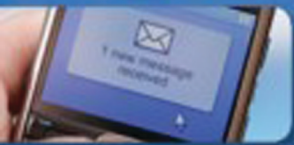


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Raja Rao's *The Cat and Shakespeare* (1965) - Enlightenment Attained through *Bhakti Yoga*

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Abstract

The article emphasis on the Bhakti Yoga as a method of attaining release through love and loyalty, further the article also explains the meaning of Bhakti as a mental effort towards religious realization beginning with ordinary worship and ending in a supreme intensity of love for Ishwara The article also explains the importance of women and her role in bringing up her offspring, further the article describes the story of Ramkrishna Pai and finally concludes by emphasizing the uniqueness of Raja Rao's writings, Raja Rao's philosophical and metaphysical predilections and their articulation in his writings make him a complex yet unique writer. Raja Rao's fiction is essentially in the form of a spiritual quest- quest of self realization.

Key Words: Ishwara, metaphysical, predilections, self realization

'*Bhakti Yoga* is a method of attaining release through love and loyalty to God. *Bhakti* is a mental effort towards religious realization beginning with ordinary worship and ending in a supreme intensity of love for *Ishwara*. At the preliminary stage, *Bhaktas* (Disciples) are conscious or unconscious materialists. At the next stage, a *Bhakta* has to choose an ideal and be loyal to it to the end of his days. When a woman becomes the life-partner of a man, she tends to become one with his spouse not only physically but also spiritually. She creates their offspring in the image of both and thereby does the creator's job. The woman sacrifices herself in every possible way for the sustenance of human existence on earth. She deserves to be praised and worshipped as a creator. The husband is transformed into a *Bhakta* in the event of his being matched with an ideal partner. Physical union alone cannot

bring about peace and harmony in their married life. When the wife falls short of his spiritual aspirations, his marital life breaks down and his soul is in search of a soul-mate to help him carry on a meaningful life. *Bhakti* towards one's *Sakti* (wife) and *Bhakti* towards the Unknowable *Sakti* (the God Unknown) are harmonizing at one stage.

Ramakrishna Pai in *The Cat and Shakespeare*, as *Bhaktas*, chooses the ideal of marriage and lives through it as a means of attaining *Self-Realization*. Ideal partners in married life are devoted to each other and their pure devotion (*Bhakti*) to the life-long bond serves as a means of realizing the Ultimate purpose of their existence. The concept of *Ardhanareeswara* harmonies a pre-eminent position to woman who is regarded as *Sakti* in Hindu theology. Hence, an ideal woman is holy, worshipful and worthy of devotion. The protagonists

Ramakrishna Pai attain Self-Realization in the light of the Indian philosophical system of *Bhakti Yoga*. Ramkrishna Pai is at the *Gruhasthya* stage when the novel opens. Pai endeavors to attain *Self-Realization* through the *Bhakti Yoga*, which is the outcome of the theme of the metaphysical quest initiated by Ramaswamy through the *Gnanayoga* in *The Serpent and the Rope*. Working as a divisional clerk in the Revenue Board at Trivandrum, Pai has been away from his family for two years. He says that he likes "being alone" (CS 8), while his wife Saroja has chosen to live with their daughter Usha and son Vithal at Pattanur.

As a *Gruhastha*, Pai fulfills the first two objects of life – *Artha* and *Kama* and never shirks his responsibilities as a husband and a father. But his wife is willfully negligent of her wifely duties and is deeply immersed in materialism. For her, looking after the coconut groves, inherited through the matriarchal system and the rope-making business are more important than conjugal bliss. Her materialism stands in the way of a spiritual life. She denies her husband the essential affection and love by living away from Pie at the coastal village of Pattanur, hundred and fifty miles north of Trivandrum. Pai and Saroja live as man and wife only in name. Their physical distance widens the gap between them. This is evident from the words of Pai: "I am a quiet man, and to speak the truth, I don't yet know what it is to mean husband"(CS 7). His wife's greed and her interest in materialism have confined her to Pattanur at the expense of her married

life. Pai and Saroja do not make a perfect couple. Their marriage has achieved only physically, not spiritually. They have realized the immediate fruit of their physical union. This has happened not out of the conjugal harmony one would expect in an ideal married life. As Pai says, it is clear that in heat, he strikes. "In heat I strike"(CS 10). It means that in the heat of sexual excitement, he seeks only the physical company of Saroja. The birth of their children proves to be accidental. So the incompatibility at the soul level between them has been an indisputable truth: "I sometimes wonder whether I have a heart as I wonder in summer whether the rains will ever come"(CS 10). Saroja has failed to touch the heart of her husband.

