FELINE CONTEMPLATIONS OF THE SPIRITUAL IN DAVID MICHIE'S THE DALAI LAMA'S CAT

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Abstract: *The paper sets out to review the aspects that make David Michie's novels a harmonious blend of various types of writing and thus a triumph: spirituality/philosophy, humor, honest introspection, romance and the presence of a cat as the center of everything which is a recipe for success nowadays. We will dwell on those facets which are more prominent, namely the transcendent and the philosophy of mindfulness, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, humor in connection with the specificities of the universe of a feline as a miraculous spice added as key ingredient of an effective and popular writing. We would like to outline the play upon seriousness and playfulness to the purpose of revealing how they make a perfectly symphonic whole.*

Keywords: *Buddhism, philosophy, spirituality, humor, feline*

1. Structure and Interests

The Dalai Lama's Cat is in fact a trilogy. The first novel is entitled like this and sets the scene and atmosphere, as well as familiarizes us with the main characters and events. The second and the third add to this title a continuation, according to the specific theme that overrides them. The second, *The Dalai Lama's Cat and the Power of Meow*, draws attention to the nature and analysis of the human mind, showing how people reduce themselves to it when in fact they should merely notice its mechanisms and the way it functions and try to master these and emphasize experience rather than thinking *per se*. The third novel, *The Dalai Lama's Cat and the Art of Purring*, focuses on the quest for the roots and causes of happiness. Simplistically put, if we think about the three books and their chief interests, i.e. facts or physicality, the mind, and feeling, we may interpret the trilogy as a treatise in the human being in all its main aspects.

What we are looking at in this paper will be the two traits that I consider to be the key elements laying the foundation of the writing – humor and philosophy – and their balanced interplay. They are followed in all three novels, from which the most relevant situations that highlight them will be introduced. These two aspects will hence constitute the two main parts of the body of this research, and are followed by conclusions.

Before approaching them, however, we will briefly glance at the subject in broad lines. In the poor outskirts of New Delhi, a small Himalayan kitty is caught, together with its siblings, by a couple of young boys, and taken away from their mother to be sold. In the commotion and hurry, the kitty that will become our protagonist is dropped by one of the boys in the muddy street, which will cause a permanent weakness of her rear paws. Being the smallest and youngest, and hence the most feeble, she remains the last one in the sale,

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after all her brothers and sisters are given successfully; as soon as the boys realize that she will bring them no earnings and is thus useless to them, she is almost thrown away into the dumpster, packed and suffocating into a newspaper. Luckily, just before the potentially fatal gesture, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, who was passing by in His car after a tour to America, notices what is about to happen and sends his companion to the rescue. The boys are given a few dollars and the cat ends up in His Holiness's car. She is taken to the Dharamsala monastery and will live close to the Dalai Lama, pendulating between the space of the monastery and that of the Himalaya Book Café down the hill of Jokhang, telling her story and recounting bits and pieces of her life from which profound meanings are detachable.

2. Humor

The first type of humor is situational. Chapter one begins with such a humorous depiction that echoes the thanks resorted to in the opening or closing of speeches given by stars in award ceremonies. The cat says she owes her thanks to a defecating bull in the middle of the road that stopped His Holiness's car, without which there would be no story to tell. The implication is that us, the readers, also need to pause and perhaps extend our gratitude to the bull and its action as well, as otherwise we would not have been able to read this book. Drawing attention to this petty (to avoid saying rather vulgar) image has another layer of meaning associated with it rather than mere humor. It is intended to already point to the idea that coincidences or meaningless facts do not exist, that everything is ultimately imbued with significance and connected to a higher purpose.

Humor is sometimes based on linguistic associations and puns. For instance, the cat says that His Holiness calls her his little bodhi*cat*va – from *bodhisattva* (enlightened being). Also, when she says she is "categorical", she asks to be excused for the pun; we realize that the word can be considered to be formed from *cat* and *ego*, as an adjective referring to self-centeredness. Yet another play on words is describing the act of cleaning her intimate parts as playing the cello (Michie, 2016: 27).

