CHAPTER III

'INFINITE PATIENCE AND THE VICISSITUDES IN LIFE'
The three stories in this group — 'Javni', 'Akkayya' and 'Nimka' present the picture of a woman whose prominent features are infinite patience and capacity for selfless service, notwithstanding the differences in nationality, religion and social status. Of these, 'Javni' and 'Akkayya', which are his early stories, show a sharp awareness of certain social evils of the thirties but 'Nimka' cannot easily be identified with any period or social movement, "because of its poetic treatment of the material". ¹ With their emphasis on class, caste and sex as bases of exploitation, stories such as 'Javni' and 'Akkayya' are prone to sound as propagandist stuff of a progressivist writer, if social awareness gets the better of artistic integrity. But Raja Rao displays such remarkable ability to transmute the immediate and the particular into the timeless and the universal that these stories transcend the times they portray. 'Nimka' is a more nature work testifying to the author's sure mastery over the medium. The women portrayed in these stories — Javni, Akkayya and Nimka — have in common the qualities of self-sacrifice

and endurance which raise them to "the level of an elemental earth-mother, kind to all alike, giving without any hope of return". But, while 'Javni' and 'Akkayya' seem to give us a forecase of what is to come in the later works, 'Nimka' shows an art "which clearly was beyond the reach of the author of 'Javni' or for that matter, even Kanthapura...."  

'Javni' has the following epigraph from Kanakadasa (the Kannada saint - poet of the sixteenth century):

Caste and caste and caste you say what caste has he who knoweth God?

The story might seem on the surface, to be merely an "unmistakable insinuation against the malady of caste system", but looked at closely, it reveals other dimensions. The story is about a low-caste servant woman called Javni, who accepts her lot without protest. But the low caste of Javni does not become a cliche in

the story, for Raja Rao invests her "with a symbolic value as the feminine principle which, as readers of his last two novels know, is central to his metaphysic and transcending aesthetic".  

Javni, whose humdrum life is the subject of the story is a victim to social exploitation, but her innocence and rustic simplicity keep her blissfully insensitive to the magnitude of her suffering. A life of this kind, devoid of romantic possibilities, is not a very promising material for a story. But the way Raja Rao handles it results in a work of unusual seriousness and absorbing interest. He successfully catches the essential truth of Javni's life by seizing on some of its important moments. In the process, what finally emerges is an utterly convincing and plausible, though slightly idealized, portrait of a woman who has a capacity for immense self-denial, in the face of the injustice done to her.

The other two characters in the story are the narrator Ramappa who grieves over her misfortunes

and invokes God's mercy on her, and his sister Sita who, for all her kindness to Javni, thinks that 'eating with a woman of a lower caste is irreligious'. This discrimination is understandably resented by Ramappa. But, it is not as a study of this social evil that the story grips us. It is in strict sense, Javni's story, and it is from her routine and habits that the narrative gets its shape. The plain details about Javni's life, unspectacular as they are, presented with a photographic detachment which shows an undeviating purity of intention.

A childless widow and a loyal servant in the household of Ramappa, Javni has endured poverty, brother's indifference and sister-in-law's ill-treatment. She is supremely satisfied when Sita says "without Javni I could never have lived in this damned place" or when Ramappa says, "So, you are the most faithful among the servants here." She is also credulous and superstitious, clinging to her naive faith in Talakamma, perhaps as 'an escape or a means of happiness'. The first person narration helps in presenting her very vividly:

She was forty, a little wrinkled beneath the lips and with strange, rapturous eyes. Her hair was turning white, her breasts were fallen and her bare, broad forehead showed pain and widowhood. (p.83)

Oil costing an anna a bottle is too expensive for her because she earns just a rupee a month. Ramappa feels exasperated by her reluctance even to dine in the hall, as also by his sister Sita's conservative outlook. Nothing less than a divine agency seems capable of saving people like Javni from this kind of segregation. This realization results in an anguished expression of helplessness:

Had not the lord said, "whatever there is misery and ignorance, I come"? Oh, when will that day come and when will the couch of knowledge blow? (p.89)

But the story does not end with an indictment of the forces, if any, responsible for Javni's plight, as many stories of this kind often tend to do. Getting over this mood of indignation, the narrator is able to see the shining, original humanity which seems to be temporarily defaced by such foolish acts of injustice.
I had nothing to say, my heart beat fast. And, closing my eyes, I sank into the primal flood, the moving found of being. Man, I love thee. (p.89)

Here, there may be, as Dr. Meenakshi Mukherjee thinks "a discrepancy between the emotion and its object". But the attempt here is to see Javni as an organic part of nature, and to avoid sentimentalizing over her sobbing image. There are no rhetorical flourishes here about injustice or guilt or conscience. The centre of the story is simply the uncovering of an emotional truth with the implied comment, 'this is the way life works, affecting some pitifully'.

