

महस्विनी – विद्वत्समीक्षिता सन्दर्भिता च शोधपत्रिका (ISSN: 2231-0452)

कुसुमम् : जनवरी – डिसेम्बर २०२१

सम्पुटम् : संयुक्तम् (१,२)

## Revisiting Raja Rao's **Kanthapura**

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With India celebrating 75 years of Independence, it is pertinent that we revisit Raja Rao's **Kanthapura** a classic Indian novel in English which presents in fictional terms Indian struggle for independence especially during the late 1920s and early 30s under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. Raja Rao, as it is well-known is one of the Big Three, Mulk Raj Anand and R. K. Narayan being the other two, who are credited with shaping Indian Novel in English. First one among his celebrated novels, **Kanthapura** is the least metaphysical while his other novels like **The Serpent and the Rope**, **The Cat and Shakespeare**, **On the Ganga Ghat** etc. are very explicitly metaphysical rooted in the Vedantic Tradition of Ancient India. One very pertinent point about the novel is that it was written and published in 1938 when India was still struggling to gain independence and thus it presents Raja Rao's take on the Independence Movement and Mahatma Gandhi's contribution to it. It is to be noted in the beginning itself that the revisiting of the novel **Kanthapura** has to be done in two ways keeping in view anticolonial strategy that the novelist adopts as part of his narrativizing the freedom struggle as well as the anticolonial movement it narrativizes. Further, revisiting the acclaimed classic would be a way of paying tributes to countless nameless Indians who sacrificed their everything in the fight against the colonial rule of the British.

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Indian independence movement is a series of incidents aimed at ending the British rule in India since the First War of Independence in 1857. This movement involved people belonging to different background and different orientation – Tantia Tope, Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi, Nana Saheb belonging to the royalty; poets like Bankim Chandra, Tagore and Aurobindo; Revolutionaries like Lal- Bal – Pal, Bhagat Singh, Chandrasekhar Azad, Subhash Chandra Bose; Gokhale and other leaders of Congress etc. But it is with the arrival of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, the nationalist movement saw paradigm shift. It became a mass movement involving villagers. It saw some unique ways of protest which were beyond anybody's imagination like satyagraha, non-violence. The movement was socio-economic and religious along with being political. It was rooted in Indian culture which was preserved in the villages of the time represented.

**Kanthapura** fictionalizes this paradigm shift in Indian freedom struggle as reflected in an imaginary village in the western ghats called Kanthapura. Thus, the freedom movement is located not in any urban centre but in a very far-flung and ordinary village. Kanthapura the village is typical of thousands of such obscure villages in India of the day in its composition of population, social structure, caste hierarchy, beliefs, superstitions and attitudes which nevertheless felt the impact of Mahatma Gandhi and his ideals and actively responded to his call to fight non-violently against the colonial power.

To recount in the briefest outline, the novel tells how Moorthy an educated and enlightened Brahminical youth of Kanthapura deeply influenced by the Mahatma's ideals organizes the people of the village and the coolies of Skeffington Coffee Estate launches satyagraha against

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the ‘Redman’ and his empire. Led by him the villagers vow to follow non-violence and truth and spin on the charkha, wear khadi, refuse to pay taxes to the alien government and non-violently picket toddy booths and groves face imprisonment as the Mahatma’s followers in cities and towns do, despite great risk to life and property until their village is completely destroyed by the colonial police forces. In this revolutionary activity barring a few families, the entire village community – men, women of all ages and castes enthusiastically participates and pits itself against the vast empire. Kanthapura presents, women, themselves marginalized lot in society, taking the centre stage and actively participating in the movement. Even though they get the worst of it, they remain staunchly devoted to the Mahatma making Kanthapura eminently a women’s story.

Though the novel is not about Moorthy alone, Moorthy is the one who initiates action in the remote village of Kanthapura. Inspired by Gandhian ideals, he comes back to the village to mobilize villagers to join the freedom struggle. Moorthy closely replicates Gandhi’s own strategy of mixing religion, politics, economy and social upliftment as part of his anti-British strategy. He proves an extraordinarily imaginative leader in introducing Gandhi and his movement as part of some myth or purana. He begins his work with unearthing of half-sunk lingam and its consecration in the temple and celebration of Sankara Jayanthi. To initiate the Gandhian movement he brings in Jayaramachar the Harikatha man who mythicizes not only the freedom struggle but also Gandhi himself. So that the villagers who were skeptical of the ‘town talk’ and ‘Gandhi business’ of Dore a young man of the village not only accept it but also become active participants in it. The prominent impact of this is that the insulated brahmin community of the village join forces with

