name, the Savitri of the Mahabharata is the ideal of chastity; even when told that the husband she has chosen is to die soon, she does not relent, and declares, 'only once a maiden chooseth, twice her troth may not be given'. But Savitri here knowingly marries Pratap after giving herself to Rama, whom she calls, 'Lord, My Master, of this life and of all lives to come.[33]

Finally, we can say that Raja Rao has created in Savitri a heroine full of complex intellectual and emotional layers, who, in terms of realistic presentation, resolves the contradictions of traditionalism and modernism who is probably accepting life in the 50s rather than in later times when aggressive feminism has had its full sway.

Saroja is another character created by Raja Rao who represents a younger generation whose aspirations are frustrated by circumstances and who is obliged to lead a conventional life. And yet she also is essentially Indian in her complex womanhood for whom Raja Rao has great sympathy. She is a charming, sensitive, intelligent young sister of Rama. He finds holiness in sudden ripening and flowering of the girl into womanhood which is rich and complex experience for him. He states it beautifully and poetically as he says,

> he is intoxicated with Saroja's presence, like a deer could be before a waterfall, or an elephant before a mountain peak; something primordial was awakening in a creature, and I felt that maturity in a girl was like a new moon or the change of equinox, it had polar affinities.[34]

This experience makes him aware of his essential Indianness and then he realises what a deep and reverential mystery womanhood is! She is the manifestation of principle of womanhood for him.

Saroja is an ambitious modern girl who wants to continue her study in Europe with Rama and to be a doctor. But she is refused admission in the Indian Medical College, at the last moment, as the University discovers her to be a Brahmin. Since father's death her life is a river of tears, who always seems lonely and sad, and cannot live another year in the house. Frustration leads her to the breaking point and she considers marriage to be an escape, and decides to marry "a good man - so generous, sincere and competent - but he is just not made for me ... he earns well, he will be loyal and devoted."[35] Saroja is prudent to choose Subramanya Sastri as he is a civil servant and well off. Little Mother and Uncle Seetharamu settle Saroja's marriage to Subramanya, though Little Mother knows he is not made for Saroja, but she is certain about the ability of the bridegroom, "He's just the man to keep under yoke a betwixt-left-and-right girl like Saroja."[36]

Saroja dislikes her betrothed not because he is older and ugly but they are not at all on the same wave length. They are not suitable to create harmonious relationship. She seeks a higher and vibrant consciousness which he can never aspire to possess. She feels terribly isolated, trapped and insecure of her future. She expresses their mutual incompatibility, "It's as though if I talked Kanarese he would talk Nepali, or if he played golf, I would play chess."[37]

Rama may regard marriage as an 'impersonal' principle where the element of personal fulfilment is irrelevant, but the characters involved suffer acutely. Saroja cannot reconcile herself to her cruel fate. All her frustration is manifested in the following dialogue between Saroja and Rama,

> "She wished, she had been a European woman, it would have given her so much freedom."
>
> "What freedom?" I exclaimed, "The freedom of foolishness. In what way, Saroja, do you think Catherine of Madeleine is better off than you?"
>
> "They know how to love."
>
> "And you?"
>
> "And we know how to bear children. We are just like a motor car or a bank account."[38]

Saroja refuses to conform to the cultural pattern. But Rama has no answer to give. On the eve of the wedding, the young

bride is full of panic. She cries out, "I must not marry. It is selfish of me to marry a man whom I detest."[39] He offers her a help - a discourse on the transitory nature of life, "We make our own happiness". Saroja does not answer. Rama admits, "I had betrayed her."[40]

Saroja yields ultimately and accepts marriage as crematorium, a funeral. She fights bitterly to lose, not being strong enough by herself. Though she feels that she is let down, she bows to her brother's orders and submerges her feelings out of a sense of duty to family. She obeys family mandate though fear and anger grip her heart. She spends the night before the ceremony tending her sick brother and reading Thomas Mann's Magic Mountain. 'Saroja was gone from our household', Rama says, 'Happiness is in a husband, a home, children. After all where would Saroja go?' Raja Rao cannot make her a rebel to challenge the traditional pattern and to choose her own course.

