Ars Artium: An International Refereed Research Journal of English Studies and Culture
ISSNs: 2319-7889 (P); 2395-2423 (E)
Vol. 11, January 2023, pp. 54-65
Edited by Vijay Kumar Roy
https://www.arsartium.org

Journey Within: A Study of Raja Rao's *The Cat and Shakespeare*

*Ram Sebak Thakur**

Abstract

Raja Rao is a novelist of philosophical bent. The whole gamut of his writing manifests his unflinching quest for Truth, and his novel, *The Cat and Shakespeare* (1965) is not an exception to it. The present article covers the main issues of a man's quest for self-knowledge or self-transcendence, and it is explored and enacted in the novel as the hero, Ramakrishna Pai, goes through his life. He is a seeker of Truth, and his august mission is to find the absolute. The various stages in his life are clearly marked out and his trials and tribulations, his spiritual doubts and uncertainties are also indicated in the novel. He is trapped in the midst of emotionally confused age, and feels some deep absence in him. Pai tries to come out of the void he has in his life, and for that he is initiated by Govindan Nair, a friend and *Guru* of him. Nair helps Pai to take the *Visistadvaitic* (qualified non-dualism) practices of *Bhakti* (devotion) and *Prapatti* (self-surrender) to lead him to his ultimate destination. He is involved in different kinds of human relationships. He is seen playing diverse roles as a civil servant, father, friend, husband and lover. But all his physical action gives rise to psychological action which takes place in the theatre of Pai's heart, mind and soul with the guidance of Govindan Nair. He helps Pai to surrender to God, to destroy 'ego' and to achieve the state of mystic illumination. The self-realization of Pai, his rise from the personal to the impersonal is the outcome of *Bhakti* and *Prapatti*.

*Assistant Professor, Department of English, Ramshwaroop Ramsagar Multiple Campus (Tribhuvan University), Janakpurdham, Madhesh Province, Nepal. Email: thakurrs033@gmail.com

© 2023 The Author. Published by Paragon International Publishers. Open Access Under CC BY 4.0 licence.

Keywords: Bondage, Liberation, Self-transcendence, *Bhakti*, *Prapatti*, Grace

Introduction

Raja Rao's *The Cat and Shakespeare* portrays a man's spiritual aspects, his relationship with himself, and finally his quest for selfhood. The novelist's preoccupation is to be philosophic, and he delves deep into the nature of man, the reality of the world, and the definition and the end of good life, which come in the common course of living and thinking. The perennial problems of appearance and reality, truth and interpretation, freedom and determination, good and evil, etc. appear with striking ubiquity in the novel. And this grand theme of spiritual insight is conveyed through the qualified non-dualistic concept of *Bhakti* and *Prapatti* propounded by Ramanujacharya.

Theoretical Framework

Ramanuja is the fountain-head of Indian theist. As a theist, he believes that salvation is possible, not through *Jnana* (knowledge) and *Karma* (action), but through *Bhakti* and *Prasada* (devotion and grace). The individual soul on account of its own *Karma* gets bound to *Samsara* (world). Bondage is ignorance of the omnipresent nature and goodness of the Lord. P. Nagaraja Rao writes, "The tragedy of the individual soul is its feeling that it can do all the things of the world. Affirming his own autonomy and self-sufficiency is the sin of man. It is self-pride" (174). The illusion of self-pride is smashed in God who created the world and thus man realizes that he is just a creation of the Lord on whom he depends his whole life. The individual *Jiva* (self) realizes that he is an integral part of the Self. But this realization does not easily dawn on man. It is first of all based on faith according to the principle of *Visistadvaita*. Faith is as essential a faculty of man as reasoning. It enables us to step out and break free from what is purely empirical. It releases us from the tyranny of the world of things. Emphasizing the importance of faith, P. Nagaraja Rao has quoted a line from the *Bhagavadgita* also known as *Gita*. The *Gita* declares that "he who is ignorant and has no faith, ever doubting, perishes" (P. N. Rao 174). The theists believe that we need an unwavering faith to love the Lord. The faith in the Lord is everything and is necessary for the soul to love the Lord. Faith is summed up in the first *mantra* of the *Isa Upanisad*, "Know all this, whatever moves in this moving world, is enveloped by God" (P. N. Rao 174). The *mantra* implies that God is the Creator, the Ruler and the Lord. P. Nagaraja Rao quotes M. K. Gandhi's comment on the *mantra*: "Since God pervades everything, nothing belongs to you not even

your own body. God is the undisputed and unchallengeable Master of everything you possess" (174). In a nutshell, it can be said that faith in Lord is the result of the knowledge of His greatness, power and love. Faith is the beginning of *Bhakti*. The *Jnana* of the Lord's qualities leads to His contemplation that grows into the full love of the Lord.