Pai often spells out his desire surging within "I like being alone"(CS 8). One therefore infers from his expression that he has at the back of his mind a thirst for inner harmony and spiritual transformation through solitude and meditation. Since he is born a human being, he has to go through both the predictable and unpredictable happenings in life. These happenings shape his soul and in the process, Pai is bound to go up the spiritual ladder by stages with objectives commensurate with each stage. What happens in his enactment of existence revolves on his successful prevailing over the temporal barriers with a view to achieving his avowed goal of *Self-Realization*—the goal of understanding the meaning and purpose of his life.

As a responsible father, Pai wants to bring Usha to Trivandrum to give her better education. Apart from his

constant thoughts about her, he keeps on brooding over building a three-storied house for which he seeks the blessings of God by looking at the sacred *bilva* tree on the other side of the wall abutting Nair's house. The *bilva* tree is dear to Lord Shiva. He remembers the story of a wicked hunter who accidentally caused the fall of *bilva* leaves on the *shivalingam* below, for which he was blessed with the vision of Lord Shiva. When God bestows his blessings even on a wicked hunter, a devotee like Pai cannot but be blessed by Lord Shiva. To seek the blessings of God, Pai looks from the window eastward and sees the stump of the *bitva* tree in the morning sun. This is how he begins his quest for the Absolute - through the *Bhakti* Yoga or the path of devotion - to inner harmony aided by outer matrimonial harmony. In Hindu tradition, an aspirant, however pious and devoted to God he may be, cannot attain Salvation without the benign love and guidance of a spiritual Guru. A Spiritual life is impossible without the guidance of a spiritual Guru. Guru is one who dispels the darkness of ignorance and bestows the light of knowledge. Pai's neighbour, Govindan Nair, a resourceful and scholarly clerk in the Ration Office, is well-versed in Sanskrit. Nair has the gift of the gab and can talk endlessly on Vedanta and spiritual aspects of life. All his utterances are punctuated with his knowledge of Sanskrit literature. He leads a contented life, unmindful of the change around him. He "looks up from between the [*bilva*] leaves"(CS 11) and always speaks with an air of spiritualism. Nair's constant sources of

inspiration are the Sanskrit work. As a spiritual Guru, Nair performs his *Dharma* well by reading *Astavakra Samhita*, a religious work in Sanskrit "from anywhere to the very end and then he said: 'I have done a good job. I have explained to the Brahmin what Brahman is'" (CS 35). Pai has an intense desire to learn the spiritual truth, which is the chief qualification of a *Sishya* or disciple. As a dedicated disciple, he reposes his full faith in his Guru and it is evident from what he says after listening to Nair's reading and interpretation of *Astavakra Samhita*: "I knew at once he was right. He was right. He is right. He will ever be right"(CS 35). His one motto in life is that we should follow 'the Mother Cat' to tide over the mundane affairs that confront us. His words and frequent references to the 'Mother cat' and the 'kittens' reveal his profound knowledge of Ramanuja's *Visishtadvaita*. He says, "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"(CS 11).

His words reflect the central doctrine of *Visishtadvaita* of absolute self-surrender, which alone can lead the devotees or *Bhaktas* to *Moksha* or Salvation. The 'cat' is the symbol of God and the 'kittens' stand for devotees. The theory of total surrender to the Absolute is based on Ramanuja's *marjaranyaya* (analogy of the cat), which illustrates total surrender of the self to the Self. The *Bhakti marga* or Path of Devotion of Ramanuja speaks of two ways of surrender to the Absolute. One, the *Markatanyaya*(analogy of the monkey)

asserts that the soul must exercise itself to get Salvation, as the baby-monkey actively grabs its mother, when she jumps from one tree to another. The other, the *Marjaranyaya* (analogy of the cat) associates God's grace to the loving care of the mother cat for the kitten, which is "independent of all efforts on the part of the latter" (Rangacharya 178). At the end of each conversation, Nair refers to this philosophical premise.

