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**ANALYSIS OF FIRST NOVEL OF A. RAJA RAO
AS A FICTIONAL BUT REALISTIC WORK IN
ENGLISH**

Analysis of First Novel of A. Raja Rao as a Fictional but Realistic Work in English

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Abstract – Rao's choice of Kanthapur The Village setting is strategic in view of his Gandhian loyalties. Gandhi locates his politics in the villages of India where the majority of Indian's population resides. Rao maintains the sanctity of the village at an ideological level, but permits mobility and change to heighten the historical significance of the national struggle Gandhi conceptualized.

The time when the action of the novel is set is the 1920s and 1930s, the period when Mahatma Gandhi had become the pivotal figure in India's struggle for freedom. Rao treats the history of the freedom movement at the level of hostility between village folk and the British colonial authority at a time when colonialism had become intensely heavy-handed in its response to the Civil Disobedience Movement.

Kanthapura is an enchanting story of how the independence movement becomes a tragic reality in a tiny and secluded village in South India. The novel has the flavor of an epic as it emerges through the eyes of a delightful old woman who comments with wisdom and humor.

Key Words: Strategic, Sanctity, Significance, Enchanting, Flavor, Epic.

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INTRODUCTION

The period around Independence provided Khushwant Singh and Manohar Malgonkar with the subject matter of their best novels: Singh's *A Train to Pakistan* (1956) and Malgonkar's *A Bend in the Ganges* (1964) deal with partition; Singh's *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* (1959) is about the movements of a Sikh family in the Punjab in the uncertain period before partition and Malgonkar's *The Princes* (1963) a sympathetic account of the tragedy of a family who represents the local elite that ruled many 'native' states during the Raj. Kamala Markandya's novels, which include *Nector in a Sieve* (1954), *A Handful of Rice* (1966) and *The Coffer Dams* (1969) are mainly about rural and urban poverty and dispossession.

Nayantara Sahgal, a niece of Nehru, writes about the Indian elite of today and yesterday. Her novels include *This Time of Morning* (1965), *The Day in Shadow* (1971), *A Situation in New Delhi* (1977), and *Rich like Us* (1985) and *Plans for Departure* (1986), she was winner of the Eurasian section of the 1987 Commonwealth Writer Prize.

Arundhati Roy: Although she has written only one novel, she managed to gain international recognition as the popularity of her maiden novel, 'The God of Small things' transcended geographical boundaries and thereby made her presence feels among the contemporary literacy greats of the west. She also won tremendous critical acclaim for her imitative use of the language and her lyrical and yet honest presentation

of her life and times of a Kerala village which culminated with her winning the prestigious Booker Prize (\$20,000), for her debut literacy venture.

Shoba De: This queen of pulp fiction, she intelligently uses the very special Indian English or Hinglish in her racy, raunchy sensual novels. Though her works are of little literacy value but she has achieved more popularity than many of her contemporaries. She can be regarded as a trend settler in the genre of sensational novels, written, with the sole purpose of selling.

Amitav Ghosh: He has carved a distinctive niche for himself with his profound works such as *circle of reason*, *Calcutta chromosome*, *shadow lines* etc. every work at his amply displays his penchant for inquisitiveness, serious research and diversity.

Raja Rao, an internationally renowned novelist who was among the first major Indian writers to cajole the English language into conveying the distinctive cadences of his native country, died on July 8 at his home in Austin, Tex. He was 97.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

Rao was educated at Muslim schools. After graduating from Madrasa-e-Aliya (Hyderabad) as the only Brahmin student, he studied English at the Aligarh Muslim University and took a degree from the Nizam College (Hyderabad). In 1929 Rao left India for Europe, where he remained for a

decade. He studied at the universities of Montpellier and the Sorbonne, doing research in Christian theology and history. In 1931 he married a French academic, Camille Mouly, who translated some of his short stories. Later he depicted the breakdown of their marriage in *The Serpent and the Rope*.

While in France, Rao was appointed to the editorial board of *Le Mercure de France* (Paris). His first stories, which show the influence of Kafka, Malraux, and the Surrealists, Rao published in French and English. During 1931-32 he contributed four articles written in Kannada for *Jaya Karnataka*, an influential journal.

Along with such writers as Mulk Raj Anand and R.K. Narayan, Rao stood in the forefront of the emerging Indian English literature. When his marriage disintegrated in 1939, Rao returned to India and began his first period of residence in an *ashram*. During WW II, he travelled widely in India in search of his spiritual heritage, edited with Ahmed Ali the literary magazine *Tomorrow* and met his guru, Sri Atmananda, in Kerala. In 1942 he spent six months in Mahatma Gandhi's *ashram* at Sevagram, in Maharashtra. With a socialist group Rao took part in underground activities against the British rule. In 1949 he edited Jawaharlal Nehru's *Soviet Russia: Some Random Sketches and Impressions*.

