



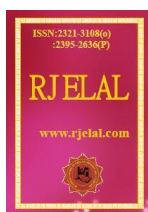
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Double-Standard of Marginalization in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*

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Abstract

Raja Rao's first novel *Kanthapura* (1938), one of the greatest novels written in English, describes in detail the participation of the villagers in the struggle for independence from the British regime. The novel portrays the repression and despotic brutality meted out on the villagers by the British government in a small village Kanthapura, a traditional caste ridden Indian village, which represents the whole country. People of all ranks, castes, religions and genders are subjected to the British oppression and suppression. But in this paper an attempt has been made to deal with the sufferings and suppression of the underdogs: women and the people belonging to the lower caste, particularly the Pariahs/Sudras who suffer not only at the hands of the British but also at the hands of the people of their own country. The British crush their body but their fellow citizens crush their soul. That is why Gandhi movement was not only against the repression of British government but also against the oppression of so-called higher section of the society against the helpless women and people belonging to lower caste. His mission was the eradication of casteism and gender-discrimination from Indian society.

Keywords: marginalization, Pariahs/Sudras, underdogs, casteism, suppression.

The novel opens with the description of the village Kanthapura situated in the province of Kara that lies in the southern part of India. The structure of the village is based on the social stratification. Kanthapura consists of only twenty-four houses. It is divided into five quarters – Brahmins, Pariahs, Potters, Weavers and Sudras. People belonging to the Brahmins are on the highest pedestal. Their houses are quite big like those of Suryanarayan, a

Postmaster and Patwari Nanjudia. Their houses are very attractive and beautiful and spacious enough to accommodate the family. They live luxurious life in their well-decorated houses. The house of the Kamayya family is the biggest and although the house was built many years ago, it still looks fresh and new. The narrator tells:

"Our village had four-and-twenty houses. Not all were big enough like

Postmaster Suryanarayan's double-storied house by the temple corner. But some were really not bad to look at. Our Patwari Nanjudia had a veranda with two rooms built on to the old house. He had even put glass panes to the windows, which even Postmaster could not boast of. Then there were the Kannayya-house people, who had a high veranda, and though the house was I know not how many generations old, it was still as fresh and new as though it had been built only yesterday." (3)

Here the dominant castes like Brahmins are privileged to get the best of the region of the village whereas Sudras and Pariahs are treated as inferiors. Thus the Brahmins occupy the mainstream of the village or society. They don't pay visit to the pariahs, the Potters, the Weavers and the Sudras because they believe that they will get polluted if they touch the Pariahs. That is why the narrator of the story, Achakka, a Brahmin, does not exactly know how many huts these underdogs; the lower sections of the society reside in. She has never dared to enter their huts. They don't have houses; they have only huts in which they find it very difficult to meet both ends together. The deplorable condition of the suppressed section, particularly the Pariahs put in contrast with the luxurious life style of the Brahmins creates a very appalling scene. Achakka describes their quarters:

"Our village had a Pariah quarter too, a Potters' quarter, a Weavers' quarter, and a Sudra quarter. How many huts had we there? I do not know. There may have been ninety or a hundred—a hundred may be the right number. Of course, you would not expect me to go to the Pariah quarter, but I have seen from the street corner Beadle Timmayya hut. It was in the middle, so—let me see—if there were four on this side and about six, seven, eight that side,

that makes some fifteen or twenty huts in all." (5)

Some people from the Potters' quarter are living in houses but they are not as big as those of the Brahmins. They were sometime flourishing but due to 'modern Mangalore tiles, they've had to turn to land'. "The rest of the Potters were rather a simple, quiet lot, who tilled their lands and now and again went out to the neighboring villages to help people to make bricks." (12) The overall condition of the Potters is miserable in comparison to that of the Brahmins. They don't have the authoritative power like that of the Brahmins in either field whether it is social, political, religious and economical etc. They struggle hard for their survival. The Sudras also are economically backward and live a marginalized life. The narrator is in a fix to describe their condition as she says:

