

Interracial and Intercultural Relationships in Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope*

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Raja Rao's *The Serpent and Rope*,¹ the classic of Indo-English literature, portrays the encounter between East and West on the intimate plane of sex, love, and marriage. The recurring theme of interracial and intercultural relationships in Indo-English literature is explored in Raja Rao's novel with a set of variables not used elsewhere.

Ramaswamy, a Brahmin from South India, goes to France to do research on the Indian origin of the Albigensian heresy. He meets Madeleine at the University of Caen. The two fall in love and they marry. Their first son Krishna dies of bronchopneumonia within a year of his birth. The second one also dies, immediately after birth. During his two visits to India in the meantime, Rama's love of his native land, people, and culture emerges most vigorously. Love of a spiritual nature develops between him and Savitri, a girl from an Indian royal family. On Madeleine's side, her interest in Buddhism grows so intense that she begins to live in virtual seclusion, doing yogic exercises, praying, and fasting. Though their love for each other remains in a way undiminished, they are practically separated, and they finally dissolve their marriage through a legal divorce.

The course of love and marriage between Rama and Madeleine is not as smooth as the above summary may indicate, and the study of it is far from an easy venture. The two lovers at one moment feel that they are united in everlasting love and, at the next see a wide gulf dividing and separating them. There is often no knowing what brings them together and what drives them apart. An attempt will be made in the following pages to present their relationship in a proper perspective.

Rama, who is a curious mixture of sensuousness and asceticism, is as strongly attracted by the beauty of Madeleine's body as by the virtues of her character. Being an Indian Brahmin, Rama is obviously impressed by Madeleine's active interest in Indian philosophy and religion and by her virtuous character; she is well known among her relatives and friends for being a person of great virtue and piety. Her cousins teasingly warn her that she will end up in a convent. She shares Rama's interest in the Cathars, because she finds in them kindred souls of purity. This streak of asceticism endears her to Rama, who never tires of talking about his purity and Brahminism.

Madeleine also combines a sensuous nature with her well-known asceticism, at least at the beginning (p. 19). She would make a big demand on Rama at times, and leave him to feel afterwards "like a summer river—the sun sizzling on the Deccan plateau, and the stones burning; the cattle waiting with their tongues out; and the neem leaves on the tree, still" (p. 163).

¹Raja Rao, *The Serpent and the Rope* (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1968). Page references are to this edition and will appear in the text.

The two love each other deeply and their married life is marked by mutual understanding, sympathy, and trust. They spend the early years of their marriage in playful fun and amusement, like children. Madeleine shows great concern for Rama's health and serves him with total devotion. Even when things cease to go well with them, their love remains unaffected. Rama continues to hold her in the highest regard, and Madeleine continues to think of his welfare. She initiates the action of divorce so that Rama can go back to the warmer climate of India which is good for his lungs; she also presents him with his freedom so that he can marry a young Hindu wife.

Rama and Madeleine are, broadly speaking, alike in temperament and character, and they seem to be made for each other. Looking at them from a distance, theirs will appear a marriage of true minds. They indeed enjoy a reputation among friends and relatives as an ideal couple. George compliments them: "I have never seen a European couple act and behave with such innocence" (p. 82).

Why then, does the marriage of Rama and Madeleine fail? The reasons for its failure are more numerous and complex than critics of the novel have generally made them out to be. S. Nagarajan, for instance, thinks that the failure of marriage is brought about by the couple's contrary world views, contrary epistemologies, nondualistic and dualistic attitudes. He explains:

In terms of the definition of India taken up in the novel, man is *purusa*, the Lord of Creation, and woman is *prakrati*, the inherent power of *purusa* whereby *purusa* creates. Woman's function is to give herself as *prakrati* to man as *purusa* so that man may know that in his true self he is *purusa* himself. Madeleine, however, with her belief in "person" tries to take her husband. The pain that she feels is not of love, explains Rama, for it springs from her refusal to transcend the subject-object relationship of lover and beloved into "the hypostasis of a cosmic order."²

S. Nagarajan goes on to observe: "Madeleine's failure from Rama's point of view consists simply in her dualism, the assertion that *purusa* and *prakrati* are separate."³

The Serpent and the Rope contains numerous possible causes which could be cited for the dissolution of the marriage of Rama and Madeleine. What is, however, significant is that the novel does not show how any of the reasons given in it, separately or together, build up a crisis and bring about the breakup of the marriage.

