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THE PHILOSOPHICAL COMPLICATION IN RAJA RAO'S *THE CAT AND SHAKESPEARE*

(A Book Review By)

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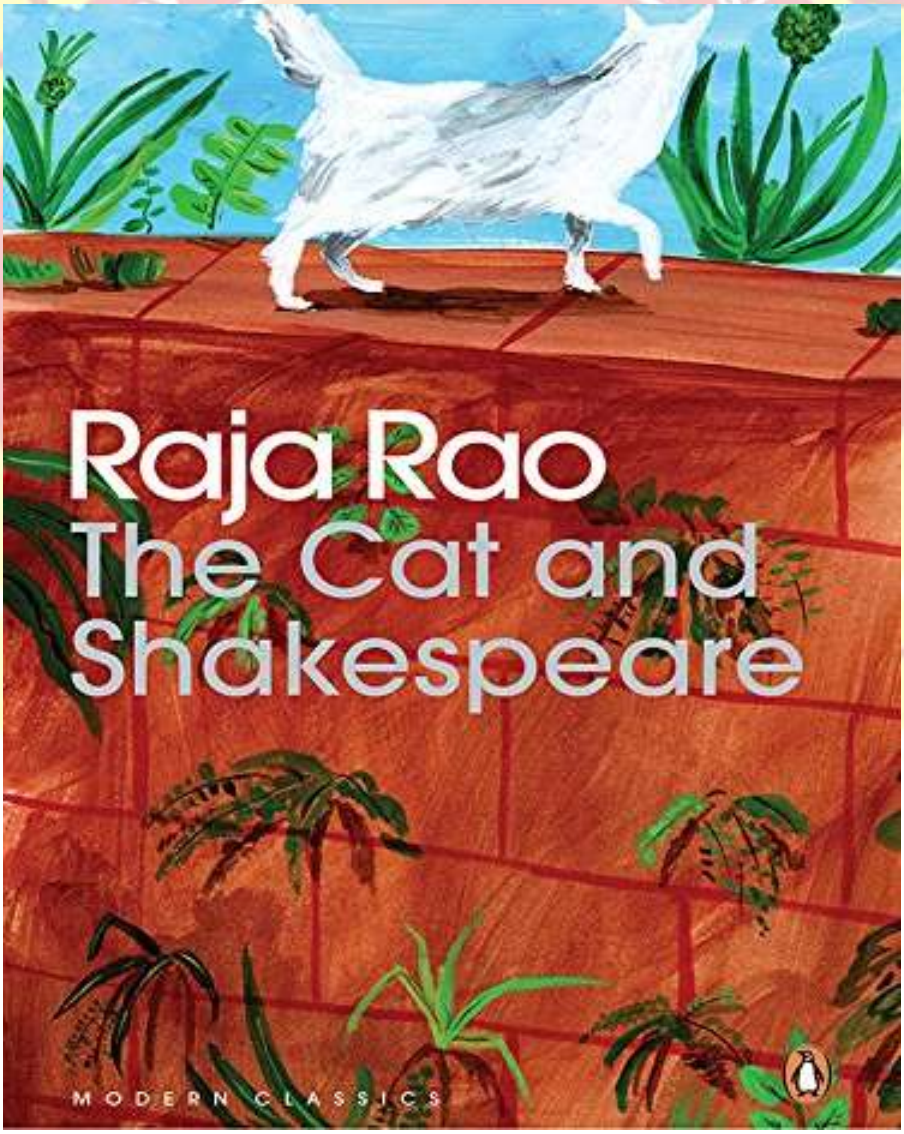

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One of Raja Rao's most baffling novels, *The Cat and Shakespeare* (1965), has created a space of its own, albeit controversial, in Indian writing in English. Largely satirical yet oddly philosophical, the novel follows the story of two friends: Govindan Nair, a deeply religious, down-to-earth philosopher who works at the Rationing Department, and Ramakrishna Pai, a self-confident divisional clerk. However, it is not just their story – and, as the sub-title suggests ('*A Tale of Modern India*'), it is a humorous yet clever portrayal of life in Trivandrum during the Second World War from the perspective of two civil servants, one a Brahmin with negligible Vedic knowledge, and the other a 'Nair', who is not a Brahmin and yet has deep metaphysical interest: "He [Govindan Nair] had copied Astavakra Samhita, and he often carried it with him. He liked to recite 'Aho Aham Namo Mahyam Yasyame Nastikinchana.'...He read several chapters right through as if they said what he wanted to say" (Rao, 46).

