

## Cultural Identity in Raja Rao's "The Serpent and the Rope"

Hanan Mohmoud Serag El-Din (\*)

### Abstract

*The Serpent and the Rope* is a complex mixture of philosophy, religious ideas and cultural history. It is a philosophical exposition of the Indian way of life. The sense of rootlessness, with its consequent identity crisis, forms the thematic focus of the novel. Ramaswamy, the main character, tells his own story, feeling rootless and sad. This sense of rootlessness leads to his spiritual journey towards achieving a genuine Indian identity. Ramaswamy's quest for truth is also manifested in his search for the ideal woman. His quest for identity is portrayed through a triangular pattern of relationship between his French intellectual wife, Madeleine, which simultaneously operates with his spiritual love for the Hindu princess, Savithri. Ramaswamy is a Brahmin, aware of his privileged stance in the Hindu social hierarchy. However, he is also influenced by the Western culture and his European surroundings. Ramaswamy tried to identify with the west which attracts him trying to find an identity for himself, Yet he feels an Indian, and his thoughts are Indian, he is aware of his Indian identity, According to Ramaswamy, the ultimate aim of an individual is to succeed in his quest for the self, His quest for identity starts by examining both the European and the Indian woman. His search for meaning through relationship with the feminine, is in reality a search for his own identity. Ramaswamy has feelings of rootlessness. He is bewildered between two modes of life: the Indian and the Western. There is no harmony between his two identities. The self which is rooted in the modern Western mode of life, fails to combine , with his Indian identity. Thus, there are two opposing forces in his own psyche. . His quest is an exploration of the essence of traditional values in order to find a new identity. In the end, his sense of alienation makes him decide to set out on a spiritual journey to find his lost self.

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\* Language Instructor Faculty of Arts Mansoura University

## الهوية الثقافية فى رواية الثعبان و الحبل راجا راو حنان محمود سراج الدين

### ملخص

تناقش رواية الثعبان والحبل للكاتب الهندي راجا راو مجموعة من الافكار الفلسفية والدينية والثقافية ، فى صورة عرض فلسفى للحياة الهندية . تدور الفكرة الأساسية للرواية حول الشعور بعدم الانتماء وما يتبعه من إحساس بفقدان الهوية. يروى القصة الشخصية الأساسية للرواية راماسوامى حيث يعبر عن إحساسه بعدم الانتماء والحزن الذى يقوده الى رحلة روحية يبحث فيها عن هوية حقيقية من خلال محاولة العثور على المرأة المثالية وتجسد ذلك فى علاقته بزوجته الفرنسية من جانب وحبه للأميرة الهندية فى الوقت نفسه. وفى محاولة لإيجاد هوية حقيقية حاول بطل الرواية الاقتراب من الحضارة الغربية ومظاهرها ولكنه يشعر دائما بداخله بهويته وأفكاره الهندية مما يجعله أمام معضلة الإحساس بالحيرة والارتباك والشعور بعدم الانتماء بين هويتين لا يستطيع الاختيار بينهما مما يولد لديه شعوره بالانعزال والضياع. وفى النهاية يقرر الذهاب فى رحلة روحية حتى يستطيع العثور على ذاته الضائعة.

Postcolonial societies cannot avoid the continuing effects of

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colonization, especially the cultural effect. Fanon states that a cultural problem exists in colonized countries because colonial domination manages to disrupt the cultural life of a conquered people. This cultural obliteration is made possible by new legal relations introduced by the occupying power and by the banishment of the natives and their customs to outlying districts of colonial society. Colonialism not only imposes its rule upon a dominated country, but it also "turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it" in order to negate the native's culture, replacing it by a western culture (173). The native reacts by shrinking away from that western culture, and searches for a national culture extracted from the past. If an affirmation of the existence of the native's culture is not accomplished, the result is usually "individuals without anchor, without a horizon, colorless, stateless, and rootless" (175).

