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Depiction of Indianness and Projection of Gandhi as an all-round Combination of an Idea, Myth, Symbol-cum-Tangible Reality in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*: An Appraisal

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Abstract:

This article significantly examines, Raja Rao, as one of those enigmatic writers whose fictional world has been received with wide acclamation and whole-hearted commendation by many critics in India and abroad. This paper throws light upon his scholarly background, an intimate familiarity with Indian myths, legends, religion and it also explores his philosophical concepts. No doubt, the paper is designed in such a manner that the presence of Gandhian ideology was felt all the time from the beginning to the end in all circles at all levels.

Universally acknowledged as one of the most notable Indo-Anglian novelists, Raja Rao's contribution to Indo-Anglian literature especially Indian English fiction is immensely and undoubtedly unique in all respects. Being an Indian novelist in English, with a cosmopolitan outlook and wide learning, he did his best in reflecting the Indian vision and atmosphere in his fictional world with a focus on the pathetic situation of India during the Pre-Independence period with reference to the novel *Kanthapura*, a small village symbolically reflecting the whole of India.

Quite often compared to Mulk Raj Anand and R. K. Narayan, as a story-teller he may seem rather inferior to both but as a sage and novelist philosopher, he is really superior to them in treatment of themes and philosophic vision. Though Raja Rao is ranked as one of considerable distinction as a novelist compared with Mulk Raj Anand and R. K. Narayan, he is the most ambitious of the three, regarding art as a vehicle for wisdom and thought. No doubt, there is an altogether new dimension in the fictional world of Raja Rao.

As C. D. Verma has put it,

“Although both Narayan and Anand understand and portray Indian life well, they seem to dwell merely on the surface. While Rao evinces the ability of going deep into

it communicating its quintessential quality, he is characteristically Indian and oriental in a way which neither Narayan nor Anand can claim to be" (P 38)

Such an outstanding novelist was born in an orthodox family of the Brahmins of Mysore on 5th Nov, 1908. Having matriculated from Hyderabad, he was encouraged by Prof. Dickinson at the University of Aligarh to study French literature and he took a degree History from the Madras University in 1928. Even at the age of twenty, he started doing research work, first at the University of Montpellier and at the Sorbonne under Prof. Cazamian. His first collection of short stories published in French got warmly praised by masters like Romain Rolland and Stefan Zweig. After a decade in Europe, he came back to India in 1940 during the war period and got married to an American actress by name Katherine Rao. He travelled the whole length of the country from Himalayas to Kanyakumari. The result of his experiences was the composition of the celebrated novel *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960).

Being a great admirer of the great "triumvirate" Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman, he got burgeoned into a philosopher writer. Raja Rao got immersed so much in philosophy that he became a professor of philosophy in a University Department, for which he was held in high esteem in both America and India. As a lover of truth, he had a greater hold on life more than any other writer, even Tagore. As a pioneer of Indian writing in English, he more than anyone else writing in the English language today, has helped to alter the expression to accommodate an essential Indian sensibility in honour of which his motherland honoured him by conferring 'Padma Bhushan' he has to his credit publication of such notable works as 1. *Kanthapura* (1938), 2. *The Cow of the Barricades* (1947), 3. *The Cat and Shakespeare* (1965), 4. *The Serpent and the Rope* ((1960) and 5. *Comrade Krillov* (1976). His first published work *Kanthapura* is nothing but the story of the awakening that came over an obscure village somewhere in the Western Ghats near Mysore under the Impact of Gandhiji's ideas in the thirties. It is not so much a well-knit tale as a string of memories throbbing with ardour and emotion, but it won high praise from E. M. Forster and the New York Times. The narrator is a village grandmother who was in the thick of the events telling the story effortlessly as Indian grandmothers do.

Being a conscious artist, Raja Rao has to his credit a definite literary and artistic creed. He writes the way he does because he is convinced and knows how an Indian writer ought to use English. He maintains that English is not really a foreign language; it is very much an Indian language so far as intellectual apprehension and communication are concerned, though it is not the language of the emotional make-up of an India. Rao himself models his style on the rhythms of Kannada, though he also has Sanskrit in his mind. He is, no doubt, a novelist endowed with the skill and power of interpreting Indian thought and culture rather than any other novelists. Far from a nostalgic admiration or a sentimental outburst, his praise of India takes the form of self-understanding for himself and interpretation of its values for others, particularly the people of West. Despite the fact that he lays stress on the values of Indian life, he evokes both the external life at its social and cultural plane. What is emphasized more in *Kanthapura* and *The Cat and Shakespeare* are the

manifold aspects of the rural and the urban life of India of the early and the mid-twentieth century. In *The Serpent and the Rope*, it is clearly stated as;

“India is not a country like
France is, or like England,
India is an idea, a metaphysic” (SR 376)

So, for a proper understanding of the totality of Raja Rao’s vision of India, one has to take into account both the aspects of external realities and the inner meanings. It is also to be borne in mind that while his pictures of the social, political and cultural life of India owe to his keen interest in the present, his obsession with the metaphysical meanings emanates from his interest in the evocation and revitalization of the past. The interest in the past, though a historian’s quest of roots, is in relation to the present, a search of continuity of the Indian tradition.

