



VIDHYAYANA

An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal

ISSN 2454-8596

www.vidhyayanaejournal.org

Manifestation of Bhakti Yoga in Raja Rao's *The Cat and Shakespeare*



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VIDHYAYANA

An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal

ISSN 2454-8596

www.vidhyayanaejournal.org

Abstract

One of the prominent pioneers of Indian English Fiction, Raja Rao makes a remarkable attempt to fictionalize the Indian philosophy. Raja Rao's oeuvre is absorbed in philosophy, and the author has immaculately chosen the way of creative writing to convey the spiritual understanding. Rao gradually constructs the holy grounds choosing India as the key backdrop. By making various experiments he has fictionalized Indian philosophy and myth. Traditions, legends, mythology, philosophical values and the contemporary social and political circumstances of his motherland make the ground of his novels. Raja Rao has made an experiment of humor in his third novel, *The Cat and Shakespeare*. It is also called 'a metaphysical comedy'. As a matter of fact, Raja Rao has made significant innovations. His familiarity with the western culture and mythical technique has made novels too complex. From the beginning of his career he was in search for the proper form for his writing. The way to the Absolute here is not Karma Yoga or Jnana Yoga of the two previous novels, but Bhakti Yoga or the path of devotion.



Key Words

Self-realization, Philosophy, Bhakti, Jnana, Karma, Spiritual, Absolute, Advaita, Buddhism, Metaphysical

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Main Article

One of the prominent pioneers of Indian English Fiction, Raja Rao has made a remarkable attempt by blending the Indian philosophy in the fiction. As Iyengar observes, "A novelist and a short story writer, he too, like Anand and Narayan, is a child of the Gandhian Age, and reveals in his work his sensitive awareness of the forces let loose by the Gandhian Revolution as also of the thwarting or steadying pulls of past tradition" (pp. 386). For Raja Rao literature was a *Sadhna*, and he was a *Sadhak*. According to him literature is also a spiritual experience. Therefore his writing deals with metaphysics. As he says, a writer is one who strives for metaphysical experience. After spiritual realization, *sadhak* is compelled to express it and this is how literature is created. He was engaged in searching deep recesses of human mind. All his writing is nothing but the manifestation of his quest for Truth. Philosophy and Metaphysics are the main concerns of his writing.



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Raja Rao's oeuvre is absorbed in philosophy, and the author has immaculately chosen the way of creative writing to convey the spiritual understanding. Rao gradually constructs the holy grounds choosing India as the key backdrop. Traditions, legends, mythology, philosophical values and the contemporary social and political circumstances of his motherland make the ground of his novels. Mythical elements and philosophical narrative cannot be observed in separation. They are firmly connected to each other. Rao feels that the Indian work of fiction might not subsist in an insignificant emptiness. Therefore, he has intermingled Indian mythology and philosophy within a fantastic structure, and the genre of fiction provides the function of beautifying a challenging and theoretical subject. As J. P. Tripathi asserts,

The philosophy of life that emanates from every work is that the phenomenon, the visible universe is illusory and short-lived and will dissolve at the time of Annihilation. Brahman alone is true. Raja Rao professes the typical philosophy that the world of senses is ephemeral and everything bodily is to be transcended and the emancipated soul-the 'I'- is to become one with the Brahman (p. 9)

Literature and philosophy are harmonising factors to each other. If Raja Rao had preferred to progress with his spiritual practice in the conservative way, then the novels would have been nominated merely as intellectual discourses and not the fictional constructions. The philosophical standards are composed within a story bound configuration consisting of legends, reflective ideas and mysterious protagonists. Rao's approach is distinctive as he attempts to intertwine the Vedanta philosophy, mythology and religious convictions with mundane existence simultaneously. As Esha Dey points out "Naturally enough, Rao's emphasis lies in the soul, not in man as a social being. Rainer Maria Rilke's assertion in the Seventh Elegy, "Nowhere beloved can world exist but within," describes exactly Rao's viewpoint." (pp. 21)

Raja Rao has made an experiment of humor in his third novel, *The Cat and Shakespeare*. It is also called 'a metaphysical comedy'. As a matter of fact, Raja Rao has made significant innovations. His familiarity with the western culture and mythical technique has made novels too complex. From the beginning of his career he was in search for the proper form for his writing. By making various experiments he has fictionalized Indian philosophy and myth. His work reveals his love for India and Indian scriptures the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana* and the *Purana*. All his writings can be concluded as Iyengar remarks:

If *Kanthapura* can be described as a *Purana*, as a *Gandhi Purana*, and *The Serpent and the Rope* as an epic, a mini-*Mahabharat* in the idiom of our age, then *The Cat and Shakespeare* is more like one of the longer Upanishads (pp. 409).

