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**BREAKING STEREOTYPES: MALE VIEW OF THE FEMALE
PRINCIPLE IN RAJA RAO'S *THE CAT AND SHAKESPEARE***

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***Abstract:** In Raja Rao's novel The Cat and Shakespeare the existential quest of Pai, an Indian male, can be studied as mirroring that of Hamlet. However, Pai's progress consists in his resistance to the stereotyped power-imbued values of both 'Shakespeare's' and his own culture, i. e. those related to colonization, radical authoritarian nationalism, caste, species and gender, the last-mentioned being the focus of this paper.*

***Keywords:** cat, guru, house, Shakti, spiritual progress, stereotype*

1. Introduction

The beginning of Raja Rao's *The Cat and Shakespeare* (1965) finds Pai, one of the protagonists and also the narrator, just arrived in Trivandrum. Trivandrum, or Thiruvananthapuram, in Travancore (India), is a place on

which Rama, the protagonist of Rao's previous novel *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960), focuses at the end of that work, his spiritual quest having been relatively unsuccessful up until then. What can nevertheless be considered a definite achievement is his awareness of the necessity, indeed an inner compulsion, for him to go to Travancore, which he calls "my country" (Rao 1960:410) and "my real home" (Rao 1960:411), and his identification with the place is accomplished when he calls it "my name". (Rao 1960:410)

Here then we have, at the beginning of *The Cat and Shakespeare*, Pai, a male protagonist who has just arrived in Trivandrum, Travancore, and who can be perceived as a kind of re-incarnation of or successor to Rama. Pai's reminiscences, which relate to the previous period of his life, seem to be preoccupied with two issues: one can be called 'an acquisition of a house' and the other 'a women's question'.

2. Pai's Spiritual Quest

In order to deal with the latter, which is the subject of this paper, we have first to understand more of the former: what the significance of the house, or of an acquisition of a house, is. Pai seems almost obsessed with the idea of a house, indeed with living in his own house. He repeatedly prays for the fulfillment of this wish/urge, being thus in tune with the worldview of Govindan Nair, his neighbour and guru, who claims that "[o]ur houses must look like us." (Rao 1965:6) Govindan also calls Shantha, Pai's companion and pregnant with his child, "by her house name as if her house were she." Pai is persuaded that "[i]n fact her house *is* she." (Rao 1965:21;emphasis mine.)

Thus, as I argued in an earlier paper, there is ample evidence in the

novel that 'the house' represents an "interior condition of man, a metaphorical space representing the potential of faculties for spiritual progress in terms of personality growth and making use of these faculties. This includes a highly active and meaningful interaction of the Self with the outside world." (Volná 2010:299) This personal quest of Pai's can be rightly viewed as reflecting Hamlet's existential puzzle in the Shakespeare play.

If Pai, in his previous appearance as Rama, says "my real home" is in Travancore, then home, indeed the real home, apparently implies a house. When Pai arrives in Trivandrum he starts living in 'a small new white house' (Rao 1965:3), which symbolizes a modest but nevertheless a new beginning in terms of his personal growth or fulfillment. He considers this house his own even though he is not really its owner, and soon he starts craving and praying for a bigger one, more precisely a three-storied house, which he will himself build. He is thus well aware of an absolute necessity – and responsibility – for personal growth for himself. And it is only after he has been in Trivandrum for two years that he is capable of contemplating his previous situation.

2.1. Former Reality

At the previous place Pai lived with his wife Saroja and two children, their daughter Usha and their son Vithal. Clearly, at this place Pai's interior well-being was challenged to the point that, as he openly admits, he struck Saroja. Not only so, but at this point in the narration, at the beginning of his spiritual-personal journey, he says "I struck my wife only twice and left marks on her face." (Rao 1965:6) This is most certainly a representation of a savage male mind breaking a female body. How he puts it either accentuates the savagery, in the sense that he believes he should

have struck her more times, or can be understood as an expression of an extreme degree of interior frustration, the fact that he held himself back from giving her more blows. Pai's relationship with Saroja has, however, a still more profound significance.

