

Gandhian philosophy and Myths in Raja Rao's Kanthapura

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Abstract:

After Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's Rajmohan's Wife (1864) a new form of Indian English fiction was given by the great trio of Indian Bloomsbury intellectuals - Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, and Raja Rao in the 1930s. Raja Rao is one of the leading authors whose works are set in Indo-English writing. Raja Rao's contemporaries' metaphorically Indian sensibility in Westernised response in his socio-political investigations. Raja Rao's fictional world is more philosophical and metaphysical. His debut novel Kanthapura (1938) is an admixture of history, myth, and folk tales with philosophy and fiction in which fiction has been alienated from philosophy and philosophy has commendable achievement in life. This paper attempts to how in Kanthapura, Raja Rao has a deep-rooted appeal to history and mythology in his artistic recapturing of beauty and imagination.

Key words: socio-political, philosophy, myth and folk tales.

Introduction:

Raja Rao's debut novel *Kanthapura* is based on the political background of the freedom movement gives the picture of the condition of rural India where the masses were oppressed by the imperial power and Gandhi was mobilizing them to achieve their political end in the form of freedom. The novel appears as a literary impetus to India's resistance against the foreign rule in the practice and demonstration of ahimsa and satyagraha. Raja Rao projects India under imperial rule and her non-violent resistance to the imperial authority. In the narrative technique of *Kanthapura*, he focuses on the sway of Gandhian philosophy in India during the freedom movement.

Gandhian philosophy in Raja Rao's Kanthapura:

The novel begins with a graphic description of the village, Kanthapura. The

description of its geo-political location is almost Edwardian and Gandhian.

Achakka describes it as:

“High on the ghats
..., high up the steep
mountains that face
the cool Arabian
seas, up the
Malabar coast ...,
up Mangalore and
Puttur and many a
centre of cardamom
and coffee, rice and
sugarcane”

The novel is set against the backdrop of political awareness and struggle, it incorporates a number of characteristics from traditional Indian life and culture. Raja Rao presents the realistic image of life in an Indian village community with its belief in old traditions, customs, rituals, superstitions, caste system, heavy reliance on religion, and local deities. The story narrated by

Achchaka, an elderly widow of the village belongs to the past and present but it prognosticates the future.

Describing the Gandhian revolution he has projected his vision into an undefined future where the story of the present becomes a legendary history. In Kanthapura, Raja Rao presents the social, political, and cultural life of the Indians in a historical moment. It evinces Rao's keen interest in a search for continuity of the Indian tradition.

As Srinivas says:

“He combines in himself both the traits of historian and philosopher; while as a historian he is concerned with the ancient tradition of India, as a philosopher he tries to discern the underlying ideals and values” (Srinivas: 106).

He connects the past and the present to suggest the continuity of the living Indian tradition in the demonstration of values through ahimsa and satyagraha in Gandhi's behaviour and reasons. It is rightly observed:

“Gandhi came to be looked upon by the mass of the people as a Mahatma before he became the undisputed political leader of India ... the asceticism of Gandhiji, his

simple life, his vegetarian diet, his adherence to truth and his consequent fearlessness - all combined to give him a halo of saintliness. His loin-cloth was reminiscent of Christ, while his sitting posture at the time of lecturing was reminiscent of Buddha” (Bose: 125).

Various activities performed by Gandhi during the freedom movement are performed by Moorthy in the novel. Moorthy is the local Gandhi for the villagers. He almost in the image of Gandhi tries to eradicate untouchability. He organizes a series of religious activities like the installation and consecration of Siva Linga and unites the Kanthapurans to expel the common enemy, the Britishers, and the caste demons. He explains the financial system of khadi and the importance of charka to the villagers and persuades them to take to spinning in their spare time.

He says; “Spinning is as purifying as praying”

The village Kanthapura is a micro India where there is a revolutionary consciousness among the masses under the

sway of Gandhian ideology. Kanthapura has a metaphorical change under Moorthy's transformative leadership. The villagers have accepted him as a committed Gandhian for his devotion to Gandhi and his conceptual dimension of protest to the imperial authority. His superhuman qualities are quite Gandhian for his dedication to selfless service. He is regarded as a local Mahatma for whom Satyagraha is not a policy but a philosophy and ahimsa, a method of self-estimation to achieve his political goal and personal happiness in life.

Secular spirit and spiritual passion have a spontaneous flow on Kanthapura's sociology. There are,

“Hindu,
Mohammedan,
Christian or Pariah
... all equal before
God. Don't be
attached to riches ...
for riches create
passions, and
passions create
attachment and
attachment hides
the face of Truth ...
for Truth is God, ...
it is the only God ...
for our mother is in
fattered weeds and
a poor mother
needs clothes to
cover her sores. If
...the money that
goes to the Red-
man will stay
within your country
and the mother can
feed the foodless,
and the milkless
and the clothless.

He is a saint, the
Mahatma, a wise
man and a soft
man, and a saint”
(22).

Though the people vary on castes and socio-economic divisions they live under the impact of Gandhian ideology and undergo a gradual transformation. They stand united in response to the call of Gandhi. The village is a backward village where socio-economic divisions are more on the caste categories of people like brahmins, pariahs, potters, weavers, and Sudras. They are backward but united under Gandhian ideology. Gandhi's Non-cooperation Movement provides a kind of incentiviveness to the people. Moorthy is converted to a Gandhian incidentally as he has touched Gandhi's hand in a dream. There are historical references like the freedom struggle, the Non-cooperation Movement and the Dandi March, etc. There is also the historical references in Gandhi's idea of women empowerment, Ratna's reading of the Vedantic texts, her urging the village women to fight against the cruelty of the Britishers, narrating the tales of Rani Laxmi Bai, and the Rajput women who had fought along with their husbands. Like men volunteers the women volunteers of Kanthapura form 'Sevika Sangha' and initiate them in the mantra of 'ahimsa' as 'services', and prepare themselves physically, mentally, and morally to face the 'lathi' of the British rulers.