In the introduction to his book, *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha sheds light on the "in-between" categories of cultural differences, and the negotiation of cultural identity across differences of race, class, gender and cultural traditions:

It is the emergence of the interstices--the overlap and displacement of domains of difference -- that the inter subjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated. How are subjects formed 'in-between', or in excess of, the sum of the parts of difference (usually intoned as race\class\gender, etc.)? How do strategies of representation or empowerment come to be formulated in the competing claims of communities where, despite shared histories of deprivation and discrimination, the exchange of values, meanings and priorities may not always be collaborative and dialogical, but may be profoundly antagonistic , conflictual and even incommensurable ? (2).

Bhabha suggests that cultural identities do not emerge from pre-given historical cultural traits that define the conventions of ethnicity, since cultural identity involves the continual interface and exchange of cultural performances between the colonizer and the colonized, resulting in mutual recognition, and representation of cultural difference.

Bhabha notes that in a postcolonial society what makes the cultural situation complex is the imposition of foreign ideas and cultural representation. The process of cultural difference initiates new signs of identity. This is because the disturbing distance between the culture of the colonizer and that of the colonized splits the presence of the colonized, "distorts his outline, breaches his boundaries...disturbs and divides the very time of his being" (44). Hence, the effect of the colonizer's culture on the personal identity of the colonized is a change of behavior. Instead of the symbolic consciousness that gives identity its integrity and unity, we are faced with a dimension of doubling, resulting from the imitation of the colonizer by the colonized. Bhabha observes that this "mimicry or doubling threatens to split the soul ...it is a false representation " (75). He goes on to explain that mimicry can be the result of a narcissistic demand made by the colonizer on the colonized to mimic the habits, values, speech, institution, cultures of the colonizer.

One of the aspects of post-colonial texts is concern with the constructed nature of identity. According to Homi Bhabha "cultural differences... constitute identities" (234), since the colonized is confronted by a different culture other than his own, and this influences his personal identity. The relationships and differences between Indian and western cultures and their effect on personal identity will be examined in Raja Rao's *The Serpent and The Rope*, in which Rao articulates his own perception of cultural space and experience, and the impact of the post- colonial condition on cultural identity.

*The Serpent and the Rope* dramatizes the relationship between India and the West, and the confrontation of Indian and Western cultures. It is a complex mixture of philosophy, religious ideas and cultural history and a philosophical exposition of the Indian way of life. Not only is the novel an attempt to assert and affirm Indian values, but as Swain notes, it is also "an acute and melancholic longing for such affirmation which stems from one's being alienated from the core of one's self"(149). This sense of rootlessness, with its consequent identity crisis, forms the thematic focus of the novel.

Ramaswamy, the main character, tells his own story. He starts his narrative with a note of deep anguish. Feeling rootless and sad at his orphaned existence, he says:

I was born an orphan, and have remained one. I have wandered the world and have sobbed in hotel rooms and in

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trains, have looked at the cold mountains and sobbed... I am an orphan. Am I always going to be an orphan? (7).

This sense of rootlessness leads to his spiritual journey towards achieving a genuine Indian identity. As an Indian scholar in France, Ramaswamy is committed to an Indian interpretation of history. He is, as Paranjape notes, "seeking Truth in the form of the missing link in the puzzle of India's influence on the West"(xi). This missing link, according to Ramaswamy, is the Albigensian heresy; he thinks that the Cathars had been driven to heresy by the influence of Buddhism that had left India. He says "I was certain to find a direct proof of India's link with the cathar heresy"(349). He thinks that, by adopting this subject for research, "India should be made more real to the European"(19). He adds: "I did not want merely to write a thesis, but to write a thesis which would also be an Indian attempt at a philosophy of history. I wanted to absorb more than to know"(105).

