Quest for Identity in Raja Rao's The Serpent and the Rope

BRIJ M. BHALLA

THE quest for identity has become a universal theme of modern literature. Modern man finds himself enmeshed in the whirlwind of rapid technological and socio-economic changes, and the result is alienation and confusion of values. Man longs for stability, security and wholeness while impersonal forces tear his private life apart. In other words, his microcosm (private life) is threatened by powerful operations in the macrocosm (public life). According to Erik H. Erikson

> The key problem of identity, then, is (as the term connotes) the capacity of the ego to sustain sameness and continuity in the face of changing fate. But fate always combines changes in inner conditions, which are the result of ongoing life stages, and changes in the milieu, the historical situation. Identity connotes the resiliency of maintaining essential pattern in the processes of change. Thus, strange as it may seem, it takes a well-established identity to tolerate radical changes, for the well-established identity has arranged itself around basic values which cultures have in common.[1]

In Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope,* Ramaswamy claims: "I am not telling a story here, I am writing the sad and uneven chronicle of a life, my life . . . . "[2] Ramaswamy's story operates at three levels: it relates and registers the changes in his inner conditions which are brought about by his "ongoing life stages"; it takes stock of "the changes in the milieu," the historical and cultural situation of India in the context of East-West confrontation of values; and it explores the possibility of achieving "well-established identity" by building a bridge across common values basic to different cultures. Actually the novel

deals with the identity crisis of the hero — Ramaswamy, whose problem is born out of his own personal situation: "I was born an orphan, and have remained one. I have wandered the world and have sobbed in hotel rooms and in trains, have looked at the cold mountains and sobbed, for I had no mother" (p. 6). His father is also dead now and he tells us that he never loved his father. In terms of the identity-crisis, the failure of the macrocosm in insuring continuity and security to the new generation amounts to the failure of the paternal principle, for in the generational cycle it is father's business to provide economic, social and psychological support to his family — the essential minimum conditions for motherhood to operate. In the microcosm mothers give love and hope to insure healthy psychological growth of the child. But mothers can provide on the basis of their own past experience of being mothered, and the sense of *continuity* is essential here. Also, trustworthy contemporary surroundings in the form of social and cultural institutions must share and support a mother's role, which should be reinforced by an all-enveloping world-image, a metaphysical concept, which is capable of tying past, present, and future into a convincing pattern of providence.[3] Now, in *The Serpent and the Rope,* it is Raja Rao's article of faith that "an all-enveloping world-image" or "metaphysical concept" can create national identity (in the form of social and cultural institutions), and a national identity can solve the individual's identity crisis. The two problems (personal and national) are resolved and transcended by the solution of the third, which is only a perspective, a realization. The personal is symbolic of the cultural, and the two can hardly be disentangled in the novel.

The personal problem of Ramaswamy, his own identity crisis is the identity crisis of his ancient nation. His own sickness is symbolic of the discontinuity and attenuation of the whole Indian culture:

> "I am a tired man. I am of a tired race which for three (four or five?) thousand years has led such a studious,

> thin-fed, sedentary existence, that our nose and throat, our ears and tongue and eyes, have lost somewhat in native agility . . . . Oh, this fight against the contingency of modern life, of modern civilization; the battle is lost before it's begun! We've the fibres to know, not the sinews to act: we, the real impotents of the earth." (p. 145)

This applies not only to the Brahmins but to the whole of India. Ramaswamy's identity-crisis, therefore, is not only a quest to seek his own mother, (his father is dead — the paternal principle has failed) but also a search for a definition of the motherland. The crisis in his personal life with Madeleine is precipitated after his visit to India, and after his awareness of the values that Little mother unconsciously embodies. Meenakshi Mukherjee rightly points out that both Ramaswamy and Madeleine are intensely self-conscious about the epistemologies that they represent, in spite of their sharply differentiated attitude towards life.[4]

Rama has had three mothers, two of them being step-mothers — correspondingly, he has three motherlands, one real, India, and two adopted, England and France. And just as a new awareness of ancient values has come to him through young Little mother, similarly, a new definition of his motherland may be achieved by building a bridge across these nations and cultures. The marriage of Rama and Madeleine is, therefore, symbolic of marriage between countries and continents. The motif of building and crossing bridges runs throughout the novel. Rama is trying to build a historical bridge in his thesis by linking the Bogomilites and the Druzes and searching back the Indian background of the Cathars in Jains or Buddhists. Madeleine, also becomes interested in building similar bridges under the influence of Rama. She starts researching on the idea of the Holy Grail. She wants to establish that the cup of Christ was a Buddhist relic. The Holy Grail gives Madeleine's sense of geography a natural movement and she starts loving countries and epochs not her own. We are told that Madeleine, like all melancholic people, loved

bridges. So they build another kind of bridge together — a son is born to them. But unfortunately he dies and the bridge is never crossed. Madeleine was afraid of crossing bridges; this is why she changed his name from Krishna to Pierre from the second day of his illness. Now there is no bridge that they could cross together. For Madeleine "all bridges now led to Spain" and Rama knew that he could never go in that direction. Madeleine's faith in Rama is shaken and she never recovers from the shock. In other words the end has come quite in the beginning and the book is only to construct the process of this end.

