



The Theme of 'Spiritual Quest for Truth' in The *Serpent and the Rope*

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ABSTRACT

The Serpent and the Rope unfolds with Ramaswamy narrating the events of his life as well as the truth hidden behind them. Rama was born a Brahmin - that is devoted to Truth. He believes that a "Brahmin is one who knows the Brahman. He knows the Brahmasutras and read the Upanishads. The story of Ramaswamy, essentially a spiritual biography with its emphasis on getting at the Truth becomes the unfolding of a Vedanta-based vision of India and deals with the magnitude, mystery, complexity, philosophy and metaphysics of India from the point of view of one who seeks Brahman and whose sensibility and values are uncompromisingly Indian.

KEYWORDS : Gruhastha, Bramacharya, Kama and Artha, Vanaprasthya stage, Sansara, Dharma, Maya

For Ramaswamy, it is the sociological and intellectual context that paves the way for his spiritual evolution. He also makes a journey away from home towards the West. It is After his education in India, Rama, a post-graduate, goes across the seas on a scholarship to France with a view to quenching his intellectual and materialistic thirst and is engaged in research on the influence of Vedant on Cathar philosophy. Thus he intends to establish a link between the Eastern and Western metaphysical schools of thought. His objective at this stage is to shine in studies and get settled in life, of course, amidst material comforts. The inner pressures are yet to surface in all their intensity. Since it can wait for some more time to ripe, Rama has to yield to the sensual pressures and fulfill the objective of the next stage - love, marriage and progeny.

At the University of Caen, Rama gets the acquaintance of Madeleine, five years his senior in age. Madeleine, a French teacher in history. She loved Rama partly "because she felt India had been wronged by the British, and because she would, in marrying [Rama], know and identify herself with a great people" (SR 18). Rama, In turn, is fascinated by the European civilization. Their domestic life starts off on a happy note mainly due to Madeleine's love for India and Its rich cultural tradition.

While Rama is physically present in an alien land, he is away from that land in terms of his consciousness. His own personality is always permeated with a sense of attachment to India's past heritage. India's rich tradition stands out like a towering oak tree in his consciousness. It is always a backdrop against which all his words and deeds are tested and executed. Rama's original intention was to obtain his doctoral degree and then to return to India with his wife and become a Professor at an Indian University. But this proves to be a dream because events take a different course. A child is born to them whom they call Krishna and later Pierre. Hearing of his father's illness, Rama returns to India in 1951. With his father's death Rama feels wholly orphaned. Soon he receives the sad news about the death of his seven-month-old son Pierre of bronchial-pneumonia.

When things do not work out to our expectations, thoughts about the unknown crisscross our minds and questions of deeper thought arise menacingly. A Gruhastha has to face the challenges of existence concerning not only himself but also everybody else dependent on him. Such challenges prepare one like Rama to elevate spiritually when he passes the Gruhasthya stage.

The story has thus started the action of the novel and prepared the physical basis for the spiritual evolution of Rama. In India, Rama accompanies his Mother to Benares and other holy places on the Himalayas to perform his father's obsequies. He visits the holy river Ganga that is having a metaphysical significance. Thus Rama's return to India has the effect of generating in him a deeper interest and keen awareness of his Indian roots. His realization that he is now the head of the family, combined with his reawakening of his Indian heritage, brings about a great transformation in his inner being

Rama thinks aloud: "I had serious questions of my own and I could not name them. Something had just missed me in life, some deep absence grew in me that no love or learning could fulfill I wondered where all this wandering would lead to. Life is a pilgrimage, I know, but a pilgrimage to where - and of what?" (SR 26). Such incomprehensible questions are beyond the reach of Rama's ability. And so he tries to puzzle out those evasive enquiries for which he has to experience the means to reach the end. He feels that he wandered a major part of his life, and became "a holy vagabond" (SR 9). In spite of his upbringing in an upper middle class family, higher academic qualification and Vedic background, Rama is unable to drift over his sufferings with self-confidence. At the stage of Bramacharya, he had been a successful student, winning a scholarship to go abroad for research. Now as a Gruhastha, he is full of unspeakable miseries. Even his knowledge of the Vedas and other scriptures offer him only fleeting solutions. The spiritual in him is yet to be activated and so remains dormant despite his Vedtci footing. He has not been able to prevail over the physical in him because he has not started practicing what he has learnt from the Indian ethos.

