CHAPTER- 5

NEGOTIATING THE FEMININE THROUGH THE
MASCULINE PHILOSOPHY: A CRITICAL INQUIRY INTO

RAJA RAO’S FICTION

Women have been given a lot of power by nature but very little by law.

--Samuel Johnson

Life is made for women – man is a stranger to the earth.

from The Serpent and the Rope

Raja Rao is a highly learned, sensitive and imaginative author. He is extolled for the delineation of his vast range of characters – especially his female characters who are believed to be representatives of ‘shakti’ or the Feminine Power. He has a very high idea of the position of woman in the world and constantly idealizes them. For him, womanhood is the primeval fact in the whole of evolution - she is the creative element in the human race. However, the perspective adopted by him for the delineation of his female characters in his works has not been consistent. At one time he eulogizes woman for being an inspiration to men but at other times he criticizes her severely for being an impediment to a man’s search for truth. He is not only eulogized but also castigated for the controversial depiction of his female characters who in spite of being the manifestations of ‘shakti’ are hapless and helpless creatures eternally dependent on men. According to Uma Parmeshwaran, Raja Rao the writer has been gifted with a revelation
of the essential androgyny of human sensibility but that Raja Rao, the thinker seems a male chauvinist who identifies the masculine sensibility with male gender and feminine sensibility with female gender...." Therefore, this chapter aims at exploring Rao's perspectives on gender issues in his novels *Kanthapura* (1938), *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960) and *The Cat and Shakespeare* (1965).

*Kanthapura*\(^2\) is the first novel by Raja Rao, and in many ways his most perfect and satisfying work. It was written in France, thousands of miles away from India and yet it gives a graphic, vivid and realistic account of the freedom struggle in India. This novel is a social document about a village in turmoil. The political movement of 1930s that caused the upheaval in pre-independent India is reflected in this novel. Its historical action covers nearly ten years of India's struggle for freedom, including Gandhi's famous Dandi march during the Salt Satyagraha and the Civil Disobedience Movement. Whatever was happening on the political scene in India in those years finds its due reflection in the novel. It is a story of collective action, collective heroism and collective suffering of the people of Kanthapura.

The characters are not sharply and distinctly individualized. In the foreground there are a number of major figures with a host of minor figures in the background: Moorthy, Ratna, Patel, Range Gowda, Bhatta, Rangamma, Policeman Bade Khan etc. appear in front of the stage, and behind them are lesser figures as Narsamma, Venkamma, Dore, Ramayya, and many others with their petty rivalries and mundane concerns. The central figure, Moorthy, an educated young man and a staunch follower of Gandhi, propagates Gandhian ideology door to door along with the men and women of the village and explains to the people of Kanthapura the significance of struggle for independence.
The people of Kanthapura actively involve themselves in freedom struggle, putting up a brave resistance but ultimately they are compelled to flee. They are defeated, but in their very defeat lies the victory.

This novel ushers in a fresh breath of change with the depiction of women who shed the age-old bars of custom and orthodoxy and assert themselves by having active shares in the fight for the independence of their nation and awakening a new consciousness among the people. The enthusiasm of both men and women and their equal participation in the freedom struggle reflects that women of Kanthapura have taken a great leap from the past to the present. But reality is different from what it appears to be. Women of Kanthapura have definitely come out of their households to fight for a bigger and noble cause but it is an illusion that these women have broken all the patriarchal paradigms of the social order and are leading a free and unfettered life. This world may be an illusion, as per Raja Rao’s Advaitic belief, but the vicissitudes and vagaries of life faced by women of Kanthapura are certainly not of an illusory nature.

Raja Rao is keenly aware of the fact that individual experience is rooted in the native tradition. He integrates his consciousness of the past tradition with his experience of contemporary times in the thirties of the twentieth century. He emphasizes, at the call of Gandhi, the need of the participation of women in the freedom struggle. He finds a fine reason for bringing women out of the four walls by describing freedom struggle of the women of Kanthapura as a part of the continuing Ramayana. Gandhi is an Avtaara (incarnation) of Rama sent from heaven to rescue India (Sita) from the British (Ravana). No cause can be better than this to bring women out of the four walls. Thus this war
against British becomes a crusade for the women to make their Mother India free. They are out fighting for their country unaware of their own existence.

Raja Rao presents the legend of Kenchamma, the Goddess of the hill, and raises it to the level of a myth. Goddess Kenchamma slays the demon who comes to ask for the young men of the village as food and the young women as wives. Her name is repeated throughout the novel. At all times of trouble, the villagers turn to Kenchamma to come to their rescue, as she once did in the remote past. She is their powerful saviour who can overcome even the most formidable of enemies. Women of Kanthapura try to emulate the path of Goddess Kenchamma and become freedom fighters to bring freedom to Mother India. Thus, they become manifestations of 'shakti' - the power. This hidden power of women is used to get freedom from foreign hands. They become mothers and protectors in the footsteps of Goddess Kenchamma.

Kenchamma, Kenchamma
Goddess benign and bounteous,
Mother of earth, blood of life,
Harvest-queen, rain crowned,
Kenchamma, Kenchamma,
Goddess benign and bounteous. (p.9)

Raja Rao selects an elderly Brahmin widow, Achakka, to narrate the story of the novel Kanthapura. Her name appears only once in the novel, but it is through her eyes
and her point of view that we see everything that happens in it. Achakka, who also participates in the Satyagraha led by Moorthy, narrates the events of the struggle with a sense of pride and achievement. She is a wonderful storyteller, who at once grips the attention of the reader and holds him captive as a listener to the end. Apart from her remarkable memory she has a vivid imagination to be able to visualize things. That is possible because Raja Rao employs her as a mouthpiece, and grants her the author’s privilege of omniscience. After all, whatever she says in her narrative is what Rao himself allows her to say. But it goes without saying that she appears to be an authentic and convincing narrator because Achakka belongs to an upper caste Brahmin family. Being an elderly grandmother, she has seen life in Kanthapura for a long time, and has a good deal to say about it. Also being a devout Hindu who knows the Puranas, she has a good collection of stories from legends and epics, which she refers to frequently while narrating the story. This story is like any other Grandmother’s tale but with a difference because Achakka, the narrator is only Rao’s mouthpiece, not the creator of the story. That is the way Raja Rao justifies the authenticity and the credibility of the narrator, who is a woman.

The world of Kanthapura is full of widows. All the major characters of the novel are widows. Whether it is Rangamma, Waterfall Venkamma, the narrator Achakka, Kamlamma, Seethamma, Ratna, or Narsamma. Rao deliberately chooses most of his female characters of Kanthapura as widows. It can be said that Rao is the man who brings these widows to the forefront by making them Satyagrahis and places these women on the high pedestal. He states in The Serpent and the Rope “Virtue is virile. Behind every ‘virtuous’ Indian woman I felt the widow” (p.355). For him widows are
bundle of power, a ‘shakti’- which is to be used in the best possible way by making them Satyagrahis. He makes them tell stories from the legends and the puranas and of Mahatma Gandhi not only to their grandchildren but also to the people of Kanthapura and promote the feelings of patriotism. They arrange Hari-Kathas and call everyone to listen to the myths and the legends and this storytelling has not only a religious significance but also political significance; it serves a great deal by arousing the feelings of the people to fight for the nation.

Rao’s orthodox upbringing could not allow him to think beyond the traditional belief that widows were a curse on the society who were forced to sacrifice themselves on the very pyre of their husbands’. Widows were considered a great threat to society and were to be contained by appalling restrictions. Rao allows them to participate in the freedom struggle but he is not totally free from the orthodox belief that is evident in the climax of this novel when these women, being part of the national movement, bring curse to the village. Their movement is ruthlessly suppressed and they are forced to leave Kanthapura. In the end of the novel, Kanthapura becomes a deserted and haunted place. Most of the houses in Kanthapura are destroyed and the village is reduced to a rubble. Moorthy leaves the village to become a full-time Satyagrahi, Ratna, a child widow, goes to Mumbai, Rangamma, daughter of a learned Bhatta, is in the prison and Venkamma, a rather villainous character, has gone to live with her daughter. Even Bhatta, a villager, has gone to Benaras. Only Range Gowda, another villager, returns to Kanthapura. Range Gowda reports at the end of the novel: “the Corner House was all but fallen, except for the byre, and Rangamma’s house was tile-less over the veranda, and Nanjamma’s house

doorless and roofless and the hearthstones in every corner...there's neither man nor mosquito in Kanthapura” (p.184).