First, there are problems created by the personality and makeup of the two. We know that Rama had lost his mother at an early age and had the feeling of being an orphan (p. 6). Madeleine was also an orphan, having lost both her parents at an early age. This shared situation probably arouses an initial sympathetic response in the hearts of Rama and Madeleine, which may be sympathetic, but not the firm base for a marriage.

We are told that Madeleine is by nature a woman who can give herself to a cause. Rama knows this and thinks that Madeleine really loved him "partly because she felt India had been wronged by the British, and because she would,

²S. Nagarajan, "An Indian Novel," *The Sewanee Review*, 72, No. 3 (July-September 1964), 514.

³Nagarajan, p. 515.

in marrying [him], know and identify herself with a great people" (p. 18). A long-lasting marriage cannot be based on such mixed considerations, especially when Rama and Madeleine are melancholic by nature (pp. 12, 135-136). Rama himself continually talks about his feelings of anxiety, tiredness, emptiness, and *absence*, and their house in Aix is enveloped in a deep sadness.

When one examines the problems caused by cultural differences, one notices that Rama is unhappy with Madeleine's indifference to his gods and superstitions. He knows that to wed a woman one must wed her beliefs, and, after some inner struggle, he accepts them. He notices with regret, however, that she does not do the same.

Rama's love for Madeleine is, in a way, impersonal and abstract. The nature of this love is described in Yagnyavalkya's words: "For whose sake, verily, does a husband love his wife? Not for the sake of his wife, but verily for the sake of the Self in her" (p. 24). Rama does not think that Madeleine could possibly appreciate this transcendental approach, for she "smelt the things of the earth, as though, sound, form, touch, taste, smell, were such realities that you could not go beyond them—even if you tried" (p. 18).

To Madeleine, purity gradually comes to mean desisting from all physical and sexual contact. She implores Rama to practice the *brahmacharya* of his ancestors. She herself starts practicing a rigorous form of celibacy, and shrinks from the touch of even Rama. She would not expose any part of her body and certainly would not allow Rama to touch her. When Rama sees her sitting in her room in yogic posture with beads in hands and chanting mantras, he ruefully thinks, "This was the Madeleine I had made" (p. 314). Rama, on the other hand, could go to bed with Lakshmi, the wife of a friend of his, without violating his sense of purity. Similarly, he could receive the worship due to a husband from a wife from Savitri without any sense of guilt or infidelity. Purity is a mental and spiritual state to Rama, whereas it is a matter of physical touch to Madeleine.

In a similar way, Madeleine's India is not the same as Rama's. To Madeleine, India means saris, worship of cows, and Buddhism. Rama's India cannot be summed up neatly along these lines. It means many things to him, big and small, and evokes many feelings. It is a country with a rich tradition and culture. Philosophers like Yagnyavalkya, Maitreyi, Shankara and Madhava, and poets like Kalidasa, Bhrtrehari, Kabir, Tulsidas, and Mira have bestowed on it beauty and splendor through their works. Lines from these authors keep coming to Rama's mind and he recites them with pleasure. The river Ganges evokes in him a deep religious feeling. The snowy peaks of the Himalayas make him bow down with reverence. He contemplates various objects, scenes, people with a warm and affectionate feeling. He likes Indian women wearing kumkum, turmeric, ear pendants, bangles, and toe rings, and who sing *arati* songs. The family of which he is a member, crowded with people and buzzing with activity, has been a source of strength and joy to him. The various Indian rituals, ceremonies, and festivals warm his heart. He takes a genuine pleasure even in small things: jasmine from Coimbatore and champaks from Chamunki; Agra jewellery and Luknow attar; rasam with asafoetida in it; and chutney with coconut and coriander leaf.

