

# A Journey to Decolonization in Raja Rao's Kanthapura

HEMANTA BORA

The novel *Kanthapura* by Raja RAO is the story of how Mahatma Gandhi's struggle for independence from the British came to a South Indian village, Kanthapura. The novel is an account of the impact of Gandhi's teachings on truth and non-violence and passive resistance on a remote village Kanthapura. Kanthapura is a place where the unity begins for freedom struggle. Moorthy, a young man is the main character of the novel, who leaves his village to study in the city and comes back as a great believer in the ways of Mahatma Gandhi. In Kanthapura, the Gandhian freedom movement was leading from the front by Moorthy.

Moorthy gave lectures on Gandhian principles and tried to reach the common village people by going door to door. He cuts across the ancient barriers of caste to unite the villagers in non-violent action. Kanthapura is a 1938 novel set during the days of the Indian struggle for independence. The novel criticizes the traditional Indian caste system.

Moorthy is arrested by the British government. Although he faces much hardship, he remains loyal to Gandhi's ideals and continues his fight and motivates the villagers. The novel depicts the Indian freedom struggle when the Civil Disobedience Movement was at its height. The novel is a fictional yet realistic account of how majority of Indian people responded to the ideas of Indian nationalism. The novel is narrated by an old woman of the village Kanthapura. While Moorthy spent his days in prison, the women of Kanthapura took charge of the struggle for freedom.

Language and style of the novel are different from others. The writer succeeds in creating his own style of writing the novel. The novel is a classic Indo-Anglican fiction. It concerns itself with the impact of Gandhian ideology on the social and political life of the country. Instead of using Western style of writing, the novelist uses the Indian ancient Puranic method of story-telling giving an Indian flavor to the novel. Moreover, the novelist explores some superstitions of ancient Indian culture and religion. The narrator compares Gandhi with Lord Krishna and the Britishers with Kansa. She considers Gandhi as the God in invisible avatar and Moorthy as the visible avatar.

In *Kanthapura*, Rao Indianizes the English language. *Kanthapura* is the first major Indian novel in English. The novel is known for social realism, economic realism and political realism. The author hasn't created any hero or heroine in the novel. Rather, it is the story of an entire Indian village and its actions against the British. It doesn't solely focus on the achievement of any particular character.

S.C. Harrex said, "Some of the short stories also contain various interior monologue and rhythmic effects which can be regarded retrospectively as a useful technical prelude to the stream-of-consciousness form of *Kanthapura*. It is clear that in his short stories and *Kanthapura*, Raja was endeavoring to formulate a style which was capable simultaneously of faithfully rendering social behavior and expressing nuances of Indian sensibility."

P.C. Bhattacharya writes about Raja Rao : "Next to Shankara and Ramanuja, Raja Rao was influenced most by Gandhi. The Gandhian movement wasn't merely a political one; it was a real social revolution, albeit without the concomitant hatred and violence. Gandhi, in his turn, was influenced by such Western thinkers as Ruskin, Marx and Tolstoy. His ideas about trusteeship, social justice and non-cooperation with the evil can be traced to these sources. However, the basic principles of Gandhi were derived from the thoughts of the ancient Indian thinkers, especially as contained in Gita and Ramayana. Even his fasts, which some thought to be a kind of political blackmail, were of a piece with the Brahminic spirit..... Naturally Raja Rao, a Brahmin, felt a strong affinity with Gandhi. *Kanthapura* is the story of such a Brahminic self-sacrifice. The village was destroyed; its men were beaten, arrested, or killed; its women raped, tortured and driven away..... yet there is no sense of despair, no feeling of failure, no bitterness at losing a battle. Rather, it is just the opposite."

K.R. Rao writes in his book "The Fiction of Raja Rao" – *Kanthapura* doesn't project the Indian spirit isolatively, but as a living experience moving in time and space. The three levels of action in the novel, political, social and religious, are all related to unified concept of India both at a tradition and as a living culture, as a magnificent past to be rediscovered in the enormous present."