Ramanuja's conception of the Supreme as a person makes the concept of *Bhakti* easy. It is of the nature of love. Nalini Kanta Brahma rightly points out the importance of love in *Bhakti* when he writes, "The essence of *Bhakti* is love, and it is this love that individuates the object of devotion" (256). The emotion of love is universal and the most potent factor in man. It is man's nature to love. Human love with all its warmth when dedicated to the Lord is called *Bhakti*.

The term *Bhakti* comes from the root, meaning 'to serve' or 'to resort to' and signifies service or resorting to another for assistance. It is an intense devotion, expressed by service and placing oneself at the mercy of the divine. However, *Bhakti*, in its philosophic connotation, is not mere emotionalism but total reaching out towards a fuller knowledge of God through meditation and love. It finds its culmination in an intuitive realization of God. Ramanuja describes devotion as continuous recollection of God. In this context, Y. Masih has quoted Ramanuja as saying, "*Bhakti* is the continuity of steady remembrance of the Lord, uninterrupted like the flow of oil in a burning lamp. *Bhakti* is one-pointed devotion, unswerving faith and love" (184). This statement throws a clear light on the nature and function of devotion. It is turning to God for protection, completely turning one's self to his service and sacrifice for God, and God's reciprocal love of man and the blessed communion between God and man. *Bhakti* brings beauty and order into the confused and tangled facts of our lives.

In Hinduism, as professor Klostermeier comments in *The Survey of Hinduism*, "the path of devotion is a path of salvation in its own right, whereby none of the scriptural codes such as the caste system are followed and scriptures are disregarded" (79).

Constant meditation (*dhruvasmriti*) on God as the dearest object of love and devotion ultimately matures into a *darsana* or *saksatkara* of God. The soul that realizes God is liberated from the body forever. But even for liberation, the soul's efforts alone are not enough. God helps the devotee to attain perfect knowledge and choose whomsoever He will for *moksha* (salvation). God lifts from bondage and misery of the creature, who flings himself at His mercy and constantly remembers Him as the only object of love. Such complete self-surrender is called *prapatti*.

Freed from ignorance and bondage, the liberated soul retains its individuality but enjoys, in perfect love and wisdom infinite joy born of complete communion with God.

Ramanuja's concept of liberation through *Bhakti* has its association with the *prapatti*. To be more precise, Ramanuja's concept of *Bhakti* is the life-blood of his philosophy. It, according to Ramanuja's concept, leads to *prapatti*. Ramanuja emphasized *prapatti* as the easiest and the surest means of liberation. God is pleased by the utter self-surrender of the devotee and takes care of him. *Prapatti* is a state of prayerfulness of mind to God associated with the deep conviction that He alone is the saviour, and that there is no way of attaining His grace except by such self-surrender. The devotee is extremely loyal to *Narayan* and prays to Him and no one else, and all his prayers are actuated by deep affection and no other motive.

According to Ramanuja, *prapatti* consists in entrusting one's parents, wife, sons, kith and kin etc. to him in abandoning all desires for happiness, and all duties prescribed by scripture, and resorting to Him as father, mother, friend, teacher, God of gods, the only support. It requires prayer to Him forgiving all sins. S. Radhakrishnan elaborates his concept of *prapatti* in these words:

> *Prapatti* is complete resignation to God, and is, according to the *Bhagvat as*, the most effective means for gaining salvation. It is open to all, the low ... any one after taking instruction from a preceptor, may fling himself on the bosom of God and take refuge in him [...]. (705)

Prapatti is also called *Sharnagati*. It is an intimate embrace with the God. It is a state in which a devotees sheds his/her ego and tries to be in perfect communion with the God. *Prapatti* has many stages or steps. It consists of six steps, as mentioned by Chandradhar Sharma, "(1) to so think, will and act as would please God, (2) not to so think, will and act as would displease God, (3) faith that God would protect, (4) appeal to God for protection, (5) absolute self-surrender to God, and (6) feeling of absolute dependence on God" (381).