Ramaswamy's quest for truth is also manifested in his search for the ideal woman. His quest for identity is portrayed through a triangular pattern of relationship between his French intellectual wife, Madeleine, which simultaneously operates with his spiritual love for the Hindu princess, Savithri. Ramaswamy is impressed with Western civilization, as manifested in his description of the places he visits in France. About Marseille, he says:

It has the old port and the beauty of Nore-Dame de la Garde. Once you go up the hundred and seventeen steps and see the majesty of the sea from the portico of the cathedral, the whole of the Greek conquest comes to your mind, and not far from there one can almost see the right Stes-Maries-de-la-Mer, where the first Christians landed in Gaul.(47)

His description of Paris is also interesting; it shows his desire to identify with his surroundings:

I wandered from midnight till five of dawn aimlessly by the Seine, absorbing Paris into my being. Paris is somehow not a city: it is an area in oneself, a Concorde in one's being, where the river flows by you with an intimacy that seems to say the divine is not in the visible architecture of the Orangerie or the presence of the Pont des Arts, but where the trees would end.(53).

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Ramaswamy is a Brahmin, aware of his privileged stance in the Hindu social hierarchy. He confesses: "We lived by tradition"(34). However, he is also influenced by the Western culture and his European surroundings where he does not feel a stranger. He notes, "When I first came to Europe I landed in Naples . Europe did not seem so far nor so alien. Nor when later I put my face into Madeleine's golden hair... did I feel it any the less familiar"(21). He married a French wife, contrary to his father's wishes, and loved her because, as he confesses, "Madeleine was different" (22).With her golden hair, she seemed "something unearthly, magical, made of moonbeam and of raven silver"(88). Through his marriage to Madeleine, Ramaswamy tried to identify with the west which attracts him. Trying to find an identity for himself, he says, "Madeleine was like the Palace of Amber seen in moonlight. There is such a luminous mystery--the deeper you go, the more you know yourself"(15). He is fascinated with Western civilization, and with Madeleine who is a representative of that civilization. He declares that once his doctorate is over, he would take Madeleine with him to India, where, at his university, he would preach "the magnificence of European civilization"(17).

Living in Europe and having a French wife, Ramaswamy feels proud. He thinks:

Amongst those olive trees which rolled like age after age before me, that had seen Roman consuls, bishops, crusaders and princes, and perhaps Napoleon himself as he came back from St Helena before his Hundred Days of Glory... the antiquity, wisdom, and the majesty of Mont Ste-Victoire...Does he who sets foot on the soil of France know he treads where Saint Louis trod, walks where Henry IV rode, goes where the great Mistral walked? Or that he looks at Mont Ste-Victoire which Cézame made famous, in violet and silver, in Venetian green and in mudred? Or that Peguy walked eighty-eight kilometers from paristo Chartres, to carry the homage of the country of Beaune to the Queen of France?(126).

Ramaswamy's visit to England conveys the same impression. He takes a stroll by the river, thinking "what an imperial river the Thames is – her colour may be dark or brown, but she flows with a

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majesty, with a maturity of her own knowledge of herself, as though she grew the tall towers beside her and buildings rose in her image"(201). He found, Oxford kind and docile, and London esoteric. To him, a Londoner is "eminently good. He is warm, he is indeed the first citizen of the world"(201). Standing on a bridge near Chelsea, and looking at the pink and yellow lights of the evening he notes:

I felt England in my bones and breath; how I revered her. The buses going high and lit; the taxis that rolled about, green and gentlemanly; the men and women who seemed responsible, not for this Island alone, but for whole areas of humanity all over the globe.(201)

Later, when his father dies, Ramaswamy comes to India to look after the funeral ceremonies and burial. In the course of his visit, he is overwhelmed by the Indian surroundings. He feels that he "was home...was back home and in India"(50). It is as if he is seeing India for the first time in his life. Greatly impressed with the Indian city, Benares, he describes it as "the sacred capital ... a surrealist city" (13). He discovers anew the goddess Mother of India in the temples of Benares in the form of Annapurna, the goddess of nourishment, and goddess Bhagavathi the sovereign queen. He realizes that what is missing in his relationship with Madeleine is the sacred and passionate. Watching the strong ties of family unity makes him feel that he misses this relationship in Madeleine's company, and in Europe. In India, he enjoys the intimacy of his family:

