

**QUEST FOR SELF REALIZATION - PHYSICAL MOBILITY, DISPLACEMENT,  
PURPOSEFUL JOURNEY, TRAVEL AND EXPLORATIONS IN RAJA RAO'S  
*THE SERPENT AND THE ROPE***

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Life and living is attaining a cognitive knowledge of the presence of a self among many other souls. Human life is not about attaining everything remaining immobile and exercising no will and effort. Physical mobility, displacement, purposeful journey, travel and explorations -- all provide humanity with experience and knowledge. New relationships or understanding the self is possible by means of entering into a new space by means of travel or quest. The willingness to experience the world and attaining thereby the wisdom of disciplining oneself is regarded as 'Quest'. World is outside one's home and the world known and experienced becomes one's own. True understanding of life and life's purpose is available for anyone who is ready to ascend, extend and learn.

Creativity involves capturing the life of human beings who enter into series of relationships which may be either bonding or breaking. This chapter attempts to read the journeying and questing minds, ambitious of attaining experience and enlightenment, made available in Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope*. Ramaswamy's experience is physical, intellectual and religious. He attains these three levels of experiences by a process of pursuit, which places him in vantage or chosen relationships bonding as well as breaking away from his moorings of monotony to new domains of excitements or in other words experiences. The key point to be recurrent in Ramaswamy's experiential life is the fact that he is able to transcend himself in a spiritual axis, for which he does not hesitate to bond with some or break from some others. In the following paragraphs, these relationships of Ramaswamy are subjected to a scrutiny.

*The Serpent and the Rope* by Raja Rao details several kinds of human relationships - familial, marital and even extra-marital. It also deals with relationship of a sensitive individual with the larger external world. Amidst these apparent and readily noticeable relationships, a relationship that is yearned by the activated soul is also latently and suggestively portrayed. If the former kinds could be termed as illusions in one sense, the latter deserves to become the real. The story of Ramaswamy accords a central place to 'family and marriage'. It is through marriage, a man and a woman learn to see each other overcoming their ego. In other words, love involves self-denial. Raja Rao asserts the significance of marriage thus:

“Woman as the eternal creator is more firmly rooted in things of the body and that of the earth than man, therefore a man must wed to belong to the earth . . . for men are born and men “die” - even women are born and marry and continue to live”(SR 141)

Man reaches the earth, according to Raja Rao through a marriage. For him, the woman is a creator as earth according to Raja Rao, is the creator of several things in life. So the process of becoming related with creativity experiencing the body of the earth is by affecting a relationship with a similar being namely the woman. In spiritual terms man understands the essence of life in woman. His existence is read and felt as truth because woman is a truth, a fact of existence. Raja Rao seems to assert the point that man realizes himself by dissolving himself in woman. The same could be stated from the point of view of the woman, that man is the truth and the woman the essence. This way of relating oneself in the other, binds people resulting in the realization that the fact and the essence are within every one. The illusion has to be overcome so that the reality is sighted. *Jnanam* and its identity with knowledge and existence are made available by way of man's relationships. The entire novel addresses this issue of realization of self, in one's self and also in the other. Marriage is one significant aspect by which one can attain various experiences. Hence Ramaswamy regards marriage as an important step and in Indian marriage system; the ritualistic ceremonies are intended to bring together the idea of '*purusa*' [the cosmic person of Rig Veda] and '*prakrti*' [feminine]. Ramaswamy however is not interned by ritualistic marriage. He is ready to break it so that he can enter into the different domains of intellectual and spiritual plane.

In India, marriage is not considered merely as a physical union of a husband and a wife. In traditional and ideal reading, marriage is a union of spirits. Two human beings become one in spirit in true marriage. Raja Rao refers again and again to the explanation of true love given by Yagnyavalkya to his wife Maitreyi. Love, says Yagnyavalkya is an activity of self (*atman*) and the self seeks the union with the eternal self (*Brahman*) and it does this by embracing the self in other. A true lover only loves the self through his beloved. He must not try to possess his beloved. His love must not be sensual or selfish. Such a love leads to transcendence and enlightenment. Raja Rao explains the significance of husband thus:

“One cannot possess the world, one can become it... Verily a husband is not dear that you may love the husband, but that you may love the self through the husband, therefore a husband is dear. Verily a wife is not dear that you may love the wife but that you may love the self through the wife, therefore a wife is dear”. (Mathur 146)