Pai leaves this family behind. The family estate, the Kartikura house, where they lived together, he perceives as not belonging to him in any sense: firstly, it comes from his wife's family as their property, and now not only is Saroja its owner in the material sense but the house is a representation of her affairs and interests. Pai sees Saroja's significant traits as devotion to material riches and a stereotyped tradition-shaped vision of woman's position, and her presence as overwhelming:

Tangamma [Usha's teacher] was always telling [Usha]: Child, you have the fingers to make a nice braid. You will be a dutiful wife. My wife Saroja said: "Nice things for teachers to be talking of wives already." But that is the way with my wife. She cannot help all the time talking of the wife. I am a quiet man and to speak the truth I don't yet know what it is to mean husband. (Rao 1965:3)

To paraphrase the quotation above, for Pai the Kartikura house *is* Saroja, and it is so in more than one respect. Pai recalls having been taught that the god Shiva is supposed to occupy "the place of the heart" and therefore rightly asks, "[t]hen what is the place Parwathi [Shiva's wife] occupies? I sometimes wonder whether I have a heart." (Rao 1965:6) As concerns women Pai is at a loss, indeed lost, disappointed by his relationship with Saroja, and he has no clue as to what position woman should occupy in relation to him. In fact, Pai perceives this situation as unbearable heat – and then he strikes.

2.2. Stepping Forward

Now Pai starts living in a small white house in Trivandrum and perceives this as a liberation from the previous state of affairs and a new beginning. He believes in God and wishes for his guidance – he wants to build a big house. A neighbour, Govindan Nair, comes to see him, and Pai renders his entry as that of a cat: Govindan Nair, “the mixture of *The Vicar of Wakefield* and Shakespeare” (Rao 1965:8), is a cat-like creature,

this big creature Govindan Nair leaps across the wall. That he is round and tall makes no difference to his movements [...] Then he would spread his fat legs on my bench, open his paws. (Rao 1965:8)

Why is Shakespeare mentioned as one of the two components of Govindan Nair’s personality? First, it is necessary to understand the significance of his cat-like appearance. Govindan Nair calls himself ‘a kitten which is carried by the cat’. (Rao 1965:8) The mother cat carries her kittens by the scruff of their necks, and thus this gesture represents kitten-like individuals’ total surrender and joy (Rao 1965:9) at being maternally cared for by a higher being, God. As to this aspect of Govindan Nair, Pai perceives that “[t]he fact is, to him *all the world* is just what he does. He does and so the world comes into being.” (Rao 1965:8;emphasis mine.) In some way or other, the whole world – and indeed the entire existence of each individual, as we will see in more detail below – can thus be seen as being encompassed.

Coming now to the significance of Shakespeare in the novel, Neelum Saran Gour (1993:1) mentions Raja Rao himself as being “singularly unclear” about the place the former actually occupies in his work, and “a certain critical discomfort” (Gour 1993:1) related to the interpretation of the

novel from this point of view. Examples such as “[H]ow are you, my lord and liege?” and “Better than if the kingdom were at peace and no wars anywhere” (Rao 1965:24) testify, as C. D. Narasimhaiah (1973:164) observes, to the presence of Shakespearean syntax and vocabulary. Apart from what is also much too obvious, i. e. the theatrical pattern of the dialogues in the novel and a paraphrase of Hamlet’s most famous soliloquy, “Shakespeare’s enigmatic identity in literature has been suggested as a parallel to the mystery of the Mother Cat” as related to *maya*, the Hindu concept of reality vs. illusion. (Gour 1993:1) This will be developed below; for the time being we can see it as related to Sudhir K. Arora’s (2007:161) mentioning of the symbolic significance of the ration shop in the novel as “the larger world, macrocosm of Malabar with Christians, Brahmin, Nair, and Muslim. For [Govindan] Nair the ration shop becomes ‘the kingdom of Denmark.’ [...] ‘He philosophises, saying’ - Arora quotes from the novel - ‘Shakespeare knew every mystery of the ration shop [...] We live in continual mystery.’” (Rao 1965:81, 82.)

The Cat and Shakespeare is a complex and complicated work imbued with philosophical meanings which are not easy to elucidate. “Only a Nair can see right” (Rao 1965:40) says Pai. Govindan Nair belongs to a lower caste while Pai is a Brahmin, a member of the highest caste. Brahmins are supposed to know and teach *brahman*, all that is included within the socio-philosophical system of what is now called Hinduism, and yet Govindan Nair has at his disposal knowledge and abilities that surpass those of the Brahmins. Recognized for what he is by Pai, Govindan Nair teaches him – and others – and becomes Pai’s guru, a spiritual guide. Govindan Nair then, as someone aware of the need to be guided by the Cat, “the guru in the feminine aspect representing divine wisdom and Love,” in Raja Rao’s own

words (Rao 1992:128 cited by Alterno 2007:38), fulfills a double role. He is both (a) kitten and (a) cat, he both lets himself be guided and guides.

