

THE SERPENT AND THE ROPE

Raja Rao

(1960)

Story

This is Raja Rao's second novel and it is a world away from his first (*Kanthapura*). Whereas the first was concerned with external political reality (the Gandhian movement within a rural village), *The Serpent and the Rope* is a search for inner truth or 'self-knowledge.' It is a semi-autobiographical novel, tracing the life of a young Indian student in France, by the name of Ramaswamy (also called Rama). The story begins in media res, when Rama, who has been living in France for some years, is married to Madeleine, who is also an academic and interested in India. Although he seems incapable of finishing his doctoral thesis on an obscure topic in French theological history, he plans to move back to India, with Madeleine, and teach there. However, things do not turn out as planned. From the beginning, the reader senses that something is not right between Rama and Madeleine. They appear interested in the same things but there is no rapport. The two years pass more or less happily, but then tragedy strikes. Their son dies when only seven months old. Then Ramaswamy receives news of his father's critical illness and rushes back to India, where he finds himself confused, yet inspired, by the renewal of his contact with his motherland. Then he meets Savithri, a young and beautiful Indian woman who is studying in the UK but is in India for the summer. At first, she seems 'too modern' for him, but later she captures his imagination. Now his loyalty to Madeleine is shaken, if not in deed then in thought, and he returns to France feeling estranged from Madeleine. Over time, they grow further and further apart. Rama retreats into the abstractions of Indian philosophy, and Madeleine becomes more detached from physical love and turns toward Buddhism. Rama fails to understand her and thinks that she is unfit for a life of transcendental truth because she 'smelt the things of the earth, as though, sound, form, touch, taste, smell, were such realities that you could not go beyond them.' After a great deal of inner monologue and painful soul-searching, Rama and Madeleine separate. Rama shifts his affections to Savithri, whom he met in India, and she becomes infatuated with his philosophical pursuits. She nearly adopts him as her guru, but Rama is attracted to her sexually. Savithri eventually rejects him and marries another man. Hearing that news, Ramaswamy is so upset that he 'drowns his sorrows' by starting yet another love affair, this time with the wife of a friend in Bombay. This sad story of personal disillusionment ends with Rama accepting Madeleine's request for a divorce, which is a complicated legal process in France.

Themes

Truth Although this novel examines a tangled web of intellectual topics, encompasses a wide variety of geographical settings and dramatises emotional conflicts, it is primarily the record of one man's painful search for truth. The very first sentence reads: 'I was born a Brahmin, that is, devoted to truth.' For Rama, the narrator and protagonist, that truth is found in a school of Indian philosophy known as 'non-dualism' (*advaita*). The central tenet of non-dualism is that there is no mind-body split because all individuals are manifestations of a single, invisible reality known as *brahman*. However, Rama discovers that while he may have been born a Brahmin, he does not behave like one. Instead of following the ascetic path to self-realisation, he is caught in the snares of the senses. In one paragraph, Rama will ponder the paradox of truth—that what appears beyond logic must be true—quoting Dostoevsky and then Rilke, but in the next paragraph he is luxuriating in the beautiful body of a woman. And yet, even in the final pages, Rama continues to struggle to understand and to articulate Truth, the meaning of life. It may be futile, and he has certainly been hypocritical, but somehow the reader feels that it has been worth the effort.

Culture clash The other great theme of this ambitious novel is the incompatibility of cultures. It reveals the impossibility of a French woman and an Indian man understanding each other and the inevitable fact that they cannot truly love one another and that their marriage will fail. In Rama's mind,

this failed marriage is a reflection of his failed (or least so far unsuccessful) search for the truth of life. It is a deeply personal failure for Rama because he is fascinated by France culture and history. He steep himself in the French language, Catholicism and French cuisine, yet he remains stubbornly Indian. In the end, he is a mongrel, or thinks he is. When he falls ill, he describes himself to the doctor as 'a European Brahmin,' which is why he cannot drink wine (usually prohibited for a Brahmin). On another occasion, it is Madeleine who explains that they will never comprehend each other. 'You will never understand us, the French,' she says to Rama when they visit the grave of one of her relatives. 'There is piety and compassion, of course. But there is also so much calculation.' By marrying a non-Brahmin, and a foreigner, Rama has committed the greatest sin of his caste, and yet he does it willingly and with the belief that humanity is one and indivisible (like the non-dualism philosophy). French history, he believes, is 'a universal history, everything can be found there.' The undeniable reality, as expressed in the novel, however, is that the mixing of cultures does not result in a harmonious blend. And the individuals themselves end up torn by inner conflict.

Characters

Ramaswamy Ramaswamy, or Rama for short, is the main character and narrator of the story. He is a Brahmin and a student of French history, but is more interested in Hindu philosophy. He marries a French woman but never finds happiness.

