The Serpent and the Rope has evoked exaggerated and conflicting reactions both in India and in the west. Meenakshi Mukherjee traces the source of the conflict in the Indian readers' attitude towards the Hindu tradition. One will, however, have to look somewhere else for understanding the diametric opposition in the reactions towards the novel in the west. If some of the western critics hailed it as "truly magnificent... packed with the real magic of poetry, a truly contemporary work... one by which an age can measure itself, its values" or as Denis de Rougemont exclaimed "I know nothing in literature that confronts east and west more tenderly, 

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1 See the appraisals of the novel done by C.D. Narasimhaiah, H.M. Williams, R.S. Singh, C.P. Verghese, Raja Harsimhan, Meenakshi Mukherjee, David McCutcheon and others in this context.

2 "Those who share Ramaswamy's Brahminical background, his traditional childhood of hymns and rituals, and his advaitic grounding, will easily identify him with India. Those who do not have this background will inevitably feel uncomfortable at his excessive emotionalism with regard to certain objects and gestures (for example: the cows of Benares, the touching of the feet with kumkum)"

Mukherjee, Meenakshi The Twice Born Fiction, p. 93.

more vigorously

one also finds David McCutchion who doubts if it is a novel at all. If the variations in the Indian reactions are rooted in the different attitudes towards the tradition, the divergence in the western responses lies in a failure to properly grasp the use to which Raja Rao has put Indian tradition in "The Serpent and the Rope". To McCutchion, it appears as a sastra rather than as a novel - "of the more than 400 pages, few are narrative, most are meditation - an unhurrying philosophical soliloquy on the nature of reality: serpent or rope." and Walsh who, unlike McCutchion, is not sceptical about the credentials of "The Serpent and the Rope" as a novel also has a similar reaction.

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4 de Rougemont, Denis, Reprinted on the Jacket of the Novel.
5 The question might arise, is this a novel at all? Is it not rather a book of wisdom, a compendium of interminable commentary and philosophising, where even conversations are dialogues in pursuit of truth - a book of discursive enquiry rather than narration? All the central concerns of the western novel are absent - social relations, psychological motivation, characterisation, judgment, a passion for the concrete.

McCutchion, David; "The Novel As Sastra" in Considerations edited by Meenakshi Mukherjee, p. 92.

6 Ibid., p. 91.

7 "It is a meditation, but a dramatic one, on the nature of existence, profoundly 'philosophical', but not at all abstract or theoretical.... The action, or the meditation, since external events do not have high status in the novel, swerves from India to France to England and takes in an astonishing number of authentic, sharply realised characters."

Walsh, William, "The Indian Sensibility in English" in Awakened Conscience Edited by C.D. Narasimhaiah, p. 68.
The two responses being so similar, however, betray a lack of understanding and an outsider's bias towards the Indian tradition. For one who understands the tradition from the inside, it is not difficult to appreciate the underlying reasons for such extreme positions. The Indian readers who have hailed the novel as a 'classic', have been taken in by the lyrical rendering of the Hindu sensibility, its myths and rituals in a novel written in English. Whereas those who have dismissed it outright have been unable to share the ardent nostalgia of Raja Rao for the Hindu tradition. The Western reader has been caught in the stylistics of the novel. What simultaneously baffles and mystifies the Western readers is the way Raja Rao has captured the surface and depths of a traditional Hindu mind with the aura of the exotic in intonations, rhythms and syntax of English language.

"Raja Rao's aim is to create a style which will reflect the rhythms and sensibilities of the Indian psyche, and since it is in Sanskrit that the Indian mind has found its most consummate linguistic expression, he has tried to adapt his English style to the movement of a Sanskrit sentence. He says that Sanskrit is rooted in primary sound, and when it is read aloud, it creates, as it were, an aura of emptiness around one and one feels the breath of oneself, sees the sight of oneself."


To illustrate his point, Nagarajan provides an example of the style that is "controlled by the central concept of the novel: "I am" is the sole truth. The first person
In a way, search for consciousness of tradition is the protagonist of 'The Serpent and the Rope'. One would be disappointed if one were to look for the contours of the traditional realistic novel - character, incident and a well-made plot in 'The Serpent and the Rope'. It, in fact, surpasses the scope of even the lyrical novel, where the focus is not on depiction of reality as a solid mass but on the play of consciousness where character and incidents are liquified into the flow of consciousness. In 'The Serpent and the Rope', Raja Rao has tried to explore an altogether new dimension of experience where the influx of consciousness does not follow an arbitrary erratic course, but is infused and penetrated by the currents and cross-currents of the collective unconscious through stirrings of culture-psyche; the obscure level pronoun is repeated with very change of epoch to proclaim that the "I" remains the same throughout time. It is Presence itself, Existence itself.... But perhaps the most striking feature of the sentence is the structure of the sound."

Ibid., p. 89.

Besides the passage quoted by Nagarajan, one may also refer to "How true the unsaid sounds against the formulated, the uttered.... The publishing of truth is the vocable of silence." ('The Serpent and The Rope, p. 297'), and also to "Savitri was there not in me but as me, ... the primary sound, the pranvam OM propounds itself, and from which all that is world is created." ('The Serpent and The Rope, p. 242').
of deepest awareness where the spirit of a culture vibrates, shapes and moulds the very structure of one's consciousness and informs and influences the whole range of one's psychic behaviour.

