

Raja Rao's Kanthapura: As a Dominantly Ideational Document of India in Microcosm

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ABSTRACT

Madhepura)Kanthapura is a small village of about a hundred houses in the district of Kara in Mysore South India. It is situated on the slopes of the Western Ghats which form a wall along the Malabar Coast facing the Arabian sea. It is situated by the river Himavathy, the source of a mountain close-by Roads that lead to Kanthapura are narrow and dusty. The village is divided into a number of quarters. First, there is the Brahmin quarter. In this part some houses are quite big. There are also the Kannaya House people and their houses are the biggest. There are also the Temple House people and fig tree House people in the Brahmin quarter. The people of Kanthapura believe in a number of gods and goddess, too. The Goddess Kenchamma whose abode is on the Kenchamma Hill is believed to be the presiding deity of the village. It is she who protects the villages from famine and disease. It is she who saves them from the cholera or the small-pox. The people have full faith in the legend that long, long ago the goddess fought with and killed a demon which had laid waste the countryside. This is only a part of the red hill.

In Kanthapura, we are given a detailed account of its topography, of its crops, of its poverty, of its division into various quarters the Brahmin quarter, the Pariah quarter etc, and of the illiteracy, superstitions, petty rivalries and jealousies of its people. The novel is a portrait gallery full of the portraits of a number of living, breathing human beings. It is realized that Kanthapura is symbolic of a wider and larger world, that in short, it is a microcosm of India herself.

Key words: *microcosm , topography, superstitions, symbolic, socio-political, envisaged, metaphysics, instinctual , infinitely, archaic , confrontation, manifestation, annihilated, antithetical, mimetic, hierarchy, untouchability, ideology, spiritualization, incarnation, immortality, resurgence, matrix, chronology, sustenance, chief motif, divine phenomenon, triangular, mythicising*

In Kanthapura, Raja Rao deals with man in relation to society and socio-political environments. His vision undergoes a perceptible change gradually. As the spiritual crisis in him deepens, he develops more and more interest in religion, philosophy and metaphysics. Life

here is envisaged as the merging of the self into the self. The victory through surrender is not act of blind faith. The surrender is actually the outcome of the revelation. It is through instinctual knowledge that Ram Krishna Pai recognizes the beautified of women with his background in the

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formal discipline of Western education predominantly.

Behind the whole archaic existence of Indian life may be found an operation of the principle of myth meta-physical attitude of the traditional society towards time as cyclical occurrence as distinct from the Western Judaeo-Christian concept of time as a straight line. The legendary structure is sacred and infinitely repeatable. In repeating the myth in actual life in the form of recital of the deeds of mythical heroes, the archaic man lives in sacred to him. Raja Rao's first novel *Kanthapura* narrates the confrontation between the static, archaic existence of a Hindu Village and the historical reality of the present in the form of the Gandhian socio-political manifestation and the historical preoccupation which is undeniable. But the Indian ethos has always consistently attempted to perceive a historical fact, the existential reality of an individual life, in the mould of a set legend or myth so that the historical person may be annihilated in the archetype which is eternal. There lies the rationale of Raja Rao's attempt to balance the two antithetical forms, the mimetic and the mythic.

The action of *Kanthapura* starts as narration of how life in a remote Kannada village, protected in its static existence by the timeless figure of Kanchamma, the presiding deity, revolves in peace and piety within the traditional rigid Hindu hierarchy of caste. Moorthy, who takes a prominent part in the religious activities which seem to continue the very life of the village, is a Gandhiman that is the follower of Mahatma Gandhi, who organizes Gandhi business, in the form of teaching the untouchables and popularizing spinning as a means to economic independence.

Precisely *Kanthapura* is the story of an Indian village with that name. Surprisingly there is no central character, other than the village,

what happens to it, what it becomes. So village life is certainly more closely at the heart of the novel than any of the other works, in spite of the fact that Raja Rao describes the movement of the village from solidarity to complete and utter annihilation.

Kanthapura is thus any village in India, India in microcosm. Thus Raja Rao's maiden novel *Kanthapura* presents the Gandhian ideology of non-violence and the abolition of untouchability. The great importance given to caste, the mythical presentation of Gandhi and mother India and the spiritualization of the Freedom Movement within the parameters of Indian cultural convention, imply the tremendous impact of Gandhian ideology in *Kanthapura*. The references to the Karma philosophy the omnipresence of God, the immortality of soul and the doctrine of incarnation which are derived from the *Bhagwad Geeta*, signify the novelist's fascination for Vedanta. Raja Rao, in fact, is a complex novelist. His artistic acumen is highly eclectic. He frequently refers to the ideas enshrined in the *Upanisad* and the *Bhagwad Gita*. He draws on Vedantic and non vedantic doctrines, such as the Advaita Vedanta of emptiness of self and Buddhist Hindu Tantric thought with ease and authority.

Raja Rao's aim in *Kanthapura* is to create a style which will reflect the rhythms and sensibilities of the Indian psyche, and since it is in Sanskrit that the Indian mind has found its most consummate linguistic expression, he has tried to adapt his English style to the movement of a Sanskrit sense.

