

## Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* : A Study of Gandhian Ideology

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**Abstract.** Raja Rao, an eminent Indian English writer can be distinguished from his contemporaries like Mulk Raj Anand and R.K. Narayan due to his narrative techniques and philosophical sensibility. His first novel *Kanthapura* (1938) is based on Gandhian ideology. This paper portrays the freedom movement of Mahatma Gandhi and prevailing caste system and how the caste system and religion intermingled to bring the Indians on one platform against British rule. Raja Rao has come out with complete mastery of the various aspects of the novel as a form of art. The novel is based on Indian struggle for freedom and is able to recapture the perfect harmony of plot, character, dialogue and narrative on the one hand and fantasy and realism on the other.

**Keywords :** Narrative techniques; philosophical sensibility; Gandhian ideology; caste system and religion.

*Kanthapura* deals with story of a village in Kerala where untouchability was deeply rooted. It also depicts how caste barriers broke down, how the women took their rightful place, and how people of Kanthapura sacrificed their everything—their lives, their homes, their land, their caste barrier without any bitterness. Kanthapura is a symbol of social, religious and cultural realities, and it was prevailing in every village during the colonial rule. Rao describes the struggle between the Mahatma and the British Government with the help of mythical analogy of the battle between Rama and Ravana and mother India as Sita. The Mahatma regarded as Ram and Jawaharlal Nehru is regarded as his brother, Bharata.

The people of Kanthapura believe that Mahatma will go to Britain and will get us freedom but Mahatma went to jail, the people of Kanthapura became active and the movement against British Government exaggerated with belief that Mahatma will come back from exile and Sita i.e. mother India will be with him. The freedom movement is a symbol of the *Devas's* struggle against the *Asuric* (demon) rule presented by the British. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar remarks :

The region of the Red-man is *Asuric* rule and it is resisted by the *Devas*, the *Satyagrahis*. The characters sharply divided into two camps – the rulers and their supporters on the one hand and the *Satyagrahis* and their supporters on the other.

(Iyengar, 395)

Raja Rao presents the Gandhian ideology of Mahatma Gandhi as veritable God. He says that the words of Gandhi should be taken as the order of God. People of Kanthapura are very much influenced by Gandhi's words and actions. The

influence of Gandhi can be observed when Moorthy is trying to convince Range Gowda to become a member of Congress. He says :

All I know is that what you told me about the Mahatma is a very fine and the Mahatma is holy man, and if the Mahatma says what you say, let the Mahatmas word be the word of God.

(*Kanthapura*, 100)

Gandhi is not physically present in *Kanthapura* but Moorthy is the sole representative of Gandhi and does all the things that Mahatma wanted. He is instrumental in bringing about Gandhian conciseness among the masses of Kanthapura. Srinivasa Iyengar says :

Kanthapura is veritable Grammar of Gandhian myth – the myth that is but a poetic translation of the reality. it will always have central place in Gandhian literature. (Iyengar, 396)

Moorthy wanted to finish the untouchability which was prevailing in the society. For that Moorthy begins to celebrate the Rama festival, the Krishna festival and the Ganesha festival and having bhajans and Harikathas every month. He is the first Brahmin of the village who goes to a Pariah house and sips milk. For this ‘Swamy’ at the instance of Bhatta, excommunicates Moorthy, but he does not deter with this excommunication. He says :

let the Swamy do what he likes. I will go and do more and more Pariah work. I will go and eat with them if necessary. Why not ? Are they not men like us ? And Swamy who is he ? A self chosen fool. He may be learned in the *the Vedas* and all that. But he has no heart. He has no thinking power

(*Kanthapura*, 59)

In this way, Moorthy brings Gandhian consciousness among the masses of Kanthapura. He has been considered as extraordinary person. Ranga describes him as “Moorthy the God, Moorthy the religion, and Moorthy the noble” (143). Range Gowda, the Patel of the village describes Moorthy as Gandhi of Kanthapura. The villagers think that Moorthy is a God and they feel sanctified by touching him. His ‘hunger of food’ leads him to imprisonment and severe beating. His fast and prayer gives him a political mileage and he becomes popular among the people of Kanthapura as it is he who finally leads the movement of Kanthapura. When Moorthy lead as Gandhi of Kanthapura released from the jail, he feels as sceptic about the pact and turns towards Nehru. The change in Moorthy's attitudes has been described by Raja Rao in the following words :

Moorthy was a young man who felt dissatisfied after he suffered a defeat. His faith in Gandhi was shaken for a moment, but the chief inspiration Moorthy got from Mahatma. One time even Nehru became dissatisfied with the way of Gandhi's struggle for independence, but if Nehru had not been a true follower of Gandhi, India would not have been an independent country. Moorthy was only deviating Gandhi. Nehru was deviating Gandhi...Moorthy and Nehru are alike.