The women are not supposed to be in the arena of power seekers. They are trained to be passive followers of men who are destined to be the lead actors, be it in politics, the labor market, or society. The women of Kanthapura play a dynamic role in the national freedom struggle but they continue to exist on the periphery of the socio-economic and political scene. No doubt their sacrifices are second to none but they do not shift from their roles as supportive auxiliaries to being direct participants in the struggle. When Moorthy is in prison, Rangamma organizes the ‘sevika sangh’. She arranges newspapers to be delivered from the city so that the villagers remain informed about the activities of the Congress. When Moorthy is released, she arranges a proper welcome for him. When Rangamma too is arrested Ratna takes over the leadership of the group. But these women only perform a supportive duty rather than taking any bold decisions and therefore the movement virtually slows down in the absence of men. When Moorthy is released, Satyagrahis become enthusiastic again and it gives them a renewed hope for the success of their unequal fight against their colonial rulers.

Raja Rao is against excessive subordination of women to men, but is not averse to women generally playing a subordinate role on the social level and he perceives women’s political participation as an extension of their familial roles as the scriptures sanction it. He urges upon the women to perform service in the following order: service towards the husband, the family and the country. In case of any conflict arising between duty towards family and duty towards country, familial duties are expected to be their prime responsibility. These role models designed for the female have invariably deprived her of
self-respect and declared a role for her not as a person in herself, but vis-à-vis her relationships with men. To render it in the words of Rehana Ghadially, “In a patriarchal culture, what we get is a masculinist definition of ideals and images of women.” Therefore, Rao carefully chooses widows as his Satyagrahi heroines because widows have no husbands at home and most of them are elderly and they have almost finished their duty towards their family. Rangamma is an issueless widow, Ratna became a widow when she was ten years old, Achakka has only one grown-up grandson. These women of Kanthapura perform their household duties, a primary occupation for women, first and foremost and then go out to perform the work as Satyagrahis. The housework is highly intensive and is yet unpaid and free:

The following Tuesday was a market-day in Kanthapura, and we had risen early and lit the kitchen fires early and had cooked the meals early and we had finished our prayers early, and when the food was eaten and the vessels washed and the children sent with the cattle- for this time they wouldn’t come with us- we all gathered at the temple (p.138).

Domestic violence perpetrated against the women by their partners and close members of the family continues to remain a matter of silent suffering within the four walls. This matter is identified as a typically private matter, made invisible in the society and kept under wraps. Women of Kanthapura during all the encounters with the police do not stay at home, but join the men in their defiant protest marches. They get beaten up
with lathis and suffer broken bones; bear the atrocities thinking that it is the same as the beatings by their husbands’. Keeping that in mind, they follow the path of Ahimsa patiently. When Dore’s (one of the villagers) wife Sundari begins to cry out and says she is frightened, Ratna consoles her by saying:

[w]hen your husband beats you, you don’t hit back, do you? You only grumble and weep. ‘The policeman’s beatings are the like!’ and we say, ‘So they are.’ And we begin to get more and more familiar with it. And we say that in a week, in ten days’ time, Moorthy will say ‘March!’ and we shall march behind him, and we shall do this and we shall do that, and now when we meet Bade Khan our eyes seek his lathi and we find it is smaller than we had imagined (p.127).

Men beat women to retain their power and authority in the family. Manu’s guidance gives men the sanction to beat up their wives. “He said that a turbulent wife should be castigated with bamboo stick to bring her to her senses! [...] Tulsidas, the revered poet-Saint who penned the ‘Rama-Charitamanas’ went one better on Manu and compared woman with - a drum, a rustic, an untouchable and an animal - adding that all of these are meant to be beaten!”

Women of Kanthapura are mostly innocent, simple and truthful. Prayer, worship and religious practices sum up the ways of life for them. It is easy to take them towards politics through the path of religion. They are staunch believers of Mahatma and can not disobey him. Their reverence for Mahatma is exemplified in these lines:
Our King, he was born on a wattle-mat,
He’s not the king of the velvet bed,
He’s small and he’s round and he’s bright and he’s sacred,
O, Mahatma, you’re king and we are your slaves (p.145).

Again:

There’s one Government, sister,
There’s one Government, sister,
And that’s the Government of the Mahatma. (p.148)

Mahatma enlists mass female participation based on the fact that woman is a giver whose giving extends beyond the family not to a few individuals but to the country and to the world as is suggested by Vanita. Mahatma Gandhi does not figure in Kanthapura as a character, but he is a living presence in this novel, and his philosophy of life and political struggle is reflected by the thought and action of several characters especially through Moorthy, the young protagonist who regards Gandhi as his role-model and follows him in every way, in word and deed. Rao mingles Hindu mythology with contemporary politics by comparing Gandhi with Lord Siva, Krishna and Rama. Gandhi appears as a king of humble origin. The people of Kanthapura consider Mahatma a great soul and a deeply religious man with super-human powers. In this way he has become larger than life character, to whom submission without question is a must. Mahatma and Moorthy are saintly figures for the women. Religious as they are, they are ready to even die for them:
Nanjamma says, 'No, sister, I do not imagine the Mahatma like a man or a god, like the Sahyadri Mountains, blue, high, wide, and the rock of the evening that catches the light of the setting sun,' and I say to myself, 'That's what he is. High and yet seeable, firm and yet blue with dusk, and as the pilgrims march up the winding path, march through prickles and boulders, thickets and streams, so shall we march up to the top, we shall thump up and up to the top, and elephants may have left their traces, and the wildfire go blazing around us, and yet we shall know on the top is the temple, and the temple is bright and immense, and when the night is slept through, the gong will sound over the pilgrims lines for the dawn procession of the Mountain-god; and so from that day we said we shall call the Mahatma 'The Mountain,' and we say we are the pilgrims of the Mountain, and whatever thunder may tear through the heavens or the monsoons pour over it, it is always the blue mountain at dusk.

'And what shall we call Moorthy?" said Radhamma.

'Why, the Small Mountain,' said Rangamma, and we all said 'That is it,' and so from that day we knew that there were the Small Mountain and the Big Mountain to protect us (p.127).

Ratna is a fifteen year old child widow who is an iconoclast. She does not care much about the norms of the society. She is a good girl yet she is considered a blot on the society because she refuses to shave her head like other widows, does not accept the ways
of the widow life and follows her own instinct. For that reason she is reprimanded and looked down upon. Ratna is a girl:

who not only went about the streets alone like a boy, but even wore her hair to the left like a concubine, and she still kept her bangles and her nose-rings and her ear-rings, and she was asked why she behaved as though she hadn’t lost her husband, she said that that was nobody’s business, and that if these sniffing old country hens thought that seeing a man for a day, and this when one is ten years of age, could be called a marriage, they had better eat mud and drown themselves in the river (p.37).

For Ratna’s act, Kamlamma, her mother, silences her and calls her a shameless and wicked-tongued creature and regrets her decision of sending her to school. It is ironical that Venkamma marries her young daughter to Lawyer Seenappa, a widower who is thirty-three years old and also has three children, but this fifteen-year-old girl Ratna can not think of marrying again and if she tries to assert herself by not following the traditions of the society, she becomes a shame for the society. A woman has to renounce any idea of self-assertion that she may have harboured for the sake of her sole commitment to the norms of servitude. If she refuses she is sent out of the world of the so-called good people as it is in the case of Ratna.
Rao is clearly ambivalent from the very beginning as how to treat Ratna. Ratna is only a fifteen-year-old girl, but she is confident, assertive, and candid. She has many so-called masculine traits which make her character increasingly complex. She is right in her ways but her behaviour is not considered decent. Rao finds out ways to avoid contradictions by presenting his character Ratna as an adolescent girl. When Moorthy observes fast, Ratna goes to him, looks at him sadly and shyly, and whispers: "[i]s there anything I can do?" and Moorthy answered, 'Pray with me that the sins of others may be purified with our prayers.' She could hardly grasp his idea. She was but fifteen” (p.70). At the age of fifteen Ratna is an immature girl who does not know the reality of the world and lives in the world of her blooming youth where everything seems rosy. Rao's sympathy lies with her but he has to send her out of the village because she has broken the norms of the society and she is sent to Bombay, a city very far from Kanthapura at the end of the novel.

As the custodian of Indian culture, a woman is supposed to be an embodiment of the qualities of endurance and adjustment and is extolled for her stoic suffering and forbearance. Narsamma is the perfect example of this category. When Moorthy is excommunicated by the society for mingling with pariahs, Narsamma, his mother, is shocked and dies out of sheer shame and guilt. Her death shows the power of tradition over women. Venkamma is another example of this category. She does not follow Gandhi because in her village Moorthy is the leader and he propagates the Gandhian ideology of eradicating the differences between the Brahmins and the pariahs. Narasamma, having her roots deeply embedded in the tradition refuses to accept this Gandhian practice.
A woman, in Rao’s novels, is not a human being but a territory to be captured by others, a means to show the conquerors’ vigour and thus justifies their ruling them. Skeffington Coffee Estate is the citadel of British supremacy, colonial power and enslavement of the people of India. Women working in the Coffee Estate are exploited and harassed by the Sahib. He tries to rape a female worker of the Coffee Estate and when it is resisted by another worker, he is shot dead. The British court acquits Sahib. Anand in his novel *Two Leaves and a Bud* depicts a similar situation.