For a traditional Hindu, Kashi is the bestower of all that is blessed and auspicious: it is the luminous and the illuminating city. Kashi is called "the supreme wisdom (Param Jnanam)" and the "embodiment of wisdom (Jnanam Swarup)". Kashi is called "the one fullfiller of all the Purusharthaas" which is said to be present at other Tirthas in India but all other Tirthas are said to be present at Kashi. According to Kashi-Khanda, "all tirthas and all cities and all sixty abodes of Siva, rivers, streams, lakes and oceans, all the gods and the sages dwell in Kashi desiring their own liberation, under the great influence of Siva who quenches desire. The mind of those who have beheld Kashi delights no more in other tirthas."

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9 Kurma Purana, 1.25: 24.
10 Puram Purana Adi Khanda, 33.30-31; Kashi Khanda, 8:67.
11 Kashi Khand, 17.29.
12 Kashi Ratnasya, 13, 54-55.
In order to understand what Kasi means to a Hindu, it is necessary to know that the word Tiruna comes from the Sanskrit root tri which means to cross over. Thus tirtha is a doorway - a threshold to the Sacred. Kasi is identified as a geographical space which makes it utterly tangible and yet it is also characterised as the indescribable Brahman in the symbolic imagination of the Hindu. Since Kasi is the place where Brahman is realised; there is Kasi wherever Brahman is realised. One of the basic Hindu beliefs is that a specific tirtha together with all its qualities and spiritual attributes may be transposed whole and without diminution of its uniqueness to any place at any time. It is for this reason that Kasi may be located in more than one place simultaneously.

Baja Bao has exploited the symbolic significance of Kasi as a tirtha by using it as a key metaphor of experience in the novel. Not only places but even human relationships are treated as a threshold to cross over from the contingent to the eternal. He invokes Kasi, time and again, for illustrating the way in which a Hindu believes in the psychic transposition of space.\(^{13}\) e.g.

\(^{13}\)For Rama, not only that Kasi is everywhere, in London or in Paris; all places for him assume a psychic significance and constitute an aspect of Rama's spiritual geography (For instance of such psychic transposition of space, see pages, 20, 22, 50, 52, 54, 207, 216, 246, 247 and 302).
"Benares is everywhere where you are, says an old Vedantic text, and all waters are the Ganges." (p. 363).

Against the dark sky of Paris, Hama is transported to the waters of Ganges at Kasi:

I do not know where I went, but I was happy there, for it was free and broad like a sunny day and like a single broad white river it was. I had reached Benares - Benares. I had risen from the Ganges, and saw the luminous world, my home." (p. 403).

And suddenly, as though I've forgotten where I am, I begin to sing out loud, 'Bhivoham, Shivoham', as if I were in Benares, on the banks of the Ganges, sitting on Harishchandra Ghat and singing away. In Benares, it may still sound true - but here against the dull sky of Paris, this yellow wallpaper, with its curved and curling clematis, going back and forth, and all about my room.... I say, 'Clematis is the truth, must be in the truth.' (p. 399).

Through this metaphor, Raja Rao has succeeded not only in touching the vulnerable spots of the Hindu psyche but also in pandering to the accredited image of India in the western mind. It is not only Kasi but India itself which is conferred the status of a metaphysical space. 14

14 For Raja Rao, India is not a geographical territory but a territory of mind, a metaphysic. India is not merely a metaphysic but the highest point of human culture. In an interview Raja Rao himself claims that "India is the direction of essential human culture. The Indian has sensibilities and refinements the world has never surpassed. In many ways, one can say, India is culture." Open, Vol. XVI, No. 1, January 1973, p. 37.
"The India of Brahma and Prajapathi, of Varuna, Mitara and Aryan; of India, of Krishana, Shiva and Parvathi, of Rama, Harishchandra and Yagnyavalkya; this India was a continuity I felt, not in time but in space; as a cloud that stands over a plain might say, "Here I am and I pour" - and goes on pouring. The waters of that rain have fertilized our minds and hearts, and being without time they are ever present. It is perhaps in this sense that India is outside history." (pp. 246-47).

"India is not a country like France is, or like England, India is an idea, a metaphysic.... My India I carried wherever I went. But not see the Ganges, not to dip into her again and again. ... No, the Ganges was an inner truth to me, an assurance, the origin and end of my Brahmanic tradition." (p. 376).

Despite the narrator's disclaimer against dipping into the Ganges time and again, the western readers have not been able to take this metaphysicalisation of space and human experience. It is for this reason that McCutchion complains that:

"He cannot (does not wish to) control his material, he never stops dipping into his inner ganges and the purifying flow is interminable and endless murky self-absorption from exposition of the deepest truths (how this type of Indian loves to dilate on truth) to anxious self.

The same sentiments are expressed in the novel as well:

"Well, for me India is the Guru of the world, or she is not India. The Sages have no history, no biography - who knows anything about a Yagnyavalkya or a Bharadvaja? Nobody. But some petty King of Bundelkhand has a panegyric addressed to him, and even this is somewhat impersonal. We know more of King Harsha than we do of Sankara. India has, I always respect no history. To integrate India into history is like trying to marry Madeleine. It may be sincere, but it is not history. History, if anything, is the acceptance of human sincerity. But Truth transcends sincerity; Truth is in sincerity and in insincerity-beyond both, and that again is India." (p. 332).
The Serpent and the Rope is a spiritual odyssey of a South-Indian Brahmin who says, "I was born a Brahmin, that is devoted to truth and all that. Brahmin is he who knows Brahman, etc. etc. . . ." (p. 5). It may appear that Raja Rao is having an ironic dig at the Brahminic credentials of Rama but the novel reveals that Rama regards himself more of a South-Indian Brahmin than a Brahmin and seems to be more devoted to "all that" and "etc., etc., . . .". In spite of his Vedantic professions and continuous invocations of Benares and the Ganges, he finally discovers that:

"Now, I think I know, but I must go, I must go to Travancore. I have no Benares now, no Ganga, no Jumna; Travancore is my country. Travancore my name." (p. 405).

