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MAHATMA GANDHI: BELIEFS IN RAJA RAO'S STORY

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Mahatma Gandhi: Beliefs in Raja Rao's Story

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Abstract – In the twenties and early thirties of twentieth century Gandhi was not the undisputed leader of the masses. There were many who did not have faith in his non-violent non-cooperation movement. But his social reforms like eradication of untouchability and picketing toddy shops and sarvodaya ideals received the attention of one and all. The humiliated and long neglected section of the society at last found one who championed their cause. This article explains how Mahatma Gandhi is introduced into the Indian English fiction in various ways.

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INTRODUCTION

Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* is one of the finest depictions of the Freedom Movement commenced in the early twentieth century by Mahatma Gandhi to lead India towards freedom from the colonial British rule. India's freedom struggle which exerted considerable influence on the demeanor of Indian population is the central thrust of the novel. *Kanthapura* illustrates how Gandhian ideals and struggle for freedom against the British arrived to a characteristic South Indian village *Kanthapura*. The novel is a striking example of the impact of Gandhian leadership and value that affected even the distant Indian villages. *Kanthapura*, the "dynamo" of the Gandhian ideals communicates the fresh impetus that propelled the freedom struggle against the British. Iyengar identifies, in *Kanthapura*, the "veritable grammar of the Gandhian myth." The novel illustrates two faces of Gandhian vision: the political and the social. This paper is an attempt to critically elucidate the manner in which Raja Rao appropriates Gandhian vision through his creative imagination in *Kanthapura*.

Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* is one of the finest depictions of the Freedom Movement commenced in the early twentieth century by Mahatma Gandhi to lead India towards freedom from the colonial British rule. India's freedom struggle which exerted considerable influence on the demeanor of Indian population is the central thrust of the novel. *Kanthapura* illustrates how Gandhian ideals and struggle for freedom against the British arrived to a characteristic South Indian village *Kanthapura*. Sing notes that, "*Kanthapura* can very easily be placed at centre of Gandhian literature for depicting truthfully and artistically the upsurge of Gandhian movement" (qtd. in Raizada 38). The novel is a striking example of the impact of Gandhian leadership and value that affected even the distant Indian villages. Dayal observes that the novel is "predominantly political in inspiration" which is uncharacteristic of Rao's novels which is rich in "metaphysical preoccupations" (Dayal 10).

Kanthapura, the "dynamo" (Kumar 19) of the Gandhian ideals communicates the fresh impetus that propelled the freedom struggle against the British. Iyengar identifies, in *Kanthapura*, the "veritable grammar of the Gandhian myth" (Iyengar 396).

It is known fact that the Indian freedom movement gained true pace under the able leadership of Mahatma Gandhi since 1920s which made powerful impact on Indian life and sensibility and is even marked in the novel where Rao attunes himself with his philosophical concern for Gandhian thoughts of non-violence, untouchability, truth and shows fascination for Vedanta. The fact is that the very concept of nationalism means alien to India before the 19th Century as a reaction to the British colonial rule in India. Alans Kohn in *Nationalism: Its meaning & History Comments: Nationalism in India* is not as a vehicle of individual liberty but as adoration of collective power.

Rao brings out the fact about Gandhi's belief that politics and religion are inextricably mated together; *Kanthapura* evinces this divine truth that man's status in the society is spiritual as much as it is political. *Kanthapura* emerges to be a laboratory of the Gandhian thought and theory. Raja Rao's acute awareness of the spiritual ideals and values of ancient India and its place and impact on the emotional make-up of the inhabitants of this South Indian Village during the period when Gandhi's personality and thought was a force to be reckoned with. Iyengar aptly comments that he novel is a veritable grammar of the Gandhian myth. (Iyengar, 87)

GANDHI—THE MAHATMA

Besides idealising Gandhi, Rao is also trying to eternalise Gandhi and Gandhism, perceiving them through his Indian eyes, Rigorous Gandhian devotion perhaps propels Rao to perpetuate Gandhi's persona though words often soaked in deep spiritual content.

Rao nurturing unqualified adoration for Gandhi weaves him into his symbolic association with India. There is an assertive attempt to dehumanise Gandhi and elevate him to the stature of a superior being, an oracle. He was for the commoners and of them, yet he was above.

Rao is found of giving his writings a background or some reference in order to take the reader slowly to the genesis of situation. In *The Great Indian Way* before introducing Gandhi, Rao discusses other heroes such as Mahavira, Buddha, Harishchandra in order to categorise him.

By referring to Gandhi's parents as the holy couple in the beginning of the biography, Rao is able to approach Gandhi in Vedic terms so as to both inform and prepare the reader for the magnanimity of the subject to follow. He takes up the characters of Rama, Krishana, Harishchandra, Buddha and Ashoka to provide that of Krishana go side by side. Rao draws analogies on their birth, their childhood mischiefs, their mother and describes both as incarnations, acknowledging the presence of god in them and in them and at many instance both become the one "Cloud-blue Lord" (Rao, 1998, 37). Rao even describes the history behind Gandhi's place of birth; it is referred to as the holy land that bore him. He mentions that it was but natural that Gandhi's birthplace had to have a history and thus he narrates the tale of Krishana and his friend Sudhama to reveal how the city Porbander got its name. It was "haven" city—a city befit to produce Gandhi. Gandhi's childhood, his parents, to Rao, is an empire that gods themselves protected and he describes the Gandhis themselves as a scrupulous people.