By virtue of the complete and absolute self-surrender to the Lord, the Lord too out of His grace ignores all omissions ad commissions of the devotees and grants him His protection. *Prapatti*, as a means of God-realization, is open to all without any distinction of caste or creed. Ramanuja's philosophy of *saranagati* emphasizes that anyone, irrespective of colour, creed, caste, sex and religion can surrender their mind, body and soul to the Lotus foot of Lord *Narayana* and the God would accept him/her. S. Radhakrishnan has beautifully written:

> The distinctions of the caste do not touch the nature of the soul. At best they belong to the bodies and determine the duties which different individuals owe to society. But caste has nothing to do with the qualities of the soul [...]. Ramanuja allows that no distinctions should be made among the lovers of God. (708)

Bhakti transcends all caste distinctions. It teaches the religion of devotion and love irrespective of caste, creed, colour, and sex. Further, the religion of *bhakti* and submission requires no priest; for offering of love does not need the sanction of the scripture; and the grace of God is not in the keeping of any man. Radhakrishnan's statement, "for one who is in devotion there is neither scripture nor rule" (709) throws clear light on the concept of *Bhakti* and *Prapatti*.

Ramanuja, in his *Saranagati-Gadya*, advocates the path of *prapatti* in which the devotees seek protection not only of *Narayan* but also of Lakshmi. Surendranath Dasgupta amplifies the above-mentioned statement of Ramanuja:

> The mercy of God is dependent on Him and no one else; yet there exists in Narayan the deity Lakshmi who is like the essence of Him or the body of Him, and who has voluntarily reconciled her will absolutely with that of Narayana. Though in such a conception, she is dependent on Narayana, yet for the devotees, Narayana and Lakshmi go together, and for them the mercy of God is to be attributed to both Lakshmi and Narayan taken as whole. (375)

The conception of Lakshmi is such that She is the greatest object of love for Narayana, who has conceived her as a part of Himself and, Lakshmi has also identified herself with Him that there is no separate existence for her. When the devotee has forsaken his false egoism and surrendered himself entirely to God, there is no need of further effort on his part. At such a stage, through the influence of Lakshmi, all the sins of the devotee are purified and through Her influence God extends His mercy to him. To quote Surendranath Dasgupta:

> She (Lakshmi) performs the dual function, first that of turning the minds of the people, who are under the sway of beginningless *avidya* by which they are always being attracted by mundane interest to God; and secondly, she also melts the heart of God who is bent upon giving fruits in accordance with the deserts of the people, and persuades Him to extend His bliss to all people by overruling the bondage of *Karma*. (375)

Visistadvaita philosophy emphasizes that Lakshmi has a crucial role in a devotee's salvation. It, therefore, assumes that woman is a must for man's salvation and a male attains awareness only through his affinity with the female and vice versa.

Critical Analysis

Rao's characters in *The Cat and Shakespeare* are in the quest for self-transcendence through *bhakti* and *prapatti*. Ramkrishna Pai who is neither a patriot nor a pilgrim but an ordinary clerk who reaches his goal with minimal effort aided by the ostensible comic rouge Govindan Nair, who demonstrates complete self-surrender to the Ultimate through the dramatized metaphor of the 'cat carrying its kitten'. The cat, for Nair, symbolizes Creator or personal God in a theistic certainty.

The title, *The Cat and Shakespeare*, takes us to the heart of the story in which the cat appears again and again in Nair's discourses. The cat figures both as a symbol and as reality. In Govindan Nair's utterances and in his view of the world, we meet the cat as an allegorical entity in the exact Tengali, *Marjaranyaya* sense. Nair can participate in the joy and the ceremony of the world, free from cares and conflicts because, having committed his soul to the safe-keeping of the benevolent motivator and sustainer of the universe, he is free from the burden of directing his life and his choices. He has the spiritual confidence of the devotee who knows with certainty that this protection and welfare are assured even if things apparently go wrong for a while.