The bridge is not built by standing on two opposite banks of the river. The two should have become one in the third, and the duality should have been resolved into oneness. But the death of Krishna forces Madeleine and Rama to find expression for their opposite viewpoints. For Madeleine the birth of a son meant the extension and continuity of her own self and that of the culture to which she belongs, which Rama in his "masculine isolation" and "Indian aloneness" can never understand. For a French mother, "It is the birth of the god in a chalice, the Holy Grail" (p. 36). Madeleine also articulates the cultural dualities in order to arrive at a clearer understanding of her own self:

> You people are sentimental about the invisible, we about the visible . . . "The child in the cradle. And the cradle against the Mediterranean, the Mediterranean the cradle of our civilization. I slept, Rama, night after night in the nursing home, not thinking of Pierre or of you but of Demeter and Poseidon and the voyage of Ulysses. In fact at first I thought a second name for Krishna would be Ulysses. How I rounded the names on my tongue: Krishna Ulysses Ramaswamy . . . . (p. 37)

Madeleine explores the roots of her own culture in order to achieve her identity. She sees a vision of Demeter and sings the beautiful Homeric hymn *Demeter Kourotrophos* to herself. The conflict starts when she asserts:

> "For you it was not a child, a son, your son and my son; but your heir. For me it was just a something — but then *suddenly* when I took him in my arms and held him

> against my breast the whole of creation shone in a single second — the nativity, I repeat, the first and only birth, the proud proof of happiness. Yes, for me Pierre was happiness, he did not make me happy. He was proof that man *is*, and cannot be happy but be happiness itself. (p. 38)

And Rama asserts: "Duality is anti-Indian; the non-dual affirms the Truth" (p. 41). Life has fluidity and continuity like the Ganges, and Himalaya "reveals the background of our unborn, immaculate being" (p. 42). It is awesome, distant and inscrutable. At the top sits Lord Shiva, the Master of life and death and the embodiment of both the sexes — a symbol of oneness.

Raja Rao is endeavouring to sift his own tradition with a view to selecting the best in our ancient thought and culture. He is trying to articulate this selective best to achieve identity in modern terms:

> Truth began where sorrow was accepted, and India began where Truth was acknowledged. So sorrow is our river, sorrow our earth, but the green of our trees and the white of our mountains are the affirmation that Truth is possible; that when the cycle of birth and death is over, we can proclaim ourselves the Truth. Truth is the Himalaya, and Ganges Humanity. (p. 35)

Ganges symbolizes humanity, so does the mysterious womanhood — the feminine principle. Raja Rao visualizes this in the person of his own sister:

> Saroja was a strange sensation for me. Here was a mystery which I had never observed before: the girl becoming woman . . . Saroja's presence now obsessed me sometimes, like one of those nights with the perfume of magnolia. Rich and green seemed the sap as it rose, and it had a night of its own and a day . . . something primordial was awakening in a creature, and I felt that maturity in a girl was like the new moon or the change of equinox, it had polar affinities. There was something of the smell of musk . . . I had named something I had not known yet — it was the absence that had become presence again; it was not Saroja I felt and I smelt, but something of the Ganges and the Jumna that rose into my very being. Benares was indeed nowhere but inside oneself: *"Kashi Kshetram, shariram tribhuvana janam."* And I knew: all brides be Benares born. (pp. 49-50)

It marks a stage in Rama's development. This consciousness is further developed when the crowning of the British

