Experimentation with Narrative Styles: A Study of Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*

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Abstract – Raja Rao, along with Mulk Raj Anand and R. K. Narayan, is one of the three pillars of Indo-Anglian Fiction. Kanthapura (1938) is Rao's first novel which is now considered a classic in Indian English fiction. In the present novel, Rao experiments with third person narrative through the eyes of an old woman named Achakka. Instead of using western style, he uses the ancient Puranic method of story-telling which, according to him, is true to Indian atmosphere and which gives an Indian flavor to the novel. Also, Rao tries to show the difference of language used by an educated man and an uneducated man. Further, the novelist explores the various superstitions of Indian culture. Throughout the novel, Rao uses some popular Indian words and phrases which are typical to Indian culture and by which he tries to Indianize English language.

Keywords: Myths, Ancient Puranas, Harikatha, Superstitions, Religion, Gandhian Philosophy.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Raja Rao (1908-2006) is one of the triumvirates of the pioneering Indian novelists in English. He has a great contribution to the growth of the English Novel in India. Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand are known as 'The Big Three', an epithet coined by the noted English critic William Walse. Talking about 'The Big Three', Walse, in his book *Indian Literature in English*, observes:

It is these three writers who defined the area in which the Indian novel was to operate. They established its assumptions; they sketched its main themes, freed the first models of its characters, and elaborated its peculiar logic. Their language has been freed of the foggy taste of Britain and transferred of to a wholly new setting of brutal heat and brilliant light. (p. 62)

Kanthapura was Raja Rao's first novel in English. It was published in 1938. The novel explores Gandhian philosophy of truth, non-violence and sacrifice. .

A literary work can be analyzed through various angles and narrative technique is one of the important angles to judge a work of art. As literature is all about experimentation with different literary words and styles, a writer experiments with various innovative narrative techniques in order to make his work effective. In this light, Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* is a triumph of narrative art. In this novel, the writer uses some popular Indian myth and superstitions to give an Indian flavor to the novel.

2. THE USE OF ANCIENT PURANAS

Instead of using western style, Rao uses the ancient Puranic method of story-telling which, according to him, is true to Indian atmosphere and which gives an Indian flavor to the novel. Rao does not follow the Western concept of chapter division in the novel and *Kanthapura* is narrated as a continuous tale. Kanthapura is third person narrative through the eyes of an old woman named Achakka. Rao tells the story in oral tradition of storytelling without any break. While describing the geographical details of Kanthapura village, it appears as if the author is talking to the readers.

"Our village- I do not think that you have ever been heard about Kanthapura. It is one of the province of Kara. It has High Ghats and mountains, that face the cool Arabian seas, up the Malabar coast is it, up Mangalore and Puttur and many a center of cardamom and coffee, rise and sugarcane. (p. 7)

Raja Rao uses long sentences in order to show the continuous flow of thoughts of the Indian people. This kind of narration is used in many of Rao's other stories also.

3. APPROPRIATENESS OF LANGUAGE

Another important aspect of Raja Rao's narrative style is his appropriate use of language. He moulds the language according to the situation. In *Kanthapura*, Rao has tried to present the language of each and every person. He exposes that an

educated man used a different language than that of an uneducated man. As the narrator of the novel is an old lady and while talking about the Goddess Kenchmma, she speaks as a typical old lady:

If the rain comes not, one needs to fall the feet and asks 'Kenchamma,

you should be kind with us. Our area is at its peak and you should

provide water to us. Tell us, Kenchamma, why do you seek

to make our stomachs bum? (p. 8)

Further, Moorthy is young and educated man in village and while talking about the Gandhian thoughts and ideas, he uses the language of an educated man. Rao also shows that the women used totally different language from man. Their only concern is about house-hold matters and they usually talk about their clothing like which dress one should wear in Harikatha. In order to give Indian touch to the novel, the narrator normally addresses the listener as brother, sister, mother, father, uncle, aunty, older brother, older sister etc.

4. THE USE OF FLASHBACK TECHNIQUE

Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* is straight forward narrative, and he sometimes uses flashback technique in order to give stylistic effect to the narrative. Achakka narrates the story of her past life to her grand-children. She tells the story in a very confusing manner due to her oldness. While narrating the story, she was not able to remember the name of famous Indian Gods, and finds herself confused to distinguish between Brahma and Shiva and Vishnu.

