



IDEA OF NATIONALISM IN RAJA RAO'S *KANTHAPURA*

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Raja Rao's literary products and philosophical stand has brought him the status of a classical novelist. His fiction has attracted considerable critical attention everywhere; in the country as well as in the west. M K. Naik aptly attempts to locate Raja Rao's contribution in the Indian Writing in English in his book *Twayne's World Authors: A Survey of the World's Literatures*. He writes: *Raja Rao has presented a creative vision which possess an astonishing origination and distinction. Perhaps of all the Indian writers of fiction in English, it is Raja Rao whose work is, both in content and in form, the most 'Indian', though bought to Indian fiction in English many elements in which it has previously been largely deficient: an epic breadth of vision, a metaphysical vigour and depth of thought, a symbolic richness, a lyrical fervour, and an essential "Indianness" of style. As a result, he emerges as perhaps the finest painter of the Indian scene and of East-West confrontation of the greatest symbolist and myth matters, and the only truly philosophical novelist in English that India has so far produced.* (Naik, Preface) Rao's literary endeavour presents an area of promise because of the fact that he offers a multi-dimensional experience to his readers. He arrests their attention. Out of serious concerns which range from timeless & temporal, metaphysical and social, local and international etc. He has emerged as the writer with innovations. Evaluating this aspect Ragini Ramchandra writes, *Unlike any other Indian English writer; Raja Rao makes India real not only to the Europeans but to Indian themselves. His books do not amount to more interminable odysseys of their inward looking protagonists, for then invariably sharpen and enrich our consciousness.* (Ramchandra, Introduction)

Raja Rao is one of the most widely acclaimed Indian English novelists whose fame rests on wide range of his intellectual, spiritual, national,

political & social thought content. *Kanthapura* (1938) which depicts the mirror images of contemporary Indian society emerges as an ancient classic narrates all affairs of social milieu; through the picture of small village Kanthapura Rao reveals his intense knowledge and understanding of Indian village life. He strongly displays deep & firmly rooted passion for India's struggle for freedom & spiritualism. His nationalistic zeal and spiritual concerns begin with his first novel *Kanthapura*. *It is believed as an epic of freedom struggle, on all sides of India's immensity and the creative construction of a work of fiction through nationalism and spirituality.* Meenakshi Mukherjee expresses her views in this regard as : *Kanthapura is narrated by an old woman to a hypothetical listener....Raja Rao's choice of this narrator serves several purposes at once. Making this old woman the narrator enables Raja Rao to mingle facts and myths and in an effective manner. For the old woman, Jawaharlal is a Bharatha to the Mahatma who she believes will slay Ravana so that Sita may be freed. For her Gandhi has attained the status of God and Moorthy is regarded Avatar in Kanthapura. The characteristically concrete imagination of the uneducated mind pictures the Mahatma as large and blue like the Sahyadn mountain on whose slopes the pilgrims climb to the top, while Moorthy is seen as a small mountain. To her the Satyagraha becomes a religious ceremony to which she devotes her sacred ardour.* (Mukherjee, 141)

It is known fact that the Indian freedom movement gained true pace under the able leadership of Mahatma Gandhi since 1920s which made powerful impact on Indian life and sensibility and is even marked in the novel where Rao attunes himself with his philosophical concern for Gandhian thoughts of non-violence, untouchability, truth and shows fascination for Vedanta. The fact is that the

very concept of nationalism means alien to India before the 19th Century as a reaction to the British colonial rule in India. Alans Kohn in Nationalism: Its meaning & History Comments: *Nationalism in India is not as a vehicle of individual liberty but as adoration of collective power.* (Kohn, 29)

As a vehicle of to collective power, Raja Rao in *Kanthapura* shows himself pre-empired with Indian themes, Indian character life, manners, etc. which makes his novel unmistakably national. At the same time, religion takes over Indian life. The temple performs an inseparable role in their life. Rao brings in element of spiritualism in India through myths & legends prevailing in Indian society. He presents *Kanthapura*, a small village with its deities & goods. There are many things like goddess, hill and a river which manifest the picture of Indian village with spiritual perspective.

Raja Rao opens the novel with information regarding the place *Kanthapura*. The grandmother recites a distinctive *sthala-purana* about the goddess: *She called a demon ages, ages ago, ademon that had come to ask our yung sons as food and our young women as wives. Kenchamma came from the Hevens... and she waged such a battle and she fought so many a night that the blood soaked and soaked into the earth, and that is why the Kenchamma Hill is all red. If not, tell me, sister, why should it be red only from the Tippur stream upwards, for a foot down on the other side of the stream you have mud, black and brown, but never red? Tell me, how could this happen, if it were not for Kenchamma and her battle? Thank heaven, not only did she slay the demon, but she even settled down among us, and this much I shall say, never has she failed us in our grief.* (Rao, 2)

The novel realistically presents the social and political milieu of India during the period from 1919 to 1930 when Gandhian movement went on with full strength where he attempted to transform the entire nation into an army of disciplined and non-violent freedom fighters, ceremony related to the farming, the weddings, all these propose the way of Indian life.