queen takes place. Here the Ganges becomes a symbol of the maternal principle, which is considered holy because consciousness of this principle of life is essential to the resolution of the identity crisis. The river as a symbol is made more inclusive and comprehensive when Seine, Thames and Cam are considered sister rivers, and equally holy guardians of the cultures which they have nurtured through centuries. And just as Benares is inside oneself, so is Paris "an area in oneself, a Concorde in one's being . . . A sort of Benares turned outward" (pp. 51-52). It is a Sanctuary built to the Mother of God. Seine has given birth to such beauty of spirit that, "Everywhere in the South you meet with this civilized attention, which shows how man has been informed of the sainthood of natural living" (p. 53). Similarly Cam is a holy river beyond history it is history itself. "The Cam is a river that lives on giving dreams" so that "a better England, a better India, a better world be circumscribed" (p. 168). Rama realises the truth about England and feels that England is in his bones and breath. He recognises that "the Londoner is eminently good. He is so warm, he is indeed the first citizen of the world" (p. 199). Besides, "the white man, I felt, did not bear his burden, but the Englishman did." And, "there would be good government on earth, and decency and a certain nobility of human behaviour, and all because England was. That I, an Indian who disliked British rule, should feel this only revealed how England was recovering her spiritual destiny, how in anointing her Queen she would anoint herself" (p. 200). This is not only the spiritual recovery of England, this is the spiritual recovery of Rama, and of India, too. This open-hearted acceptance of the best in the countries of his adoption corresponds to his respectful acceptance, and genuine appreciation of Little mother. This makes for wholeness and contributes to the making of his new self. Rama now achieves an "awareness of a new continuity" and his hope of making Madeleine his own is strengthened.

Besides, Little mother has sent the family jewels — the toe rings, for her daughter-in-law to insure continuity.

This new awareness must help him in establishing deeper relationship with Madeleine. For Rama, his new identity would consist of the best in his own tradition and the best of France and England. In short, the wholeness will be constituted of these diverse elements. Diversity is essential but the essence is unity. If duality persists, the identity crisis will persist also. In order to partake and perpetuate this new self Madeleine should believe in this unity and strengthen it. But Madeleine's identity crisis is of a different nature. To her, her marriage to Rama is based on duality i.e. an understanding between two individuals. She is extremely sincere in her efforts toward making this marriage successful. Rama's Indianness is meant to add to her knowledge and awareness to strengthen her own identity. She is proud of Rama's brilliance and loves his lofty impersonality, but she hates Indian haphazardness and haughtiness. She feels insecure in cutting herself off from her own cultural moorings. She thinks she has failed Indian gods but she is mistaken, for Rama can easily worship her gods, and is actually anxious about his Christian becoming. The failure of their marriage, therefore, is due to a gap in understanding. From now onwards, Madeleine comes under the influence of Georges, the Christian fanatic, and drifts away from Rama. Rama wants her as his "companion of pilgrimage . . . to lie at the feet of God together and unalone" (p. 99). But unfortunately Madeleine loves him out of pity to redress the wrongs the British have done to India. She also fails to understand that Rama's India has nothing to do with history; it is eternal:

> India has no history, for Truth cannot have history. If every battle of France has been fought for humanity, then it would be honest to say no battle in India was ever fought for humanity's sake. Or if fought, it was soon forgotten. Krishna fought against Bhisma by giving Bhisma courage. Mahatma Gandhi fought against the Muslims by fighting for them. He died a Hindu martyr for an Indian cause. He died for Truth. (p. 102)

This India, i.e. Truth, is beyond any formulation of conflicting polarities of good and evil: "India is everybody's: India is in everybody." Rama is a quester after this "India," this eternal Truth. For him this is true joy, true freedom. But for Madeleine India can at best be a paradise. This gap between these two attitudes is never bridged. Rama wants to prove that he is metaphysically right and he defines his identity at this stage in relation to the Absolute. All women are perfect for they have "the feminine principle in them, the *yin,* the *prakriti,*" and all men "are perfect when they turn inward, and know that the ultimate is man's destiny" (p. 311). Madeleine's spiritual satisfaction lies in Buddhistic renunciation, austerity and compassion. To Rama it is self-destructive: "the anthropocentric civilization, whether it be the Purist (or Protestant) or the Buddhist (or Jain), must be self-destructive" (p. 302). Madeleine develops mystic powers through her esoteric practices. But to Rama, "the miraculous itself is the dual made manifest" (p. 335). He emphatically refutes duality in a key passage in the novel:

> "The world is either unreal or real — the serpent or the rope. There is no in-between-the-two — and all that's in-between is poetry, is sainthood. You might go on saying all the time, 'No, no, it's the rope,' and stand in the serpent. And looking at the rope from the serpent is to see paradises, saints, *avatáras,* gods, heroes, universes . . . You see the serpent and in fear you feel you are it, the serpent, the saint. One — the Guru — brings you the lantern; the road is seen, the long, white road, going with the statutory stars. 'It's only the rope.' He shows it to you. And you touch your eyes and *know* there never was a serpent. Where was it, where, I ask you? The poet who saw the rope as serpent became the serpent, and so a saint. Now, the saint is shown that his sainthood was identification, not realization. The actual, the real has no name. The rope is no rope to itself." (p. 335)

Ultimately it is a question of perception. The reality is only One i.e. one's Self. This realization is made possible only through a personal Guru, for which one has to make a gift of one's ego. Madeleine refuses to accept Rama as her Guru. Her ego becomes more assertive as she advances

in her Buddhistic practices, and she challenges her husband to find for himself an "Indian Maitreyi" and leave her alone. The final break has come. She is advancing toward her sainthood, he toward his selfhood.