Living in the intimacy of my own family where every gesture, idiosyncrasy or mole-mark was traced to some cousin, aunt or grandfather, where there were such subtle understandings of half-said things of acts that were respected or condemned according to the degree of stature, age or sex .(280)

This "complex ones", he feels, lasts till death, "and even after that one would get into it again in the next life, and soon till the wheel of existence were ended" (280). He feels an Indian, and his thoughts are Indian, he is aware of his Indian identity, and feels that it is "beautiful and sacred to live and be an Indian in India...the India of my inner being" (306). As he senses India in his self, he starts to feel that Madeleine seems very far. He also realizes the difference

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between India and Europe: "India is not a country like France is, or like England; India in an idea, a metaphysic"(380).

During his visit to India, Ramaswamy for the first time meets Savithri, the daughter of a Raja. The first meeting between this Indian princess and Ramaswamy has a deep effect on him. He describes this incident as something "which was to change the whole perspective of my life"(30). From the first glance, he feels something sacred about her. As he says, "her presence never said anything, but her absence spoke". Even when she went to answer the telephone, one felt she had a rich, natural grace, and one longed for her to be back" (33). Later, Savithri will visit Ramaswamy in France.

On his return to France, Ramaswamy is different. His surroundings are no longer the same. He says, "I felt a foreigner in France... something has happened"(67). He also feels alienated from Madeleine. He tries to enter into a sacred relationship with her, but fails. He cannot explain to her what is involved in his mythology of Shiva and the goddess Mother and their theriomorphic companions, Nandi and Ganesha. Madeleine also fails him because she has entered into a superficial psychological relationship with the mythic constellation:

When we reached home I said "look, here's Shiva's bull at our door," and I showed her the huge flat stone that lay like a squat Nandi at the edge of our garden."True, how very like a bull he is. You thought of Shiva, and so here is Nandi", she said, with unconvinced assurance. And she plucked some grass and gave it to him, saying, "Now Bull, eat".(57)

There is a growing alienation between them which is felt by both of them, causing Madeleine to wonder:" Did you hate the Europeans very much when you were there ?"(64). Also Ramaswamy starts to feel that he is a foreigner, being a provincial Brahmin from Mysore. He has come with that background to France, to Madeleine and her friends, almost all Catholics, or serious communists. While he has a rich relationship with the Indian culture, with its gods and mythologies, she, on the other hand, has a rich relationship with French civilization and history. He represents the best of India, while she represents the best of France. Sharma explains:

This background of theirs comes in the way of a divine tantric relationship because they are not able to cross the cultural bridges...Ramaswamy is too much with India in



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his relationship with Madeleine, and this India is different from the India Madeleine intuitively feels. She is too much with France, but her France is again different from the France he intuitively feels through his Ph.D. involvement with French history.(96)

Ramaswamy receives a letter mentioning that Savithri will be stopping for a few days with them on her way to Cambridge, His meeting with Savithri arouses a new awareness in him. During her stay, a whole new age is ushered in for Ramaswamy. Seeing her the next morning in the garden, he notes that: "there was but one woman, one form, one sound, one love"(135). The relationship between Ramaswamy and Savithri begins on a simple natural note and grows progressively and magically. For him, they gave love to each other as the Ganges receives the water of the Himalayas. Later, when they meet in London, something mystical occurs between them, and they perform a symbolic marriage in a hotel room. Ramaswamy feels that they are true to each other. After finishing the marriage rituals, he says:

And this, my love, my spouse, I whispered, is from my home. This is coco-nut, this is betel-nut, this is kunkum and these toe-rings my Mother gave, and left for my bridal. Slowly I anointed her with kunkum from my home, offered her the coco-nut and the betel-nuts--there were eight, round and auspicious ones. 'And now I shall place the toe-rings on your feet'... The toe-rings were the precise size for her...for Madeleine they would have been too big.(215)