Nair initiates Pai with the *mantra* of cat-hold theory and teaches him that one's first duty is to surrender oneself completely to the Supreme energizing principle in the universe which he symbolically calls 'Mother cat'. He tells Pai, "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 'mew-mew" [. . .]. I like being the kitten" (12). Nair regards himself as a kitten in the hands of the Mother Cat and also teaches Pai to be so.

Nair's observations on the cat express his unflinching faith in the benevolence of the divine power whose grace is indispensable for man's liberation on earth. He tells Pai, "Learn the way of the kitten. Then you're saved. Allow the Mother Cat, sir, to carry you" (66). The kitten principle of Nair is based on the blissful manner in which the kitten surrenders itself utterly to its mother and is well taken care of which means that the devotees who adopt an attitude of self-surrender to the Creator need to have no fear and worries. In humility and resignation before the Creator lies one's salvation.

Having given to the notion of divine grace, Nair attempts to make Pai feel that it is in a confession of vulnerability lies man's strength. Nair convinces him that only after a blind commitment of faith one can realize the upholding and succouring presence of mysterious protective force. Therefore, he teaches Pai not to worry, for everything is bound to turn out well once the first duty has been discharged satisfactorily. He expounds his philosophy to Pai:

> 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 elongated thin hairy thing dangling, and you think, poor kid, it must suffer to be so hold. But I say the kitten is the safest thing in the world, the kitten held in the mouth of the mother cat. (13)

Nair, using one of the classical metaphors of devotional Indian thought, asserts that life need not be looked upon as a test or trial. A man, like a new born kitten insensible of life's peril, should neither fear nor strive for anything, because the mother cat is ever at hand, protecting him never allowing to slip him. In the world of Nair, there is place neither for anxiety, nor guilt, nor panic because there is indeed a compassionate and personal force watching over all beings.

Nair's *prapatti* is a living example of theistic certainty. No more *Nirvikalpa* (trans-conceptual) and *Nirakarrupih* (immaterial), Nair's divinity has positive qualities of compassion, loving concern and protective tenderness. The blind infant kitten matters to the mother cat. Even so does an ignorant, vulnerable man matter to his Maker. Nair convinces Pai that, "The mother cat alone knows. It takes you by the skin of your neck, and takes you to the loft. It alone loves" (40). The statement clearly indicates that one can reach one's goal only through the protection and care of 'Mother Cat'.

Nair assures Pai of latter's reaching to goal through self-surrender to God. He tells that no danger exists in surrendering to God. He is always there to help and protect them who have shed 'ego' and taken the refuge at the feet of Him. Nair explains to Pai:

> What is death to a kitten that walks on the wall? Have you ever seen a kitten fall? You could fall. I could fall. But the kittens walk on the wall. They are so deft. They are so young. They are so white. The mother cat watches them. And when they are about to fall, there is she, her head in the air, and she picks you up by the scruff of your neck. You never know where she is. (61)

The quintessence of Nair's philosophy is his unconditional faith in self-surrender to the Creator who finds an admirable concrete equivalent in the cat. Implicitly, he explains to Pai that the lord incarnates in any form whenever He finds His devotee staggering on the thin path between the world of mental categories and the world of illumination.

The cat-hold theory thus is well illustrated in the characters of both Nair and Pai, though a subtle distinction can be observed between the two. Nair illustrates that the pardoning Lord is the God of the sinner and He seeks the evil doer more than He does the *Satvika* (pure). He even relishes the physical *dosa* (evil) in the suppliant like the mother who embraces with pleasure her dirt-stained child returning from play. He tells Pai, "Lord saves us from our sins" (81). This is the reason why in spite of all his roguery, Nair qualifies for grace in the end.

