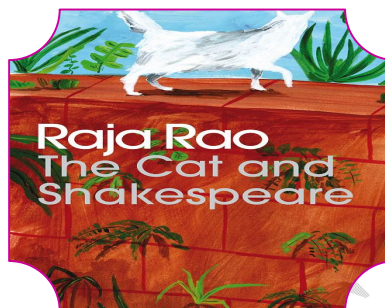




AN APPROACH TO RAJA RAO'S THE CAT AND SHAKESPEARE

Dr. Kalyan Dnyaneshwar Sonawane
Assistant Professor & Head ,
Department of English ,
Annasaheb Waghire College, Otur, Tal. Junnar Dist. Pune.
Affiliates to S. P. Pune Uni. Pune.



ABSTRACT

The present paper is a moderate attempt to explore into the labyrinths of culture and philosophy as reflected in Raja Rao's novel The Cat and Shakespeare. The culture and philosophy are Indian and it entails that the study should be carried out with this perspective in mind. This is very obviously true and the researcher has tried to probe into the Indian cultural and philosophical facets in this novel, yet it is important to note that Raja Rao was an Indian writer who got his higher education in the West, worked as a professor in reputed American universities and earned prestigious position as a writer and philosopher in the West. A huge Western background of culture and philosophy that his fictional work reflects and the interventions that are made by the colonial rule in India entails a cursory learning of some of the basic ideas of the Western culture and philosophy. Rao's fictional world thus requires a subtle understanding of the Indian culture and philosophy but simultaneously a cursory knowledge of the Western culture and philosophy is also necessary. It is sensible to sneak into the Western philosophy to know the backdrop of Rao's selected novels.

KEYWORDS: culture and philosophy, philosophical, western mode, coalesce, colonial rule.

INTRODUCTION :

The present paper approaches the portrayal of Indian culture and philosophy in Raja Rao's *The Cat and Shakespeare* published in 1965. It is notable to point out at the outset that the novel adopts several positions at drawing an apparent picture of the Indian culture and philosophy. With the political freedom achieved by the Indians, Rao no more lingers on the theme of political activism but moves beyond it and into dense intellectualization. The novel expresses the prominent features of the Indian culture in their micro forms and at intellectual level. In this sense, the novel should be understood as progression of the theme of philosophical quest for self that the author initiated with the earlier novel, *The Serpent and the Rope*. The novel has been described by the Raja Rao himself as a metaphysical comedy. He loses himself entirely in the prayer and becomes what he sees.

The book has developed out of the story, *The Cat* published in *ChelsaReview* New York (No. 5, Summer 1959). "Shakespeare" is afterward added to the title of the book. The story tones very hilarious but has a profound philosophical meaning. Ramakrishna Pai is a Saraswat Brahmin. He has a wife and two children but he lives away from his family. Pai has developed relations with Shantha, a school-mistress. The relationship of Ramakrishna Pai and Shantha obtain full acknowledgement by Nair. He takes it very gently like a good and truthful friend. The wall between the houses of these friends blocks communion between them. Govindan Nair frequently meets Pai by leaping across it, with no secrets misplaced between them. Even at the age of thirty-three, Pai experiences that he has not been able to attain anything valuable in life.

The novel in part is a depiction of a society which is invaded with evils like casteism, superstition, corruption along with the varied surface of social, cultural, intellectual and religious life. There is a reference to public sharing system through ration cards, brought in during the period of World War II, in order to regularize the provisions of food grains, sugar, oil, cloth, cement and other essentials of life. This scheme in the hands of dishonest and corrupt officials grows into a network of bribery, corruption, secret dealings and favoritism. Many duplicate copies of the ration card, bearing the same number, are printed and sold surreptitiously at a best price often rupees against the government price of two rupees. Bags of rice are stolen from the railway wagon and sold in black-market. There is also a vision of the impending Gandhi-Raj which will give a house to every resident. House is a falling back and central symbol and as such as has been dealt in feature later.