They just surrender themselves to the divine, and become part of the myth of eternal love as exemplified in Shiva and Parvati, Krishna and Radha, and other sacred Syzygies. To Ramaswamy, Savithri is symbolic of Parvati and Radha. On the other hand to Savithri, Ramaswamy is the symbol of Shiva and Lord Krishna. He confesses, "We were so happy...no one could take us away from each other and nobody marry us again. We were not married that morning, we discovered we had ever been married— else how understand that silent, whole knowledge of one another?"(215). He feels that she fills his whole world: "She became the awareness behind my awareness, the leap of my understanding I lost the world and she became

it"(171). However, his relationship with Savithri is not complete, because he does not surrender all the way to her. She returns to India in order to marry her fiancé, Pratap, realizing that this is her duty. Yet ,spiritually, she is Ramaswamy's wife.

On his return to France, he "knew it would never be the same again. Something colossal and complete had happened to Madeleine, to me – to the world"(246). There is now a space between him and Madeleine. He feels that his heart is hollow. He has no commitment nor assurance to offer when Madeleine says, "Rama, tell me – tell me, that you love me"(242). Ramaswamy's cold response indicates his isolation and non-commitment: "I am mine; and you, Madeleine, are a chunk of truth – as the sun, the moon, the space of the stars"(242). Eventually their marriage ends in divorce. Ramaswamy's encounter with each of Madeleine and Savithri lacks resolution. He wonders whether Madeleine would one day let him speak to her again, or whether Savithri had reached India and would she be truly happy. His affinity with both of them is marked by temporal isolation.

According to Ramaswamy, the ultimate aim of an individual is to succeed in his quest for the self, which according to the Advaitic philosophy, is the equivalent of the Ultimate Truth. According to certain aspects of Upanishadic interpretation, woman plays a vital role in man's cosmic journey to the self. It is against this background of beliefs that Ramaswamy develops his concept of the ideal woman who enables man "to be in a world that is familiar and whole"(57).For him, the concept of womanhood provides an awareness of the oneness of truth. His quest for identity starts by examining both the European and the Indian woman. His search for meaning through relationship with the feminine, is in reality a search for his own identity. This is what Madeleine and Savithri symbolize in Ramaswamy's life. He thinks that the goal of existence is self-realization, and this, to him, is truth. In order to be able to recognize his own identity, Ramaswamy needs the polarity provided by the female in order to gain a true perspective of his own destination. As he says, "Man sees himself in woman as essence...If there were none other, you could not know what you are"(170).

Ramaswamy has feelings of rootlessness. He is bewildered between two modes of life: the Indian and the Western. By profession, he is a historian wanting to study medieval heresies; but by nativity and tradition, he is a Brahmin who wants to assert his Brahminhood. There is no harmony between his two identities: the

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academic and the religious. The self which is rooted in the modern Western mode of life, fails to combine with his Indian identity. Swain notes:

He is a scholar seeking a balance between his existential involvement with life, and an intellectual quest for meaning. He is engaged in an intellectual and spiritual journey to reach out to future destinations. But, he fails, since the intellect is out of tune with the spirit, and the two seldom compromise. He is torn between the concept of timelessness: his Indian identity and a time-bound historical existence: his other identity that of the historian (150).

He describes himself as "a European Brahmin"(286). Thus, there are two opposing forces in his own psyche. Rootless, his identity is forever torn and the gulf between "the Brahmin and I"(135) is never bridged. He is carried away from his native ethos by the stream of existential history. His quest is an exploration of the essence of traditional values in order to find a new identity. He is searching for a meaning, a value. As he says, "There must be something that exalts and explains why we are here and what it is we seek"(399).

Supposedly, after finishing his thesis, he would return to India; but he hesitates: "I was not in a hurry to go back to India: what was there to go back to, after all?" (373). His alienation from his native heritage gives him feelings of rootlessness. The realization of his isolation weighs heavily on his soul. He thinks: "There is nobody to go to now: no home, no temple, no city, no climate, no age"(407). In the end, his sense of alienation makes him decide to set out on a spiritual journey to find his lost self. He decides to leave for Travancore searching for a spiritual Guru. "a Guru is what I need... truth indeed is He, the Guru"(410). Through the rootlessness of his protagonist, Raja Rao is actually trying to probe the spiritual roots of his own motherland, India.

