The Mystic Cat: Reality and Māyā in Raja Rao's *The Cat and Shakespeare*

Raja Rao conceives literature as a true spiritual experience, one that is best described by the word s*adhana*, a vocation rather than a profession. He views the act of writing in terms of a "very hard discipline", whose painfulness however is not devoid of satisfaction.[1] He writes to achieve spiritual balance through self-analysis. To him, the figure of the writer is synonymous with the seeking devotee (*sadhaka*), the wise man (*rishi*) and the poet (*kavi*).[2] To illustrate this point he says,

> I AM NO SCHOLAR. I am a "creative" writer. I love to play with ideas. […] The game is not for winning. It is for *rasa* – delight. I enjoy the juxtaposition of ideas. I play. The end, I have been *taught*, is not a question of success or defeat, but the abolition of contradiction, of duality. […] I Play the game knowing I am the game. That is the meaning of India.[3]

In order to explain the 'meaning of India' in one word we could use the term *yajña* - sacrifice. As Kathleen Raine has pointed out in her review of Raja Rao's *The Meaning of India*,

> the true meaning of sacrifice is the renunciation of the ego to the higher, the universal Self. And that universal Self, which is to be found in our own deepest nature, is being, consciousness and joy. In total sacrifice lies total freedom. Yajña means giving up greed, taking from the earth only enough to meet our basic needs and returning as sacrifice what earth and nature so freely give. This eternal wisdom of India is so much needed in our time when materialism is dominating our culture.[4]

In *The Cat and Shakespeare* a similar perspective shapes the master-pupil relationship between Ramakrishna Pai[5] and Govindan Nair, the spiritual *guru*, the one

who embodies the concept of *vidyā*[6] and is consequently able to perceive, to 'see' reality and to distinguish it from the un-real. Agata Sannino Pellegrini contrasts *vidya* with *avidya*.

> A necessary presupposition in order to reach the supreme knowledge, that is freedom in itself, is to remove ignorance (*avidyā*) from oneself. It is because of ignorance that man cannot be aware of the non-opposition between the Universal Principle and the Inner Self and it is also the origin of all the dualities and the antinomies which we perceive within ourselves and within nature.[7]

The need of finding a *guru* is also expressed by Raja Rao in his novel *The Serpent and the Rope* through his protagonist Ramaswany: "No, not a God but a Guru is what I need."[8] The critic Meenakshi Mukherjee underlines this point: "The world is either unreal or real – the Serpent or the Rope... One – the Guru – brings you the lantern. The road is seen, the long, white road"[9]. Ramaswany is in quest of a deeper meaning of life, of an answer to the question why we are here and what we are looking for. He believes that only a *guru* can answer this question, so he decides to come back to Travancore[10] in India, in search of a spiritual *guru* who will be able to support him in the tradition of the wise Yajñyawalkya (to whom Shantha refers in the novel),[11] to reach salvation.[12]

In this context, the novel *The Cat and Shakespeare: a Tale of India* (1965) together with *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960), can be regarded as the achievement of that quest for salvation already experienced by Ramaswany.[13] Raja Rao himself admitted in an interview: "In *Kanthapura* [his first novel] I was Gandhian. In *The Serpent and the Rope* I was searching. *The Cat and Shakespeare* is the conclusion to the *Serpent and the Rope*."[14] "You only see what you want to see. But you must see what you see. Freedom is only that you see what you see." (95-96). Such words constitute the fundamental teaching imparted by *Guru* Govindan Nair to his disciple Ramakrishna Pai. And it is towards the end of the novel that Ramakrishna Pai realizes it: "This is what Govindan Nair meant. This is what Usha meant when she said she saw Shridhar. She did not really, but when she went up, she saw herself and called herself Shridhar. Now I understand."(101)

Hence, we may look at Raja Rao's novel as a text that retraces the literary tradition of the Astāvakragītā, namely the "Astāvakra's Song", a philosophical and didactical composition written in the form of a dialogue between a wise man, Astāvakra (personified in the figure of Govindan Nair), and Janaka, a disciple who longs for learning (such as Ramakrishna Pai does).[15] Both texts share a similar vision concerning the ultimate meaning and comprehension of reality. Indeed, as Pellegrini affirms,

> [...] under the skin of the teaching of a wise man to his disciple the Astāvakragītā propounds, with the aim of spreading the idea, the thought of the *Advaita* (or 'non-dual') *Vedānta*, a philosophical and practical doctrine which, like the different orthodox and heterodox Hindu systems, [...] traces its origins back to the belief in the firm dogma of rebirth and whose essential aim is the achievement of the earthly transience. The Astāvakragītā points to this, and taking into account the absolute monistic philosophy of the *Advaita Vedānta* stresses the point that all universe can be summed up to one principle, which has no second, which is pure, unchangeable, undestroyable, which cannot be defined in empirical terms and which is the supreme Reality and the innermost nature of each human being.[16]

References to the "Astavakra Samhita"[17] are explicit within the novel. It is with the help of the "Astavakra Samhita" that Govindan Nair fulfils his duty, succeeding in explaining to the Brahmin Ramakrishna Pai what the Ultimate Reality (*Brahman*) is: "I have done a good job. I have explained to the Brahmin what Brahman is. Brahmin is he who knows Brahman, etc., etc." But it is only towards the end of the novel that the homodiegetic narrator Ramakrishna Pai alludes to his decisive experience of going across the symbolic wall of knowledge for the first time:

> That was the first time I went across the wall. I found a garden[18] all rosy and gentle. There were bowers and many sweet-smelling herbs, there were pools and many orchids that smelled from distance. There were old men with beards as long as their knees, and they talked to no one. Young men

> were in green turbans and others, 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. I saw deer, too. [...] I could walk into fire and be cool, I could sing and be silent, I could hold myself and yet not be there. (100-101)