Clearly, Govindan is a bearer of values alternative to those embodied in what is called the great, Brahminical, mainstream tradition. The pattern of beliefs as preached by Govindan, a kind of counter-tradition within Hinduism by contrast with mainstream Shivaism and Vishnuism, is expressive of worship of *Shakti* and the Mother Goddess. *Shakti* is a cosmic female principle which endows the male gods with creative force or energy, Cosmic Energy, a force responsible not only for multiple representations of creation, but also for destruction. (Zbavitel 1993:62-64) Through the Mother Goddess, the embodiment of *Shakti*, the Absolute (God) moves into creation. It is thanks to this maternal energy of nature that both microcosm and macrocosm can be created, kept going and re-created.

In order for this circle of re-creation or rebirth to be kept going for individuals (the microcosm), they have to strive to make the spiritual progress which needs to be achieved before they can aspire to a higher level of existence. As Pai is guided by Govindan Nair towards this spiritual quest and its accomplishment, a kind of enlightenment, we will now analyze the ways in which his progress is reflected in relation to the feminine aspect as represented in the text. The feminine there becomes the protective maternal feminine and is embodied in the character of the cat, presented as both symbol, in the first part of the novel, and a real cat, in the second, and also in Shantha, Pai's female companion, his daughter Usha, and other female characters.

Pai does not follow the principal concepts of Hinduism, those traditionally recognized by Brahmins, which can thus be called 'male' or 'patriarchal' as 'Brahmin *houses* near the temple are dilapidated' (Rao

1965:116) while pursuing his spiritual/personal quest. Instead he chooses the cat-like Govindan Nair as his guru and Govindan's philosophy which runs counter to accepted values.

This is true in a number of respects. Firstly, as has already been clearly stated, it is Govindan, a Nair, not a Brahmin, who mediates the guidance, and the guidance itself is based on the *Shakti* concept, not on the worship of any male deity. Another breaking of a stereotype may be seen in the fact that the *Shakti* principle is expressed by an animal, and specifically by a cat, an animal despised by Brahmins. Creative aspects and activities become vital: the mother cat brings forth her kittens, and there are other females with whom maternal features are associated, Shantha and even Usha. Personal progress is symbolized by building houses, which, in turn, is contrasted with war and colonization: "Who cares if they have guns? We have sinews. You build empires. We build houses." (Rao 1965:27) 'The building of empires' and war are activities traditionally associated with the male part of humankind, 'the building' there being no more than a euphemism. This particular kind of greed for material and territorial profit and power is a capitalist value which not only destroys the houses of 'the others' but also runs counter to the capacity to construct one's own metaphorical house, i.e. to achieve any personal progress. (See Volná 2010) Thus power-related structures, which are all associated with destruction, are rejected, i.e. patriarchal order, speciesism, casteism, colonization and war.

The beginning of Pai's spiritual-personal quest as it starts in Trivandrum, in a new place and a new house, finds him wondering:

I developed a bad habit. I like women. Not that I like all sorts of women. I like woman, in fact. What is woman, you may ask. Well woman is Shantha. [...] Shantha is not just a woman, she is woman. (Rao 1965:20)

There are two women-companions in Pai's life, Saroja, his legal wife, and Shantha, who, in Pai's eyes, is a representation, an incarnation indeed, of a state of womanhood, of ideal womanhood.

Saroja is associated with patriarchal aspects and other power-related structures: as we have seen, she is in favour of the concept of a 'dutiful wife'. Capitalist values are extremely important for her, as "[s]he is busy inspecting the rope making [...] [F]or her fact is that which yields." (Rao 1965:29) at the cost of showing tender maternal concern for her daughter Usha. She even threatens Usha with being sent away with the 'Dutch' (the colonizers). Significantly also, Vithal, Pai and Saroja's son, stays with his mother while Usha moves to live with Pai. Vithal as the male offspring will inherit Saroja's property. Saroja, who knows how to "take" (Rao 1965:21), becomes a symbol of destructive values.

By contrast, "[Shantha's] giving is complete." (Rao 1965:21) With Shantha Pai's quest becomes possible, as "Shantha worships me and has herself." (Rao 1965:21) Pai realizes that it is only through caring for oneself – that is, through striving for individual personal progress, 'building one's own house' – that one can meaningfully project oneself into the surrounding world. Individuals have first to find and be firmly rooted in themselves in order to be able to go out towards their environment and thus also fully appreciate each thing in its own right. Only in this way can they have a clear vision of things. In short, it is only if individuals are rooted in themselves that they can be rooted in the world and find their place. While Pai realizes

he has not yet achieved this stage of personality growth, he is also aware that Shantha has done so.

