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REVIEW ARTICLE

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A Thematic Overture of Kanthapura by Raja Rao

Monika*

V.P.O.-Kanina, Distt.-M. Garh, Haryana

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There are at least three kinds of that one encounters in *Kanthapura*: social, political and religious. Out of these the religious ones are presented as most centrally associated with social regeneration in the village Kanthapura. This is consonant without the true tradition in India, where social reformers have invariably been profoundly religious men. Again, the idea of social regeneration is linked up with rituals like the Harikatha. Raja Rao's protagonist Moorthy knows very well that the real key to the rustic Indian mind is religion.

Initially the villagers have an indifferent or reactive attitude to Gandhian ideas, but moorthy puts the new Gendhian mind in the age old bottle of the Harikatha, and thus greatly succeeds in indoctrinating the Kanthapurians.

Rao's handling of the legendary technique is based on the nature of the traditional Harikathas. In these Harikathas, the past and the present stand juxtaposed together, and contemporary personalities and events are linked up with the Puranic gods and goddesses and heroes and heroines, and their exploits.

The people of the village Kanthapura keenly gather around Sastri to listen to Harikathas. When he [Sastri] stood up with the bells at his ankles and the cymbals in his hands, how true and near and brilliant the good-world seemed to us. And never has anyone made a grander Harikatha on pravati's winning of Siva.

Rao uses religion as a powerful source of influential ideas. Through religious folk tales and rituals, religion works as a cardinal impelling force. in the very beginning of the novel, there is an invocation to the goddess Kenchamma. Again, Rao suggests the idea of the powerful role that religion plays in the process of rural social change in his descrption of the unearthing and consecrating of the half-sunk Linga by Moorthy and Bhatta respectively. Rao also describes religious rituals, like Sankar Jayanti, to highlight the idea of religious devotion in the minds of the Indian rural people.

Religion indeed is presented as the central force in the story of the novel. The veneration and devotion of the villagers for Kanchamma is behind all monumental

action in Kanthapura. If there is anything that successfully brings Kanthapurians together, it is religion. Religion is at the core of the life of the villagers, whether it is their ideas in common talk, their beliefs in social interrelationships or their reaction to happenings past or contemporary. By portraying the significant part that religion plays in Moorthy's mission, Rao indirectly underlines the importance of the religious associations of Gandhi's political strategy.

Take another context from Kanthapura life as represented by Rao. When Sankar Jayanti is started, postmaster Suryanarayana saya, "We shall read the Sankar Vijaya every day, and somebody will offer a dinner for each day of the month." Everybody accepts the suggestion, and after this people gather at Ishwara Temple at the promonotary, and Ramakrishnayya, the very learned father of Rangamma, discusses Vedanta and Mayavada with the Kanthapurians, who sing Bhajans and listens to recitations from the epics.

The old peasant woman-narrator is fully familiar with the deep religious faith of the villagers, and for the benefit of the consumers of her narrative pictures describes their rituals and festivals, such as the Sanakar Jayanti, the Rama Festival, and the Krishna Festival of Lights, which is celebrated in the month of Kartik. She also describes at length the villagers' worship of their benign and bounteous goddess Kanchamma, who resides in the Red Hill, from which emerges the river Himavathy.

The religious sentiment of the rural people is also shown reinforcing their patriotism. One of the measures of Rao's technique of indirection in communicating ideas, and thereby almost insinuating them, is evident in his references to certain specifics of a locale, or to an event in history, real or mythic. Thus, he succeeds in placing his sympathies on the wrong side of the Britishers by putting a passing reference, the first one, to the foreign rulers of Kanthapura, in the mouth of the narrator. Referring to the Red-man's looting of the natural resources of Kanthapura, the narrator says, "There on the blue waters, they say, our sacred cardamoms and coffee get into ships the Red-men bring, and, so they say,

they go across into the countries where our rulers live.

Kanthapura is a Sthala Purana, a regional record, of the dedicated and selfless deeds of the local Mahatma Gandhi, Moorthy. The Narrator, Achakka, herself soaked in the local lores, and brought up on the current myths, legends and fables, cannot resist the temptation of making suptuous references to them.

Kanthapura being a typical agricultural centre, a very important event there is the ploughing of the fields in Vaisakh. Thus in the season of rains, which are thought a blessing of Kenchamma's bestowing, the whole ploughing ceremony is endowed with a sublime, almost mythic grandeur. As soon as Range Gowda comes, Priest Rangappa rings the temple bell, and uncovers the visage of Kenchamma, straight, bright and genign, and the candle beams weave their light around her. There she has sent her blessings! "O Kenchamma, give us a fine harvest, and no sickness." They anxiously await the appearance of the eagle when they are about to begin ploughing, for according to the popular belief, the eagle is the vehicle of Kenchamma. If the eagle, "the feather of God", circles the temple spire three times, the villagers think they are going to have a fine harvest.

