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Dwelling on Language and Nationalism in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*

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Abstract:

Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* is one of the very first novels to depict India's initial tryst with western ideas of nationalism and modernity. The novel chronicles the progression of the anti-colonial movement of the country under the leadership of Gandhi and Nehru from the perspective of the grass root level participants of the movement. The text also takes on issues like caste hierarchy and the women's role during the initial years of the resistance. The present paper explores the nuances of the novel's narrative technique, use of language and engagement with the Indian freedom struggle.

Keywords: Nationalism, language, modernity, narrative.

The third decade of the twentieth century witnessed the first flourishing of Indian novels written in English. It was started in a still colonised India, by writers evidently well educated in various fields and most of them being privy to a larger cultural exchange by studying abroad. With colonisation the knowledge of world literature also came to India. It was a time when foreign scholars, writers were reading and exploring the enriched, thousands of years old culture, religion, philosophy and politics of India and simultaneously Indian intelligentsia was also drawing inspiration from French, Greek, German and undoubtedly English culture. Most of the Indian writers of this generation were of trilingual, privileged enough to know Sanskrit, their mother tongue and English, and for various reasons chose the language of the coloniser as the language of their creative expression. British colonialism and the freedom movement had inspired an atmosphere of self-discovery and introspection among the common people and intellectuals alike. Such engaging times produced literature where India's tryst with European modernity and nationhood were highlighted. The early decades of India's national consciousness were evidently informed by a relentless negotiation with western modernity and existing ideas of tradition of the land.

Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* exemplifies these emerging ethos of nationhood and identity. Thinkers like Partha Chatterjee and Sunil Khilnani have dwelt at length on the complications of adapting the western frameworks of a modern nation state for a country like India which thrives on a heterogeneous culture. So, in order to invent and discover a shared history of the people of India, or to borrow Benedict Anderson's term to visualise our own "imagined community" the nationalist leaders and intellectuals of the time came up with narratives of historical and mythical unity. Ranajit Guha's "Small Voices of History" very eloquently talks about the immense role of constructing history in the process of nation building. Here in comes the unique mythic/narrative technique of *Kanthapura* where Hindu

epics are turned into political allegories and the nationalist leaders the representation or rather incarnations of various gods. The religious performance and reading of *Harikatha* was transformed into stories of the emerging resistance against the Raj.

While locating the novel in the perspective of a postcolonial narrative written during the colonial period, the readers can identify many subversive elements that define the text as a harbinger of a new era in Indian fiction written in English. One of the most crucial aspects of the novel is its intrepid and honest engagement with the caste dynamics of a very traditional Indian village. These caste divisions are readily apparent in the very first pages of the novel, while narrator describes the demography of the small village divided into caste based quarters. This motif of caste hierarchies is repeated throughout the text with the effect of a crescendo towards the conclusion. Now what makes the novel a fascinating read is the India's freedom struggle no longer remains a distant, passive epoch, it becomes something which the readers are a part of. But the fact that the writer was in France when writing his novel, cannot be ignored; as the narrative reads as an insider's account and Raja Rao was never overtly active in India's freedom struggle until the year he published this novel. It was only in the subsequent years that he was actively involved in the freedom struggle.

Set in the decade of 1930's *Kanthapura* is the story of a south-Indian Hindu village and its involvement and contribution in the freedom struggle. *Kanthapura* was a conservative village, self-complacent and preoccupied with religion and harvesting until the day Indian Nationalist Movement slowly creeps in and inevitably engulfs it. What happens to *Kanthapura* was happening all over India in those stirring years from 1919 to 1931 of the Gandhian non-violent, non-co-operation movement for the independence of the country. Much has been made of the "Foreword" with which Raja Rao begins his narrative, as a point of discussion. The "Foreword" is very much self reflexive for an Indian writer living abroad for a decade and writing his very Indian story in English, "The telling has not been easy. One has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own" (v). Meenakshi Mukherjee in her oft quoted essay "The Anxiety of Indianness" claims Raja Rao to be "the first to articulate the anxieties of the Indian novelist in English in his prefatory remarks, ... in the text he works out a strategy for negotiating the contesting claims of language and culture" (2607). In the "Foreword" to *Kanthapura* Rao talks about the problem of style, form, narrative technique and expressing the particular story in English. He also glorifies the Hindu epics Mahabharata and Ramayana and the innumerable Sthala-puranas. He adheres to the Indian grandmother's story telling style in this novel, "It may have been told of an evening, when as the dusk falls, and through the sudden quiet, lights leap up in house after house, and stretching her bedding on the veranda, a grandmother might have told you, newcomer, the sad tale of her village" (vi). He tried to fuse this narrative style in English language. We may question why Rao did not write in his mother tongue Kannada or in any other Indian language, why not even in Sanskrit, why he needed to write in English and then give reason for his writing. The desire for a wide readership in the whole world cannot be the only answer, to add to this we may refer to Meenakshi Mukherjee's view that it is not only a question of preferring one language over another but also of competence. Raja Rao, in his self-reflexive essay "Entering the Literary World" concedes,

