

The Essence of Enlightenment in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*

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ABSTRACT

Man's relationship with God in contemporary social reality needs to be explored. A study based on Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* having *rural life at the very centre; sons of soil characters; day to day happenings* reveal a way of living and a view of life taking the readers into time machine. The exploration and revelation of the nature of reality through the narration of human actions and an attempt to capture the mystical or the metaphysical are put to investigation in this paper stimulating deeper and deeper social fabric stratum.

KEYWORDS

Rural life; Raja Rao; *Kanthapura*; *sons of soil characters*; social fabric; mystical metaphysical.

Introduction

Science and Technology have ushered us into this present age in which each individual speaks of inter-stellar spaces and relaxes at test matches. The faculty of English in America is alerted on the 'Precipitate exodus from the English class room'. (Qaiser Zoha Alam) Fortunately the constant demand for English graduates in our developing society and the search for alternatives after an assessment prepare our graduates appropriately. The steady output of distinguished fiction in India till today stands favourable, comparing with the best efforts of the west in term of literary merit. With its acknowledged inwardness with the English language and a rich stock of cultural common place, the promising Indian fictional classics of yester years, be it 'Untouchable, *Kanthapura*, *Swami and his friends*; *All About H. Hatterr*, *Chronicles of Kedaram*, *Train to Pakistan*, *The*

Silver Pilgrimage, *Vermilion Boat*, *Princes*, *Billy Biswas*' and recently Sethi's 'Golden Gate', have surprised the Western world.

Encounter & the Aftermath

Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1930), one of the finest novels of mid-twentieth century in India, is the dramatic tale of how Gandhi's struggle for independence from the British came to a typical village, *Kanthapura*, in South India carving the chief male protagonist Young Moorthy, back from the city with "new ideas," who cuts across the ancient barriers of caste to unite the villagers in non-violent action, which is met with violence by landlords and police and unfolds in a poetic, almost mythical style the rich textures of Indian rural life. The narrator is an old woman, imbued with the legendary history of the region, comments on their actions with observant wisdom that makes this novel as one of India's traditional

folk-epics. This novel of colonial India is post-colonial in spirit deifying Gandhi, a part of the process of decolonizing the Indian mind as in Jayanta Mahapatra's post colonial poem Requiem: "It is a world in itself/this ahimsa/With its mysterious shadows /Lurking under ancient places /That assumes the classes /Self-sustaining light of suns /a redefinition of beauty". Moorthy fights orthodoxy at the social level and the British at the political level through a multifarious zing negotiated through custom and change. There is the alike personality crisis and the post colonial attempt to go back to the roots. The delicate subversion of the harikatha to allegory of India's freedom is quite interesting. All these are microcosmic presentation of the macrocosmic reality but fictionalized for presenting the traditional Indian society which is in quest of its roots. In the hub of theories and schools of thought post modernism or Derridean approach or Lacan's psychoanalytical theory has proved to be a hot cake for the evaluation of the latest works of art. Raja Rao's Kanthapura is a meaningful and inspiring critique on Indian National Movement which provided a philosophical depth and ideological height to Indian English fiction. Female characters like Ratan, Rangamma and Venkamma playing lead roles and this is where the novel appeals most to us. The narrative is a beautiful mingling of the fiction and reality.

Raja Rao's first novel Kanthapura, narrated in the form of a 'sthalapurana' by an old woman of the village, Achakka, is the story of Kanthapura, a traditional caste ridden Indian village in south India. Dominant castes like Brahmins are privileged to get the best region of the village whereas Sudras, Pariahs are marginalized. The village is believed to have protected by a local deity called Kenchamma. The village has got a long nourished traditions of festivals in which all castes interact and the villagers are united.

