

Thematic Study of Raja Rao's Novel, Kanthapura

Khursheed Ahmad Rather¹ & Dr. Manisha Dwevedi²

¹(M.Phil Scholar), Dr. C.V Raman University Kota Bilaspur (Chhattisgarh)

²(Guide), H.O.D Department of English

Dr. C.V. Raman University Kota Bilaspur (Chhattisgarh)

Abstract: *The three prominent writers, R.K Narayan, Mulkraj Anand and Raja Rao played strong influence to Indian English Novel with the remarkable style and themes in their writings. They tried to explore social problems and lives of people of India. Artistically Raja Rao is important because of his unique formal and thematic accomplishments. He highlights the 'Spiritual and Philosophical India' in his characters and their dialogues. In the novel Kanthapura, I find that the style and technique are uniquely Indian and aim at carving out Indian identity through a genre that is essentially Western. Raja Rao is very successful in carving out the real picture of Indian village in pre-independence era. Kanthapura is the microcosm of the Indian traditional society and what happened in Kanthapura was also happened in India during 1919-1930. Kanthapura at the miniature level presents Indian Freedom Struggle. Raja Rao artistically has woven different strands of Colonialism, of casteism, of Indian Myths together, so as to portray a realistic picture of imperialistic times. The purpose of this present paper is to explore various issues depicted in the novel-Freedom struggle of Indian people, Gandhian influence, and women participation in the freedom struggle, casteism, and introduction of Hindu mythology.*

Key Words: *Indian identity, Pre-independence era, freedom struggle, colonialism, Gandhian influence, Hindu mythology.*

INTRODUCTION:

The novel, Kanthapura (1938) is the debut novel of the Indian novelist Raja Rao. The novel narrates the story of Indian Freedom Struggle in a small village called Kanthapura. It represents the freedom struggle at the miniature level. The novel is narrated by an elderly woman of the village, Achakka in the form of 'Sthalapurana' (a legendary tale). She provides a detailed picture of the rural setting, establishing both an ambiance and a rhythm for the novel. She imbued with the legendary history of the region, who knows the past of all the characters and comments on their actions with sharp eyed wisdom. Her narrative, and the way she tells it, evokes the spirit of India's traditional folk-epics.

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 novel is a portrait-gallery full of portraits of a number of living, breathing human beings. There are both major and minor figures, and both come to life in the hands of the novelist. As the action proceeds, his presentation of the region gains in depth and complexity, and it is realized that Kanthapura is symbolic of a wider and larger world, that, in short, it is a microcosm of India herself.

The novel, Kanthapura portrays artistically the Indian Freedom Struggle going on when India was in the clutches of British. The brutal atrocities done to Indians by Britishers are also highlighted clearly by the author. In the novel Kanthapura, we have more than a glimpse of Freedom movement in India under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. No other book of this scope and size on this theme pictures so vividly, truthfully and touchingly the story of resurgence of India under Gandhi's leadership. We see how the name of Gandhi acts like a charm in every part of India and how the people in remote and far away Kanthapura wait with baited breath and observe a fast in order to show their solidarity with Mahatma Gandhi as he sets out on his Dandi march. Moorthy a typically example of the thousands of young man who were fired by patriotic zeal by Gandhi's inspiration and who, under his programme, left schools, colleges, and universities, or resigned from their jobs and made bonfire of their costly imported clothes. In the novel Kanthapura Raja Rao tried to ascribe moral values of Gandhi through the character of Moorthy, who attains the status of Mahatma and the villagers are devoted to him throughout the whole life. Psychologically there is parallelism between Raja Rao and Gandhi with regard to making India free from the British rule. Both are patriots. As a result, Raja Rao is able to create the character of Moorthy, who is the replica of both Gandhian ideology and his own self.

The villagers of Kanthapura lead calm and placid life till Moorthy disturbs it by bringing in the Gandhian Satyagraha Movement into their life. The

village is no longer the same after that as it becomes part of the country wide struggle against the British rule. The air resounds the cry of slogans- 'Vande Matram', 'Mahatma Gandhi Ki Jai', and 'Inquilab Zindabad'. People are exhorted to give up their foreign clothes and dress in Swadeshi Khadder. Free spinning wheels are distributed so that people can spin cotton yarn. Moorthy leads the villagers in an attempt to picket the toddy shop near the Skeffington Coffee Estate to prevent the coolies and other people from buying and consuming country liquor. The police try to foil their attempt and beat them mercilessly. Protest marches are organized against the repression let loose by the police. It provides more lathi charges, arrests and police brutalities. But Moorthy and his followers remains firm in their resolve. The boycott of foreign goods was meant to cripple the efforts of foreign manufactures to exploit and impoverish India, and the insistence on spinning taught people the dignity of labour as well as self reliance. In a poor country like India simple living must be practiced. Moreover, spinning could provide a regular income to the common masses, especially to women who have no other means of earning available to them. Gandhi's emphasis on education and avoiding alcoholic drinks had both a moral and an economic aim. The effect of the toddy grove and the toddy booth has the immediate effect of making the coolies realize how evil toddy-drinking is, so that some of them even take a pledge that they would never touch the poisonous drink again. Unremembered acts of courage and sacrifice of peasants and farm hands, students and lawyers, women and old men, thanks to whom Gandhi's unique experiment gathered momentum and grew into a national movement.

