
The Puranic Influence On Kanthapura

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Abstract

After the study of Raja Rao's short stories, his novels bring a wider scope for Indian thought, tradition and quest. 'Kanthapura' (1938) is Rao's first novel. It is a classic of its own kind. The influence of India's Sanskrit classics on the writer is quite obvious. Rao has brought the Vedic-Puranic-Epic thought and tradition in this novel. It has been written on the Puranic pattern. The way in which the Kanthapurians worship the village-Goddess is absolutely traditional. The gathering of people near the temple proves their unshakable faith in her. Even today, this tradition is maintained in Indian villages. Kanthapura (1938) describes the Gandhian movement against the British rule in India. Gandhi is an incarnation of Rama for the villagers, and the foreigners represent the ten-headed Ravana. The Satyagrahi in prison is the divine Krishna. The novel shows the whole drama of the Gandhian revolution mixing politics with mythology, using ancient mythological devices in order to mix up Indian folk tradition. Gandhi is of the view that politics and religion are inseparably woven together. Kanthapura evinces this divine truth that man's state in the society is spiritual as much as it is political. He has employed three types of myths in his novels- (a) Puranic Myths (b) Localised Myths and (c) Rites and Rituals. The Puranic myths pertain to the binary opposition of the good and the evil symbolized through the character of Rama and Ravana

Key Words: Kanthapura , Puranic Myths, Localised Myths and Rites & Rituals.

Introduction

After the study of Raja Rao's short stories, his novels bring a wider scope for Indian thought, tradition and quest. It is well known to all that Rao is not a prolific writer. But within the meagre range of his works, he has preserved and promoted Indianness from many viewpoints. 'Kanthapura' (1938) is Rao's first novel. It is a classic of its own kind. The influence of India's Sanskrit classics on the writer is quite obvious. Rao has brought the Vedic-Puranic-Epic thought and tradition in this novel. It has been written on the Puranic pattern. The opinions of Dr. V.N. Mishra and Sachchidananda Vatsyayan may aptly be applied to this novel. They opine:

.....the West has gradually re-awakened to the value of myth not only in the enrichment but even the survival of human personality. The Indian mind has always conceived of change within framework of continuity; a new event is regarded not as a historical product of preceding events but rather a re-enactment of the first event of creation.¹

The way in which the Kanthapurians worship the village-Goddess is absolutely traditional. The gathering of people near the temple proves their unshakable faith in her. Even today, this tradition is maintained in Indian villages. When the Harvest is ready, they worship their Goddesses, offer 'Chunari' and 'Puris'. Every village-goddess in India is supposed to have done something miraculous like Goddess Kenchamma. In fact, every Indian village has some blind faith and traditional rituals. The locale of the village 'Kanthapura' is thoroughly natural and the arrangement of village is also traditional. Brahmins, Patels, Pariahs, Bhattas and Shudras live in one and the same village but their houses are situated in different rows. It is a happy note that there is unity in diversity in the village. There have been no communal riots in the village since the unknown period. They live in perfect harmony. They are culture-bound and tradition-bound. They do not react against the evils of caste-system. There is no problem of the rotten practices of the Brahmins in the village. The Brahmins enjoy social supremacy in the novel. The Shudras and pariahs of the village are satisfied with their social status. The miserable social and financial condition of the Kanthapurians becomes Rao's concern, though they are not worried about it. The twin problems that Mahatma Gandhi was facing during the freedom movement were political and social as well. It is finely delineated in the novel by Raja Rao.

Kanthapura (1938) describes the Gandhian movement against the British rule in India. It quickens the process of social change in Indian villages from which begins the action of the novel led by Moorthy, who is the confluence of the three strands of experience that make in the action of Kanthapura — the political, the religious and the social. These ideas of the movement are deeply rooted in the culture of the people. Thus the entire atmosphere of the novel echoes the Gandhian struggle and movement which increases the frontiers of human consciousness throughout the country.

The Gandhian consciousness is conveyed through Moorthy who transforms the life of the village but the fact is that the story is narrated by an old woman who is able to evoke the Indian spirit of folk-epic, the Puranas. She speaks typical local language. Moorthy, the village Gandhi organises Bhajan, Harikatha, fasting and religious functions at 'Kanthapura Swami Temple'. Through these religious functions, Moorthy creates national feelings in the minds of the uneducated villagers. The social functions become popular at that time.