Theoretically, the women of Kanthapura hold supreme importance but practically these women do not really hold the centre stage and can not bring out a change in their traditional roles. These women are, no doubt, women who step out of the four walls for a bigger cause at the call of Gandhi but their mental and social status remains the same. They are still dependent, financially and psychologically on men and seek help and protection from them. It is inconceivable that a woman who has hardly a say in the household matters can be a leader outside, a woman who is a weakling inside can be a bundle of power outside. This novel negates the secular reality of women’s existence. According to Rao, women are manifestations of ‘shakti’ and he uses this ‘shakti’ to serve the very purpose of men.

Rao acknowledges that judged by any standard, *Kanthapura* may be a major achievement but also a confused and immature creation. He said in an interview published in the Illustrated Weekly of India in January 1964, “For me literature is Sadhana - not a profession but a vocation.” This was so even when he wrote *Kanthapura*, “but I was then confused and a lost person. And that was why I gave up writing for a long time.” According to Rao, one must be a man first, and a writer
afterwards. By man he means a metaphysical entity, one who realizes the Absolute Truth. This truth can be realized only through a Guru, who should be a realized being. And after the twenty-two years gap Rao writes his second novel *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960) and states: "*The Serpent and the Rope* came as a result of spiritual fulfillment - that is to say it was born after I had met my Guru."

When Rao was writing *The Serpent and the Rope*, it was the time when the objective conditions of the world underwent a sea change. The Second World War, with its vast devastation, not only added to the misery of the world but also destroyed systems and values held dear by it. New ideas and the concepts in the fields of political, social and economic theories helped dispel many illusions as well as traditional beliefs based on an earlier idealistic philosophy. Processes of industrialization, urbanization and to some extent Westernization also seemed to be working in society more rapidly after independence to produce their desired effect. The women's movement was revived and revitalized in the nineteen sixties. The intensity of women's liberation grew at an extraordinary rate. Development of consciousness widened the movement from the elite lobby to a mass movement. Steady growth in every sphere of life discredited the traditional image of woman being passive or an inferior being.

The old order, in the realm of thought as well as reality, was fast yielding place to a new one. But Rao, who had spent his entire life in France and America, never lost contact with the goings on in India. He was deeply rooted in the Indian traditional values and always believed in going back to the roots to lead a peaceful life. He advocated recovering the values of golden Vedic age for he believed that it was the best possible way for men and women to avoid despair and disillusionment of the times.
The Serpent and the Rope is a complex work of art and as such it can be read at various levels and interpreted in different ways. A number of themes and ideas have gone into the making of its complex texture, but the basic theme of this novel is the quest for self-knowledge, self-transcendence and self-fulfilment. The protagonist of the novel, Rama, who calls himself a 'holy' vagabond is in search of self-realization and self-knowledge and comes to the conclusion that in such a spiritual quest the role of a guru is crucial. He is married to a French woman but loves an Indian woman Savithri, daughter of an Indian Raja. The novel gives an account of their married life and explores the causes of the disintegration of their marriage. His French wife Madeline is an educated, modern and sensible woman who turns to Buddhism and renounces the world at the end of the novel. The novel may also be regarded as a spiritual autobiography of the novelist himself.

The Serpent and the Rope has been followed by a rather slim and smart novel The Cat and Shakespeare written in 1965. This book is a metaphysical comedy. It is the story of two friends - Govindan Nair and Ramakrishna Pai and deals with the corruption in the rationing department. The two live in adjoining houses and help each other in need.

The storyteller of the novel The Serpent and the Rope is Ramaswamy who is a central protagonist of this novel. Rama is a Brahmin, who is sensitive, subtle, sensual and spiritual, and is well versed in Sutras, Upanishads and many Hindu as well as foreign religious texts. Unlike Kenchamma, Rama is not a storyteller nor does he give an account of the events and incidents happening around him but he analyses everything intellectually. Iyengar states, "A young man like Rama with antecedents like these cannot write like the simple sincere widow who tells Kanthapura after dusk to a stray visitor or
group of visitors. Rama’s mind is a seething whirlpool of cultural currents and cross-currents.”

Rao sets his preoccupation in the very opening line of the novel *The Serpent and the Rope*, which reveals the patriarchal superiority of Rama not only on the basis of caste but also on the basis of gender. “I was Born a Brahmin - that is, devoted to truth and all that. ‘Brahmin is he who knows the Brahmin” (p.7). The reiteration of this occurs in many places in the novel. It is a ‘male’ Brahmin who has got the privileged position in the society. The entire first paragraph deals with the question of the quest for truth by the ‘male’ Brahmin members of the society. The act of finding the truth is considered the most important and the most difficult task a man can do. Earthly life is a pilgrimage, for it is through this life that men can achieve self-realization or self-transcendence and thus know the truth. The search for self-realization is only for men whereas women are given this bright idea: “For a woman her home is her paradise” (p.140). Shyamala A. Narayan argues, “For Ramaswamy, the function of the feminine is to make man realize his goal, and through serving him, fulfil herself. For him, woman’s salvation lies through man and the world, not by moving away from the world approaching the Absolute directly.” Eternity is only for men and women will die at the opportune time.

Rao suggests that women should find fulfilment in nourishing their children and tending to their needs so that they become immortal even after death when remembered by their children. Like Narayan and Anand, Rao also idealizes the image of woman for their role of being a mother. Rao also projects the mother figure as ‘indispensable’. Like Nur in *Lament on the Death of a Master of Arts*, Ramaswamy also bereaves the death of his mother: “I was born an orphan and have remained one. I have wandered the world
and have sobbed in hotel rooms and in trains, have looked in the cold mountains and sobbed, for I had no mother” (p.7). Pratap, son of Jaghirdar, works hard to brighten his mother’s solitary existence.

For a woman rural or urban, educated or uneducated, married or unmarried, working or non-working, motherhood is to be worn like a crown of achievement till her death. She finds fulfilment in nourishing her child, in tending to its needs. It is said in the novel, “The sorrow of woman be indeed the barrenness of man” (p.238). Margaret Mead interprets such statement in these terms, “a new and subtle form of anti-feminism in which men ...are tying women more tightly to their children.” Rao reinforces stereotypical image of mother repeatedly and emphatically in his novels through his female characters. Madeline is so much into the profession of motherhood that she never recovers from the agony of her son’s death. “Madeline had never recovered - in fact she never did recover- from the death of Pierre.....mothers always know what is dangerous for their children” (p.14). Madeline blames Rama that a son means an heir for him but for her - when she holds it out against her breast the whole creation shines in a second. Savithri’s mother lost her son when she was eighteen. The shock of her son’s departure makes her a docile and a quiet woman. She never shouts or even speaks loudly and makes a quick gesture. Rama’s mother is held responsible for all his dignity, deference towards elders and a deep seriousness towards family, “Only such a mother could have borne such a son” (p.35). Rama also feels, “a bad son may sometimes be born, but a bad mother never” (p.35). He believes that motherhood is so pure a relation for a woman so that even woman who is a concubine and a mistress of passion becomes virginal. “The world is pure. For the mistress has become the mother” (p.165). To quote Ashish Nandy:
"The mother-son relationship, is thus the basic nexus and the ultimate paradigm of human social relationships in India."\textsuperscript{14}

In \textit{The Cat and Shakespeare} Rao says that without a mother the world is unthinkable. People do stumble, even the most wise and nimble one’s, but stumbling does not matter because there is always a mother to save and protect. “Man is protected. You could not be without a mother. You are always a child” (p.33). Rao sometimes goes to the extent of being envious of women: “[h]ow beautiful it is to be pregnant... Shiva will appear. I envy women that they bear children” (p.28). Meena Shirwadkar points out that, “Indeed, the mother image shines like an unbroken ray in the whole of Indian culture and Indo-Anglian fiction.”\textsuperscript{15}

In spite of the glorification, motherhood is a mirage. Women are not only glorified but also humiliated for being a mother. Rama speaks disgustingly, “Something in the woman is so complicated, so tortuous, I think a woman is just good enough to have babies and nothing else” (p.228). Rao first glorifies the role of a mother and then he despises it by saying that they are born to become only mother and they are good for nothing. It is not a valued aspect but a natural phenomenon. Shantha, (with whom Pai has developed physical relationship) tells Pai that if she thinks because she bears a child she is special it is wrong. All that is born has a mother. Mother is necessary for all children but motherhood has nothing special.