What the narrator is talking about is the non-dual world, where all antinomies reconcile and where every single allusion to duality or to the physical qualities proper to an object vanishes thoroughly. Thereafter, the stress falls upon the harmony of the opposites through the mystical experience of the realization of the Absolute, of Brahman, which in Pai's words is: "I looked in and saw everything."(100-101) The ultimate perception of Reality coincides at last with Ramakrishna Pai's waking up from a dream-like condition, when he realizes he has "killed death":

> I woke up and found that death had passed by, telling me I had no business to be there. Then where was I? Death said it had died. I had killed death. When you see death as death you kill it. When you say, I am so and so, and you say, I'm such and such, you have killed yourself. I remain ever, having killed myself. (100-101)

The obsession of the Ego, of one's own Self means the tyranny of time, it implies the triumph of death[19]. Ramakrishna Pai reaches therefore a dimension where death is not, because there is no illusion of an Ego. He succeeds in overcoming death on behalf of immortality, not on behalf of the state of being.[20]

But Pai's path towards the realization of Brahman is definitely not an easy one. His situation at the beginning of the novel[21] is similar to that of the hunter whose puranic[22] story is narrated in the novel. Now, let us examine Raja Rao's account of the same legend, it is useful to his discursive strategy and at the same time justifies the role assigned to Pai and endorses his creed:

> I don't know if you've heard of a bilva tree[23] it has three leaves and a crust of thick thorns. It's a scraggy tree but dear to Shiva, for one night a hunter trying to shoot at his game - was it a deer or a porcupine? - went up this obnoxious stump, and in his hours of waiting, sent down leaf after leaf, so they say, and a Shiva image being beneath, Shiva himself came in a vision and said: "Here I am." For it's not the way you worship that is important but what you adore. Even an accidental fall of leaves on Shiva's head got the wicked hunter his vision. (10)

Like the hunter, Ramakrishna Pai wishes for a gratuitous and unexpected blessing: "So when I look from my window eastward, just by the garden wall, I see this stump of bilva tree, thorns visible in the morning sun. And I wonder if God will ever bless me, just like that." (10-11)

Another reason why Raja Rao uses such a myth in his novel is to give credit to Ramakrishna Pai's metaphysical meditation, so as to make it easier for the reader to understand the relationship between him and Govindan Nair. When Pai is pronouncing the above mentioned words "this big creature Govindan Nair leaps across the wall" (11) and, as if he were led by intuition, he unveils Pai's most intimate whirl of thoughts ("You are an innocent. I tell you God will build you a house of three stories – note, please, I say three stories – here, just where you sit."[13]), so as to emphasise a relationship which goes beyond verbal communication in a kind of spiritual and deep understanding.

However, the legend of the hunter does not constitute however the only instance of how Raja Rao lends deeper significance to his fictional work with a mythical episode taken from the Hindu tradition. Nor it is by mere chance that he negotiates religious allegory into the cultural and thematic genealogy of his narrative discourse. By so doing, he shares with his Hindu readers a well-known corpus of myths and puranic legends.

In an interview dating back to 1979, Raja Rao says in answer to a question concerning the aesthetic of *The Serpent and the Rope:*

> The aesthetic is that, sometimes, I like to write like a Purana. I like the Puranic conception. That is the only conception of novel for me. I don't

> want to compare my novel with any foreign novel. I don't like to write like a foreign novelist. I am very much Indian and the Indian form is the Puranic form. Form comes naturally to me. Hence, it is wrong to study my novels in the light of the Western conception of a well-made novel.[24]

So myths strengthen the power of tradition and appeal to the common feelings of mankind. Through them Raja Rao suggests that people all over the world share the same feelings, that every human experience is the same for everybody and finally that sorrow is the same everywhere. Traditional societies like those of South India often make use of myths and legends, so as to lay strong emphasis on and lend added significance to the narration of events or to the representation of a contemporary situation.[25] Myths and legends are conceived by Raja Rao as something that is absolutely tangible and real. The *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* and the *Puranas* represent the rich mythical sources from which most of the Indian writers derive their structural themes, although they reshape them according to their own purposes. The intertwining of mythical episodes within a narrative plot has been defined by critics like Esha Dey and Rajesh K. Pallan in terms of a "digressional" use of a procedure that is typical of the Indian oral tradition. R.K.Pallan also adds that "the distinctive trait about Raja Rao's narrative technique is that he mythologises the contemporary reality."[26]

A further instance of how a reference to myth may illustrate the inner nature of a character concerns Govindan Nair, whose eagerness in helping his neighbour reminds the writer of the relationship between Bhima and Hanuman:

> He was like Bhima.[27] You want the flower of paradise? [28] Why, here I go and come. And Hanuman himself will help, Hanuman his half-brother, unknown unto Bhima. Everybody is half brother to you, man and thing. So why worry? That seemed the principle on which Govindan Nair worked: I am, so you are my brother. (34)

It is quite relevant that, according to the mythological tradition, the terrible Bhima was a huge man, incredibly strong. Govindan Nair seems to possess the same qualities: "Govindan Nair is a terrible man: huge in his sinews but important in his thought […]." (14)

The beautiful, colourful and fully emotional description of the hidden *trysting place,* in which Shiva and Parvati secretly meet, constitutes a further example of the flavour of mythical telling, with which *The Cat and Shakespeare* is imbued.[29] Here Raja Rao echoes a *Sthala Purāṇa*, a form of narrative traditionally associated with the gods and their exploits, one that impresses the mark of regionalism on the style of the writer.

