

## The Gandhian Presence in Raja Rao's Kanthapura

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### Abstract

The transformative effect that Gandhi brought about in the social and political lives of Indians in 1920s and 1930s remains the main driving force in Raja Rao's Kanthapura. The novel is an attempt to represent in the fictional form the Gandhian discourse of nationalism. It is also an attempt to trace the fault lines that run through the Gandhian discourse. Thus the novel is simultaneously a representation and a critique of Gandhian discourse. It is a fact that most of the early Indian English novelists adopted the traditional nineteenth century Western form of the novel in presenting the varied colours of the Indian life. But Raja Rao's achievements both in the spheres of content and technique can never be questioned. His novel Kanthapura reveals how, apart from the obvious Indian accent in its language, the writer achieved a blend of Indian metaphysical tradition, cultural forms and social reality and gave it a symbolic richness. This paper discusses all those aspects of Kanthapura which create for itself a special place in Indian English fiction.

**Keywords:** Identity, language, national struggle, new Indian society

### 1. Introduction

The thirst for improving career graph and the subsequent urge to return to one's roots are two main features of Raja Rao's Kanthapura. The novel is primarily about this return and the Gandhian influence that makes Murthy to make this return. Murthy, while in city, has a grand vision and sees Gandhi urging him to give up his foreign clothes and foreign university education, to go back to the 'dumb millions of the villages' (Rao, 1971) [8]. This is an exact echo of the sentiments of Gandhi in 'Hid Swaraj' (Gandhi, 1997) [5]. In this way, Kanthapura echoes Hind Swaraj. The novel presents the Gandhian version of the Golden age of Indian Civilization and its return (Das, 1995) [4]. This Golden age of Indian Civilization is represented by the contemporary generation of Indians who has remained unaffected by Western influence. These are the people about whom Gandhi talks. The fall in this Gandhian pattern is thus represented by a journey to the city, where one contracts the disease of the satanic civilization of the west. When Murthy has his vision of Gandhi, he is already in that state of disease. The return to the Golden age in Gandhian discourse is the journey to the roots, to the village with an attempt to reconnect with the aspects of Indian Civilization, which has remained uncontaminated by western values (Sircar, 1992) [9]. The sections below focuses on those aspects of Kanthapura that captures the individuality and independent strength of Indian socio-religious existence that found an expression even during the colonial period.

### 2. The Indian Idiom

Indian English novel gathered momentum from 1920s and then gradually established itself in the next twenty years. The genre was then greatly influence by the emotional upheavals of the freedom fight. Beginning to write in such a period, Raja Rao had been able to construct an identity of his own (Bhatia, 2000). Contemporary novelists like R K Narayan showed the

progress of National struggle in relation to the life cycle of an individual and writers like Mulk Raj Anand uses the national struggle to present a cross section of Indian society. But Raja Rao dramatizes the national struggle as a mythic and symbolic event. The struggle for freedom acquires the shape of a legend and fable and finally takes the form of Gandhi Purana. His Kanthapura is a mythic soil. Through the colorful presentation of the village, the novel projects the total image of India with its diverse social and religious customs binding the different aspect of its life. Thus Raja Rao portrays the national struggle in relation to the nation.

Raja Rao had proclaimed boldly in his foreword to Kanthapura, "We cannot write like the English. We should not. Our method of expression therefore has to be a dialect, which will someday prove to be as distinctive and colorful as the Irish or the American. Time alone will justify it." Thus the language of the colonizers is used to express the emotions of the colonized. This is done by infusing the language a native color.

One of the salient features of the language of "Kanthapura" is that the sentences have the typical prosodic movement of the Kannada language and can effectively transmute the vigour and simplicity of the domestic argument. There are even literal translations of names such as water-fall Venkamma, Front house Akkamma, Corner house Moorthy. Sometimes the Kannada words are directly imported to reinforce the local sense. For example-Bhattare, hele, hele etc. The dialogue also picks up the characteristic Kannada tone and conversational case. For example-"If the Elder says 'yes' and the Patel says 'yes' and the Panchayat says 'yes' what else we have to say?" One of the features of Kanthapura English is the villagers' passion for inventive sobriquets and evocative labeling of persons. It obviously conduces to the community's sense of belonging, to know everyone by his defining. It may be one-eyed pariah Linga, fig-tree house Ramu, husking Rangi, Jack-

tree Tippa or front-house Suranna and so on. Raja Rao also uses aphoristic English expressions in a novel way. Often the novelty consists in a slight shift in an otherwise well-worn proverbial usage in English. Thus in *Kanthapura* the expression “a cow and sparrow story” supplants the familiar “cock and bull story”, the expression “every squirrel has his day” supplants the word “dog.”

To give his novel a distinctive Indian colour, Raja Rao uses long sentences, sometimes running into several lines or a paragraph, consisting of small sentences joined together by commas or ‘and’. This is in consonance with the gossipy style of talking of the old woman, the narrator of the novel.

Another novel aspect of the language of *Kanthapura* is the literal translation of Indian phrases and idioms in English. One comes across phrases like ‘traitor to his salt’, ‘licker of your feet’, ‘sparrow voice’, ‘laid is laid’, ‘like a banana trunk.’ These translations add Indian flavour to the story. In this way, through a new use of the English language, Raja Rao is able to create an Indian consciousness.

### 3. Identity for the Indian Writer in English

In *Kanthapura*, Raja Rao’s penchant for the vernacular rhythm and spirit adds depths and momentum to English idiom (Alam, 1979) [1]. The sentences have the typical prosodic movement of the Kannada language and effectively transmute the vigour and simplicity of the domestic argument. There are even literal translations of names such as water-fall Venkamma, Front-house Akkamma, Corner-house Moorthy etc. The dialogue also picks up the Kannada tone and conversational ease. For example: “Range Gowda, Range Gowda”, says Moorthy “there is something I want of you.”

