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## **CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF RAJA RAO'S NOVEL- KANTHAPURA**

# Critical Analysis of Raja Rao's Novel-Kanthapura

Shivangi

M.A. English, PU Chandigarh

**Abstract – Raja Rao, the famous Indian English writer, was born on 8th November 1908 in Hassan, Karnataka. Nationalism was a theme of many of his novels. His novel Kanthapura is an account of Mahatma Gandhi's teachings. It is the story of national struggle through the view point of a villager in Karnataka. In the words of a critic- "Raja Rao is one of those enigmatic writers whose novels have been received with wholehearted commendation by such critics as C.D. Narasimhaiah and Edwin Thumboo and with as intense or bemused a condemnation by many critics in India and by the reviewers of Time and the New York Times abroad. Rao is a powerful writer. He is profoundly metaphysical in the way he thinks and feels, and he has a scholarly background, an intimate familiarity with primary texts of Hindu, Bhuddhist, and Christian philosophies; his mastery of English vocabulary is indisputable (as is his mastery of French), and his prose is often scintillating poetry. ... All of Rao's novels explore philosophical concepts."**

## INTRODUCTION

Raja Rao's novel Kanthapura 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 book 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' 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.

The novel is narrated in the form of a 'sthalapurana' by an old woman of the village, Achakka. Kanthapura is a traditional caste ridden Indian village which is away from all modern ways of living. Dominant castes like Brahmins are privileged to get the best region of the village whereas Sudras, Pariahs are marginalized. The village is believed to have protected by a local deity called Kenchamma. Though casteist, the village has got a long nourished traditions of festivals in which all castes interact and the villagers are united.

The main character of the novel Moorthy is a Brahmin who discovered a half buried 'linga' from the village and installed it. A temple is built there, which later became the centre point of the village life. All ceremonies and festivals are celebrated within the temple premises.

Hari-Kathas, a traditional form of storytelling, was practiced in the village. Hari-Kathas are stories of Hari. One Hari-Katha man, Jayaramachar, narrated a Hari Katha based on Gandhi and his ideals. The narrator was arrested because of the political propaganda instilled in the story.

The novel begins its course of action when Moorthy leaves for the city where he got familiar with Gandhian philosophy through pamphlets and other literatures. He followed Gandhi in letter and spirit. He wore home spun khaddar. Discarded foreign clothes and fought against untouchability. This turned the village priest, a Brahmin, against him who complained to the swami who was a supporter of foreign government and Moorthy was ex-communicated. Heartbroken to hear it, his mother Narasamma passed away.

Bade Khan was a police officer, a non-Hindu of Kanthapura. He was brought and supported by the coffee planters who were Englishmen. Considered as an outsider, Bade Khan is an enemy of the people who refuses to provide shelter to him.

After the death of his mother, Moorthy started living with an educated widow Rangamma, who took part in India's struggle for freedom. Moorthy was invited by Brahmin clerks at Skeffington coffee estate to create an awareness among the coolies of the estate. When Moorthy turned up, Bade Khan hit him and the pariah coolies stood with Moorthy. Though he succeeded in following Gandhian nonviolence principle, the incident made him sad and unhappy.

Rachanna and family were thrown out of the estate because of their role in beating Bade Khane.

Meanwhile, Moorthy continued his fight against injustice and social inequality and became a staunch ally of Gandhi. Taking the responsibility of the violent actions happened at the estate; Moorthy went on a three day long fasting and came out victorious and morally elated. Following the footsteps of Gandhi, a unit of the congress committee was formed in Kanthapura. Gowada, Rangamma, Rachanna and seenu were elected as the office bearers of the committee and they avowed to follow Gandhi's teachings.

Fearing the greater mobility of people of Kanthapura under the leadership of Moorthy, the foreign government accused him of provoking people to inflict violence it and arrested him. Though Rangamma and Rachanna were willing to release him on bail, he refused. He was punished for three months rigorous imprisonment.

While Moorthy spent his days in prison, the women of Kanthapura took charge of the struggle for freedom. They formed Women's Volunteer Corps under the leadership of Rangamma who instilled patriotism among the women by presenting the historical figures like Laxmi Bai of thansi, rajput princess, Sarojini Naidu etc. Moorthy was released later and he came out as strong as he was. People thronged at his house were dispersed peacefully.

Dandi March, Picketing of Boranna's toddy grove were other activities led by Moorthy after his release. Arrest of the satyagrahis, and police brutality to women became a part of the everyday life of the people in Kanthapura. Atrocities against women added miseries of the people. In the last part of the novel, it is mentioned that people of the village were settled in Kashipur and Kanthapura was occupied by people from Bombay.

