



THE IMAGE OF INDIA AS PICTURED BY RAJA RAO IN HIS THE CAT AND SHAKESPEARE: AN APPRAISAL

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Abstract

*This paper clearly presents the image of India through Raja Rao's **The Cat and Shakespeare**, which is gentle and almost teasing of two friends Govindan and Ramakrishna. Govindan, who tackles the problems of routine living with extraordinary common sense and gusto and his conclusions continuously panic Ramakrishna. Bringing home the point, the novel brings alive the raw texture of Indian life and delights in its humour.*

Key Words: *Corruption, Disgression, Self-Surrender, Redemption, Superstition, Recaptualisation, Non-Duism.*

Raja Rao is regarded as one of the greatest of the Indo-Anglian novelists. This can be considered a great achievement considering his meager output. His first novel *Kanthapura* appeared in 1938 and his next novel *The Serpent and the Rope* appeared eighteen years later in 1960. His third novel *The Cat and Shakespeare* appeared in 1965. His total output amounts to not more than a thousand pages in print. Yet by the quality of his writing, he has placed the Indo-Anglian novel on the world map and achieved international fame and recognition. The significant contribution of Raja Rao to Indo-Anglian fiction lies in the fact that he founded an almost new tradition. India's freedom struggle has been stock subject in the literatures of the modern Indian languages. But Raja Rao was the first writer of undoubted genius who exploited this field in English and did so without any reservations so much so that his *Kanthapura* is referred to variously as a *Gandhipurana*, or a *Gandhian epic*.

Generally speaking, the image of India gets reflected in almost all his works. "In *Kanthapura*, the picture of Indian freedom movement is so vividly and effectively pictured that one has yet to find any other work of art on this theme to be placed against it as a peer" (Srivastava 14). *The Cat and Shakespeare* is the third novel of Raja Rao. Like his previous novels, this novel too has the reflections of India. Indian customs, attitudes and Indian way of life have been mostly brought out by the novelist. Truly speaking, an Indian atmosphere has been created vividly and beautifully. It is more of a fantasy with a lot of philosophical discussions and it has been called a 'philosophical comedy' by Raja Rao himself. Narsingh Srivastava rightly observes:

"Philosophical and literary influences which Raja Rao has assimilated, have lent him a quality of mind that distinguishes him from the other great writers of Indo-Anglian fiction such as Mulk Raj Anand and R.K.Narayan, and have also given to his style a typical trait born of the combined forces of simple narrative and profound thinking" (14).

Raja Rao has written this story as if it has occurred in Trivandrum, a most popular city in Kerala State. It is the story of two friends Govindan Nair and Ramakrishna Pai dealing with corruption in the rationing department. The very title of this novel shows the whimsical, paradoxical note that is characteristic of Raja Rao. The story moves in a zigzag way with numerous digressions, relevant or more often irrelevant. The hero Ramakrishna Pai is the narrator of this story, but even he goes into a number of digressions, as Raja Rao. The novel deals with a few middle class families of Kerala during the period of the Second World War. Nair and Pai are the next door neighbours. Pai has a wife who is practical-minded and two young children Usha, the girl and Vithal, the boy. Pai falls in love with a young school mistress Shantha who has a child by him. Shantha also gives him her private money for the purpose of a house. Pai's friend Govindan Nair loses his title son Shridhar who is supposed to marry Pai's daughter Usha. He is charged with bribery and is locked up in prison, though he is ordered to be released by the High court. After being released, he shifts elsewhere from Trivandrum.

The Cat plays a central part in the incident at the office which was evidently meant as a practical joke against him. But the joke has a tragic consequence for the office boss, Bhoothalinga Iyer who dies when the cat jumps on his head. The cat is produced in the court too. The reader is persuaded to believe that the cat serves as the linchpin to keep this whole delicate fabric together. The story is very small indeed. It is not as well-told as in *Kanthapura*, which has stood the test of time. Rao says about the book as:

"It is a metaphysical comedy and all I would want the reader to do is to weep at every page, not for what he sees, but for what he sees he sees. For me, it is like a book of prayer" (Preface to CS).



Govindan Nair is a typical South Indian character, intellectual, poor and devoted to philosophical arguments. His style of talking is mixture of the ‘Vicar of Wakefield’ and Shakespeare. The words are choice, the choice of the situation clumsy. He never says ‘come and go’. He will always say, ‘Gentleman, may I invite myself there will I be permitted into your presence?’ That’s ever the way with him in English or Malayalam. He must twist a thing into its essence and spread it out, so that milk becomes cow’s precious liquid or water the aqua of the Ganges. His heart is so big, it builds a wall lest it run away with everything. He always wants to run away with everything. In fact, he himself is running.