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others of the community. Of course, there are some like Bhatta, Waterfall Venkamma who see no personal profit in it and do not join. Moorthy's actions also lead to breaking of barriers of caste in the village to some extent as he braves excommunication of the religious head 'Swami' and visits the paraiah houses and makes them also part of the freedom struggle. In time Moorthy is able to make them believe that supporting the British colonial government is 'pollution' unlike what Swami and his followers try to project. Moorthy also follows the Gandhian strategy of breaking the colonial government's economic control by rejecting foreign cloth and picketing toddy booths and graves. Moorthy's followers mostly women of the villager do not understand the economic implications of what they are doing but they put their best foot forward because in their minds by now there is no difference between fighting for the country and fighting for their religion. So, they not only take to fasting as a protest but fast to strengthen their souls in this journey. They replicate 'Dandi March' of Gandhi and make salt. They participate whole heartedly in the non-cooperation movement and refuse to pay tax. Once Moorthy is arrested the novel becomes more of the women's story – how they form a Sevika Sangha under the leadership of Rangamma and later on under Ratna train themselves in the non-violent protest, hold fasts, pujas and keep the protest alive against the colonial government making the novel about 'kanthas'[women].

As indicated earlier, Raja Rao's anti-colonial strategies are not limited to narrating the freedom struggle. It includes other strategies like pitting an obscure village against the mighty colonial centre. The novel opens with a masterly lyrical evocation of Kanthapura thus: "High on the Ghats is it, high up the steep mountain that face the cool Arabian seas up

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the Malabar coast is it up Mangalore and Puttur and many a centre of cardamom and coffee, rice and sugar cane. Roads narrow, dusty, rut-covered roads wind through the forests of teak and jack of sandal and sal and hanging over bellowing gorges and leaping over elephant-haunted valleys, they turn now to the left and now to the right and bring you through the Alambe and Champa and Mena and Kola passes into the great granaries of trade. There on the blue waters, they say, our carted cardamom and coffee get into the ships the Red-men bring and so they say, they go across the seven oceans into the countries where our rulers live.” [1] The description is not only visually clear and striking but evokes the very atmosphere of Kanthapura, its environs of rich forests and estates and their exploitation by the ‘Red men’ ‘our rulers’ who live ‘beyond the seven seas’ immediately establishing the centre-margin, exploiter–exploited relationship between the British and Kanthapura [India]. Further, positing another challenge to colonial centre whose novel form he uses Raja Rao makes Acchakka, an old unsophisticated brahmin widow, herself a marginalized being, narrate retrospectively the sad tale of her village and its destruction in their opposition to the ‘Red-men’.

In his famous ‘Foreword’ to **Kanthapura**, Raja Rao says “There is no village in India however mean, that has not a rich *sthalapurana* or legendary history of its own. Some god or godlike hero has passed by the village – Rama might have rested under this pipal tree, Sita might have dried her clothes ... on the yellow stone, or Mahatma himself on one of his many pilgrimages through the country might have slept in this hut ..... in this way past mingles with present and the gods mingle with men...”[v]. Consequently, and quite appropriately too, Raja Rao casts his

novel in the mould of a *sthalapurana*, a long oral narrative following the tradition of *itihasa* and *puranas* of the yore. ‘Itihasa’ means “Thus it was” in short emphasizing that these ancient narratives – *itihasa* or *puran-* are, among other things, records of historical facts but presented not in terms of linear history of the western tradition but facts mythicized and fictionalized to fit in the cyclical time frame of *yugas* of continuous evolution and dissolution and in which past mingles with present and present is understood and interpreted in terms of the mythical past. The history that the *Puranas* present is in this sense ‘living’ [Lakshmi, 1] unlike its western counterpart. It is this puranic cyclical time that forms the time-frame of **Kanthapura** as the entire narrative is presented through the consciousness of old Achakka, a Brahmanical widow who is steeped in this puranic tradition. So, for Achakka and the villagers like her, the struggle for freedom from the ‘Red-men’ is a recurrence of the struggle between Rama and Ravana. The temporal fact of British colonization of India is seen and understood in terms of the mythical. Thus, Raja Rao turns the novel **Kanthapura** which describes people resisting the colonial rule into a *purana* type narrative contesting the western master narrative of history which is based exclusively on linearity of facts. He also subverts the western historical novel which views events in terms of chronological time and entirely in human terms.

Raja Rao presents the novel as a ‘hybrid’ product owing its allegiance to both western and Indian literary tradition by combining a realistic picture of an obscure village in the western ghats with that of a *sthalapurana*. But the most daring of his experimentation remains his ‘decolonizing’ the language [Bhat, 374] of the colonizer and moulding it to suit his intentions and to Indian sensibility. In the ‘foreword’ to