As an ultimate resort, Saroja makes up her mind and bravely says, while she seeks her brother's blessings before she goes away, 'Brother, I shall bring but a fair name to the household. Do not worry'. She, like millions of her fellow country girls, has been taught not to blight the honour of her family, irrespective of her love, happiness and life. The supreme duty of the Indian girl is to abide the laws of Dharma and fulfil her duty as a wife.

Marriage is the most important event in a Hindu woman's life. It bestows status on her but also imposes a discipline upon her which usually tends to be quite harsh. The situation is superbly portrayed by Ramabai Ranade (1802-1924) in her autobiography, which opens, dramatically with the words "Eleven years old and not married, shocking it truly was in India, and especially in such an orthodox and aristocratic family as mine." She proceeds to recall the advice she received from her father on the eve of her wedding. He advised her "to suffer and endure everything and treat even the servants of her husband's family with respect. He explained to her that father's family's honour was in her hands and she must not sully it, he would never let her come back on a visit."[41]

Indian girls are expected to adjust to her father-in-law's household to which she goes after marriage. She is placed under severe restrictions and has little or no say in decision making and is directly subordinate to her mother-in-law. The relationship of a Hindu wife with her husband is shaped by traditional values which equates him with God and by her personal experience of living under the control of her mother-in-law, who usually turns out to be true to the stereotype. Besides the mother-in-law there is the husband's sister, who makes her own contribution to her hardships that a woman must suffer in her husband's home.

Saroja is miserable in her in-law's house and she presents

her plight to her brother and calls him desperately, 'For me life has come to an end. By life I mean hope, work, fulfilment. I expect nothing, except I long for you. Brother, come back soon'.

By the end of the novel, Saroja is settled at Allahabad with Little Mother. Rama writes in his diary, 'I think of Saroja; she is not happy but she is settled'. Irrespective of her happiness her role fulfilment as the wife of Subramanya is very important. Saroja's life is bleak with the loss of vitality and intelligence. The marriage transforms her to be a responsible and mature woman, but the traditional role does not offer her consolation; motherhood and wifehood provide her life-long vocation. Saroja's rebellion proves fruitless as she is ultimately made to conform to the stereotype of an Indian wife. Her unsuccessful revolt proves her to be representative of emerging new woman.

Raja Rao has created a lively character in Sukumari. She is the youngest sister of Rama who is full of vitality, vigour and gusto while Saroja is tired, restless and helpless. At home and outside Sukumari is spirited and a rebel. She refuses to be cowed down by the menace of family honour and respect.

The external pressures are there on her independence; since her girlhood, Little Mother grudges against her ambitious nature to be a doctor. She gets more freedom in Bangalore, 'Sukumari was happy too, for here (Bangalore) she could go about with boys without people talking scandal'.

Sukumari provides a contrast to Saroja and Savitri. She marries a man of her choice, Krishnamachari, a member of the communist party and settles in Bombay. She challenges the ageold Brahmin pattern of family and tradition, commits herself forcefully to the ideology. She chooses a new way of life, of her own choice. Rama says, 'her letters to me became more scarce. I was the arch reactionary for her and she hated me with the hate brothers and sisters have for one another when they cannot agree?' Sukumari is a new and vigorous version of modern emancipated woman who is an intellectual life-partner of her husband sharing his ideas whole-heartedly. And yet she too has to conform to the pattern as Rama points out, '... her politics became an act of faith, a duty she owed to her happiness. She had to love and worship her husband. She was too much of a Hindu not to worship her Lord'.

Sukumari's character is a step forward in so far as she asserts her will in marrying a man of her choice, and that too, a communist. Upto this extent, she is a departure from the norm, and, yet she has to merge her personality in her husband's. Raja Rao seems to suggest that the typical Indian woman will never be too much Westernised to be in a constant conflict with her norm.

