

ISSN: 0976-8165

The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Bi-monthly Refereed and Indexed Open Access eJournal

5th Year of Open Access

Vol. 5, Issue-6 December 2014

Editor-In-Chief- Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor- Mrs. Madhuri Bite



About Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

Contact Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

Editorial Board: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>

The Art of Story-telling in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*

Aprajita

Research Scholar
Department of English
University of Delhi
New Delhi

Abstract:

Raja Rao has been celebrated as one of the first chronicler of the “Indian” way of life. His style and technique are uniquely Indian and aim at carving out an Indian identity through a genre that is essentially Western. This paper seeks to examine this art of story-telling and the use of narrative technique as deployed by Raja Rao in his novel *Kanthapura* (1938) to represent a historical event through the voice of a marginal character. Raja Rao brings the mythology, history and nationalism together in a curious way that is typically Indian and hence fashions a unique style of narrative that is colored by multiple hues. India's tradition of handing down history through story-telling is manipulated by the narratorial voice of an old woman who is a participant in the events that unfold in the novel. This paper analyses the subtleties of such marginal voice in performance as well as the intricacies of “her” version of “his-story”.

Keywords: Indian, Myth, Narrative, History, story-telling, marginal, Novel, nationalism

Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* captures the social and political milieu of India during the turbulent days of Gandhi's non-cooperation and civil disobedience movement. The novel is a representation of the freedom struggle of India as well as an expression of its author's concern for Gandhian ideology- untouchability, non-violence and truth- and his fascination with Indian Vedic heritage. But the novel does not adopt any central plot at the peak of national awakening. Instead it grows from a small village named Kanthapura in South India amidst the humdrum and ordinary life of its inhabitants to a tumultuous struggle for freedom under the influence of Gandhian ideology along with its narrator who gains wisdom as the novel proceeds. The novel is located in a particular time frame which brings history and a grandmother's tale together obliterating the distinction between the formal and informal record in the process of documenting reality. The equilibrium is further challenged by infusing various myths and legends that are inseparable from the everyday life of the people of India. The dialectic of various modes of story-telling explores the spatial and temporal dimensions of a novel. Thus Raja Rao experiments with the novel form to portray India in all its “Indianness” through a narrator who is unsophisticated and unaware about the significance of the tale that she narrates in the annals of history-writing and hence imbibes an art that is simultaneously personal and unintentionally political. Raja Rao himself mentions, “The Indian novel can only be epic in form and metaphysical in nature. It can only have story within story to show all stories are only parables.”¹ Seen in this light, *Kanthapura* is a stock of such parables blended in the narrative structure of the novel to delineate the story of the awakening of the masses during the freedom struggle of India and also highlights its own process of coming into being.

In the analysis of the art of story-telling in Kanthapura, the 'Foreword' to the novel holds immense significance. Raja Rao delineates the major themes of the novel in 'Foreword' itself which comprise of the mythic element, the language adopted and the style of the novel which are further elaborated in this paper in order to analyze the narrative technique of the story "the telling [/interpretation of which] has not been easy" either for the author or the reader. Introducing the mythic element, Raja Rao links the quintessence of a place with a legend that grants it an epic significance. The *sthala-puranas* enable the co-mingling of past with the present and god with ordinary men². What this co-mingling gives effect to is the deviation from the linear narrative structure within the precincts of reality. The narrative is never distorted in order to accommodate mythology in the mundane but the ordinary is raised to fantastic to transcend the temporal limits. The narrative of Kanthapura delves at the helm of this meeting of historical with mythical to carve out a story which acts as the microcosm of a gigantic movement and a rich cultural past. Mahatma Gandhi as the harbinger of a revolution is kept at par with mythical characters like Rama, Shiva, Krishna, etc. and thus deified as a symbol to be worshipped and followed. At a point in the novel, the *Harikatha*-man Jayaramachar narrates the story of the birth of Gandhi which is nothing less than a legend (10-14). Gandhi is hailed as the incarnation of Shiva and various other stories are narrated during these sessions which also aid in propagating the nationalist issues like Swaraj and "self-purification, Hindu-Moslem unity, [and] Khaddar"³. The nationalism is linked with the question of religious faith and thus attains the quality of exigency of action and sanctification of the tradition.