Many circumstances and issues successively heighten his agony. For instance, the death of Pierre makes Madeleine religious but not philosophical. But Rama's approach is altogether different: it is of a man, what is more of an Indian, whose soul has its roots in immemorial memories of a philosophical past. Rama, deep in his heart, is not worried because death for him is not the end of life but the continuation of it. It is not so unbearable to him as it is to Madeleine, the Westerner. Rama's philosophical attitude towards life makes him take his son's death with an easy mind. It is very clear that Rama who has almost reached the Vanaprasthya stage cannot look back to console Madeleine.

Rama remains calm over the death of his son Pierre. He is naturally bent to find answers to some deeper questions about existence. This shows that Rama is set to go to another higher level towards Self-Realization, Rama distances himself from his wife in view of his philosophical leanings. As a husband, he has to go through the cycle of Gruhastha which is yet another step to measure the worth of the ultimate goal of understanding oneself. The Gruhasathya stage is a part of our existential condition and a necessity to step on to the next stage of Vanaprasthya.

In the heat of passion, both Rama and Madeleine hoped to draw spiritual inspiration from each other but their efforts prove to be futile later because their individual selves do not converge at the same point. Rama tries to find his own self in Madeleine but it results in a miserable failure. His visits to his motherland pull him away from the earthly, especially his visits to some holy places in India and his meetings with Savithri. Many critics regard Savithri as a symbol of Indian womanhood representing Sakthi on the one hand and the mythological Savithri of Satyavan on the other. In the words of Iyengar, Rama finds in Savithri "a spiritual affinity" (SR 401). The process of Rama's Setf-Reahzation is set in motion after his association with Savithri.

Rama's marriage to Madeleine breaks down, but through his ideal, 'platonic' love of Savithri, which endures even her real marriage to another [Pratap Singh], he begins to realize himself and his Indian heritage and goes on to seek out a guru who can bestow the vision to his spiritual quest of Rama's. Rama's Indian roots and his association with Savithri serve as the media to enable him to elevate himself up to Self-Realization. To him, Savithri appears as a spiritual companion and one who has inspired his spiritual awakening that was sleeping in him for a long time. The ancient Hindu Scriptures expound that man and woman are complementary and one can realize one's self in the others. Rama does not want to turn back and wants to take quick steps to for the spiritual growth in him for his ultimate release from the maya.

Rama attempts to explain his meaning to Madeleine with an analogy, that of the serpent and the rope. In the dark it is possible to take a rope for a serpent. The rope stands for reality while the serpent does not exist. It is the Guru who brings the light of knowledge with which one can see that the rope is only a rope. It is this illusion of one's eyes which makes one see the serpent, and the truth is that there neither is nor ever was a serpent.

When Madeleine has a wound in her foot, Rama cleans it with boric acid. She has become so shy of exposing any part of her body that even getting her to stretch out her leg is difficult. She covers the whole of her leg and allows him just to touch her foot. Madeleine addresses her husband as brother and it marks the beginning of her Self-Realization. Simultaneously Rama's Vanaprasthya stage comes to an end and the final goal of Self-Realization is now within his reach.

After this strange meeting, Rama returns to Paris where he lives alone in a seventh floor room, which commands a view of the entire city of Paris. Hinduism talks of a maximum of seven rebirths during which a human soul must plan its earliest opportunity to rejoin the Paramatma. One need not wait for any successive rebirths and try to realize the Ultimate Truth as early as possible. From this point of view, we may assume that Rama has come to the extreme end of the secular world planned and has to design his merger into the Great Soul. His stay on the seventh floor may symbolically suggest his expediency towards Self-Realization. Rama heeds to Madeleine's advice and completes the legal formalities of a divorce. Meanwhile, he has completed his thesis, which is being translated into French before submitting it to the university. Now his mind is full of inquisitive ideas. His external participation in the earthly affairs has come to a dead end at which his inner voyage commences. Impelled by an awareness of the Absolute indicating him back, Rama chooses Travancore, his real Benares as the spot of his spiritual Guru. The unidentified Guru symbolizes the Absolute. Rama hopes to burn his physical attachments in the Guru's spiritual flame and merge into the Unknown. He realizes that it is not the God whom he is longing for: "No, not God, but a Guru is what I need. Oh, Lord, my Guru, my Lord" (SR 402) - the spiritual tradition of India which gives the Guru the highest place in man's quest for truth. The Guru is Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesa. He is the Ultimate Reality Itself.... declares a Sanskrit verse.

Abbreviations for text:

SR: The Serpent and the Rope

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