Raja Rao's first three novels are the steps towards realization. *Kanthapura*, the first novel embodies the Karma yoga (the path of action); *The Serpent and the Rope* manifests the Jana yoga (self realization) and



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ISSN 2454-8596

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the third and the sequel to the second novel, *The Cat and Shakespeare* demonstrates the path of Bhakti as enunciated in Bhagvad Gita. It portrays the journey from Karma to Sadhna and Sadhna to Bhakti. The novel implies to elaborate yet another stage in mythical self-understanding. Raja Rao's quest for truth at last arrives at final destination in *The Cat and Shakespeare*, where Rao comes nearest to a synthesis to embody his metaphysics in a literary form, without that pronounced conflict in the earlier novels. As Medha Sachdev has noted:

The Cat and Shakespeare is a sequel to *The Serpent and the Rope* ... it takes up the theme of Metaphysical quest at the point at which Rama's story has carried it, and showed the next step in this quest. (pp. 132)

The Cat and Shakespeare is a funny story if it looked at the simple narrative level, but has a deep philosophical meaning. It is a story of Govindan Nair, a clerk in the Ration office and Ramkrishna Pai, also a clerk in the Revenue office; in Trivendrum, the capital city of Kerala. The story is set against the background of Kerala during the period of World-War II. Ramkrishna Pai, the narrator, is an innocent little man, who loves the beautiful Shantha and dreams of building a big house; his neighbor Govindan Nair is a genial soul and a man built on a large scale, whose philosophy of life is that one should surrender oneself completely to the supreme energizing principle in the universe which he symbolically calls 'Mother Cat'. The two clerks especially Nair - undergo several surrealistic adventures including cat-worship in the corrupt rationing office where Nair works, the sudden death by heart-failure of his boss when the cat sits on the unfortunate man's head and the trial of the cat in a court of law. At the end, Nair is his old happy self, in spite of all that has happened (including the death of his son), while Ramkrishna Pai, fulfills his ambition of building his house; and in the symbolic end, he follows the cat up the stairs and is vouchsafed a mystic experience. We leave him listening to 'the music of marriage', i.e. in a state of illumination. As Letizia Alterno observes:

In the novel, Govindan Nair acts like the Mother Cat. He constantly takes care of his kitten Pai, never letting him risk a fall and always ready to pick him up in time of danger. Moreover, following a recurring representation pattern describing Hindu gurus, he is viewed as a child-like figure, a frequent image in Indian philosophy especially among cults devoted to the worship of the Mother Goddess. (pp. 75)

Raja Rao calls it 'a book of prayer'. M. K. Naik points out "...but it is a strange prayer to a strange god, a prayer in which solemn chants of devotion are mingled with loud guffaws of laughter." (pp. 179). The reader has to conjecture a great deal between the lines, he has to weep and laugh at once and all the time; and he has to lose himself in prayer. The novel is stuffed with real-life situations, metaphysic, irony, fantasy



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and fact, digressions, tragic and comic situations. There is haphazardness and the narrative mode is in consonance with the life and characters of the story. As Govindan Nair asserts,

A clerk is a clerk. He could at best rise to the post of superintendent and have two peons at his door. Isn't it that so, dear sir? 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? You see the longed thin hairy thing dangling, and you think, poor kid, it must suffer to be held so. But I say the kitten is the safest thing in the world, the kitten held in the mouth of the mother cat. (*The Cat*, pp. 10)

According to the Bhagavad Gita, there are three paths i.e. Jnana, Karma and Bhakti through which human being can attain salvation. It had been made practically the only source for the means to *moksha* with the development of classical Hinduism in the 8th or 9th century, and then Hindu philosophers of the medieval period have tried to explain the nature of these three paths and the relation between them. For example, Shankaracharya tended to focus on Jnana Yoga exclusively, which he interpreted as the acquisition of knowledge or *vidya*. He considered Karma Yoga to be inferior, and ignores Bhakti Yoga entirely. According to the 12th century philosopher, Ramanujacharya Bhakti Yoga appears to be the direct path to *moksha*, which is however available only to those whose inner faculties have already been trained by both Karma Yoga and Jnana Yoga. Raja Rao has chronologically demonstrated these paths in the first three novels. As Iyengar points out,