Another type of humor arises from the way the cat envisages herself and her relationship with humans. It is based on all the modern myths relating to cats' inner life and on the suppositions made by people that cats can reason and, while doing that, they "see" themselves as superior, as having the upper hand in the relationship with a human being, and as being the true masters of the household that they inhabit. This image is attributed to cats due to their independent attitude (by contrast to dogs, for instance), interpreted, along the line mentioned above which makes cats reasoning beings, as intentional arrogance towards humans, even mockery, as if cats were sure that they subjugate human beings with their beauty and cuteness which make them irresistible, granting them the advantage of misbehaving without consequences, which they conscientiously abuse. A reflection of this type of "reasoning" in cats and in the protagonist is her surprise at people's bafflement as they realize that the Dalai Lama has a cat. She wonders why His Holiness would *not* possess a cat – as if a cat were the most naturally preferred animal by human beings – and then, of course, rectifies the concept of a human being *owning* a cat, wondering if it is accurate when it comes to understanding and defining the relationship correctly.

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During a televised interview, she enters the scene and sits on the interviewer's lap, a famous businesswoman, actress and writer, also the founder of a media company that has gained worldwide renown. As the moment of a meditation session before the cameras comes, as it unfolds, the cat sits up from the woman's lap and drinks from the glass of water customarily prepared for her on the coffee table beforehand, then nonchalantly crosses her lap to go and sit on the other side of the couch, stirring everybody's laughter despite the live broadcast.

The protagonist defines herself as an impeccable, although undocumented breed. Indeed, if we consult the Wikipedia, we see that the Himalayan cat is described as the Himalayan Persian or Colourpoint Persian, "derived from crossing the Persian with the Siamese", but "the Cat Fanciers' Association considers the Himalayan Persian simply a color variation of the Persian rather than a separate breed, although they do compete in their own color division"; this equivocality makes the status of the breed unclear (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Himalayan_cat) The Colourpoint Persian was obtained as a result of two cross breeding programs running in parallel in Great Britain and the United States starting with 1947, which earned its recognition as a breed in 1955 in England and 1957 in the USA (Rousselet-Blanc, 2006: 147). The name "Himalayan" was used in America and comes by association with the appearance of a domestic rabbit whose fur is colourpoint in type, i.e. the hair is long and colored only towards the extremities called points (*ibidem*: 148). The cat's eyes are always strikingly dark blue, no matter the color variety, which can be either of the four main ones, centered on brown (Seal point), milk chocolate (Chocolate point), blue-grey (Blue point) or pink silver grey (Lilac point), or a derivative of these (*ibidem*). From all the references in the book it is unclear what sub-breed HHC is; she could be Seal point or Chocolate point, if we take into account the mention of brown in her little kitten's fur, or Blue point, as she once refers to her own greyish points; the issue remains unelucidated.

Another comic aspect is the way the cat pretends to be the very embodiment of discretion in referring to Dalai Lama's guests in such a way as to allegedly protect their identity, but in fact gives clues in this respect that are so suggestive that it is as if the actual name was spelled out directly. From the first page of the Prologue in the first book, one of the Lama's guests is the actress from *Legally Blonde*, fond of charity work for children and donkeys, and we, of course, recognize Reese Witherspoon (Michie, 2016: 1). In *The Power of Meow*, we recognize Arianna Huffington from Huffington Post in the cat's description of the woman who comes to take His Holiness an interview: "an American of Greek descent […] who founded an online media outlet […] [,] one of the fastest growing in the world. An author herself, one of her most recent books concerns what it means to thrive. *There*, that's as many hints as I'm willing to disclose." (Michie, 2015 b: 21) When a remarkable social media senior executive visits, the cat again allows herself to leave only an innocent, "very subtle" clue: the "name of the company where the visitor was a high flier is reminiscent of the sound made by birds in trees", "not a million miles away from rhyming with that essential cat bathroom provision: litter" (*ibidem*: 88). A third relevant example would be the "Austrian-born body-builder who not only became one of the hottest tickets in Hollywood but went on to be governor of California" (Michie, 2015 a: 29), who on departure "darted away without so much as an '*Hasta la vista, baby*'" (*ibidem*: 30).

