

IV THE CAT AND SHAKESPEARE

CHAPTER IV

THE CAT AND SHAKESPEARE

I

William Walsh calls The Cat and Shakespeare (1965) as novello, and Raja Rao describes it as 'a metaphysical comedy' while Uma Parameswaram regards it 'scarcely a novel'.

Though critics comment that Raja Rao, as a novelist, lacks form or he is 'cranky' to the form of fiction, he does have his own concept of form, as he said to K. Natwar Singh that,

The Indian novel can only be epic in form and metaphysical in nature. It can only be a story within story to show all stories are parables.¹

On the simple narrative level, the novel is an uproariously funny story of a cat and two clerks. The narrator Ramkrishna Pai loves beautiful Shantha and dreams of building a big house; the other clerk, Pai's neighbour Govindan Nair, 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 worship 'the Cat' in the corrupt Rationing office. The boss dies suddenly when the cat sits on his head and finally there is the trial of the cat in a court of law. Nair follows the cat up the stairs and is vouchsafed a mystic experience, we leave him listening to "The music of

marriage,"² i.e., in a state of illumination.

Raja Rao calls the novel a 'metaphysical comedy' and the metaphysical meaning of the cat-symbol has been stressed by almost all the critics who have dealt with this novel. Thus Dr. M.K. Naik comments,

Nair's symbol of the cat and the kitten are taken from the philosophy of one of the schools which arose out of the modified nondualistic philosophy of Ramanuja, a celebrated interpreter of Vedanta who flourished in the eleventh century.³

Dr. Naik assures that, according to Raja Rao, the image of the Mother cat represents divine wisdom, love, feminine aspect. In this sense The Cat and Shakespeare is a sequel to The Serpent and the Rope. According to Prof. Naik, the Cat image is the glorification of the Feminine Principle which is one of the leading ideas of The Serpent and the Rope. The novel is a modern hymn, a praise of the Feminine Principle in its various embodiments. The main thread throughout the book is assertion of the supremacy of motherhood.

The cat refers to Marjara Nyaya, the cat principle which is the basis of a school of Indian thought. The principle is based, as Paul C. Verghese says,

On the blissful manner with which the helpless kitten surrenders itself utterly to its mother

and is well taken care of and therefore, means that the devotee who adopts an attitude of self surrender to the Creator needs have no fear about himself or his near and dear ones in the world.⁴

The mother cat is the mysterious protective principle in life. Thus Govindan Nair observes, "The kitten is the safest thing in the world, the kitten held in the mouth of the mother cat."⁵

II

Raja Rao's women characters in The Cat and Shakespeare are not mere symbolic or allegorical but real. They belong to the various classes of society. Raja Rao has given vivid glimpses into the various facets of women-life in Kerala, their superstitions, traditions, casteism and yet full of colour, freshness and vitality. The matriarchal family set-up in Kerala provides Raja Rao's women characters greater amount of freedom than an average contemporary Indian woman, even in this century of feminism. Raja Rao's women in this novel assert their individuality, and lead the life of their own choice, discarding the traditional domination of men and social customs. They are fascinating and non-conformists. Particularly Nair women are worshippers of mother; they are conscious of their self and have a sense of identity. Gita Krishnakutty comments,

Raja Rao has captured the essentials of this (matriarchal) feature of Kerala society with remarkable skill and woven

them very naturally into his novel - it may be added in passing that, even in India, many regard these customs as peculiar and incomprehensible. ... But the social system does safeguard certain rights to property that give women a greater measure of security than elsewhere.⁶

For instance, Saroja is the realistic creation of Raja Rao who is the second child of her father, married to Ramakrishna Pai but stays away from him at Pattanur, Alwaye. Their son Vithal lives with Saroja in her own ancestral home called the Kartikura House, whereas their daughter Usha accompanies her father Trivandrum, at Kamla Bhavan. Saroja has thirty-three acres of wet land and her family business in coconut. She is a tremendous worker and cannot remain away from her home for long, not even for the sake of her sick husband. She is always busy in taking care of her lands, repairing boats, making rope. She ably manages her own affairs keeping her identity separate from her husband's. She has the courage to tell her son that he has no father, the sun is the father and to bring him up as her own, single handedly. She belongs to a race which believes that motherhood is certain and necessary fact of existence. Dr. M.K. Naik comments,

(Saroja) keeping her son Vithal away from his father and telling him 'your father is no father. Your real father is sun', is likewise a typical product of the matriarchal system peculiar to Kerala.⁷