Madeleine Madeleine is a French history lecturer who falls in love with Rama, in part because he is Indian, and marries him. Their only child dies an early death, and so does her marriage, but she eventually finds solace in becoming a Buddhist.

Savithri Savithri is a young Indian woman, a student at Cambridge, whom Rama meets while on holiday in India. She is his ideal woman (a 'Benares bride,' as the phrase goes), and she is intrigued by his philosophical searching. In the end, however, she rejects him and marries another man.

Ramaswamy (Conflicted)

Character Ramaswamy, or Rama, is a confused man. He calls himself a Brahmin and a searcher for 'Truth,' but he is drawn to France, where he studies obscure topics in medieval Christianity. He thinks he can understand the world around him by adopting an Indian philosophical point of view, but reality keeps upsetting his equilibrium and leaves him sad and alone. We discover that Rama lost his mother at an early age and suffered from lack of maternal affection. He appears to be a gentle introvert, who is frail from an early bout of tuberculosis. At times he appears to be a bloodless type, who prefers cold abstractions rather than warm flesh, while at others, he revels in sensual pleasure. In other words, he is conflicted, torn between India and France, between Hinduism and Christianity, abstraction and full-bodied living, and between Madeleine (his French wife, who, at the very end, divorces him) and Savithri (an Indian woman, who is his ideal of the perfect Indian woman but who rejects him). For all his sensual enjoyment, however, Rama is also an emotionally distant person, incapable of true rapport or love. He also distances himself from injustices in Indian society, even when they influence his own family; for instance, when his cousin complains about the degrading position of women in a marriage, all Rama can say is, 'There is no answer to that.'

Finally, Rama is an intensely self-aware person, whose constant self-examination and evaluation is revealed to the reader since he is the narrator of the story. When he first meets Madeleine, who is five years older than he, he is infatuated: 'I love the curved nape of her neck, so gentle, so like marble for me, almost saffron-coloured under the light of the moon, or when I call her to myself in the day, and take her in my arms, how her throat smells of some known musk.' At the end of the novel, when they have grown apart, he realises what has happened to them. When Rama finds her sitting in her room in yogic posture with beads in hands and chanting mantras, he wryly smiles and says, 'This is the Madeleine I have made.'

Activities

Rama spends long hours reading about medieval Christianity in France as well as studying Hindu philosophy. He also likes to get involved in long discussions on these topics, or indeed on any topic. He visits places in France for his research, he accompanies his French wife to church and to visit her

relatives, and he often returns to India to visit his aging father. In the end, when he is divorced, he wanders the streets of Paris, alone but hoping to make friends.

Illustrative moments

Conflicted Rama's personal strife is dramatised throughout this somewhat long and meandering novel. We see it in his philosophical search and in his marriage. One exquisite example of the conflict between his 'Indian-ness' and his 'European-ness' is found in an episode involving toe-rings. This piece of women's jewellery is traditionally handed down from generation to generation, from mother to daughter, and sometimes from mother-in-law to daughter-in-law. Rama possesses his mother's toe rings, which he had brought with him from India to France. He plans to give them to Madeleine, his wife, but for some reason they remain in his suitcase. When he returns to India for a visit, he gives them to Savithri and realises that they fit her perfectly and that they would have been too small for Madeleine. In that moment, he sees that he cannot embrace Madeleine in his cultural traditions and that they will be forever separated at the deepest level of inheritance. This is one of those moments when Rao shows his talents as a novelist, using a small but precious object to suggest something much bigger.

Deluded Although Ramaswamy believes he is truly Indian and prides himself on being an 'authentic' Hindu, he is in fact a mixture of two cultures: Indian and European. The first words of the novel are spoken by him: 'I was born a Brahmin, that is, devoted to Truth.' However, he breaks all his caste rules by going overseas and marrying a French woman. Similarly, he claims that he is a seeker of abstract truth, that he yearns for the serenity of the sages, yet he enjoys passionate love-making, and not only with his wife. This self-delusion is illustrated in one scene when Rama acknowledges that he is 'trapped in a cobweb of illusion, of *maya*.' Lying alone in bed, he sits up and thinks, 'I am a follower of Vedanta, a seeker of ultimate reality, and yet I cannot escape the most mundane of human failings.' Here, again, we see how the novel functions on two levels: the philosophical and the personal. Illusion, which is a powerful theme in Hindu philosophy, and becomes a source of disappointment in Rama's own life.

Distant Paradoxically, the same Rama who is trapped by his senses, is emotionally distant. He may be swayed by sexual attraction, but on a deeper level he appears incapable of real love and empathy. After one of his arguments, typically about philosophy, with Madeleine, Rama goes for a walk and sulks. Then he sits down and says to himself, 'Did I really love her? Or am I just infatuated with her? No, I do not love her. I did not even love Pierre [their dead son]. Had I been less of a Brahmin, I would have known more of love.' Here he blames his interest in abstract philosophy for his inability to love a real person (since in non-dualism the idea of an individual person is an illusion). However, we suspect that this explanation is another example of his self-delusion and that his emotional distance is caused by a more personal failing, that is, his inability to empathise.