Pai, in contrast with Nair, has led a blameless life, but he too has done nothing to deserve his good fortune. He remains perfectly passive until the supreme spirit acts upon him. The only thing he has done is that he has whole-heartedly left everything to the mercy of Lord, and has shown unshakable faith on Him. He, with the totality of his existence, has followed the path shown by Nair. He has played with *bilva* (aegle marmelos) leaves, and like the hunter, he has continuously been dropping them on the silence below. Like a true devotee, Pai has his *dhruvasmriti* (constant remembrance) on the Lord. There is no trace of ego in his submission to God. He does not have the egoistic assurance of a special spiritually privileged status. In his small white house with a courtyard, Pai seems modest and well content and even in these confined environs 'some where there's the sound of the sea', the sea always with Rao is a symbol of the universal essence. Pai passes his day-to-day life in a rare restfulness which may be noticed in the very tone and temper of the opening lines of the novel. He tells us, "I have a small white house here, with a courtyard. From the back, I look over the coconut trees, and huts, and somewhere, there's the sound of the sea" (7).

The serene anonymity of Pai, the resigned mediocrity, the complete freedom from all intellectual pretensions and the tranquil humility of his all too ordinary surroundings and pleasures and aspirations are very assisting for him in following the path of *prapatti* to reach his goal.

Pai, in spite of being a Brahmin, does not boast of his lineage. He tells us that, "Though a Brahmin I know less Sanskrit than he [Nair]. And I understood even less" (34). He even unresentfully admits that he is "slow of mind and often too

prosaic to understand his neighbour's philosophic flights" (13). He admits himself the lack of intellectual grandeur in him but he shows immense faith in the divine power. The very sentence, "God helps one in everything" (11), is an indication of Pai's trust in the Lord. An ill-paid clerk, Pai can only dream of building a big house, "I worship nothing [. . .] and I don't think I care for anything" (23), he tells us.

Nair, the initiated, prepares Pai for the spiritual growth and teaches him that the true knowledge of the Lord is possible only when the distinction of subject and object no longer operates. To know the Lord means to sink oneself, to the complete annulment of the limited self into the essence of the other, to experience a unity above mental mode. "When you can walk to the next garden, you can say "I love the Cat" (101), are Shantha's cryptic words.

What is relevant in this psychic domain is not the consideration of knowledge or the lack of it but the joyous participation in the frolic of the universe. If, as Nair prescribes, man can realize a state of identity less celebration, he can give himself up to the Lord's supreme play in complete spiritual quiescence.

Nair has used a very authentic metaphysical conceit of a 'tamarind seed' to explain to Pai the importance of the shedding of one's intellectual arrogance and to break away from the conceptual mind. Nair tells Pai to sing; "I am empty as a tamarind seed, / The lord plays the square and four with me." (87) The song signifies that to give oneself up to the Lord's game, His *Lila* (play), is to share in the cosmic sport. To relinquish one's tight hold upon one's anxious self-protective ego, to erase all traces of craving or effort, to forget choices and assertion is to experience choiceless awareness, *Samadhi*. It is a state where a devotee can reach only when he becomes a vehicle and let God play some instrument through him. He becomes His flute, a hollow bamboo, and it is only after that God's song will descend upon him. The sheer joy and innocence of the mystic comes from this choiceless participation in the game of the universe, "When you are reminded that you are empty as a tamarind seed, you see it and say it again, you know the tamarind seed is empty. And begin to think of the play. And where the play begins, reality begins" (87).

Nair is in a state of constant merriment relishing the world as a huge field of sport. It takes Pai long to acquire the same psychic frequency but he does come to an ultimate realization. His own account of this is, "And I understood the ration shop scale where children played. You weigh only that which you seem to weigh, but that which knows neither balance nor weight stands outside of time. Life is so precious.

I ask you why does not one play?" (102) Nair, in this way, gives himself willingly and with joy to the tune in to the psychic-force of compassion and grace inherent in the frolic universe.

Nair's talk about Mother Cat completely mystifies Pai and finally it is the sight of the blind, feeble kittens walking on the wall that propels him into an instant spiritual experience. The concrete vision enkindles the spiritual vision and Pai is conscious that new dimensions open out before him. So far, unsuspected even by himself, every inane act and thought of his has been like a *bilva* leaves dropped unknowingly on the Lord's Shrine. As Lord Krishna says in the *Bhagavadgita,* "I enjoy whatever is offered with devotion, be it a leaf or flower" (qtd. in Gour 353), Pai's actions are mysteriously pleasing to the Lord and he is, as it were, chosen for the experience of *Samadhi* which descends upon him like a glorious and bountiful spiritual largesse. Shiva has appeared and spoken to the ignorant, unpretentious hunter the words "Here I am" (10).