In terms of style, it is crucial for a deep analysis of the novel to highlight how Raja Rao discards in *The Cat and Shakespeare* many of the rhetorical devices that are characteristic of his previous novels *Kanthapura* and *The Serpent and the Rope*. He also simplifies his lexicon and discards his elaborate plurisyllables of literary origin, in favour of more concise and meaningful lexemes. At first sight, his constant repetition of such terms as sea, tree, house, cat, kitten and wall,[30]each of them connected with everyday life, does not seem to imply any special symbolical or abstract meaning.[31] Yet, these *leitmotive* acquire by degrees a more precise metaphorical significance through repetition.[32]

For example, the *leitmotiv* of the sea seems to relate to the sphere of disorder, destruction and danger, and it is therefore associated with the image of the deluge or *pralaya*, a cosmogonic event that in the Hindu view does not necessarily imply the idea of a negative force, but rather suggests the end of the evil and the dawn of a new beginning.[35] Apropos of Saroja the narrator points out: "She will talk of the Dutch and Christianity – and the sea." (8) To associate the sea with the Dutch invaders and Christianity might suggest alien aggression, one that threatens the long-established order and culture of India. It is also true, though, that the many references to the sea ("and somewhere there's the sound of the sea" […] "and I could hear the sea" [7]) do remind Ramakrishna Pai of the permanence of the divine creation. Even Shantha, Pai's pregnant mistress, is associated through her role of mother with the divine creation. Thereupon, that mysterious affinity which links her to the image of the sea should not surprise us at

all: "If I were a queen I would build a wall of wattle round the garden and I would then hear the sea. The sea knows me." (49)

The text throughout uses the motif of water as a metaphor for the natural cycle of existence. The dialogue between Govindan Nair and Lakshmi makes clear that water, with its perpetual and all-penetrating flow, represents the never-ceasing stream of life: water from the river, the running of the tap, the raindrop. This dialectic exchange of ideas takes us back to the philosophy that is specific of the *Advaita Vedānta*, a text that we have already mentioned.

Apart from the motif of water, the wall image is closely associated with the house, seen as a symbol of spirituality. Its function in the novel is to mark a dividing line between the world of appearance, of illusion ("māyā") and the dimension of Reality, of Truth; the serpent and the rope again. As we have already pointed out, it is at the conclusion of his spiritual quest that Pai unconsciously follows the mother cat and goes beyond that wall. Readers may perceive that very moment in rhetorical terms of 'suspension of disbelief', one whose language is strongly imbued with poetic tension, and allows us to follow Pai step by step when he goes up the staircase to the granary and hence to the place where –

> [the cat] went up a series of stone steps. Up and up it went, up the staircase. Everybody bowed as if awed. Then I, too, followed it. This time I would not be defeated. I must win, I said. The winning was easy, for I heard a very lovely music. I was breathless. The staircase suddenly turned, and in went the cat. I stood there white as marble. I looked in and saw everything. (101)

It is not by chance that Shridhar, Usha, Govindan Nair and Shantha often jump across the wall: they succeed earlier than Pai in annihilating their own egoes, so that they can see 'everything' beyond the wall of "māyā". They totally surrendered to Govindan Nair's philosophy, one grounded on the principle of the Mother Cat. Govindan Nair himself enunciates his philosophy:

> But I say the kitten is the safest thing in the world, the kitten held in the mouth of the mother cat. Could one have been born without a mother? Modern inventions do not so much need a father. But a mother – I tell you, without Mother the world is not. So allow her to fondle you and to hold you. I often think how noble it is to see the world, the legs dangling straight, the eyes steady, and the mouth of the mother at the neck. Beautiful. (13)
> Govindan Nair always talks of a mother cat. It carries the kitten by the scruff of its neck. That is why he is so carefree. He says: 'Learn the way of the kitten. Then you're saved. Allow the mother cat, sir, to carry you,' said John, and he suppressed his resentful laughter. (66-67)

In this context, *The Cat and Shakespeare* could be regarded as a tribute to the Feminine Principle. The central image of the novel, the Mother Cat, is nothing but an apotheosis of the Feminine Principle. That reminds us of the eternal feminine that Goethe describes in *Faust*, that is a fully accomplished form of life, which can assert better than a male the human substance against the force of circumstances and that is more sheltered from any Mephistophelic influence.

In Hindu tradition the term *Shakthi* (literally: 'might') indicates the concept of universal energy, embodied mainly by the feminine principle. It also designates the general name given to goddesses in Indian mythology. The image of the Mother Goddess[34] represents therefore the principle of energy through which everything in this world comes into existence. Consequently, every god in the Hindu pantheon takes force and power from the *Shakthi* of the goddess to whom he is married. As a father is unable to create life by himself, so a god is powerless without his *Shakthi*.[35] Hence, the traditional belief that "without a *Shakthi* there is no *Shiva*."

In the cult devoted to her, *Shakthi* is conceived as the Universal Mother. The relationship between a devotee and his deity is therefore the same as exists between a son and his mother. Still more interesting is the theory of *Marjara*[36] *Nyaya* proper to a South Indian school of thought (*Thenkalai* or 'Southern school'). It is not by chance that the idea that lies beneath this theory is exemplified by the image of a Mother Cat holding her kittens.[37]

In *The Cat and Shakespeare* Pai's sluggish and submissive spirit will be able to go across the wall of māyā only when he totally abandons himself to the Feminine Principle of the Mother Cat, to her care and love. This Truth is made clear in the novel through the example of the Mother Cat, who acts as a maternal figure, a necessary element to survival of man, ("Modern inventions do not so much need a father. But a mother – I tell you, without a Mother the world is not." [13]), always ready to jump and catch her kittens in case they are going to fall, ready to risk her life to protect them.