Kanthapura is written with three stand points: political, religious and social as Narasimhaiah observes that, "There are at least three stands of experience in the Kanthapura- the political, the religious and the social" (p. 37). As for as the religious stand point is considered, Kenchamma is a superpower goddess to the people of Kanthapura village. From the political stand point, Rao presents the prevailing condition of India before Independence, especially the Gandhian dis-obedient movement. From the social point, the author exposes the hierarchy system where Brahmins were the most privileged group and they were considered the most upper class in the village.

5. THE RELIGIOUS SUPERSTITIONS

The people of Kanthapura were ignorant, poor and superstitious but they have a strong faith in religion. They have a deep faith in Goodness 'Kenchamaa'. She is believed to be in the center of the village. It is strongly believed that marriage, sickness, death, ploughing, harvesting, arrest, release all are watched by Kenchamma. Either, you are suffered from small pox or influence by any other disease, you just need to make vow to the Goodness Kenchamma, the next morning, you walked and you find the disease has left you. There is also a temple of Kanthapurishwari in the village and the people sing before the Goddess as:

Kenchamma, Kenchamma

Goddess benign, and bounteous,

Mother of earth, blood off life,

Harvest- queen-rain, crowned,

Kenchamma, Kenchamma

Goddess benign and bounteous… (p. 4)

As one goes to the social background of the people, it is found that the caste system is divided in four parts as Brahmin, Parihar, Potter, Weaver. The Brahmins are considered as the upper class of the society. But the condition of Dalits, Parihar, and women is very bad in the village. They have a very little space in the village. There was a caste system of vivid communities. These Dalits, Parihar and women are suppressed due to this caste system.

6. THE USE OF VARIOUS INDIAN MYTHS

Just like the English writers T.S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf, Raja Rao has used various myths in *Kanthapura*. Rao choses a number of myths from the famous Indian Holy books like the *Mahabharata*, and by using this, the author makes its narrative very simple to understand for an Indian reader. Rao uses the myths of Goddess Kenchamma, Lord Rama, Lord Krishna etc.

First of all, Raja Rao presents goddess Kenchamma as a mythical character. According to the villagers, Kenchamma provides them food, gives them rain, and protecttheir life. The villagers, in a mood of celebration, sing her songs like:

"Kenchamma, Kenchamma…

Mother of the earth and blood of life,

Harvest-queen, rain- crowned

Kenchamma, Kenchamma

Goddess benign and bounteous". (p. 4)

Each and every ceremony like Marriage, funeral, sickness, death, harvesting etc. are looked over by the Goddess Kenchamma. It is also believed that if there is any disease spread over anyone, the

women prays Goddess Kenchamma and the diseases are vanished. Further he says:-

She called ages, ages ago, a demon that had come to ask our sons as food and our young women as wives. Kenchamma came from heavens…. she fought for so many nights that the blood was submerged into the earth. This is the reason why the Kenchamma Hill is red from all sides. (p. 9)

Secondly Lord Krishna is presented as a mythical character. The narrator compares Gandhi with Krishna and the Britishers with Kansha. Then, Lord Rama is also presented as a mythical character in the novel. According to the grandmother, Swaraj is Sita, Mahatma is Ram and Nehru is brother Bharat. The narrator considers Gandhi as the God in invisible avtar and the young Moorthy as the visible avtar. In this way, the structure of *Kanthapura* is Puranic and mythical characters are juxtaposed with present time.

7. INDIANIZATION OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Another interesting feature of Rao's *Kanthapura* is his Indianization of English language. By his use of Indian words and expressions, he wants to make it easier to understand for an Indian reader. Rao has moulded the language according to the situation in order to get desired effect. He has translated the native words and phrases that we express in our daily life. For example, "Well, if the heavens will it, and the elders bless it let our family creepers link each other (p. 55)". For various Indian religious ceremonies, Rao has translated words without any hesitation like; "God's birth celebration ceremony", "rice-eating ceremony", "hair-cutting ceremony", "death ceremony" etc.

8. CONCLUSION

The novel starts with simple narration about one of the villages in South India, later it evolves to entire India. Raja Rao blends the various myths with that of Gandhi's Freedom Movements very harmoniously. To show the genuineness of his novel, He used the Hindu epic myth. Rao uses these myths in order to achieve his goal. It is not only the myths but his intellectual power and his ability to utilize the Indian words makes the novel popular.

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