Sharifa, the daughter of an advocate general, Lakshmi Iyengar from Ministry of Education, Delhi, Gauri from Hyderabad

are Savitri's friends at Cambridge. They do not play prominent roles in The Serpent and the Rope, they are Raja Rao's minor women characters who provide contrast to make Savitri's character conspicuous. They are highly educated but typically Indian in their outlook.

Lakshmi Iyengar with her big kumkum mark and deep-set melodious voice is doing child psychology, but is jealous of Savitri. Raja Rao's minor women characters are varied and interesting ranging from Cambridge graduates to ordinary women. In between are Kapila the eldest sister of Rama who is married in a 'big house' in Mysore, and who has quarrelled with father and has never set foot in the household again. Lakshamma, wife of a university Professor at Allahabad their eldest daughter married to an I.F.S. in Delhi, second to railway officer and youngest one is Kumudi studying for the Intermediate, Pushpavathi is Savitri's younger sister, who loves the traditional way of life, does not care for her studies any way. She longs for a large family and a good mother-in-law, Pratap's mother actually likes Pushpavathi. Savitri suggests the same but Pratap chooses Savitri. Finally, the group consists of Rama's cousins Seetha, Parvathi, Lakshmidevi, Nanja, Sita, Cauvery, Anandi, Ventalakshmi, Bhagirathi and Savitri (This Savitri is a lean and haggard thing having borne four children in succession, year after year) have gathered to attend Saroja's marriage. Raja Rao creates these minor characters to fill up the setting, as it were, who are

quite conventional and may be described as 'flat'.

Thus, the Indian women characters portrayed by Raja Rao present a paradigm of Indian womanhood from the highly sophisticated western-educated to the most traditiona, conventional, illiterate women in a period of transition in India. Raja Rao seems to suggest that even the most sophisticated woman like Savitri does not cease to be Indian in her essential womanly qualities. She represents perhaps the best of this sophisticated type which he approves. The other characters in varying degrees are less and less sophisticated down to Little Mother who is illiterate and yet great in essential womanly qualities.

III

Raja Rao's Western women in juxtaposition to Indian women in The Serpent and the Rope provide a fascinating subject of study. French women are delineated more concretely than their Indian counterpart, definitely because they stress their own uniqueness more and Rama is unaccustomed to their independence. The leading character in this group is, of course, Madeleine, the hero's wife. Srinivas Iyengar summarises Madeleine's character as follows,

> Madeleine experiences the glory and the 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.[42]

Madeleine Roussellin, a Lecturer of History at the Lycee de Jeunes Filles at Aix, is brought up by an unmarried aunt at Saintonge, meets Rama at the Caen University. Rama, a scion of an ancient South Indian Brahmin family, which traces its lineage back to the legendary Upanishadic Sage Yagnyavalkya, goes to France to do research in history - Albigensian heresy. Their acquaintance ripens into profound friendship and love. India for Madeleine, with her hoary wisdom and her monuments of unaging magnificence secular and sacred is a very heaven and a cause to love. They marry despite her affair with Georges.

Before their marriage, Madeleine has a premonition that she may not make Rama happy, as she says, "I have a fear, a deep fear somewhere here; ... I will kill you and I shall be a widow."[43] However, their marriage begins on a basis of deep friendship transcending racial and cultural barriers. Rama says, "She loved me partly because she felt India had been wronged by the British, and because she would, in marrying me know and identify herself with a great people."[44]

Madeleine is interested in Cathers as a research subject because she hopes to trace the origin of the Holy Grail. Touch is always distasteful to her, she likes the untouching Cathers, she loves their celibacy. She hates killing animals. The course of their marriage refuses to run smooth, from the beginning. Their first born dies after seven months of brancho-pneumonia,

leaving Madeleine in a state of inconsolable despondancy. Aware of their different cultural, national identity, they attempt to synthesise the values and traditions and try to give a double identity, natural and cultural to their son Pierre - Krishna. At the time of crisis in Pierre's illness, she reverts to her French identity and thinks her son's Indian name Krishna is unlucky and gives him a French name - Pierre with some primitive superstition, from the second day of his illness. This is symbolic of her emotional refusal to accept Indian values, though she expects Rama to perform miracles. She says, "the gods of India will be angry that you, a Brahmin, married a non-Brahmin like me."[45] Madeleine never recovers from the death of their first son but grows more sorrowful and introspective, knowing that she has failed and is losing Rama. Her ebullience before others is both a mark of her sensitive caring and a mask for her inner turmoil.