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We could not leave unmentioned from this section on humor the Skype "conversation" between HHC and the Pope's dog, named (ironically, in the perception of the cat), His Holiness's Dog. Their dialogue hints at the worldwide issue of tolerance of diversity of religion and doctrine, as they have to admit that there can be two spiritual leaders rightfully entitled "His Holiness" at the same time, as well as the paradox that the cat is Indian and at the same time Himalayan, just as the dog is both Italian and an Irish wolfhound. The implication is that if the animals, belonging to species proverbially at enmity, could believe and understand one another, ultimately finding common points in their lives as well as those of their masters, perhaps people should be willing to acquire, promote and manifest the same tolerance in their relationships with their fellowmen.

3. Spirituality and Philosophy: Practices, Wisdom, and Mindfulness and Happiness

The space of spirituality is on the hill of Jokhang, where there is the monk monastery of Namgyal, where the inhabitants only have very few hours of sleep around midnight, as the rest of the time is dedicated to prayer, study and debates. Any guest coming for a session with the Dalai Lama presents a white scarf, *kata*, extending it with both hands while bowing. The Dalai Lama receives it then gives it back with a blessing. At some point in the story we are presented the concept of *geshe*. It is the equivalent of a doctoral distinction, which young novice monks aspire to, and can be obtained only as a result of a thorough examination before a committee, consisting in theoretical questions, recitations from memory and the philosophical discussion and interpretation of an issue. Novices prepare for twelve years for it, around twenty hours per day.

The spiritual nature of the practice of yoga at the Dog School of Yoga on a nearby hill is revealed by master Ludo. Maintaining one body posture is a search for *karuna* (stillness in Sanskrit), "awareness imbued with compassion", being "Receptive. Expansive. Abundant. Free from ill will." (Michie, 2015 b: 29-30). The asanas appear as as many instances of meditation. Moreover, contorting one's body to make it more flexible seeks liberation from rigid physical patterns of the body that encase and mirror the conditionings of the mind, which also need to be eliminated. Thus, yoga actually aims at freeing one's mind and the individual from *samsara*, "going around and around in circles" (*ibidem*: 30), to *nirvana*/"letting go", relaxation (*ibidem*: 31).

Humorous contexts are sometimes meant to suggest profound interpretations in a light, unintrusive manner. Humor, as it were, triggers subtle, deep interpretations, which is the reason why we are here analyzing the philosophy after we have looked into the humor. One of the first lessons of spirituality is occasioned by the discontent transpiring from a history professor from a British university for having to share Dalai Lama's attention with the cat (physically interposed between them during their discussion). This makes the Dalai Lama point out that the professor and the cat have some very powerful things in common, such as the desire to be happy and avoid suffering, clinging to their specific and partial experiencing of consciousness. At the other's protest that surely his life and the life of an animal cannot have the same worth, the Lama explains that the potential is different but, as manifestations of the same consciousness, all living things are equal. The literality of this statement is mirrored by the box of cockroaches that the Lama keeps in order to avoid

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killing them, which of course shocks the professor who nevertheless keeps his feelings in check, refraining from any reaction in order not to offend, and showing openness to take in alternative perspectives as a man interested in evolving.

The incident above, meant to point out to the chief values of Buddhism, is connected with the naming of the cat, or rather the ordination name she was close to receiving, which is supposed to reveal a relevant aspect of one's personality at that time. Initially, as a result of almost leaving paw marks at the end of a letter from the Dalai Lama to the Pope, in the guise of signature (while crossing his desk in pursuit of a fountain pen tap), she is called His Holiness's Cat (HHC) by Dalai Lama's trusted men who witness this situation and bemusedly think that this is what the equivalent of His Holiness the Dalai Lama – HHDL – would be as signature in her case. However, as one day she brings a mouse in the room, the two men above think it as untenable behavior and voice their concern that the name HHC may no longer be suitable, deeming that, for a being capable of an act of cruelty, something like Mouser, Mousie Monster or Mousie Slayer would be more appropriate as an ordination name, finally finding the suggestion of the driver – Mousie Tung – the perfect match. Humiliated, the cat leaves the room, years pressed back and tail hanging. A few days later, as the mouse recovers, the Dalai Lama takes her in his arms and explains that one needs to surpass instinctual negative drives and improve one's condition, finding the capacity to change for the better – an attribute of all living things. Surpassing one's condition is the lesson learnt on the occasion of this diatribe on the cat's name.

