

Study of 'Kanthapura' as a Gandhian Novel

Kavita Saini*

M.A, M.Phil., NET in English, Ex. Extension Lecturer in English, Govt. P G College, Mahendergarh, Haryana

Abstract – 'Kanthapura' is an excerpt from Raja Rao's novel 'Kanthapura', appeared in 1938. The novel is about the days when Indians were struggling for independence under Mahatma Gandhi. The novel describes the events that take place in the Kanthapura under the impact of the Gandhi's non-violence and non-co-operation movement in 1930's. Kanthapura is a special novel for young generation of twenty first century, in more than one sense. It takes us back to the times when India as a Nation was fighting for independence. The novel narrates the long battle and how it was fought by the masses. Gandhi is a metaphorical presence in Kanthapura, an absent hero. It was Gandhi's greatness that he produced thousands of little Gandhi throughout the country. Moorthy was one of them. Moorthy, a young student of Kanthapura is the central figure of the novel.

-----X-----

INTRODUCTION

In chapter 1st Achakka, the narrator introduces Moorthy as quiet, generous, serene, different and Brahmanic, and compares him to a noble cow. She says:

"We loved him, of course, as you will see, and if only I had not been a daughterless widow, I should have offered him a granddaughter, if I had one." (p.4)

Achakka's son Seenu and Moorthy is of same age. They are best friend and share brotherly relation. She says about Moorthy:

"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." (p.4)

Gandhi inspires Moorthy to be a Satyagrahi. Many young men like Moorthy come out by breaking the middle class notions of peace, happiness and security. Moorthy left his college studies under the influence of Gandhi. Moorthy organizes the Gandhi-work in the village. Moorthy says to Nanjamma:

"Sister, the Congress is giving away free spinning wheels. Will you spin, sister? And why should the Congress give it free? Because millions and millions of yards of foreign cloth come to this country, and everything foreign makes us poor and pollutes us." (p.16)

He has a vision in which Mahatma Gandhi leads him from darkness to enlightenment. Gandhi ji instruct him to lead a life of truth and to discard foreign clothes, foreign books, and everything foreign. Moorthy envisions Gandhi ji as mythical Rama figure who is to

save Sita (India) from the clutches of Ravana (British), and finds himself in the role of Hanuman.

The entire novel is full of actions and all that actions is centered round Moorthy. He forms Village Congress Samiti. He persuades the woman of the village to join the struggle. In chapter 2nd Moorthy says to Nanjamma: "Our country is being bled to death by foreigners. We have to protect our mother." (p.14) He encourages the villagers to join Village Congress Smiti and give up using foreign clothes. British govt. appoints Bade Khan to keep a watch on anti-British activities being planned by Moorthy and his follower. He warns them that if they don't give up the use of foreign clothes it will make their country economically poor. Moorthy gives a detailed explanation to Nanjamma how, despite being the producers of rice and cotton, the common people in India are cheated by the agents and British sponsored industrialists. The factories take the raw material from the producers (villagers) at a petty price and after processing it in factories sell the final product to the consumers (again the same villagers) at a very high price. Moorthy says to Nanjamma:

"You get poorer and poorer, and the Pariahs begin to starve, and one day all but Bhatta and Subba Chetty will have nothing, and have nothing else to eat but the pebbles of the Himavathy and drink her waters saying, Rama-Krishna, Rama-Krishna." (p.16)

Like many freedom fighter, Moorthy also arrested. When the police come to arrest him, he shouts: "Mahatma Gandhi ki jai and Inqlab Zindabad."

Moorthy calls the Harikatha man, Jayaramachar. He mixes religion with politics and compares Gandhi to Rama and Britisher to Ravana. He says: "Never had I heard Harikatha like this." In his Harikatha, Jayaramchar says that one day Brahma was resting

in heaven. The sage Valmiki entered and says: "Rise up, O God of Gods!" (p.9) He complained that Brahma had forgotten his daughter, Bharatha (India). He told Brahma that demons (the Bruisers) had come from across the seven seas and captured Bharatha. Valmiki says to Brahma: "O Brahma! design to send us one of your gods so that he may incarnate on Earth and bring back light and plenty to your enslaved daughter..." (p.9) Brahma listened to Valmiki and sent Siva to take birth on the earth and free Bhartha from the Britishers. He took birth as a son in a family in Gujarat. Men followed Gandhi in the same way as they had followed Krishna, the flute-player. Gandhi has been compared with the three-eyed Lord Shiva. The three eyes stand for self-purification, Hindu-Muslim unity and Khaddar. In chapter 2nd Moorthy says: "The Mahatma, sister? Why, every morning he spins for two hours immediately after his prayer. He says spinning is as purifying as praying." (p.16)

