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MASCULINE PERSPECTIVE OF THE FEMININE IN RAJA RAO'S FICTION

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Abstract

Raja Rao glorifies women as *shakti*, but, on the other hand, he presents them as highly submissive, obedient and subservient to the demands of the male, family and society. His patriarchal mindset is evident when he expects a woman to worship her husband. In the novel *The Chessmaster and His Moves*, the intellectual Brahmin hero, Sivaram Sastri, is against asceticism and has relationship with three women and believes that spiritual love is superior to marriage. A believer in *Advaita* or non-dualism, he expects them to forego their identity and merge themselves completely into him. He never enters into wedlock because for him marriage is an insignificant bond. Being a Brahmin gives him a privileged status and he justifies his promiscuity, mistress-keeping and *lila* of love by referring to higher truths. His intellectualized spiritualism is baffling as he only thinks and talks about spiritualism, but cannot rise above physicality in his actions. He repeatedly refers to the Krsna and Radha myth to glorify extra-marital affairs. For Raja Rao, a woman's body is no doubt a territory and relationships are only for women to observe.

Key-Words

Shakti, Patriarchal Mindset, Female Principle, *Advaita*, Promiscuity, Marriage, Spiritual Affinity and Spiritual Buffoonery.

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Raja Rao's fiction as a whole is a panorama of Indian women of all classes, castes and creeds playing various roles from their youth to widowhood. Women characters have been skillfully delineated in *Kanthapura*, *The Serpent and the Rope*, *The Cat and Shakespeare* and *The Chessmaster and His Moves*. The women in his works belong to the tradition of Sita of *The Ramayana*, Draupadi of *The Mahabharata*, Radha of the Radha-Krsna legend, Savitri of the Savitri-Satyavan legend and they are paragons of all that is sacred in womanhood.

Glorification of woman is recurrent in all the novels of Raja Rao. In *The Serpent and the Rope*, Rao compares woman with the vast micro-cosmic energies of nature --- earth, air, fire and even ether. He beholds in women the manifestation of *shakti* without whom Siva is *shava* (dormant) and no creation is possible. In *The Cat and Shakespeare*, he has explored the *Tantric* myth of the Female Principle wherein the benevolent Mother Cat is the Supreme energizing principle that takes care of all human stumbling and we should have an unflinching faith in Her. But it is quite ironical that while on the one hand women are considered fit to be worshipped as a goddess, on the other hand they are treated as sub-alterns. Most of the female characters in Raja Rao's works are highly submissive. Right from their infancy, girls are taught, by their example of their mothers, that they can obtain protection of man by having submissive traits.

Raja Rao has depicted Indian women silently suffering domestic violence at the hands of their spouses who assert their power and authority by doing so, whereas women

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consider the matter as a private matter and keep it under wraps. In *Kanthapura*, women patiently endure police atrocities during the freedom struggle thinking that it is the same

as the beatings by their husbands. Most of the activists like Rangamma, Ratna and Achakka are widows and are free to participate in the freedom struggle. Raja Rao portrays a positive image of women as the forces of harmony, struggle and survival. They transcend barriers of caste distinctions and are upholders of stability. They have an uplifting role and they say: "Ravana will be slain and Sita freed and we shall be happy."¹ Though Rao might have glorified the role of women, his orthodox upbringing does not allow him to think beyond traditional Indian beliefs. Widows are depicted as being a curse on society, appalling restrictions are imposed on them, they are supposed to uncomplainingly serve the other members of the family and their remarriage is totally discouraged. But the double standards of our Indian society are evident because for a widower there is no dearth of girls and parents are more than willing to give away their daughter, not bothering about his age or the number of children he has.