The reason of Saroja's not living with her husband may be

as Pai confesses, "In heat I strike. I struck my wife only twice and have left marks on her face."⁸

Saroja is absorbed in her worldly pursuits as Shyamala Narayan aptly comments that she "loves her property more than her husband and her daughter."⁹

Saroja is materialistic; truth to her is a tangible fact; she confines herself to her mundane existence as she believes, "For her fact is that which yields ... Land is a fact. You reap what you sow."¹⁰

Saroja refuses to live in a dream, though she knows in the logic of her dreams two and two make seven in reality two and two is four. She does not follow illusory and unearthly logic. She is a true Brahmin and knows how to take rather than to give. She is a contrast to Shanta. She is a practical woman mostly with meagre education.

Thus Saroja is Raja Rao's realistic creation and a convincing character, not sophisticated like Madeleine or Savitri, but fascinating due to her consciousness of self and individuality. Perhaps matriarchal pattern of family has provided her adequate training for self-assertion.

Gita Krishnakutty comments, "Raja Rao has almost intuitively pinpointed certain recognisable features of the Kerala matriarchal society, especially in his delineation of Shantha."¹¹ Shanta is a

prominent woman character of Raja Rao, fascinating and realistic in The Cat and Shakespeare. Ramakrishna Pai's truth equates beauty. Shantha is an embodiment of truth in the form of beauty to him. He comments, 'Truth is such a beautiful thing, a beautiful woman like Shantha loves to hear the truth talked, because it explains beauty. ...'

No comment is made on Shantha's intellectual qualities, though she must have received a good education and specialised training of a kind in order to be a school teacher in Trivandrum. Shantha lives with her mother, who is a good cook, and two school-going brothers. They have some landed property in North Travancore. She meets Pai in his office in connection with her land case.

Pai has an extra-marital relationship with Shantha, a Nair woman. She is true to the ancient customs of her community, not ashamed of this extra-marital alliance of a Brahmin. For Shantha freedom of choice is a birthright and the devotion she shows her man is also self-chosen, not imposed. She is not a conventional mistress at all, she moves in with Pai of her own free will. She never feels guilty or sinful in their relationship. She has not touched a man before, but knows Pai to be her man 'the moment he went and stood against the filing ladder'. She worships her man; in love, her 'giving is complete'. She is four months gone with Pai's child, but she is not worried about marriage or

'ashamed to be a woman'. For her, marriage is not a fact; it is a state, mere rituals do not make a wife. Saroja is married to Pai, but when he needs her help she is not present, 'What is the use of having a wife if she cannot take care of one ...'. Shantha on the other hand is a true wife, as she believes "To be a wife is not to be wed. To be a wife is to worship your man."¹²

Shantha does not only worship him but corrects his wrong decisions, curbs his too high ambitions, warns him against embarking on a dangerous project, when Nair predicts his death with three storey house. Dr. M.K. Naik rightly says,

True marriage is where there is only perception, and so neither perceiver nor perceived; as Raja Rao explains ... In other words, marriage signifies a going beyond duality, and achieving oneness with the Divine. Hence, Shantha, who is not married to Pai, is not worried, for she has already achieved the higher union, which is granted to Pai only at the end.¹³

Shantha does not enter the Kamla Bhavan, till she buys it. She is resourceful enough to find the means to buy the house that Pai dreams incessantly of owning, for it is with the proceeds from the sale of her land, she helps to purchase the house and move into it with Pai and his daughter Usha. Shantha is always mistress of herself and of any situation she finds herself in. She can handle the delicate relationship between her and Usha,

Pai's daughter with infinite grace, winning the child over her. Usha herself is more Shantha's spiritual daughter than Pai's. Finally, she gives birth to a lovely child; he is to be named Krishna but left without name.