Raja Rao is gifted with the artistic power of handling the English language rather skillfully. In fact, it is difficult for an Indian writer to bring out the real emotions and feelings while writing in a foreign language. But with the use of literal translations, Rao maintains the originality of feelings among the readers. His imagery is out and out Indian. His similes metaphors and images are all drawn from Indian objects and the lives of Indian people. He states that rice should be fine as filigree and mangoes should be yellow as ‘gold’. The sky is as blue as a marriage shawl. Some women are beautiful as ‘newly opened guavas’ and the others are tender as April mangoes. Young boys are as bright as banana trunks. It will be apt saying that his images give an Indian flavor to his writings.

Raja Rao’s primary gift as a novelist is his capacity to create living characters. S. S. Mathur rightly remarks:

“His characters are real creatures of flesh and blood with their own virtues and vices, their love of gold and their love of the motherland. Their prejudices and superstitions, their beliefs and ideals” (P 35)

Truly speaking, his characters do pulsate with life lingering in our memory for long.

Raja Rao is the most Indian of the Indians writing in English. Even during the period of his religion earlier days, he had a thorough grounding in Indian religion and philosophy and observed Indian life rather minutely. While writing his stories, sitting thousands of miles away from his land, he could visualize the Indian scenes and Indian thought processes objectively. It may be said that he carried India wherever he went. In the writing of novels and stories, he is said to have given graphic descriptions of Indian village life. His descriptions of the sufferings of Indian untouchables and Hindu widows are something superb. Not only does he draw vivid pictures of the exploitation of the peasants and labourers by the landlords, the plantation owners and the moneylenders but also points out the glory of his Brahmin ancestors and the degradation and corruption of the present day Brahmins of Benares. He is good at presenting a picture of India with the Rakhi, Coconut, Kumkum, toe

rings etc., For laying focus on the importance of Indian national life, "he has widened the scope of the novel to include not only the experience of living people but also the myths and legends of India and other nations and the speculations of philosophers of the past and the present, of the east and the west" (Mathur 39)

Despite the fact that Rao has written only three novels, no one can deny the fact that he stands in the front rank as an enthusiastic novelist of Indo-Anglian literature, being absolutely brilliant in observing real Indian novel. Of his novels, *Kanthapura* is his master piece. The theme entirely reflects Indian thought and atmosphere. The novel is not only Indian in spirit, theme and structure but a reflection of the deepest urges and problems of India. In spite of its being written in English, the expression projected in the novel is out and out indianized and the rhythms of speech are more often those of South Indian languages like Kannada rather than English so that incongruity of the villagers, some of them being illiterate, speaking in English becomes much less prominent. *Kanthapura* is thus a most remarkable example of the incarnation of Indian sensibility in English creative writing. While speaking about the novel *Kanthapura*, Narsingh Srivastava rightly says thus:

"It depicts India of pre-Independence days the real India of that time which still continues to exist in great many respects. The vivid details of the village life are so evocatively described that the Indian way of life comes fully alive" (P 16)

Raja Rao approaches his story as a Sthala-purana or the epic of a place for his conception of narration is thoroughly Indian. "The narrator in *Kanthapura* neither the learned author nor the hero, Moorthy but an aged village woman, so that the story inevitably takes on some characteristics of a folk tale. In *Kanthapura*, Raja Rao has created "a legendary history out of the Indian life in the Pre-Independence era. As the novel was written in the same period as the Gandhian revolution, the artist has also projected his vision into an undefined future when the story of the present will veritably become a legendary history for its readers" (Srivastava 40). In the very first chapter of the novel, there is a rather elaborate story about the legend of Kenchamma who once saved Kanthapura from being destroyed by a demon. It is cited as a proof of this incident that Kenchamma Hill is even now red. The Goddess Kenchamma is the presiding deity of the village of Kanthapura and its neighborhood.

