

COLOURS OF COURAGE-CHARACTERIZATION OF WOMEN BY RAJA RAO

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Abstract

*The understanding that femininity is not a natural pre-existing entity but a social structure forms the basic premise of my article. From such a premise I propose to analyze the construction of femininity in Raja Rao's fictional works. By 'construction of femininity' I mean a definition of the 'real' woman which insists on a particular kind of behavior as natural for woman. Femininity, in Raja Rao's works, is constructed through inventory of the qualities of woman without considering the possibility of difference and variation. The absence of a comprehensive analysis of the representation of woman/women in Raja Rao's works makes this attempt essential not only because of the importance of Raja Rao as a writer, but also because of the contemporary relevance of an issue such as the construction of gender. This article shall focus primarily on the two novels, *The Serpent and the Rope* and *The Chessmaster and His Moves* because there is extensive discussion about woman in these two novels as compared to the others. Finally, the article summarizes the conclusions drawn from these novels and tries to explain the need for such a construct in Raja Rao's project of reviving "Indian tradition"*

Key words: Femininity, Woman, Enumeration, Contemporary

INTRODUCTION:

Understanding how femininity is constructed in Raja Rao's fiction is important for several reasons. First of these is that no Indian writer in English has discussed 'woman' in fiction as extensively as Raja Rao has. Secondly, Raja Rao is seen by various readers and critics as representing the 'real' traditions of India. Therefore, it becomes important to my article to understand the role offered to woman in this India. Thirdly, no other novelist has used the concepts of *Purusha-Prakriti* and *Shiva-Shakti* as consistently as Raja Rao has in order to define woman and her role. Finally, the canonization of Raja Rao's works accords a certain authority to his status as a leading novelist. Consequently his views, including those on women, gain an added and perhaps dangerous strength. This makes a review of his works essential so that the validity of these ideas can be questioned.

Significance of Feminism in works of Raja Rao:

Feminism in its broadest sweep is a humanistic concern. Feminist perspective is to become aware of the situation of women, of relation of women to the world, of the oppression and discrimination to which women have been subjected and to use this as a power to change this situation. So, to regard feminism merely as a Western concept and to dismiss it, is to willfully ignore its importance.

Indian tradition as suggested by Raja Rao's works is an adoption of *Advaita*, *Manu Smriti*, and so on. Raja Rao's views regarding women largely match with the scriptures of Manu concerning the duties and behavior of women. So, in attempting to read the novels exclusively in terms of what is regarded as Indian is to also confront the possibility of ignoring certain other aspects that might prove relevant to a different kind of reader such as one concerned with the depiction of women.

Characterization of women and construction of femininity:

The Indian woman fits more into the mould of the role model than her Western counterpart. In the context of the central concern of Raja Rao's works, which is a search for identity, the construction of woman becomes important. Since man is defined in contradistinction to woman, the representation of woman as the other could imply that woman is a deviation whereas man is the norm. Such a perception explains the concern regarding the representation of woman in these terms, especially, when the male characters hold such view. The basis of the construction of femininity in Raja Rao's works is the woman's constitution. Her attitudes and her responses are seen as being influenced by her biology. This is stated as much in *The Serpent and the Rope* by different characters. Savithri, for instance, says, "No woman who is a woman can choose her destiny. Men make her destiny. For a woman to choose is to betray her biology" (SR 291). The implication is that a woman's biology dictates and controls her actions. To do anything contrary would be to negate one's womanhood. An extension of the argument suggests that a woman's biology does not permit her to choose her destiny because her destiny is made by men. While the reference to the "biology of woman" is mainly to her procreative abilities, there is also the suggestion of a reciprocal relation between biology and behaviour. Biology is behaviour and behaviour is

biology. This kind of a relation is evident in the remarks of the other characters as well. Rama, referring to Madeleine's efforts to get Catherine and Georges married says, "the biology of woman and the cardinal part it plays in her activity - you see it best, not when she is in love (for that is melodrama) but when she wants to get a man and woman entangled for the continuance of the race" (SR 145). There is also the remark by Rama that "Jealousy with woman is a greater biological quantum" (SR187).