Stepmother, almost in all cases equal to her husband’s children’s age, is portrayed as a blot in the name of motherhood: The new mother is always a threat to the children. This stigma associated with women from time immemorial makes the life of stepmother a hell. Rama is an orphan and will always be even when Little Mother enters his family as
a new mother. Saroja complains to her brother Rama about life with a stepmother as a
guardian. Although Rama is also her stepbrother Saroja relies more on Rama than on the
Little Mother. Rama always craves for his mother and reiterates that he is an orphan.
After the death of his father he feels that he has again become an orphan. The Little
Mother tries hard to perform her duty well yet she is despised and looked down upon by
the children.

Mothering is a job that is not only done by a mother alone it is also done by aunts.
“I mean, orphans of the family always have great aunts, who go on changing from an
orphan to orphan—that they remain ever young” (p.9). Lakshamma dies serving the
children of her brothers and sisters. She never complains or sighs and spends her entire
life like a saint aiming at the higher ideal of salvation by leading a pure and chaste life
because she has no son of her own and a son is necessary for a woman to secure heaven
as it is declared in the Vedas. Still she is not trusted and respected by the members of the
family. Rama says that his grandfather, “never let me stray into the hands of
Lakshamma” (p.10). Grandfather Kittannna tells Rama about his own daughter: “Auntie
smells bad, my son, I want you to be a hero and a prince” (p.10). It is Lakshamma’s duty
to bring up the children and at the same time she is also criticized for spoiling them and
so they should be kept away from her. She tries to fix a place in the heaven by bringing
up her relative’s children and also by abstaining herself from every pleasure of the
worldly life but in this world her sacrifice is not acknowledged even by her family.

Benaras is the holy city and concubines of Benaras are the “most beautiful of any
in the world” (p.14). The sexual dichotomization is clearly evident in this sentence—men
are for spiritual quest and women are there to distract the aspirants. For men: “Death
makes passion beautiful. Death makes the concubine inevitable” (p.14). Death makes men feel that they are mortal and fallible human beings. Therefore, there is nothing wrong in having some worldly pleasure with women. Rama’s grandfather Kittanna goes to the concubine Chandramma. He feels no shame in explaining to his grandson that his daughter-in-law’s voice is similar to the voice of Chandramma, a whore. “Grandfather concluded, it was in Mysore, and I have not been there these fifty years” (p.8). His association with concubine does not bring any kind of disgrace to his family, as it is in the case of a woman. He is rather adored and revered by everyone for being a manly figure. Aunt Seethamma calls her father ‘Dharma Raja’ and feels proud of him. She says, “The impossible, for Grandfather, was always possible. He never - he, a Brahmin-never for once was afraid of gun or sword, and yet what depth he had in his prayers” (p.8). Being a Brahmin gives a privileged status to a man to have adultery with the concubines without fear of any kind.

Not only grandfather Kittanna but Rama also approaches prostitutes. Like his Grandfather Rama also justifies the act of adultery by saying: “[t]he holiness of the body is like the duty of the devdasi - it functions within its own dimensions. The body can no more be holy than the mind be pure” (p.113). In Paris, like a big-hearted and compassionate man he helps a prostitute and walks out saying: “[m]an in his flesh is unutterably weak and the sorrow of the Paris prostitutes somehow to give meaning to one’s own sorrow, to show one’s intimacy to oneself, and perhaps even reveal the nature of poetry....You should know a woman and not understand her - for if you understand her, then you can never be a pilgrim to knowledge” (p.220). For Lakshmi, a fine looking woman, Rama feels that she has the power to pluck manhood out of anyone. Being tired
of the struggle and intense craving for Indian woman and the thought that there is not going to be a Savithri anyway, he slips slowly and deliberately into Lakshmi’s bed. Lakshmi reiterates the same old myth that men are by nature promiscuous and there is nothing wrong in it. It is in their biology; they are helpless in this matter: “[m]en are worthless,’ she remarked often. They are simpler than children. Any patch of flesh will do for them- the fairer the better” (p.298). Rama feels adultery is like eating pickle which leaves a lasting taste in the mouth.

Savithri is neither Rama’s concubine nor his wife. She is also not his sister and the relationship between the two can not be called platonic. Although it is not physical, Rama always craves for the physical enjoyment with Savithri whereas Savithri takes this relationship to the spiritual level and worships him. All women are one and the same, for they are the different manifestations of ‘shakti’ or the feminine principle. This metaphysical concept accounts for Rama’s peculiar relations with other women, particularly with Saroja, his step-sister. Although he accepts that in India every woman who is not your wife — or your concubine — is your sister but fails when Saroja comes before him. He does not even spare Saroja and feels intoxicated in her presence and realizes how a Brahmin woman can radiate energy that can make others crazy. Saroja trusts him more than anyone else and thinks of him as a protector and a guardian. Rama talks about the Indian sensibility and morality but does not feel ashamed of possessing an incestuous desire for Saroja. In a similar vein, Mulk Raj Anand also presents his character Bakha who harbours the same feeling for his sister Sohini. Rao’s hero, Rama only spares Catherine from his ‘male gaze’ whom he calls ‘sacred sister’. For Anand and Rao women’s body is no doubt a territory and relationships are only for the women to
observe. Men are free to pursue their desires: moral or immoral. Men feel at large on the excuse of the beauty that radiates from the body of women.

Oncle Charles, Madeline's Uncle, tells Rama that he has been constantly unfaithful to Catherine's mother, his first wife, but she never complained though she knew it. He goes to whores in Paris when Aunt Zoubie, his second wife, has a mild paralytic attack. Captain Sham Sunder, Rama's friend, also involves in adultery and prefers white skin to brown.

Adultery, on the part of women, is something that strikes at and erodes the very core of the family ties and threatens all that the family as a social unit strives to achieve. Saroja, wife of Govindan Pai, in *The Cat and Shakespeare* is badly hurt when she comes to know about her husband's relationship with Shantha outside marriage. She, unlike an ideal Indian woman, refuses to worship and condone a man who betrays her. She never allows her son to see his father because she wants to keep her son away even from the shadow of him. She could take such a bold step because she is financially independent and can take care of herself and her child from the earnings of the land given to her by his father. Pai shows the true traits of patriarchal norms and does not feel any kind of guilt for his adultery. He rather justifies his illicit relationship with Shantha by criticizing the character of Saroja as a dominating and a haughty woman and by eulogizing the character of his concubine Shantha as a tender, soft-hearted, caring and dedicated woman. Pai proves himself reasonable and upright by supplying proof to his act: "[t]hat is why she is so exquisite in her love play. She is shy like a peahen. Her giving is complete" (p.22). Pai also pacifies his male desire by being loved and revered by Shantha:
If she became my mistress it was because she felt wife. She remained a wife. My feet were there for her to worship. My weaknesses were there for her to learn; my manhood, at least such as I possess, for her to bear children. She had never touched any man before. She said she knew me to be her man the moment I went and stood against the filing ladder. For a woman love is not development. Love is recognition (p.23).

'Holy' is an ancient myth associated with the character of women. Women are conditioned to value their virginity before marriage and their chastity after, as though their very life depended on it. They are in bondage to their chastity, which is the only substantiation of their goodness. Savithri, a pure and pious woman, is shy and throws her pallo more amply over her breast. Rama admires Savithri’s skin as wondrous and thinks that five hundred years of being shut in zanana produces such type of skin. Rama, “had never felt, no not even in Saroja, a presence that made a gift of life to itself, and as such had a natural purity that showed up your vulgarities as the X-ray the bones” (p.130). Rama cherishes the thought of holding Savithri into his arms and feels that it is not the thought of Pratap who stops her but she herself. She never pushes man away, but man draws away from her, because there is no common knowledge, no language in which one has similar symbols to exchange. Her simplicity is her defense. Rao’s another female character Lakshmi is not so clean in habit but she is a good Hindu wife and her immoral relationship with Rama is justified by revealing the truth of her husband, Captain Sham Sunder’s immoral act and his indifferent attitude towards her.
Rao has created a character of Madeline, a French wife of Rama, pious and untouched: “Madeline was altogether unreal. That is why I think she never married anyone - in fact she had never touched anyone” (p.15). Once a German tries to touch her hair but he dares not and bows down and moves away. Madeline is so particular about chastity that her cousins tease her that one-day she will end up in convent as a Catholic sister. Her cousin Roland tells Madeline that in Australia there is an island Kuru-buri where her virtue will be appreciated.