The Hari Kantha-man from the city invents another story which gives a mythological origin to Gandhi, considering him as an incarnation of Siva. The entire background of the story is mythological and religious for both the parties cite lines from the Gita in which Krishna says that he takes birth in a human form. Whenever evil reaches its extreme, in order to punish evil doers and protect protector of 'Dharma' whereas Jayaramachar says that Gandhi is the divine protector of dharma and an upholder of Truth, a supporter of the Swami claims that the English came to India as protectors of not only the lives but the dharma of the Indians. *Kanthapura* is thus, thoroughly Indian because it is an example of peculiarly Indian art-form, i.e, the sthala-purana *Kanthapura* does present a phase of Indian through the real story of a small south Indian village in the thirties with a unique force of evocative description and vividness of detail. In the words of Narsingh Srivastava,

“The development of events in Kanthapura represents all that was happening in every village and every city at that time; thus Kanthapura is not one village but every village; ray, Indian in microcosm” (P40)

Kanthapura is a novel depicting the early stages in India’s freedom struggle. It can be looked upon as a Gandhi-epic because it celebrates the activities of the freedom fighters led by Gandhi, and even its hero Moorthy is the only Gandhi on a smaller scale, a small mountain as he is referred to in the novel. The ideals of Gandhism and some of the actual incidents and events which took place in the 1930’s when the Civil Disobedience Movement was at its height, are immortalized in *Kanthapura*. Non-Violent, non-cooperation and non-payment of taxes and other Government dues were treated as those taking prominent part of the Gandhian methods of struggle against foreign rulers. As described in *Kanthapura*, there was something like a parallel government in some parts of India. Men, women and even young boys and girls took an enthusiastic part in it as the novel describes. Thousands of people were jailed generally on the basis of some fictitious charges as happened in the case of Moorthy and other inhabitants of Kanthapura. The behavior of the police with non-violent Satyagrahis was actually as inhuman as this novel narrates. This phase of Indians freedom struggle came to an end with the signing of the Gandhi-Irwin pact, as a result of which Indians were given participation in the government. The dissatisfaction of Moorthy and others, with the goal of Swaraj alone, and their feeling that Gandhi, although noble and selfless, was taken in by the clever Britishers, also reflects what actually happened when Nehru emerged as leader of national importance. Some staunch followers of Gandhi, like Rangamma in this novel, could not imagine anything beyond Gandhism. Gandhi appears in a scene or two in *Kanthapura*:

As C.Sanyal has rightly observed, “The one major Indian novel in English in which he figures more prominently is Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura*. The most potent force behind the independence movement, the Mahatma is a recurring presence in this novel. He has been treated variously as an idea, a myth, a symbol, a tangible reality and a benevolent human being” (P 128)

Moorthy’s austere practice of the Gandhian philosophy creates a stir in the village. All the orthodox men and women raise. Such a cue and cry against Moorthy’s way of doing things that the swami, the custodian of the Santhana Dharma, threatens to ex communicate the whole Brahmin community of the village. Only Ratna, the young widowed daughter of Kanthamma turns out to be the spiritual helpmate of Moorthy. The threat results in Nasimma’s suicide. But Moorthy continues his work undaunted with some vigour and determination. Rangamma, an enlightened lady shows active sympathy for the cause of Moorthy. Active non co-operation movement, no-tax-campaign and picketing the toddy shops swiftly succeed the imprisonment of national leaders. Moorthy, the spiritual guide, a friend and philosopher of the people of Kanthapura leads the villagers ably in launching and carrying on the movement. The strategies adopted by Gandhiji during the freedom movement have been vividly pictured by Raja Rao. The complete Indian atmosphere is neatly brought out by the Rao, for the author deals with some social abuses like untouchability prevailing in

India. The residents portrayed in *Kanthapura* live in segregation according to the caste or class to which they belong. Even the kind and sympathetic narrator says that as a Brahmin, she never entered actually the pariah quarters of the village and Moorthy as a follower of Gandhian principles and ideals worked for the upliftment of the pariahs and even while he is excommunicated, for this, he intensifies his activities.

The socio-economic divisions of the village in various quarters like the pariah-quarter, Weaver's quarter and Brahmin quarter of "four and twenty houses" do provide a veritable picture of a traditional Indian village. The novelist shows his literary skill in evoking familiar pictures of Indian village life through concrete details of their names, houses, their occupations, illiteracy, ignorance of many things in life, starvation of labourers, the intolerable atrocities faced by the coolies of Skeffington Coffee Estate, division of people by the caste and creed exploitation of poor workers by their masters, the evils of child marriage the indirect plea for widow remarriage, etc., all of which beset Indian society as projected and pictured in *Kanthapura*.