Madeleine (Magnanimous)

Character It is somewhat difficult to get a clear picture of Madeleine's character because her actions and thoughts are filtered through Rama, the narrator and her husband, whom she later divorces. We know that Madeleine is an orphan. (Curiously, Rama, the other protagonist, also lost his mother when he was young). Both her parents died when she was a child, and she was raised by an aunt in the countryside. When we first meet her, she is a university lecturer in Greek history in a minor town in southern France. She is five years older than Rama, whom she marries soon after they meet. She appears to be a 'normal', middle-class French woman. Even her fascination with India, and especially with Indian spirituality, is not uncommon among a certain class of French people. For Madeleine, however, the interest is also political or ethical. She falls in love with Rama 'partly because she felt India had been wronged by the British, and because she would, in marrying [him], know and identify herself with a great people.' She is sincere in trying to assimilate to Indian culture and begins her own study of Hinduism. For example, she calls her son Krishna. The early death of her son is a terrible blow from which she never recovers. As the lack of rapport with Rama becomes evident, she turns toward Buddhism, which to Rama signifies her inability to understand the more abstract levels of Hinduism. Madeleine seems satisfied with certain material crutches, such as beads, incense, bells and images. As their marriage deteriorates, Madeleine withdraws physically from Rama and becomes a celibate. She hides her naked body from Rama, and even the touch of her husband repels her. At the same time, she tries to be 'a good wife' to him, undertaking household

chores, such as cleaning and cooking. Rama says that she is 'melancholic' and that like all melancholic people 'she seeks truth at the end of a bridge.' On the other hand, we see her as a warm and honest woman, who bravely attempts to cross a cultural divide and form a new life with her Indian husband.

Activities Madeleine is a lecturer, who spends her working days at the university, although she gives up her job when her son is born. After he dies after only seven months, she stays home, too depressed to face the world. Later, she attempts to become a housewife for Rama, doing normal household chores. At the same time, she begins to act like a Hindu woman, doing rituals in the house and praying to Hindu gods and goddesses. As the book progresses, she becomes more and more of an ascetic and eventually a celibate. In the end, she withdraws from her husband, undertakes long fasts and begins to live in a separate house.

Illustrative moments

Maternal Despite all her interest in intellectual pursuits, Madeleine is a devoted mother to her son, Pierrot (also called Krishna). His early death is a tragedy that she cannot overcome. The depth of her grief is revealed in a letter she writes to Rama, who is travelling in India. In it, she explains, 'You can never understand what Pierrot's birth did for me. You in your masculine isolation—I could also say Indian aloneness—can never understand what it is for a mother, and a French mother, to give birth. It is the birth of the god in a chalice, the Holy Grail...I bore him, you son, with such love, for he was a child of love. But you were more interested in his sonship than in his being a son.' Here, Madeleine expresses the deepest levels of her being, the flesh and blood level, and views the birth of a child as a gift from a man she loves. And when that part of her is taken away, the loss is visceral and unimaginable to a man.

Indian Madeleine increasingly identifies with India and Indian culture as the story develops, perhaps because of the terrible grief at the death of her son. Initially, her interest is stimulated by her love for Rama, for he is forever talking about philosophy. She then begins to worship Hindu gods, such as Siva, and even Siva's bull, called Nandi. There is one moment when we glimpse the extent to which Madeleine is trying to assimilate to Indian culture. She and Rama are on a short visit to India and go on an elephant ride in the forests of south India, where Rama was born. As they bump along on the huge animals, she says to him, 'I am happy here, Rama. I shall die in India, you know. And I want to be burned here, with you.' In this last statement, she refers to *sati*, the Hindu custom of a widow burning on her husband's funeral pyre. By the mid-twentieth century, when the novel was written and when it was set, this custom was all but extinct, although the ideal remained in the culture. When Madeleine says she wants to be burned on Rama's funeral pyre, she is committing herself in the strongest terms possible to him and, more importantly, to his culture

Understanding In the end, indeed almost from the beginning, Madeleine is unable to bridge the cultural gap between herself and her husband. She does not, however, blame him or become angry. Instead, she shows a mature understanding of the situation and slowly withdraws from him, culminating in a formal divorce in the final pages. This understanding is illustrated in clear terms in a scene in the middle of the story. At this point, she is painfully aware that they do not share enough to make the marriage last; she knows that he has been unfaithful and that she no longer loves him. Instead of arguing with him about his 'affair' or finding any fault in him, she decides that she is the reason for their unhappiness. She says to herself that she 'must set him free to pursue his dream. He must marry someone younger [Madeleine is five years older than he] from his own country. He will be happy with an Indian.' Madeleine does not hesitate, at other times, to criticise Rama's indifference and even 'cruelty', but in the most critical moment she shows an admirable magnanimity.

