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## "KANTHAPURA": INDIGENOUS MONTAGE

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## ABSTRACT

Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* is a meaningful and inspiring critique on Indian National Movement. He added a philosophical depth and ideological height to Indian English fiction. Rao regarded literature as *Sadhana*, or spiritual discipline. In writing a metaphysical comedy, he presented the contemporary life, social, political and personal through Indian philosophy. A reader having upanishadic orientation can easily understand the philosophical overtone. The novel is full of similes and metaphors and they are drawn from people living in Indian villages, especially in south Indian villages. The narrator is an ordinary woman, a Brahmin widow belonging to a Scholarly family with no sophistication, but she is rich in native wisdom and sympathy for all. RajaRao makes this grandmother with a rich fund of folk lore and folk wisdom the narrator of *Kanthapura*. She weaves the past and present and gods and men together in her narrative. The novel is about some traditional past and the recordation of folk lore. It refers to the contemporary events with the same farcicality as it does to the gods and goddesses. She mixes up the present into past. She sees everything from the puranic point of view, which gives a measure of objectivity to the narration of political movement. The old woman sees the prophetic visions through her native wisdom and intuition. *Kanthapura* is also imbued with a religious spirit akin to that of the Puranas. The epigraph of the novel, taken from the sacred Hindu scripture the Bhagavad Gita, is the famous explanation of the Hindu notion of incarnation. The avatar in *Kanthapura* is Gandhi, whose shadow looms over the Whole book, although he is himself not a character. Incarnation, however, is not restricted to one Great Soul, Gandhi, but extends into *Kanthapura* itself, where Moorthy, who leads the revolt, is the local manifestation of Gandhi and, by implication, of Truth. But the novel of colonial India is Post-colonial in spirit for various reasons. To deify Gandhi is a part of the process of decolonizing the Indian mind. The fight against the British colonialism gives us a clear picture of decolonization process.

**KEY WORDS:** Philosophical depth, metaphysical, native wisdom, upanishadic orientation, Folk-wisdom, incarnation, quest of its roots, colonial, decolonization.

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In Indo- Anglican fiction the writers have made a conscious use of not only the legendary stories from Ramayana or the Mahabharata, but also the folk tales and fertility rituals. Rao is an outstanding exponent of using the mythical parallel to extend our understanding of the contemporary historical situation. He weaves in many stories within a story. He intentionally infused a number of regional and Indian myths, Kannada idioms, phrases and proverbs, similes, metaphors, which make it more rich, vibrant and original. He makes a mythic reference to the mystified legends and fictionalized history. The innocent villagers are immediately electrified into the vision of nature of conflict in terms of good principle in the avatara and the evil principle in the adversary.

In the preface to *Kanthapura*, Raja Rao states: " Episode after episode follows and when our thoughts stop, our breath stops and we move on to another thought. This was and still is the ordinary style of our storytelling. I have tried to follow it myself in this story" (RajaRao: 1970, 5).The novel should not be judged by Western strands and criteria because it is a novel in the Indian tradition which is oral tradition. Though the novel is set against a backdrop of political awareness and struggle, it incorporates a number of characteristics from traditional Indian life and culture. He presents realistic image of life in an Indian village community with its belief in old traditions, customs, rituals, superstitions, caste system. Heavy reliance on religion and local deities, manners of speech and address, and with the help of the elderly female narrative voice gave an oral flavor to the tale, in the puranic style, with story within story". He presents rural life convincingly by interweaving religious myths into the structure of the novel. He presents an authentic picture of village life in all its complexity and uniqueness. Like all Indian villages, *kanthapura*, too, is neatly divided according to caste and occupation of the villagers into a Brahmin quarter, a potter's quarter, a weaver's quarter, a sudra quarter.

The socio-economic condition of the people is evident from the houses they live in. Rao uses adjectival names to acquaint the reader with the status, occupation, temperament, habits and

physical features of the different characters. We have postmaster Suryanarayana, patwari Nanjudia, Waterfall Venkamma, snuff Sastri, temple Lakshmma, one eyed linga and many others. These adjectival appellations, peculiar to the Kannada culture not only individualize the

Characters but also show the kind of familiarity that exists in an Indian village where everyone knows everyone else and refers to them in a manner that immediately establishes their identities. All women in South India especially in villages are called amma and in the novel too are addressed as such. Words like sister, brother, aunt; daughter and mother have been used even

When there is no actual relationship in keeping with the Indian forms of address. Relations are explained very explicitly as; he is my wife's elder brother's wife "brother-in-law" (34).

The rural tone has been perfectly captured by Rao in these expressions which convey the living vibrancy of Indian provincial speech, the essence of Indian speech habits. Rao, effectively harmonizes the Indian idiom with the English language recreating actual characters. People use mannerisms and speech issue from the sing-song lilting rhythms of a Dravidian language. Instead of using the pronouns "it" for inanimate objects and animals, Raja Rao personifies he, or she to describe the wind, earth snakes, etc, thus ascribing feminine and masculine qualities to them.