Rao's involvement in the nationalist movement is reflected in his first two books. The novel *Kanthapura* (1938) was an account of the impact of Gandhi's teaching on non-violent resistance against the British. The story is seen from the perspective of a small Mysore village in South India. Rao borrows the style and structure from Indian vernacular tales and folk-epic. The narrator is an old woman. She tells how the community obtains from daily life, with its millennia-old worship of the local deity, the strength to stand against the British Raj.

In the character of the young Moorthy, who comes back from the city, Rao portrays an idealist and supporter of *ahimsa* and *satyagraha*, who wants to cross the traditional barriers of caste. The younger generation has city ways, they read city books, and they even call themselves Gandhi-men. Doré, as the old woman calls the "university graduate," has given up his "boots and hat and suit and had taken to dhoti and khadi, and it was said he had even given up his city habit of smoking." The work was highly praised by the English writer E.M. Forster, whose masterwork *A Passage to India* (1924) criticized British imperialism. However, Rao's India is not a certain geographical or historical entity, but more of a philosophical concept and a symbol of spiritual calling.

Anand's reputation was first established by his first two novels, *Untouchable* (1935), which gives an account of "a day in life" of a sweeper, and *Coolie* (1936), which follows the fortunes of a peasant boy uprooted from the land. His trilogy *The Village* (1939), *Across The*

Black Waters (1940) and *The Sword and the Sickle* (1942) is an epic account of the gradual growth of the protagonist's revolutionary consciousness which may be seen as a microcosm of India's movement towards an awareness of the need for independence.

Raja Rao's first novel *Kanthapura* (1938) is his most straightforward. It gives an account of how her village's revolt against a domineering plantation owner comes to be informed by the Gandhian ideal of nonviolence. Rao's major work *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960) is regarded by some Indian critics as the most important Indian novel in English to have appeared to date. Rao has also published the short novels *The Cat and Shakespeare* (1965) and *Comrade Kirillov* (1976).

MATERIAL AND METHOD:

Raja Rao's novel *Kanthapura* (1938) is the first major Indian novel in English. It is a fictional but realistic account of how the great majority of people in India lived their lives under British rule and how they responded to the ideas and ideals of Indian nationalism. The work has been considered by many to be the first classic modern Indian writing in English and is thought of as one of the best, if not the best, Gandhian novels in English. *Kanthapura* The Village: 'Kanthapura' portrays the participation of a small village of South India in the national struggle called for by Mahatma Gandhi. Imbued with nationalism, the villagers sacrifice all their material possessions in a triumph of the spirit, showing how in the Gandhian movement people shed their narrow prejudices and united in the common cause of the non-violent civil resistance to the British Raj.

This village is a microcosm of the traditional Indian society with its entrenched caste hierarchy. In *Kanthapura* there are Brahmin quarters, Sudra quarters and Pariah quarters. Despite stratification into castes, however, the villagers are mutually bound in various economic and social functions which maintain social harmony. The enduring quality of the Indian village is represented as ensuring an internal tenacity that resists external crises, its relationship to past contributing a sense of unity and continuity between the present and past generations. *Kanthapura* may appear isolated and removed from civilization, but it is compensated by an ever-enriching cycle of ceremonies, rituals, and festivals.

Rao depicts the regular involvement of the villagers in Sankara-Jayanthi, Kartik Purnima, Ganesh-Jayanthi, Dasara, and the Satyanarayana Puja with the intention of conveying a sense of the natural unity and cohesion of village society. Old Ramakrishnayya reads out the Sankara-Vijaya day after day and the villagers discuss Vedanta with him every afternoon. Religion, imparted through discourses and pujas (prayers), keeps alive in the natives a sense of the presence of God. Participation in a festival brings about the solidarity among them. The local deity Kenchamma protects the villagers "through famine and disease, death and despair". If the rains fail, you fall at her feet. Equally

sacred is the river Himavathy which flows near Kanthapura.

Rao's choice of this village setting is strategic in view of his Gandhian loyalties. Gandhi locates his politics in the villages of India where the majority of Indian's population resides. Rao maintains the sanctity of the village at an ideological level, but permits mobility and change to heighten the historical significance of the national struggle Gandhi conceptualized.

The time when the action of the novel is set is the 1920s and 1930s, the period when Mahatma Gandhi had become the pivotal figure in India's struggle for freedom. Rao treats the history of the freedom movement at the level of hostility between village folk and the British colonial authority at a time when colonialism had become intensely heavy-handed in its response to the Civil Disobedience Movement.

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The author's "Foreword" to the novel almost spells out the postcolonial cultural agenda:

The telling has not been easy. 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. I use the word 'alien', yet English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up-like Sanskrit or Persian was before- but not of our emotional make-up. We are all instinctively bilingual, many of us writing in our own language and in English. We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians.

Rao's novel is significant as a cultural tract which rewrites true history against the "inauthentic" historical accounts compiled by Europeans, and because it effects a cultural revival through the use of indigenous themes and motifs. Rao is also alive to the fact that religion has the potential to move people beyond dormancy - to display active political energy to the extent of sacrificing their lives. Kanthapura evokes a sense of community and freedom, construed as a spiritual quality which overcomes all bounds and crosses all barriers.