Madeleine accepts everything good has only come to me from India, "There the Hindus are right. Man must lead woman to the altar of God."[46] She tries to know and understand India, Rama and his philosophy. In his absence she feels tremendously lonely (Rama is in India for his father's illness). She wonders that Indians are sentimental about the invisible while Europeans about the visible. Rama's impersonal approach is strange and she loves him, but is confused "whether anyone could love a thing so abstract as"[47] Rama. All she knows about India and Benares is

the bits of floating human-flesh and the pyres of the dead.

With renewed awareness of his roots in India, with the impact of three separate glimpses of Indian womanhood, indubitably altered, Rama comes back to France to Madeleine. He brings with him two little toe-rings of his mother's which Little Mother gives him as her parting gift and her blessing to daughter-in-law. The gift emphasizes the continuity of the family tradition. The heirloom is so significant to Rama that he feels 'at last I was going to make Madeleine mine'. The trip back to Aix starts somewhat inauspiciously, everything goes wrong evaporating dream of making Madeleine his own. Due to missed connections, Rama reaches home to find it locked. Madeleine returns from the airport disappointed, as she says prophetically, "I just do not know why, I do not want to enter the house, I do not want to."[48] She kisses Rama for the first time and confesses months later, "it was like kissing a serpent or the body of death."[49] When they have their first meal together after the reunion, Rama consciencely remarks,

> "Mado, something has happened,"
> She, who was half-filled her spoon with rice,
> stopped, and said: "yes, something has."
> I was quiet. Then she said, slowly, "To whom?"
> "To everything." I answered."[50]

Amazed by the growing rift Madeleine asks distressingly,

"I have failed your gods?" "No," I said, looking at her; and for some ununderstandable reason I added, "You've failed me."[51]

Rama brings a sari, a gift from Saroja to Madeleine, with marks of kumkum which make it auspicious. Madeleine is disappointed to know the gift is from her sister-in-law and not of Rama; the Kumkum means nothing to her. She is pained and hurt but puts on a brave face, "Tears came rarely to Madeleine, she seemed to have a power to stop them."[52] He realises, at least for an Indian marriage is not merely a personal bond between a man and a woman, but something more than this bond. Dr. M.K. Naik comments,

> In order to continue to remain firm and strong (marriage), must be interwoven with stronger bonds such as family traditions and loyalties, and a commonly shared spiritual and cultural ethos.[53]

Rama does not wish to offer the little toe-rings to Madeleine and they remain in his suit-case. Madeleine meets Rama on the intellectual plane but not on the deeper, emotional, spiritual and cultural plane; they touch each other tangentially evading the deeper level of being. Madeleine sincerely endeavours to perform the role of a devoted and good housewife. She does everything for him and receives his grateful acknowledgement. 'There was nothing I needed which she did not know before hand and try to do, my medicine after lunch, my handkerchief when I started on a walk, my pencil duly sharpened and laid on my notebook.' She tends him with utmost care and love, in his

tubercular condition. She wipes the blood off his face. She cooks new dishes for him, but they realise that the core of their relationship remains hollow and untouched.

To fill up the widening vacuum, the couple try to cling to timely sexual fulfilment, but Savitri's advent to France drives them away, bringing Rama close to Savitri. Rama's visit to Cambridge unites him with Savitri in a symbolic, mystic marriage ritual, and Rama pushes 'the toe-rings' into her second toes and the marriage with Madeleine is doomed for ever.

Rama's second visit to India to attend Saroja's marriage, is a second home-coming and transforms him totally. Madeleine's second child, a boy, dies 'soon after' his caesarean-birth. Rama's absence at this crucial juncture possibly widens the rift between them, drives her deeper into depression and makes her embrace Buddhism. Her study of Buddhism, which is earlier only an intellectual pursuit, becomes her an all absorbing spiritual quest, as a way of escape from her frustrations, and once she takes to it, with typically Western thoroughness she snaps all her ties and shuts the door on the world.