While referring to Gandhi's home in the book, Rao writes, "But who can destroy what God has built and established" (Rao 1998, 25). Gandhi, born to a wise father and pious mother, was to be led by God as the protector of Dharma fighting in the great Indian way of Mahabharata. Thus, from Mohania to Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi to Gandhiji to Gandhi-swami and finally to Rama, the trajectory of the prophesy of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi as the future Mahatma is

narrated in theological loops and leaps of imagination. And Rao feels the need to mention Putli Ba's words, "Oh Mohania!..... Where have you come from? And who taught you all this? What were you before you came to me, Son" (Rao, 1998, 40)? And if this was not enough, later he mentions that Mohandas' first unborn child was a superior being. Rao too joins in the call for Ramrajya that could only be attained by Gandhi as evident in the lines: "yes, he had led them rightly, he, this thin and deep-eyed man, soft-voiced and silent, and he would take us where we have to go, to that Rajrajya, the Kingdom of Rama, which is ours. And like Sri Rama he only speaks of the truth and of love....." (Rao, 1998, 304).

Here one is reminded of Basavraj Appa Rao's poem on Gandhi. He dubs Gandhi as reincarnation of Jesus who by using the weapon of-violence defeated his foes¹. In *The Meaning of India* while writing of Nehru in the Book Rao is careful not to bestow him the title of lord Rama as that is for Gandhi alone. Nehru, who had ascribed Gandhi with the title of Saint King, has to settle down for the status of Bharatha. Rao has commented that without Gandhi there could be no world of tomorrow. And to him, not only the Indian masses but also the British could feel the empowering influence of Gandhi. Rao's heightening of the historical significance of Gandhi evident of his own Gandhian loyalties.

MAHATMA GANDHI IN INDIAN NOVELS

Mahatma Gandhi is introduced into the Indian English fiction in various ways. He appears as a character in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935), *The Sword and the Sickle* (1942) and *Little Plays of Mahatma Gandhi* (1991), K.A. Abbas's *Inqilab* (1955), R.K. Narayan's *Waiting for the Mahatma* (1955) and Nagarajan's *Chronicles of Kedaram* (1961). Though he does not appear as a character in K.S. Venkataramani's *Murugan*, the *Tiller* (1927) and Kandan, the *Patriot* (1932) or Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938), Gandhi is the driving force and is represented by idealized characters. Gandhi's followers appear in Bhabani Bhattacharya's *So Many Hungers* (1947), Mrs. Sahgal's *A Time to be Happy* (1957) and R.K. Narayan's *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967).

In the twenties and early thirties of the last century, Gandhi was not the undisputed leader of the masses. There were many who did not have faith in his non-violent non-cooperation movement. But his social reforms like eradication of untouchability and picketing toddy shops and sarvodaya ideals received the attention of one and all. The humiliated and long neglected section of the society at last found one who championed their cause. Many Indian English novelists like K.S. Venkataramani and Mulk Raj Anand felt that Gandhi was more effective as a social reformer. This is clearly revealed in their *Murugan*, the *Tiller*, Kandan, the *patriot* and *Untouchable* respectively.

Unlike Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao does not present Gandhi as a character in *Kanthapura*. Nevertheless, he gives a vivid and faithful account of the impact of Gandhi on rural India. The image of Gandhi as presented by Raja Rao is an exemplary image because to him Gandhi is an avatar of Vishnu. For too many people in *Kanthapura*, Gandhi is the invisible God and Moorthy is the visit avatar. Moorthy's efforts to eradicate untouchability and make the villagers spin weave and wear hand-spun cloth meet with some resistance. But Moorthy slowly succeeds in making the freedom struggle take roots in *Kanthapura*. The oppressive government uses brute force against the villagers, some of them die and others leave *Kanthapura* and settle in a new village. Moorthy is

drawn towards the Congress activities led by Jawaharlal Nehru.

Though Kanthapura is destroyed in the physical sense of the world by the imperialist government, the spirit of the villagers remains undaunted. They believe, "He will bring us Swaraj, the Mahatma. And we shall be happy."

As in Kanthapura, in *The Cow of the Barricades* (1947) also, Raja Rao deals with the fight for India's freedom and Gandhi's impact on people. Gandhi, as in Kanthapura, is in the background. On the advice of the Master, the apostle of peace, people stop buying foreign cloth, stop serving the red-men's government and refuse to pay taxes. The workmen build barricades to prevent the army from entering the city. But the Master says: "No barricades in the name of the Mahatma, for much blood will be spilt. No, there shall be no battle, brothers."