The narrative operates on two levels; that of manifest action and contingent reflections. The reflections of the narrator are meant to provide a glimpse of the Hindu psyche but are not organically related to his actual behaviour. It is conceded even by G.D. Narsimhaiah, ardent admirer of the novel and the novelist. He confesses that "The entire conversation . . . is not organic to the action of the story, does not arise from it inevitably, inexorably, and can therefore be cut out without injury to the main action -- which would be very unfortunate considering how important it is. But had it been incorporated into the structure of the novel.
situations of his life, his motivations and impulses are not so ambiguous as he makes believes himself in his retrospective reveries. There are leaps, gaps and spurts of silence in his interminable perorations. The contemplative and the active remain at odds with each other following an independent course and touching each other only tangentially.

We learn that Rama's mother died while he was very young and left him with a feeling of being an orphan, a homeless. His homelessness assumes cosmic proportions in hotel rooms, whether in Paris or in London, in trains or in aeroplanes, on the highways, and the far flung obscure corners of earth. He feels himself to be a holy vagabond, a wanderer at large. This feeling of being eternally homeless could be a reaction against the lack of mother's affection in childhood. And he tries to make up for it with a vengeance. In his successive encounters with women — be she Madeleine or Savithri, Little Mother or Saroja or Catherine or Lakshmi, Rama's interaction with them can be interpreted as a defensive strategy against the void which was created by his mother's death. The denial of affection turns into a fond obsession and an infatuation with absence as a

without letting it stand outside the narrative, its value would have been inestimable."  

mode and category of experience. He seems to be more at home with absence as it were. Interestingly this is true not only of the women but also of his Upanisadic ancestors and his heritage. In keeping with the Hindu tradition, Raja Rao, while depicting any human situation, betrays a bias for the metaphysical as against the phenomenal and experiential reality. Through the tangible, concrete and the mundane dailiness of living he seeks the awareness of absence, in its mysterious permeations. Absence becomes a mode of experience, not counterposed against the concrete and the tangible dimension of reality, but as a supervenient intangible which not only informs the phenomenal, experiential awareness, but is the very ground, the very source, the principle of emanation. Throughout Rama's ruminations over his thwarted destiny, a sense of absence emerges with a piquancy and intensity which overshadows completely what is being experienced by Rama in the immediate environment.

"Something had just missed me in life, some deep absence grew in me, like a coconut on a young tree, that no love or learning could fulfil. And sitting sometimes, my hand against my face, I wondered where all this wandering would lead to. Life is a pilgrimage, I know, but a pilgrimage to where and of what?" (p. 26).

What missed Rama in life was the awareness of the absolute, Rama's consciousness swings between the
immediate, the tangible and the elusive, the intangible, the absolute. He remarks:

"There is no absence if you have the feel of your own presence. The mountain echoed an absence that seemed primordial, a syllable, a name." (S & R, p. 41).

The glimpses of the absolute Rama introjects in his awareness of Savitri, Kasi and of the ancient Brahmanic tradition:

"Her presence never said anything, but her absence spoke." (p. 31).

Even in moments of erotic intimacy Rama impresses upon Madeleine his aura of brahmanic remoteness and piety of non-touch:

"But I'm a Brahmin, and for me touch and knowledge go with the holiness of surrender, of woman not taking me there, but I revealing to her that." (p. 66).

Rama's ritual marriage with Savithri and subsequent parting is a symbolic celebration of the non-touch.

"Savitri was made of such stuff that for her the real had to be clothed in terms of the illusory to make it concrete; truth was to be made the revelation of a puzzle a riddle a mathematic of wisdom. For her, I could see, everything was gesture and symbol and time had been abolished, ... and the body itself be a casket in which one sees oneself, not as limb and form, but as light cooled into space, as a gift, an object, a truth." (p. 126).

The absolute is identified in terms of fear of the unnamable and the intimations of his immaculate
unborn self:

"Ultimately the far and the awesome is divine; it destroys the barriers of body and mind, no, rather of mind and body, and reveals the background of our unborn, immaculate being. That is why Shiva lives in the Himalaya." (p. 42).

"In between the smells of the sea there came sudden wafts of incense, as though absence was no more an absence, but just a presence invisible, unincarnate." (p. 45).

The absence is not just the fear but also the lure of the unknown which threatens at moments to be more real than the known. 17

From waft of incense in between the smells of the sea to his confrontation with Saroja at the threshold of femininity, and with Śańāhari as its consumate embodiment, Rama fumbles through absence to his self-awareness. It appears that Rama locates his sense of bearing through feminine presence which, for him, is the human rendering of the absolute:

17 "I had named something I had not known yet—it was the absence that had become presence again." (p. 50).