In *The Serpent and the Rope*, Uncle Seetharamu makes Saroja 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"² (S. R, p. 271). Madeleine, an educated twenty-seven year old French lecturer, earnestly tries to please Ramaswamy in every possible way and is desperate to be loved by him. She becomes vegetarian, does not call her husband by his name like an Indian woman, cooks for him, cleans up when he vomits blood, and keeps things in an apple-pie order while he places things haphazardly everywhere. Her hankering after him makes him feel greater and godlier. He believes that worshipping another is the basis of all love. His superiority is further reflected when he states: "[t]he woman needs our worship for her fulfillment"³ (p. 174). Savithri also, despite being well-educated and rebellious, is subservient to the demands of the male, family and society. Feeling suffocated in the company of her husband Surrender Pratap, she wants to abandon him, but when Ramaswamy prevents her from doing so by reminding her of the importance of the husband and prime duty of a wife, she reconciles to her fate and accepts her future with Pratap.

In India, marriage is a sacred bond which has religious sanctity and women are expected to be chaste and devoted to their husband only. In *The Serpent and the Rope*, for Little Mother, a woman who pleases her husband attains heaven. "A man at home is like a God in the temple"⁴ (p. 261), says Little Mother, "What more happiness does a woman need than a home and a husband. The temple needs bell... and the girl a husband, to make the four walls shine"⁵ (S.R., p. 278). In *The Cat and Shakespeare*, Ramakrishna Pai opines that husband is like a God for the wife, so she must worship him. When his daughter Usha asks: "Father, what is marriage?" he replies, "Daughter, it is when I give you to God"⁶ (C.S., p. 62).

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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". His hatred for his wife Saroja is evident when he beats her up and blames her for every mess. When he has boils all over his body and there is no one to serve him, he remembers her and criticizes her for not being with him to take care of him.

For Rao, a woman's body is a territory and relationships are only for women to observe. Being a Brahmin gives a privileged status to a man to indulge unscrupulously in adultery. Women in Rao's novels surrender their *tan*, *man* and *dhan* happily the moment they come in contact with a man who is a Brahmin and dissolve into him. In *The Serpent and the Rope*, Ramaswamy's grandfather Kittanna's association with the concubine Chandamma brings him admiration and reverence for being a manly figure. In *The Cat and Shakespeare*, the thirty-three year old Saraswat Brahmin protagonist Ramakrishna Pai also exhibits the true traits of patriarchal norms. Instead of feeling any kind of guilt for his adultery, he rather justifies his extra-marital relationship with Shantha whom he considers an incarnation of ideal womanhood as her "giving is complete"(CS, p. 22) and she reveres him.

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. ⁷ (C.S, p. 23).

In all his works, Rao seems to declare the superiority of Indian eternal love that transcends marriage and we find in them Indian ceremonies to solemnize the spiritual marriage.

In the novel *The Chessmaster and His Moves*, the learned Brahmin hero Sivaram Sastri's relationship with different women--- Jayalakshmi, Suzanne and Mireille gives him insight and understanding of them as well as of himself. When Siva feels isolated in France, he feels fascinated by theatre actress Suzanne's physical charm. Suzanne likes Siva's Brahminic awareness and knowledge of *Vedanta* and she loves the Indian ethos, Sanskrit, *Hitopadesha* and the *Mahabharata*. Like a devoted Hindu wife, she never mentions Siva by name and uses only pronouns "you" and "he". She even wishes to be cremated like a Hindu wife. For her, Siva is a virtual god whom she pays obeisance by putting her head on his feet.

Suzanne's background reveals that she was deserted by her husband and was greatly upset by the tragic loss of her son Robert. She wishes to have a child from Siva, Robert reborn with a Brahmin father. But Siva, who expects unconditional love from her, is unnerved by her wish. He tries to convince her that as a Vedantist and a non-dualist, he expects her to get incorporated into him. He says, "Where there is no two, that is happiness, that is truth". But Suzanne cannot give up her identity and merge herself completely into him.

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Siva and Mireille attain a higher plane of awareness through physical union. Mireille's beautiful body gives him the joy of slowly rising dawn. He is reminded of the "cosmic festivity of peacocks, elephants and serpent dance before they mate. Siva wants Mireille to surrender her individuality and get absorbed into him on a psychic plane. But Mireille wants to live an independent life that is entirely hers.