(Niranjan , Interview, 23)

The people of Kanthapura pray before Kenchama on all auspicious and inauspicious occasions. She is protector for all the calamities—natural and unnatural:

Kenchama, Kenchama  
Goddess being and bounteous  
Mother of the earth, blood of life  
Harvest Queen, rain crowned  
Kenchama, Kenchama  
Goddess benign and bounteous (*Kanthapura*, 4)

The protagonist of *Kanthapura* is a young boy, Moorthy who has come from city after completion of study. Ratna is a young widow who is emotionally attached to Moorthy and sacrifices her personal emotion for the struggle of independence. Ratna Gowda is a tiger among villagers and a terror to the British rulers. Rachna, a Pariah stands behind Moorthy and Ranga loves Moorthy as her own child and supports him shoulder to shoulder in the Gandhian Congress movement. On the contrary, the people of Kanthapura who oppose Gandhian Congress in the name of Brahmanism or loyal to the western master are Venkamma, Bhatta and the police man, Bade Khan. Jayraman is known as a man of "Harikatha" He narrates the "Harikatha" to the villagers very cleverly as he mixes religion and politics to leave greater impact on the minds of people of Kanthapura. Jayramachar compares Gandhi with Lord Krishna as Mohan was also the name of Krishna, He tells that Krishna a young boy killed the serpent Kali and Gandhi also moves from village to village and describing British rule as a serpent Kali. Commenting upon Gandhian movement in *Kanthapura*, R.S. Singh says :

Villagers born and brought up in Indian tradition understand easily a contemporary problem if it is explained through a fable or an episode of *the Ramayana* or *the Mahabharata* or *the Gita* etc.

(Singh, 109)

Very soon the villagers realise the importance of freedom and they show their keen interest in the politics and mass movement against the Red man's Government.

The imprisonment of Moorthy makes the whole village gloomy and despaired. But immediately they take the movement in their hand and continue the movement against Red man. Even the women of the village join the movement and work with freedom fighters. They even face lathis and bullets but even then continue the revolution in the name of Mahatma. The police beat them but, they raise—Mahatma Gandhi Ki Jai ! Vande Matram ! Inquilab Jindabad !

The People of Kanthapura sacrifice their, homes, land, and dear ones during struggle and at the end of the novel *Kanthapura* they themselves are destroyed. Men are arrested and women are shifted to the nearby village Kashipura for their safety. After shifting at Kashipura, they fell into the same system, but they are conscious of their duties towards the Mahatma and Motherland. They are again planning to punish the demon of the British rule.

Raja Rao agrees to the statement that this novel is also like “Sthalpuram” as he says “, there is no village in India, however mean that has not a rich sthalpuram” or legendary history of his own. One such story from the contemporary annals of my village, I have tried to tell” (*Kanthapura*, v). Raja Rao recaptures the flavour of religious rituals by employing a narrator. An old illiterate lady, Achaka is narrating the story and her narration is authentically sacred and momentous. She plays the role of protagonist in the novel.

In this way *Kanthapura* expounds the freedom movement at Gandhian’s non-violence, abolition of untouchability, truth, satyagraha, the religion and political activity, the myth of Gandhi and Mother India. The novelist is fascinated not only by *the Bhagwat Gita* which deals with the philosophy of “Karma”, the omnipresence of God, the immortality of soul, the principle of incarnation but also towards Vedanta. *Kanthapura* can be evaluated as a documentary of Indian village life, and genuine expression of Indian mind as a novel of Indian struggle for Independence, a spiritual reawakening of India under leadership of Gandhi. So, *Kanthapura* is superior to any other novel which deals with such type of theme in Indian English Literature.

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