"Mysterious are the intimations of absence in between a smell of the sea, then came sudden waft of incense as though absence was no more in his absence, but just a presence invisible unincarnate." (p. 44).
It makes all the difference in the world whether the woman of your life is with you or not; she alone enables you to be in a world that is familiar and whole, if it is not his wife, then for an Indian it may be a sister in Mysore, or Little Mother in Benares. (p. 57).

Especially a sister, she with the woman in her without the woman's demands, she in whom family pride and devotion made of you a god, she could make the ununderstandable known, the mysterious simple and reverential. Besides, Saroja had a perfume that would fill my days and my nights - the perfume of the body breaking into the simple principle of womanhood.

You must have a spot, a centre - to run away from. (p. 169).

Rama's remark "you must have a spot, a centre - to run away from", betrays his constant desire to evade the continuity of consciousness in socio-historic time and space and the concomitant obligations and responsibilities. Through this kind of evasion, he undercuts the reality of the contingent and seeks asylum in the eternal. This makes Rama fall back upon a series of fake myths during his stay in the west. The fake myths of expedient living are threatened and challenged by the true 'myth' of continuity of consciousness. He muses:

The trouble with time is that it creates its own myth, and thinks we become with its becoming. Just as we can park motor cars, we can park thoughts in time, and go away on our job, which is living. To forget time is to live in recognition, and whoever said love could be born? Love is never born, but all is premonition of love. You come upon it as you come upon -- as you come upon a poppy, by the roadside. You do not drive past it and say, "Oh!, the lovely poppy, how beautiful she
looks in the sun!" In fact the poppy has nothing to say, not even that she is a poppy, but to you it has happened; to her nothing has happened, for what can happen to what is? The isness cannot be added on to isness; love cannot be added on to love; for to know love is to love love and to love love is just to be. (p. 134).

Rama repeatedly provides justifications for his obsession with absence and evasion of present in terms of a search for the Paramarthik (absolute), whereas in practice he is living in the Pratichasik (the illusory) and evading the Vyvaharik (the practical).

He explores at the heart of experience a sense of ambiguity which he seeks to identify in terms of the play of illusion and reality, "The Serpent and The Rope." This play does not unfold itself in the problematic apprehension of the real but in his shifting and slippery loyalties. He resorts to metaphysicising only when he lands himself into a situation he cannot rise unto or face squarely. His journey carves out a wayward course seeming to move towards the Paramarthik through the Pratichasik/bypassing the vyvaharik.

In order to evade the responsibility and the consequences that one has to accept by adopting a personal perspective on life, he takes recourse to the impersonal
and the metaphysical view of relationships in life. As McGutchion has rightly pointed out:

Hama tries to live in the world and think out of it. This gives rise to a kind of duplicity tearing the reader and hero between double standards desire for happiness and justice in this world coupled with lack of responsibility and decision because this world is not ultimately real.

To absolve himself of his failings at the vyaharik level, that is, his responsibility towards his family and Madeleine, his incapacity to face his amorous disposition towards Savithri, performing of ritual marriage with her, committing adultery with Lakshmi, not intervening and helping Saroja save herself from being married to a man whom she did not like, he indulges in metaphysical rationalisations. By creating a dichotomy between the moral and the metaphysical, Rama is falsifying Sankara's Advaita

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For right and wrong are questions of a personal perspective, but dharma is adherence to the impersonal. So when Rama goes to liberate Sita from the prison island of Havana, the very monkeys and squirrels build roads and bridges, carry messages, set fire to fearful cities, because dharma must win. (p. 183).

McCutchion, D., Novel as Shastra, in Minakshi Mukherje, op. cit., p. 100.
which he persistently invokes to legitimise and sanctify his conduct. In Sankara's Advaita, the metaphysical does not negate the moral but is its consumation. Even though the moral categories do not completely express the metaphysical, yet they are not dissolved in it. The moral is not the whole truth, yet it is not untruth either. Though the moral is not the ultimate truth, for Sankara, yet it may be of help in arriving at the same. Without being negated by the ultimate truth, in the metaphysical transformation of the Vyaktaharik the moral finds its completion and consumation. In Advaita Vedanta, the moral is not an external aid for achieving the ultimate truth but is intrinsic for the recognition of our innermost being. When we fully realise the metaphysical potential of our nature the moral is neither negated nor denied but is internalised. It is as impossible to alienate the moral from the metaphysical as it is to recognise one's essence without one's existence.²⁰ The fact of the matter is that Rama always manouvers his way-out of every embarrassing situation. For example, in his relationship with Madeleine he presumes that the rock in front of his house, which he had named as Nandi bull, would have told

²⁰ For such an interpretation of Advaita Vedanta based on textual evidence, see Dr. Rama Rand Tewari's *The Ethics of Shankaracharya*, Ph.D. thesis Allahabad Univ., 1947.
Madeleine about his extra-marital exploits.²¹ If he finds in Savithri what his deepest nature yearns for, one fails to understand what kind of call of Rama's being Lakshmi answers whose disaffection with her husband he exploits to assure himself of his masculinity and runs away from her like a coward.²² It is height of arrogance on his part to believe that he owed to Madeleine no explanation no clarification, not even courtesy information about his affairs with other women.²³ He sees all women who run into him or he runs into as projections of variations of Man woman relationship which according to him serve as the medium of search for the absolute. How far this search is genuine remains questionable. Instead of search for the Brahman it seems to be a progress of the oversized ego from self seeking to more of self-seeking with impunity. The incantations of the absolute are conveniently harnessed into the service of this self-seeking. Strangely enough this ego-centric pursuit

²¹"May be the elephant had told her, or the bull." (p. 239).