Biology and behavior of women:

The correlation between biology and behaviour which is clearly stated in *The Serpent and the Rope* is implicit in the generalizations regarding women wherein the assumption is that the biology of all women being the same, their attitudes and their responses too must be similar. A construction of femininity, in fact, becomes possible only through such sweeping generalizations; by tracing the behaviour patterns of some women, femininity itself is defined. Such an unified view of woman necessarily ignores the expected difference between one woman and the other. But reservations of any kind, which would take into account these differences, are not expressed. Instead the underlying assumption, as expressed by Mirielle's words is that, "All women are women and they speak one language. But every man speaks a different language" (CM 352). The theory regarding a woman seeking man and his guidance in order to transcend the materialistic world is expressed in *Comrade Kirillov* as well. Kirillov's wife, Irene, who imbibes much of "Indian philosophy" (an ineradicable part of Kirillov's mental make-up) writes in her diary, "The real man is the one who runs after abstractions, and the real woman she who catches, or tries to catch, the man who is trying to catch abstractions" (CK 117). Woman is thus represented as not being able to and also as not wanting to seek the abstractions directly but only through a man. Her fulfillment seems possible only through him. The suggestion is that a man not only leads woman to her God but also helps her to understand herself as explained in *The Cat and Shakespeare*. Pai is convinced that "Shantha worships me (Pai) and has herself" (CS 23). This view is tied up with his belief that "To be a wife is to worship your man. Then you are born" (CS 32). The echo of such statements emphasize that a woman ought to worship her husband/man. In *The Chessmaster and His Move* the theory of woman being able to reach the Absolute through the chosen man, is reiterated by Jayalakshmi who says "Our ancestors were right. A woman had to have a husband and lord, chosen and consecrated by as—trilogy and the *vedas*, and it was through him to substantiate her belief that a woman attains God/Truth/Absolute through man" (CM 172). She also uses the analogy of the sun, moon and the earth to make a similar point.

Insolence of women in Raja Rao's characterization of women:

A submissive attitude is one of the striking features of Raja Rao's characterization of women. Their submission is considered appropriate and necessary for the enlightenment of both the man and the woman. All the ideal women characters—Savithri, Shantha and Jayalakshmi, who act as illuminati to Rama, Pai and Siva respectively are also characters who submit themselves completely to these men. They perceive in them the ability to help them reach an awareness of themselves, of God and of Truth/Absolute.

In *Kanthapura*, the submission of a wife to her husband is highlighted. This is evident in the incident involving Bade Khan. During the training of the women at the Kanthapura village, Rangarma advises "Be strong sister. When your husband beats you, you do not hit back, do you? You only grumble and weep." (KP175). This kind of submission involves woman accepting the immediate superiority of her man in every day situations. However, the submission discussed in the other works is of the emotional and spiritual kind Rama says

For women possession is knowledge..... Bondage is her destiny. Not so with Savithri. Having accepted bondage she was free. To be a woman, she knew was to be absorbed by a man. (SR 187)

Therefore, bondage, it is stated, is as an unchangeable part of a woman's life. So there can be no freedom other than through the acceptance of bondage. This is an attitude which suggests that chains are an integral part of a woman and within this limited space; she can be free only if she accepts them and adjusts to them. Therefore Savithri within this framework is the ideal woman. Her submission to Rama is evident in her statement, "I can go nowhere ... I belong to you" (SR 211). The submissive nature of Madeleine too is emphasized. Rama says

I was happy with Madeleine. I could be bent by the knowledge she had of me - the knowledge of my silences, the vigorous twists of my mental domain. But further down where the mind lost itself in the deeper roots of life, she waited like an Indian servant at the door, for me to come out. Then would she know what was told. (SR 92)

This kind of a submission is privileged in all the works. It is repeatedly stressed that only through submission to a man can a woman hope to reach her goal of salvation. For a woman submission to a man is

natural, all the more important because as Little Mother says, "for a woman the sacred feet of her husband be Paradise" (SR 294). Once a woman has submitted to her husband she has attained paradise. A woman being led by man is represented as predictable- fits into the general philosophy of Raja Rao's works that destiny cannot be changed. What is ordained will take place. Given this philosophy and the assertion that a woman's destiny is to be made by man, the woman is caught in a situation where there is no option for her but that of dependence.

Marriage, motherhood and sati in works of Raja Rao:

Marriage, in Raja Rao's works, is considered essential for woman because it is through man that she is able to reach the Absolute. However, marriage, as used in Raja Rao's works, is not restricted to the conventional sense the one recognized by law and society. The union between Rama and Savithri in *The Serpent and the Rope* and the relationship between Shantha and Pai in *The cat and Shakespeare* is also regarded as marriage. However, in whatever sense the word 'marriage' is used, an unmarried woman is still considered inauspicious. In Kanthapura, Venkamma's daughter's marriage to an old man is condemned. But the inevitability of a woman having to marry is emphasized in *The Serpent and the Rope*. The view expressed by Little Mother that a "woman has to marry whether she be blind, deaf, mute or tuberculosis. Her womb is her life." (SR 258).