In spite of the self-realization in a spatial domain known as home, people have broken the relationships choosing to enter into larger spaces involving greater enterprise. The knowledge that home is the place where you gather grace does not freeze the willing minds from seeking something in an unknown world. Leaving the home is a recurrent motif in ancient Indian literature. Heroes and warriors, kings and emperors celebrated in Hindu mythologies have been known to undertake periodic and strenuous journeys into the dark recess of *Aranyas* [forest]. In the case of Rama, the hero of The Ramayana, a life in forest is imposed for his empire's goodness. The five heroes of The Mahabharata, the Panchapandavas, are also ordered to disappear into the forest for long years so as to undergo the process of penance. The concept of leaving the home is not exclusive to the brave and the royal, but it was also imposed on the saintly and the godly. Several saints of many ancient Indian texts provide information about the life in the recluse. Even the story of The Buddha equates self-realization with the renunciation of wife, child and the choice of joys and comforts of palace and power. In true Indian tradition, Raja Rao also imposes on his protagonist Ramaswamy the condition of leaving his wife as he embarks on the religious quest in the wide wild world and in India. He wanders from place to place and enters into various relationships. He leaves his wife Madeleine and returns to India. As he detaches himself from her, she lapses into a religion of total detachment by embracing Buddhism. Being a Catholic, she opts for religious conversion and becomes a Buddhist monk. Ramaswamy also involves himself in seeking the truth from the vast external world, beginning his quest for spiritual life. In fact, Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope* presents many married couples. As his mother dies, Ramaswamy's father remarries and his second wife too dies leaving three daughters behind. He however chooses to re marry again, this time a girl younger than his eldest son. When tragedy strikes, he dies leaving his young widow and their infant son. In the case of Ramaswamy, he marries in defiance of his family tradition, Madeleine, a French woman five years elder to him. Uncle Charles, Madeleine's uncle too takes a divorcee Tante Zoubie as his third wife. Saroja, Ramaswamy's sister agrees to marry Subramania Sastri in obedience to her brother and naturally it was a marriage without love. French couples Georges and Catherine are also presented to the readers as not so happy. One can read a uniform note of lack of happiness in most of the marriages shown by Raja Rao. This could be read as Raja Rao's statement that the meaning of life could be understood beyond the familial or marital systems. Ramaswamy reconciles to this fact. In the world of illusions, realization is not possible, hence he even advocates that one can marry any one for it is not going to matter much in the world of illusions.

“if a man understands that world is an illusion like a city seen in a mirror, it matters not who you marry, Subramania Sastri or Pratap.” (SR 121)

Ramaswamy's marriage with Madeleine is different from many Indian marriages for parents did not arrange it. It was a love marriage. Both Ramaswamy and Madeleine were happy ritually and finally both of them lost hope and trust on each other, which resulted in their separation. Their family life was a failure and so Ramaswamy opted for the other aspect in life, which was the spiritual life. Thus from the family life he turned slowly towards the spiritual life. Ramaswamy married Madeleine as a part of his quest for self-realization. He wanted to spiritualize love. He thought that it would be marriage of two souls. But that could not be achieved and so the marriage failed. Madeleine loved him, but did not grab his spirit. Both her sons died. This disturbed her emotionally that she adopted the extreme form of Buddhism, which advocated ascetism, celibacy and mortification of the body. All men were her brothers now. She renounced all pleasures of the body and became a Buddhist Sadhaka. So she could no longer live with Ramaswamy as his wife. If she had remained a Catholic, their marriage would not have been wrecked.

Raja Rao uses Ramaswamy's relationship with women like Madeleine, Savithri, Pratap's wife and Lakshmi to highlight his ideas on Hindu marital life as well as spiritual love. His Indian trip and his experience hang around him even after his return to France. On the day he comes back, he dresses his French wife in the saree, which he has brought for her, and they sit down to supper.

"My hand just would not lift", writes Ramaswamy. "Mado, something has happened, "Yes", she agrees. "Something has... To whom?". "To everything," he answers. (SR 65)

Ramaswamy was reared by traditional upbringing as prescribed in the Hindu books for a Brahmin boy. He had read the Upanisads at the tender age of four before he was 'Brahminised' with the holy thread. His visits to the holy places of North India and his new status as head of the family after the death of his father renew his awareness of Brahmin birth, which wells up when he sees his French wife, dressed in a saree, for the supper. Madeleine too senses the change in him, and in pain and longing asks him: "Have I failed your Gods?" "No", he says, "You have failed me". (Qtd.in Harrex 179). Ramaswamy thinks that one has to lose one's ego so as to rejoice in the knowledge of the absolute, as he himself does when he falls in love with Savithri. To tell precisely, Raja Rao illuminates Ramaswamy's moods in effecting a relationship. He speaks of a continuity of relationships that transcends time.