Savithri (Pious)

Character The character of Savithri is elusive for two reasons. First, her personality within the novel is conflated with the Savithri of Hindu mythology. Second, all her actions and thoughts are filtered through the mind of Rama, the narrator of the story. In modern parlance, we would say she has no agency. We do know that she is a south Indian Brahmin, which is to say, she comes from a very traditional family, but she goes to England to study and becomes something of a rebel. She has agreed to marry the man (Pratap) whom her family have chosen for her, but she delays the marriage. She has Muslim friends in London, and when she meets Rama, she falls in love with him. She is young, free-spirited and beautiful, and Rama is attracted to her, too. She, however, realises that her

attraction to him is more for his intellect, and she slowly begins to accept him as her guru and not her lover. She and Rama do undergo a 'marriage', although it is a highly ritualised event in which they play the roles of the mythic characters of Radha and Krishna. In these ways, Savithri is a symbol of the cultural confusion that disrupts Rama's life. She is a 'modern' woman, educated abroad and able to choose her own path in life, but she accepts the most traditional of Indian roles for women: a devotee of a guru/god. She struggles with these contradictions (just as Rama and Madeleine struggle with theirs), and in the end she decides to give up Rama, to marry and settle down with her fiancé. As the narrator (controversially) comments, 'Savithri was a free person. Having accepted her bondage, she was free.'

In Hindu mythology, Savithri is the model Indian wife. She marries her husband knowing that he is fated to die within one year, but then she succeeds through her own strength to bring him back to life. Her devotion to her husband is held up as the standard that all Indian wives should aspire to realise. The Savithri of the novel shows a similar steadfast loyalty to Rama, and her idealised love is consistent with the purity of the mythic character because she does not indulge in physical love. Her love is the higher love for a guru, who represents an embodiment of enlightenment or Truth. By withholding her sensuality, she possesses more power than a woman who has sexual relationships. This is the paradox of the erotic/ascetic as represented in Hinduism by Siva, who is both a sexual symbol (his image is a phallus) and a great renouncer. The ascetic enables the erotic.

Activities While a student at Cambridge, Savithri spends long hours in the library and takes walks along the river. In cafes, she engages in endless discussions with her political friends, such as communists and socialists. On her visits to her family in India, she also likes to wander in the mountains or jungles. In the end, she gives up the carefree life and marries a young man and settles down to domestic life in India.

Illustrative moments

Religious Despite her rebellious nature, and her departure from the norms of an Indian woman, Savithri is a deeply religious person. She is studying at Cambridge, she travels on her own (even though she is engaged to someone) and she wants to experience different cultures. And yet, she is rooted in her Hindu heritage. This deeply implanted cultural orientation is illustrated on her first trip to France. Savithri has come to stay with Rama and Madeleine in their house in a beautiful region of the south of the country. When she is shown to her room, she flings open the windows and looks out at the mountains. 'Look,' she says to no one but herself. 'That moon is like Siva [he wears a crescent moon in his hair].' This instinctive translation of a French night time scene into the details of Hindu mythology reveals Savithri's irreducible Indian identity. She studies in England, she visits France, but she remains a traditional Hindu in her mind.

Intelligent Savithri is also an extremely intelligent person, capable of understanding the subtleties of Indian philosophy. It is this almost innate capacity to follow philosophical discussions that attracts Rama and make him realise that Madeleine is incapable of that level of rapport with him. A good illustration of Savithri's talent occurs during her stay with Rama in France. Madeleine has retired, but she and Rama talk long into the night. Savithri tells him a long story from French history (one of her subjects), and he replies enigmatically, 'It's like the concept of zero, or sunyata. It is everything and nothing. But what is the Truth?' Savithri says, 'Is-ness is the Truth.' From there, they delve deeper and deeper into philosophical concepts of being and universality. It is all highly abstruse, but Savithri does not miss a step. She is the equal of Rama and his intense search for the truth. They are philosophical soul-mates.

Maternal The hidden side of Savithri, amid the philosophical discussions and cultural explorations, is her maternal instinct. This is revealed most clearly in an episode when she and Rama are together in at a pilgrimage site in south India. They have joined a queue to enter the temple, where the goddess can be worshipped on a special day at an auspicious hour. As they wait, in the hot sun, Rama talks about the legend of the goddess, and he is pleased that Savithri has such a rapturous expression of her face. She must find my explanation interesting, he thinks. But Savithri is not listening. She has been watching a young mother breast feed her young child. She has never before thought of herself as a mother, as having a child, but in that single moment she is spellbound.