Certain things which have a special significance for Rama remain foreign to Madeleine. For example, the word "dukkha," means simply sorrow to Madeleine, but Rama writes that he cannot think of the word without feeling his entrails dropping into his hands. Similarly, the episode of the toe rings brings out her limitations. The toe rings are a precious possession of the family, and have been

worn and sanctified by Rama's stepmother, mother, grandmother, and so on for generations. After the death of Rama's father, Little Mother asks Rama to take the toe rings to Madeleine, a gesture which expresses her desire to associate Madeleine with the noble line of wives in the family and to see Madeleine carry on the tradition of an ideal wife. Rama carries them to France with great excitement, but he cannot somehow give them to his wife. They remain in his suitcase, and are a source of profound anguish until he gives them away to Savitri. Significantly enough, Rama notes that they are just the right size for Savitri's toes, and that they would have been too large for Madeleine.

Though Madeleine transcends her own cultural orientation to a certain extent, she is unable to acquire an inward knowledge of Rama's Indian culture. Though Rama quotes from Paul Valéry and gives beautiful lectures on French history, he cannot for a moment forget that he is an Indian Brahmin from Hariharapura of Mysore, and a grandson of Kittanna.

Important as some of these differences are, they are not accumulated and intensified so that a crisis forces the couple to separate. Further complications are caused by their declarations of everlasting love which occur right in the middle of the eruptions of their bitter thoughts. The reader's confusion is compounded by these expressions of love which continue even while their divorce arrangements progress.

The author himself is perhaps not very clear as to precisely what brought about the separation of Rama and Madeleine. Having chosen to present these sensitive, intelligent characters as two people who continue to show every possible consideration for each other's feelings in spite of their collapsing marital relations, the author does not seem to know how to explain their final estrangement. He reviews various events, thoughts, and words in the hope of finding the reason for their separation. Just as Rama collects numerous pieces of information throughout to determine Indian origins for the heresy of the Cathars, so the author gathers data to establish the cause of the couple's separation. When the book ends, neither Rama nor the author has resolved the problem.

The inconclusiveness referred to above need not, however, detract from Raja Rao's skill as an artist. He has chosen to present a difficult real life situation, one that does not always lend itself to logical explanations. The author should be commended for resisting the temptation to twist and turn situation or character, producing thereby a simple novel of East-West encounter.

The separation of Rama and Madeleine is a moving story. They respect one another, and yet they part. They are intelligent, mature, and enlightened; they are free from the usual narrow racial and cultural prejudices, and yet they cannot prevent themselves from drifting apart. The comforting aspect of this sad story of separation is that the end of marriage need not mean the end of love. Love between members of different races and cultures is possible, even if marriage is not. Having lived through the kind of situation presented in the novel in his own personal life, Raja Rao is able to give a point and force to his conclusion.

In Kamala-Markandeya's *Some Inner Fury*⁴ and Manohar Malgonkar's *Combat of Shadows*,⁵ two other Indo-English novels which deal with the theme of

⁴Kamala Markandeya, *Some Inner Fury* (London: Putman, 1955).

⁵Manohar Malgonkar, *Combat of Shadows* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1962).

interracial and intercultural relations, the encounter between the groups takes place in India. Raja Rao's novel, has for the most part, France as its background. The heroine of Raja Rao is, unlike the heroines of Markandeya and Malgonkar, from the Western hemisphere, from France. Whereas insurmountable obstacles come in the way of the marriage of Markandeya's and Malgonkar's lovers, no serious difficulty is experienced by Raja Rao's lovers who represent their respective cultures in a richer and fuller way than Markandeya's and Malgonkar's lovers. The action of the story in Raja Rao's novel takes place between 1946 and 1952. This covers India's pre-Independence and post-Independence years. The spirit of confidence and pride which pervaded the Indian subcontinent at that time is subtly captured by Raja Rao whose colored Indian hero weds a white woman yet makes no secret of his pride in native Indian culture. Though the novels of Markandeya and Malgonkar are published, like Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope*, after India became independent, they seem to express essentially the temper of pre-Independent India. This, then is a rich theme for Indo-English writers.