The women characters have been skillfully delineated by Raja Rao. There is a great variety of them in the novel. Though Moorthy is the central figure of Kanthapura, among the other characters, women have an equal role to play with their male counterparts. In the novel, women are shown equally powerful, competent and fought equally with men for freedom. The river bank is the regular meeting place of the village women, and they gather there every morning. Besides attending to their bathing and washing, they also get a chance to exchange gossip and news of the latest happenings. Among them, Ratna and Rangamma are the true representatives of brave women who struggled for freedom.

Ratna, a young widow, is educated. She is of progressive views. She takes keen interest in the Gandhian movement, and is a source of inspiration and help to Moorthy. When Jayaramcharan, the Harikatha man is arrested, she conducts the

programmes of Harikatha. She reads out the news paper, and other published material of the Congress to the Kanthapurians. When Moorthy is arrested, she carries on his work and serves as the leader. She organizes the women volunteer corps and imparts necessary training to Savakis. She displays great deal of courage and resourcefulness in the face of government repression and Police actions. She is dishonoured, beaten up and sent to jail as a consequence. But she suffers all patiently and unflinchingly.

Another women character Rangamma is one of the few educated women in the village. She reads the newspapers herself and others acquainted with the day to day developments elsewhere. She is a lady who is "deferent, soft-voiced, and gentle-gestured". She is never be fooled by Bhatta. She helps Moorthy literally, although she does not seem to share his belief that pariahs and Brahmins are equal. It is she who plays the major part in organizing the women of Kanthapura into a Sevika Sangh.

Waterfall Venkamma has a vicious tongue, and she enjoys using it against everybody else. She is particularly vociferous against Moorthy and his mother, Narsamma, for the former's mixing with pariahs. But, in her heart of hearts, Venkamma is not so bad. She symbolizes all the pettiness, the jealousy, the triviality and the orthodoxy of Indian village life.

Narsamma is the old widowed mother of Moorthy. She is orthodox and conservative, unable to understand the implications of Gandhian – movement and the noble work in which her son is engaged. She has a great love for her son and she has high hopes of a brilliant career for him. But her hopes and dreams are shattered when he joins the freedom movement. She is good and noble, despite her orthodoxy and lack of sympathy for the freedom movement. There is no evil within her.

As a counterpoise to the village in Kanthapura, Raja Rao presents the Skeffington Coffee estate. The village stands for the Indian values, traditions, myths, faith and influence of the teaching of Mahatma Gandhi. The coffee estate, on the other hand, is a citadel of the British supremacy, colonialism, and enslavement of the people of India. Raja Rao included its depiction in the novel because he wanted to include an instance of large-scale economic exploitation of Indians by Britishers and the depiction of the coffee estate enabled him to do that. Once the coolies were brought to the coffee plantation, the manners of the Foreman changed, and he grew harsh and threatening. They were exploited in many ways. All promises were forgotten. No wages were given.

Indeed the white owner did not even know that they had promised four-anna bit for a man and two-anna bit for a woman. They were given small huts to live in, which they had to repair or thatch themselves. They were provided with a frugal diet, and were made to work hard for five in morning till late in night. If anybody took rest or was slow, he was severely whipped by the maistri who was ever on the watch. No wages were paid, and the old hands knew that one, who comes to the estate once, never went out of it again. He must work, suffer and die there.

Towards the end of the novel there was awakening among the coolies. The coolies of the Skeffington Coffee Estate threw down the barricades and loudly shouted out, "Vande Mataram" etc. The city-coolies looked at them and at once stopped work. The lights were all pull out. The Skeffington coolies continued to march towards them shouting slogans. They were ordered by a white officer on horseback to stop. On their refusal to do so, shots after shots were fired and cries, groans, and lamentations resounded in the air. They ran forward and the police could stop them no more. Three thousand men in all and from the top of the Mound soldiers opened fire which they bore bravely. That is how the Gandhian Movement reached even the Skeffington Coffee Estate, and created turmoil within its boundaries. It was only after this incident that Moorthy began his 'Don't-touch-the Government campaign', in other words, Gandhi's Non-cooperation Movement.

Theme of casteism in Indian society is clearly portrayed by Raja Rao. Caste system is one of the most important evils in Hinduism in Kanthapura there is much criticism of it. Achakka, the narrator is an upper caste Brahmin. When she begins her account of the social structure of the village, it is of Brahmin households that she talks of first and that too in some detail. Only after that she mentions the other quarters of the Pariahs, Potters, Weavers, and Sudras. She frankly admits that she has never been to that part of the village, and has only the rough idea of the number of huts situated there. The only member of the lower caste that she speaks well of is Patel Range Gowda, who is well off and wields considerable authority in Kanthapura. The casteism is also described through Bhatta, and later through Swami. Both are conservative, orthodox Brahmins, are the agents of British government and work together to frustrate and defeat the Gandhian movement. Since the Swami's power rests on the superiority of the Brahmins over other castes, he takes the view that the caste system is the very foundation of Hinduism. He maintains that no Brahmin should have contact with the Pariahs, and threatens to excommunicate Moorthy because he

does so. People of the lower castes are not admitted inside temples but must have darshana of the god from outside. But Gandhi's true disciple Moorthy, though being a Brahmin mixes with the people of lower castes and thus unifies the people of Kanthapura for the ongoing freedom struggle. On one occasion, Moorthy visits Pariah Rachanna's hut. Rachanna's wife is overwhelmed, and invites him in. It is with a trembling heart that Moorthy crosses the threshold. When she offers him milk to drink, he finds excuses to avoid doing so. She persists:

'Touch it, Moorthappa, touch it only as though
It were offered to the gods, and we shall be
Sanctified; and Moorthy, with many a
Trembling prayer touches the tumbler and
brings
It to his lips, and taking one sip, lays it aside.
(105)

This episode shows how deep are the considerations of caste in Brahmin, and that one might be a disciple of Mahatma Gandhi but one cannot, in spirit, be exactly like him. It is not only the upper classes but the lower classes too that are shackled by the traditional views about the distinction of caste. What is true of the rest of India is equally true of Kanthapura. Thus in the novel, casteism and untouchability are shown big hindrances in achieving freedom.

In Kanthapura, Raja Rao has made effective use of the mythical technique. He has consciously used myth as a technique in the manner of such modern English writers like T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats and others. He uses ancient mythological motifs deliberately as a technique of narration. In Kanthapura he depicts the epics like Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Bhagavad-Gita. Raja Rao used myths to glorify the present and to impart the novel to the dignity and status of an epic. He made an attempt to show the parallelism between Ramayana and Kanthapura. He has presented India as Sita; Mahatma Gandhi as Ram, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru as Bharatha (Laxman) and British is shown as Ravana. The way in which Ramayana narrated by Sage Valmiki, Achakka is an old woman of Kanthapura acted as the narrator and commentator. In Ramayana Ram did a heroic fight against Ravana and in Kanthapura Raja Rao showed Gandhi as a hero who fought against British rule to free India. The way in which Rama fought with Ravana and liberates Sita, Mahatma Gandhi also bought Swaraj for Indians by using non-violence. The relationship existing between Arjuna, the Pandva prince in the Mahabharata, and Krishna is duplicated by Moorthy, the disciple, and Mahatma Gandhi, the master. Gandhi's teachings have the

same significance for Moorthy as the message of the Bhagavad-Gita for Arjuna.

The use of the mythical technique is seen at its best in the strange kind of Harikathas recited by Jayaramachar the Harikatha man. In his Harikatha, the past and the present are juxtaposed and contemporary events and personalities are constantly linked-up with Puranic gods and epic heroes and heroines. The Harikatha-man narrates Mahatma Gandhi's story as Harikatha, which is a deliberate attempt on his part to mix politics and religion. But we can say that it is also a deliberate attempt at myth-making by Raja Rao. He uses it as a powerful argument in favour of the leadership provided to the Indian nation by Gandhi. He raises Gandhi to divine heights by comparing him to Shiva and Krishna. Like Shiva's three eyes, Gandhi's political programme is three-pronged and again like Krishna, he goes from village to village, slaying the serpent of foreign rule. The aim behind these Harikathas in the novel is to divert the attention of the people of Kanthapura towards the ongoing freedom struggle.

Achakka creates a faithful image of an Indian way of life, circumscribed by tradition and indebted to its deities, of whom Kenchamma, the great and bounteous goddess, is made the village protectress. She is invoked in every chapter, for the characters never forget that her power resides in her past action. It is she who humanizes the villagers and their chants and prayers ring out from time to time:

Kenchamma, Kenchamma,
Goddess benign and bounteous,
Mother of earth, blood of life,
Harvest-queen, rain-crowned,
Kenchamma, Kenchamma,
Goddess benign and bounteous

CONCLUSION:

After studying the novel, *Kanthapura*, I come to know that the novel is Indian both in theme and treatment. The whole story is put into the mouth of an old woman of the village, imbued with the legendary history of the region, who knows the past of all the characters and comments on their action with sharp-eyed wisdom. The novel is a great work of art presenting artistically, impartially, and realistically the impact of Gandhian movement on the masses of India. Moorthy from the novel, *Kanthapura* is a social reformer, as he tries his best to bring social equality among their people. He though being a Brahmin mixes with of lower castes and thus unifies the people of *Kanthapura* for ongoing freedom struggle. Casteism and untouchability are shown big hindrances in achieving freedom. The novel acquires the

dimensions of epic – the epic of India's freedom struggle. The technique of the novel is as old as those of the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and as modern as those Conrad and Joyce. The superstitious belief of Indian people is shown sublimated towards good. Raja Rao's introduction of 'Harikatha man' is the best tool for infusing freedom spirit and Gandhi's ideology in the people. In the novel women are shown equally powerful, competent and fought equally with men for freedom, the novel give believable information about the freedom fighting, the villagers, their aspirations, and protest against the injustice, rigid, and torturing of British authorities.

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