Rama says, “It was Brahmin in me, she said, the sense that touch and untouch are so important, which she sensed; and she would let me touch her” (p.15). Madeline is a combination of beauty and purity. Rao makes his French heroine, a symbol of purity and beauty, ideal enough to be a wife of a Brahmin. And it is Brahminism in Rama that makes her surrender her body happily. For Rao, no matter where a woman belongs to and which tradition she follows, when she comes in contact with a man who is a Brahmin, she dissolves into him. She loses her identity and enters into a life where she can only be recognized by the status and name of that man. Similarly, Rao has created his character Shantha, a pious and untouched woman but when she comes in contact with Pai, a Brahmin, surrenders herself completely. She is a Nair. Nairs worship their mothers and revere their fathers. But Pai makes her follow his Brahminic tradition not by force but by consent. Therefore, surrendering to a Brahmin male is not a sin; it is rather natural. In the whole process the Brahmin male receives a privileged status and enjoys all the pleasures of life.

Almost all the male-characters of Rao in these two novels are involved in adulterous relationships. Their wives never react by reason of ignorance, fear,
complacence, and even indifference. Rao presents adultery in such a natural way that it seems that his female characters are socially conditioned to accept it. Neither does the wife feel humiliated nor is it a cultural or social shock to her. In this connection Wollstonecraft rightly states:

"Ignorant women forced to be chaste, to preserve their reputation, allow their imagination to revel in the unnatural and meritorious scenes sketched by the novel writers of the day, slighting as insipid the sober dignity and matron graces of history, whilst men carry the same vitiated taste into life, and fly for the amusement to the wanton, from the unsophisticated charms of virtue, and the grave respectability of the sense."^16

Marriage is a sanctified bond that is attributed with religious sanction and piety, blessed with the charm of eternity. A woman entering into marriage means she enters into a new life where she discards the old one and shifts her loyalties to the new God in her life. Marriage holds different meanings to different female characters in these two novels but it brings the same destination to all the characters - misery. For Madeline: "Love at nineteen is as illusory as happiness at twenty-five. Marriage is a bond, and you live together because you can change hands at the wheel, and bring gateaux for guests, as you pass chez Madame Tissier" (p.145). She feels that there is no use of her going to India because she has never been close to Rama. Her husband does not need her and to be physically present will bring no good to either of them. For Madeline marriage is not a
means to obtain biological needs. She firmly believes where the mind is not ready to accept the relation; the body should also make itself free from the bond of marriage.

For Savithri: "marriage would be to wed anyone, for whatever happened would just happen, and the wedding too would be happening" (p.137). She believes marriage is an indissoluble tie where: "[y]ou reap and you enjoy, you breed children and you grow fat, you live in a palace or give away prizes at a football match" (p.290).

Saroja says that between a marriage and a funeral there is not much difference: in one you are two and in the other you are alone. On the day of marriage, Saroja tells Rama: "[o]h, Brother, I want to run away, run away, anywhere. I cannot marry him. I must not marry him. It is selfish of me to marry a man whom I detest, I look down upon. I think I only like his car, his position; and the feeling that he is like father" (p.264). She finds no escape and readies herself for the sacrifice: "[a]fter all, the dead body, when it goes to the crematorium, must feel happy. It does not say, "No, I will go back, I'll go back and be a ghost" (p.265). After marriage she writes to Rama: "[f]or me life has come to an end. By life I mean hope, fulfilment. I expect nothing" (p.374). Saroja promises Rama that even if she is not happy she will settle with her husband without any kind of distraction.

For Little Mother marriage is a way to salvation for women: "[a] woman has to marry, whether she be blind, deaf, mute, or tuberculous. Her womb is her life, and we cannot choose our men. True in your part of the globe, in Europe, they say they choose their own husbands, and I have seen all this in the cinemas. But we are not Europeans. We are of this country - we are Brahmins" (p.260-61). For men, she thinks differently. She tells Rama that his case is different; he is a favourite of the Gods. He is not of this
earth. He does not smoke, drink, eat meat and take vulgar ways. She says, “A man at home is like a God in the temple” (p.261). Her phrase is inconvertible: “After all, Rama, what more happiness does a woman need than a home and a husband. The temple needs a bell,... and the girl a husband, to make the four walls shine” (p.278). Meenakshi Mukherjee justly opines: “Little Mother’s whole strength lies in her unconscious and unquestioning identification with a set of ancient values.”

Aunt Zoubie describes her marriage as a source to fulfil biological needs only where there is no place for the communion of the heart. She tells Madeline about Oncle Charles:

...love affairs were written on his face. He wore his women as he wore his cuff-links or his pince-nez, and hid them when he wanted to....Man is such a frail, such a foolish creature. If you respect him too much, he will cheat you. If you treat him with condescension, he will obey and insult you. So you must give him a hot bath at one moment and a cold bath at another, as the doctors have advised me....Tell me Charles, did you marry me because you were alone? Speak. You married me because you wanted a wife, somebody to sew on your buttons, and wipe your mouth when your saliva ran down your face (p.378-9).

For Ramakrishna Pai, husband is like a God for the wife so she must worship him. His daughter Usha asks: “Father, what is marriage?” “Daughter, it is when I give you to
God" (p.62). He further defines how it is to be a wife: "To be a wife is not to be wed. To be a wife is to worship your man. Then you are born. And you give birth to what is born in being born. You annihilate time and you become a wife. Wifehood, of all states in the world, seems the most holy. It stops work it creates. It lives on even when time dies...Such is woman" (p.30). He hates his wife, Saroja, for her talk about her illustrious background and blames her for every mess: "[s]he cannot help all the time talking of the wife. I am a quiet man, and to speak the truth, I don’t yet know what it is to mean husband" (p.7). He beats Saroja to release his frustration and sometimes to show his godly power over her. Pai has boils all over his body and when there is no one to serve him, he remembers his wife and criticizes her vehemently: “I had such disgust. What’s the use of having a wife if she cannot take care of one-for when boils come, do they say, Dear sir, I am coming, may I come, like a mother-in-law? No, they come just like that, and occupy your house. They’re of British make, and like everything British, it works without your knowing” (p.16). Marriage for Pai is a source to get all the comforts a woman can provide for, and if necessary, even by denying her own existence. In return a man is, “meant to work for his wife, to feed her and for the children to go to school” (p.8).

Saroja holds a view similar to Madeline regarding marriage. She refuses to carry the eternal bond between two partners in marriage when one partner is disloyal. She rejects the idea of being a good wife and bear all the atrocities inflicted by the husband. She also denies the very existence of her husband and refuses to accept his help. She tells her son Vithal, “your father is no father. Your real father is the sun. Worship him. And when he falls and rises in prostration every morning, Vithal finds a box of peppermints,
round as the sun. This is to prove his paternity” (p.96). Saroja keeps everyday a box of peppermint before Vithal and thus fatherhood by ‘sun’ is justified. It is believed for thousands of years that husband is the true breadwinner of the family and wife and children are always at the receiving end. It is the prior duty of a husband to feed his wife and children. Saroja refuses Pai’s authority over her but upholds the very importance of father as a true breadwinner of the family. In the whole process, Rao brings out that a father figure is indispensable for a family.

Govindan Nair believes that, “children need houses. And women need husbands” (p.46). Therefore, a woman must marry to find shelter and protection. He accuses his wife of being a materialist who craves for money and status and drives him crazy. He sees the world replete with opportunistic and selfish wives. He reiterates: “I tell you Ramakrishna Pai, there’s nothing like becoming rich. Our wives adore us if we can produce a car, even a toy car for a baby. Females have one virtue. They adore gilt” (p.12). As per the cultural norms of Indian society husband expects from a wife complete submission of her true-self. While the wife, in turn, expects only financial and physical protection from her husband. If a wife’s demands exceed her husband’s capability, she is charged as a greedy and shameless woman as it is evident in the relationship between Nair and his wife Tangamma.

Once married, women are forgotten by their parents. Parents are not ready to take the responsibility of the married women and avoid them in such a way as if they have never been related to their family. Kapila is the eldest sister of Rama and has never set her foot on the household ever since she got married into a house in Mysore. Little Mother has never visited her father’s house after marriage. She has become a stranger to
her family and familiar to those whom she has known only for five or six years. Saroja is leading a dead life and Savithri reconciles to her fate after marriage because parent’s doors are closed for them.

Further, child-marriage limits women’s life and expectations. Theoretically chances of remarriage are higher for women due to their early marriage but they are barred from being married again whereas men are allowed to marry a number of times. This is evident even in these novels where woman spends her entire life bringing up the children of her sisters and brothers and dies a death of a virgin. Rama’s father marries for the third time but his aunt, Lakshamma, a child-widow, can not re-marry. In *Kanthapura* Rao portrays the character of Ratna on the same lines. She is only fifteen and is expected to spend her entire life as a child-widow. In *The Cat and Shakespeare* Nair fixes marriage between Sridhara, his seven-year-old son and Usha, a six-year-old daughter of Pai. He says that Usha would make Sridhara live long. Sridhara catches pneumonia and dies. Nair blames Usha for his son’s death: “[t]he more innocent a thing the more mysterious its cause...Innocence is the most dangerous thing in the world” (p.58). The patriarchal society sanctions persecution of even a small girl child. Her very innocence leaves no impact on men living in the society. The child-widow learns to survive trauma, without any support or love since childhood.

