

# Symbolism in Raja Rao's Novel, 'The Cat and Shakespeare'

Laiphrakpam Pushparani Devi, Research Scholar, CMJ University, Jorabat, Meghalaya- 793101

## Abstract

Raja Rao is one of the founding fathers of Indian English Literature along with Mulk Raj Anand and R. K. Narayan. They are considered the "Big Three". The Cat and Shakespeare is Rao's third novel after he has successfully published *Kanthapura* (1938) and *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960). The Cat and Shakespeare is narrated by a Brahmin named Ramakrishna Pai. The setting of the story takes place at a small place in Kerala, South India. He and Govindhan Nair, another character in the story are neighbours. There is not much of a story in the novel. It revolves around the story of the mother cat which is taken as a symbol for the Creator of this universe and because of this, we must surrender ourselves to it as we are saved in God's hands. The story is filled with many symbols. For example, there are hidden symbols on the cat, the ration office, the three-storeyed house, the sea, the wall, and so on. Rao has beautifully placed these things at the right place and it is from this kind of talent that he is still now considered as one of the greatest novelists who had contributed a lot to Indian English Literature.

**Keywords:** Montpellier, Vishishtadvaita, Always, Boothalinga, Sattvas, Ration Office, Spiritual.

Raja Rao was one of the great pioneers of Indian English Literature. He was born on 8th November 1908 in a district called Hassan located in Southern India. He belongs to a high caste Brahmin family. He lost his mother, Gauramma at an early age. His father, H.V. Krishnaswamy was a teacher at Nizam College. He spent most of his early life with his grandfather. He did his education mostly at institutions run by Muslims like Madrasah-e-Aliya and Aligarh Muslim University. He was much influenced by Prof. Eric Dickson whom he met at Aligarh Muslim University. He later went to the University of Montpellier, France for his research work. There, he met Camille Mouley, a history teacher whom he married later in his life. Raja Rao married three times in his life. His famous works include *Kanthapura* (1938), *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960), *The Cat and Shakespeare* (1965), and so on. *The Serpent and the Rope* is a semi-autobiographical novel that won him the Sahitya Akademi Award. Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, and Raja Rao are considered as "Big Three" as they are the founding fathers of Indian writings in English.

Symbols play a vital role in our everyday life. This also happens in literature. A symbol is the representation of a thing or an object. It is derived from the Latin word 'symbols' which means 'a sign of recognition'. A Dove is simply an ordinary bird but we take it as a symbol of peace. Likewise, the color white stands for purity, red for love and romance, and so on. Similarly, a lion symbolizes power and force. Each person has their own opinion of what a symbol is. According to M.H. Abrahams, the symbol means:

In the broadest sense, a symbol is anything that signifies something else; in this sense all words are symbols. In discussing literature, however, the term "symbol" is applied only to a word or phrase that signifies an object or event which in its turn signifies something or suggests a range of reference, beyond itself. [M.H. Abrahams:304]

In addition, custom writing.org defines a symbol in the case of literature as:

A symbol in literature is a thing with both a literal and figurative meaning that helps the readers to comprehend the story better. This literary device can refer to a word, an object or a setting the author uses in the text to focus readers' attention on the message. [Custom-writing.org]

After the successful publication of his two novels, *Kanthapura* (1938) and *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960), Raja Rao published his third novel, *The Cat and Shakespeare* in 1965. *The Cat and Shakespeare* were earlier given the title *The Cat* and it appeared in *Chelsea Review*, New York. The novel is subtitled *A Tale of Modern India*. The story revolves around Vishishtadvaita philosophy of Ramanuja which states that God holds the power of this Universe and we are all his disciples. We feel safe when we are under Him.

Ramakrishna Pai is the narrator of the story. The story starts with Pai being shifted to Trivandrum for his work posting. He works as a clerk in Revenue Department. Govindan Nair is his neighbour. He lives with his wife Tangamma and his two sons, Modhu and Shridhar. Govindan Nair works at a Ration Office. Pai's wife doesn't come to meet him often. Both of them lack emotional attachment. When Pai was seriously sick with British bubos, his wife visited him once, left their daughter

Usha and went away to Pattanur stating that she has lots of work to finish. Because of all these situations, Pai comes to love with Shantha, an unmarried woman who works as a school teacher near Trivandrum. She is a very smart woman who handles every situation smoothly. She and Pai's love is spiritual even though they are not married. Their love can even be compared with the love story of Ramaswamy and Savithri from Rao's second novel, *The Serpent and the Rope*.

Right after the death of Nair's son, Shridhar due to some illness, he was arrested on a charge of bribery. We also come across a scene where John, a colleague of Govindhan Nair brought a mother cat to their office. Nair considers the mother cat as the creator of all of us. It is the symbol of a divine being. A funny yet serious scene is created at the court where the file touched by the cat contains a signature which was thought to be Nair's previously was actually for BoothalingaIyer who died of a heart attack when the cat jumps over his head. Thus, with the help of the cat, Nair was proved innocent. The mother cat was kept under the care of Pai later in the story. The story ends with Nair being transferred to Alwaye. Ramakrishna Pai's dream of building a three-storeyed house changed to two stories later in the story. He also comes to hold the post of Secretary of Temple Grants Department at the Revenue Office.