Nair provokes Pai into thinking of the Absolute and of the means to reach Him. He plays the role of a guru who initiates a disciple into a certain faith. As Pai says, "it's not the way you worship that is important but what you adore"(CS 10). Nair's is an elevated soul and Pai's association with him and his spiritually oriented conversations leads Pai into the mysteries of the 'mother cat'. According to him, one has "just to look and see. Look deep and see." The mother cat, presumably God, holds "you by the neck"(CS 13). After his conversation with Pai, Nair jumps across the wall, which stands between Pai's house and that of Nair's. The crossing the wall becomes a metaphor for coming to understand the world as Govindan Nair does, from the standpoint of *Visistadavatta Vedanta*. The way of the Cat is the philosophy which Govindan Nair not only advocates but lives, and in time Ramakrishna Pai allows himself to be earned by the Mother Cat. This suggests that Pai comes round to the line of Nair's thinking.

Many Indian critics are of the opinion that the high wall is the wall of Illusion. With Nair as his spiritual

Guru, Pai can cross the wall of Illusion and go near the sacred *bilva* tree. His propinquity to the *bilva* tree, in some sense, shows that he has already begun the quest for *Self-Realization*. Knowingly or unknowingly, Pai volunteers to be away from the illusory aspects of human existence. He is married with two children and wishes to be a dutiful father. However, his wife generates dissatisfaction in him for the better. He is on the doorstep of *Vanaprasthya* stage but he needs help and guidance to take the first step in boldly and confidently. His mind appears to be a clouded sky and too many thoughts about the real meaning of existence harass him after a certain point in his domestic life. He has safely played the roles of a bachelor, a husband, a father and a conscientious government servant. But beyond all this hustle and bustle, he craves for *inner* peace and eternal bliss. That hidden fire in him gets lit with a spark, when Govindan Nair ignites it through his inimitable story of the mother cat and her kittens.

But for Saroja "fact is that which yields Land is a fact" (CS 30). She is least concerned about her husband and his miserable life at Trivandrum. Saroja sharply stands in contrast to her husband regarding truth. While Pai regards what Saroja feels true as illusion, she does the other way. His separation from his wife is otherwise fertile for his philosophical imaginings. When he is confused about the deeper meanings of human existence, Nair comes in to shape him up philosophically.

When Pai is in a state of confusion, Nair comes to his rescue and lights the

inspiration of hope in him. A spiritual aspirant like Pai needs the guidance of a Guru to conquer the world of illusion. Nair skillfully guides his disciple in spiritual as well as material aspects of life. Nair clears Pai's doubts and explains all about the myths of human existence. His mother-cat-kitten theory is an allegorical narration and feeds Pai with the requisite amount of force and co-ordinates all his intellectual powers with a view to solving the riddles of life. Nair's spiritual guidance and the conjugal bliss that Pai experiences with Shantha lead him on the path of *Self-Realization*. Of all the characteristic traits of a Guru, love and charity are the most important ones. Pai's Guru, Govindan Nair admires courage. He always loves people who go in search of the paradise flower when one does so, according to Nair, one becomes half-brother to mankind.

Hearing that Pai is ill, Saroja makes a dash to Trivandrum to fulfill an obligation outwardly. She stays with her ailing husband only for a few hours. Her visit is more of a formality than of a genuine concern for her husband. Her material interests like "boat repairs" and "carrying away coconut shells" and so on (CS 32) reduce the love of a wife in her for her husband. She understands the practical aspect of life and at the same time she fails to understand that her material pursuits are illusory. Unlike her husband, she is "not living in a dream"(CS 29). In fact, Saroja lives in a world of illusions. She regards the unreal real and vice versa. The spiritual side of life seems to be avoided by Saroja. The condition of her husband

evokes no change for the better in her mind. Her visit, probably, has been motivated by her plan of leaving Usha with her husband.

Saroja, who is more materialistic than spiritual, sticks to her property and business and refuses to become one with him as husband and wife, more on the spiritual plane than on the physical plane. Despite his readiness to uphold the principles of *Dharma* as a husband and a father, he is hindered by his wife's indifference. This leads to Pai's alienation from Saroja and forces him to lie in the spiritual lap of Shantha.