Power and prestige is only to be attained by men and they are instinctively prone to the desire of power while women are supposed to be altruist and the desire for power is denied to them. Madeline talks about the difference of the colour of the skin but Rama never notices this and acknowledges that difference is self-created and it does make difference to him when he steps out and people pay respect to his family and even
Maharaja gives proper respect to them. "The principle of man as ruler, as regulator of the kingdom; just as woman is mistress and doctor of the household" (p.191). Savithri's father might refuse the proposal of Rama on the ground that he is just a professor. Man looks for social status and a woman's status is decided by her husband's status, therefore, her father never gives consent to this alliance.

The social roles for a woman within the family and even in the larger context of the society has already placed her in such invisible bondage that she either feels diffident about asserting her rights, or simply remains ignorant about these rights. She even has been conditioned that it would be wrong and sinful on her part to think in terms of individual rights as different from her husband and separate from her family. Vishalakshi, Little Mother, Rama's second stepmother, is an embodiment of traditional patriarchal mindset. She is the fifth out of the seven children. Her father is a court clerk and a strait-laced man. Her life before marriage was hell and she is taught since childhood to be a gendered self. She recalls: "[I]life to me, Rama, was like that municipal tap at the door, purring the whole night through. But at least, when women came in early in the morning, the tap heard someone sing, whereas I - I knew kicks and tears" (p.290). She is a religious, shy and silent woman. She is the grand-daughter of learned Bhatta but her education is meager so she speaks in simple sentences and speaks with long silences. She feels that Sridhara, her son, is an orphan and looks at Rama to reassure herself that from now he is the heir, protector and companion. Little Mother is the head of the family after Rama's father's death but according to patriarchal society it is the man who rules the family and being the eldest man in the family Little Mother asks Rama to take the responsibility of the household. She asks him to do a favour: "[s]imply by writing to us
often; and coming to us every two or three years. So that they know there's a head of the household, an elder brother; so that the children feel they are protected, and there's one whom they have to obey” (p.48). Rama accepts this responsibility and declares: “I have become the head of the family now. And since I must return to Europe soon Little Mother will be my representative, with the power of the baton and the bank account” (p.49). Little Mother does not interfere in Rama's affair but she certainly has a say in her stepdaughters' affair and sometimes forces them to comply the patriarchal norms as it has been followed by women for generations. Neither she questions the social order nor does she allow her stepdaughters to do so. She follows every order given by men and tries to secure a place in the family as well as in the heaven. Mary Ellmann in Thinking About Woman rightly argues that: “[w]hen men are searching for the truth, women are content with lies, but when men are searching for diversion of variety, women counter with their stultifying respect for immediate duty.”

A woman is bound to her work-life, whether at home or in the market place. Her work is always a means to satisfy other people's ends. She has to forego opportunities of vertical mobility, she is denied the chance of a decisive job, besides she is exploited physically and financially. Saroja has a growing awareness of her powerless existence in every sphere of life. She imagines that had she been a European woman, she would have freedom to pursue her desire of studying medicine. She feels that European women know how to love, whereas Indian women know how to bear children. Rama establishes the superiority of Indian tradition by calling their freedom- a freedom of foolishness but Saroja refuses to accept Rama's logic in this matter. She realizes her futile existence and tells him that women are just like a motorcar or a bank account. Saroja, in fact, laments
on her powerlessness and chained existence. In the realization of self-negating powers Uncle Seetharamu also plays a decisive role by making her understand the existential reality of an Indian woman: "A woman is a woman and she must obey, even if she has got a first class University degree" (p.271). Saroja wants to fly off and lead a life of her own but succumbs to the demands of society and family and promises her brother that she would only bring a fair name to their household. Kathleen Raine rightly remarks: "Saroja’s story is indeed a grave criticism of the position of woman in India....her sad choice is a blend of youthful perversity and acceptance of the role of woman within the Indian society."¹⁹

Madeline, a twenty-seven year old lecturer of history at a college, is a dedicated wife and wants to please Rama in every possible manner. Madeline is a French woman but shy like an Indian one, does not call her husband by his name. She makes sacrifices like any other Indian woman for her husband. She becomes vegetarian and calls Rama ‘Lord’. Madeline is a good wife and the protector of the household hearth. She loves India because in India Rama’s father lives and she has veneration for his father. She hangs Rama’s parent’s picture on the wall. She gives grass to the stone-bull to make Rama happy although she has the slightest belief in all that. After the death of Rama’s father she becomes his mother. She learns cooking for Rama. Madeline is particular about time-table and keeps things in an apple pie order while Rama places things haphazardly everywhere. She changes her son’s name from Krishna to Pierre because she believes that she is a French woman and Indian Gods will get angry if her son bears the name of one of them. She cremates Pierre. She is a romantic, sentimental and humane
woman. She tries hard to please Rama in every possible manner and wants to be loved by him.

Madeline hankers for Rama’s love. She wonders why Rama treats her unnaturally and why he does not include her in the deep recess of his heart. She emphasizes her love for Rama throughout the novel. Without having proper response from Rama she becomes agitated and criticizes none other than herself: “[h]ow Indian sometimes I have become - I see and I wonder. India is infectious, mysterious and infectious” (p.42). Rama shows the attitude of an impregnable mountain that can not be shaken.

Though Madeline is well educated, financially independent and sensible, she is not confident. She is not sure of her happiness with Rama. She has a premonition that she will kill Rama while Rama, who is five years younger to Madeline, is very confident and gives comfort to her by saying: “I will never die till you give me permission, Madeline” (p.22). Madeline always has a fear that Rama would convert her into a Hindu. She is indignant to see any injustice done to anyone and cries for a long time instead of finding a solution for it.

Devoid of love, Madeline’s shaken confidence gives rise to her contradictory statements. On the one hand, she blames Rama for his pride and on the other she admires him for his innocence. She writes that Rama will never understand what it is to be a mother - and a French mother specially. She blames that people in India want a child to be a hero, a wise man, a doctor, a grammarian but she only wants a son: “[y]ou people are sentimental about the invisible, we about the visible” (p.39). But on the very second paragraph of this letter she writes that Oncle Charles rightly says that she has done right to marry such an ‘outlandish creature’. Further, she admires Indians’ beliefs and admits
that: "without a man she can see nothing great or holy. There the Hindus are right. Man must lead woman to the altar of God" (p.42). She loves Rama with a strange, distant, impenent love - as though in loving him she does not in fact love him. She wonders whether she can love a thing so abstract as Rama. She acknowledges that she does not love him for his purity and inner strength and wonders if Indians can love. She says that Rama is the noblest, and at the same time the most inhuman husband. Madeline feels that she has failed Rama's God, but Rama thinks that she has failed him. Later she tries to soften Rama by saying: "[e]verything good for me has only come from India" (p.70). She asks Rama to cremate her when she dies.

Madeline tells Savithri that a woman of France is made to carry the burden of a Brahmin. The very next moment she says, "Rama is either thousand years old or three... He cannot do anything wrong, for he's either so wise or so innocent...He's been born a man by mistake - for my joy" (p.142). Madeline shares her feelings with Rama and tells him that she wants to run away from him. Soon she says she is joking but she is not, that is also known to Rama. Madeline finds something missing in their relationship and tries to overcome it with the help of Rama but he lives in a different world where her feelings hold no importance. Her paradoxical statements prove her sheer desperation for Rama's love, which makes her behave in an eccentric way.

The more Madeline hankers after Rama the more he feels great and godly, which further frustrates her. Rama is so much imbued with the spirit of being an Indian and being a male that he becomes blind to see everything beyond this. When Little Mother gives him an ancestral toe-ring for Madeline as a parting gift, Rama feels that he is at last going to make Madeline his own. Rama always tries to make Madeline happy by doing
superficial things. "What I think Madeline really cared for was a disinterested devotion to any cause, and 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" (p.20). He hardly understands her and tries hard to project himself as a larger than life figure by giving metaphysical dimension to everything. When Rama falls ill and vomits blood, Madeline cleans everything and takes good care of Rama. Inspite of Madeline’s love and care Rama declares: “Madeline does not love me. She wants me to be big and true that she may pour her love on me, as some devotee would want her Shiva or Krishna to be big and grand, that she might make a grand abhisheka with milk and honey and holy Ganges water. To anoint oneself in worshipping another is the basis of all love. We become ourself by becoming another” (p.82). His superiority is further reflected in this statement: “[t]he woman needs our worship for her fulfilment, for in worshipping her we know the world and annihilate it, absorbing it into ourself. We should be Shiva that woman be dissolved - and with her the world. For the world is meant not for denial but for dissolution” (p.174). She seeks true communion with Rama where she can share her feelings with Rama and could tell him that she misses him and so many affectionate gestures. She wants to have a child because she wants to tell the baby a million silly things that she could not speak to Rama for he makes all simple things too big and everything that is human seems ridiculous before him. When Rama gives her a saree sent by Saroja, she is disappointed because she wants a gift from Rama.