Consequently, Shantha, Pai's mistress, represents the first step in the spiritual evolution of the protagonist. As a future mother Shantha represents the Feminine Principle or the *Matrishakthi*, the same way as the female protagonist Savitri does in *The Serpent and the Rope*. It is through women that men can learn to annihilate their own Ego, so as to reach the full consciousness of the Self: "If woman were not, would you know you were? Shantha said: "You", and I saw I." (32) In fact, it is only after having fully understood Shantha that Pai will be able to understand the Mother Cat. As we read in the novel: "I say, to say I love you is to say I love myself." "Who said so, Shantha?" "Sage Yagnayavalkya said so." I now understand. Yes, I love Shantha because she has my child in her. That is the secret. She has myself in her." (82)

However, there are women who do not act as helpmates of men. Pai's wife Saroja, for example, constitutes an obstacle to his attaining the Ultimate Reality. In contrast to Shantha, whose silence is extraordinarily meaningful, Saroja opposes her logic scheme of two and two: "Shantha's silence has all that logic cannot compute. Saroja wants two and two to make four […]".(29) Moreover, if Shantha can be related to the spiritual dimension of life, Saroja is definitely related to the material aspect of existence.[38] The latter is in fact always busy in amassing a fortune for her son Vithal: "Saroja is a tremendous worker. For her fact is that which yields." (30) Her pragmatism is pitted against Shantha's genuine desire to give all that she has to her beloved, without any distinction between what is hers and what is others:

> There's a story said of Sinbad the sailor. He was told by the jinn: Take, take all the royal treasury. He opened his hands to take. The hands had changed into gold. […] That's taking. Saroja of Kartikura House is a true Brahmin. She knows how to take. But Shantha is a Nair. (22)

Another Mother figure, the cat, one that embodies the Feminine Principle at its best, symbolises the path to submission that Pai must follow in order to attain salvation (*moksha*). The *leitmotiv* of the kitten carried by the Mother Cat, which through a constant recurrence becomes a central symbol in the novel, is introduced by Raja Rao as a metaphor for the complete surrender to the Absolute Reality. According to what Raja Rao himself has admitted in an interview, the cat should be viewed as "the guru in the feminine aspect representing divine wisdom and Love."[39] However, the image of the mother cat goes beyond the symbolic function of nurturing or it does not always illustrate yielding practices of devotionalism, such as represented by *bhakti* or by total surrender (*prapatti*) to the Ultimate Reality. It is equally possible to associate her presence with the corrupt practices in the Ration Office or her virtual testimony in the court.

In his essay on *The Cat and Shakespeare* the critic Narain Prasad Shukla maintains that the image of the cat is a constant feature in Raja Rao's work.[40] For instance, in the short story "The Client" a cat appearing repeatedly from a window has the same symbolic value as given to the Mother Cat in the novel: that is the total surrender of one's ego, exactly as a kitten completely trusts its mother.[41]

The fact that Mother Cat appears in flesh and blood in the second half of the novel *does* confirm the veracity of Govindan Nair's theory, which turns into practice, as it were. The cat rescues Nair from prison by leading the clerk to the missing paper ("The cat now jumped over the table and sat. […] The clerk had indeed found the paper." [93]) and also guides Pai to the garden that stands for the realization of the Self ("I was not satisfied. But one day the cat came back with a hollowed belly. […] One by one she took them [the kittens] down the wall. That was the first time I went across the wall. I found a garden all rosy and gentle." [99-100]). Here the Cat has a pivotal role in leading, through the agency of Govindan Nair, Ramakrishna Pai to the Ultimate Reality.

According to Esha Dey's analysis of *The Cat and Shakespeare* Pai initially assumes in the text the passive role of an object. Things happen around him and he seems to be affected by them just as he is affected by the British bubo. In this context Govindan Nair "appears as the agent, the active character, the subject, who fetches some strong evil-smelling native medicine to drive out the British bubo. It is he who always talks about Vedanta, schemes how to acquire a house, leaps this side or that side of the barrier of the wall." [42] It is after his experience in the garden and after Nair's trial that Pai's new role as the agent emerges (he will take care of the cat and succeed in building a house). Within the narrative itself this corresponds to Nair's withdrawal as a character from the fictional matrix (we are only told that he "is transferred to Alwaye" [102]) and to the attainment of his primary goal as a Proppian instrumental helper, which is to facilitate Pai's journey beyond the wall. It is thus clear that without Govindan Nair's help Pai would have never set himself on the path of salvation.

Critics like C.D.Narasimhaiah[43] see in Govindan Nair the one who can reconcile all opposites (it is not by chance that Shantha says of him: "What a strange man. He seems wanting to devour the whole world with fire. Then he sits down and talks to you as if he were sending a child to sleep." [99]), the man who unifies all castes and religions (although a Nair he is able, as we have already underlined, to teach Pai, a Brahmin, what *Brahman* is), respects and understands their vital principle, gets the best out of all languages and cultures[44], teaches the world 'the way of the kitten' and whose heart is really open to everybody.[45]

Nair has indeed overcome his phase of struggle because, as Kamala Markandaya points out, he has already reached the state of *Jivan-Mukti*, during which, according to *yoga* tradition "the saint has ceased to have any desire. He may be doing all kind of actions externally, though he remains altogether unaffected by them internally… He is full of bliss and happiness and therefore appears to ordinary eyes to be an ordinary happy man… ("Govindan Nair always talks of a mother cat. It carries the kitten by the scruff of its neck. That is why he is so carefree." [66]) He is wise pleasant and loving to everybody… ("I know you are a man with a big heart, so please do this service for me" [91]) though unaffected within himself, he can take part in the enjoyment of others, he

can play like a child and can sympathise with the sorrows of sufferers ("Anybody could see he played with children and the scale. […] Some had noticed him give way to ladies when the bus was overcrowded" [92])."[46]

Although a positive character, Govindan Nair combine within itself somewhat contradictory qualities. This identity combines the guru together with the rogue[47], such as found in the picaresque novel. These two aspects are apparently contradictory but they find a fitting answer if viewed in the light of the *Saiva Siddhantha* thought, which provides the keys useful to understand Govindan Nair and his enigmatic personality.