In *Kanthapura*, Gandhi myth is expressed like this- "They say Mahatma will go to the red-men's country and he will get us swaraj. He will bring us swaraj. And we shall all be happy. And Rama will come back from exile, and Sita will be with him, for Ravan will be slain and Sita freed, and he will come back with Sita on his right in a chariot of air, and brother Bharata will go to meet them with the worshipped sandal of the Master on his head. And as they enter Ayodhya, there will be a rain of flowers. (257)

P. Dayal writes in *Raja Rao: A Study of His Novels*- "*Kanthapura* remains primarily a novel about the freedom movement. It propounds the political beliefs of Mahatma Gandhi, as Gandhism forms the basis of the book. The novel expounds the Gandhian values on non-violence and abolition of untouchability. The tremendous religious activity, the mythicizing of Gandhi and mother India and the spiritualization of the freedom movement within the framework of Indian cultural tradition suggest Raja Rao's zeal for Indian philosophy. The references to the Karma philosophy, the omnipresence of God, the immortality of soul and the doctrine of incarnation which are derived from the Bhagavad Gita signify the novelist's fascination for Vedanta."

The narrator Achakka is an upper caste Brahmin. She speaks well of Patel Range Gowda who is a member of the lower castes. She adds- "The other sudras weren't badly-fed householders and they had an usual two or three sons and a few daughters, and one could not say whether they were rich or poor. They were always badly dressed after several notices. But as long as Range Gowda was there, there was no fear. He would see them through the difficulties. And they were of his community. (15)

In his "Foreword" to the novel, Raja RAO writes- "There is no village in India, however mean, that hasn't a rich sthalapurana or legendary history of its own. Some god or godlike hero has passed by the village- Rama might have rested under this pipal-tree, Sita might have dried her clothes, after her bath, on this yellow stone, or the Mahatma himself, on one of his many pilgrimages through the country, might have slept in this hut, the low one by the village gate. In this way the past mingles with the present, and

the gods mingle with men to make the repertory of your grandmother always bright. One such story from the contemporary annals of my village I have tried to tell.(5)

Analyzing the role of Moorthy, Paranjape writes- “Kanthapura is really a novel about a village rather than about a single individual; nevertheless, Moorthy, the Brahmin protagonist of the villagers’ struggle against the government, is a prototypical hero. Moorthy is the leader of a political uprising, but for him as for Gandhi when he follows, politics provides away of life indistinguishable from a spiritual quest, Action is the way to the Absolute. In Gandhi, he finds what is right action. Thus for him, becoming a “ Gandhi man” is a deep spiritual experience.....”

S.C. Harrex writes- “Moorthy is a young Brahmin and former student, and is independent-minded with respect to marriage; he becomes leader of the village congress committee and is ex-communicated from the Brahmin brotherhood for putting in practice Gandhi’s untouchable policy. Moorthy befriends the local Pariahs, mixes with them, and works for their educational advancement. He treats them as equals in the political struggle and fights for their social and economic rights as human beings. The effect on his orthodox mother of his excommunication- she dies of shame and guilt- is indicative of the moral intensity with which Hindu communal mores are felt and practiced by its orthodox members.....If Kanthapura has a message, it is this, And in Moorthy’s speech Raja Rao captures the profound spirit, the gentle firmness, the oratory of the heart in plain speech and homely understanding, which Gandhi’s public person epitomized.”

Kanthapura describes the life of a small village. Women play an equal role like their male counterparts. The young character Moorthy is a shadow of Mahatma Gandhi. Moorthy unites the village community in the name of Gandhi against the British. The people of Kanthapura remain defiant against the police to the end.

#### **Bibliography:**

- 1.Rao.K.R. *The Fiction of Raja Rao*. Aurangabad: Parimal Prakashan,1980.
- 2.Dey Esha. *The Novels of Raja Rao*. New Delhi: Prestige, 1992.
- 3.Paranjape M. *The Best of Raja Rao*. New Delhi: Katha, 1998.
- 4.Iyengar K.R.S. *Indian Writing in English*. New Delhi: Sterling, 1985.
- 5.Dayal P. *Raja Rao: A Study of His Novels*. New Delhi: Atma Ram and Sons, 1983.