

Fate, Redemption, and Human Agency in Selma Lagerlof's *The Rattrap*: An Examination Through the Lens of Indian Philosophy

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Abstract

The paper explores the themes of fate, redemption, and human agency in Selma Lagerlof's short story *The Rattrap*, through the framework of Indian philosophical concepts, particularly those from Hinduism and Buddhism. It draws parallels between the narrative structure and motifs of the story and core elements of both Hindu and Buddhist thought and how the story resonates with the moral and philosophical values of both traditions.

Keywords: *The Rattrap*, Indian Philosophy, Hinduism, Buddhism, Desire, Redemption

1. Introduction

The Rattrap by Selma Lagerlof is a multi-layered, allegorical tale that explores the profound transformation of its central character, a peddler, from a cynical, self-interested, even misanthropic man into one who experiences moral redemption. At the heart of this transformation lies a confrontation with human nature, temptation, and the moral consequences of one's choices. The story reveals the possibility of change and self-realisation, as the peddler's encounter with kindness leads to a profound moral shift.

The Rattrap offers an interesting ontological analogy, as the peddler likens the world to a materialistic "rattrap". He believes that all humans are by nature avaricious and desirous. It is their desire that leads them to crave materialistic comforts such as wealth and luxury. However, as soon as man acquires an amount of material luxury, he desires more and more of

it, and is thus captured in a self-imposed and ever-expanding “rattrap” of greed, desire, and dissatisfaction.

However, the peddler, who possesses nothing, believes himself to be above the hedonistic “rattrap” of possessions. Ironically, after stealing money from a crofter who shelters him, the peddler finds his own self ensnared in the rattrap. After he finds shelter yet again in Ramsjo Ironworks, he is confronted by the patronising benevolence of the ironmaster, who mistook him for an old regimental comrade who had fallen on hard times.

The story describes how “kindness” can be a multi-faceted concept. The peddler is treated with ostensible kindness by both the crofter and the ironmaster, which he repays with deception. Yet, it is apparent that the crofter’s kindness stemmed from loneliness and a self-interested desire for company. Meanwhile, the ironmaster wants to help the peddler because he believed the man to be an old companion, and sees himself as a beneficent, father-like figure. Thus, the peddler does not feel real moral scruples in deceiving them, and is rather concerned about the implications of this for his own self.

However, it is Edla’s- the ironmaster’s daughter- true and unselfish kindness that acts as the catalyst for bringing about a moral and spiritual transformation in the peddler. She, through her genuine kindness and faith in the peddler’s morality, imbibed in him the desire to live an honest life. She transformed him from a cynical misanthrope to a man who believed in human kindness and individual agency. Thus, the story demonstrates how compassion can bring about transformation and redemption.

2. Hypothesis

The paper hypothesises that *The Rattrap* not only reflects a profound moral transformation but also embodies the broader philosophical principles of Indian thought, emphasising the importance of moral choice and redemption in the face of life’s inherent illusions.

3. Research Questions

- What are the core features of similarity between values reflected in *The Rattrap* and Indian Philosophic thought?
- How do the questions on morality and redemption in the story align with Indian philosophical framework?
- What is the significance of transformation and transcendence in the story and Indian thought?

4. Analysis and Application of Concepts

The analysis examines the themes of fate, redemption, and human agency in *The Rattrap* through the lens of Indian philosophy, particularly Hinduism and Buddhism. Both traditions offer profound insights into human nature, the moral struggle between attachment and liberation, and the potential for spiritual transformation. Concepts such as *dharma*, *maya*, and *karuna* play a pivotal role in both *The Rattrap* and ancient Indian philosophy, offering a robust framework for understanding the peddler's journey in the context of the latter. By aligning the story with these philosophical tenets, we can better understand the broader moral and metaphysical messages embedded in Lagerlof's narrative.