This paradoxical duality in Govindan Nair should remind us of Shiva, the double-faced Indian god par excellence. He is both the saviour and the destroyer haunting the graveyard. We should particularly focus on the peculiar facets of identity attributed to Shiva within the *Saiva Siddhantha*[48] tradition. Besides conceiving Shiva the Almighty in his dual aspect of mother and father (*Ammaiyappan*), he is viewed as the Prankster, the trouble-maker teasing his most fervent devotees up to the point of the disclosure of his divine identity. Shiva's pranks, usually suggesting moral lessons, are collected under the name of *Thiruvilaiyadal* (the divine play). In addition to this, in some Tamil devotional poems Shiva is often apostrophised as *Pithan* (madman). "A well-known devotional verse to Shiva runs *"Pitha, pirai soodi, perumanae, arulala"*, which translated reads 'madman who wears the moon on his forehead, Great God, bestower of grace."[49]

The implied connection between Shiva and Govindan Nair has been stated by Chitra Sankaran, who notes how many of the terms "used to describe Nair can be applied to Shiva, within this tradition, without incongruity."[50] Let us consider for example, the author's first presentation of Nair: "Govindan Nair is a terrible man: huge in his sinews but important in his thought," (14) or when Pai tells us that "The sun was up and the light played on his head" (18) and again: "It was as if Govindan Nair was there when he was not there but yet he was truly there"(18). Thus, Raja Rao's implied reference to the *Saiva Siddhantha* is necessary for us to understand these particular attributes concerning Govindan Nair's personality.

The only discordant note of the novel, which has puzzled most of the critics of Raja Rao[51], concerns Shakespeare. Beyond some explicit but sporadic quotation

(particular reference is made here to the similarity of Nair's language to Shakespeare's[52] and to the 'Mock-Hamlet scene' – as a critic has defined it – the dialogue between Govindan Nair and some of his colleagues), throughout the narration Shakespeare seems to be rather a fluttering and mythicized presence akin to the spiritual Indian tradition.

In a letter to M.K. Naik Raja Rao affirmed: "Shakespeare is someone who has gone beyond duality, and as such he is a universal symbol."[53] And again, during an interview in 1979, when asked about the justification of the name of Shakespeare in the title of *The Cat and Shakespeare* he answered: "Because of the fact that Shakespeare is a sage."[54] Just as the 'wise' Govindan Nair, "to whom every mystery seems to open itself" (71), Shakespeare possesses such an imagination and sensitivity that have allowed him to unveil the deepest mystery of existence. Of him, the narrator indeed writes that he "knew every mystery of the ration shop" (74), that is not only a parallel between the corruption in the Kingdom of Denmark and the corrupt Ration Office,[55] (the equivalent of a stage where men and women play their roles), but it also means that within Shakespearean imagination everything is really possible. "I ask you, - says Govindan Nair to John – what is dream? Are you sure you are not in dream (laughing)? […] In the dream the whole is real." (75) Inside the Shakespearean 'play within a play' the dimension of dream and of fiction is extremely important to understand Nair's philosophy. An action which is committed within the scene (see Polonius' murder) is like killing in a dream. Hence, Govindan Nair pierces "the veil, and the asthmatic falls." (74)

According to some critics, Nair's inquiry "A kitten sans cat, that is the question" (73) is the parody of the well-known Hamletic 'to be or not to be', but at the end of it all it appears more coherent to his philosophy. Thus, the question is whether to follow the Mother Cat or to be a kitten sans cat. Still, the parody continues when Nair says: "You purge to live. You sleep to die. When sleep is life, where is death?" (21) which is the perfect parody of Hamlet words: "To die, to sleep; to sleep, perchance to dream – ay, there's the rub."[56] Whereas Hamlet muses about a possible suicide Nair opposes his Mother Cat philosophy, according to which death is only a natural stage of life. We do

not have to be afraid of what will come afterwards, we simply have to realize that only after death can Reality and Truth be experienced. As Narain Prasad Shukla rightly observes,

> *The Cat and Shakespeare*, then, is a novel not about whether to be or not to be, but how to be; it is concerned with how life should be lived and what attitudes one must take towards death, reality and experience.[57]

In the end, what we think of as real is not, dream being the only reality. What we have to realize is that life is a mystery, "a riddle that can be solved with a riddle." (35) In a world where the beginning coincides with the end, where life and death are parts of the same enduring cycle the only explanation is that there is no cause connection because it is not necessary, it is meaningless:[58] that is Nair's answer to Pai, when the latter desperately tries to find a cause to Shridhar's death ("Since you want a cause, anything is the cause. The more innocent a thing, the more mysterious its cause."[58]), but that is also the end of the dialogue between Nair and Lakshmi:

"Where does it [happiness] come from?"
"Where does water come from?"
"From the tap?"
"And the water in the tap?"
"From the lake?"
"And the water in the lake?"
"From the sky."
"And the water in the sky?"
"From the ocean?"
"And the water in the ocean?"
"From the rivers."
"And the river waters?"
"They make the lakes."

"And the tap water?"

"Is river water."

"And so?"

"Water comes from water," she said. (45-46)

It is at the same time the end and the beginning of a new cycle but also the typical *Upanishadic* pattern, where "the rhythm produced by short staccato sentences with their repetitive sound have an hypnotic effect which aided memorising in the Vedic age."[59]

Going back to Shakespeare, some critics like C.D. Narasimhaiah, agree with Govindan Nair being regarded as a Shakespearean Prospero sitting in judgement over Evil and Good, a guide to wisdom and peacefulness, an outstanding example of balance and of the harmonious union of man and nature.