Marriage seems the culmination of a woman's experience because it means that she has found her man and also because it enables her to bear children and know motherhood. Referring to the happiness that Little Mother comments, "After all, Rama what more happiness does a woman need than a home and a husband. As temple needs a bell ... and the girl a husband, to make the four walls shine" (SR 276). In Savithri's case her symbolic wedding with Rama is the one that is important when compared to her marriage with Pratap. Like Rama, she believes that they (Rama and she) had forever been married. Her marriage with Pratap is comparatively insignificant a duty to be performed in this life.

The excessive importance given to marriage in *The Serpent and the Rope* is missing in *The Cat and Shakespeare*. Marriage, as recognized by society, does not mean anything to Shantha. For her there is only the instinctive recognition of her man. That is marriage to her. Woman and marriage are differently defined in *The Cat and Shakespeare*. Pai feels that to be a "wife is not be wed. To be a wife is to worship your man. . . . You annihilate time and you become a wife. Wifehood of all states in the world seems most holy" (CS 32). To be a wife, is to worship the husband and consequently, understand the difference between illusion and reality which is one sign of enlightenment. Thus, an indication of having gained knowledge. Woman thus acquires knowledge by worshipping her husband. A reciprocal relation between attaining knowledge and worshipping the husband is suggested.

Marriage, for woman, as observed earlier, is important also because of its promise of motherhood. The definition of femininity in Raja Rao's fiction lays great emphasis on the ability of woman to procreate. This ability is glorious in all the works of Raja Rao. The woman is to be revered because she bears children. Motherhood confers a special status on woman. She is regarded as holy even in her pregnant state. The notion of motherhood includes not only the idea of bearing children but also of nurturing and nourishing them. The mother, according to the interpretation emphasized in the works, is one who protects her children.

Importance of men in women's life:

The importance of a man in a woman's life is seen as deriving from his ability to provide guidance to her and also because her exalted state of motherhood is attained through marriage with him. Therefore, woman without man, according to the construction of femininity is, to quote Jayalakshmi, "inauspicious, impure" (CM 173). The concept of dharma, in the works of Raja Rao, defines a woman's dharma regarding her relationship with man but does not elaborate on the man's dharma towards a woman.

Tradition and Femininity:

The need for a tradition can be understood in the context of the characters being situated in the West. This necessitates an identity which while being different from the Western one not only offers a way of proving the superiority of the Indian tradition but also reveals the protagonists' involvement with the tradition. Indian tradition needs to survive in an alien culture also by establishing the identity of one's own culture. In *The Chessmaster and His Move*, the traditionality of Jayalakshmi becomes a matter of great pride and admiration for Siva because she is so totally uncorrupted by Western materialism, that she can, even in France, maintain her attitude of respect towards him. Jayalakshmi insists on following Siva in the traditional manner of Indian women instead of succumbing to the Western notion of chivalry—women preceding men. It is significant, therefore, that Jayalakshmi dismisses Western materialism in her comments- "Oh, the West, how much they have still to learn to be civilized" (CM 173-74). This comment works at two levels. Firstly, it descants Western materialism by

stating that it has much to learn. The implicit suggestion is that the lessons should be drawn from India regarding the evolution of civilizations. Secondly, the masculine is privileged over the feminine. In the context of the Indian tradition being represented as superior to the Western one, the characterization of Indian versus Western women gains significance. The characters, both Indian and Western, acknowledge the superiority of Indian civilization. For instance In *The Serpent and the Rope* Madeleine comments, "Oh, to be born in a country where tradition is so alive . . . that even the skin of her men is like some royal satin ..." (SR 19). In contrast, the Indian women are able to accept the guidance of the male characters, and hence are regarded as being able to live the tradition more successfully than their Western counterparts. By privileging the attitude of the Indian women over that of the Western women, the tradition of woman submitting to man is also reinforced.

CONCLUSION

In Raja Rao's construction of femininity woman is mostly empowered in terms of abstractions. In actuality her power is very limited. While the works state that men need women in order to inspire them, that is act as the "illuminati", it is they (men) who are more important in the social structure. So the problems of women do not get solved at the concrete level. In fact, the problems themselves are erased in the abstract generalizations of woman and so no solution is suggested for them even in here. The model of leaving her offers to the actual world is detrimental to the interest if women because it leaves them powerless to act independence of men. Raja Rao has regarded Pursha with men and Prakriti with female and so at this juncture there is conflict categories in works of Raja Rao. The general philosophy of Raja Rao is a woman is led by men and hence it leads to this philosophy that assertion that a woman's destiny is to be made by man, the woman is caught in a situation where there is no option for her but that of dependence. The patterns in the characterization of women and the views expressed on woman in Raja Rao's different works enables the readers the understanding of his construction of femininity while also answering the questions that have been raised.

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ABBREVIATIONS

CM-*The Chessmaster and His Moves*

SR-*The Serpent and the Rope*

KP-*Kanthapura*

CS- *The Cat and Shakespeare*

MAYUR