The main character of the novel Moorthy is a Brahmin who discovered a half buried 'linga' from the village and installed it. A temple is built there, which later became the centre point of the village life. All ceremonies and festivals are celebrated within the temple premises. Hari-Kathas, a traditional form of storytelling of stories of Hari (God), was practiced. One Jayaramachar, a Hari-Katha man narrated based on Gandhi and his ideals. The narrator was arrested because of the political propoganda instilled in the story. The novel begins its course of action when Moorthy leaves for the city where he got familiar with Gandhian philosophy through pamphlets and other literatures. He followed Gandhi in letter and spirit. He wore home spun khaddar. Discarded foreign clothes and fought against untouchability. This turned the village priest, a Brahmin, against him who complained to the swami who was a supporter of foreign government and Moorthy was ex-communicated. Heartbroken to hear it, his mother Narasamma passed away.

Raja Rao is the first Indo-Anglian novelist who has effectively exploited the Gandhian Myth translating reality into poetry. The spirit of Gandhi pervades the whole story. The entire episode of making Murthy 'the Gandhi man' reminds us of Narendra's encounter with Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa in its spiritual awakening. Raja Rao vividly describes the actual recital of a Harikatha in which Gandhi is represented as the holy Avatar of Siva. Even the ideal of Swaraj assumes a divine significance. The Mahatma is compared to Krishna: "men followed him, more and more men followed, as they did Krishna, the flute-player." Gandhi-Bhajans come in handy for Moorthy to rouse the dormant national consciousness of the villagers. The presence of Gandhi is always felt. "Gandhi Mahatma ki Jai" and "Vande Mataram" are vital war-cries of the non-violent soldiers. When news reaches Kanthapura about the

Mahatma's Salt Satyagraha March to Dandi, everyone in Kanthapura eagerly awaits orders to join the march. The arrest of the Mahatma shocks them, but they continue their peaceful fight under the leadership of their saintly Moorthy. Their faith in Gandhi is unshakable: joyously they sing:

"There's one Government, Sister,
There's one Government, Sister,
And that's the Government of
Mahatma."

Mahatma Gandhi is the invisible hero of Kanthapura; the Gandhian image is convincingly integrated with the main action. Perhaps a closer parallel of the Gandhian image of Raja Rao, appears in Mulkraj Anand's *Untouchable* recording the experiences of a young untouchable, Bakha, on one of the ordinary routine days." Bakha stands staring at the flowing humanity. He recalls all that he heard of this man: "People said, he was a saint, that he was an Avatar (incarnation) of the gods Vishnu and Krishna and they said no sword could cut his body, no bullet could pierce his skin, no fire could scorch him." R. K. Narayan's *Waiting for the Mahatma* is based more on history than on legend. The action in Kanthapura concludes with the departure of Gandhi to attend the Round Table Conference in London, soon after the Salt Satyagraha is halted. The range is radically limited—that the story in relation to the village Kanthapura comes to a full stop by the year 1931. The concentration and rapid action of Kanthapura are impressive. Secondly, in Kanthapura the impact of Gandhi is indirect, though not imperceptible, however, it is the archetypal image. It is also a masterly exposition of the Gandhian phase of the Indian National Movement.

The central myth of Kanthapura is given mythical setting caricaturing Rama-Sita, and Ravan, as Mahatma Gandhi (Rama)-Sita (Swaraj) and the British (Ravan). Gandhi endeavors to attain independence, through

ordeals. Kanthapura's puranic texture is reflected in its abundant application of the Hindu myths & legends. However, Kanthapura is primarily a Sthala Purana, but not a mere panegyric or "Gandhi Purana". Of course, Gandhi is the living image that sustains it, the myth-making, hero-worshipping tradition of India regarding him as a remote legendary leader with saintly virtues and divine ordinance. Gandhi, the symbolic prototype of the universal values of life, Truth, Non-violence and Freedom, elevates Sthala Purana of Kanthapura to the status of a Jagat Purana. As a writer who uses metaphysical themes by involving characters with imaginary ideas, out looks and backgrounds. We are forced to examine the personal political, spiritual, and cultural values in his work Kanthapura. Rao contrasts Indian Philosophy and spiritualism with western society's emphasis, on dualism and rationalism. Rao gains his insights into the nature of identity existence illusion and reality his work contains insights emblems mantras, metaphors, and other carries of meanings and instructions that enable the individual to achieve through his own meditations a better understanding of the self through knowledge and truth. Raja Rao skillfully exploits the traditional mythological device in driving home a point as well as the south Indian folk idiom in making the action of the novel authentic artistically convincing. It is a beautiful combination of fact & fiction, myth & history. Kanthapura is Raja Rao's *Ramayana*. Raja Rao's unique highly innovative, experimental, and dynamic prose style, but the deeply spiritual content philosophically rigorous of his works, with the ideas being suggestive of something beyond itself, pointing, ultimately, to the Absolute. Raja Rao considered his writing, a spiritual discipline, a sadhana. Reading him is also a sadhana. Like the great Russian writers Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, his fiction elevates the spirit, taking the reader to a higher plane