Pai appears to be held back by the socio-religious stereotypes of his culture; he repeatedly states that Saroja is a Brahmin and he himself is too, while both Govindan Nair and Shantha are Nairs, people belonging to a lower caste. These latter two are not bound by Brahminical requirements; as has been mentioned above, they do not follow the Brahminical tradition: “they worship their mothers. [... Shantha is] not worried about marriage. I am a Brahmin. Shantha is not ashamed to be woman. I am afraid to be a man.” (Rao 1965:21)

Along the same lines, later on Pai recognizes that “[t]o be a wife is not to be wed. To be a wife is to worship your man” (Rao 1965:30), that is push forward your closest life companion. This is to be truthful. It is because Shantha is not ashamed to be woman that she worships Pai. On the other hand, Pai, being afraid to be a man, i.e. to be fully himself, to stand by his personality and indeed his identity, admits that “I worship nothing [...] I don’t think I care for anything.” (Rao 1965:21) There is as yet no reciprocity in this regard.

Apart from Shantha – and of course from Pai’s guru Govindan Nair – it is Usha, Pai’s daughter, whom Pai admires and recognizes as ‘being fully herself’: “Usha is the dearest thing in my life. She is my child. She is not merely that. She is child. [...] for me walking is Usha. When she sits it is sitting.” (Rao 1965:28) For his child Usha Pai buys a house, the first house he acquires as property. Usha is a child to become a woman.

The maternal care of the Divine Being, the Mother Goddess, becomes a crucial aspect in the novel and is represented by feline ways: “The kitten is being carried by the cat. We would all be kittens carried by

the cat” (Rao 1965:8) says Govindan Nair. From a certain point of view, the cat is the main character in the novel; being represented as ‘anticipation’ in the first part, as she is repeatedly spoken about by Govindan Nair, and as a real cat in the second, her maternal mission being accomplished when she gives birth to kittens and is recognized as a being endowed with abilities beyond those humans can understand.

It is the maternal aspect of both Shantha and Usha which is emphasized and celebrated by Govindan Nair, and Pai adopts the same attitude:

The wife is she who makes you the child. That is why our children resemble us men. [... Usha] loves her mother, who is Shantha, for Shantha is kind and will not talk of the Dutch [...] Mother is Shantha [...] Mother, I worship you. (Rao 1965:33, 64, 66)

When the children Shridhar, Govindan Nair’s son, and Usha meet they talk about marriage and the maternal aspect is emphasized in this context: “Usha got fever that night. She thought she was growing eggs.” (Rao 1965:63). Usha also behaves like a mother towards Shantha’s newborn baby. (Rao 1965:107)

3. Conclusion - Accomplishment

As Pai approaches the accomplishment of his spiritual-personal quest, the cat gives birth to her kittens, and this significantly coincides both with the birth of Shantha’s (and Pai’s) baby and with Pai having built a house two stories high. The accomplishment of Pai’s growth is symbolized by his venturing across a wall (this is yet another symbol) as ultimately led by the Cat: he thus feels *enlightened*:

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 a distance. (Rao 1965:112)

In this garden the old men who represent the Brahminical tradition speak to no one, whereas

young men [...], 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. [...] The air was so like a mirror you just walked toward yourself. [...] I had also met some of my neighbors. [...]How is it that I never saw the others anywhere or when I saw them I did not know they were here, across the wall? (Rao 1965:112, 113)

Here, the point of accomplishment of the novel can perhaps also be perceived as a culmination of what Gour (1993:1) again calls “the perfect cohesion between the world-view offered by Rao and that present in Shakespeare”, namely, as has already been suggested above, that “[o]ne of Shakespeare’s foremost philosophic questions is that of the appearance or reality of the world”, expressed indeed as moving “between dream and delusion, between waking, sleep and death, between imagination and madness.” (Gour 1993:1) Not only does Pai find himself in this paradise environment, but it is through ‘seeing’ others that he recognizes his true self, hitherto hidden to him. He starts to feel at ease with others and with himself. This is only made possible through his ‘going out of himself’, through going towards ‘the other’, through ‘transcending’ the common obvious reality of everyday life and attaining a kind of ‘higher reality’.

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