The English used in the novel being represented in Indian culture and linguistic setting. It has been creative and adoptive for future writers. Many Indian words and expressions directly used in the novel e.g. " I shall squash you like a bug" (21), you had better tell those tales to white washed walls. Nobody who has eyes to see and ears to hear will believe in such a crow –and sparrow story" (22), "our hearts are squeezed like a wet cloth" (175). Some of these expressions

Also point at the beliefs held by Indian people. He uses unique regional expressions in the novel. It is clear that he uses English creatively to convey the native sensibility and succeeds to adjust it to the Indian emotional make up.

The narrator is an old woman called Achakka. She belonged to *Kanthapura* and is a part of the events or witness to the events narrated by her. As she is a talkative old woman she includes, many things which are irrelevant and superfluous, while narrating the events. There are numerous digressions no doubt, but the novel cannot be called formless. It has a well organized

Structure and a well- knit plot. The old woman tells the story in a leisurely manner. While telling the story she makes comments on what she is narrating. The things put into the mouth of the narrator suit her nature and background. The telling of story gives the whole affair a puranic dignity. K.R.S. Iyengar observes: "We see everything through the film of her memory, sensibility and temperament and the manner of her telling too is characteristically Indian," (305)

Many legends, folk tales and myths are included in the narrative and they make it more interesting. The myths are transformed into a living legend and this is made possible by the narrative mode itself. The freedom movement is introduced by the narrator only after giving the background. *Kanthapura* deconstructs the myth of the power of the foreign ruler. It views resistance as an enabling strategy and examines in detail the meaning and practices of satyagraha and ahimsa. Gandhi remains in the background throughout the novel. The narrator uses episodes from the Ramyana and the Mahabharat to explain the contemporary situation. The freedom struggle was an epic. Thousands of people sacrificed their lives in the freedom movement. His artistic exploitation of the rich resources of India's past in relation to the complex present is strikingly evident in *Kanthapura*.

Prof. C.D. Narasimhaiah explains that three strands of experience in the novel. The political, the religious and the social, and all the three are woven inextricably into one complex story of *Kanthapura* (1973, 118). The novel tells of Murthy trying to infuse nationalism into the minds of the uneducated villagers through the familiar and effective means of Bhajans and Hira-kata Kalakshepams. *Kanthapura* is narrated by an old woman to a hypothetical listener. Making this old woman the narrator enables Raja Rao to mingle facts and myths in an effective

manner. For her Gandhi has attained the status of God and Murthy is regarded as an avatar in *Kanthapura*. In the fiction, the comparison between Gandhi- British rule and Rama – Ravana situation is not elaborate and complete. In addition to the use of the myth of Rama- Ravana battle, there are other myths also that are used not only to diversify the Harikathas and make them more interesting to the people of the village. Moorthy – an image of Gandhi –also organizes Bhajans, Satyanarayan Puja and exploits indigenous tradition of Harikatha in which symbols and images are in language comprehended and used by the people. The strength of the Hindu symbols draws the crowds and has an appeal for the masses. The Harikatha, used as a strategy to mobilize the villages, apparently religious has a political connotation. In the words of the narrator it was a katha in which: Parvati in penance becomes the country and siva becomes heaven knows what!" siva is The three eyed" he says" and swaraj too is three eyed. Self-purification, Hindu-Moslem

Unity, khaddar" and he talks of....And everywhere there is something about our country and something about swaraj. (16)

The Harikatha man Jayaramachar then recalls the rich culture and religious heritage of India and goes on to enumerate names like Ashoka , Akbar, Krishna to Buddha,sankara to Ramanuja etc. Mahatma Gandhi is compared to Lord Krishna. Gandhi was born to kill the serpent of foreign rule in same way as the Kaliyamardhana of lord Krishna. The Harikathas were used for telling the villagers about Gandhi and the British rule. Jayaramachar, the Harikatham and Rangamma easily reach the hearts of the villagers. They associate the struggle for independence to a pilgrimage, a holy mission and though the emotional chord in their hearts and get them actively involved in the movement. Owing to the use of mythical technique, Gandhi is made a God and Moorthy is made into an avatar. K.R.S.Iyengar points out that "Moorthy (likeGandhi) becomes the epic hero Ramarouting the demon Ravana's sinister army of Occupation, namely the British intruders (1962, 391).

Moorthy, the local leader of *Kanthapura* was also an avatar, like avatar, like Mahatma Gandhi. The Britishers or the Redmen were like the

asura or demons. The clash between India and England was like the clash between the Gods and the demons, between the forces of good and evil. Moorthy was like Rama and Seenu, messenger, devotee and worker was like Hanuman to him . Swaraj is compared with Lord Shiva. Shiva is three eyed and swarajya has also self-purification. Moorthy is compared to Ram, Krishna, Christ and Gandhi who had taken upon themselves the task of saving the mankind.