of consciousness. "...India, according to Raja Rao, is not a nation, like France or Italy or Germany: India is a state of being (Shalini Dube)... On another occasion he wrote that India is an idea, a metaphysic. My India I carried where so ever I went ... India, Raja Rao implied, is open to whoever can attain it, wherever they may be. And reading his works was an invitation to taste that eternal India — of the Mahabharatha and the Ramayana, of the Upanishads, of Sankara, of Aurobindo, of Tagore, of Vivekananda, and of Gandhi.

Kanthapura is one of the most honest novels I have read in a long time. The novel is vivid in its rendering of the village family culture and as the reader progresses through the book he is engagingly drawn into living itself, into a more moral and meaningful world of the mind that seems so much absent from the recent fiction of our time, Rajarao, with him readily accessible poetic prose in which narration, dialogue and memories, places the reader into the centre of south Indian way of life and the traditional values only to realise that these values are slowly and certainly vanishing in a chanting, hypnotic style. When immersed in the reading of the novel, any non native Indian (NNI) would forget that he was NNI and not Indian. And this is how a reader relates to literature, be it from a developing or developed country. And the novels splendor rests on the trouble-free world of family unit and their relationships. Even the account of death becomes so grandly an affirmation of life. Raja Rao's writing craft is well commendable serving aural traditions of the South Indian and continuing the ancient practice of story-telling through a different medium. However, the theme of *Kanthapura* is modern and set in the present day. He brings forth the India of legend springing a surprise on the reader with all dexterity; the reader may notice the chuckles of Raja Rao that makes his heart heavy. The mythological grand narrations become magic wand in his hands

and he creates this myth in the reader's mind. His masterpiece *Kanthapura* with powerful oral narration grips the reader and the life size characters create an energetic aura. Still the grand narrator does not seem to reach the intense peaks of emotion which either R K Narayan or Mulk Raj Anand achieves so easily in their gentle writing. Raja Rao's work is a not sweet pill to be chewed. One is left with a bitter taste on the tongue; the only guarantee is he is cured.

It would be of much interest now to examine Raja Rao in the light of Naveen's work, *Ampasayya* (1969). Naveen is a natural strong teller who pens in Telugu language and he portrays quite a different student world. With mature realism every little part of his stories expresses the wholeness of the Indian students' condition – with its hopes and anxieties. With the dream like desire to turn inwards it is because Naveen's fiction reflects honestly the stuff of which our lives are made and ordered. His language is graceful, and he writes from the inside of a University campus-life he seems to know so well. 'Amusing at times, Naveen's tolerant picture of students' life in India never attains the sour and derisive flavor that darkness the writings of other South Indian writers – as for example, in the work of Yendamuri, the popular Telugu fiction-writer, This is where Naveen differs from the other Telugu novelists and his novels are written with perfect vision of an insider. He works to a certain order, of quiet tolerance, from within the Indian tradition his fillings with voices of reason. There is an inherent realism, and if this realism brings about with it a loss of hope or fulfillment, it also surprises one into living for some other purpose – as Ravi discovers towards the climax of *Ampasayya*.