Madeleine is shattered by the successive failures in her life, takes to Buddhism; its compassion and pity casting a potential spell on her. She finds solace in her self-imposed penance of isolation and later solicits Rama for divorce in order to free herself from the entanglements that hinder the

progress of her spiritual pilgrimage. She gradually withdraws from Rama and from the world, until both cease to have any significance for her. She forges a contemplative life, with Buddhism as her obsession. She studies Pali, Tibetan, and Chinese languages, sleeps on a board, fasts once for 'fortyone days', develops extraordinary power, prophesises, prays her brown rosary, aids wounded caterpillars and pansies, limits the number of words she speaks each day, becomes 'a log of flesh' and declares, 'I am no longer a person', performs miracles.

The divorce which comes at the end of the novel is thus a mere formality. She writes to Catherine, 'It is all a ghost story - Rama, India - and the world. Contemplation is the only truth one has'. She wants Rama to be free to marry an Indian woman to make him happy. The marriage which has long ceased to exist is legally and irrevocably ended when Rama signs the divorce papers in the office of a snabby Parisian notaire. It is an anticlimactic end to a marriage from which the partners hoped so much. Rama seeks to come back to India and endeavours to find new meaning to his existence under the guidance of his guru, in Travancore. Their marriage as a means of mutual salvation is ended for ever.

Some Western reviewers have been puzzled by the fact that Madeleine's 'Conversion' to Buddhism, instead of bringing her closer to Indian husband, hastens the end of the marriage. The

answer can be found in the novel itself. Madeleine asks,

> "What is that separated us, Rama?"
>
> "India".
>
> "India? But I am a Buddhist."
>
> "That is why Buddhist left India. India is impitoyable."
>
> "But one can become a Buddhist?"
>
> "Yes, and a Christian and a Muslim as well."
>
> "Then?"
>
> "One can never be converted to Hinduism."
>
> "You mean one can only be born a Brahmin?"
>
> "That is - an Indian."[54]

Raja Rao himself makes the point very clear. He observes: 'The answer (for an Indian) is simple'. As the Gita so justly and nobly proclaims, 'the dharma of another, however good, is not to be followed as against one's own dharma'. Madeleine has no firm base and is continually drifting and as a result of her increasing absorbtion in Buddhistic rituals, she withdraws from her husband more and more because as an ascetic almost to the extent of being inhuman. (the impersonal principle.) The novel relates no sufficient or immediate cause for the break-down of relationship between the emancipated and highly intellectual husband and wife. The reader can only guess at it. It starts with Ramaswamy's return from India as he reflects. 'For once I felt a stranger in France', because of Madeleine's cold behaviour.

Rama is the descendant of an ancient Brahmin family who has firm roots in the Indian tradition. Rama knows that he has married a French woman five years older and a Catholic too, to have an appreciation of true difference is to seek to bridge it, to make adjustment, 'to wed a woman' is to 'wed her god' and share her superstitions. Rama says 'the gods are neither Hindu, nor Greek being creation of your own mind, they behaved as you made them.' Rama muses on the banks of the Ganges at Benares: "Did I love the self in Madeleine? I knew I did not. I knew I could not love."[55]

For Rama love, filial, conjugal, paternal and maternal is manifestation of Maya, he finds strength and courage in traditional conviction. But Madeleine is more adventurous and individualistic. She is on a quest for self-discovery, for her own sake, not for her husband's. She does not need a mediator to reach her God nor does she feel her to be a medium to enable her husband to reach Moksha. The Vedantic concept which Rama believes and Savitri understands is not for Madeleine.