The narrative style in the novel closely resembles the Vedantic and Puranic tradition of story-telling where oral performance and memory ensure the continuity of the tale. Regarding this, M. K. Naik remarks, "the story in Kanthapura is told with the breathless garrulity of the Puranas where the style rests principally with the spoken word."⁴ Raja Rao affirms that this tale could as well be told by a grandmother at the dusk to eager children who participate in the process of narration and memorization. This motif defeats the purpose of any pretense to elitism that history/literature demands. Like The Serpent and the Rope (1960) where the identity crisis of the narrator Ramaswamy is linked with the macrocosmic instability at institutional and national level, the tale of Kanthapura is also inclusive and there are no separate or varied narratives but "one interminable tale". One narrative develops the legendary trait and exists at every level of society. Hence the authorial voice which asserts itself in the 'Foreword' as the origin of the tale merges with the narrator's voice. This is the function that the legends serve that they are all-encompassing and get passed on from one generation to the next. Thus the story of a small village acquires the gravity of a historical event which is further elevated to transcend the spatial and temporal co-ordinates to "acquire a timeless mythic dimension of epic proportions. It surpasses the dialectics of history."⁵

The art of story-telling acquires a significant function in a community as the social relations are based on the ability to connect through oral performances. The civil bond of the villagers is measured through their, especially women's, ability to spread a piece of information throughout the village. The stories provide a space for information building and dealing with any alien force. Hence they are characterized by a strong sense of preservation and resistance. The assumptions about the Bade Khan after his arrival at the village spread like a fire giving rise to different stories. Like Scheherazade in Arabian Nights who keeps postponing death through telling stories each night, the anecdotes of Pariah Siddayya told on a hot afternoon offer relief from the hard-

handed maistri. Similarly, Moorthy's adoption of Gandhian life is based on a parable-like vision which takes on a revolutionary force capable of great change. It delves on the ability of stories to translate into myths and hence provide a strong base for the revolutionary struggle. The narrative is studded with a chain of such parables and stories which grant it the epic form and hence transform the genre of the novel. As Ratna Mani K. says, "Raja Rao has brought to Indian fiction in English many elements in which it has previously been largely deficient: an epic breadth of vision, a metaphysical rigour...a symbolic richness...and an essential "Indianness" of style."⁶ Thus Raja Rao moulds the novel form to regulate the function that the art of story-telling performs in a community.

The sense of community through participation in story-telling is closely linked to the question of identity formation. The narrator Achakka is not identified as an individual in search of an identity like Ramaswamy in *The Serpent and the Rope*; she is not even the chief protagonist but a marginal woman character that grows in perspective as the narrative proceeds. She is the ideal grandmother that Raja Rao envisions as the narrator of this tale. Achakka identifies herself as "we" collectively with other women of the village who are awakened for the nationalist cause. She does not narrate a personal life story but reflects on an event which she has witnessed but to which she has in no major way contributed. Raja Rao engages the reader in the meaning-making process through the omission of an omniscient narrator and provision, instead, of an unsophisticated old woman with restricted purview as a narrator. The reader is treated as a "newcomer" to the village name of which might not have been heard by him. The element of timelessness and spacelessness introduced at the beginning of the narrative lends it a mythological attribute thus linking the past with the present and the future. It is not important to harmonize the events recorded in the narrative with the historical documents, the tale imbibes the quality of perceived collective continuity⁷ and it shall not cease to exist in the memory of the story-teller and the listeners.