The novel is stuffed with many symbols. We can see this from the title of the novel itself. The cat as mentioned in the story symbolizes the Creator of the Universe. She is represented as an image of a woman like every mother who looks after her with great care for her child. The mother cat was brought by John. Govindan Nair has a deep respect for the cat and he even tells people to follow the way of the cat as it will give peace and harmony to the individual. It is a symbol of power and destruction. Boothalinga Iyer who is a Brahmin dislikes the cat considering it to be an animal of a lower caste. He faces death after the cat jumps over his head. Thus, it destroys the evil ones and protects the good ones. Maarjala Kishora Nyaya which is one of the Nyayas (Principles) of Vishishtadvaita Philosophy is used here. It means Cat-Kitten Principle where a kitten feels safe when it is with its mother. The Kitten is symbolic of ordinary human beings. The mother cat makes sure that its little one doesn't fall and holds tightly by its scruff. So, the kitten's life lies in the hands of its mother. It doesn't have to worry about the upcoming dangers as it is protected by its mother in every step. Govindan Nair completely surrenders himself to the Almighty. He takes everything, be it positive or negative things always in a positive way with the thought that his life path is made by the Creator. Shakespeare stands for temporal things in life like those of happiness, sadness, sorrow, etc.

The Ration Office is a symbol of corruption. Many corrupt practices are performed here. Fake ration

cards are issued with the exchange of money. People like BoothalingaIyer and Velayudhan Nair represent those people who get indulged in corrupt practices. Even the rats in the ration office represent the corrupt individuals. After acquiring enough money by false means these people loaded it in their homes and spent it on unnecessary things. People, irrespective of caste, creed, religion, sex, etc. are all corrupted as we can see in the story that there are Muslims, Christians, Brahmins, etc. in Govindan Nair's office who are indulged in these practices.

To feel comfortable and cozy is certain if we have a house. We must be satisfied with it and its surroundings. The house that Ramakrishna lives in Pattanur are symbolic of the residence of Almighty. It is painted white and white is a symbol of peace and purity. Pai feels happy and comfortable staying at that place. He considers it to be a sacred place like the temple for Hindus, Church for Christians, and Mosque for Muslims, etc. and he can hear the sound of the sea nearby which he loves too.

The three-storied house which Ramakrishna Pai wants to build represents the three Gunas. They are the Sattvas, Rajas, and Tamas. Sattvas is the pure one with positive thoughts and happiness. Rajas are the passion or an intense desire to do something. Tamas remains in the lowest position. It is laziness or dullness in humans. He is an idle being. Bhagavadgita mentions that all three are present in humans with different quantities. To attain liberation, an understanding of the three Gunas is very important. In connection with this third-story house, we also find there is mention of sea. It symbolizes infinity which is also a window on God. About this three-storeyed house, Dr. Bhargavi gives her opinion as:

The three-storeyed house symbolizes the cessation of the suffering and the release is seldom achieved, Pai remarks that it is not possible to build a three-story high in this life. [Bhargavi: 204]

Later Pai is satisfied with building a house of only two stories. His mind changes when he follows the cat one day in the garden. On this, M. K. Naik comments:

This has reference to the old quarrel between the two modified non-dualistic schools referred to earlier; building another story onto the house would be equivalent to salvation by effort--- and this, Pai finally discovers, is inferior to going out into the beautiful garden could be educated with salvation by grace. [M.K.Naik:138]

The wall as mentioned in the story marks the division between reality and illusion. Govindhan Nair jumps across the wall when he comes to visit Pai's house. The wall is located between Govindhan Nair's house and Ramakrishna Pai's house. The wall stands for illusion. In the last section of the novel, Pai happens to cross the wall after he follows his mother cat who is looking for its

kittens. After crossing the wall, Pai sees a beautiful garden. He finds spiritual satisfaction after this. The garden is a window on God.

The novel also comes out to be a successful one with many symbolic interpretations. After the successful publication of his semi-autobiographical novel, *The Serpent and the Rope* with Shri Atmananda's Non-Dualistic Philosophy, Rao in this third novel presents Modified Non-Dualistic Philosophy of Shri Ramanuja. The significance of Bhakti is beautifully painted in the story. *The Cat and Shakespeare* is an amalgamation of comic and serious situations. It also has a connection with his second novel. The hero Ramaswamy at the end of *The Serpent and the Rope* went to Travancore in search of a Guru to attain self-realization. Ramakrishna Pai in *The Cat and Shakespeare* attains self-realization at the end of the story. Thus, the novel turns out to be a beautiful piece of art with all the Indian philosophical elements in it.

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