It might be wrong to address this novel as simply a 'tale' of two friends and their eccentric behaviour when the text almost entirely revolves around Hindu philosophy and its concept of 'karma' and divine guidance. This fact makes the text even more inaccessible to the common herd of readers who have no 'Brahmanical' knowledge, and to them, it may sound purely nonsensical and, of course, extremely misogynistic. Browsing through the readers' review section on Goodreads, one can find reviews having quite negative responses, such as: "The absolute wanking by a Nair Metaphysician with his Brahmin sidekick. Written by the grand-daddy of Indian Brahmin fiction…this text is a classic for only one reason as that - it has been declared a classic by other brahmins, a simple reason" (AnkitRamteke on Goodreads.com).

While such opinions are not unfounded, and regardless of the fact that the text requires a certain understanding of metaphysics, one can easily use intuition and common sense to get a hold of what Rao is really trying to say. Moreover, the novel's bizarre, quizzical form and linguistic experimentation are attempts at Sanskrit-ising the English language, similar to Milton attempting to Latinise English in his *Paradise Lost*. (Parthasarathy, 30) The intent behind this is possibly Rao's desire to assimilate his most admired language, Sanskrit, into the language he can best express himself in. This is the reflection of a quintessential phenomenon in Indian civilisation, as in the English translations of classical Sanskrit poets and even the more mundane occurrences of 'pidgin-isation' or, in Rushdie's terms, 'chutnification'.

Often considered to be the sequel to *The Serpent and the Rope*, this novel has a greater philosophical onus compared to it. Rao utilises the AdvaitaVedantic idea of the world being a play ('lila') of the Absolute – bringing to the minds of the readers the famous lines from *As You Like It*: "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players. They have their exits and their entrances; And one man in his time plays many parts." (Shakespeare, 2.7.) On another note, one finds a stark similarity with Hegel's concept of the Absolute in the context of the Spirit – therefore confirming Rao's hidden intention to spread the Vedic word (albeit humourously) to the Western literary world and its target audience.

Furthermore, one of the two ways of devotion to God for achieving salvation (according to Ramanuja's *Vedanta*) is through the analogy of the Cat, where it says that God saves even those who do not make an effort to reach Him, just as a kitten is simply carried by the mother cat without having to do anything. The cat is the focal point of the philosophical aspect of the text, and it is through Govindan Nair that Rao explains this analogy:

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> The kitten is being carried by the cat. We would all be kittens carried by the cat. Some, who are lucky . . . will one day know it . . . Ah, the kitten when its neck is held by its mother, does it know anything else but the joy of being held by its mother? . . . But a mother—I tell you, without Mother the world is not. So allow her to fondle you and to hold you (Rao, 8-10).

Reading such statements by Govindan Nair makes one feel like they are sitting in an aesthetics or philosophy class for the very first time, staring at the professor with utter confusion and often experiencing small, interjecting moments of epiphany. Besides its direct reference to the Advaita Veda, the analogy of the mother cat could also be an attempt to define India as a concept rather than a country. Is it simply a 'book of prayer', or is India as a concept yoked into the Cat as a symbol of Hindu karma, devotion, and divinity? (Arora, 155) These questions point to a broader intention of mystifying the already mystified 'Orient' theology, but this time, it is done to exemplify rather than obfuscate.

Ontologically speaking, then, the Mother Cat equates to the Divine Feminine, or in this case, India – resplendent in her spiritual heritage, where cosmopolitanism, sacrifice, and tolerance have been known to be her crown jewels. Moreover, Nair is very bizarre when he assures Paithat God is going to build a three-storey home for him, and he says this with great confidence, like one who knows the truth of life and who considers 'meow meow' to include within itself the 'aum' mantra (Aurora, 155) – the chant of the Ultimate One, the Absolute: "For him all gestures, all words have absolute meaning. 'I meow-meow the dictionary, but my meaning is always one,' he used to assure me" (Rao, 11).

But simply knowing the methods of attaining salvation and its associated theology is not enough. One must acquire a 'guru' who will act as a guide through the complex web of Vedic understanding. And Pai finds not one but multiple gurus in his life in *The Cat and Shakespeare*. Essentially, he finds two kinds: the feminine and the masculine. Shantha, whom Pai has an extramarital affair with, represents the gentle feminine 'guru'. Shantha is "What is woman, you ask? Well, woman is Shantha…Her giving is complete" (Rao, 20-21). On the other hand, Govindan Nair stands for the more active, guiding masculine 'guru', whose task is to shed light on the deeper meaning of life.