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Kanthapura, Raja Rao succinctly explains his stand regarding the use of English. “One has to convey in a language that is not one’s own the spirit that is one’s own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought-movement that looks maltreated in an alien language.... We cannot write like the English. We should not.” [p. v] Raja Rao breaks the English syntax and uses one which is an approximation to Kannada the mother-tongue of the narrator Achakka. To cite two random examples: “Kenchamma is our Goddess. Great is she.”[2] “And there were other stories he told us, Jayaramachar.”[17] Raja Rao also evolves a style and rhetorical strategy which is most appropriate to the unsophisticated narration of Achakka, reflecting the way her mind works, recreating her garrulousness and capturing her voice and breathless speed of her narration and simulating her oral mode of narration. Achakka’s deep-rootedness in Kanthapura is reflected in the way she describes people ‘Waterfall Venkamma’, ‘Nose-scratching Nanjamma’, Temple Rangappa and also in her idioms like Moorthy goes through life “like a noble cow”. Raja Rao frequently uses long sentences consistent with Achakka’s interminable style of story telling which is best exemplified in the description of Skeffington Coffee Estate in chapter 5. He also employs frequent repetitions and successfully recreates the speech rhythms of Achakka’s Kannada though the language used is English. For instance, this passage: “He went to Dore and Sastri’s son Puttu, Dore and Sastri’s son Puttu went to Postmaster Suryanarayana’s sons Chadru and Ramu, and then came Pandit Venkateshaiah and Front house Sami’s sons Srinivas and Kittu, and so Kittu and Srinivas and Puttu and Ramu and Chandru and Seenu threw away their foreign clothes and became Gandhi’s men. [18]

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Jayaramachar, the famous patriotic exponent of the indigenous and traditional narrative art of *Harikatha*, whom Moorthy brings to Kanthapura to rouse the villagers' patriotism and political awareness needs special mention not only because it is his arrest while performing a *Harikatha* at Kanthapura that turns the villagers in the favour of Gandhian movement but because his *Harikathas* fit very well into the *sthalapurana* framework of the novel and help it transcend the historical and temporal limitations of the current events. *Harikatha* is a living popular art form generally a religious discourse in which exercising imaginative freedom and flexibility allowed in the art form, the *Harikatha* exponent interprets contemporaneously the mythical events to instruct and delight the audience. Jayaramachar uses the stories of Damayanthi or Sakuntala which are familiar to his audience and somehow seamlessly connects them to the country and Swaraj. While telling the story of Siva and Parvati, Parvati in penance becomes the country longing for freedom. "Siva is Three-eyed, Swaraj is also three-eyed: Self purification, Hindu-Moslem unity, Khaddar"[14]. Jayaramachar refashions the story of Mahatma Gandhi blending fact and fiction and presents Mahatma as incarnation of Siva himself to free 'Bharata' from her enforced slavery[16] and thus makes an indelible impact on the villagers.

The use of *sthalapurana*, *harikathas*, Achakka's narration and mythical presentation of Gandhi in the novel has made the novel to be some sort of a 'Gandhian Purana' instead of a historical novel narrating the events of freedom struggle. But, Raja Rao, it has to be said to his credit, very subtly problematizes and subverts the anti-colonial strategies of Gandhi though the novel is seemingly on the surface valorizes



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Gandhian strategies. When we go through the novel it becomes very clear that colonial exploitation is just an idea for most of the villagers unlike the coolies of Skeffington Coffee Estate. Bhatta's economic exploitation is much more real for them. Gandhi and his strategies against the British are accepted because of the clever mythizing done by Moorthy as well as Jayaramachar. It can also be noted that Gandhi's exertion of power on the inhabitants of Kanthapura is similar to that of the colonizer. The colonizer is never seen by the people but his presence is always felt. His power is exercised through local men like Bhatta and revenue inspector. Gandhi is also never seen physically by anyone not even Moorthy who has seen him only in a dream. Decisions are taken by village Congress Committee only after the directions are given by the Central Congress Committee. The relationship appears as one-sided as the relationship of colonizer-colonized. Just as the colonizer ignores the individuality of the colonized, the freedom movement under Gandhi's leadership is also found to be homogenizing people of different backgrounds in such acts like imposing Hindi on everyone in the name of freedom struggle and ignoring the mother tongue Kannada. The Gandhian movement also fails to address the oppression by natives like Bhatta and Revenue Inspector.

This raises the question how did Raja Rao see Gandhian contribution to freedom struggle? Is it a success or a failure for him? It seems to be a 'yes' and a 'no' for Raja Rao. The Gandhian Movement was successful in uniting people in spite of their caste, class and religion. It was also successful in forging a national identity among villagers who have never ventured out of their village and who were oblivious of happenings around them [Kamalakar]. But, it is to be noted that self-

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reliance which Gandhi wished is still a dream in the novel. Though the worry of pollution of castes is lessened, caste discrimination still persists. Finally, Moorthy, 'our Gandhi' 'Little Mountain' as the villagers call him, who was once staunch supporter of Gandhi is dissatisfied with Gandhi especially Gandhi-Irwin pact and moves over ideologically to the Nehruvian idea of equitable distribution.

To conclude, Raja Rao's **Kanthapura** stands out as a postcolonial novel not only by narrativizing and problematizing the freedom struggle under Mahatma Gandhi but by decolonizing the language and also narrative tradition of the novel.

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