²²"I booked my seat on the plane, somewhat secretly, for I had become a great coward.... "You ennuch, "She cried "You lecherous coward," and thought she would beat me, but she was still very handsome." (p. 290).

²³"For, lying by Madeleine, I was overtaken by no remorse, no inhibitions in eating back my sorrow on thinking of Savithri." (p. 242).
masquerades itself as the pursuit of the Brahman. So circumscribed in his self-seeking that he treats others as mere foils and counterfoils to his overbearing ego. There is a desperate attempt on the part of Rama to keep his relationships limited to the symbolic and the ritualistic level so that he owes others no obligation and hence no responsibility. Wherever a relationship threatens to concretize, he resorts to fantasizing which involves a kind of moral evasiveness. He makes himself believe that his primary concern is the search for the metaphysical and not the moral truth. The Vedanta is persistently invoked to salvage himself from the sordid and arbitrary withdrawals and the Brahmanic remoteness which he inflicts on others whenever it seems convenient to him. Rama’s vedanta is the vedanta of opportunism and expediency as he himself belies his own Vedantic professions at the slightest opportunity.

At one stage he exclaims that "to wed a woman is to wed her gods" but in his relationship with Madeleine he does his best to subvert her faith and wean her away from Christianity to Hinduism.

Then there was the elephant too at the top of the hill. A huge, gently curved rock by almost flat on the ground, and if you sat on him of an evening, very still, you could hear him move. You could actually feel him shake and change sides, one foot first and then the other. When Madeleine and I had questions we could not solve, and she wished to avoid getting irritable and angry, she would say, "I will go and consult the elephant." (p. 55)
while the South Indian Brahmin in him is deeply outraged on seeing the smoking Savithri during his first meeting with her, she is transformed into a saint when he is infatuated with her. This change in his attitude towards Savithri also makes him change his perception of the South Indian sensibility:

I could not understand these Northerners going from strict purdah to this extreme modernism with unholy haste. We in the South were more sober, and very distant. We lived by tradition -- shameful though it might look. We did not mind quoting Sankaracharya in law courts or marrying our girls in the old way, even if they had gone abroad. (pp. 31-32).

You and I, who come from the South, we know too much: we shall never have such innocence. Savithri is a saint. (p. 167).

And all his lofty talk about history Stalin and the Super Man evaporates when Savithri begs him to absorb her unto himself.²

²"Pray, that you might awaken, and not burn the world with that third eye - that eye which plays with history," she laughed.

"And parrots would sing, and the mango leaf be tender, be like copper with morning sunshine."

"And I would go round you three times, once, twice, thrice and fall at your ash-coloured feet, begging that the Lord might absorb me unto himself.... I am a woman, "she added hesitantly, "a Hindu woman."

Meretho Girichara Gopala....
Mine the mountain-bearing Krishna,  
My lord none else than he.

History, Stalin and the Superman had vanished. Trying to solve the puzzle of history, like some hero in a fable, I had won a bride. (p. 208).
Describing the ritual Rama says:

Then she knelt before me, removed one by one my slippers and my stockings and put them aside gently-distantly. She took flower and kunkum, and mumbling some song to herself, anointed my feet with them. Now she lit a compmor and placing the censer in the middle of the kunkum-water she waved the flame before my face, once, twice and three times in arathi. after this she touched my feet with the water, and made aspersions of it over her head. Kneeling again and placing her head on my feet, she stayed there long, very long, with her breath breaking into gentle sobs. Then she gently held herself up. (p. 211).

The aspiration to win a bride into service of which he harnesses his proficiency in the Vedantic lingo and the Hindu lore throws doubts on the metaphysical claims of his search. In fact, the original desire, that brought him to Europe was not search for Brahmam but, as he says:

Once my doctorate was over I would take Madeleine home and she would settle with me somehow I always thought of a house white.

25 In this regard Meenakshi Mukherjee however points out that "This act of worship, however, does not seem quite natural to the character of Savithri who has been depicted as a non-conformist, somewhat a rebellious girl. Unlike the traditionally brought up Indian woman she is fond of asserting her own will, and has, earlier in the novel, resisted an arranged marriage. It is arguable, therefore, that the fond description of these rituals has its birth in the sentimental longing of the writer himself, an expatriate Indian, who sees all traditionally Indian actions enveloped in a mist of nostalgia."

Mukherjee, Meenakshi, The Twice Born Fiction, p. 145.
single storied, on a hill and by a lake and 
I would go day after day to the University 
and preach to them the magnificence of 
European civilization." (p. 15).

This desire to preach the Indians the magnificence 
of European civilization seems to be an expression of 
infatuation of a colonial intellectual towards the master 
culture. He goes to Europe to soak himself into the 
master culture though he introduces himself to Madeleine 
through Indian History as also to Savithri:

And when I introduced her to Indian History... her joy was so great... when I first came to Europe - I first landed in Naples - Europe did not seem so far nor so alien. Nor when later I put my face into Madeleine's golden hair and smelt its rich acridity with the olfactory organs of a horse for I am a sajetarian by birth - did I feel it any less familiar. I was too much of a Brahmin to be unfamiliar with anything, such is the pride of caste and race, and lying by Madeleine it was she who remarked, "Look at this pale skin besides your golden one, On to be born in a country where tradition is so alive." She once said, "that even the skin of her men is like some royal set in, softened and given new shine through the rubbing of ages." I, however, being so different never really noted any difference... to me the difference was self-created and so I accepted that Madeleine was different. That is why I loved her so. (pp. 19-20).