As V.V.N. Rajendra Prasad reminds us, Nair's attitude is the same "impersonal attitude of Shakespeare towards humanity, which is detached and at the same time compassionate."[60]

Nevertheless, apart from every superficial analogy, it seems that the true reason for the presence of Shakespeare in the title is related basically to Raja Rao's profound regard for the Elizabethan playwright, a sage amongst Indian sages. We would rather look at it as Raja Rao's tribute to Shakespeare rather than an author's deliberate choice dictated by some thematic and stylistic compulsions. It would be a risk, as Raja Rao himself points out, to study his novels "in the light of the Western conception of a well-made novel."[61]

Therefore, we could consider it in terms of a "Word as Mantra", a word enclosing a truth within itself, whose power has to be found in its sound rather than in its lexical meaning and whose understanding is beyond our mind.

> If anyone is so honoured, [affirms Raja Rao] almost a saint in a country of saints, it is William Shakespeare. And that this great English poet should be happy amongst us is not because he finds us so drunk with his metrics or

> his sense of the tragic, but for the perception he has of values… It is ultimately the spiritual tradition of India that has incorporated the English language to itself.[62]

Shakespeare's perception of literature as a spiritual pursuit reminds us of Raja Rao's writing as *sadhana*. It is in fact through the dimension of the dream that a creative writer like him succeeds in helping Pai accomplish his ultimate quest for salvation. We would therefore conclude this study of *The Cat and Shakespeare* and leave the reader to his own judgement of what the dream constitutes. Nobody other than Shakespeare better sums up the state of "seeing in sleep" (104) which Shantha refers to at the end of the narrative:

> We are such stuff
> As dreams are made on; and our little life
> Is rounded with a sleep. (The Tempest IV.1.130-33).

Notes

[1] Shiva Niranjan, "An Interview with Raja Rao", *Indian Writing in English* (New Delhi: Heritage, 1979) 20.
[2] "I try to belong to the Great Indian tradition of the past when literature was considered a *Sadhana*. In fact I wanted to publish my books anonimously because I think they don't belong to me, but the publishers wouldn't agree." Raja Rao during an interview by R.Parthasarathy, *The Future World is being made in America*, Span, Sept. 1977: 30. And again during another interview: "The best thing would be to call me a *Sadhaka*...", Shiva Niranjan , *An Interview with Raja Rao* 26.
[3] Raja Rao, *The Meaning of India* (New Delhi: Vision Books, 1996) 7.
[4] Source quoted from the website www.gn.apc.org/resurgence/articles/raine.htm
[5] Ramakrishna Pai himeself says in the novel: "Govindan Nair is my guide. He lives across the wall and the bilva tree spreads like a holy umbrella above him. It gives him spiritual status." Raja Rao, *The Cat and Shakespeare* (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1971) 58. Hereafter in the text.
[6] *Vidyā* literally means "to see, to know".
[7] Agata Sannino Pellegrini, *Il canto di Astavakra*, Estratto da "La Memoria" – 3 – Annali della Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia dell'Università di Palermo, 1984, 311. [Translation mine.]
[8] Raja Rao, *The Serpent and the Rope* (Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1968) 408.
[9] Meenakhshi Mukherjee, *The Twice-Born Fiction* (New Delhi: Arnold Heinemann, 1971) 97.
[10] Prior to India's independence three regimes governed this region, the princely states of Travancore, Cochin and the British, who directly ruled Malabar. Later on in 1949 the states of Travancore and Cochin were united in the state of Travancore-Cochin and in 1956 Malabar too was integrated in what became the state of Kerala. Kerala is thus a union of the three former provinces of Travancore, Cochin and Malabar.
[11] "I say, to say I love you is to say I love myself." "Who said so, Shantha?" "Sage Yagnayavalkya said so." (82) Yajñyawalkya was a wise man prominently figuring in the Upanishads, where it is said, just like here, that there is an only Absolute laying inside every being, because my Self is like everyone's Self.
[12] It is worth noting that every Indian school of thought regards the submission to a guru as essential to the achievement of knowledge.
[13] Furthermore, the character of Ramaswamy is to be linked to the *Advaita* philosophy. The term *Advaita* literally means 'non-dualism' and is used to describe the great *Śankara's* philosophy. He believed that there is an only Reality (*Brahman*), which lies within every being as the Self (*Ātman*). Towards this latter, the phenomenic reality is only an illusory manifestation of the only Absolute. Therefore *Śankara* brought the example (used by Raja Rao in his novel *The Serpent and the Rope*) of the traveller who mistakes a rope for a snake thus justaxposing a false image to the truth (the rope). According to *Śankara* everything can be regarded as part of a whole and freedom can be achieved only by fighting ignorance (*avidyā*), that is learning how to distinguish what is eternal from what is only apparently so, in order to realize that everything can be related to the only Absolute. The idea of the identity between Self and *Brahman* dates back to the ancient Upanishadic era, but *Śankara* goes on to affirm that *Brahman* is the only Reality and that the world is nothing but an apparent manifestation of the Absolute due to *avidyā*.
[14] Niranjan, *Interview* 22.
[15] Pellegrini 307. [Translation mine.]
[16] Pellegrini 311. [Translation is mine.]
[17] Rao 34: Nair "had copied the Astavakra Samhita, and he often carried it with him. He liked to recite:"Aho Aham Namo Mahyam Yasyame Nastikinchana." ("Wonderful am I! Adoration to me who love nothing.")
[18] Within the western literary tradition the garden itself, whose symbology derives from Christianity, is the traditional place for redemption. What the author alludes here to is the inebriating heavenly garden, the Eden or the Nirvana but also the *Hortus Conclusus* where Pai, such as Maria, receives the annunciation of his self-consciousness. It is not by chance indeed, as Esha Dey points out, that Raja Rao uses the adjective 'rosy' as a connotation of the garden itself, the rose being the apocalyptic flower, symbol of the Divine Grace ("I found a garden all rosy and gentle" [100]). According to Aeppli Ernest the garden is 'the place of the growing of vital and inner phenomena [...]. It is the expression in terms of images of a long-term psychic evolution which has come to an amazing inner richness.' J.Chevalier, A.Gheerbrant, *Dizionario dei simboli*, vol.1 (Milano: Rizzoli, 1994) 506.
[19] Raja Rao believes that we should not conceive death as pain and suffering because it only represents a bridge between life and what comes afterwards. It is like being free from every spatial and temporal boundary, from the rebirth cycle, from the illusions of Reality. That is why Govindan Nair does not worry about his son's death, his faith in the Mother Cat enables him to face every calamity. (See also how he faces the court trial scenes.)
[20] Esha Dey, *The Novels of Raja Rao: The Theme of Quest* (New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1992) 153.
[21] It is not by chance that Pai introduces himself with these words: "I am a quiet man, and to speak the truth, I don't yet know what it is to mean husband." [...] "I was thirty-three, and I had ever wondered that one is alive." (7-9)