Conclusion

The Cat and Shakespeare exhibits the theme of quest for self-recognition through *bhakti* and *prapatti*. Pai has been a pilgrim to no shrine except the Divisional office at Trivandrum. But he has given up totally to the Lord and has *dhruvasmriti* on Him. God, in response to Pai's *bhakti* and *prapatti*, rewards him with His *kripa* (grace). Pai goes across the 'wall and finds himself in a garden all rosy and gentle.' The 'Wall' is a symbol of the conceptual barrier beyond which illumination lies; it stands for the ever-present obstruction of the intellect which has to be transcended before enlightenment can dawn. Pai himself accounts for it thus:

> That was the first time I went across the wall. I found a garden all rosy and gentle. There were bowers and many sweet-smelling herbs; there were pools and many orchids that smelled from distance. There were old men with beards as long as the knees and they talked to no one. Young men were in green turbans and others, children and women, sang or danced to no tune but to the tune of trees. Snakes lived there in plenty, and the mongoose roamed all about the garden. I saw deer too. (100)

This vision of life as harmony – reconciling diversities and opposites – is only a prelude to a richer vision that follows when Pai walks behind the Cat. The staircase up which he follows has been a traditional symbol of the stages in the quest for self-recognition. So is the "very lovely music" (101) he hears while mounting the steps.

The staircase suddenly turns, and in goes the cat. Pai looks in and is granted a vision:

> I saw nose (not the nose) and eyes seeing eyes, I saw ears curved to make sound visible, and face and limbs rising in perfection of perfection, for form was it. I saw love yet knew not its name but heard it as sound; I saw truth not as fact but as ignition. I could walk into fire and be cool, I could sing and be silent, I could hold myself and yet not be there. I saw feet. They made flowers on stems and the curved hands of children. I smelled a breath that was of nowhere but rising in my nostrils sank back into me, and found death was at my door. I woke up and found death had passed by, telling me I had no business to be there. Then where was I? Death said it had died. I had killed death. When you see death as death, you kill it. When you say, I am so and so, and you say, I am such and such, you have killed yourself. I remain ever, having killed myself. (101)

This is a description in metaphorical terms of an intense spiritual experience, which a reader familiar with *Vedanta* could easily understand. It presents the divine principle as perfection, incarnate, absolute good and infinite love, as both immanent and transcendent. And it shows how the ego into which the self degenerates in the world must die when one surrenders oneself to the Lord, where it recovers the true Self, which is an eternal mode of It.

Pai, after the recognition of his true self has become totally one with the moment. All duality, every division between the actor and the act, between the experiencer and the experienced, the observer and the observed has disappeared. He is chastened by both pain and pleasure and is enriched with beauty and grandeur. He has killed death and is no more perturbed by it. He has achieved a state of harmony and has come out of the trap of duality, where there are no contradictions, but only variations of the same essence.

Works Cited

- Brahma, Nalini Kanta. *Philosophy of Hindu Sadhna*. Book Faith, 1999.
- Dasgupta, Surendranath. *A History of Indian Philosophy*. Vol. III. Motilal Banarasidass,1954.
- Gour, Neelam Saran. *Confrontation of Thought Systems in the Novels of Raja Rao*. University Press, 1988.

- Klostermaier, Klaus K. *The Survey of Hinduism.* Sunny Press, 1989.
- Masih, Yakub. *A Comparative Study of Religions*. Motilal Banarsidass, 2005.
- Radhakrishnan, S. *Indian Philosophy*. George Allen and Unwin, 1941.
- Ramanujacarya. *Vedartha-Sangraha of Sri Ramanujacarya*. Translated by S. S. Raghavachar, Advaita Ashrama,1978.
- _____. *Sarnagati Gadya*. Translated by S. S. Raghabachar, Advaita Ashram, 2002.
- Rao, P. Nagaraja. *Introduction to Vedanta*. Bharatiya Vidya Bhawan, 1990.
- Rao, Raja. *The Cat and Shakespeare: A Tale of India*. Orient Paperbacks, 1971.
- Sharma, Chandradhar. *A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy*. Motilal Banarasidass, 1960.

❑❑❑