Apparently a novel, of political resurgence, it bristles with many myths which Raja Rao has finely knitted into his creative matrix. It is a fictional rendering of *Sthala Puran* the legendary history of a place of a village embedded in it are the localized myth of goddess

Kenchamma and her daughter, Himawanthy. The well known epic or Puranic myths are also revitalized in the novel as it dramatizes the philosophy of selfless action as expounded in the Bhagwad Gita. The Polarities between the good and the evil as exemplified in Rama and Ravana are used to freedom against the brutal force of the Red man.

The Indian Struggle of freedom is equated with the great war of the Mahabharata and Kanthapura becomes a veritable Kurukshetra. Raja Rao has mythologized even the historical character the forces of good and evil, truth and untruth, love and hatred. The Indian myth of time and chronology has also been employed to present the change from one civilization to another as a continuum cyclical process. Rites and rituals permeating the novel lend credibility to the suggestion of mythical parallels in it.

The story of Kanthamma's setting in Kanthapura finds mythical parallel in the Ganga Puran. As the river Ganga came down from the heaven to this earth for the purification of the mortal remains of his cursed ancestors', so Kenchamma came down from the heaven to the rescue of Kanthapurians. The divine grace of their problems to the will of their Goddess is so much so that they invoke her grace to destroy the British Government. Thus the myth of Kenchamma has been used to explain the conflict between the good and the evil and the whole complex of human activity dominated by the Goddess.

Several myths have been associated with river Himawanthy the daughter of Kenchamma. The myth knit around the river is also local in character and people draw inspiration and sustenance from it. Raja Rao created a veritable Sthala Puran in this novel and the tale of Kenchamma is told in full detail to acquaint the reader of the local deity's influence. Moreover, the essential differences between the well known

Puranic Myth and the Sthala Puran demands the detailed description because of the reader's unfamiliarity with the later but as soon as the local legend has been narrated and established its function becomes the same as that of a more well known myths.

Kanthapura appears to be a dynamo of the Gandhian thought and theory. The chief motif of Raja Rao in Kanthapura is his 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.

In Kanthapura religious fervor 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 phenomenon. He is a saint the Mahatma, a wise man and a soft man and a saint. It is worth while to suggest that Dandi March has been portrayed as a pilgrimage. This is Moorthy, the Gandhian who keeps the village people with day today activities of the Mahatma while he was on the Dandi March.

Interestingly enough, whatever success the freedom fighters hope to attain in their struggle against the British is ascribed to the deity they worship. As more freedom fighters arrive from other parts of the country to join the struggle in Kanthapura, the villagers pray to Shiva to accept them in the movement. Believing that the soul is immortal and indestructible, the Satyagrahis cheerfully plunge into the freedom movement without fear of death. The emphasis on the religious faith of the freedom fighters, who derive inspiration from the Ramayana or the Geeta, affirms the novelists abiding belief in the eternal values of Indian metaphysics.

The whole of the Indian tradition is brought up-to date, along with pertinent persuasions for the present, flows into the villagers, because it is rendered in and recommended to the villager's own idiom. Knathapura proves to be a milestone in combining the colonial complex and winning respect for the Indian- Indian, in-form and content. Hence it becomes a potent weapon for creative use of English for the expression of a truly Indian sensibility.

The villagers are depicted in realistic colours. Their names are made descriptive in nature. It is a typical rural way. For instance Bent legged Chadrayya, Cardamom field Ramchandra, coffee planter Ramayya, corner house- Moorthy, front house Akkamma, cold bangle Somanna, Nine- beamed House Range Gowda,, Nose-Scratching Nanjamma, Patwari Nanjunda, Temple Rangappa, and Waterfall Vekamma. Here nature is living being and the hills, rivers, fields, and animals have a distinguished presence, and personality. Animals are referred to : Meanwhile the cattle were coming out of the main door the Whitty, the Blotchy and the one horned and Lakshmi and Gouri.

Many hills and fields are specifically named: Bear's Hill, Bebbur field, Big bund field, Devil's field, Plantation field, Serpent field, Tank field, Triangular field. The language in the novel is saturated with Indian idiom and rural colour. Like Mulraj Anand Raja Rao seems to translate simultaneously from a dialect Kannada in his case. He includes many words from the Indian languages : Ahimsa, Dhoti, Harikatha, Hobli, Khanda, Karait, Magh, Maistric, Mandap, Malech, Mutt, Odes, Pheni, Pushya, Sravan, Tirtham, to name a few.

The Gandhian movement spreads in Kanthapura and the village becomes a part of all India Panchayat, a territory to be ruled by a parallel easily discernable all over India. Here

the religious elements and the social and political issues are artistically transformed into entity. It is natural that prayers and national songs are sung side by side. The novelist embodies peasant sensibility in Kanthapura. Thus, it is any village in India, India in microcosm. Kanthapura is a regional novel in this larger sense. Kanthapura is a microcosm of the microcosm, for what happens in Kanthapura was happening all over India during those stirring days of the Gandhian freedom struggle.

Conclusion:

Kanthapura is a great regional novel, as well as an interesting Sthala-Purana. The novelist rises from the particular to the general and by the use of myth and legend gives to the freedom struggle of the Kanthapurians and all India characters. By mythicising the heroic-struggle and self-sacrifice of the people of the South Indian village, the novelist has created a new Sthala-Purana, a new local legend. Though Knathapura is a regional novel, it represents the universal elements. Hence Knathapura is India in microcosm.

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