If I wanted to write, the problem was, what should be the appropriate language of expression, and what my structural models- Sanskrit contained the vastest riches of any, both in terms of style and word-wealth, and the most natural to my needs, yet it was beyond my competence to use. To marry Sanskrit and Gide in Kannada, and go further, would have demanded an immense stretch of time, and I was despairingly impatient. French, only next to Sanskrit, seemed the language most befitting my demands, but then it's like a harp (or vina); its delicacy needed an excellence of instinct and knowledge that seemed well-nigh terrifying. English remained the one language, with its great tradition (if only of Shakespeare) and its unexplored riches, capable of catalysing my impulses, and giving them a near-native sound and structure. (537-38)

The obvious fact that Rao could so indulgently choose the language of his creative expression places him as the very first of Indian culturally hybrid writers who spent most of his life outside India but wrote fictions with a characteristic Indian essence another example of which is his 1960 novel *The Serpent and the Rope*. We could arguably call him as one of the first generation Indian diasporic writers. The feeling of an essential difference existing between the way of life of the east and the west is more evident in his autobiographical novel *The Serpent and the Rope*. The popular notion of wide marketability of English language fiction is not viable while discussing Rao's choice of language here as *Kanthapura* did not get its due recognition in its initial year of publication, outside India. Meenakshi Mukherjee traces hints of post-modernism in *Kanthapura*. According to her, the novel did not get its due recognition in England in its own time because it depicted a very social story while modernism "with its implicit ideology of the alienation of the artist and the deliberate separation of art from mass culture and community life" was very much in vogue in England (2607).

While discussing Rao's original use of the English language to fit into an Indian narrative, we have to mention the cuss words uttered by the villagers along with their very Indian names. Phrases like "he is my wife's elder brother's wife's brother-in-law", "less strange are the ways of gods than are the ways of men", "kitchen queen", "she's an old sour-milk", "if you are the sons of your fathers, stand up and do what this learned boy says", "shut up, you sons of my woman", "if you are not silent, you will get a marriage greeting today", "you son of my concubine", "Moorthy! The Red-man's judges, they are not your uncle's grandsons"; are very witty and devoid of any kind of reference point to the English language. The whole narrative is interspersed with these kinds of phrases which other than reducing the tension of the narrative also add to the Indianisation of English language. Most of the narrative goes like an orally told story, with some descriptive passages here and there. The writer gives the narrative voice to Achakka, an old woman. She had been personally involved in the events which form the core of the novel and she narrates those years later. Thus, the substance of the novel is made up of the stream of her memory, in which many events and characters have been blurred by the passage of time, and many others have been heightened by her imagination. She is a woman with balanced mind, sound common sense, with the gift of shrewd, intelligent observation and her fair share of prejudices. Her personality colours the

whole non-co-operation movement, the brave resistance of the people and their consequent suffering. All is recollected and narrated with a naivety which is not the author's but the narrators. The device of choosing a woman to tell his story allows Raja Rao to retain in his narrative the idiosyncrasies of Indian oral story telling tradition. The story also follows a month wise narration as Achakka keeps referring to the changing months like *Kartik*, *Vaisakh* etc. It may be worth mentioning that throughout the novel nowhere there is a mention of any particular date or year.

The impact of Gandhian thoughts in Indian Nationalist Movement is immense and Rao depicts Gandhi's ever-growing influence in Kanthapura beautifully. Gandhi does not make a personal appearance in the novel, but he is constantly present in the background, and in every step there are references to important events of the day such as the historic "Dandi March" and the breaking of the "Salt Law". Gandhi aimed at the total involvement of all sections of the Indian people and so launched a comprehensive programme of economic, social and religious uplift and emancipation of the Indian people. His programme of action was fourfold: spinning of the *charkha*, weaving one's own cloth and boycott of foreign cloth and other goods. *Swadeshi* products and *Khaddar* were necessary for *Swaraja*; eradication of untouchability, and other social evils like the *purdah* system, so that women and the so-called lower castes may play their part in the freedom struggle; village uplift, eradication of poverty, illiteracy, casteism, etc and Hindu-Muslim unity. In the novel in discussion Moorthy places this very Gandhian programme of action before the people of Kanthapura. Gandhi's stress was on truth and non-violence and this message was carried to the remote parts of the country by devoted Congress workers. Congress committees were formed in every nook and corner of the country and *satyagrahies* were trained to carry out the programme at the call of the Mahatma. Rao's interest in Gandhian thoughts found its firm voice again in 1998 when he published a biography of the Mahatma, *The Great Indian Way: A Life of Mahatma Gandhi*.

Although the bigger concern of the novel is the Indian Nationalist Struggle, Rao also gives proper attention to the individual characters and their growth throughout the novel. No two characters talk in the same manner, everybody has a distinct style. Moorthy, one of the chief protagonists of the novel, first emerges as a devotee of Gandhian principles, his inexperienced young mind fully accepting those values without any question but as he gains maturity in the course of the novel. Eventually, the repetitive failure of the non-violent crusade prompts him to lean towards a more aggressive facet of the Congress following the footsteps of Nehru towards the end of the novel. In his letter to Ratna he writes,

The youths here say they will change it. Jawaharlal will change it. You know Jawaharlal is like Bharatha to the Mahatma, and 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. (Rao189).