Some critics offer the simplest explanation for the failure of Rama-Madeleine's marriage as his infidelity. But considering the plane story marital inconstancy cannot destroy the marriage but the cause can be allotted to the unbridgeable gulf between the two cultures. Madeleine loves bridges. She felt truth was always on the other side, But she does not try to cross the bridge to reach

Rama's truth. Meenakshi Mukharjee quotes from, The Illustrated Weekly of India,

> 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.[56]

Madeleine and Ramaswamy have a striking similarity - both of them are acutely aware of their epistemologies they represent, they do not regard themselves simple as individual human beings, they think and regard their actions in terms of nation and cultural differences 'Indian' and 'Western'. Even in minor events and small actions they show their national characteristics. Ramaswamy's haphazardness or inability in practical side of life is allotted to his Indianness and not personal shortcoming. This certainly shapes their personal relationship.

Atmasamarpana, merging wife's identity in that of her husband, not to have different view, and Pativratadharma are the ideals of Indian wife. Madeleine does not understand the Indian concept of wife. Rama feels, 'You've failed me.' She cannot yield totally to her husband, which proves her to be an unworthy wife, she lacks the mother and 'the feminine principle' which Rama seeks everywhere and finds in Indian women, particularly in Little Mother. Motherhood makes the sacrament of marriage holy, indissoluble and continuous. Her two children dying in infancy proves her to be barren, symbolic of her psychological, emotional

and physical failure from Rama's point of view, to be true Feminine Principle. His views of Madeleine as wife are based on woman as the cause of creation, the mother; the wife is subordinate.

At the time of Pierre's illness she thinks the Indian name - Krishna - unlucky for her son. This manifests her emotional refusal to accept Indianness. There is the emotional rift also, she loves bridges but horrifies to cross them which symbolises her inner emotional and spiritual distaste for accepting the Indian way of life. Rama feels her homecoming in South India would have miraculously cured his father from apoplexy; and it would have been the symbolic crossing of threshold like Indian brides. But she does not accompany Rama to India at the hour of his emotional need. She excuses herself by saying, if his mother had been alive, she would have accompanied him to be beside her in her pain. She cannot follow the ideals of Indian wife while Rama remains an Indian at the core and forever. M.K. Naik has rightly observed:

> Thus marriage as history (Rama Madeleine) fails but love as Savitri-Rama succeeds ... their individual conceptions of marriage and the roles of Man and Woman are radically different.[57]

Madeleine is a typical emancipated Westerner, individualistic; she is indignant for a just cause, hates all sorts of tyrrany, cares for disinterested devotion to any cause; she is elected President of the College Syndicate; the Inspectors make best report

for her work, even her headmistress praises her calling 'the sister soul of Simone Weil'.

Madeleine is adventurous enough to choose her own course of life. She dwells exclusively in the world of self-absorbing intellectualism, does not mind the outer reality which is counter to her ideas. She disbelieves the religious thinking and considers everything will be well 'if man simply lived intelligently'. She refuses to get involved in Ramaswamy's values based on intuition than intelligence. She cannot participate meaningfully in the rituals.

Madeleine is not deceived, she realizes the utter incompatibility of her interests with Rama's rituals and values, she snaps her ties with her husband to make her free to find a personal solution for her problems by accepting Buddhism to attain sainthood. She is truly liberated to choose a course of life, implementing her own decision rather than to betray herself by yielding or accepting unwanted husband like Savitri or Saroja. She is a feminist in the real sense. Readers are dazed by her inner growth and extraordinary powers, though she is somewhat absurd and pathetic, but sturdy enough in her new faith.

Raja Rao displays great perception in delineating Madeleine's character with such deep sympathy and understanding. Contrasted with Little Mother and Savitri, Madeleine emerges as

a truly emancipated, and independent, intelligent woman. She is not his ideal woman, glorified, but Madeleine has her own individuality, which is quite self-sufficient, even spiritually which has no parallel in the Indian English fiction.