Rama does not see his marriage with Madeleine as an act of his own choice and does not hold himself responsible for it. Madeleine accorded Rama love

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26 "I might never have met Madeleine or married her - like a good Brahmin of the older generation I would have sat in meditation morning and evening and
sympathy and subservience and did her best to adjust with his Brahmanic eccentricities but his exaggerated esteem for everything Indian -- food, manners, rituals and his ego which he sought to identify with the soul of the Hindu tradition:

India is the Guru of the world, or she is not India. The Sages have no history, no biography -- who knows anything about a Vagnyavalikya or a Bharadavja? Nobody. But some petty King of Bundelkhand has a panegyric addressed to him, and even this is somewhat impersonal. We know more of King Harsha than we do of Sankara. India has, I always repeat, no history. To integrate India into history -- is like trying to marry Madeleine. It may be sincere, but it is not history. History, if anything, is the acceptance of human sincerity. But Truth transcends sincerity: Truth is in sincerity and in insincerity beyond both. And that again in India. (p. 332).

would have sat in meditation morning and evening and changed annually my sacred thread, for even in Aix-en-Provence, though you cannot make pipal-fire, you can always make an olive wood fire, draw the swastika on the wall, decorate the sanctuary with mandalas, light the sacrificial hearth and walk round agni. You can get Ganges water by air every week for aspersions and mouth ablutions. And going back home, I would have gone seven times round fire again, and safely married some Venkatalakshamma or Subbamma, who would have borne me my heir and my funeral fire-lighter; and at the end I would certainly have held the tail of some bull or cow that my son had bequeathed for my further journey, and thus my story would have ended. Madeleine might have married some doctor from Rouen or naval cadet from Touton, would have borne him two children and possibly even a third - it did not depend as in India on the stars, but on arithmetical figures at the Bank and the Caisse d'Epargne." (pp. 231-232).
To the question why Rama's marriage with Madeleine failed, Uma Parameswaran says:

The answer is not far to find though Rama never finds it. Marriage involves interaction and Rama's essential weakness is that he cannot survive interaction. Rama lives within his illusory realm, a snake-charmer piping tunes to serpents that dance as and when he wills them to. Madeleine is the rope, the only reality that intrudes upon his insular world. He builds a romantic image of her also, but the very state of cohabitation makes continuous idealization impossible. This trait in Rama's character precludes ideal marriage, and since he would not have been satisfied with anything less, no marriage could have brought him happiness.27

It would be a mistake to see the failure of the marriage between Rama and Madeleine as a failure of the marriage of "two contrary world-views and contrary epistemologies."28 The roots of the failure lie in Rama's bad faith for he is hardly honest and fair towards Madeleine in his relationship with her.29 At first he infuses in her a sense of

27 Parameswaran, Uma, A Study of Representative Indo-English Novelists, pp. 155-56.

28 "In the marriage of Rama and Madeleine, two contrary world-views, two contrary epistemologies, come together, and the novel is a study of that encounter."


29 "I could not tell her, in spite of all my truth, that I had been up already. She felt that if nothing else worked our superstitions would work." (p. 66).
inferiority for she is not a Brahmin, and sees to it that she is mesmerised by his Brahmanic aura, his angelic purity and his supercilious self cherishing, and finally makes her believe that she has failed him.

Instead of reciprocating all the efforts that Madeleine puts in to live up to him by learning to live like a Hindu wife, Hama keeps on yearning for the externals of the Hindu form of life - kunkum/coconut saris, toering and so on. The strains in Hama's relationship with Madeleine start appearing right from the time he feels jealous of Georges and Liz, and the cruelty with which he treats Madeleine as he described in his diaries:

How I waited yesterday for Georges to go home, how I hated him for staying on. He knew my knowledge. Oh, I wish Georges had never existed. (p. 162).

How I forced her to undress, and how without sweetness or word of murmur I took her; and she let me be in her, without joy, without sorrow, I just remembered Georges was not there. (p. 162).

Today I could have destroyed Madeleine, so richly, so perfumedly she hung to me. I could have spat into her mouth and called her the female of a dog. (p. 164).

30 "And how sad, Hama, is a lonely woman. 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. 40).

31 "I have failed your gods?" She said. "No," I said, looking at her; and for some un-understandable reason I added, "you've failed me." (p. 50).
Baja Rao seems to be killing two birds with one stone. He is giving vent to his Brahmanical spleen against Buddhism and also the western tradition. Madeleine's Buddhism does not pose any challenge to Rama's overweening Hinduism for Raja Rao would not let the intra-cultural clash grow authentic. Madeleine's turning towards Buddhism after her getting disillusioned with Rama is portrayed more as a resort to self-destruction rather than a genuine search. Rama makes it out to be her misfortune that she could not be a Hindu wife to him. Her being ought to have been focussed and centred on him for sustenance/for her destiny was to be subordinated to him. Ramaswamy gives his own garbled version of Madeleine's Buddhism and regards it more psychic than genuine. Finally, it is Madeleine who initiates divorce proceedings to enable Rama to get out of the mess he has made of his marriage.