Moorthy gives a Practical form to the Gandhian programme of Swadeshi, non-violence and truth. "Truth must you tell", he says, "For Truth is God," (p.10) He has faith in Gandhi's ideology and he himself follow them. He says about non-violence in the following words. "Fight", says he, "But harm no soul." (p.10) He spreads Gandhi's message of eradication of untouchability. The village Kanthapura, like any other village in India in Mid-Twentieth century, is vertically divided on caste lines. The villagers maintain the caste hierarchy and the upper caste people maintain safe distance from the lower castes like the Sudra and the Pariahs. Bhatta expresses his view: "I see no fault in Khadi and all that. But it is this Pariah business that has been heavy on my soul. (p.25)" He is not against Gandhi Ji but he believes in caste-system. There is no social interaction between the Brahmins and the Pariahs. But mixing with Pariahs is important for the mission of India's independence from the British. So, Moorthy goes from door to door even in Pariah Street. Pariah is a lower caste and the people belong to this caste are considered untouchable. Person belong to high caste does not go to the moholla of lower caste, but Moorthy goes door to door of Pariah moholla and drinks milk offered by them. Satamma says about mixing with pariah in the following words: "After all, my son, it is Kalyuga floods, and as the sastras say, there will be the confusion of castes and the pollution of progeny. We can't help it, perhaps..." (p.24) Moorth is excommunicated by his caste. When his mother comes to know of this act she feels annoyed because he belongs to Brahmin caste. Narsamma (Moorthy's mother) says:

"Oh! To have a son excommunicated! Oh! To have gone to Benares and Rameshwaram and to Gaya and Gokurna and to have a son excommunicated! I wish I had closed my eyes with your father instead of living to see you polluted. Polluted! Go away 'You Pariah!'" (p.35)

Moorthy is the only son and he loves and respects his mother. He says to his mother: "I swear upon my holy

thread I shall keep pure and noble and will bring no evil to my ancestors." (p.35)

He encourages the women of the village to join the freedom movement. Ratna is a widow of progressive outlook. She opposes the restriction imposed on widow women. She wears bangles, nose-ring and ear-rings. When people collect money for freedom movement, everybody is ready to give whatever they have. Women give money and their jewellery. In chapter 1st they say: "Take it, my son." (p.8)

Moorthy helps the coolies who are working in Coffee Estate to come out of the web of false consciousness created by the dominant class. Gradually they come out of darkness. They start learning what Moorthy is trying to teach them. They educated themselves in order to come out the oppressive power structure of British. So with the support of Bade Khan, the police physically resist Moorthy's entry and when the two sides disagree there is a scuffle in which the police beat up Moorthy and his supporters. Moorthy feels that it was his fault that leads to violence at Skeffington Coffee House and as a true disciple of Gandhi he is against any form of violence, even if it is causing others to be violent. So he decides to do penance by fasting for three days at the temple and to take nothing but a glass of salt water for three days. It is Hindu faith that by fasting we purify our body as well as our soul and this belief emerges as a very strong weapon in the hands of Gandhi ji.

In '*Kanthapura*' Raja Rao describes the atmosphere of national upheaval by showing dharnas and satyagrahs. Even women, children and old men are injured in large number. This shows the brutality of Bruisers against Indian. Women like Ratna are beaten up and dishonored. The novel describes the atrocities of police on the freedom fighter. The Satyagrahis narrate the story of horrible beating and torture in the jails. In chapter 2nd Patel said to Bade Khan: "So you are a traitor to your salt-giver." But he replies: "I am not a traitor. I am telling you what the law is."

The villagers decide not to pay revenue. The govt. prepares to auction their lands. People are compelled to leave the village. But before going they set fire to their fields and houses. Many of them reach another village, Kashipura where they settle down. In this village an old lady Achakka tells the story to another woman in the form of '*Sthalapurana*'. We can call the novel '*Kanthapura*' a Gandhian novel but the great Mahatma himself doesn't appear in the novel. Raja Rao has made the readers feel the presence of Gandhi ji without introducing him in the novel.

REFERENCES

1. Iyenger, K. R. Srinivasa (1969). Historical Review in K. Santhanam (ed.) *An Anthology*

of *Indian Literatures*. New Delhi: Gandhi Peace Foundation, 1969. Print

2. Naik, M. K. (1982). *A History of Indian English Literature*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1982. Print
3. Narasimhaiah, C.D. (2015). "*Introduction Raja Rao's Kanthapura*". New Delhi: OUP, 2015. Print
4. Nehru, J. L. (1961). *The Discovery of India*. New Delhi: Asia Publishing House, 1961. Print
5. Said, Edward (1984). *The World, the Text and the Critic*. London: Faber, 1984. Print
6. Rao, Raja (1938). *Kanthapura*. New Direction, 17 January, 1967 (First Published in 1938). Print

Corresponding Author

Kavita Saini*

M.A, M.Phil., NET in English, Ex. Extension Lecturer in English, Govt. P G College, Mahendergarh, Haryana