As against Madeleine, Catherine, Madeleine's cousin, is portrayed in a lower key by Raja Rao. Catherine is the daughter of Oncle Charles, from his former wife and cousin of Madeleine. She has no pursuit of learning, and is very shy, 'she never looks at man'. She feels secure in the company of Madeleine. She is immature and average. Her aversion to men is due to lack of her self-confidence. Being then only heiress to considerable money of Oncle Charles, he is worried for her marriage and aware of her average capacity, he expects her to be a good housewife of a faithful Catholic husband, with many children. Like Little Mother's advice to Saroja, Oncle Charles remarks, "For a woman her home is her paradise."[58] Catherine is not strong enough to choose own course, she needs preparation, training, advice, so Oncle Charles leaves her in charge of Madeleine and Ramaswamy. Stephen Hemenway explains Rama's role superbly,

> Rama is her guru instinctively making her his sacred sister by means of the Indian rakhi and giving her brotherly advice she needs to leap into womanhood.[59]

Catherine likes the Rakhi and she listens attentively to

Rama's explanation of womanhood. Rama seeks and experiences the female principle and prospective role fulfilment of Indian womanhood, a wife and mother in her, and significantly remarks, 'She is a good catholic'.

Rama finds Catherine to be the right wife, perfect mate, holy companion to Georges - a white Russian intellectual with one arm, who teaches Latin at College of de Garcons. Catherine knows how to make her man happy. The affinity successfully proceeds them to be a prospective and happy couple. Catherine expresses her gratitude to Rama, 'You are my godfather of happiness'.

K.R. Rao portrays the contrast between Madeleine and Catherine beautifully,

> Catherine, Madeleine's sister, is Georges' true counterpart; and indeed the Georges Catherine episode serves to counter-balance the tragic intensity of the Rama-Madeleine story of alienation. Catherine, with her engaging innocence and naivete, contrast with Madeleine who is a complex individual with incompatible interest; and as against Madeleine's psychological and spiritual isolation, Catherine finds solace in her married life and motherhood, simply and naturally.[60]

Catherine becomes Rama's sole links with Madeleine and with France, her hospitality and kindness with her husband offer

solace to Rama at the time of confusion and crisis. She is the sole witness to Rama-Madeleine's divorce.

Tante Zoubie is Raja Rao's minor but realistic woman character; though French, her name is legendary Indian which has fantastic history; when her father had been to Paris for honeymoon, he came across "an operetta called Zoubeida Ou I'Esclave de Perse, and it was about a slave girl, Zoubeida was wished to wed the Prince Soulieman one day and she did."[61] She was a divorcee, her first husband was younger to her who was a minor diplomat and ran off with some younger woman. Though she marries Oncle Charles, there is hardly any love left, for her, he wants somebody to 'wipe the saliva off his mouth'. She tells fantastic stories of her travel with her first husband and the stupidity and backwardness of the British, "they never wash their back ... they wash their shirt fronts, so that if you want to smell le Comte de Saint Simon you have only to sit next to an English diplomat."[62] Zoubie is typical and common French housewife, generous, jolly, romantic, fantastic, humorous and bit eccentric by nature. She provides comic relief in tragic story of Madeleine and Rama.

Raja Rao has sketched his other minor French women characters in outlines in The Serpent and the Rope; they are types as well as individuals with their distinct marks and traits. Old Madame Rousselline is typical, affectionate woman of eightyseven,

she is Oncle Charles' mother and Madeleine's grandmother. They have considerable regards, reverence and love for her. She has false notions about Indian people, religious traditions and customs which make her naturally anxious about Madeleine. Catherine's mother is Raja Rao's traditional, devoted French housewife, she is neglected wife, spiritualises and sublimates her agony in religious reading. She is silent sufferer and never utters a single word against her husband's infidelity or constant unfaithfulness. She dies in childbirth, she is a parallel to Rani Saheba. Julietta is a young English girl, at Girton, the representative of English young generation who fought in the war or maturing during it. She is Raja Rao's minor woman character, supporting to Savitri's, but fascinating. Marie is a French maid who is healthy, cooperative, sincere, but grown lazy and irritable. Raja Rao has portrayed compassionate, kind and lovable Madame Chimaye an attentive waitress in the restaurant.