On the realistic plane, Shantha is a teacher, a gentle mistress, but on the symbolic level she manifests the feminine principle in human form and with human limitations. She is in tune intuitively with Prakriti. 'Shantha's silence has all that logic cannot compute'. This intuition makes her to take care of Pai when he is unconscious, 'my son (in her) told her so'. Shantha embodies 'mother cat', 'mother principle'. Pai goes into raptures and says, "Man is protected. You could not be without a mother."¹⁴ He appreciates motherhood, 'How beautiful it is to be pregnant' and envies the woman who bears children and, "Wifhood, of all states in the world, seems the most holy ... it creates."¹⁵ Woman as a lady love helps to know her man. The narrator remarks, 'If woman were not, would you know you were?' "She is the biggest puzzle,"¹⁶ and Shantha, "The woman is always right."¹⁷

Shantha is a rather ambivalent character. Though she tries to assert her individuality, obviously, she is a traditional, devoted, submissive wife to Pai (though not married to him). She is the symbol of complete surrender, as Pai says, "My feet were there for her to worship."¹⁸ Shantha looks upon Pai as her Lord

Krishna, as Savitri to Rama. She is the extension of Savitri in The Serpent and the Rope. Shantha is Raja Rao's woman with different layers of personality, realistic, symbolic, spiritual, metaphysical. She is womanhood personified whom Raja Rao has glorified and idealised.

Shantha displays tremendous courage to choose her own course of life and to adhere to it. Inevitably, she is the product of matriarchal family system of Kerala. Being a teacher, she is financially independent. Michele Barrett significantly comments,

Feminists have consistently and rightly seen the family as a central site of women's oppression in contemporary society. The reasons for this lie both in the material structure of the households, by which women are by and large financially dependent on men, and in the ideology of the family, through which women are confined to a primary concern with domesticity and motherhood. ... Virginia Woolf saw women's struggle for mental independence of men as directly related to the difficulties of shaking off the burden of financial dependence.¹⁹

Matriarchal society is powerful in this novel and feminism might seem a new fangled and rather puzzling.

Another female character, fascinating of her purity and innocence is Usha, Saroja's daughter portrayed by Raja Rao in The Cat and Shakespeare.

Govindan Nair has also a son, Sridhar. Usha and Sridhar play at marriage and house-building. Unfortunately, Sridhar dies as a result of fever. Nair helps Ramkrishna Pai to buy the house of Mudali for the sake of Usha. Mudali also develops a bond of affection for Usha. Mudali takes Usha to his house on every Friday to fill up the emptiness of his house and offers her rich gifts. Usha, an adopted daughter brings happiness into the life of the rich but childless Mudali. Usha is a sensitive child who accepts Shantha as mother, Mudali as grandfather and looks after Shantha's child affectionately.

Usha is an embodiment of mysterious womanhood, wisdom, love and wide sympathy. Pai thinks that like Shantha, Usha is always happy and able to intuitively comprehend many things that remain a mystery to him. Usha can understand Nair's philosophy. She manifests motherhood for Pai,

Usha looks after him (Shantha's child) as if it were her own child. A child for a woman is always her own child.²⁰

Raja Rao's child character, Usha, is a glorification of feminine principle, supporting Shantha's character and yet credible.

Raja Rao's another realistic woman character is Lakshmi, who is beautiful but pathetic, mercilessly trapped in a disreputable situation. She is a young widow whose husband is

killed by the British during the war for refusing to shoot at the Germans. Govindan Nair encounters her in a 'doctor's shop' (actually, brothel). She stands like a daughter before a father when Govindan Nair blesses her. Her whole being becomes 'lucent'. He assures her with all the sincerity at his command that her husband is sure to come, he calls her to Ration Shop to offer her card.

Raja Rao has created a number of other women characters in The Cat and Shakespeare. They are minor characters who provide setting or background in the novel. For example, Tangamma is a grandlady from a well-spoken family, wife of Govindan Nair and a considerate neighbour. She has some land in her own name which provides supplementary income. The rich businessman, Mudali's daughter is there who in spite of doing every pilgrimage, bears no child. Mudali's wife's grandmother was a great lady and beauty. Velayudhan Nair's wife has an 'array of gold bangles on her hands.' Bhootnlinga Iyer's wife Lakshamma is deeply grieved by her husband's death. Abraham's childless wife and John's wife Anita are there. The women stand in the queue in the ration shop and shut 'The sun is hot for us'.

III

Raja Rao has painted beautifully, the word-sketches of women characters in The Cat and Shakespeare, with their individual

and peculiar traits of Kerala background which offers Saroja and Shantha tremendous courage to confront life and assert their individuality. They are not highly educated or sophisticated like Madeleine and Savitri, and yet, they are quite individualistic in their behaviour. Raja Rao's favourite conception of 'mother-principle' is also manifest here which glorifies and idealizes woman. Thus, Raja Rao can be said to be consistent in maintaining his attitude towards women - that attitude is idealistic as well as paternalistic.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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