Kanthapura is a work of social realism, of nationalism and spirituality H.M. Williams mentions: *Kanthapura, which looks in many ways like a realistic*

epic of the freedom struggle, turns out on introspection to be first of Raja Rao's explorations of the nature of India... Raja Rao constantly invites us to see life as symbolic... (Williams, 71)

Rao brings out the fact about Gandhi's belief that politics and religion are inextricably mated together; *Kanthapura* evinces this divine truth that man's status in the society is spiritual as much as it is political. *Kanthapura* emerges to be a laboratory of the Gandhian thought and theory. Raja Rao's acute awareness of the spiritual ideals and values of ancient India and its place and impact on the emotional make-up of the inhabitants of this South Indian Village during the period when Gandhi's personality and thought was a force to be reckoned with. Iyengar aptly comments that *he novel is a veritable grammar of the Gandhian myth.* (Iyanger, 87)

Religious fervour in *Kanthapura* is blended with social realism in such a way that the ideas of Gandhiji are easily comprehended by the villagers. The impact of Harikathas is ennobling and innovating and even the old women cannot remain detached. Gandhiji had been a divine man and a saint.

Kanthapura, the little village, forms the microcosm of the Indian subcontinent is shown to come to life where movement for national freedom during twenties and thirties worked on successfully. The village is located in the province of Kara, situated high on the ghats and the steep mountains facing the Arabian sea Like *Kanthapura*, thousands of villages of India had woken up to fight the alien rulers. The remote village is caught in the maelstrom of the freedom struggle of the 1930s and is transformed into living symbol of Gandhism. R.S. Singh's observation is noteworthy in this regard of nationalism and spirituality: *It may be clarified at outset that Kanthapura, is not an allegory because the comparison between Gandhi-British rule and Rama-Ravana situation is not elaborate and complete. It is only a convenient comparison. A villager born and brought up in Indian Tradition understands easily a contemporary problem if it is explained through fable or an episode of the Ramayan or the Mahabharat or the Gita etc. Moreover, the narrator, being an old woman found it easier to explain subtle thoughts of Mahatma Gandhi*

and the complications of contemporary situation through the widely-known fables, legends, and religious stories of god, demons and supermen. The stories of the Ramayan are repeated ad nauseum in our villages. Therefore, it is but natural that a novel dealing with political awareness takes into consideration the rural vocabulary and obsessive images. (Singh, 82)

The use of the religious metaphor helps Raja Rao's narrator to explain the subtleties of the freedom movement. It is a part of Raja Rao's narrative technique. The narrator blends the past with the present. Myths coexist with contemporary reality. The strength to fight the British comes from the religious faith. For the illiterate villagers, the contemporary problems like those of the freedom struggle can be explained through scriptures which form the psyche of the Indians. The appeal of these religious books has the efficacy to inspire the simple villagers to join the Satyagrahis. The villagers, now and then, invoke the spirit of goddess Kenchamma for the success of the freedom movement. Ram festivals, Krishna festivals, Gandhi Festivals with all religious fervour, the Bhajans and Hari-Katha become popular and sustain the spirit of the Kanthapurians. They ascribe the success of the movement to the blessings of these deities. Temples are used to recruit members for the Congress, and they administer the oath of allegiance to the party and its ideologies, particularly, of Ahimsa, Love and Truth in the sanctum sanctorum

Gandhi is a vast symbol of ideal life-code, of a holy and noble person. Achakka, the narrator is like Shelley's Westwind, a symbol of rebirth and regeneration. Moorthy becomes a symbol of a modern progressive and spiritual leader. At times he is a Bhakt Prahalad, a *messiah* of the *pariah*, a *symbol of new life in Kanthapura*. *Moorthy is a true symbol of Vedanta*. He states: "There is but one force in life and that is Truth, and there is but one God in

life and that is Love of mankind, and there is one God in life and that is God of all. Moorthy says that he is just "a pebble among pebbles of the river, and when the floods come, rocked by rock may be buried. This statement suggests his victory over egoism. His recitation of "Shivoham, Shivoham" is purely Vedantic. A sheer glimpse of Gandhi thrills him. Moorthy appears to be the alter ego of his creator. C.D. Narasimhaiah remarks: "The author's own self is projected so largely...to be inescapable, inevitable". In an interview with Shiva Niranjana, Raja Rao frankly admits: "Moorthy is myself."

The total destruction of Kanthapura towards the end of the novel is symbolic of new life emerging out of the dead one. Just as a new Phoenix arises out of holy ashes of the burnt one, Kashipura becomes new one. It is a purgatorial process that gives a new life. Rajesh K. Pallan summarises the entire process: *...The end of novel is like the end of Kalyuga with the Pralaya or inundation engulfing the whole village. All the villagers leave Kanthapura to settle in Kashipura. Range Gowda, the one-time head of the village, goes to Kanthapura only to find, 'there is neither man nor mosquito in Kanthapura.'* *This is undoubtedly a change from yuga cradling into another, and pralaya indicates the end of cyclical civilization and the preparation for the new beginning and the trumpet call of change; is head by Range Gowda in the end of the novel whose hear 'beat' like a drum.'*

Kanthapura is an epic of freedom struggle, encompassing India's vastness within its artistic structure of a work of fiction, especially the grand battles fought on the field of the villages. The role of the villages in freedom struggle has not, hitherto, been adequately appreciated by historians. It is a marvel of narrative technique, a blend of *puranic* style, symbols, myths, religious metaphor and linguistic experiments.

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