This change of approach on the part of Moorthy may be connected to the historical fact that at the initial stage Gandhi only stood for securing an honourable place for India in the British Commonwealth, but after the "JalianwalaBagh Tragedy" of 1919 and the unprecedented

violence of “Chouri-Choura” many of his followers became disillusioned and finally Nehru was declared the presiding president of Congress in 1929 and they stood for the complete freedom of India.

Now coming to the story of the novel one cannot ignore the fact that it is a predominantly Hindu tale. The main protagonist of the novel, who first wakes the village from its deep slumber with Gandhian thoughts, Moorthy, is a Brahmin, thereby belonging to the highest rank even within Hinduism. He attended one of Gandhi’s meetings and was awestruck, after that he felt within himself a divine inspiration and left his city education to devote himself completely to the greater cause of rescuing the country from the evil clutches of the British. Although Moorthy wanted to imbibe all the teachings of the Mahatma totally his transgression was not complete overnight, he could never fully remove the class consciousness which was so ingrained in him through all the past practices. His reaction when for the first time he enters a *pariah* house vividly shows the burden of a lifelong practice:

Moorthy thinks this is something new.....and thinks surely there is a carcass in the backyard, and it’s surely being skinned, and he smells the stench of hide and the stench of pickled pigs, and the roof seems to shake, and all the gods and all the manes of heaven seem to cry out against him, and his hands steal mechanically to the holy thread, and holding it, he feels he would like to say, ‘Hari-Om, Hari-Om. (75).

Moorthy’s actions lead him to be excommunicated from his caste by the evil designs of Bhatta, the bad Brahmin of the novel. Narsamma, the mother of Moorthy could not bear the pain of her son’s excommunication and dies. Her death liberates Moorthy further from the old shackles of caste system and now there is nothing between him and his greater cause. If we read *Kanthapura* as a nationalist novel where the village Kanthapura is seen as a microcosm of India we will notice that like most nationalist stories here too the theme of sexuality as a basic instinct of human beings is suppressed. Though there is a faint romantic sub-narrative between Moorthy and Ratna, the young widow, hinted at, it is never fully explored. Moorthy was finally free and purified for his crusade. The persons who display an urge of sexual desire are evil in the novel, for example Bhatta and the white ‘sahibs’ of Skeffington Coffee estate. This glorification of and stress on asceticism was a very ancient Indian idea revived during the Freedom Struggle by Mahatma Gandhi to awaken and bring the nation together. How much this non-violent, somewhat timid method of Gandhi foregrounds and constructs the occidental view that the native males of the East are effeminate when compared to the so-called masculinity of the white-West male, is questionable. We cannot deny Gandhi’s tremendous impact in the Indian Nationalist Movement, but the eventual failure of non-violence movement and the horrific ordeal of people during the always criticised Partition also have to be kept in mind.

Everything from religion, philosophy to historical facts was used to raise awareness among the *janata* the common village people. Ratna explains to the women of the village, “Sister, if for the thorny pit the illusioned fall into, you put the foreign Government and for the soul that searches for liberation, you put our India, everything is clear” (106). Facts about

Rani Lakshmi Bai, Tantia Tope, Soldiers' Revolt are also conveyed to the people. All the religious references made in *Kanthapura* are Hindu, the *Harikatha*, Gandhi seen as an incarnation of Shiva, India as Bharatha the daughter of Brahma, India's colonisation as Sita's captivity in Lanka by Ravana, Jawaharlal Nehru as Bharat to Gandhi's Rama. The role of the empowerment of women in the fight for freedom is another dominant theme of the novel. We have many women characters coming forward to participate in the Freedom Struggle transgressing their domestic boundaries. India is seen as woman, a mother, therefore nurturer of the people. The protector of the village is also again a Goddess, Kenchamma. The narrative is of first hand woman's experience and more often than not the men are put in the periphery.

Finally, the displacement of the people of *Kanthapura* has an uncanny resemblance with a coming catastrophe about to happen after some years when India is finally independent and divided into two countries, and the greatest mass deportation ever in the history of mankind happens. The growing defiance of the people of *Kanthapura*, with their picketing of the toddy-booths, boycotting of foreign cloths and finally their refusal to pay revenues resulted in military invasion of the village. The people were brutally beaten, shot, the women were molested and all their property seized to be auctioned. They had to leave their village eventually and finally relocated in a nearby village *Kashipura*, where they were praised and admired by the people for their close involvement in the Freedom Movement.

We cannot deny the obvious limitations of *Kanthapura* as a literary work but it is really a slice of the time of colonised India, where Nationalism replaces the all pervading importance of religion in an orthodox Hindu village. Raja Rao criticises the brutality and unjust British occupation of India and also says that there were people inside the country who also along with the British exploited the native people. Through Achakka's tale the reader has a sense of reliving India's colonised past.

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