Gandhi's method of non-cooperation and process of civil disobedience was appealing to the common people. The villagers of Kanthapura had accepted Gandhi's ideals and path of ahimsa which was reiterated by Moorthy who considered them not as

warriors but as soldier saints. Moorthy's idea of nation is that of Gandhi's imagined nation in a macro sense for which the villagers acknowledge him as a 'Small Mountain' and Gandhi, a 'Big Mountain' (127). The Kanthapurans believe in Gandhian principles of universal love, fasting, the practice of brahmacharya, non-violence, and accepting the protest of enemies and opponents with love.

Myths in Raja Rao's Kanthapura:

“Myths can't be translated as, they did in their ancient soil.

We can only find our own meaning in our time.”

-Margaret Atwood

Myths are integrated into the religious doctrines of a particular culture in which the people of a community consider it sacred and factual. Myths contain supernatural and divine elements, folktales, and legends which often appear to be light-hearted, entertaining, and fictive. In fact, mythologies are historically pre-historic and characteristically pre-scientific but the scientific world imbibes its characteristics in modern time and perpetuates a mythic tradition. Myths are based on the conceptual facts in man's anthropological and psychological perspectives.

Raja Rao in his novel Kanthapura uses myth as a technique to focus on the archetypal situations of the freedom movement. He uses it in the novel mythologising the Gandhian freedom movement.

K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar rightly remarks:

“The political revolution is thus transcended and

assimilated into the racial heritage as myth and legend” (390).

By weaving the mythical personages and situations from the Ramayana in the novel he draws mythical parallelism and extends our understanding of India's pre-independence situation in its historicity. With the fusion of history and myth in contemporaneity, the novelist makes us aware of our past in order to undertake the responsibility for our future. He has fused myth and history artistically in the novel and narrates the epic struggle of Indians for their freedom.

The myth of Kenchamma has been used to explain the conflict between good and evil. The Kanthapurans believe that Kenchamma saves people from cholera and smallpox. People suffering from these diseases get well only because of the blessings of the goddess. There is a close association between goddess Kenchamma and her daughter, the river Himavathy which acts as a life-giving force with its immense power. Rao writes in the 'Foreward' of Kanthapura:

“There is no village in India, however mean, that has not a rich Sthala-purana or legendary history of its own. Some god or god-like hero has passed by the village-Rama might have rested under this pipal tree, Sita might have dried her clothes, after her bath, on this yellow

stone, or the Mahatma himself, on one of his pilgrimages through the country, might have slept in this hut, the low one, by the village gate. In this way the past mingles with the present, and gods mingle with men to make the repertory of our village grandmother always bright. One such story from the contemporary annals of my village I have tried to tell” (Rao: 1971:5).

Raja Rao has essentially derived the mythical concept from the Ramayana and the Gita and has practiced it in the socio-political sphere of his own. Gandhi like Shiva has his third eye to destroy the enemies. As Shiva’s Kailash Mountain is beyond corruption, Gandhi visions a nation to be free from the corrupting influences of the imperial authority. His idea of ‘Swaraj’ has been compared to the three eyes of Shiva: “self-purification, Hindu-Moslem unity, Khaddar” (20)

Drawing the parallel between Harish Chandra and Gandhi, Rao narrates:

“Like Harish Chandra before he finished his vow, the gods will come down and dissolve

his vow, and the Britishers will leave India, and we shall be free, and we shall pay less taxes, and there will be no policemen” (172).

The novel as a mythical text demonstrates the Gandhian freedom struggle in India’s Pre-Independence socio-political context with a reference to Rama’s (Gandhi’s) attempt to liberate Sita (Bharatmata India) and kill Ravana (the imperial power). The Harikatha-man leads the Kanthapurans into the complex tradition of India where they actively participate in the freedom struggle. He reminds them how Valmiki had gone to Brahma and requested him to send somebody to this earth in order to free his daughter from the foreign yoke.

Raja Rao also envisions ‘the mother image’ and ‘mother-principle’ in the supreme quality of women in his application of myth in the novel. He thinks of women in the mother principle, the center of the family, and the goddess of tolerance. He applies the ancient Vedic image of woman in animals and in nature who stands for infinite patience, and symbolic purity with love, patience, and tolerance.

KRS Iyenger rightly remarks:

“It is thus with sure racial insight that the Raja Rao has made the Cow’s mother-gait and silent tears symbolic of India’s, the mother’s, travail and the cow’s infinite

patience and veiled power as symbolic of the mother's genius for surviving her sorrows and transmuting them into great joy to come" (390).

Conclusion:

In conclusion we may say that Gandhian philosophy influenced Raja Rao so much and the present novel, *Kanthapura* shows an authentic picture gallery with living human beings. The weaving of ancient myths into the structure of the novel gives it the quality of timelessness that all great works of art have. By mythicising the heroic- struggle and self-sacrifice of the people of the south Indian village, he has created a new sthala-purana, a new local legend. Raja Rao deals with the theme of patriotism to make us aware of the nation's history, myths, culture, religion particularly on the basis of Gandhian philosophy in *Kanthapura*.

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