Siva is very much fascinated by Jayalakhsmi, a sophisticated and elegant princess who is married to an unimaginative business tycoon Raja Surrender Pratap. Jaya's yearning is spiritual. Siva likes Jaya for her Brahmin-like purity, spiritual inclinations, and reverence which is characteristic of South Indian women. Siva too, like a true lover reveres her as if she were a goddess. He believes that she is a saint who gives him strength. She remains joyous and serene despite her serious ailment. Like an obedient and dedicated Hindu wife, she never allows Siva to let her go first as they open the door. She must come behind him as if he "indeed were the teacher and she the pupil". The intellectual and spiritual affinity between Siva and Jaya brings them closer to each other and they sit and converse for hours together. In Siva's company she feels *sat* as *anandam* (Truth as happiness). For her, he is her true lord. Their love is presented like that of Siva and Parvati, the goddess who remained unmarried and became an eternal bride to be awaiting her Lord forever. Jaya regrets having married unimaginative Surrender and wishes she had married Siva. But she upholds the sanctity of the age-old social convention of marriage and would never think of violating it. She thinks that there is but one marriage for a Hindu woman and she would never like to abandon her husband.

Having aspiration for the *Advaita Vedanta* non-duality of Sankara, Sivaram wants a woman to relinquish her individuality and get absorbed into him. He never enters into wedlock because for him marriage is a bond which he does not consider essential to reach the *advaitic* 'non-dualistic' state of two becoming not two. Sivaram is against asceticism and has relations with three women at one time. He believes that the Absolute can be realized through "the innermost recesses of woman". He experiences himself moving towards the light of the Absolute through his sexual pleasures. He seems to have faith in the analogy of thorn picking out a thorn which affirms that sensuality, which causes the fall of man, is also a means of his spirituality.

Siva greatly benefits from the modern Western set-up which he himself despises so much. In that system, women have enough liberty to help aliens like Siva. He does not show any sense of responsibility. It is his friends who make all arrangements for his sister Uma's stay and treatment when she arrives in Paris for medical consultation. Whatever he needs in his daily life is provided by others, particularly Suzanne. It is Suzanne cooks his food, cleans his kitchen, gives him medicine, nurses him in his sickness, takes care of his mail and readily offers him her body. And what does Siva give her in return? He continually nags her, complains against her hankering for a child. Suzanne's spiritual desperation is

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again a replay of Ramaswamy-Madeleine tragedy in *The Serpent and the Rope*. Despite the importance given to the institution of marriage in the *Vedas* and *Puranas*, in *The Chessmaster*, marriage is regarded as a myth and insignificant for a man-woman relationship. The Hindu myth of Krsna and Radha is repeatedly referred to glorify extra-marital affairs. On one of their last evenings together Jayalakshmi chants Mira's devotional song: "mere to girdhara gopala dusara na koi/tat mat bhrat bandhu apno no koi"⁸ (CM, 565). Siva claims to hold woman in high esteem and indulges in intense relations with them, but he does not marry any of them. He believes that if a man and a woman are deeply involved at the physical plane or at the spiritual plane, they can realize Brahman and reach the *advaitic* 'non-dualistic' state of two becoming not two. Marriage is not essential to attain this *advaitic* state. Real marriage takes place when there is non-dual affinity between the male and female. "The not two alone is marriage (CM, p. 701). He is of the opinion that man and woman in a relation should get submerged into one in such a way that they lose their individuality.

It seems that Siva wants to enjoy the company of women and develops relationship with them, but he wants to lead a life free from any bondage and commitment and for him marriage is a bond. And despite the indifferent and callous treatment meted out to them, all the women in *The Chessmaster* find Sivaram irresistible and willingly offer him his *tan man* and *dhan*. He is a wayward intellectual-sensualist who justifies all his escapades, liaisons, adulteries and treacheries by referring to higher truths. The intellectualized spiritualism of Raja Rao is absolutely baffling as it is embodied in his characters' thoughts and talks only and not in their actions. Rao seems to be justifying promiscuity, mistress-keeping and *lila* of love by his metaphysics and spiritual buffoonery.

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