The other sudras were not badly-fed householders and they had as 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 and always paid taxes and debts after several notices. (5-6)

Sudras are considered to be the lowest of the four varnas: The Brahmins, the Kshatriyas, the Vaisya and the Sudras. There is no mention of the Pariahs in four varnas. They are none but the sudras. Throughout the Indian history the Sudras/the Pariahs have been living the life of marginalized underdogs. They are susceptible to every kind of exploitation and harassment. The term untouchability is concerned with them. They are the Pariahs and the Sudras who face the brunt of untouchability. They have to face the double-standard of the marginalization or subjugation. They are economically backward in comparison with the other so-called higher castes of the society. And during the British regime, like other people of India, as shown in the novel, they suffered all kinds of tortures and exploitations. Besides this they

underwent the agonized situation of untouchability and discrimination on the basis of caste system of the society. They always tolerated the blows within the society and from the British colonialism. Even after the independence of India they are treated as untouchable and lowest of the low in society.

Most of the Brahmins don't entertain Gandhi's mission of equality and upliftment of the pariahs. That is why the Swami and Bhatta, another Brahmin, who was at first interested in Gandhi's bhajans, turn against Gandhi's movement for freedom, not because they don't want freedom but because they are unable to adjust with Gandhi's mission of giving more rights to the pariahs who, they apprehend, would claim to be the equals of the Brahmins. Then they would assert their rights to enter their temples which would get polluted. That is why Swami instructs Bhatta to suppress Gandhi movement in Kanthapura. Bhatta says that The Swami is neither for the government nor against it; he is only against Gandhi's pro-pariah teachings and is for all those who respect the ancient ways of our race. Bhatta is informed by Seetharamu that:

The Swami is worried over this Pariah movement, and he wants to crush it in its seed, before the cactus roots have spread far and wide. . . . The Mahatma is a good man and a simple man. But he is making too much of these carcass-eating Pariahs. . . . We must stop this. The Swami says he will outcaste every Brahmin who has touched a pariah....
(24)

So many people who are staunch followers of Gandhi don't like Gandhi's idea of uplifting the pariahs to the equal position of other communities of India. Rangamma is a strong supporter of Moorthy and Gandhi's movement and is not ready to hear a single word against Moorthy and Gandhi but when Bhatta tells her that Gandhi plans to make the pariahs equal to the Brahmins and to impart

them the rights of entering the temples; she is set aback and says that she could not believe the Mahatma supports such kind of pollution as says:

'... I don't think so. He (Gandhi) always says let the caste exist, let the separate eating exist, let one community marry with the other - no, no, Bhattare, the Mahatma is not for all this pollution.'
(24)

When any person tries to improve their deplorable condition, he is threatened of excommunication from the society. Advocate Ranganna tells that he has been excommunicated because he has thrown open his private temple to the pariahs. Moorthy, a staunch follower of Gandhi's movement, visits the wretched pariahs and tries to uplift them. He distributes charkhas free of cost to the pariahs as to others. He is warned by everybody not to come in touch with the pariahs. Even his mother doesn't like his sympathetic inclination towards the pariahs as they might be excommunicated by the Swami. She wants him to keep in mind that the people of different castes are to be treated differently. In spite of all these warnings he carries the dead body of the wife of Rachanna, a pariah when she dies. He keeps on visiting the pariahs and consequently he along with his family is excommunicated from the society. His mother dies of shock of excommunication. Even after such catastrophe he continues going to the pariahs. But It is surprising that such a staunch supporter of Gandhi as Moorthy, who sacrifices his family and mother for the sake of the pariahs, is not completely free from the Brahmins' ideology of being polluted in touch with a pariah. Notwithstanding his frequent visits to the pariahs with an intention of ameliorating their deteriorating condition, Moorthy dare not touch them and their pots. He talks them standing at a distant place, the gutter-slab. At one occasion Moorthy goes to the pariahs' quarter to meet Rachanna to convince him and other pariahs to join the Congress Committee but in the absence