[22] Group of texts belonging to Tradition. They deal with the origins of humanity and with the Indian history. Despite this, they also contain rituals, law codes, descriptions of sacred places and all that a Hindu has to know to behave properly on every occasion.

[23] According to Esha Dey this tree sacred to Shiva has many symbolic meanings because it is at the same time a symbol of birth (indeed, we see the pregnant Shantha, Pai's mistress, standing under the tree), of growth and of death (the two playmates Usha and Shridhar use to spend most of their time by the tree; this is as well the place where Shridhar will die of pneumonia because of the rain) and also a symbol of rebirth (it is not by chance that Pai wonders if God would ever bless him and let him build a house three stories high). Dey 152.

[24] Niranjan 20.

[25] S. Xavier Alphonse, *Kanthapura to Malgudi* (New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1997) 116.

[26] Rajesh K.Pallan, *Myths and Symbols in Raja Rao and R.K.Narayan* (Jalandhar: ABS Publications, 1994) 19.

[27] See footnote No. 7 to the novel, p. 34.

[29] "Look, look, there Shiva comes down three days before full moon and in Marghashira to besport himself with his spouse Bhavani. The river therefore carries flowers, and the young tigress cubs." (15)

[30] Except for the word *kitten, t*he equivalent terms of the original novel, that is *sea, tree, house, cat, wall,* are all monosyllabic in English.

[31] The critic Esha Dey underlines that the *leitmotive* of the house, of the tree, of the garden and of the cat could all be regarded as elements of a harmonic frame, which is basically Christian. Dey 154.

[32] Let us analyse for example the word house. In English the concept of 'house' can be explained with two significants: *house* and *home*, the former relating to the building in itself, external, material, the latter being more linked to the inner dimension of feelings. In his novel Raja Rao uses the term *house* in preference to *home* and this confirms that Pai's house is only a physical structure, a tabernacle, not his 'home', which is one with God. A further confirmation of the material aspect related to the concept of a house is given by Pai's words at the beginning of the novel, concerning the Indian traditional belief that a man who builds his own house is a successful man: "I wanted to become a rich man [...] I would build a big house, like contractor Srinivasa Pai." (9) Nevertheless, this small house acquires different symbolic nuances which relate either to the Christian or to the Indian religious sphere for, coincidentally, the colour of the house itself is white and whiteness is a symbol of purity and bliss according to Christianity. Moreover, the ochre bands, which are similar to those on a temple, are associated to the Indian idea of spirituality. There is however, an important point to be noted and it concerns to the linking of the three stories to the three different 'steps' in Pai's spiritual evolution, namely the three *gunas*: *Tamas* (literally: darkness), the most obscure and unconscious aspect; *Rajas* (literally: dust) man's most active element; and finally *Sattvas* (literally: being) the purest and most shining aspect. Madelaine Biardeau, *L'Induismo* (Milano: Mondadori, 1997) 124. [Translation mine]. We can therefore assume that the building of the three stories corresponds to different degrees in Pai's gradual realization and spiritual progress.

An alternative perspective is presented by the critic Chitra Sankaran in her essay "The Myth Connection" on the novel *The Cat and Shakespeare*. She analyses the term 'house' from the point of view of *Saiva Siddhantha*. Indeed, within the *Saiva Siddhantha* tradition, the noun *Veedu* is used to define the achievement of grace or salvation. Having understood this, we can now look at the Tamil expression *Veedu Petraen* from a diffrent point of view, because apart from meaning "I have obtained a house" it also means "I have obtained salvation" according to the *Saiva Siddhantha* literary tradition. Furthermore, the four aspects of life, which to the Sanskrit tradition are known as *dharma, artha, kama* and *moksha* (salvation), are translated into Tamil as *aram, porul, inbam* and *veedu*. Chitra Sankaran, *The Myth Connection* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1993) 198. Hence we can conclude that having succeeded in building his house, at the end of his initiation experience Pai has finally gained salvation.

[35] According to the traditional symbology the sea represents the dynamic of life. Everything arises from it only to come back to it: it is a place of birth, of transformation and rebirth. Eternally moving the sea symbolizes a transitory state which shifts between what is still to be accomplished and what has been already accomplished, that is to say, a state of ambivalence, of doubt, of uncertainty which can have a happy or a sad end. It is for this reason that the sea could be either an image of life or of death. J. Chevalier, A. Gheerbrant 67. [Translation mine]. In this context, we should not only think about Pai's wondering if God would ever let him build a house at the beginning of the novel, but we should also consider the various phases through which the protagonist goes during the narrative.

[34] We should not forget that in the Vedic tradition *Vac* was the most important female deity and that within the Rigveda she is also conceived as the energy principle.