The numerous characters in this novel demonstrate the sense of community that unifies the plot and gives substance to the political and social conflicts. There is a sense of teeming life, and because the larger question is not about an individual's fate but about a group destiny, Raja Rao's mode of characterization is impressionistic. Dialogue is kept to a minimum, and the focus encompasses both the masses in the background and certain salient figures in the foreground.

The female narrator is a medium for storytelling as well as a character in her own right, for she expresses her own radical nature and that of changing India. Though she tells the reader little directly of herself (she admits to owning seven acres of wet land and twelve of dry, it is clear from her mode of speaking that she is willing to accept fundamental social changes. Although she is respectful of Hindu tradition, she is not bound to old ways. She is caught up in all the turmoil, and her at times breathless narration expresses the excitement of

the period as well as her own recognition of a movement that is leading to India's autonomy.

The conflict between acquiescence to time-honored tradition and resistance to old tyrannies is dramatically expressed in the two factions: the Gandhians and their foes. Moorthy is the prime representative of the modern Indian struggling with dignity for freedom. He is linked to Hindu traditions from the outset, for he is the youngest son of a pious mother and is called a "holy bull," implying that he is a specially marked character. So thoroughly Gandhian is he in his creed and practice that he scandalizes his own mother by his unconventional fraternization with the Pariahs, and he is willing to suffer rejection and violence in the name of his cause. Like his mentor, he exerts both a political and a spiritual force. Yet he eventually turns from Gandhi to Nehru in an abrupt recognition that saintliness is not necessarily synonymous with political wisdom.

Rao skillfully controls the focus of the novel by bringing forward subsidiary characters at particular moments when they can sharpen the conflicts. They are usually distinguished by a single facet of personality: Bhatta is known by his smiling, false charm; Rangamma by her eloquent disputatiousness; Patel Range Gowda by his ceremonious speech; and Dore by his scoffing manner.

Because the crux of the novel is a struggle for independence, there are the adversaries of Gandhi and, hence, independence. Although these figures are not without their melodramatic evil, they are granted their moments of fair combat when they summon up all of their arguments against Moorthy. Such is the case with the old government man who appears at a nationalist gathering and presents his cunning rhetorical attack on the Gandhians.

Finally, then, Kanthapura achieves a sense of continuous agitation. Even when the government soldiers lay waste to the village, dispersing the men and slaughtering many of the women, there is no victory for the old political arrangement. The new spirit of India is on the move across the vast land, and the hearts of the survivors in Kanthapura beat like a drum, with the strength of hard-won freedom.

The story shows the birth of new ideas in old India. The arguments against change which in the Gandhian sense is a change of soul and not simply of caste or social function are made forcefully by reactionaries who point to the disorder, corruption, and arrogance of pre-British rule. As the old government man puts it, the British have come to protect dharma, or duty. Playing upon raw fear in the populace, the antinationalists argue that reform will mean the eventual corruption of castes and of the great ancestral traditions.

Although this novel does not have the profound philosophical nature of *The Serpent and the Rope*, Rao's most massive novel, its thrust is certainly didactic in that it glorifies the idea of revolt. It is surprising, indeed, that the author was not incarcerated for his views.

The theme, as of a legend, is one of cultural set-up. It is cosmic struggle between transcendent righteousness and ever proud illusion of evil. The former is transcendent as it has resilient power to crusade vain powers of evil from times immemorial. The latter has proud illusion as it is its vulnerable, ever defeated and never abandoned nature. Both the powers are identified with the Indian who is a Satyagrahi and the Red man who is a powerful coward. This explains why Moorthy or the Mahatma or Rangamma is not seen from the middle of the battle. The powers are the representatives of their nation's culture. Cultural background adds to the theme what interest the anachronistic struggle for freedom removes. Had it been merely the point of freedom to be discussed through these chapters, it would have lost its relevance and claim to epical nature though not exactly epic in structure.

Moorthy is not the man of modern novel. He is "a very prince," "our Rama" and "a small mountain." He is the prince of visions, of God-fearing and of an order called Gandhism. He, like Spenser's knight, sets out on the lookout for truth. What is Gandhism? Oh! it is three-eyed-self-purification, Hindu-Muslim unity and Khaddar. Who is a Satyagrahi? An upholder of truth and non-violence. Does he seek anybody's help in crisis? He needs no help externally. Everything depends upon his spirit. What is death to him? It is a promoter of his mission. This is Moorthy of corner house in "Kanthapura."

Moorthy, an allegory of invincible spirit, commands his soul to withstand an endless discord. His three-day fast is a preparation of a grand hero to conquer vice, a sort of Redcross knight's atoning in the House of Holiness (Canto X Book I 'Faerig Queene')—where he "merged deeper into himself and radiance powered out of his body and he seemed to rise sheer into air!" He catches a little of that primordial radiance.