The whole narrative of Rama's life which is claimed by him to be a search for Brahman is a conducted tour which progresses with the whims and predilections of the guide. Through the exclamations of Rama, his relationships with many women are made to fit into the Shaivite Vedantic conceptual framework. It is this superimposition of the metaphysical categories of The Sacred — through invocations, bland rhetoric, mythological allusions, exotic descriptions, enactment of rituals — which make some readers see The Serpent and The Rope as the great Indian novel.
In this regard an attempt has been made to show that the incantation of Vedanta finds its place only either as a topic of conversation or in the metaphysical reveries of Rama but does not percolate into his conduct. What has been seen as the great East-west encounter in which Hindu tradition is repeatedly exclaimed as superior is nothing but the precepts of Vedanta rendered into an idiom which legitimizes escapism and utter moral neutrality of the narrator. Though Raja Rao has claimed that he has tried to present the Vedantic tradition through the form of the novel what one finds is a falsification of Advaita Vedanta for the dichotomies of moral and metaphysical, the tangible and the intangible, the contingent and the transcendental, are only hoped to be transcended when Rama would be with his Guru in Travancore. As it is, they remain glaring throughout the action of the novel. Instead of an encounter between East and the West, the novel only remains at the level of juxtaposition of two cultures. One would expect Rama living on the razor edge of his sensitivity to lay bare the inner contradictions and ambiguities inherent in the bi-cultural encounter but that does not come off. One wonders if Rama is not aware of the contradictions he chooses to bypass them in his mythopoeic stride. He does betray the tensions generated in his reflective consciousness and also unsettling impact on his relationship with others as well as with.
himself. and he, somehow or the other/gets better of them to his advantage. The phoney and illusory character of his western existence dawns on him only when he is caught up in a situation which warrants responsibility and commitment on his part. This awareness provides him a refuge, an escape, a safety-valve rather than discomfiture of self-confrontation. Apparently, he seems to be continuously confronting himself but he so manages to keep his self-image intact that credentials of his search for the Absolute become highly suspect. His reflections on the nature of reality, self and the absolute truth reveal his commitment to the Shaivite Advaita but this commitment does not emerge through struggle at the level of experience. Rama's philosophical speculations do impinge upon his experiences but in a tangential, oblique and expedient manner. Shankar's advaita seems to be harnessed into self-justification. One does get, however, glimpses of the Hindu-psyché in his intimate living but in a manner that is ritualistic and self-glorying. Ever since his return from his first journey to India, he has been striving to relate Madeleine to his Hindu ethos. The toe rings which little mother gives for Madeleine never reach her but are presented to Savithri. He is thrilled to see Madeleine clad in the sari which Saroja had presented to Madeleine but his despair is that she slips out of it.
Little Mother places Madeleine's portrait in the Mandir in the house. Grandfather Kittana, we are told, though a great votary of Euclid was worried over his daughter-in-law not being able to join Aarthi. Grandfather Kittana could not have died in the event of the first visit of the daughter-in-law to the house and Madeleine is made to strike rapport with Nandi Bull and also the gods and goddesses of Hindu pantheon. Rama goes into ecstasies over the spectacle of Catherine tying Rakhi on his wrist and Georges on Madeleine's and each one of them locked into a laughter which escapes bordering on the grotesque. Rama singing hymns from Shankaracharya while rocking the new born baby of Georges and Catherine in a cradle seems to be filling a void which had gnawed at him throughout his life. These are, of course, deeply moving and lyrical moments of crossing over. But somehow one has an uncomfortable feeling that such gestures are meant to bypass rather than face up to the contradictions generated by the inter-cultural encounter. Rama does insist on rendering all his experiences in terms of myths, rituals and axioms of the Sacred and this is what forecloses the possibility of a genuine interaction and violates the spirit of novel. In a way Rama's journey is a symbolic
looking out for that safe place, the place of arrival, where he can escape fear of conflict and exposure. For a displaced person, however, just as there is no longer any where to return to, there is no possibility of arrival either. Rama's journey is an attempt to recapture an innocence which existed in a past which it is impossible now to enter. Raja Rao has articulated this search in terms of the Advaita metaphysics of Sankara. Rama's search for self-discovery is portrayed not in the context of contemporary history but in the context of eternity. Raja Rao seems to suggest unequivocally that the locus of one's self-identity is hidden in one's culture, in the consciousness of one's tradition, the ground and soil of one's sensibility.

The Locus of Rama's search in the context of eternity - coming to terms with his ancient self, which Raja Rao emphasizes is an indispensable element in cognitive activity of any vital culture, primitive or civilized. Whether it is an escape or return or escape and return to the past, it is nonetheless essential in order that present becomes significant. A consciousness disassociated and dislocated from the past is sterile, for no future can be envisioned without a past. One feels uncomfortable, however, when Rama seems to opt for unqualified acceptance of the Advaita metaphysics
and particularly when this Absolutist and transcendental consciousness shies away from any meaningful interaction with the contingent circumstantial concerns of acts of living.\footnote{Raja Rao, in my opinion, does not quite succeed in working the advaitic in the structure of the novel and enact in Rama's consciousness, the process of change culminated in hero's final decision to absorb the European experience and return to India for spiritual enlightenment.}

Rama's decision to return to seek self-realization reads like the befitting finale to a parable or a Puranic tale, not a novel. Its epiphanic manner is not worked out in terms of the structural dynamics of the novel. It appears all the more quixotic as:

One would have thought that the road to enlightenment was through Protagonist's encounter with turbulent life's experiences: of betrayal or faithlessness, dismal failure or tragic death. And through severe tension, conflict and crisis, the realization of the futility and falsity of all human concerns and relations urging the hero on to disengage himself from worldly bonds and seek emancipation at his Guru's feet.\footnote{Singh, Satya Narayan, "A Note on Raja Rao's worldview in The Serpent and The Rope", \textit{Kakatiya Journal of English Studies}, Vol. III, No. I, 1978.}

Rama does live through tension but this tension never generates a real sense of conflict or crisis. It may be

\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, pp. 255-56.}
argued that the Advaita metaphysics eschews altogether a sense of conflict since it does not admit of duality - I and thou distinction or the distinction between the observed and the observer. The real question is not whether this kind of metaphysics is incompatible with the ideology of novel as an art form which is founded on duality, conflict and crisis, but whether Advaita metaphysics is experientially worked out in terms of crisis and conflicts of human relationships or affirmed in an axiomatic and tendentious manner? One cannot quarrel with the metaphysical predilections of the novelist, but one certainly has a right to question the mode of affirmation of such a metaphysics.

What is most baffling to the western as well as the Indian readers is the diversity, encyclopaedic range and eclectic temper of Raja Rao. The elusive blending of legends of different cultural traditions into each other reveals the sweep and complex character of Rama's

34 "While on the one hand, the Serpent and the Rope invokes legend of Satya Kama and the Hudulekeya for the recitation of Rama's story every Saturday and the blessing it confers, on the other hand, it also plays upon the Chinese fable of Wang-Chu and changing and the tales of Tristan and Isenil."

Mukherjee, Meenakshi, The Twice Born Fiction, p. 142.
consciousness. In his experience of the western culture, he is acutely aware of the split and the dichotomy between the circumstantial, the contingent and the transcendental. He is even aware of the fascination of the evil in the Christian sense and it is not without reason that his experience of erotic and sensual orgies are soaked into the sacred lore. One might have an impression that Ramaswami exploits The Absolute and The Vedanta for his conception of the erotica. His relationship with Savithri conceived in terms of the love-legend of Radha and Krishna and in the cosmic relationship of Pursha and Prakriti, a la Sankara's Advaita, lays down a norm of the Erotica of The Sacred to which the christian sense of sin -- the way of all flesh does not correspond. But the experience of sin is so intense and fascinating that it resists the overwhelming pressure of The Sacred.

Rama's involvement with his thesis on Brahmanical influences on Albingsian Heresy, his marriage with Madeleine and his affectionate concern for Catherine and Uncle Charles comprise facets of Rama Swami's consciousness. None of the characters have been allowed to emerge more than an aspect of Rama's consciousness and one would not be wrong in believing that he swallows them all. They are reduced to being mere foils to Rama's over-bearing Brahmanical ego. The crucial problem which Rama's consciousness presents is the way he absorbs and
transmutes a bewildering diversity of cultural influences without letting a sense of antithesis, or contradiction emerge. The tension and a sense of personal crisis is there, of course; but the sense of crisis is dissolved in Rama's search for and surrender to The Guru. The possibility of encounter and a meaningful interaction is narrowly missed.

At best, The Serpent and The Rope remains a tale of a silent erosion of Rama's attitudes and beliefs in an alien cultural environment which throws him into a metaphysical void. Instead of struggling to find his feet in the possibility of a new cultural milieu through critically examining his traditional heritage in terms of contemporaneity/Rama takes recourse to mystique of silence for which he finds sanction in the Upanishadic tradition:

How true the unsaid sounds against the uttered, words should only be used by the perfect, by the gods, and speech indeed be made incantatory. For speech is sound, and sound is vibration, and vibration creation. To create would be to know what the creator is, and to claim creatorhood for ourselves is indeed to commit a nominal sin. Silence is golden, says the European. No, silence is the truth. "Maun Vakya, Prakatith Par Brahma, Tattvam", said Sri Sankara. "The publishing the truth is the Vocable of silence." (p. 297).
Mystique of silence, nontouch and the inescapable ancient self is Rama's desperate bid for survival after the traumatic disenchantment with the west. And for his disenchantment he seems to hold the west responsible for not measuring up to his vedantic absolutes. Dissolution of his marriage with Madeleine is not symbolic of failure of a creative interaction between the two cultures but of his preconceived superiority of the East over the West. Madeleine is transmigrated into a fanatic buddhist nun disintegrating into eighteen aggregate's -- a state of living disembodiment -- a nemesis with no saving grace as it were. 'So this was the Madeleine I had cherished and made', (p. 314), he exclaims. Madeleine is made to fit into his meta-cultural scheme -- apart from it she is not allowed any existence. And 'The bridge was never crossed. Madeleine had a horror of crossing bridges' (p. 14). And his return to the East -- to Travancore -- the land of Sankara is projected not as withdrawal or a defeat but a caving into the recesses of his own 'familiar and

35 Even Savithri exclaims: "that's just like Ramaswamy ... he works with symbols and equations. History for him is a vast algebra, and he draws in unknowns from everywhere to explain it", p. 182-83.
unrecognized self' -- a dogmatic fortification of his Brahmanic self. It does not come off as a new discovery for him or a new revelation but confirmation of a cultural a priori, a subjective universal built in his psyche.