Thus, The Serpent and the Rope is a novel full of an asortment of women characters - Indian, French, English - portrayed with insight into the feminine psyche with intellectual perception and emotional involvement. It appears that Raja Rao maintains, if only on the score of women, that East will be East and West will be West and the twin will never meet; for it is the women who are really the custodians of their respective cultural traditions. This sounds pessimistic, but Raja Rao's tone throughout this novel sounds to me to be pessimistic if not one

of despair.

Comrade Kirillov (1979) is Raja Rao's latest novel. Dr. V.V. Badave comments, "(Raja Rao) attempts to explore the mind of an alienated Indian communist who ends as a drifter, and who has nothing positive to offer either to India or world."[63] Dr. M.K. Naik observes,

> In actual fact, Comrade Kirillov evidently lacks both the range and scope of The Serpent and the Rope and the metaphysical profoundity of The Cat and Shakespeare, probably because it is in the nature of spillover of the creative energies which fashioned these major novels.[64]

From the point of view of women characters, Comrade Kirillov has only one major woman character and like Madeleine, she too is a foreigner, Irene is not sketched with depth, she is Czech with red hair whom Padmanabh Kirillov marries. She too is an enthusiastic and passionate lover of India. She is intelligent and is charmed by the Bhaskaracaray's mathematical treatise, Lilavathi.

Padmanabh Kirillov is really Padmanabh Iyer who is a handcore communist. The paradoxical aspect of Kirillov's nature is presented through Irene's point-of-view, her diary entries are full of Kirillov's pronouncements and full of information faithfully recorded by her who is particular about facts as she is a Westerner. She teases Kirillov on his being essentially an Indian, and, yet his logic comes always to his defence, Kirillov often calls Gandhi,

for instance 'That old puritan humbug' or 'that fine, moral hypocrite'. Irene is intelligent enough to put her finger on the contradictions in his characters, she writes,

'I tease him and say, "All this is your European, indeed Marxist, baggage." ... "At heart Gandhi is your God. You tremble when you speak of him sometimes. I once saw even a tear, one long tear, it is there when you spoke of Gandhi to S."

Chemical reactions to be remembered conditioned reflexes", he (Kirillov) added and laughed.[65]

Irene is devoted and faithful housewife who cares utmost for her husband. She is able to commit herself to his creed completely and obtains a release and a freedom denied others. She will be happy to have a wonderful child, if the child will be a boy, it will be Stefanovich and if a girl she will be Lila, but they have a male child with dark skin, they call him 'Kamal', he is able to inherit the cultural and spiritual identity of his ancestors at Kanyakumari, the meeting place of the three oceans. In spite of these many bonds between husband and wife, she is disturbingly aware of her European roots, while Kirillov is totally Indian, and the roots cannot be acquired, they must be inherited, she expresses her apprehensions frankly in her diary. "I will not go to India. I almost begin to hate it."[66] Irene's tragic demise in childbirth proves her forecast.

There are parallels between Irene and Madeleine. Irene receives from her Indian father-in-law the ritual choli-piece, kumkum and a gold coin, just as Madeleine too receives a sari and toerings from her step mother-in-law. Both the heroines are initially attracted towards India as much they are repulsed by it later on. Just as Madeleine dreads the prospect of settling down in India, Irene too is afraid of India, there is probably a suggestion here that the spouses, as between East and West will never meet.

Raja Rao's other woman character in Comrade Kirillov is an Irish woman Peggy who is 'round and redhaired, with two deep-set mystic eyes - is a school teacher, has only a marginal role to play in Comrade Kirillov. The narrator's friend marries her 'for Gandhiji, the Irish come only next to the Indians in patriotism.' Love offers her fulfilment, but her husband's sudden death shocks her and leaves her in despondancy, which she tries to minimise by marrying an aeronautical engineer, she is a minor and flat character but provides setting to Irene's character.

Unlike The Serpent and the Rope, in which Madeleine's character dominates as an intensely sensitive intellectual and emancipated feminist, Comrade Kirillov is a novel in which the hero dominates. The novel is a character study of Padmanabh Iyer as an ambitious communist confronted with a spiritualist (the narrator who is presumably Raja Rao himself). Irene, however,

leaves an impression of a good Western housewife who only exposes the chinks in her husband's armour.

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