GANDHI'S FAITH SPELT MODERNITY

Critical writings seems to question the hostility that Gandhi's religious preaching seemed to bear against modernisation. Naipaul too has throughout questioned application of Gandhism since according to him Gandhi was a spiritual leader rather than a political one, a preacher of Gita in the modern times, thereby spelling backwardness for India through his influence. Rao on the contrary in *The Great Indian Way* (Rao, 1998, 330) asserts that asceticism is the only way of

true life; spirituality is the key to truth and the Gandhi spiritual was the true perspective on life.

In Rao's works, Gandhi's life and his movement are more or less described as play of the divines. Gandhi, according to him, was on higher perspective of life. By believing in and surrendering himself to god. Gandhi went on struggling and this was the *rasa* of his life. Rao describes Gandhi as the truly wise who has understood the presence of a cosmic rhythm in life and connection between facts. In fact, he was the "true hero" (Rao, 1998, 72).

Rao refers to the journey to South Africa as a pilgrimage. At all times Gandhi was exploring varied religions and constantly accepting desirable tenets from each. For instance in *The Meaning of India* Rao mentions that Gandhi respected Islam; in Christianity he was dedicated human service and spiritual unification of mankind (Rao, 1996, 68). From Gita by which he was grounded, he learned forgiveness and this forgiveness and this forgiveness laid the seeds of non-violence. Thus, Rao wraps Gandhi's life in a celestial cloak. At one time he mentions that the Gandhian movement is Sri-Krishana's whirl of his disc and at another moment the people are lauding him with slogans of "Ramachandraji ki jai." Rao's

statements in *The Great Indian way* as "....and let God decide the rest" (Rao, 1998, 84) or "God's ways are strange. Let us play the game not knowing where we go. The end is not here nor now. The end is where one is beyond the here and now" (Rao, 1998, 28) and finally his implications that all the

while Gandhi was brought up with the chant of Rama Rama on his lips and directed by strange ways of god—are all indicative of endorsing the significance of spiritual faith and guidance in approaching Gandhi. Rao depicts Gandhi as playing the strategies of Krishana all the way with the gods descending to his rescue is needed hours. In the biography Krishana is always there, behind Gandhi. Thus is transformed a "gentleman of god".

As far as Gandhi's obsession with the Vedas and the Gita is concerned. Rao (Rao, 1998, 17) is very clear to mention that these contain the very essence of the spirituality of Indian and when the land of gods was invaded by the British, rescue emerged in the form of Vedantic glory and Gandhi was one of its pioneer. It was Vedic tenet of strong sense of religion reflected in Rao's Gandhi. Religion being dharma acquires the nature of responsibility, decree and highest merit all together. Rao also adds the Gita taught Gandhi "Samabhava" or equanimity, Bhagwad Gita was his tried and tested faith. He found it of have more logic than Bible. It gave him the answers he sought. Rao describes him as the dharma—performer of the Gita (Rao, 1998, 113).

The Gita being "the noblest expressions of philosophy that man have ever stated" carrying "all the great wisdom of India and of the world" (Rao, 1998, 217; 231) was rightfully chosen by Gandhi as the guiding source. Rao seems to comply with the Hindu Idea of Vedas and the Key to the knowledge of the eternal spiritual truth.

Thus Raja Rao defends Gandhi's appeal to the deep religious sentiments in India. People in his writings respond to Gandhi largely as the saint-philosopher, the master of the "light-giver". Rao attempts to weave Gandhi and Gandhism into the traditional framework of India as he writes on "Gandhi-inspired stir; new social ideas; Gandhian challenge as a conflict between the good and evil" or "the right dharma". For Rao, metaphysics was integral to the representative Indian tradition. Spirituality was an important binding factor. It had a stronger impact on unifying the mass sentiments into desired direction. Gandhi's Rao could be called a "political-saint". Rao implies that Gandhism was trying to humanise the state as the spiritual and the earthly are interrelated.

Gandhi has rather a practical approach wherein he webbed the moral, political and religious aspects of his life. Action and reflection went side by side. And not anywhere does Rao give the impression that

Gandhi's spirituality is passivity. Rather he offers it as an active field of energy. Religion was an instrument of truth and spirituality was dynamic not passive.

CONCLUSION

Thus, a study of the pre-Independence and the post-Independence Indian English fiction reveals that the principal Indian English novelists who were profoundly affected by Gandhi are K.S. Venkataramani, Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan, Bhabani Bhattacharya, K.A.

Abbas, and Nagarajan. Each of these novelists seeks to present Gandhi in his own characteristic way.

The story of the village named kanthapura in south india . but it is not merely that; it is a sthala purana too, as it carries about it a halo of myths and epics and legends . the village has a presiding dieity in goddess kenchamma who looks after the welfare of the villagers . but kantapura is not merely a sthala-purana. It has given an evic form too. It carries a mythical techniques . Gandhi ji eleveated as the lord rama . swaraj is sita who has been kidnapped by the red man ,ravana. Just as rama slew ravna and redeemed sita , in same way Gandhi would vanquish the red men and secure swaraj. Gandhiji is lord Krishna too men follow him as they did Krishna , the flute player ;'and so he goes from village to village.

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