The concept of the personal Guru signifies the rebirth of the paternal principle, the failure of which precipitates the identity crisis. The realization of the primacy of the preceiver in the recognition of the truth — the Absolute, kills duality or multiplicity and reintegrates the psyche.

Apart from these two characters, Saroja and Savithri also face identity crises. Both have been exposed to western education and both refuse to accept the traditional roles assigned to Indian women. In the end both accept the traditional destiny. But in the case of Saroja the conflict is resolved by traditional authority, and her revolt fails for lack of conviction and courage. But Savithri's quest assumes the symbolic and mythical proportion of an epic character. She offers a contrast to Madeleine's development, for we are told that if Madeleine was all *explanation,* Savithri was all *recognition.* Like Madeleine, Savithri is also trying to imbibe new values from a distant continent. Emancipated and shockingly unorthodox in her way of life, she refuses to accept the traditional role dictated to her by her parents. Though she has agreed to get engaged to Pratap, she refuses to marry him. She has a Muslim friend in London but on suddenly discovering Rama she falls in love with him. Savithri symbolizes modern India, caught up in the conflict between tradition and modernity. Savithri understands that neither her father nor Pratap can help her in resolving this conflict. Rama convinces her as no other man has done in her life. The moment of realization is also the moment of surrender for her. But for Rama also this is a moment of recognition — a stage in the development of his own self. It is not that he becomes her Guru — her Krishna: she also becomes the medium of his self-realization, his Radha — the embodiment of the feminine principle, the eternal Truth.

She worships him as her Krishna, her Lord. But what is the meaning of this ritual? It is a commitment to the Absolute and a recognition that one belongs only to one's own self. The consummation will take place only when Ramaswamy becomes Krishna, it cannot take place now: "Because Krishna is not Krishna yet. And when he is Krishna there is no Radha as Radha, but Radha is himself . . ." (p. 363). This is a paradox, the mortal paradox of man; and strange as it may seem, "there where we take there is no love, and there where we love there is no taking" (p. 363). One can resolve this paradox only by "Discipleship of Krishna, of the Truth" (p. 363).

Hence, Savithri goes back to Pratap and marries him. She realizes that she is getting married to the eternal in him and there Rama's and Pratap's truth become one "Absolute," and all contradictions are resolved.

Rama attains here another dimension in his quest for selfhood. But he realizes he has a long way to go — "Krishna is not Krishna yet." The horse Kanthaka is waiting for him but he is not taking refuge in renunciation, he is going into battle. The horse symbolizes quest, and as the road is long, Rama's realization makes him humble. *Waves are nothing but water. So is the Sea,* says the epigraph at the beginning of the novel and its implications are realized by Rama only in the end, when he accepts the discipleship of his Guru. Kanthaka must take him now to Travancore. But that is not the end of the journey, for harnessing one's ego is no easy job. True marriage implies a complete negation of the ego, which is possible only at death. But Rama is now ready to move to the next stage in the journey of his soul. He, himself, has been a Guru to Savithri, but there is no limit to the development of the "self." Rama has recognized this truth and has cultivated the humility to accept discipleship. His commitment to his "India" is abiding and clear:

> India is not a country like France is, or like England; India is an idea, a metaphysic. Why go there anyhow, I thought; I was born an exile, and I could continue to

> be one. My India I carried wheresoever I went. But not to see the Ganges, not to dip into her again and again . . . I would go back to India, for that India was my breath, my only sweetness, gentle and wise; she was my mother. I felt I could still love something: a river, a mountain, the name of a woman . . . . (p. 376)

And this is not renunciation. It is onward march to a new *dharamkshetra,* Travancore this time. Benares has been conquered and the South must yield its spiritual riches in defining an Indian identity. Travancore is the new capital in the symbolic and psychic geography of Rama's self. The quest does not end with the end of the book, the dissolution of Rama's marriage with Madeleine does not signify any shrinking of Rama's spirit. It only signifies that Madeleine's France is not his France, nor Madeleine's India is his India. So this divorce is also a discovery. The obvious tragedy is actually an enrichment and affirmation in the sense that identity crisis has been successfully resolved.

NOTES

[1]Eric H. Erikson, *Insight and Responsibility* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1964), pp. 95-96.

[2]Raja Rao, *The Serpent and the Rope* (Delhi: Hind Pocket Books, 1968), p. 231. All page numbers at the end of quotations refer to this edition of the novel.

[3]Erikson, p. 116.

[4]Meenakshi Mukherjee, *The Twice Born Fiction* (New Delhi: Heinemann, 1971), p. 92.