" For men are born and men die - even women are born and marry and continue to live. There is only one woman, not for one life, but for all lives. Indeed the earth was created that we may seek her ". (SR 207)

He finds the illustration of his point in the divine union of Lord Shiva and Parvathi as the novel projects:

“And the question of seeking does not arise either for where the both have shed the lower self... as Shiva and Parvathi did the absolute in union with the absolute to be one. There one does not possess the other.”(SR 207).

C.D. Narasimhaiah comments that the human relationships especially between men and women, should be read as the influence of a divine order, in which what is important is not the desire to possess the other but the quest for the Absolute. Hence he states, “Not for the husbands sake is the husband dear but for the self’s sake.”(Narasimhaiah 96).

Ramaswamy through Savithri achieves self-transcendence. Their ritual marriage is a true marriage. They are both one in spirit and mind. Ramaswamy has no desire to possess Savithri. His is a pure love for her, and when he yearns for spiritual life he even advises her to marry Pratap and be true to him. Savithri is quite modern and was western in her choice of leisure. She uses to smoke and fixes dance engagements with many youths for the same evening. But when she falls in love with Ramaswamy, she is suddenly transformed and sacrifices her ego completely. This was a true marriage. There was no ego in it. There was no sense of possession. Through his relationship with Savithri, Ramaswamy achieved true self-transcendence. While Madeleine touches only his exterior, Savithri enters his inner life. The name Savithri has glorious mythological associations--The Savithri of the Vedas, of the Satyavan - Savithri story and Aurobindo’s epic symbolizing knowledge, virtue and purity. The very name can conquer death. In *The Serpent and the Rope*, Savithri represents Shakti and Ramaswamy is her Shiva. In the legend of Savithri and Satyavan, she defeats the God of Death because of her perfect devotion to her husband. In Sri Aurobindo’s great work, *Savithri*, Satyavan symbolizes truth and Savithri symbolizes the power of devotion. In the novel, *The Serpent and the Rope* Savithri loves Ramaswamy in the same way as Radha and the Gopikas and Mira loved Krishna. Savithri is Radha and Ramaswamy is her Krishna. She is Mira and Ramaswamy is her lord. “ I have known my Lord for a thousand lives, from *Janam* to *Janam* have I known my Krishna” (SR 212).

The real Raja Rao’s Savithri regards life as a game. Ramaswamy is her Krishna and beyond that it is immaterial with whom she dances and whom she marries. For Ramaswamy, Savithri is more of a symbol than woman. She visits Ramaswamy and Madeleine in France, and when Ramaswamy visits England soon after, a deep friendship develops between him and Savithri. When she visits him in his room in London, she considers him as Krishna, the divine lover, and herself as Radha, the beloved of Krishna and offers him a ritual worship, very much like a traditional Hindu bride.

“A Hindu woman knows how to worship her Krishna, her Lord. When the moon shines over the Jamuna and lights are lit in the households and the cows are milked, then it is Janaki’s son plays on the banks of the

Brindavan.... What gopi, my Lord, would not go to this festival of love? ....”  
(SR 209)

The self-realization or the realization of the Absolute is the reality - the aim and the end of the meaning of the life. Life of relationships effected or broken shall be the cause to arrive at this effect. Raja Rao leads Shankara's non-duality in terms of reality to the real, which involves dispelling what is unreal. When Savithri, before leaving for England, comes to him with the spirit of Radha, the perfect bride offering Krishna worship, and touches his feet. Ramaswamy tells Savithri: “In marriage both the spouse and the espoused become anointed unto Godhead.” (SR 212). This bonding is a kind of spiritual marriage. Hence Raja Rao states thus: “We were not married that morning we discovered, we had ever been married-else how understand that silent, whole knowledge of one another”. (SR 213). “For to wed a woman you must wed her God”. (SR 84). In another place in the novel Raja Rao states: “The God of woman must be the God of her man”. (SR 113). For this reason true marriage was possible between Ramaswamy and Savithri but not between Ramaswamy and Madeleine. Ramaswamy's relationship with others particularly women also turn out to be an exploration in search of self's kinship with the eternal and the cosmic.

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