The 'guru-disciple' relationship is quite central to the shaping force of the hereditary disposition called "Indianness" (Dave, 358). K. Unnikrishnan quotes Janet Powers where she compares the characters Kirillov and Govindar Nair, saying: "Inhabiting both fictional worlds are guru figures fascinate their respective narrators and attempt to initiate them into new world views. Pai, in *The Cat and Shakespeare* and 'R' in *Comrade Kirillov* are disciple followers of two extraordinary figures, Govindan Nair and Comrade Kirillov (Unnikrishnan, 146). To Nair, who talks in mysterious mantras and murmurs (much to the befuddlement of the readers), one can only attain grace and *'mukti'* through total spiritual surrender. He is the Ajatasatru, the Kshatriya, and Balki; he is a strange mix between The Vicar of the Wakefield and Shakespeare. And, of course, he is the true 'Brahmin' without being one by birth since "Brahmin is he who knows Brahman…" (Rao, 35)

Rao achieves literary mastery of the satirical genre in the character of Govindan Nair. Quite a lot of epithets and allusions are used in the text to delineate the true nature of Nair; however, some of them are quite intentionally ironic and contradictory. For example, Ramakrishna Pai describes him as somewhat of a Shakespeare (referring to the wisdom that is often found in his plays), and later, Nair

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even creates his own version of *Hamlet* as a fun gesture with his colleagues at the Ration department. While this is perhaps a way to Indianise the Western figure of Shakespeare, it can, in a sense, also be the opposite – an attempt on Rao's part to somewhat universalise or give his novel Western exposure.

Moreover, the portrayal of Nair as the *'sadhaka'* and Pai as the disciple or *'bhakt'* is ironic. Pai might consider Nair to be the torchbearer of the Absolute truth and his guide for a metaphysical quest, but Nair is not altogether a morally righteous person. One must keep in mind that he is later accused of fraudulent practices and money extortion, and he very conveniently shifts the blame on his now-dead boss, BhoothalingaIyer. Perhaps, in this light, he truly comes to represent the 'cat-hold' theory, where " Nair's career illustrates that extreme aspect of theory which holds that the pardoning God loves the sinner even more than he does the pure" (Naik, 171).

Fraud and liar, he may be, but a bad friend, he is not – from nursing Pai, who suffers from the 'British bubo' back to health to helping him build a two-storey house of his own – he sure is a friend we all want. Nair tells Pai, "I tell you I will help you to build the house … with bricks … In dreams you can build it in gold. In the Mahabharata you build it in lacquer. I will build it for you in stone" (Rao, 31). *The Cat and Shakespeare* is also replete with symbols, and this 'building' is one of them. It is, essentially, a symbol that implies a state of divine bliss where one can enter the garden across the wall that encloses his house.

The wall is yet another symbol that stands for the "empirical ego that obstructs the liberation of man" (Dayal, 138). Crossing the wall requires the annihilation of the ego, which Govindan Nair had already achieved, and he helps Pai shed his ego that "smell of dung and urine of kine" (Rao, 14) in a similar fashion. However, this exemplifies the loophole that exists in the character of Govindan Nair: how can he have no ego when he goes to lengths for self-preservation, to the extent of committing possible perjury in court? How can he, who supports and even encourages Pai's misogynistic views on women, wifehood, and pregnancy, possibly be the 'guru', the one who has Absolute knowledge? It is up to the readers to read this as a loophole or an intentional satire on the self-righteous, all-knowing man, but the intention still remains blurry, given the religious ardour of the novelist himself.

Aside from the larger philosophical context of the novel, Rao also delineates a certain sense of community through the portrayal of the ration shop, which becomes the larger world with its fair share of Christians, Muslims, Brahmins, and Nairs (Arora, 161). The ration shop becomes the kingdom of Denmark, where all the colleagues of the department partake in a play created by their very own brand of Shakespeare. Moreover, Rao paints the picture of the lower and middle-class people of Trivandrum – working men, mothers with babies on their hips, snotty children in worn-out clothes – all waiting in the queue for their ration coupons. This is the only instance where Rao truly highlights daily life, as it were, in this novel, and we do see his literary brilliance seeping out from the cracks of the canvas.

To conclude, *The Cat and Shakespeare* is an avant-garde mixture of Vedic philosophy, satire, irony, and linguistic experimentation that is one of a kind and yet not for everyone. It is a twisted commentary on time, death, eternity, and life, and also, perhaps, Rao's way of nudging his readers to lean on Vedic or 'oriental' theology for comfort instead of following the Western ways. Such a reading is definitely not uncalled for, as there is plenty of evidence in the text. But it is J. Srihari Rao who aptly describes what the novel is really like:

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"Everything about the novel is a baffling challenge to the reader, who at the end of reading it, finds himself provoked, dazed and bewildered at its elusive metaphysical meanings. The yoking of the incompatibles like the cat and Shakespeare remains a riddle" (Rao, 122).

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