HHC's belief that she needs a companion cat causes her to suffer, and occasions a discussion on the way happiness and reality are a matter of perspective. The conclusion is reached by our protagonist as a result of information coming from more than one source around her. One day, a nun who has dedicated her life to the reintegration of detainees tells the Dalai Lama that she had a conversation with a prisoner who derived from it the conclusion that monastic life is worse than prison, as it does not even offer the possibility of earning money out of work or of conjugal visits, and invites the nun to come and spend some time in prison if she ever finds her monastic existence too burdensome. Another example is given by Mrs. Trinci, the Dalai Lama's Italian chef, who, although living without a husband and only at the service of others, says that her happiness comes from providing culinary delights for the people around her, which makes His Holiness mention the wonderful paradox of finding happiness in offering it to the others. The way monk Chogyal, one of the Lama's closest people, calls the cat Snow Lion, a being that symbolizes unconditional happiness, high vibration and great beauty, is prophetic of the cat reaching the conclusion that she should simply give up an idea that causes her sorrow (that of needing another cat to be happy) and follow the others' example, of rather modifying her perspective on things than trying to change the things themselves. Interestingly, the moment she detaches herself from this wish, she sees a tomcat through the window, an occurrence which hides the philosophical aspect that when one frees oneself from attachment one stands more chances to be granted a wish.

Exaggerated preoccupation with oneself, being self-absorbed, resembles a cat's excessive self-grooming when this extreme care fills her up negatively – with her own hairs, which need to be coughed out in the form of fur balls to avoid illness. The cat's lesson to humans is to avoid directing too much attention to one's own person, self-obsession or

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being full of oneself (figuratively), and rather focus on the others. The human embodiment of the self-obsessed individual in the story is Franc, the owner of Café Franc (named, of course, after him). His tight clothes, golden OM earring, colorful threads worn as bracelets, showing the initiations he has received from various masters (which he never misses an opportunity to enumerate), do not impress the Dalai Lama when Franc comes to ask His Holiness to assign him to a master, and he is sent to *geshe* Wangpo (a quite straightforward man).

First, Wangpo points out that there is a progression of stages that the apprentice needs to go through, namely the four "Noble Truths" revealed as a consequence of associating Buddha with a doctor: checking the symptoms, diagnose, weighing facts and prescribing the treatment (Michie, 2016: 98). As soon as one understands that the source of discontent and suffering – *dukkha* (*ibidem*: 99) – can be eliminated or ameliorated once we see that reality depends greatly on our own perspective on it (*ibidem*: 100), then *dharma* – the philosophy of Buddha or the end of discontent – can be attained (*ibidem*: 101). The gradual path of evolution is called the *Lam Rim* (*ibidem*). The main identified common problem is, the way *geshe* Wangpo puts it, the fact that all people are specialists in "I", concentrating too much on their own person, which can even become the source of physical illness, instead of thinking more about the others in a positive way and about how these can be unburdened of some of their sufferance (*ibidem*: 102). As Franc seems to internalize some of the truths revealed by his new master, and as the bracelets, tight clothes and earring disappear, his karma changes and one day the editor of a famous worldwide culinary magazine shows up and has a meal in the café, saying he is willing to promote the locale, whose name will be turned, upon Franc's initiative, to Himalaya Book Café. He will leave for San Francisco and pass the management to Serena Trinci (Mrs. Trinci's daughter), after also opening a library inside as an annex with the help of initially-extremely-shy IT programmer Sam.