There are certain things that denote the social status of people in Kerala. For example, owning a house is a status symbol. As well, reference is also made to middle-class practice and customs like quaffing large quantity of coffee by Nair, snuff-taking by Boothalingam Iyer, faith in astrology and the curse of God on the unholy. Drought and food shortage are assigned to war-crimes. The Ration office where Govindan Nair works is a true spokesperson of cultural and religious variety of Kerala. There are Christians; as a result of imagined visit of St. Thomas to Malabar in 52 A.D. Brahmins and Nairs are major castes among Hindus. The Ration office has Boothalingam Iyer as the boss, and other important associates of the staff comprise Govindan Nair, John, Abraham and Syed Sahib. All these acts in the novel show both post-independence period of the novel and the changed focus of the author.

There are two humorous court scenes wherein Nair's skill in dialectics becomes evident. Nair is arrested on charge of accepting a bribe of rupees one hundred and nine from some lady. It is constituted that the lady's son, owner of a ration shop, has adopted assets more than his recognized sources of income. The lady, when interrogated, accepts that she had paid the money to Nair for the heifer which she buys from him. The police superintendent in jail feels very painful in his presence because of his capricious questions. He tackles him with the questions. The novel has profound philosophical implications. For the Western reader who has no background-knowledge of *Vedanta*; non-dualism, Hindu scriptures, it should certainly bewilder him.

The novelist applies myths, legends, fables and symbols to actualize the metaphysical utterances of some characters to demonstrate the individuality of characters. Rao also uses digressional mode for the reason of clarifying a meticulous part of the story, defining feature of a character or situation or merely for a transitory reference. *The Cat and Shakespeare* is the tale of Pai's quest of ultimate reality. In the novel, Raja Rao uses rich Indian mythology, history and culture to express his idea of the Impersonal Absolute and recognition with it in the post Independence period of time.

The novel *The Cat and Shakespeare* expresses Rao's masterly use of the protagonist narrator method. He artistically interlaces the myths, legends and symbols in the narrative to actualize the metaphysical content of the novel. *The Cat and Shakespeare* may bewilder those readers who do not have enough knowledge of the basis of Rao's philosophical tone. Writers in post Independence period are determined by Western theories but at the same time they do not forget the foundation of Indian culture which have firm trust in god. Even the legendary books ponder the culture and philosophy and a suitable way to live their life through the medium of *Bhakti* and *Sadhana*.

Devotion is further separated into - *sakama* and *nishkama* forms. *Sakama* indicates worship by means of a desire for worldly gain and tangible possession. These become an 'end' in them and oppose any wish for sovereign satisfaction, immortality and *moksha*. Idol-worship or *upasn'* forms the first step in *bhakti-marga*. The symbol is instilled with life and revered as godhead. The visible image acts as external symbol of God for aim of worship.

The devotee experiences the attendance of the Lord in the image and worships it with commitment. The idol remnants an idol, but the worship is for the Lord. After that internalizes feelings and search for God inside the quester's spirit. He is intimidated by his Supreme and heavenly presence. This is a higher form of worship entailed solely for men of uncommon intellect. Debauched and conservative minds fail to reach this

phase. Their ego and longing become the biggest impediment between them and God. Ideal worship needs complete disengagement from all worldly things.

The devotee senses the attendance of the Lord. He graduates into *para-bhakti*. Venerate and devotion of such a votary is kind, unselfish and total, with perfect disregard to any type of reward. Replicating His name, remembering Him and His assigns, the worshipper aspire at fusion with the Over soul. Such a meditation generally consequences in the seeker's communication with the transcendental, changeless Brahman. Devotion should not be believed as only a state of emotional exposition. It is meticulous discipline and arrant coaching of the will and mind. Divine love can be formulated only through forwarding the whole human experience.