of Rachanna his wife requests Moorthy to come inside the house. After some hesitations he does enter the house but when she offers him a glass of milk to drink, he pretends that he has just taken the coffee. At this she asserts just to touch the glass so that they might be sanctified. He somehow takes a sip and puts the glass aside. But when he returns home, the glass of milk haunts his mind. This thought makes his hair stand on end as if he has committed a serious sin. He tells the whole story to Rangamma who suggests taking bath and wearing fresh clothes and drinking Gangajal to purify himself and he does the same. Thus the ideology of untouchability promulgated by the so-called higher section of the society has permeated the mind of the people so deep that in spite of their best intention they still find themselves unable to shake off the ideology of untouchability which they have internalized into the deep recess of their mind. Therefore they always try to make a safe distance from the underdogs, the untouchables who are still pushed to the margin of the society; and the centre is still captured by the so-called elite class. These underdogs are still deprived of their privileges, their rights of living independent life. In reality the pollution is not in the supposed untouchables but in the mind of those who blindly believe in untouchability because it is not an inherent trait of the underdogs but a social construct enforced on the underdogs. The need is not to clean the untouchables but to clean the pollution from our mind. According to Raja Rao we have to:

Choose between a saint like Mahatma Gandhi who has given up land and honours and comfort and has dedicated his life to the country, and these fattened Brahmins who want to frighten us with their excommunications, once the Government has paid them well.
(78)

No doubt, with the exception of some people who surrender to the British government and become their agents, all the people of India go through the ordeals of repression and even

rigorous imprisonment during the British regime but the poor workers and the coolies are subjected to the multi-dimensional suppression and subjugation. Firstly they face the economic deprivation and secondly they suffer the physical tortures at the hands of their employers. They are badly cheated by their employers, the British. They are recruited through the British agents by false promises of higher wages and reasonable work-load of merely picking coffee leaves, and of comfortable accommodation. But when these helpless and poverty-stricken workers come to the Estate with their belongings leaving behind their huts, they find the ghastly different reality. They start their work early in the morning at five. Men have to dig pits and hew wood; and women are forced to kill the vermin. The estate is full of different venomous snakes. They are forced to work continuously without any break. In the scorching afternoon they are not allowed to take rest even for a single moment. During the rainy season they suffer from different fatal diseases like fever, stomach-ache and dysentery etc. they are unable to return their home because they are not paid wages with which they might go to their houses. When some benevolent people like Moorthy try to help these desperate workers, they are not allowed to enter the estate. When there is some conflict between the Moorthy's supporters and those of the British government, these workers are badly lathicharged and some of them along with their children are thrown out of the estate without paying wages.

The condition of women in general is no better than other underdog of the society. They are supposed not to be equal to men in general. Their household drudgery is taken for granted. They have always been considered to be the subordinate to men. *Manu Smriti* establishes the subordinate position of women:

In childhood a woman should be under her father's control. In youth under her husband's, and when her husband is dead under her sons'. She should not have independence. (Swami 55)

Logics, reasoning and thereby philosophy are generally considered to be beyond their ken. They are considered to be incompatible to study these subjects from the time immemorial. In the novel after the death of Ramakrishnayya, the single interpreter of the Vedantic texts, it is a matter of concern who would explain to them the Vedantic texts. Rangamma's explanation of the philosophy surprises them because a woman is not expected to be capable enough to discuss philosophy. Another curse in the society is the widowhood imposed on women who are supposed to live a life of austerity thereafter. She is not permitted to live an independent life. Raja Rao has also stated the case of widowhood in the novel. Ratna, a widowed daughter of Kamalamma tries to live a normal like all other women but her unrestrained life style is intolerable to Bhatta and other people of the village. When she asserts her independent identity, she is silenced even by her mother who calls her a shameless and wicked-tongued creature. She thinks that if she continues behaving in this manner, she will surely bring dishonor to the family. Many other women of the village speak ill of Kamalamma due to her daughter. Well-known critic S. Natrajan's remarks about the pathetic condition of enforced widowhood are very appropriate:

. . . I do not care whether all or many widow remarry but I do feel that they should be more loved, nursed and cared for; more humanity should be shown to them. . . (Natrajan 132)

The condition of women of the Pariah community is all the more appalling. These women suffer within home due to the lop-sided values cherished in the patriarchal system of the society for being a Pariah. They are nothing but a play thing in the hands of all kinds of people. In the novel even the British daren't touch a Brahmin woman. So far as a pariah girl is concerned they feel free to do with her what they like. Nobody is there to check their cruelties meted out on the pariah women. At the Skeffington Coffee Estate many pariah girls are

tortured and even raped. Even if a pariah girl refuses the advances of the Sahib, an Englishman and the owner of the Estate, he hardly sends a man to bring her forcibly to him. But many a time he rapes the pariah young girls in the field and gives them five rupees. Mulk Raj Anand, the champion of the untouchables, has depicted the wretched condition of the untouchables even more glaringly in his novel *Untouchability* where the untouchables face the dishonor at every step. They clean the excreta of other human beings and walk at the corner of the road lest they should be touched by the people of higher caste. They are not allowed to enter the temple. Their women-folk are dishonored and when they resist the advances, they are blamed of polluting men of high caste.

The curse of untouchability is still inherent in our society in some form or the other but through the efforts of Mahatma Gandhi and the philanthropists like Moorthy there is a drastic transformation in the mentality of the majority of people. During the British regime the freedom fighters understood that India couldn't get freedom until the people from all sections irrespective their caste, religion, gender and ethnicity join together to fight against the British despotism. Therefore Moorthy convinced the people of all sections to join together to exterminate the British government from India. Like other men and women of so-called higher caste, many men and women of the pariah community also face physical tortures and fight against British government jostling their shoulders with one another.

There is a messianic consciousness even among Indian women. The widowed women are coming to front from the quagmire of imprisoned life within the four-walls of their house. In the novel the widowed Ratna roams about the village streets like boys. Although she is a widow, she wears bangles and nose rings like other married women. When she was asked why she did not wear clothes like a widow and 'why she behaved as though she hadn't lost her husband', she replied bluntly:

That was nobody's business, and that if these sniffing old country hens thought that seeing a man for a day, and this when she was ten years of age, could be called marriage, they had better eat mud and drown themselves in the river. (27)

Furthermore, in the absence of Moorthy (when he is arrested,) she along with Rangamma, another widow, took charge of the struggle for freedom and emerge as the chief leaders of all men and women. They lead the villagers courageously and continue their struggle against the British government. Ratna is also sentenced a rigorous imprisonment and tortured like other men in jail. It is emerging consciousness among them that after Ramakrishnayya's death Rangamma surprises the villagers with her scholarly discussion of philosophy in Vedantic texts so well. She proves that women don't lag behind men in any field. She practices Yoga and under her guidance so many women of the village begin to practice Yoga that, according to her, makes a person spiritually stronger and dynamic. Inspired by Rangamma, the women of the village come forward to forming a 'Women's Volunteer Corps' which they call *Sevika Sangha*. She inspires women to become *Sevikas* and instilled patriotism among them by presenting the stories of Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi, of the Rajput ladies who burnt themselves on the pyre rather surrender to the enemy, of Annie Beasant, Kamla Devi and Sarojini Naidu. Her preaching created a wake of awakening among them. She enthuses in them the courage and heroism to fight against the British government. But she does not let them avert from their household duties and responsibilities. Her preaching is very encouraging as she says that 'Lathis and blows can affect only the body, never the soul.'

Even they prove themselves stronger and more heroic than men who refuse to form the same volunteer corps for men because they are reluctant to disturb the peace and comforts of their lives. Thus Raja Rao asserts his point

through this novel that the independence can be achieved only through the collective efforts of all sections of the country irrespective their caste, religion, ethnicity, gender and ranks. It can be secured only when peaceful co-existence of all citizens of the country is assured. It must be kept in mind that discrimination and disparity among the citizens of the same country invite bondage from outside.

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