Saroja's very utterances prove that she does not regard Pai as her husband and the father of her son Vithal. She is "living far away" from her husband and "keeping Vithal and telling him your father is no father. Your real father is the sun. Worship him" (CS 96). The expression 'living far away' demonstrates not only her physical separation from her husband but also her careless and heartless attitude towards her husband. No wife worth her salt will tell her son 'Your father is no father'. To imprint this idea in the tender mind of the child and to "prove his paternity"(CS 96), she offers Vithal a box of peppermints every day as soon as he makes his obeisance to the sun, his 'real father'. When Saroja has such an attitude towards her husband, one cannot expect her to assist Pai as a soul-mate. Their wavelengths of understanding life are different and they can never merge. She is too much in the grip of absolute materialism, and spiritual life, which gives one real happiness and comfort, is a complex subject for her. This results in her failure to honor her commitment to her

husband for life through their sacred marriage.

Pai certainly cannot find his soul-mate in such a wife and therefore he is in need of a soul-mate for attaining fulfillment in life. He satisfies his physical thirst to keep his mind free from avoidable tension but his soul is searching for a suitable mate. As Sri Aurobindo says about the Integral Yoga, "the body should be free from its encumbrances before the soul sets its eyes on transformation" (209). Marriage is a worldly event and part of the *Samanya Dharma* (which deals with the affairs of the world). There has been emptiness in Pai's personality and a thorn in his flesh that prevent his mind from turning to self-introspection and consequent *Self-Realization*. Shantha comes to fill the emptiness and now Pai's mind becomes absolutely free and prepares only to discard all the attachments. He does what he ought to do for his children as a father because they are born out of his marriage to Saroja. For a Hindu, there are two *Dharmas* – the *Samanya Dharma* and the *Visesha Dharma* which deals with the affairs of soul. He performs the *Samanya Dharma* to his satisfaction while preparing the groundwork for the *Visesha Dharma* with the help of Shantha.

Shantha becomes his mistress, for "she felt wife. She remained a wife"(CS 23). He admits that a he likes woman It does not mean that he likes all sorts of women. In his opinion, "Woman is Shantha." She is "not just a woman, she is woman" (CS 22). Shantha is identified as an ideal woman. He cannot say this of his legally wedded wife Saroja, because he lives with her

as a chained co-habitant, rather than a wedded spouse.

Shantha establishes not merely physical compatibility with him but an empathetic connection with his soul. This enables Pai to realize gradually the nature and purpose of human existence in general and that of his own existence in particular. With her sterling devotion, Shantha worships Pai as her husband. Having failed to find his own self in his wife Saroja, he attempts to find it in Shantha.

Pai's soul is tormented between the roles of father and devotee seeking *Moksha*. He has been thinking of the *bilva* tree, the mother cat and building a three storied house for his daughter Usha. He wants to perform his *Samanya Dharma* well as a *Gruhastha* so that he will be able to step into the next stage of *Vanaprasthya*. Though Shantha is Pai's mistress, she has been accorded the status of more than a wife. She has accepted Pai as her lord: "I am a Hindu woman and you are my lord"(CS 82). Her words "I say, to say I love you is to say I love myself" are reminiscent of what Yagnayavalkya said to his wife to which Rama refers in *The Serpent and the Rope* (SR171). Shantha is seven months pregnant and in Pai's opinion "pregnant women are holy" (CS 82). She bears Pai's child and so he feels "she has myself in her"(CS 82). The child in Shantha's womb is purported to be Pai's spiritual heir.

Pai says, "To be a wife is not to be wed. To be a wife is to worship your man. Then you are born"(CS 32). Shantha's devotion to Pai and her love for him lie at a sublime level. Of all the states, according to Pai, wifeness

"seems the most holy" (CS 30). To Pai, his union with Shantha seems more holy. Pai too is devoted to Shantha, who is more than a wife to him. Shantha treats Usha as her real daughter and her "house will be the right place for Usha"(CS 31). Shantha is deemed to be the all-embracing Goddess *Sakti*. Pai expects his son Vithal to inherit his mother's property. If Pai has to reach the highest goal in life, his mind must be free from cares and fears.

