Treatment of Puranas in Raja Rao’s *Serpent and the Rope*

Dr. Alka Sharma

Puranas are not merely fabricated stories. Puranas narrate a sacred history. In other words, Puranas tell us how through the consciousness, a reality came into existence—it can be a complete reality or only a fragment of reality. In fact, Puran is such a dynamic word which always revigorates the old in the new context (puraa navam karoti). The Indian-English novelists search and nourish the roots in their own Indian past, discover the myths that facilitate communication in the realm of timelessness and dovetail them with the experience of the immediate present. The attraction towards the wealth of our mythological paraphernalia and its treatment in Indian–English novel has made it a tapestry embellished with mythical spangles.

Age cannot wither; nor custom stale the life blood of the infinitely significant role of Puranas. Puranas are not merely fabricated stories; the man used to treasure these myths in his priceless possession. Puranas are, in fact, straightforward stories, a narrative which reflects the integrating values around which societies are built and organized. It codifies belief, safeguards morality, vouches for the efficacy of ritual and provides social norms. That’s why Bronislaw Malinowski describes it as:

‘…a vital ingredient of human civilization; it is not an idle tale, but a hard worked active force; it is not an intellectual explanation or artistic image, but a pragmatic character of primitive faith and wisdom.’

Puranas narrate a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in primordial times. In other words, Puranas tell us how through the consciousness, a reality came into being—it can be a complete reality or only a fragment of reality.

In M.H. Abrams words:

One story in mythology….A system of hereditary stories which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group, and which served to explain (in terms of the intentions and action of supernatural beings) why the world is as it is and things happen as they do, and to establish the rationale for social customs and observances and the sanctions for the rules by which men conduct their lives.

Puranas are a hard working extremely important cultural force. It is a narrative resurrection of a primeval reality, told in satisfaction of deep religious wants, moral cravings, social submissions, and even practical requirements. Finally, we can say that Puranas relate past with the present. They are a statement of past, greater and more relevant reality by which the present life, fate and man’s course of action is determined. Puranas are preservatives of traditions. They are dynamic and constantly regenerated.

Traditional Indian words are not only impregnated with root based meanings but also have a long traditional meaning which has always influenced the collective Indian mind at different
levels and in different situations of life. These traditional words have “sanskaarised” Indian psyche and as a result Indian’s understanding about the universe is expressed in the terms – Brahman, Purush, Shakti etc. Puran is another such dynamic word which always revigorate the old in the new context (Puraa navam Karoti). That is why Puranas are an expression of man ‘s deepest concern about himself and his place in the scheme of universe, his relationship with man, nature and god. Infact Puranas form a structure of ideas, images, beliefs, hopes and fears, love and hate. Eric Gould observes that myth is a synthesis of values which uniquely manages to mean most things to most men. It is allegory and tautology, reason and unreason, logic and fantasy, waking thought and dream, origin and end.4 As a matter of fact, the sole function of a myth lies in reconciliating of an original event to interpret and explain human nature in the modern context, and between the new meaning and the old event, this ontological gap is filled by myths.

The Indian – English novelists search and nourish the roots in their own Indian past, discover the myths that facilitate communication in the realm of timelessness and dovetail them with the experience of the immediate present. Indian English novelists have not aped their European counterparts, but they have harked back to the mythology of their own culture to forge significant patterns of fiction. Indian people are closer to their mythology than the modern Europeans The attraction towards the wealth of our mythological paraphernalia and its treatment in Indian –English novel has made it a tapestry embellished with mythical spangles.

If a world-view is required to make literature meaningful in terms of shared human experience then the Indian epics offer a widely accepted basis of such a common background which permeates the collective unconscious of the whole nation.5

Most of the Indian novelists have tried hard to probe deep into the realm of our past experience and, by connecting it with the present one, they have succeeded in making the contemporary reality more clear and more meaningful, giving us an impression that here is god’s plenty. Puranas have lend new meaning to the contemporary events. Puranas are like flesh and blood for the constitution of life. Infact Puranas are the legitimatization of life and life finds self-awareness, self-correction and self-realization in them.

“In Puranic history, women is conceptualized as Shakti, the possession of which is the ultimate quest. She is the one who is ever desired, won and lost again in the endlessly revolving strife for the world dominion between the demon-giants and the gods.”6

Shakti is, infact, the mindset of the people, of the society, of the civilization. Shakti is everything and everything is in Shakti. Shakti is union and this unity is truth- the ultimate truth. Prakriti and Purush constitute the ultimate reality – the ultimate truth. Though the two are diametrically opposed to each other, the evolution of the world takes place because of the union of the two. Modern man, like king Suratha and vaish Samadhi, has painful realization of his own isolation. There is a mood of total vacancy and dejection:
“There is nobody to go to now; no house, no temple, no city, no climate, no age.”

Preoccupied with the ultimate problems of life, man passes through various situations, making endeavours to transcend the fragmented and splintered worldview to arrive at an integrated one, to reach out to the absolute in order that the relative may become meaningful. It is during these efforts that he mutters to himself, the metaphysical questions like “who are you and whose, whence have you come?” and till he finds answers to these questions, he remains a wanderer, a vagabond on the earth. Feminine Principle is the agency through which self-realization is possible. Shakti is the power through which socio-physical, psychological, cultural union is possible. Womanhood is a vital entity for spiritual development.