### **Artistic Expression:**

*The Serpent and the Rope* is a challenging work with different meanings at different hierarchies of awareness in which the author, Rao, invites the reader to envisage reality from his Hindu viewpoint. He offers the reader the key of distinguishing the projected reality of the serpent from the existing reality of the rope, an image derived from Adi Shankara, a sixth-century scholar. Shankara was the first

to systematize the Advaita Vedanta, viewing the individual self and the universal self, Brahman, as one. The Advaita Vedanta or non-dualism is one of the six main schools of Hindu philosophy; it holds that the world is the expression of an all-encompassing unity, Brahman, the ultimate and impersonal principle of the universe, from which all being originates and to which it returns (Commaraswamy, 77).

*The Serpent and the Rope's* sweep is unique: geographically, historically and philosophically. Geographically, the novel includes a variety of settings, ranging from Paris to Ramaswamy's home in a south Indian village; from European locales such as Aix, Pau, Montpellier, Cambridge and London to Indian locales such as Hydreabad, Delhi, Bombay, Bangalore and Benares. Historically, Rao delves back past history from the invasion of the Aryans to the advent of British rule. He also explores European history, mainly the Albigensian heresy. Philosophically, Rao discusses Hinduism, Buddhism, Marxism, Darwinism and Nazism. Since the protagonist, Ramaswamy, is a historian, he expounds his theories about these topics in conversations with the leading characters in the novel.

As, the content of the novel is varied, so also is its form diverse. The novel uses the first person method of narration. Ramaswamy is the narrator from whose point of view the reader sees all events. He says: "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 sciences, for by taste and tradition I am only an historian"(233). He occasionally interrupts the narration to read parts from his diary, and to comment on them. He says, "I could thus go on quoting from my endless diary. But I will stop here"(167). Rao quotes verse and songs in various languages, including Sanskrit, Hindi, French, Italian and Latin. The narration also includes long interludes and stories such as a Chinese fable about the trip of Wang-Chu and Chang-Yi to the castle of Changto, and the story of Grandmother Lakshamma, about a princess who becomes a pumpkin, and Ishwara Bhatta's story of Rama. In addition, the novel contains various Indian myths and legends which serve to convey the philosophical notions of the writer and reveal his mastery of Hindu mythology. For example, Rao alludes to the myth of Siva-Parvathi, the heavenly couple protecting mankind. Ramaswamy thinks of kailas the heavenly abode of Siva and Parvathi, and how from there they protect mankind:

Somewhere over against the sky should kailas stand and

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Siva and Parvathibesport themselves therein, for the joy of mankind. Nandi, the vehicle, the disciple of Siva, the bull without blemish would wander round the world, hearing the sorrows of this vast countryside hearing of painful birth and death, of litigation, quarrel and Paupery, Parvathi would know of it for Nandi would not dare tell his master in speech and Parvathi would plead with Siva, that orphan, beggar and widow should have the splendor of life given unto him.(37)

Ramaswamy finds a number of mythical parallels for his situations, and so he quotes mythical stories to give expression to his love, his quest, and also to convey his philosophy of life. He uses myths as concrete illustrations for the metaphysical and philosophical ideas he wants to convey. A difficult concept is made easy to comprehend through the introduction of mythical allusions, as in the following illustration, given by Ramaswamy:

Rama is the river of life, the movement towards self-liberation, the affirmation of one's true existence. Ravana is negation, is the earth, the fact. But the earth is made for dissolution, so he who holds the earth in bondage, he who possesses in the real sense works against life.(184)