A spontaneous fertility

Indian writers – at national level (Raja Rao); and regional level (Naveen) have all

worked their fiction in the traditional manner. Their language is easy and readable, their base rural. Plot, style and their own individual ways of looking at life, have only made the worlds they have chosen to write about more orderly, more plotted and discrete. As a reader it is easy for me to understand how such life is ordered, because most Indians come from similar rural backgrounds – from towns and villages where life has not undergone much change – where interactions continue to take place without undue intellectualization of one's purposes and goals. Life matters for these authors above everything else; it is solely their own experience which they have crafted successfully into their art. They are committed to the language in which they live above everything else; it has urged their fiction to take on relevance beyond the limits of Western Critical Assessment. Majority of writers in India, with no theory of fiction from Bankim Chatterji downwards, have evolved a new kind of form shaped by our various habits of thought, our conscious and subconscious inheritances, speech, symbols and images, tested by our present day living realities integrating the ancient dharmic lessons often. In the present contemporary world – the age of anxiety, despair, negativism and the new renaissance knowledge – the more baffling mystery of life as evil over balances the good. When the creative processes of these passions are understood, a creative criticism does come. The new awareness springs. The emotions love, pain, hatred jealousy, desire and the longing for light against darkness streamline us to life.

Kanthapura is born out of an act of faith on the revolution wrought by the Mahatma in Indian consciousness. To bring out the energy and poetry of the revolution, and to dramatise the power of an idea, once it has gripped the imaginations of the people, is the seminal impulse behind this novel. The old woman's narratology in Kanthapura is neutral and the

readers cease to hear her. The danger arises to hear the voice of writer and the hero. The real Indian consciousness is well reflected in our ancient literary lore like our epics and as a result the fictional works are stories of society facilitating to redefine and reexamine or even re discover the whole complex of values and systems. The image of India and its consciousness puts up to transmit its own identity and create awareness in the minds of global citizens and Indians as well. "A systematic study of culture contact and culture change, with Indian world view as the focus for the westerners to increase their knowledge of acculturation processes." (Harish Raizada)

An all - India character audience both inside and outside India

The novelist writes to be read; the communication of his vision of life is his primary aim and the aim is to think of his audience along with his characters. The reader must be made to see what each situation is. By maintaining 'a dense web', like all novelists Raja Rao tries to reach in and out audience. Realism presents a slice of life with photographic fidelity. Realism is life likeness versus book likeness. (George Becker) The true or false reflexion of reality gives rise to meaningful or artistic trends. "It is the being which determines the consciousness." (Karl Marx) The duty of the real artist is to uncover the hidden meanings of life. It's like 'trust the writer; trust the tale.' Man is the central figure of art or literature constitutes the centre stage of indwelling spirit. Ultimate reality, whatever else it is, is genuine. Bringing it out and accomplishing into reader – writer space blurred itself is the success of our writers and Raja Rao is the pioneer in such hologram where the readers will be on par with him consciously brought into awareness by electromagnetic energy at the psychological level, a process that starts has a beginning and ends with the chuckles of the readers. The appearance and reality, a metaphysical

element outreaches the readers with a capacity to distinguish between knowledge of reality and thus become scientists after roaming in the created fictional space of these writers where reality becomes genuine as opposed to deceptive. (Plato) The ultimate realities that the empowered reader seeks to know are precisely simple things and not variegated. Realistic steadfastness of this category, however, is very diverse; the task of the creative writer or critical genius is to challenge all assumptions and finally arrive at an account of the nature of things that is fully coherent and fully thought-out.

Conclusion

Why do so many theories evolve? The society that exploits and frustrates the individual does not deserve our loyalty. In order to assess the contemporary social reality, the life size fictional characters exhibit freedom in withdrawal from society situating

the individual in international context. The strong local colour sharpens the insight into reality of our way we live in. Let the Regional writer's local colour sharpen our right and complete immersion into Indian Cultural Tradition distinctively possible through translations and the great Indian Translation in desirable and need of the hour. 'This is where it ends and begins' (Witi Ihimaera, Tangi) Man's relationship with God in contemporary social reality needs to be explored. A study based on Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* having rural life at the very centre; sons of soil characters; day to day happenings reveal a way of living and a view of life taking the readers into time machine. The exploration and revelation of the nature of reality through the narration of human actions and an attempt to capture the mystical or the metaphysical are put to investigation in this paper stimulating deeper and deeper social fabric stratum.

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