Moorthy is a man of action. And realization comes to him through political action, Gandhian satyagraha. Rama (Ramaswamy) is a scholar, an intellectual, a metaphysician; realization can come to him only through *jnana*, and it is the Guru that will make Rama *see* that *one* alone remains, the many merely change and pass...But Govind Nair is no intellectual; he is intelligent, but he is no intellectual, he is no metaphysician. Neither is Ramakrishna Pai. They are like you and me, they are common humanity; but equally with Moorthy or Rama, they too hanker after fulfillment. For them, the path of devotion (*bhakti*) and the path of surrender (*prapatti*) – one shades off into the other – is best; following this path, one cannot possibly miss one's goal. (pp. 410)

It is interesting to note that Rama's search for the Guru in the preceding novel is materialized in *The Cat and Shakespeare*, as his successor Ramakrishna Pai finds the Guru in Govindan Nair who is an adept. Pai's longing for riches-money, a palatial building must not be confused for material desires so uncommon in a person with a Brahminical aura. It is craving for something spiritual-peace, solicitude and inner quest for something other than worldly. Using the architectural symbol of a 'big-house', the truth has been brought home by Raja Rao in his own philosophical way. Thus it is made clear that the path of Bhakti or devotion to



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the absolute is the only way to achieve our goal. Such is the significance of Bhakti or devotion to God. What one is – a rascal, a brahmin, a sudra – is not important in Bhakti Yoga; what is important is total surrender to his will. If Ramkrishna Pai is a pilgrim in search of truth, Govindan Nair, a clerk in Ration office is remarkable in the sense that he is genial as well as jovial, worldly as well as detached, it is like one who is saint. Nair's discourse is full of metaphysical truths. In fact, he is an enlightened soul, who has realized truth and has recognized Brahman. As Govind Nair asserts, "The kitten is being carried by the cat. We would all be kittens carried by the cat. Some, who are lucky (like your hunter), will one day know it. Others live hearing "meow-meow"...I like being the kitten. (p. 8)

The Cat and Shakespeare professes complete surrender to the Ultimate. The mother cat in the novel is the symbol of the Ultimate, and the theory of complete surrender to the Ultimate is based on Ramanuja's *Marjaranyaya* which stands for complete surrender of the self to the self. In Ramanuja's Bhakti marga there are two ways of surrender to the Ultimate, one is like the surrender of the baby-monkey to his mother and the other is the surrender of the kitten in the mouth of mother cat. These two anecdotes have different approaches to the Ultimate. Monkey has to cooperate with the mother, where as kitten can freely surrender to the mother as it is carried by the mother cat safely. As Rakesh Kumar Pandey points out "It has to be born in mind that the surrender in the case of kitten does not mean extinction of the self, but the union of the will of the self with that of the self. (pp. 34)

Between Pai's house and Nair's is a wall over which Nair leaps every time he visits Pai. The wall is an important symbol because it represents the division between illusion and the Truth. Nair crosses it easily, but Pai has never gone across. Towards the end of the novel, following the cat, Pai accidentally crosses the wall. Like the lucky hunter, he too is vouchsafed a divine vision, for first time Pai sees the whole universe as a unity. The novel ends with Pai's spiritual as well as material fulfillment, having partially realized his lifelong ambition of owning a three storey house. *The Cat and Shakespeare*, although not as ambitious as *Kanthapura*, is as successful on its own terms. The novel is an elaborate puzzle which challenged the reader to solve; a solution is not only possible at all levels, but is completely satisfying as well. As Raja Rao asserts, "Life is like a riddle that can be solved with a riddle. You can remove a thorn with another thorn, you solve one problem through another problem" (pp. 47). The way to the Absolute here is not Karma Yoga or Jnana Yoga of the two previous novels, but Bhakti Yoga or the path of devotion. Makarand Paranjape observes in his remarkable introduction to his book *The Best of Raja Rao* "Nair lives this philosophy and is responsible for teaching it to his ignorant neighbor, the narrator Pai. Pai is like the innocent hunter in the story who unknowingly heaped leaves on a Shivalingam and was rewarded with a vision." (pp. xiii)

The Cat and Shakespeare conspicuously manifests the Bhakti Yoga. The protagonist of the novel,



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ISSN 2454-8596

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Ramkrishna Pai, by going through many different ways, ultimately reaches the Ultimate. He is transformed from a *Sadhaka* to *bhakta* who is surrendered to the God, as a kitten to the Mother Cat. He attains salvation. After surrendering himself to his Guru, he is completely transformed. He is free from worries and the fear of death. Thus, Raj Rao has revealed the significance of Guru in one's life.

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