

DEPICTION OF WOMEN IN RAJA RAO'S THE CAT AND SHAKESPEARE

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ABSTRACT:

Raja Rao has a prominent place in the Indian English Fiction and created a number of female characters in his novels. The women characters like Rangamma, Ratna, Little Mother, Madeleine, Savitri, Saroja, Shantha, Irene, Jayalakshmi and others have been portrayed as the earthly representatives of the Supreme Goddess. Raja Rao idealizes and adores them as they play a crucial role in the lives of their male counterparts. Rao, in some novels, portrays women in the light of Tantrism which gives the prime position to Sakti. The themes of the worship of Sakti, the Mother Goddess, exaltation of women, feminine principle, the man-woman relationship occupy a major place in the fiction of Raja Rao. In *The Cat and Shakespeare* he has portrayed two contrasting female characters namely Saroja and Shantha, the first is traditionally married wife and the second an unmarried but true wife of Ramakrishna Pai. The image of the mother cat carrying its kitten grows into a complex symbol embodying in itself the theme of woman's power and the man's surrender to her is regarded as a gradual realization of Truth. The woman protects man as the cat protects its kitten. These women do not suffer under the shade of their male partners but have their own identity.

The present paper discusses how Raja Rao depicts his female characters in *The Cat and Shakespeare*. It analyses their roles as a mother, wife, mistress, guide and so on. It also throws light on Raja Rao's treatment of these women as individual, powerful and supreme entities.

KEYWORDS:

Tantrism, Sakti, exaltation of women, feminine principle, realization, truth, identity, supreme entity, matriarchal family, traditional domination

FULL PAPER:

Raja Rao's women characters in *The Cat and Shakespeare* are not mere imaginary 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 novel²

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 about her as,

... 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.³

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

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 'Sambandam' 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 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. Then 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.*⁴

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 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. She is Raja Rao's woman with different layers of personality – realistic symbolic, spiritual, and metaphysical. She is womanhood personified whom Raja Rao has idealized. Though she is traditional, devoted and submissive, she asserts her individuality in many situations.

In the novel, another female character, fascinating of her purity and innocence is Usha, Saroja and Pai's daughter. Usha is taken to Mudali's 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*⁵

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 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 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 of *The Serpent and the Rope* yet, they are quite individualistic in their behaviour. Raja Rao's favourite conception of 'mother-principle' is also manifested here which glorifies and idealizes woman. Thus, Raja Rao can be said to be consistent in maintaining his attitude towards women. His attitude towards women is idealistic as well as paternalistic.

REFERENCES:

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