



KANTHAPURA: DEMYSTIFICATION OF CONTEMPORARY INDIA

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Abstract

Literature is created and composed for multifarious issues to write upon. The phrase is appropriate that literature reflects society. Literature is an amalgamation of tradition, religion, social, psychological and political aspects of human life. Indian literature in English portrays India as Arvind Adiga defines, "two different Indiaan India of light and an India of darkness." Raja Rao's remarkable novel *Kanthapura* portrays a whole new India. It takes us back to the times when India as a nation was fighting for its independence. The novel is a social document which records the historical, political and traditional experiences, methods and events of contemporary India. The paper is an attempt to depict these experiences, events and the Indian sensibility during the British rule.

Keywords: Satyagraha, Indian sensibility, Indianness.

Introduction:

"There are at least three strands of experience in the novel: the political, the religious and the social and all the three are woven inextricably into the one complex of *Kanthapura*."

These words of Narasimhaiah has beautifully defined the novel *Kanthapura*. It reflects all aspects of Indian village life; the division of society on the basis of caste, superstitions, myths, woman status, Impact of Gandhi and freedom struggle on the innocent villagers. The novel captures the very flavor of Indian life. It is narrated by an old grandmother Achhakka, years after the events narrated in the novel had taken place. It is a source of Indian ethos narrated in global English, where the content is typically Indian. Raja Rao experiments with the language and style. He renders Indian modes of thoughts and feeling into English. According to Raja Rao, "English is the language of

our intellectual make up" but it is not "the language of our emotional make up". In his preface to *Kanthapura* he writes,

"One has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought movement that looks maltreated in an alien language. I use the word alien, yet English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make up- like Sanskrit or Persian was before-but not of our emotional make-up."

Raja Rao has literally translated Indian idioms, Phrases, Proverbs literally. Syntax has modified or broken according to the need; Indian imagery has used beautifully to express Indian sensibility, the very flavor of contemporary Indian life. He uses words from the Indian languages directly in English without any translation or

modification. Rao has done it so effectively that even those who are not acquainted with the social or political structure of South Indian village will feel some acquaintance with it. S.Nagarajan says,

“Raja Rao’s aim is to create a style which will reflect the rhythms and sensibilities of the Indian Psyche and since it is in Sanskrit that the Indian mind has found its most consummate linguistic expression, he has tried to adopt his English style to the movement of Sanskrit sentence.”

Raja Rao succeeds in adding local color to a foreign language. In order to achieve this, Rao uses an old woman, Achakka for the narration of the novel. She tells the story in a very natural and spontaneous manner. The village and villagers are represented in realistic colors. There is a vivid description of geographical location of the village and gives a detailed account of the Tippur Hill, the river Himavathy, goddess Kanchamma and on the other hand poverty, illiteracy and superstition of villagers are also described. Rao’s sixty page glossary that accompanies the novel can prove itself as an excellent portrayal of rural life.

It is a political novel. It concern with the Indian freedom movement under the guidance and direction of Mahatma Gandhi who is not physically present in the novel but his presence can be felt as motivating force. What was happening in Kanthapura was happening all over the country during that period. There are references to events like Dandi March, Non cooperative movement and the Jalliahwalla Bhag Massacre. Moorthy was in College when he felt the impact of Gandhi and became a Gandhian. He explains to the people economics of the Charkha and Swadeshi. He inspires the woman of the village to adopt Charkha-spinning. Moorthy motivates the innocent villagers to start satyagraha for the freedom of India. The strong wave of nationalism and the volcano of Patriotism can be seen in the slogans like *Gandhi Ki Jai* and *Inquilab Zindabad*.

The novel uses mythical methods like stories from Mahabharata and Ramayana, mythical origin of Kanthapura and legend of Goddess Kanchamma to inspire the innocent villagers for

swaraj which renders the Indianness of the novel. Moorthy arranges Hari Kathas to awaken the religious and patriotic feelings of the villagers and in order to expose the evils of foreign government. He compares Gandhi as Ram and India is shown as suffering sita under the control of British Ravana. The narrator Achakka finds it easier to explain the subtle ideas of Gandhi through fables, legends and myths. Raja Rao uses this aspect of politico-religious awakening as the background of the novel *Kanthapura*. This atmosphere of a national upheaval has been success fully captured by the novelist. Meenakshi Mukharjee has said:

“Kanthapura is narrated by an old woman to a hypothetical listener.....Raja Rao’s choice of this narrator serves several purposes at once. Making this old woman the narrator enables Raja Rao to mingle facts and myths in an effective manner. For the old woman, Jawaharlal is Bharata to the Mahatma who she believes will slay Ravana so that sita may be freed.”

The novel is not just concerned with the political aspect, it also depict the social, religious and economic aspects. A number of local customs and rituals are picturized in a very genuine manner. The people are uneducated and deeply religious. The society follows the caste system strictly. It is divided into four quarter called the Brahmin quarter, the potters’ quarter, the weavers’ quarter and the sudra quarter. Moorthy who is an upper caste Brahmin gives a practical form to the Gandhian programme of removal of untouchability and his emphasis on the upliftment of the lower castes. When Moorthy has drunken milk from a pariah’s house, his mother, who is an orthodox and religious woman becomes angry. She says:

“What? Don’t talk like an innocent. Go and stand on the steps like a pariah. I don’t even want your shadow to fall on me. I have had enough of it.”

The villagers maintain the caste hierarchy. It is evident even in the location of the houses. The description of the dress of Indian man and woman; traditions; their locality and habits; language and rituals; customs and conventions; myths and

superstitions are used for a clear and comprehensive grasp of Indian background. For instance, Indian widows keeping shaven head is simply mentioned:

“Tell me, said Venkamma one day to Akamma, bringing forward her falling sari over her shaven head, ‘why should our family feed theirs?...’”

There are a number of women characters who are treated in a respectful and skillful manner in the novel. Rao’s female characters are not submissive, dependent on others, silent and suppressed. They play as powerful role as the other male characters. Rangamma is well read. She is a follower of Gandhi and actively participates in the freedom movement of India. Ratna is fifteen years old. She is a widow. People expected her to dress up and behave like a widow but she refused to do so. In Moorthy’s absence she became the leader of the freedom fighters in Kanthapura. The novelist also gives information about the relationship of each character with the other characters and the jealousies and rivalries between them.

Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura* is a mine of information about the political and socio-cultural life of villagers in southern India during the British rule. Raja Rao has modified and broken the English syntax and structure to make the novel more Indian and render the Indian sensibility. The novelist has maintained this Indianness by adopting the Indian way of telling a story. It breathes the native air of India under the portrayal of Gandhi in the background with mythical references.

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