4.1 Human Nature and *Dharma*

In Hindu philosophy, *dharma* refers to the moral law or ethical duty that governs an individual's actions. It represents an inner sense of righteousness, a cosmic order that upholds the harmony of the universe. Thus, *dharma* emphasises order for both the individual, as well as the society as a whole.

It is one of the *purushartha chatushtaya* (the four goals of life). Additionally, not only is *dharma* one of the four *purushartha*, it is also the underlying foundation for the other three. Thus, to live a life that aligns with the *purushartha*, one must live a life that abides by

principles of *dharma*. *Dharma* also converges with the three *gunas*; *sattva*(purity), *rajas*(passion), *tamas*(darkness), and aligns with the Buddhist concept of *dhamma*.

In the context of *The Rattrap*, the peddler's initial nature embodies a lack of *dharma*—he is self-serving, deceptive, and driven by personal gain. His life is governed by survival instincts rather than any higher moral code.

However, his encounter with the Edla serves as the catalyst for his transformation. She indirectly reminds him of the importance of *dharma*, guiding him toward a more ethical and moral life. This shift reflects the potential for individuals to align with their higher nature, to recognise their moral duty, and to act accordingly. He is thus brought to a way of life that aligns with the fulfilment of the *purushartha*.

In Hindu thought, the concept of *dharma* emphasises personal responsibility, where one's actions are shaped by a higher moral order. The peddler's eventual decision to act nobly in returning the money to the ironmaster is an embodiment of this principle, marking his journey towards spiritual redemption. His redemption is not merely an external act but a realisation that true fulfilment comes from aligning with *dharma*, not personal gain.

4.2 Innate Propensity Towards *Lobha* (Greed)

One of the central psychological tendencies in *The Rattrap* is the peddler's inclination toward *lobha*, or greed. This desire for material gain traps him in a cycle of deception and survival. In Hinduism, *lobha* is considered one of the five principal afflictions (*kleshas*) that obstruct an individual's spiritual growth. Greed leads to attachment, which in turn leads to suffering and bondage in the cycle of *samsara* (birth and rebirth).

The peddler's life is initially marked by this tendency toward *lobha*, which is symbolised in his view of the world as a rattrap—an environment where he believes everyone is out to exploit each other. His worldview reflects a deep attachment to materialism and a failure to recognise the potential for moral transformation. However, as the story progresses,

the peddler's encounter with selfless love and compassion challenges his attachment to *lobha*. By the end of the story, he transcends this base instinct, recognising that true freedom lies in the selfless action of returning the stolen money. This act of moral redemption reflects the possibility of overcoming *lobha* and attaining a higher state of being.

4.3 *Maya*: Materialism, Hedonism, and the *Charvaka* Tradition

In Hindu philosophy, *maya* refers to the illusion of the material world—an illusion that distracts individuals from realising their true nature. The material world, with its temptations and desires, creates a false sense of reality that keeps individuals trapped in the cycle of attachment and suffering. *Maya* as illusion is an important part of the *Upanishadic* tradition.

The *Charvaka* tradition, an ancient school of materialistic thought in India, exemplifies this emphasis on the physical world and the pursuit of pleasure as the ultimate goals of life.

The peddler's life is interspersed with *maya*— his analysis of the world as only a trap of wealth and the need for survival, and his perceived immunity from material pursuits shows that at the very beginning of the story, the peddler believed himself to be above the mesh of *maya*. Later, after stealing the money, however, the peddler realises the pervasiveness of *maya* and how he himself had become embedded in material pursuits. His cynical perspective that everyone is out to exploit others aligns with the *Charvaka* perspective, where individuals are driven by hedonistic desires and the pursuit of immediate gratification.

Towards the end of the story, however, it is apparent that this worldview is not the end of the peddler's journey. His encounter with compassion and selflessness challenges the illusion of *maya*. Through this experience, the peddler begins to see beyond the material world, and thus begins to transcend *maya*.