In order to allow an easy interchange between the world of men and the world of gods, between contemporaneity and antiquity, Rao thus equips his story with a protagonist whose role it is to enthuse the villagers into joining the political cause of India's struggle for freedom without reservation.

The tension between these two often contradictory levels of writing - the mythic/poetic and the political/prosaic - is the defining characteristic of the novel. As will be seen, this tension is both a strength and a weakness to the narrative; on the one hand enhancing its sheer readability as a story, and on the other hand blurring readers' understanding of the realities of the Indian Independence struggle.

He focuses on two individual leaders and their beliefs; the actual and the mythicized figure of Gandhi, and his transmutation into Moorthy, the saintly hero of the novel. As the movement reaches Kanthapura, young Moorthy, son of a Brahmin woman, Narasamma, takes up the responsibility of spreading Gandhi's message. He brings about cultural awakening among the villages by organizing harikathas ("tales of gods"). By a subtle subversion the harikatha is turned into an allegory of India's struggle for freedom wherein the Gandhian saga is inscribed. Moorthy visits the city, and returns a "Gandhi man". He has become a spokesman for Gandhi, by submitting to his attitudes and beliefs. The villagers describe him as "our own Gandhi", yet interestingly he never has an actual meeting with Gandhi. He has only seen him in a "vision" addressing a public meeting with himself pushing his way through the crowd and joining the band of volunteers and receiving inspiration by a touch of Gandhi's hand. This enables Rao to turn the historical moment into a visionary experience, and opens a space for the possibility of assumed politics. Moorthy preaches and practices ahimsa (non-violent resistance), the hallmark of Gandhi's appeal to the public, and evokes an overwhelming response among the villagers who unite in common cause, ready to break the British laws, picket toddy shops, and fight against social evils like untouchability.

Moorthy has several sympathetic souls with him: Rangamma, the kind lady and a patron for harikatha celebrations, Ratna, the young widowed daughter of Kamamma, Rangamma's sister, Patel Range Gowda, the revenue collector, and others. But there are also sceptics, like the foul mouthed Venkamma. His own mother is much concerned about Moorthys mixing with the low caste pariahs. Indeed, when someone spreads the rumour that the Swami - the priest; upholder of dharma - has threatened the villagers with excommunication if Moorthy continues to go around with the pariahs, Naraamma is terribly upset; she sobs and shivers and soon dies.

He has to resist orthodoxy at the social level, and at the political level he has to fight the British authority symbolized by the Skeffington Coffee Estate and the police inspector Bade Khan who is out to suppress any undercurrent of Gandhian movement in Kanthapura. Moorthy's efforts bear fruit and the village changes. Rao is careful to point out that the transformation occurs through a complex dynamism negotiated through tradition and change, as the

village affiliates itself to wider nationalistic cause. The British find their ally in Swami, who supports them as upholders of dharma and is rewarded with "twelve hundred acres of wet land" by the Government. Meanwhile Moorthy's message spreads far and wide and several private temples are thrown open to the untouchables.

CONCLUSION:

As far as the form and technique of the novel is concerned Rao makes a deliberate attempt to follow traditional Indian narrative technique and it is Indian sensibility that informs *Kanthapura*. In fact both the spirit and the narrative technique of *Kanthapura* are primarily those of the Indian Puranas, which may be described as a popular encyclopaedia of ancient and medieval Hinduism, religious, philosophical, historical and social. Rao at the outset describes his novel as a *sthala-purana* - legend of a place. The Puranas are a blend of narration, description, philosophical reflection, and religious teaching. The style is usually simple, flowing, and digressive.

Rao makes a highly innovative use of the English language to make it conform to the Kannada rhythm. In keeping with his theme in *Kanthapura* he experiments with language following the oral rhythms and narrative techniques of traditional models of writing. The emotional upheaval that shook *Kanthapura* is expressed by breaking the formal English syntax to suit the sudden changes of mood and sharp contrasts in tone. While the intuitive borrowing from language takes place at one level in the novel, at another interconnected level, "real" India is constructed by enshrining the novel in Gandhian ideology. It is a highly original style. *Kanthapura* has been described as the most satisfying of all modern Indian novels. Recognized as a major landmark in Indian fiction, it is the story of how the Gandhian struggle for Independence came to one small village in south India.

"There is more to Raja Rao's book than a morality tale. It is written in an elegant style verging on poetry; it has all the content of an ancient Indian classic, combined with a sharp satirical wit and a clear understanding of the present. The author's extensive notes (printed as an appendix) will prove invaluable to the general reader." - New York Times

Indian writer of novels and short stories, whose works are deeply rooted in Brahmanism and Hinduism. Raja Rao's semi-autobiographical novel, *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960), is a story of a search for spiritual truth in Europe and India. It established him as one of the finest Indian stylists. "Writing is my dharma," he once said.

I hear you saying that liberation is possible and that Socratic wisdom is identical with your guru's.

No, Raja, I must start from what I am.

I am those monsters which visit my dreams and reveal to me my hidden essence.

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