The novel advises Ramanuja's theory of '*Vishishtadvaitavada*' or characterized-doctrine. Ramanuja's renowned system is so called because it speaks regarding God with entailed assigns. It is *advaita* or non-dualism with experience. *Sankara* holds *avidya* or ignorance accountable for not realizing the expressions of God. The illusory appears real. Ramanuja regarded arrogates as real and permanent but focus to the control of Brahman.

The title of the novel *The Cat and Shakespeare* also carries the Shakespearean themes of divine justice, prevarication and vengeance. Thus, Rao's novel presents a virtual storehouse of rich philosophical musings, language and themes, prominently parallel to the playwright. With the assistance of this guide, he is carried on into an ordered condition of purity. On the other hand Shakespeare also deals with the basic feelings like love, hate, guilt, fear, jealousy that emanate from the real world. Love as a feeling is not expressed to a single section or time of human existence but demands a range of feelings covering the entire life of an individual. Relations between husband and wife, master and servant, friends, brothers and sisters get demonstrated in Shakespeare's world.

The character of Govindan Nair reflects all these features of worldliness and other worldliness. He loves his neighbor like a friend, takes care of him like a mother, directs him as a guru and assists like a brother. 'Cat' and 'Shakespeare' in the title of the novel is implicative as a metaphysical conceit. The use of Shakespeare as a symbol suggests that like a cat, he is also a great mystery. This is reflected in the enigmatic personality of Govindan Nair whose comments and proclamations often are equivocal. Nair's unplumbed knowledge is at par with the philosophy embodied in the plays of Shakespeare.

In the novel the symbols applied by Rao are evidently unusual. The two equivocal representations in the 'serpent' and the 'rope' and their deep philosophical introduction in the former novel have been contributed metaphysical continuity here in the shape of the 'cat' and 'Shakespeare'. These may also represent to the motif of 'female-male relationship' talked about earlier. Acting as diverse points of reference due to their singular connections, they appear different with different insight. Their major function is to melt negations.

Raja Rao's *The Cat and Shakespeare* is an oracular work of fiction. It is there a slight interaction of the comic and the serious, the amatory and the metaphysical. The collocation of the evidently heterogeneous constituents interwoven in the novel, and the symbol of the cat as a goddess lend difficulty to the novel. The novel casts man's quest for Truth as the metaphysical inquiry. Pai's ontological conjecture in prompt the readers of Ramaswamy's exploring questions about love and death. Like Ramaswamy, Pai experiences that life is a great mystery and man does not know even a bit of Truth. Death disturbs Pai as it does Ramaswamy. Pai is amazed by self-interviewing whether there can be a father without a daughter or whether he is the real reason of Usha's birth. The more he thinks himself to be the reason of Usha's birth, the more he gets troubled. His emotional cry, "Lord, where shall I go now? For I am cause," (P.66) is an argument of the person baffled by the mystery of the Creation. *The Cat and Shakespeare* has the Tantric contemplation subtly woven into its texture. The major characters in the novel talks the miracle characteristic of necromancy utilized in *Tantrism*. In his initial meeting with Ramakrishna Pai, Govindan Nair says him that there are *sadhus* who eat three emergencies of sand to satisfy their hunger.

Govindan Nair's affirmation that he is himself such a *sadhu* "distributing numbers" and giving "magical cards" is forced by his interest in the occult used in *Tantrism*. The narrator, Ramkrishna Pai, also

remembers the *Tantric* miracles carry out by the grandmother of Mudali's wife. She could stop a flood through conjuration. She beams to the goddess as if she had recognized her well. She entered the palace as if she had been familiar with its circuitous ways. Such positions in the work are aromatic of the occult practiced in *Tantra*. The novel is a generous adoration of the supreme goddess. The majority of the characters such as Govindan Nair, Shantha, Shridhar, Usha, Mudali and Ramakrishna Pai are the worshippers of the goddess who is the supreme divinity of the Hindu *Tantra*.