Myths play a significant part in Indian life because of the fact that even the most illiterate Indian is well acquainted with mythological stories. For instance, Indians at every level are extremely well acquainted with the stories in the Ramayana and Mahabharata. It is quite natural to compare two loving brothers or friends to Rama and Lakshmana and the narrator does so in the case of her Seenu and Moorthy. In the Myth that Jayaramachar invents about the divine birth of Gadhiji, he is held to be an incarnation of Siva, but Archakka compares him with Rama and India with Sita. Gandhi's going to England to participate in the Round Table Conference is compared to Rama's exile and the Indians who participate in the process of Government are compared to Bharatha who worshipped Rama's Sandals in his absence. The foreign rulers are compared to Ravana and Gandhi is to kill this demon and bring back the enslaved Sita, i.e. India who is under the domination of foreign rulers, back with him after liberating her. His return is expected to be like the triumphant return of Rama to Ayodhya when there was a shower of flowers from the sky. The followers of Gandhi are like Hanuman and they are equally ready to carry out his instructions at any time. Sanyal rightly observes:

"In the novel, Moorthy is presented as a figure much above the level of common human beings. He is an ideal man who has dedicated his life to the selfless service to humanity. To the local people, he is respected as local Mahatma" (P 169).

He further says,

"A myth or legend necessarily deals with a man much higher than the normal level of humanity. Raja Rao uses the device of mythicising facts in order to give his hero that godly status" (P 169).

The reflection of India in *Kanthapura* is also emphasized by its conception of women. Generally speaking, women have held honoured places in Indian society in spite of their

secondary and insecure position in society. The greatest curse of Indian womanhood has been 'Widowhood', that too; child widowhood: Remarriage of widows' has been looked upon as a taboo in India despite the fact that many social reformers Raja Ram Mohan Roy have pleaded for it. In *Kanthapura*, the author has pictured the plight of several widows like Rangamma, Narasamma, Kamamma, Venkamma etc., and for many obvious reasons known to them only, they have not remarried. Ratna is an example of a child widow. Under the leadership of Gandhiji, the women of India started again playing their rightful role in life. Rangamma and Ratna organised a volunteer corps of the women of the village with the instruction that they should not neglect their household work as sign of Indian tradition Thus, Raja Rao has presented the women characters so as to symbolize Indian womanhood. As a matter of fact. 'Indianness' is reflected obviously by the Indianised English. This is true of the diction in which words like KumKum, linga Katha, Bhajan etc., occur frequently.

Raja Rao does not consider English a foreign language. He himself states in his foreword to *Kanthapura*; "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" (P 11). His English springs from the scene and soil of India and seems to have reached maturity in the fields, markets and homes of the country.

It harmonizes well with Indian habits, gestures and ways of thought with its shifts and modulations being authentic. His style has little traces of foreignness with its distinctive quality as 'naturalness' to the core. This naturalness enhances the authenticity of the content which is thoroughly 'Indian' and 'Indianness' Being told in the age old Indian tradition of story-telling, *Kanthapura* is a breathless tale from the beginning to the end abundant in the use of Indian imagery, idioms and proverbs, nearer to their Indian equivalents than Standard English form, both matter and manner. Narsingh Srivastava is right in saying;

"---- as a novelist Raja Rao has been Conscious of the need of using a kind of English expression in which the truly Indian life and sensibility could be Powerfully expressed. He aimed at evolving an Indian English which was to be truly Indian-almost a dialect" (P 108)

To conclude, it may be said that for the first time, an Indian novelist writing in English has handled the novel in such a way as to make it a means of enlarging the frontiers of human consciousness. No doubt, the Indian metaphysical notion of the oneness of all life and life's phenomena has been skillfully assimilated and harmonised *Kanthapura* depicts the close alliance between politics and spirituality coupled with religion which was Gandhiji's main contribution to the public life of India. This is reflected by Raja Rao through the use of mythical element in his novel. In short, let it be said that *Kanthapura* is a fine work of art but it is in intention a novel aiming at rousing the conscience of India and even of the world at large, at the ills and injustices which plagued Indian life in the 1930's. *Kanthapura* does innumerable problems. The most important of them would be, of course, the problem of foreign rule and the depiction of the struggle against it led by Mahatma Gandhi and eradication of untouchability and the rigidities of caste system and ends with a point that the basic ill in India was something more fundamental than conceived by Gandhiji- i.e.

'inequality; uses of idiom, syntax and imagery are thoroughly indianised and the judicious use of Indian myth, legend, mythology, religion, philosophy has rather undoubtedly made Raja Rao the most 'Indian' of the Indo-Anglian novelists.

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