Finally, Madeline’s frustration takes the form of cynicism. Being a failure in gaining Rama’s love, she becomes skeptical about everything. She develops bitterness for Rama and contradicts whatever he says. When Rama says that the Indians love all and
forget everyone’s sins, she comments sarcastically: “[s]o that the pariah may have his separate well, and the woman slave for men” (p.64). Being tired of Rama’s indifferent attitude she implores Rama for his love: “for you, a woman is still the other, the strange, the miracle. You could never show the familiarity European men show towards their wives. You worship woman even if you torture them. But I like to be tortured and to be your slave” (p.100). Florence Nightingale’s words aptly describe her predicament: “[g]ive us back our suffering, we cry to heaven in our hearts-suffering rather than indifferentism: for out of nothing comes nothing. But out of suffering may come the cure. Better have pain than paralysis!”

However, Rama is not completely ignorant of Madeline’s agony but his patriarchal mindset never allows him to see things from different perspectives. He feels: “[s]he seemed so far that nearness was farther than any smell or touch. There was no bridge - all bridges now led to Spain” (p.16-7). Rama believes that after the death of Pierre, Madeline has gone too far in spite of being so close to him. Rama thinks that loss of the child for Madeline is so big that it is impossible for her to reconcile to it. He never even for once realizes that Madeline hankers for his love and intimacy. Madeline writes to Rama that she has developed a love for ruin and especially ruins of the cathedrals and the chapels. Rama understands her desperation in this way: “Like all melancholic people, Madeline loved bridges. She felt Truth was always on the other side” (p.14).

Madeline feels that she is kissing a serpent or a dead body when Rama kisses her because she believes that man and woman who have no love for each other should not involve in mechanical touch. While Rama interprets this as: “[t]ouch, as I have said, was always distasteful to her, so she liked the untouched Cathars, she loved their celibacy.
She implored me to practice the ascetic Brahmacharya of my ancestors, and I was too proud a Brahmin to feel defeated. The bridge was anyhow there, and could not be crossed. I knew I would never go to Spain” (p.17). Rama believes that man only has sexual desire and women are groomed for the fulfilment of the main goal and purpose of her existence, namely sexual gratification of her husband and procreation. But had she been so much averse to male touch, she would not have made a violent love to Rama again and again – a love – that makes Rama feel that she will devour him.

Nevertheless, Rama tries hard to understand the gravity of the situation:

What after all was the problem? Where exactly did it begin? For Madeline had never been sweeter. There was nothing I needed which she did not know beforehand, and bring to me: my medicine after lunch, my handkerchief when I started on a walk, my pencil, duly sharpened and laid on my notebook - for I continued to work on my Albegensians. Yet she herself was not there. She was nowhere (p.79).

But the more Rama tries to understand the problem the more he drifts apart. In order to make Madeline happy and wipe out the differences between them he once tries to follow Madeline’s God although deep down from his heart he is least concerned about this: “[h]ow I wish I could tell Madeline I have begun to worship her God...For to wed a woman you must wed her God” (p.85-6). Rama thinks that it is his concern for her religion that makes her happy but for Madeline it is Rama’s love that makes all the difference.
According to K. R. Rao, a critic, "Madeline is a typical Westerner with her individualism, calculation and deliberation, and exemplifies the Western predicament of self-crisis and isolation." However, this cannot be true in case of Madeline. She is the woman who craves for her husband’s love like any other woman and when denied feels isolated and deserted. She begs him: “Rama talk to me, say something to me” (p.237). She beseeches him to talk but Rama has nothing to say to Madeline, he has all his love for Savithri. Madeline feels alone and engrosses herself in reading. She reads Buddhism and takes lessons on Pali language. A silent distance grows between them. She has separated her room from Rama’s and asks him to be a good Brahmin. She says that she cannot love anyone else but Rama. She observes every festival and becomes a staunch believer of Buddha and ultimately transforms herself into a Sadhvi. Madeline’s failure in love is the cause of her transformation.

Madeline engrosses herself completely in Buddhism by breaking all the connections with Rama. When Rama comes back home Madeline does not show any kind of good or bad feelings for him and asks Rama ‘why did you come?’ Madeline writes a last letter to Rama and speaks about his last visit to her:

[I]t’s all like a ghost story,’ ……I am sure it would also be wise to give Rama his freedom. He must marry someone younger from his own country. He will be happy with an Indian woman, I have no doubt. I know talking like this is painful, but truth has some day to be faced. In any case Rama must go back to his family; his lungs cannot bear our climate anymore. Besides, why would he want to stay in
France? Nowadays divorce has become so easy. You could perhaps tactfully put it to Oncle Charles. Better still, why don’t you consult someone there, while I consult someone here (p.399)?

Her frustration gives place to self-disgust, which is evident in the following statement by Madeline when she suffers from Influenza: “[o]h, it’s nothing, you know I have had a bad throat since I was a child of three. They say that Mother thought I would have goiter some day. But nothing so serious will ever happen to me. I am not even good enough for disease” (p.335). She is so much depressed by Rama’s indifference that she not only leaves Rama but also renounces the world.

Nevertheless, she still has love and affection for Rama. She observes forty-one days fast for Rama. Her love for Rama is clearly shown here:

[t]hat is why I say it. I have prayed night after night, like you said emperor Babar prayed for his son Humayan, that I be taken away in your place. You are young, you are a man, you have yet to live. When I knew you first you were such a sprightly vivacious being. It is I who brought all this on you. I am only a log of flesh, and anyone can take my place. But you, you are the head of the family (p.336).

She asks Rama,”[w]hat is it separated us, Rama?” ‘India’. ‘India. But I am a Buddhist.’ ‘That is why Buddhism left India. India is impitoyable”(p.336).
separated them because Rama’s Indian mentality always makes Madeline feel alienated. The more she tries to become familiar with Rama the more she feels lonely and different. Finally, she decides not to run after Rama and Buddhism gives her the light to move on. She turns to Buddhism because as Uma Parmeshwaran says: “unfortunately, man’s search, as portrayed by Rao, could be taken to mean just that: gender-oriented and male rather than generically human.”

According to S. Nagarajan, a critic, “in the marriage of Rama and Madeline, two contrary world views, two contrary epistemologies come together, and the novel is the study of encounter.” The reality is that this novel is based on the Miltonic phrase “He for God only, and she for God in him” but with a difference. Here the woman changes her God.

Rao firmly believes in the old ways of living and he ridicules the mixture of Eastern and Western civilization. He tries to portray his female character Savithri, nineteen-year-old daughter of a tyrant Raja Raghubir Singh of Surajpur, as an amalgamation of an Indian and as well as European civilization. She smokes and fixes up dance engagements. She has an affair with a Muslim boy, Hussain Hamdani, in London. Rama fills with disgust to see Savithri’s lifestyle and does not understand her going from strict purdah to this extreme modernism with unholy haste. Rama reflects: “we in the south were more sober, and very distant. We lived by tradition - shameful though it might look. We did not mind quoting Shankaracharya in Law Courts or marrying our girls in the old way, even if they had gone abroad. The elder brother still commanded respect, and my sisters would never speak to me as Savithri spoke to her father” (p.34).
However, Rao fails in portraying her as a female who is a combination of Eastern and Western civilization. She appears to be an independent and emancipated woman but in reality she is not as emancipated as she appears to be. In spite of being educated and leading a free life-style, she has no role in the scheme of things. She is a mere puppet in the hands of her family and dances to the tunes of her father. She goes to Europe for higher education because her father takes a special pride in giving education to his daughter and wants that no women in the whole Rajput caste should be as educated as Savithri. Her education is aimed not at her personal upliftment but at gaining false pride. She goes to London to pursue a doctorate degree for the sake of vanity.

Savithri looks for worldly pleasures. She takes her own stand about everything but again her very stand is too based on traditional pattern. She shows the sign of resistance, but after a mild resistance she surrenders every time and walks on the lines of an ideal Indian woman. She is interested in studying history but her father insists upon her to study English. She is also not ready to marry Pratap and suggests that Pushpavati her younger sister should be married to him. Savithri refuses to see Pratap and believes nothing ever would take place between the two because she has an aversion to British rulers and Pratap serves the British with great loyalty. Her argument for not marrying Pratap is considered frivolous and not taken up by her parents seriously. Against her wishes she is engaged to Pratap because Pratap prefers Savithri to Pushpavathi. It is the wish of Pratap that is taken into consideration.