[35] In the novel Ramakrishna Pai concludes: "And that is the truth. Who can create a child but God... What is the relation between God and Shantha?" (25)

[36] Incidentally, in the novel Bhoothalinga Iyer uses the Sanskrit term *marjara* to refer to the cat. Rao 67.

[37] For more details on the concept of *Shakti* and on the *Thenkalai* school of thought see Sankaran 203.

[38] "The *Samkhya* (which probably derives from *samkhya*, 'number') is a philosophical system which numbers all the elements constituting the universe. It propounds a strict dualism: on the one hand stands the matter (*prakrti*), eternally evolving according to its immanent law; on the other hand the *purusha* or individual souls which are numberless and wrongly believe that they are linked to the matter itself. Salvation is achieved only when the soul realises to be

substantially different from the matter." *Kṛṣṇamiśra*, La Luna Chiara della Conoscenza, a cura di Agata Sannino Pellegrini, (Brescia: Paideia Editrice, 1987) 17. [Translation mine].

[39] Raja Rao, "To M. K. Naik," *Raja Rao* (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1992) 128.

[40] We should remember that an earlier version of the novel itself was originally published with the title *The Cat* in the summer of 1959 in *Chelsea Review*.

[41] Narain Prasad Shukla, *Raja Rao's The Cat and Shakespeare* (New Delhi: Indian Association for English Studies, 2000) 92-93.

[42] Dey 157-58.

[43] C.D.Narasimhaiah, *Raja Rao* (New Delhi: Arnold-Heinemann India) 165.

[44] There are hints in the novel to Nair's deep education and culture. He can speak about Persian cats, about Islamic theology, about Egyptian traditions, about Latin, about Sanskrit, about Malayalam and so on.

[45] On many occasions the reader realises Nair's generosity. For instance, when it is said that "Govindan Nair loved slipping in two rupees and five rupees through windows where a child cried." (34) or think of Mudali's happiness when he is allowed to see Usha as his niece: "The Mudali and his wife had no grandchildren […] Murugan Mudali (he was about fifty-five) began to smile, and seemed almost happy now." (54-55) Finally, we can observe as readers, Nair's sympathetic and respectful attitude towards the prostitute Lakshmi who, thanks to him, gets a ration card: "Come tomorrow to Ration Office No.66. I will give you a card, a family card." (47)

[46] Kamala Markandaya, *A Silence of Desire* (New York: Noonday Press, 1964) 131-32.

[47] Think for example about Nair's arrest for corruption and bribery: during the trial he starts teasing the judge and the court convincing them of his innocence through philosophical queries: "Your Lordship, could I say Your Lordship without the idea of an Accused? Could I say respectable without the ideas of unrespectable coming into it? Without saying, I am not a woman, what does the word man mean?"[...] "Your Lordship, I only speak the truth. If the world of man does not conform to truth, should truth suffer for that reason? [...] The judge can give a judgment. The Government Advocate can accuse. Police Inspector Rama Iyer can muster evidence. But the accused alone knows the truth." (89-91) Furthermore, within the already mentioned *Thiruvilaiyadal* tales, some mythical parallels concerning Shiva (or his chosen devotee) while in a trial in front of the court of a Pandyan king can be found. Sankaran 188.

[48] Sankaran 186.

[49] Sankaran 187.

[50] Sankaran 188.

[51] R.V.H. Zuckerman wrote: "It seems to me that the later addition to the title was ill-adviced for very little is said in the novel about Shakespeare." R.V.H. Zuckerman, "The Cat and Shakespeare", *Books Abroad 39*, (Summer 1965) 365. Similarly, E.D. Dimock writes: "The Shakespeare in the title may be somewhat gratuitous." E.D. Dimock, "The Garden Wall between worlds", *The Saturday Review* (1965): 28.

[52] "That is his style, if one may say so, of talking. It's a mixture of The Vicar of Wakefield and Shakespeare. The words are choice, the choice of situation clumsy. He never says come and go." (11)

[53] Raja Rao's letter to M.K. Naik quoted in "The Kingdom of God is within a *mew*" 143.

[54] Niranjan 25.

[55] A place where corruption reigns and facts are distorted yet to give the appearance of reality. But it is also a symbol of a bigger world, of a microcosm where Christians, Brahmins, Nairs and Muslims dwell, a world representing in addition a neverending burocracy and the corruption of modern India, where people die because of starvation, starvation reaching incredible levels because of corruption and bribery and because of people like Velayudhan Nair who manipulate ration cards... Coincidentally, this world is full of rats; and the mouse, Ganesha's vehicle in India is associated to the idea of theft, of stealing others' properties. J. Chevalier, A. Gheerbrant 279-80. [Translation mine]. A symbol of this macrocosm is the huge scale which reminds us that we will all be morally judged according to our actions. The comparison is clearly to *karma* which everybody is subjected to as a result of his/her previous births. Within the Ration Department one receives one's own ration depending on the colour of one's card, that is to say, the world is offering us rewards or punishments according to our *karma*.

[56] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (London: Penguin Books, 1994) 113.

[57] Shukla 97.

[58] The very structure of the novel reflects this idea: indeed, we cannot say that events linearly progress. Rather, they seem to extend (in saying so, we go back to the digressional aspect in Raja Rao's narrative) through – as Esha Dey affirms - "a series of 'happenings' which happen as 'non-happenings', gratuitous encounters juxtaposed by chance." The reader is somehow confused, he cannot distinguish what has and what has not really happened because of the lack of a linear progressive development in the novel and because, at the end of it all, past, present and future are part of a whole. Dey 156.

[59] Sankaran 208.

[60] V.V.N. Rajendra Prasad, *The Self, the Family and Society in Five Indian Novelists (*New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1990) 154.

[61] Niranjan 20.

[62] Raja Rao, *The Caste of English* (New Delhi: Arnold Heinemann , 1978) 420.