Through the Satyavan-Savithri myth, Ramaswamy conveys the abstract notion that the truth is non-dual. Rao is familiar with the incidents and characters of the legends: the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, as Ramaswamy mentions Karna, Utra, Dussasana in different contexts, and refers to the life of Rama and the relationship between Sita and Rama as illustrations. There are also philosophical discussions between Ramaswamy and Savithri, or between him and Georges, in which he tries to reach a meaning for life. He wonders, "life is a Pilgrimage I know, but a Pilgrimage to where -- and of what?... What is the answer?"(28). In these philosophical discussions, Ramaswamy is, as Savithri describes him, full of "interesting things to say about everything. He relates things apparently so unrelated – for him history is a vast canvas, for the discovery of value, of metaphysical value....he works with symbols and equations. History for him is a vast algebra, and he draws in unknowns from everywhere to explain it"(185). He is aware of this tendency in him, as he says: "I like these equations about myself or of others, or about ideas: I feed on them"(197). The main narrative is

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the gradual disintegration of Ramaswamy's marriage to his French wife, Madeleine; it is the strand holding the novel together.

The plot of *The Serpent and the Rope* appears puzzling. We wonder why the marriage of Ramaswamy and Madeleine disintegrates. This is not clear to the reader. One possible answer could be the incompatibility between an Indian husband and a French wife; another could be Ramaswamy's infidelity to Madeleine. These are plausible reasons, yet they are not satisfying because they are not perceived by the characters themselves. Although both Ramaswamy and Madeleine are aware of the growing gap between them, they do not attempt to bridge this gap (17). Helplessly they watch the dissolution of their union, Ramaswamy asks, "What after all was the problem? Where exactly did it begin? For Madeleine had never been sweeter"(79). Madeleine also senses that there is a problem. She tells Ramaswamy, "I lose you – I know I will lose you"(219). Thus, the bridge is never crossed. Moreover, it is not obvious why Ramaswamy avers his love for Madeleine, and at the same time he seeks fulfillment in other women. He never tells her of his affairs, although he claims that he keeps no secrets from her. The narrator, Ramaswamy, chronicles the breakdown of the relationship without answering these questions, as if there were nothing he could do to save the marriage. He does not think himself responsible, even for having affairs with other women, one of which involves a ritual marriage, while Madeleine is still his wife. Paranjape explains:

What is lacking, then, is an adequate motivation for the actions of the characters, something that most readers are conditioned to expect from the novel. Perhaps, a better approach, instead of asking of the novel something that it did not intend to give, would be to consider what it does clearly provide, indeed, questions which appear unresolved on the literal level are resolved more satisfactorily on the symbolic level.(xi)

Rao portrays two opposed worlds: the Indian and the European. India, the world of introspection bent on self-knowledge and "the beautiful Truth"(303). This is different from the Western world of extroversion, where "existentialism had cleared the libido out of the knots of hair"(400). Ramaswamy states, "the moral universe insists whether it be according to Newton or Pascal on the reality of the external world. That dhira (here) of whom the

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Upanishads speak, enters into himself and knows he has never gone anywhere"(303). These differences are obvious in Rao's portrayal of Indian and European characters in this novel. Thus, for example, there is a great deal of difference between Madeleine and Savithri. As Ramaswamy notes, "with Madeleine everything was explanation, with Savithri it was recognition"(345). Also he feels "to take Madeleine's arm in public seemed a desecration to me. But with Savithri it was different"(246). It is through subtle detailed description of the characters that Rao infuses life into them and brings their way of life into focus. Menezes notes that the characters of this novel "are delightful sketches vibrant with life...Raja Rao's creative awareness invests the characterization with subtle personal variations that help to preserve the identity of each individual character in the novel"(14).

The theme of alienation and diverse identities pervades the novel. The deepening of estrangement between Ramaswamy and Madeleine is symbolic, as it illustrates the conflict which exists between the two cultures, the Western and the Indian, or between the West and the East. This unresolved conflict causes him an internal struggle, and a feeling of rootlessness, which leads to his quest for identity. This quest is an attempt to achieve a new identity. At the end of the novel, his quest is manifested in his need of a guru, and a withdrawal from the world of illusion (the serpent) to the world of reality( the rope).

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Hanan Mohmoud Serag El-Din

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