For Savithri, everything is gesture and symbol. Madeline observes about Savithri that she is not real. She lives in the world of fantasy and dreams; her strange acts bewilder Madeline. Her little knowledge of Buddhism surprises Madeline because
Buddhism originated in India. For her ignorance and innocence Madeline describes her: "It’s three thousand years of civilization that produces a thing like her" (p.144). However, Rama is all praise for Savithri:

That is the beauty of Savithri. She is whole and simple wherever she is; for her there is only one world, one spot, one person even -and that is he who is before her. From her distant perch of the impersonal she offers him a spoon of sugar or a glass of whisky, as though her only concern were his joy. No one can be near her-except perhaps me, I told myself- for she is everywhere, and you had to be her to be by her (p.293).

She tends to be modern but at the same time is religious who entertains Rama with Uttra Rama Charita or Raghuvamsa. She is not attracted to Rama's physical appearance but his intelligence. Rama realizes that: "[h]er presence never spoke anything but her absence spoke" (p.33). Like 'Darcy' in *Pride and Prejudice* Rama does not find Savithri attractive but later he falls madly in love with her. Rama realizes that he breathes with Savithri and feels like Yagnyavalkya who had said to Maitereyi: "[f]or 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.26). Rama does not love the self in Madeline but he definitely loves Savithri for the self in her.

Savithri's ritual marriage with Rama symbolizes that she belongs to him whom she has known from times immemorial. Washing of Rama's feet by Savithri signifies the
position of woman in the society with respect to men. Uma Parmeshwaran observes: "The ritualistic washing of Rama's feet by Savithri is one of the more explicit statements on woman's position vis-a-vis men." She asks Rama, "would you really marry me? ..."But I am too poor, too wretched a creature. No woman who's a woman can choose her destiny. Men make her destiny. For a woman to choose is to betray her biology" (p.294-5). Savithri earns admiration from Rama for her submissive traits which could be described in Mary Wollstonecraft's words: "[w]omen are told from their infancy, and taught by their example of their mothers, that....softness of temper, outward obedience, and a scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety will obtain for them the protection of man". 26

"A Hindu woman knows how to worship her Krishna, her lord" (p.211). This statement by Savithri makes Rama fulfilled and complete. Rama touches Savithri's feet and carries the feel of it home. Rama never learnt to kiss good-byes in public. Even to take Madeline's arm in public seemed a desecration to him. But with Savithri, it is different. "With Madeline everything was explanation. With Savithri it was recognition" (p.345). Indian religions and cultures contain powerful matriarchal myths, or myths of female power. Such myths may only confirm male superiority. Savitri's power is derived from and is in the service of her man. Here we have a powerful legitimisation of the ideologies that give manhood a supreme position and a woman strength as a wife and a reproducer in a patriarchal family.

Savitri feels suffocated in the company of Pratap and wants to go back to Rama. But Rama checks her movement and reminds her of the importance of husband and prime duty of a wife. He also warns her that she should not break the norms and if she does, the
outcome would be tragic. He advises her: “rejoice in the rejoicement of others” (p.369). Savithri reconciles to her destiny and accepts her future with Pratap. Thus, in spite of being well educated and rebellious she becomes subservient to the male demands - subsuming the priorities of the self to the needs and demands of the family and the society. Rao has written a long panegyric for woman:

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 against 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 growth, the gods, inheritance; the woman is death, for it is through woman that one is born; woman rules, for it is she, the universe. She is the daughter of the earth, the queen, and it is to her that elephant and horse, camel, deer, cow, and peacock bow that she reign on us, as in some medieval Book of Hours where she is clad in the blue of the sky: all the animals and world surround her, and praise her that she be. The world was made for celebration, for coronation, and indeed when the king is crowned it is the Queen to whom the Kingdom comes-....for even when it is a king that rules, she is the
justice, the bender of man in compassion, the confusion of kindness, 
the sorrowing in the anguish of all. Woman is the duality made for her 
own pools of mirroring and she crowns herself to show that man is not 
of this kingdom. Man cannot even die. Then must he absorb himself 
into himself and be being. The coronation is the adieu of man to the 
earth. Be gay, earth, be beautiful, for man must go (p.357-8).

Further:

woman will sit in a coach and see herself as seen by others...she will 
dream of orb and dove, of annum and bacculum, of garter and the 
knights; and she will think of the Abbey, where she will see herself as 
seen by a thousand years. Woman after woman has sat on the same 
seat, and has counted the same beads of love. Woman will be on the 
coin of England, woman will sound as silver all over the world, 
woman will go round the world and bring the warmth of tenderness to 
many homes. Woman will wander the seas, mount the stairways of 
many a palace and parliament, for woman is the only meaning of 
silence over the seas. In the little alleys in London, by parks and by 
pools, simple virgin grass grew all like words of a saying, and many a 
child played rejoicing on its birth, for the world would be handed over 
to a Queen (p.358).
At the time when Rao was writing this novel the coronation of the Queen was to take place and it seems Rao was not very happy about it and rather he felt alienated at the idea of a woman reigning. Even after writing a long panegyric for women Rao remains cynical. He who has suggested women to ‘rejoice in the rejoicement of others’, laments over the death of a man primarily because there will be a queen substituting him. Then he consoles himself by saying that for a man, death is transcendence because he is eternal.

Rama criticizes severely the European and American civilizations for growing more and more terrestrial: “civilization, as against culture, terrestrial - the feminine permanence will grow as in America. Death will be abolished, through the funeral parlours, and love will be made into the passion of the bed. Man is a stranger to this earth – he must go” (p.148). He believes that every man is like a Christ on the cross. Rao is apprehensive of the future generations and fears that freedom of women may bring the decay of values and civilization. He is deeply rooted in his culture and does not want to contaminate it with the newer forces considered to be modern. He is completely satisfied with what our scripture says and is a staunch believer of Vedanta. In Vedanta, there is no going back or forward. Rama talks about the morality of European girls and criticizes them bitterly. “Young Englishmen looked so open, so intellectually keen, and the girl’s seemed so feminine, so uninhibited. It was all so far from the world of Jane Austen or Thackeray, or even from the world of Virginia Woolf. Boys and girls met and mated and helped each other through life with, as one girl remarked to Savithri, the facility of eating an apple” (p.202).

Most of the female characters in The Serpent and the Rope are well educated. Their problems lie in the fact that their education awakens a desire in them for self-assertion
and self-quest, which is frowned upon. This predicament leaves them alienated and discontented. The marital relationship, too, has its share of overt and covert manifestations of their oppression. Both Rama and Madeline are socialized into accepting the norms of patriarchal society. Not only this, the day-to-day strife on the domestic front is the most intangible part of Madeline’s existence and contributes in good measure to her suffering. She finds it impossible to have a progressive mind when the body is itself retrogressive and coils her neatly within its trap, holding her within the trap till she dies. Rao allows his heroine Madeline to pursue a spiritual quest because she is a European woman but his patriarchal outlook never allows Indian women to go for the self-quest and for the reason that it would mean going against the scriptures. Even for Madeline, Rao’s thought is not so liberal because she has to renounce the world and follow a different religion for the quest of knowledge, self-realization and self-transcendence.

Women are born in bondage and therefore bonded from birth. The word freedom always eludes them. They think they are free because for them the word freedom is defined differently by men in patriarchal society into which they are born. If they begin to doubt the credibility and validity of their freedom they have to pay the price to be mentally and spiritually free. Unable to embark on their own quest for self-fulfilment as men do, they are given twofold choice: accept or refuse. Those who accept like Savithri and Saroja are ruined emotionally and mentally, and those who refuse have to withdraw from life itself like Madeline and Saroja from The Cat and Shakespeare.

From the preceding discussions of the three novels by Rao it is evident that the female protagonists in the novels have been vaguely craving for the air of freedom and struggling to break off the patriarchal Indian societal structure. Rao who inspires women
to come out of their kitchens to participate in the freedom struggle does not wish women
to take up employment, which would come in the way of their traditional mother-wife
roles. It is only a difference in the degree of oppression that differentiates one woman
from another. In *The Serpent and the Rope* he conveys the idea, “To be woman is to
suffer, to bear the yoke of man” (p.135).

Raja Rao, despite being an erudite scholar and philosopher cannot transcend the
forces of history which have allowed him to look at women with stereotypical vision.
Woman is either a goddess or a mistress or nothing. The sad truth is Raja Rao does not
realize that woman can neither be stereotyped nor defined. Julia Kresteva’s insightful
statement clearly sums up the futility of any such exercise: “Woman Can Never Be
Defined”: “In ‘woman’ I see something that cannot be represented, something that is not
said, something above and beyond nomenclatures and ideologies.”

Notes


7 Ibid.