Raja Rao depicts woman as a defensive mother who is subservient in the continuation and affirmation of life. Shantha also typifies the complete nature of woman, for she is at the same time a wife, mother and goddess; all the changed aspects of womanhood embodied in her. The woman in the novel is defined as wife, mother and deity; all the various forms of womanhood mix into a single being. This discussion of the woman in the novel is accordant with the *Tantric* faith which believes all women at all representatives of the supreme goddess.

The novel also draws the -non-dualistic kinship between Ramakrishna Pai and Shantha. Raja Rao dwells upon the communication between man and woman as he comprehends the reliance of one on the other. He thinks that the male achieves consciousness only through his kinship with the female. The following dialogue in the novel plans the identity-experience culminates in non-dual connection between Pai and Shantha.

The novel is a narrative of modern India as Raja Rao himself sub-titled it. It is a realistic portrayal of practical and realistic surface of Indian life, which is confined balance by a strong spiritual crouched of mind. The novel dwells of a down to earth demonstration of Indian life as against the usual flight into the higher realms of religious experience undertook in *The Serpent and the Rope*. Knowledge and devotion play a very important role in getting liberation of individual soul from the fetters of bondage. To put it in appropriate terms *Bhakti* and *prapatti* are the watch words of this technique.

The Cat and the Shakespeare is another effort of Raja Rao at philosophical fiction, though in a new instruction viz. 'metaphysical comedy'. The author himself has called it 'a book of prayer'. There is randomness and the story mode is in consonance with the life and characters of the story. As *Nachiketa* was released and *Yama* ushered him into the nature of the Self, similarly Ramkrishna Pai, achieves salvation. Here too, when the seeker crosses the roadblock of limited knowledge, there is an elevation in feeling. Even death could not scare the aspirant at that point of time. The spiritual feel diffuses his being as he learns the lesson of rejection. Pai discovers that the real realizing involves an amalgamation of the self with the object of perception. He now estimates the importance of his Guru's acts and declarations.

To convey the ideal and whole surrender to the will and elegance of the cosmic mother, the philosophical similarity of cat and kitten is applied by Govindan Nair. The philosophical similarity of cat and kitten is symbolic and adverts to *Ramanujacharya's* theory of *Vishistaadvaitavada*. *Ramanujacharya's* famous system is so called because it talks about god with involved assigns. It is *advaitic* or non-dualism with experience. Sankara applies '*avidya*' or ignorance responsible for not realizing the expression of God. The unreal seems real. *Ramanujacharya* considered assigns as genuine and enduring but subject to the control of Brahman.

The novel *The Cat and Shakespeare* is an attempt to strike balance between polarized opposition. Rao is a modern writer with modern view and this prevents him from having full access to the *Sthitpradnya* (stoic) state. It is important to note that *The Cat and Shakespeare* is in advance over *The Serpent and the Rope* and a mid-position between beginning of *Sadhana* and its end. The novel also deepens the crisis of self-attainment and thus intellectually enters into deep theorization.

The road to self-realization is full of difficulties, pains and sufferings and so the seeker needs great mental strength, devotion and the blessings of his/her master. Surrender, as an act of complete submission to Guru purifies the mind of the seeker and prepares him to move on towards the Absolute. Nair works as a mentor to Pai. There is a very healthy correspondence between Nair and Pai as Nair enables his *Sadhaka* to reach his aspired goal. It is needless to relate the entire narrative here, but it aptly shows that synthesis, submission and realization are the stages through which every *Sadhaka* has to go and get redeemed.

Rao is aware of the untranslatability of such metaphysical/spiritual experience and he deliberately keeps such untranslatable experience untouched by words. Rao's firm conviction that social problems are indicative of spiritual problems gets easily translated into the narrative. The social is the outward projection of the spiritual and liberation from this dilemma makes life truly happy and worth living.

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