Now Pai to strive for his salvation, which he will attain through time. As a real *Bhakta* or devotee, Pai always refers to the *bilva* tree and the salvation attained by the wicked hunter with his "unknowing worship" (CS 57). He feels that he lives "a bit of eternity" which is not enough to have a vision of the Lord. His longing for *Moksha* or Liberation thus finds expression in his own words: "Lord I am not even a hunter that in his nervousness lets down *bilva* leaves. Lord, what hope is there for me"(CS 57). Pai's longing for spiritual upliftment surfaces now and the time for it is ripe, for his guide Govindan Nair lives across the wall, and the *bilva* tree spreads like a holy umbrella above him and gives him "a spiritual status"(CS 58). Pai has to go a long way to attain that status. Now Pai has just been initiated into *Self-Realization*.

Govindan Nair's second son and Usha's playmate Shridhar is seriously ill. Nair is not able to save his son. Both Nair and Pai view Shridhar's death objectively in a detached manner Rama of *The Serpent and the Rope*, Nair and Pai regard death as a natural ending of human existence. When Rama hears

the death of his son, he is not upset. While watching the funeral preparations for Shridhar, Pai says, "The bamboos were already in the courtyard. Death had come. It spoiled the nice courtyard, with flowerbeds of roses"(CS 61). Similarly, while Nair and his colleagues delight in a mock-Hamlet soliloquy scene 'To be or not to be', a cat brought to the ration office by John, one of the clerks, jumps on Nair's superior Bhoothalinga Iyer's head and he dies instantly of a heart failure. Nair takes home the cat affectionately and later it becomes Pai's pet and he treasures it as the living symbol of the Mother Cat. Pai's attitude towards death is, a symbolic way of saying that life is continuous, that death is just one of the doors to the realization that one exists forever in the Universe, but it is an unfortunate way of saying it.

Shantha is more than a wife to Pai in the sense that the love that binds her and Pai is pure and perfect, suggesting the *idea* of *Purusha-Prakriti* relationship. She expresses her love thus to Pai. "I am your proof. You are only seen by me. Who could know you as I know you' You made me say I am"(CS 94). Shantha is not a substitute for Saroja but the missing other side of Saroja. She makes Saroja's role complete and helps Pai to go ahead with his mission with single-mindedness. Shantha resolves Pai's distractions.

Shantha's extra-marital love is portrayed as a kind of worship. Shantha owns all passion and depth of love that is not possible between Pai and his wife Saroja. Pai feels the mind of Shantha and says in a convincing

manner: "If she became my mistress it was because she felt wife, she remained a wife. My feet were there for her to worship" (CS 23). Where Saroja fails Shantha takes over. For a woman love is not development. Love is recognition. Despite the fact that she is not legally wedded to Pai, she becomes his wife in the truest sense of the word, which is the most sublime and the holiest thing she is able to achieve.

Thus the unity achieved through love and self-surrender reminds one of the *Advaitic* truth of the unity of all things. In every respect, Shantha proves to be a worthy companion of Pai's soul and enables him to realize his own self. Here, selfless love on the part of Shantha for Pai plays a pivotal role in achieving *Self-Realization*. Recognition of the self is identified with true love. It may not be an exaggeration to say that Shantha take credit for helping Pai in his spiritual journey on the path of *Self-Realization*. She shows the path of realization to Pai, who is still in the mire of confusion. Shantha has the spiritual strength of dispelling his *avidya* or ignorance. Savithn's role as a spiritual guide in *The Serpent and the Rope* is

very limited, because Ramaswamy is an intellectual. But, in the case of Pai, despite his Brahminic background, he is an average man. The efforts of Nair alone will not be enough to clear the doubts of Pai and push him across the wall. It is Shantha who can guide him through his pilgrimage, for Shantha says: "I can see you have never been across the wall. For there you could touch me and see yourself touch me" (CS 83). Shantha's devotion to Pai strengthens that of Pai towards her. Thus, Shantha facilitates Pai to move from the *Gruhasthya* stage to the *Vanaprasthya* stage and again on to the final stage of *Self-Realization*. As a *Sadhaka* (spiritual quester), Pai progresses along the path of spiritual salvation and gradually achieves a clearer vision of truth.

Raja Rao's philosophical and metaphysical predilections and their articulation in his writings make him a complex yet unique writer. His purpose is quite different from the writer whose prime concern is to present a faithful account of some unique physical experience. His fiction is essentially in the form of a spiritual quest- quest of self realization.

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