What is evil? Is it in Bhatta who has thirty-seven acres of wet land and ninety acres of dry land? He is not in two minds to collect 20 per cent of interest. Like the traditional evil, he has a clean black record of internal crime and perfidy hates Gandhism, manages haunted tamarind tree field, banks upon Kotyahali widow's affair and wife of Sidda's sickness always lisps to gain silvers on obsequial occasions, and marries second time to add to his countless riches. But he is not the one our epic needs. It does not want a Machiavelli or a dissatisfied Socrates or speculative Hamlet to offer climax. It wants that Dragon the Red man. It is the vice to battle with neither it is Bade Khan, the policeman,

whose feet must be licked, nor waterfall Venkamma who is ready to excommunicate anybody, including herself by mistake.

Rangamma is the oracle, the Cassandra of Kanthapura. She tells the people of plants that weep, of the stars above, of the universe, of God, of countries beyond Lahore, Kabul, Bhukara, of Gandhi and of Dharma. She is the soothe sayer of Caesar, like Moorthy and later a Panthsalia leading her tiny brigade of women soldiers in the great battle.

How is the battle? It is a war between a coward of enormous physical strength and Satyagrahi of oceanic spiritual strength; between the man who robs and the spirit that tries to persuade the robber against his crime. Like Rabindranath Tagore's "Gitanjali" the Satyagrahi wants freedom to move into an endless world of truth. Started with lathi charge after three-day fast of Moorthy, the battle is waged through-out with no suggestion of a possible end. It is not a physical catastrophe. It is a spiritual battle captained by the Mahatma. Kenchamma, the Goddess, Siva the three-eyed, and Narayan, the Lord of Heaven, shall come to save the seeker of truth. The battle as it progresses takes obvious spiritual turn. Borannatoddy episode makes Satyagrahis feel as if they walked through fire in harvest time. Or in the picketing before Skeffington Coffee Estate the Satyagrahi feels a "secret exaltation" even though Rangamma is kicked in stomach or Ratna slapped to sleep.

The battle or struggle for freedom sweeps the epic to cosmic significance. The war has different episodes like that of an epic. It has true beginning in the shrieks of Parish women in Non-co-operation Movement in the main street of Kanthapura. This episode ends with Puttamma's unhappy event. For the occasion everybody is lost. The steadfast desire to conquer vice meets suspicion – "and we think neither of Puttamma nor Seethamma nor Moorthy nor the Mahatma, but the whole world seems a jungle in battle, trees rumbling, lions roaring, jackals wailing, parrots piping, panthers screeching ..... if mother Earth had opened herself and said, "Come in children." How real the epical battle is! Radhamma delivers there! Nature's violence selects the universal violence.

The first one is called Satyagraha movement. The last episode like the second one has no hero but heroes. An epic has many—the city boys and women of Bombay—and of Kanthapura, nearly three thousand people. Rachappa, Rudrappa, Ammayya and Siddayya fall down in service to truth.

The legend has finery and primaeva simplicity. Ramakrishnaiah, the very learned father explains Maya-Vada; Jayaramachar chants the story of God. Karthik comes with the glow of light and unpressed

footsteps of the wandering gods, with lights from clay trays and red lights from copper stands and diamond lights from bowers of entrance leaves; and Visakha with fine, first footing rain, running cattle, Rohini Star and yoking of new bulls to the plough, slides always in Kanthapura.

Language and style of the novel differ from others. As the writer suggests, we find a new type of language as ideal and different from King's English as Irish, or Americans' English. The writer succeeds in creating his own style. First it must, in general, be capable of "expressing sublime thoughts," e.g., "He merged deeper into himself and radiance poured out of his body and he seemed to rise sheer into air." Next, at times it should be ideal and fleeing as to delve into our subconsciousness, e.g., "...and he too entered the temple like a sparrow, and he sat, on the handle of the candelabra, and floods suddenly swept in from all the doorways of the temple.....".

## CONCLUSION

Kanthapura was published in 1938 but it was only after the publication of Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope* that he was catapulted into international fame. In course of time, the novel came to be recognised as a classic of Indo-Anglian fiction. Kanthapura deals with the Gandhi Movement and its impact on a small village called Kanthapura. The novel depicts the early phase of India's freedom struggle when the Civil Disobedience Movement was at its height. It concerns itself with the Gandhian ideology such as non-violent, non-cooperating movements of 1919-22 and 1930-31 and its impact on the social and political life of the country.

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## Corresponding Author

**Shivangi**

M.A. English, PU Chandigarh