RajaRao introduces the symbol of Brahmin to represent wisdom and purity of mind. Moorthy is compared to a mild cow, which is treated by the Hindu as mother and is worshipped by them. A temple is a symbol of ancient culture. The people used to go to the temple of Kenchemma to pray for love, guidance and charity. Himavathy River goes round the village which means that life flows continuously around. The hills represent strength and stability. Moorthy like Gandhi is firm like rocks or mountains. In addition to all these, Raja Rao makes use of local rituals as well. It is a regional novel as it deals with the physical features, people, life, customs, habits, manners, language, and traditions of particular locality. It also rises from the particular to the general. In a way, it is a representation of humanity in general. The novel fills the life of the ordinary people when they fight for a noble cause, and by a vision which transforms the commonplace into the sublime.

Raja Rao's deliberate use of the oral tradition and violation of the standard English usage is a statement of resistance and rejection of English- The language of power and superiority- and also a devise signifying the cultural distinctiveness that between the two cultures. Ashcroft,Griffiths

and Tiffin in *The Empire Writes Back* , while discussing post-colonial literatures state that they understand " post-colonial" as a term that covers all the cultures affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day" (1989,1-2). He has created a postcolonial text in *Kanthapura*. It is post-colonial text, coming as it did in the wake of Gandhian movement.

It focuses on the encounter of the two cultures and shows how while countering the imposing cultures the weaker one redefines and

reinterpreted its tradition while it seeks its identity. The novel questions the very form of the Western novel.

But the novel of colonial India is postcolonial in spirit for various reasons. To deify Gandhi is a part of the process of decolonizing the Indian mind. The subtle subversion of harikata to allegory of India's freedom is quite interesting. All these are microcosmic presentation of the acrocosmic reality but fictionalized for presenting the traditional Indian society which is in quest of its roots. The crisis of identity is another factor of post colonial literature. But in *Kanathapura* , the colonial novel of 1938, the post colonial trends are quiet apparent, particularly visible in the efforts of people for creating national myths to decolonize the mind of *Kanthapura* ,which is a smaller counter part of India itself . The simple happenings including the fight against the British colonialism gives us a clear picture of decolonization process. It questions its time frame and appropriating an alien language uses it for purposes of expressing a native myth. What begins as a tale told by an old woman soon transforms itself into a political narrative. He makes abundant use of the oral narrative discourse which depends heavily on a sense of community.

English being a foreign language was not the language of what Rao calls "our emotional make-up". It had however appropriated intellectual space therefore it was almost inevitable that writing should be done in English, but it was equally necessary that it was written differently and was made to carry the weight of languages native to the writers of the colonial countries. Rao in the novel, indeed succeeds in reshaping the English language for his own needs making it distinctive and colorful using the syntactic resources of an Indian language. The grandmotherly, Achakka captures every nuance and detail of real language. So effective, forceful, evocative and unique is the style and so masterly is the use of words that we are able to visualize the sounds, colors the lights and movements of *Kanthapura* and its inhabitants. The religious aspect of the Indian psyche has been fully brought out by Rao in the novel for not only the good, honest and pious characters employ religious myths but the corrupt, greedy, selfish and hypocrite characters like

Batta, Swami and his agent also use the same myths of Rama-Sita – Ravana- Krishna inversely because of their dishonest intentions and exploit the credulity of the native villagers. Rao implants ethical sense and human values in the minds of his readers, through myths and mythological characters. These myths lay down a code of conduct for human beings. His basic

Purpose is to expose human weaknesses and to set models of human behavior for the society.

The novel ends on realistic note. Moorthy writes to Ratna, "Jawaharlal will change it... he, too, is for non-violence and he, too, is a satyagrahi, but he says, "In swaraj there shall be neither the rich nor the poor. And he calls himself an "equal-distributionist", and I am with him and his men" (133). This is very significant in this context as it captures the prevalent mood of the contemporary Indian people. By the late 30s the political debate about modernization and socialism had begun and Nehruvian policies held greater attraction for the youth, who were impatient for change. Raja Rao uses inexhaustible strength to his imagination to the realms of mythology and fantasy, from the mundane to the spiritual, and wove a breath-takingly beautiful fabric which integrated the designs and patterns of both the past and the present which are native. The combination of folk speech, which can be sly and broad, insinuating and direct, with the vigorous tradition of Indian story-telling going back two thousand years to the Ramayana with all the resonance and subtlety this implies, allows the novelist suppleness and variety in rendering the response of the villagers.

The profound philosophical vision is all absorbed in and sustained by the particulars of the fable. The innumerable literary and philosophical hints and suggestions, the analogies, the muted quotations, the remote, insinuated connections which echo and reecho throughout are used with that musical propriety, wholly different from merely explicit or pedagogic, which is infallible evidence of an authentic art. He wrote Indian novels on English pattern which were representative of indigenous life. His ideas are very much akin to the ideas of Gandhi - ideas of truth and ahimsa which strengthen

the inner self. He had with a profound sense of the richness and creativity of the past, metaphysical, poetic and traditional. The racial and poetic wisdom which is everywhere implicit, the evidence of Brahminical thought, the profoundly philosophical vision are all absorbed in and sustained by the particulars of the fable. The novel is the best example of Indo – Anglican novel with its native sensibility, its form and its style- all rooted in the soil and drawing from it.

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