The social scenes and cultural values of India have been picturized wonderfully well in **The Cat and Shakespeare** by Raja Rao. But the prime aim of the novelist is the affirmation of the ultimate reality in accordance with the philosophy of modified non-dualism of Ramanuja Charya symbolised by the Cat-kitchen relationship. In the task of interpreting India in this novel, Raja Rao has moved a step ahead of the pre Advaitic path of knowledge of Sankara as enunciated in his master piece **The Cat and Shakespeare** by adumbrating the doctrine of self-surrender which derives directly from Tengalai devotional school of thought of South India – one of the two chief off-shoots of Ramanuja’s Vishishtadvaita. This theory of self-extinction and self-surrender is comically presented through the portrayal of the actions and attitudes of character like Govindan Nair, Shantha and Usha or even Ramakrishna Pai, who, though remaining uninitiated throughout, begins to understand the truth by the close of the novel. We are taught here through the medium of fiction, though in a partially successful way, a new tenet of Indian philosophy as a path of redemption.

Raja Rao believes that India can be known chiefly through the knowledge of Indian metaphysics, but he has also done full justice to the depiction of a slice of Indian life at the physical and moral planes. The scene in **The Cat and Shakespeare** shifts from the rural to the urban India. A realistic view of Indian social and political life in a city of Kerala evokes the veritable picture of life as it was lived in the whole of India during the days of the Second World War. In his review of the novel, Mr. Paniker rightly remarks:

“Raja Rao has delved deep into the charm and bane of Kerala life, a life steeped in superstition, traditions, casteism and corruption and yet full of colour, freshness, vitality and Vedanta” (P 124).

The natural aspects of Trivandrum are vividly evoked through landscape features along with the recaptualisation of history. Ramakrishna Pai’s wife approvingly describes Trivandrum:

Oh, it is just like home, coconut
trees, huts and the sound of Sea” (TCS 6)

The real atmosphere of Trivandrum and the way of life of the people of Trivandrum have been brought out wonderfully well. What adds significantly to the realism of the novel is the depiction of the material side of life symbolised by the ration shop. Food is the greatest need of life and that was most scarce during the global war, hence the mad race for it and the prevalent corruption in the ration shop. The ration offices were centres of corruption and we are told that:

“The kingdom of Denmark is just a ration office”

Raja Rao has brought out the corruption of ration shops in general. This kind of corruption happens in almost all the ration shops in India. Seventeen sacks of rice were lost from the goods wagon, and the office files are alleged to have been eaten by the rats. Some people do not have their cards but they get the ration all the same. In a ration office, one is shown married where there is no wife and take cards are issued to those who bribe the authorities. Through presenting the real picture of ration, Raja Rao has depicted the ugly atmosphere of India and the sufferings of the poor people of India. To such accounts of the material side of life is added the colourful scene of the pomp and show of the procession of the Maharaja with elephants and horses which evokes the traditions of the princely state of Travancore of which Trivandrum was a part till the independence of India. Thereby the novelist brings out the life of the high class society of India.

The tradition and the social life of India have been naturally presented by Raja Rao. But these are only short glimpses as the philosophical theme and the comic technique, which are admirably mixed together in this novel, allow no elaborate description of either social life or conventions and ceremonies. Consequently, the painting of the social scene remains sketchy though it is pardonable in a novelist who is by no means a regional novelist interested simply in the social and material aspects of a defined and distinguishable locality. His chief purpose is to create an interesting fantasy for the philosophical doctrine of the cat-hold theory as a way of deliverance from the mysterious and complex world of Shakespeare. The simple tale of life in Trivandrum in the mid-twentieth century is, in fact, the real tale of the whole India of the time. At the purely materialistic level, the possession of a three-storied house is as much a status symbol in the northern India as in the hunter who got the vision of Shiva by accidentally dropping vilva-leaves on the image of the Lord is a popular myth throughout India. Besides, the feminine principles of a cosmic mother as a creator of this universe and also the preserver and destroyer is a traditional



metaphysical truth universally believed in all over India. It is India in its manifold aspects that we are shown in this short novel of Raja Rao as also in his other novels, which aim at revitalizing the metaphysical truths and spiritual values. In this respect, Raja Rao has become an authentic voice of India, painting the present and enlivening the past for revealing both the outer and the inner relatives of India.

To conclude, *The Cat and Shakespeare* is more a book of philosophy than a novel. It is a fantastic hotchpotch of realism, philosophy and fantasy. The novel *The Cat and Shakespeare* appears to be Raja Rao's own favourite though it evokes a very mixed response of most readers. For one thing, it is not clear as to what Shakespeare is doing in the title. When asked this question in an interview, Rao replied that he put Shakespeare there because Shakespeare was a sage. One has even a suspicion that Raja Rao is here caricating his own style, though this could be there only at the unconscious level. Raja Rao has claimed that '*The Cat and Shakespeare* is a sequel to *The Serpent and the Rope*, though it is difficult to see how this is so. The element of fantasy is hardly reconciled with the abstruse philosophical and metaphysical discussion. According to Srinivasa Iyengar, this novel is like the Upanishads, partly narrative, partly speculation and in part even dialogue and debate. Narsingh Srivastava has rightly said:

"More like an expanded metaphor which is developed in a ridding style of the narrative and dialogue, this novel is closer to an upanishadic parable and can rightly be branded as a metaphysical comedy or philosophical fantasy" (P 90).

Indo-Anglian particularly values the quality of 'Indianness'. In this respect, Raja Rao's fiction steals a march over that of other writers because it is Indian in both form and content.

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