The feline protagonist is extremely unhappy and traumatized as, upon the occasion of the reconditioning of His Holiness's quarters, she is taken to Chogyal's home for a week, and only later realizes that this change has occasioned a meeting and conversation with the tomcat she occasionally spotted rambling about the monastery. The moral of the story is that although change requires adaptation and an effort of going out of one's habit, and even in instances in which it brings about catastrophe or loss, it should not be seen as melodramatic, as it ultimately always works towards filling the future with the possibility of growth and evolution. The cat derives this truth from the conversation Dalai Lama has with another enlightened spiritual man, when His Holiness observes that without the invasion of Tibet by the Chinese, a drama at the time of its occurrence, he would have never left Lhasa and many people would have never had contact with Dharma. So, ultimately all change should be accepted and seen to be for the better in the long run.

Asked one day which is the most important practice in Buddhism, the Dalai Lama answers promptly referring to *bodhichitta*, described as the desire to achieve illumination in order to free all other beings from suffering by leading them to their enlightenment as well (*ibidem*: 212-3). It is worth noticing that the answer stresses the nature of *bodhichitta* as practice and not merely as a philosophical concept, emphasizing its active pursuit through one's conscious efforts.

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Karma, seen as the law of cause and effect, is explained to function at the level of consciousness, which is energy and eternal, unlike the person, although it suffers transformations too (Michie, 2015 b: 70). The eternal quality of the soul raises the issue of past lives and reincarnation, capitalized upon in the story as the cat's awareness of having met old helpers from past lives as dear acquaintances in this one: the driver who named her Mousie-Tung and planted catnip for her in the garden saved her once, when she was the Dalai Lama's dog, by lifting her up in his arms and carrying her to safety; she feels that there is a mother-daughter relationship between her and Serena's boyfriend's little girl, Zahra; the DNA of an animal hair from an ancient box belonging to the Fifth Dalai Lama, analyzed with carbon, shows striking resemblance to hers, pointing out to a century-old connection with the spiritual leader etc.

Tenzin, Dalai Lama's diplomatic attaché, gives one of the first definitions of mindfulness in a conversation with Chogyal: being in the moment, granting it exclusive attention, deliberately and without judging; time is annihilated, there is no past, future, fantasy or anxiety, and the being is suffused in pure presence (Sogyal Rinpoche's term) (Michie, 2016: 51). The cat illustrates the concept with a very lay reality. As she develops the habit of visiting Café Franc at the foot of the Jokhang hill (where she is offered a great variety of European fancy dishes from the moment the owner finds out who she is), she notices that people who serve all the refined food are not mentally present in the act, not consciously enjoying the variety of tasty meals, and wonders why would humans pay for an espresso and not actually really *have it*, mindfully, instead of merely drinking the free coffee from their hotel, since they are not going to savor the espresso, as their mind is elsewhere. Even food can be had in a mindful way, i.e. appreciated and enjoyed. Finding happiness in a small gesture or action such as eating is what the monks do, discovering something to say about the texture of their modest rice or the innovative combination of some spices every day.

A deeper, more detailed understanding of the concept of mindfulness is contained in the second book of the series, *The Power of Meow*. A few contexts are used simultaneously to help shed some light on it. A very suggestive metaphor for the agitation of the mind, which prevents mindfulness, or the concentration on the here and now, on a single aspect, is that of fleas. The cat takes this type of parasites from a stray dog that is temporarily allowed on the premises, which makes her contort, scratch and be agitated. Even when the physical fleas are exterminated, the protagonist associates the state of discomfort, restlessness and anxiety which she sees in chef Trinci with the itch caused by the fleas. As Mrs. Trinci is the victim of a heart attack and is forced, in order to preserve her health, to slow down the pace of her living and take up meditation, and as she declares that she finds herself unable to tame her mind, which is "out of control" (Michie, 2015 b: 12), the cat diagnoses her promptly "We both suffered from fleas." (*ibidem*: 13) Symbolically suffering from fleas means that one's mind is a "tumult of distractions" (*ibidem*: 4), and that there is an impossibility to keep it still or focused. Meditation is the opposite state, i.e. being capable of "focused attention", metaphorically interpreted as "the power of meow", as when all concentration, attention and intention is put into a cat's meow and directed towards someone (*ibidem*: 15). Mindfulness means taking meditation one step further, namely

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always focusing purposefully on the activity at hand, irrespective of its nature, which also brings about its enjoyment, as no other thought or worry comes into the picture.