The story is a credible picture of Indian village life in the first few decades of this century. In spite of the rapid change in the rural Indian scene, "there is much in this picture that is more or less true even today". Details evocative of

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Indian village life — such as the pipal tree, dusty roads, ghosts, witches and animal sacrifices — form the setting. The story shows that "Raja Rao knows his Indian village life thoroughly" and one can clearly see here "the promise of a master manifest everywhere".

Raja Rao's another powerful story 'Akkayya' concerns itself with the life of a traditional Hindu widow and her bleak life. While 'Javni' belongs to a low class, 'Akkayya' is a brahmin. They both share, "the inexorable futility of tradition bound Indian widowhood in the same measure".

Akkayya is capable of loving and giving and also aware of her suffering. She is a widow who lives in her sister's house.

10. C.D.Narasimhaiah, Raja Rao, p.3.
11. Indian English Literature by Prof. M.K.Naik, p.89.
Kittu the narrator was asked to sit beside Akkayya in his innocent way. The narrator asked Akkayya why she remained without applying vermilion and also not wearing bangles. But Akkayya explained clearly to the narrator that she was a widow and so she was forbidden from doing this. Even other characters in the family do not associate themselves with the widow. Naturally she becomes an example of,

"the impending disintegration of the family ties which have held Indian society from the very dawn of history". 12

The members with suspicious looks, keep the widow secluded. Like a typical realist, Raja Rao presents a realistic portrayal of Akkayya's life in an orthodox brahmin family. Kittu remains as an emotional observer. As one who is brought up by Akkayya, the narrator stands apart from all others. It is his unsentimental account that makes us take Akkayya seriously for him,

'Akkayya was as pure a thing as the jasmine in the temple garden' (p.49)

The joint family system soon collapsed. The brothers of Akkayya never agreed to take the widow. They quarrelled so violently with one another that the family had to break up. The grand mother of Kittu invited her into her fold. Soon Akkayya felt relaxed. She cooked for the family, sometimes discussed philosophy with the grand father of the narrator. The widow protected all the children in the house.

In spite of her disease she observed fast and sang the glory of the Lord. As usual she smiled at the children and encouraged them. With good old memories of the past she encouraged the children. After a lapse of four years the narrator comes to know that Akkayya is dead. Soon the widow collapsed. The members of the family of Kittu arranged for the funeral of Akkayya.

In this story one sees the symbol of cow that signifies innocence and pity of Akkayya. Her character becomes a very significant one because of her association with the children in a traditional Hindu family. Her plight lies in not performing the necessary ceremonies by the members of her family but by a strange brahmin. That is how the story becomes very significant.

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Similar indifference and detachment are found in Raja Rao's 'Nimka a White Russian Girl', who rejects the values of western civilization. The narrator juxtaposes his impressions about 'Nimka' twenty years ago and those after twenty years. Michael her lover in a way, influences the character of Nimka. She serves in a Paris restaurant because of her mother's association with the romantic life the Smolny court yard. Though she is an ordinary waitress she is looked upon by her student admirers as a princess and an inviolable deity. The narrator himself basks in the sunshine of her beauty. Michael impresses her with his dignified voice and his love for scribbling all over the table cloth. Her charms are exemplified through her kindness, restraint and her intuitive moral right and wrong.

The narrator is drawn towards Nimka for she has the same temperamental affinity. Like the narrator she knows about Indian philosophy that gives a knowledge of the virtue and the vice. They both like the great books of India namely the Ramayana and the Mahabharatha. She entertains scepticism about marriage. She immediately
realises the depth underlying the apparent simplicity of the narrator.

Soon Nimka realizes the meaning of life. Factors like her disappointment in love, her mother's death and her son's departure for Russia really help her in knowing the meaning of life. She soon, becomes meditative and reflective and makes philosophical statements. In her own words:

"Nimka asked nothing of life, she asked nothing of me. When I said good bye, she did not say when shall I see you again? She knew the life that as ended is eternal when you are shot you become immortal." 13

That is how Sita comes before us as a symbol of suffering and endurance.

The three stories have something in common in them. In 'Javni' one sees the suffering of a low caste servant woman for her love with Ramappa. The narrator depicts the plight of Javni a symbol of an Indian village girl. Akkayya is in a similar plight as she works like dirdge reconciling herself to her

lord. She blames herself in the joint family system. If the emphasis in 'Akkayya' is on the plight of a widow in 'Nimka' the narrator dwells upon the philosophic indifference to the pains and pleasures of life of a Russian girl. Nimka too like the other two (Javni and Akkayya) suffers in life.

Sex is another factor that binds these three stories together. In 'Javni' we see a servant girl who becomes a prey to exploitation because of class, caste and sex. In 'Akkayya' the brahmin widow is meek and has cow like virtues. She easily becomes a representative of Indian woman who emerges very much as flesh and blood characters. Similarly in Nimka, it is suffering that makes the character of Nimka very convincing. Nimka's desperate lover Michael, her mother countess Boriloff and the Indian narrator all emerge as individuals influencing the course of the events. The east-west encounter is seen here. Thus Nimka acquires mysterious distinction owing to her mother's association with the romantic life of the court yard. The narrator himself has a soft corner for her. Thus these three stories have something in common in them.

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