4.4 Desire

In Buddhist philosophy, desire is seen as the root cause of suffering. This thought finds its expression in the Four Noble Truths, which are:

- a) '*dukkha*' (the world is full of suffering)
- b) '*samudaya*' (desire leads to suffering)
- c) '*nirodha*' (cessation of suffering is possible)
- d) '*magga*' (cessation of suffering can be achieved by following the *magga* or the path of moderation)

This in turn leads to the Eightfold Path, which describes the conduct through which cessation of suffering may be attained.

Desire, and the cessation of ruinous desire, is the core theme of *The Rattrap*. The peddler views the world as a rattrap of desires, and much like Buddhist philosophy, believes that it is desire that leads to attachment, and desire that gives rise to insatiable greed. Moreover, when, moved by Edla's kindness, the peddler decides to live an honourable life, he moves beyond the trap of desire.

4.5 Determinism and Optimism

Several sects within Hinduism and Buddhism deal with the question of determinism and human agency. While some philosophies hold with fatalism and pre-determinism, the karma theory of both of these traditions emphasises individual agency and reciprocity of individual actions in shaping eventual outcomes.

The theme of determinism in *The Rattrap* can be seen in the peddler's initial view of life as a trap, where individuals are bound by fate and circumstance. This perspective echoes a deterministic view of human existence, where one's actions and fate are shaped by external conditions and inner desires. However, Lagerlof presents a more optimistic view, suggesting

that redemption is possible through human agency. The peddler's transformation is not predetermined; it is the result of his choices and his encounter with compassion.

4.6 *Karuna* (Compassion) and *Metta* (Kindness)

The Edla's compassion plays a pivotal role in the peddler's redemption. In Buddhist philosophy, *karuna* refers to compassion, the deep empathy for the suffering of others, and the desire to alleviate it. Her selfless act of kindness offers the peddler a glimpse of a world beyond selfish desires. This compassion serves as a counterpoint to the peddler's initial state of *metta*, which is compassion and empathy towards others. *Metta* emphasises universal companionship; Edla does not simply pity the peddler, she also empathises with him and treats him in a manner as she would treat an "equal".

4.7 Human Agency and Ultimate Redemption

The story of *The Rattrap* ultimately underscores the power of human agency in the process of redemption. While the peddler's actions are initially driven by his selfishness and belief in determinism, his redemption is a result of his conscious choice to act according to *dharma*. The story imbibes the principles of *dharma* and *karma*, that allow him to transcend his past actions and achieve liberation. The peddler's act of returning the money to the ironmaster represents the triumph of *dharma* over *lobha* (greed) and the ultimate victory of truth.

The phrase *satyamev jayate* (truth alone triumphs) serves as a moral and philosophical culmination of the peddler's journey. His ultimate act of returning the money signifies the triumph of truth, selflessness, and moral righteousness over the forces of materialism and deception. This mirrors the Hindu and Buddhist teachings that, despite the illusions of the material world, truth and moral integrity will ultimately prevail.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, Selma Lagerlof's *The Rattrap* presents a profound exploration of human nature, fate, and redemption. Through the lens of Hindu and Buddhist philosophy, the story's central themes—such as *dharma*, *lobha*, *maya*, and *karma*—can be interpreted as a representation of the moral and spiritual challenges that individuals face in their pursuit of self-realisation and redemption. The peddler's transformation from a cynical, materialistic man to a figure of moral integrity mirrors the potential for all individuals to overcome the illusions of the material world, transcend greed, and align with a higher ethical order. The themes of human agency and the triumph of truth are central to the story's message, which highlights that through compassion, self-reflection, and righteous action, redemption is possible. Ultimately, *The Rattrap* illustrates the importance of *satyamev jayate*—the victory of truth—and serves as a reminder that moral and spiritual redemption is within reach for those willing to transcend the traps of materialism and illusion, which align with central teachings of Indian philosophy.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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