The interview given by the Dalai Lama to Ms. Huffington makes the latter contribute to clearing up the definition of mindfulness with some very useful lay parallels. Mindfulness is like "Being in direct mode instead of narrative mode." (*ibidem*: 22), and, as afar as the difference between meditation and mindfulness is concerned, "meditation helps us become more mindful in the same way that an exercise program helps us keep more physically fit" (*ibidem*: 22-3). Dalai Lama completes her explanations with the way a master described the concept once: "when I eat, I eat. When I walk, I walk. And when I sleep, I sleep" (*ibidem*: 22).

Meditation and mindfulness help the human being understand the real nature of the mind, which is stillness, along with "perfect clarity, lucidity, boundlessness, serenity", by contrast to thoughts, which, like clouds, are impermanent, as they come and go (*ibidem*: 14). Sogyal Rinpoche makes the distinction between the casual mind, "*sem*", dual and active, and "*Rigpa*", primordial, awakened, still and radiant mind which meditation and mindfulness aim at attaining (Rinpoche, 2001: 54-5). This realization leads to the awareness of the true nature of human beings as well, who are primarily "pure, great love and pure, great compassion" (Michie, 2015 b: 15).

This type of awareness, along with mindfulness – to which psychologists have referred as "presentism" – trigger happiness (Michie, 2015 a: 16) for which the phrase "the art of purring" is metaphorically used in the last book. Also, suffering etymologically means "to carry", so while the pain associated with an event is unavoidable, prolonging it by carrying it into the future can be escaped, so suffering becomes an option and is unnecessary (*ibidem*: 40). Other ways to happiness include a balanced diet and slow burn foods (*ibidem*: 143-4), or improving the terms that can be affected from the formula which defines happiness as the sum of S+C+V, i.e. one's "biological set point"/"base-level of subjective well-being", which can be improved through meditation, life conditions, and "voluntary activities" (*ibidem*: 89). Edgar Tolle goes a step further to show that beyond polarities such as good and bad, or sorrow-happiness, there is "inner peace" i.e. acceptance of what is, associated with stillness, and in opposition to mind and resistance (Tolle, 2005: 177-9).

4. Conclusions

One of the reasons why we considered David Michie's novels a material worth putting under the lens is that the unusual mix of traits that he uses in the recipe of his narrative – and a very popular and appealing one which it turns out to be – seems to parallel the citizen-of-the-world quality of the author himself. Born in Zimbabwe, graduating from the Rhodes university of South Africa, launching himself to the European continent to live a decade in London, to finally establish himself with his family in Australia, and writing about Buddhist philosophy as an initiate but with a healthy tinge of worldliness, he seems every bit of an intriguing, versatile cosmopolite, a personality which could not have been more obvious in his approach of narrative.

With titles such as *Buddhism for Busy People*, *Hurry Up and Meditate*, or *Mindfulness Is Better than Chocolate*, our novel included, he manages a few valuable

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things. For one, he proves significant insight into human nature, which he accesses with the qualities of a psychologist. Also, by apparently taking serious matters as well as himself less than seriously, Michie reaches a wide readership in unexpectedly efficacious ways, as the burden of responsible, grave approach laid on the reader by a downright philosophical writing – absent in our case – would make it less effective than one which apparently endeavors only to amuse, but ends up, due to its unstressful manner, making one meditate even more profoundly precisely due to not having necessarily intended it. Last but not least, Michie capitalizes upon people's vulnerabilities – in the best sense of the word – to increase our awareness of human nature and facts of life. One of these so-called vulnerabilities is, in the case of The Dalai Lama's Cat, the very fact that a lot of people are, apparently, "cat persons", sensitive to the beauty and cuteness of these animals. However, the quality of the author's approach is that Michie's use of aspects of the universe of felines, their behavior and appearance, is not only and merely a marketing strategy, but a means to increase the reader's self-knowledge, self-awareness, empathy and compassion. This quality probably remains (alongside my own being a "cat person") the chief rationale for this study.

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