Notwithstanding the marginal role within the novel, Achakka has been a participant in the Satyagraha Movement and privileged with a vision of the knowledge of causes that have led up to it, she stands like Tiresias in T. S. Eliot's 'The Wasteland'. She is a connecting link between culture that she belongs to and literature that she records. She represents the voice of the sub-altern history in both senses that it is a female voice coming from the marginal space. Her narrative is part of the residual culture that Raymond Williams defines in his essay "Dominant, Residual and Emergent."⁸ According to him, the residual narrative always exists with the dominant culture and comprises of the tendency to reach back to a past where the meaning can be located, and "which still seems to have significance, because [it] represents areas of human experience, aspiration and achievement which the dominant culture neglects, undervalues, opposes, represses or even cannot recognize."⁹ This residual thus needs to be incorporated in order for the dominant narrative to make sense. The prolific use of myths in post-modern texts like Eliot's "The Wasteland" and also in *Kanthapura* questions the relation between past and present and thus obliterates the distinction between fact and fiction. The historic-writing process that Achakka participates in is not based on a personal narrative but on 'reality' that is drawn from a perceiving collective and therefore representing a totality. She stands as the symbol of the determination of all women of Kanthapura who draw their strength from Moorthy as well as their religious faith. Kenchamma is hailed as the solution to their every problem and thus the deity is made customary while their leader Moorthy is exalted and glorified.

The myth simultaneously preserves, says A. Sudhakar Rao, as well as breaks away from tradition.¹⁰ In the same manner, Raja Rao creates an 'Indian' style of English to faithfully represent the social milieu of India. In the 'Foreword' to the novel, he mentions the difficulty of using a foreign language as a medium for telling the story "yet English is not really an alien language to us" and has been a part of our "intellectual make-up." In that case one must ask, what role does language play in conveying the meaning of the narrative and in the process of history formation? The meaning of a text is stable in reference to the context of its origin but its significance is open to change. Language is necessarily linked to the question of identity and intellect. Achakka uses the literal translation of Indian phrases and idioms in English like "traitor to his salt", "licker of your feet", "sun fell into the river", "stomach that has borne eight children", etc. that shows her rural background and her unsophisticated mind. She calls the people of her village by suffixing their peculiar quality. For example, Waterfall Venkamma is called so because she is fall-mouthed and speaks like the torrent of a waterfall- unstoppable. The villagers are introduced in the familiarity of their surrounding that could be recognized with any other place as well. The ability to convey the story of one's people located in another space and time and hold the attention of the audience through encouraging them to participate in collective interpretation contributes to recognition practices and developing the spirit of nationalism. In Kanthapura and his other novels Raja Rao attempts to create a "dialect" –like American or Irish- that characteristically defines the changed backdrop of Indian society that has embraced the global mores. The art of story-telling is indispensable to the creation of an "Indian English" dialect which involves the newer audience and hence ensures the continuity of the narrative. Even though the village has been deserted at the end of the novel, the story of the brave struggle of the people of Kanthapura shall continue to exist, inspiring fortitude in the generations to come and keeping the art of story-telling alive.

Works Cited:

1. Rao, Raja. "India's search for self-expression". *The Times Literary Supplement*, August 10, 1962.
2. Rao, Raja. 'Foreword' to Kanthapura, *Second Edition*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989.
3. *Ibid*.
4. Naik, M. K. Raja Rao. Twayne Publishers (1972).
5. *Ibid*.
6. Mani K., Ratna. "The Use of Myth in Raja Rao's The Serpent and the Rope". <http://www.yabaluri.org/triveni/cdweb/theuseofmythjul91.htm>
7. Sani, Fabio; Herrera, Marina; Bowe, Mhairi. "Perceived collective continuity and ingroup identification as defence against death awareness". *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* (2008), doi: 10.1016/j.jesp.2008.07.019.
8. Williams, Raymond. "Dominant, Residual and Emergent". Marxism and Literature. OUP, 1978.
9. *Ibid*. p-123.
10. Rao, A. Sudhakar. Myth and History in Contemporary Indian Novel in English. Atlantic Publishers & Distributors (P) Limited, 01-Jan-2000. p-1.