Raja Rao in his The Serpent and the Rope suggests that Shiva and Parvati are the manifestations of metaphysical truth. Ramaswami, the protagonist, recognizes his identity through the feminine principle in order to gain a true perspective of his quest for wholeness. Both Savitri and Ramaswami achieve self-realization as in them, the Masculine principle is wedded to the Feminine Principle. On the other hand, the marriage of Rama and Medeleine proves unsuccessful and barren because Medeleine fails to be the true Feminine Principle – the feminine active principle, the efficient and material cause of the universe.

Even the queen of England in the novel is seen to be the feminine principle that makes the universe move. “To Mitra she is Varuna, to Indra she is Agni, to Rama she is Sita, to Krishna she is Radha”(352) She is Savitri for Satyavan. “She is the Prakriti that makes Purush manifest. The matrikshakti of Hindu mythology that gains a universal significance through Raja Rao’s panoramic application of it.”8 Shakti is active and creative principle and “Maya- Shakti is personified as world protecting, feminine, maternal side, the ultimate Beings. She is the creative joy of life... she instills into us – and she is herself – surrenders to changing aspects of existence. Maya Shakti is Eve, the Eternal Feminine”9 In the novel, the universe manifests the creativity of Maya.

Woman is the earth, air, ether, sound; woman is the microcosm of the mind... the knowledge in knowledge... woman is the meaning of the world... woman is kingdom, solitude, time ... woman rules, for it is she... the universe... woman is the world. (352)

The position of Shakti is described as:

“the womb (bhaga) represents the great Prakriti (nature)” yet “the possessor of womb (Bhagvan) is Shiva.”370

Thus Feminine principle through which Ramaswami realizes the ultimate truth because “the touchstone for measuring the truth and falsity of philosophies, ideologies and people.”10 That Ramaswami’s quest for truth is scaffolded on the Feminine principle is clear in his relationships
with various women in various forms as Shakti present in various forms – Madeleine, Savithri, Saroja, Lakshmi, Little Mother and Aunt Lakshmana. (170) Savithri, like her mythical counterpart, emerges triumphant in leading her eternal lover to the path of the knowledge of the self. As an embodiment of the three aspects of the feminine principle – Skakti, Prakriti and Sri. Savithri symbolizes love and the power of devotion which can conquer death itself. 11 Savithri remains a self-effacing, self-negating person who unlike Madeleine becomes ‘atman’ beyond body. In this way, she becomes a ‘hypostatic presence’ which he has been looking for and she becomes, as it were, a means of entry into a state where he transcends the dimensions of the ego and annihilates time and place. 12 There is an archetypal relationship between Savithri and Ramaswamy- the seeker and sought. Savithri’s love for Rama represents an enactment of myth of the eternal love of seeker unrealized longing for Absolute. To Rama, Savithri is symbolic of Parvati and Radha; to Savithri, Rama is the symbol of Shiva and Lord Krishna. In a passage which recounts the sweet longing of the gopi for Krishna of the soul for the divine, Raja Rao describes Savithri’s yearning and devotion for Rama:

A Hindu woman knows how to worship her Krishna, her Lord. When the moon shines over the Jamuna and the lights are lit in the households, and cows are milked, then it is Janki’s son who plays on the banks of the Yamuna in Brindavan… Krishna dances on the red earth….(209)

Savithri’s ritual marriage to Rama symbolizes the union of the Feminine principle with the Masculine principle. Thus in the character of Savithri, Raja Rao depicts woman as the metaphysical counterpart of man – Shakti to Shiva – Prakriti to Purush, as the cosmic energy, vital to the universe – as the soul born of silence as the power born of fire. Perfect union represents the final union with the absolute. Thus it is through a perfect understanding of the Feminine principle that one can learn to annihilate one’s ego to transcends the self, and achieve realization. It is in his relationship with Savithri that Ramaswamy realizes the significance of the Feminine Principle for self – illumination.

With the impact of modern literature, we began to look at the gods, demons, sages, and kinds of our mythology and epics, not as some remote concoctions but as types and symbols, possessing psychological background… Passing inevitably through phases of symbolic, didactic, or over-dramatic writing, one arrived at the stage of valuing realism, psychological and technical explorations and technical virtuosity. 13

It goes without saying that the force Puranas exert on the society is directly related to the credence its members attach to them. This is possible only when in our modern society this Puranic history is knitted in the fabric of contemporary scenario. The most pertinent question is that whether modern woman is empowered or she is an epitome of fulfillment like Durga or Shakti or Puranas? Well friends, I think she has the moral and spiritual power even today. If we talk of power and strength in terms of courage, endurance, self – sacrifice, women is the
supreme power today. The only important thing is that she needs to realize that Shakti Swaroop or herself.

**Works Cited:**
- Raja Rao, p.402.
- Meenakshi Mukherjee, p.143.
- Meenakshi Mukherjee, p.149.