Such sympathetic, almost loving, references to Kanthapura's religious and social traditions are in themselves a comment of the novelist on the life of the innocent and straight forward people of the village. Mythical and historical characters are, at places, imparted a symbolic value by the narrator, and that value is shared to some degree by living characters when certain comparisons are made, as, for example, when the narrator refers to Moorthy and Seenu as Rama and Lakshmana respectively: "He's the age my Seenu is, and he and Seenu were as, one would say, our Rama and brother Lakshmana. They only needed a Sita to make it complete.

ELSEWHERE MOORTHY IS SPOKEN OF BY ACHAKKA AS HANUMAN:

Consider, again, the manner in which the ten-living persons and happenings get invested with a mythological value. By placing Gandhi in the line of incarnations like Rama and Krishna, Rao manages to mythologize a living person, as also the freedom struggle being carried on under his leadership. The Freedom Movement assumes the mythic dimensions of a sustained fight between good and evil, like the fight between Rama and Ravana. It is this harmonious fusion of poetry and politics, of religion and social reform, and the tightly packed and yet liquid symbolic structure that makes Kanthapura distinct as a novel. The ideas generated thus may not in all cases stand valid in their own right, but they ring true and authentic in juxtaposition with other things in the tale. Gandhi is commented upon in this fashion in more than one place, as, for once where the narrator, in winding up her tale, hopes and wishes that the Mahatma's mission should triumph in the end:

They say there are men in Bombay and men in Punjab, and men and women in Bombay and Bengal and Punjab, who are all for the Mahatma. They say the Mahatma will go to the Red-man's country, and will get us Swaraj. He will bring us Swaraj, the Mahatma. And we shall all be happy. And Rama will come back from exile, and Sita will be with him, for Ravana will be slain and Sita freed, and he will come back with Sita on his right in a chariot of the air, and brother Bharatha will go to meet them with the worshipped sandals of the Master on his head. And as they enter ayodhya there will be a rain of flowers.

It will be seen that here the hoped-for ideal metaphorical transformation of the things in the present, as if, rides on the back of the popular myth in a dependent fashion.

V.Y. Kantak, in an essay in *Critical Essays on Indian Writing in English*, edited by M.K. Naik, justifies the technique adopted by Rao. According to him, the transformation of language takes place to appear as myths and legends at a high artistic measure, and the world becomes a perception.

According to Mark Schorer, technique means by which the writer compels the reader to attend to him, Rao certainly uses myth adroitly as technique in his novels. In Kanthapura no less than in others, myth also serves as a handy means of discovering, exploring, and developing the novelist's subject, and also of signifying ideas truly Indian. In this way, it helps the novelist to express Indian sensibility in the form of profoundest Indian experiences, thoughts, feelings and aspirations. Its especial pertinence consists in its enunciating, with a measure of indirection and sophistication, the precise modality in which Rao seeks to express himself. Myth also fetches for him a visionary emphasis in his expression of spiritual experience, and after all, it is as embodiment of the highest spiritual experience that it is an *italcis* which demands total concentration. Through myth Rao is better able to represent man as basically a metaphysical entity. Myth also enables the novelist to lay out his overall pattern, and hence in the expression, with indirection, of global ideas in his novels. In Kanthapura, for example, before ending the novel, Rao makes use of the Ramayana fight between good and evil in the form of the fight between Rama and Ravana, and thereby brings the reader's conviction to the narrator's hope that the Gandhi's movement would succeed in bringing swaraj to Kanthapura.

Rao uses myths and legends symbolically. Dr. K. C. Bhatnagar explains how myth functions in literature best in conjunction with symbolism. An idea, in the real sense of the word, cannot be conveyed but by a symbol. But to understand some symbols which are archetypal we must first try to understand the original context from which a symbol emanates, then the larger context in which the artist seeks to use it, and finally the context in which the reader of the novel is required

to respond to the symbol. Raja Rao's genius is best suited to the use of myth and symbol. Through symbolism Rao is able to speak of the world of Kanthapura in terms of a microcosm of India, and thus imply ideas applicable on the national scale. Thus, in Kanthapura, Parvati in penance becomes Mother India, and the Swaraj, like Siva, three-eyed, the three eyes being self-purification, Hindu-Muslim Unity and Khaddar. This kind of poetic symbolism lends meaning and purpose to the myth with which it is associated.

Considering that such symbolism comes mostly spontaneous in a moment of imaginative exuberance, it tends to be coupled with what Forster calls 'prophecy'. A fine example of such a moment is to be found in the story of *Kanthapura* where the Harikatha man, already become the chief spokesman of the Sthala Purana of the village, eventually reaches a point in the consciousness of the community where the present and the past merge into each other and also spontaneously give rise to prophecy about the future. This is the kind of genesis of the ideas about the future that one frequently encounters in the novel.

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Corresponding Author

Monika*

V.P.O.-Kanina, Distt.-M. Garh, Haryana