The national theme has been employed by other writers like R K Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand. But Raja Rao goes beyond representational realism and dramatizes the national struggle as a mythic and symbolic event. The sense of place is marked by the mention of the Kenchamma Hill, the Skeffington Coffee Estate, the temple of Kanthipurishwari, the rivers Himavathy and Cauvery. The cultural domain is represented by the mention of goddess Kenchamma or the inclusion of Harikatha tradition. The legendary heroes and heroines are linked up with the historical personae. Thus Mahatma Gandhi is Prince Rama resisting the demonic rule of Ravana, the Red-Men. He is again divine Krishna, in human incarnation “engaged in killing Kaliya, the serpent of the foreign rule.” Thus the struggle for freedom comes out of temporal and spatial bounds and becomes a legend or Purana. Raja Rao has demonstrated this feature in novel writing.

*Kanthapura* is modeled not so much after the novel as the *sthala-purana*, or legendary history, which-oral or written-is chatty, digressive, amply laced with allusions, hymns, stories, and sayings (Narasimhaiah, 1977) [7]. Achakka’s torrential, digressive voice overwhelms all and works against the sense of controlled, historical progress or sequence. This also makes the novel a work by an Indian writer. The opening description of the village is in the spirit of a *sthala purana*, describing the significance of the place. The village is hallowed by the presence in it of the goddess Kenchamma. The story of Kenchamma is parallel to other such legends to be found in Puranas. All these together construct the Identity of Raja Rao as an Indian novelist.

### 4. Indian English Novelist

A common theme in the contemporary novels is the East-West conflict. Some have used this theme to describe the way the protagonist regain his roots. Some other presented it as

conflict of values and attitudes. With Raja Rao the conflict achieves a cultural and metaphysical dimension. Thus in *Kanthapura*, Mahatma Gandhi becomes the Prince Rama resisting the demonic rule of Ravana, the ‘Red-men’. He is again the divine Krishna in human incarnation ‘engaged in killing Kaliya, the serpent of the foreign rule.’

The national theme and the East-West theme made most novelists throw very less focus on social mores and social criticism. R K Narayan has portrayed the middle class people in a little town called Malgudi. Pravar Jhabavala presents the complexities of city life. But Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura* is not only about the Gandhian struggle for freedom, but also about the problem of social emancipation of the untouchables and the economic betterment of the downtrodden, the clash between national and anti-national forces. With this kind of fusion of themes Raja Rao is able to leave a distinct mark in Indian English fiction.

### 5. Emergence of Modern India

Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura* presents the living spirit of India (Mondal, 1999) [6]. The three levels of action in the novel, political, social and religious are all related in a unified concept of India. Although Gandhian ideas of non-violent freedom fight are the foundation of the novel, it also portrays a transforming India.

When the novel begins, *Kanthapura* is still the land of superstition and orthodoxy. It has not completely snapped its link with the past. When Moorthy tries to enlighten the villagers on the Gandhian principles, they first remain unconcerned. Bhatta let’s go no opportunity to pour forth his vitriolic comments and even tries for social excommunication of Moorthy for trying to break the caste system. Thus the forces of orthodoxy and conservatism has been a hurdle in steeping the *Kanthapura* society in the new principles.

However, the *Kanthapura* society finally yields to the possibility of social emancipation of the untouchables and of the economic betterment of the downtrodden (Augustine, 2000) [2]. With the growth of Congress activities in the village under the leadership, the caste barriers gradually started to go away from the people’s consciousness. The caste Hindus started to mix with the Pariahs on equal plane. Ranganna throws open his temple to the pariahs as an opposition to Swami’s views on maintaining casteism. After considerable time and effort by Moorthy, the Brahmins, the Weavers, the Potters, the Pariahs, the Sudras keep aside their differences and let themselves sway away the Gandhina freedom struggle. Thus Raja Rao portrays the emergence of a new Indian society.

Development of economic self-reliance through the production and use of Khadi is also another aspect of the new Indian society. The boycott of foreign goods is related to the way spinning could provide a regular income to the common masses. Another factor related to social awakening is the picketing of the toddy shops. The people of *Kanthapura* picket the toddy shops. They are joined by volunteers from the cities, and coolies from Skeffington. This also portrays the gradual change in the *Kanthapura* society.

Another important point in the emergence of a new Indian society is the active presentation of the women characters in the struggle described in *Kanthapura*. At the foremost, there is Rangamma, who develops into a fine leader and speaker. There is also Ratna who does not regard being a woman as a matter of shame and inferiority. Thus Raja Rao has presented a narrative in which portrays a transforming society and this is according to him the new India.

### Conclusion

Murthy's activism in the village is strongly characterized by his opposition to Caste segregation. Thus his return to the village is less characterized by his willingness to accept the age old traditions, but more by his willingness to transform the village into a homogenous mass, which can then be directed against the colonial authority. The story of Murthy's return is not that of a smooth integration to the village life which would be exalted as the repository of Indian values in Gandhian thought. The story is rather one which describes the disruption caused by Murthy in the regular pattern of the village life in Kanthapura. He attempts to break various caste taboos and tries to politically mobilize the women and to bring them out of the patriarchal domestic confines. Thus Colonialism, Patriarchy and Caste-division are challenged in Kanthapura in such a way that the novel remains much more than Murthy's simplistic physical assimilation as the prodigal son.

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