Gandhi is an incarnation of Rama for the villagers, and the foreigners represent the ten-headed Ravana. The Satyagrahi in prison is the divine Krishna. The novel shows the whole drama of the Gandhian revolution mixing politics with mythology, using ancient mythological devices in order to mix up Indian folk tradition.

K. R. S. Iyengar makes it a point, **what happens in Kanthapura is by no means a unique experience, but the telling of the story gives, the whole affair an itihasic—at least, a Puranic dignity.**² The entire action is set in a village. Thus, the novel is at its best, considered to be a village novel having a record of its changeless and ever changing choice. The story of Kanthapura is beautifully narrated by a typical Indian grandmother—Achakka with her own idiosyncratic norms. Symbolically ‘Kanthapura is India in microcosm. **What happened there is what happened everywhere in India during those terrible years of our fight for freedom.**³ In his analysis of the book, Iyengar rightly sums up the stylistic feature of Raja Rao in his own way. He writes, **Gandhi and our village, but the style of narration makes the book more a Gandhi Purana than a piece of mere fiction. Gandhi is the invisible God, Moorthy is the visible Avatar.**⁴

In the mid of the village, there is a temple dedicated to Kenchamma. The picture of the village is being constituted by a river, a hill and a temple with the presiding and all pervasive deity. The folk song pertaining to the Goddess evokes images and attitudes meant for the people of Kanthapura. Kenchamma, the blood and bone of the village presents the core and cure of their lives and makes everything meaningful and possible. There are references to the moneylender, the priest and the Zamindar which focus the traditional forces of oppression and exploitation. Moorthy, the Satyagrahi, and leader of the non-violent movement belongs to Gandhi in Kanthapura. Bade Khan is the symbol of oppression, Bhatta stands for orthodoxy. Range Gowda, indomitable sense, sanity and honesty in the village. The village has been charged with deep and dense abiding and all-pervading localized colour and Charisma. To Raja, Rao literature is meant for spiritual experience as he says:

For me literature is Sadhana.....my writing is mainly the consequence of a metaphysical life, what I meant by Sadhana, And by man I mean the metaphysical entity. So the idea of literature as anything but spiritual experience.... is outside my perspective.⁵

Gandhi is of the view that politics and religion are inseparably woven together. Kanthapura evinces this divine truth that man's state in the society is spiritual as much as it is political. In the ontological framework, the theme of Kanthapura is the liberation of Indian spirit by Gandhian ideas

while Brahma Dutt Sharma points out that—**Here Gandhism and Nehruvian socialism have been presented as two alternatives... and there comes a stage when the protagonist and his followers resolve to embrace the political philosophy of the Nehruvian Socialism.**⁶ Kanthapura appears to be, a dynamo of the Gandhian thought and theory. The 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 makeup of the inhabitants of this South Indian village during the period when Gandhi's personality and thought, was a force to be reckoned with. 'The novel is, of course', as Iyengar writes, **a veritable grammar of the Gandhian myth.**⁷ In Kanthapura religious fervour is blended with social realism in such a way that the idea of Gandhiji is easily comprehended by the villagers. The impact of the Harikatha 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 worthwhile to suggest that the Dandi March has been portrayed as a pilgrimage for the villagers.

Gandhi disliked the tenet of Hindu caste-system. The opening of the temples to the pariahs when Gandhijee called them Harijans is an event of historical importance in the novel. Untouchability was considered to be a blot on the face of the society. It is a revolutionary gusto of Rao in Kanthapura that the Brahmin boy Moorthy, who becomes the spokesperson of Gandhian idealism and ideologies, changes the chants of 'Satya Narayan Maharaj Ki Jai' into the shouts of 'Inqilab Zindabad' and Gandhi Mahatma has come on this earth to kill the serpent of the foreign rule'. When the village Panchyat Committee is constituted, Range Gowda finds Seenu as the 'fire-tailed Hanuman'. In Kanthapura, all the plans and programmes of Gandhiji have been taken into account, such as non-violence, untouchability, prohibition and the way in which the women of Kanthapura, Rangamma and Ratna under the leadership of Moorthy, come forward in the wake of the struggle. Such is the spirit of women of Kanthapura that their faith in Gandhiji and in their goddess Kenchamma sustains their life spirit. It is very captivating that the spiritual force of the mother goddess is invoked again and again to encourage people to action. This is the only language through which the political idea of India's liberation can be transmitted to the villagers. In fact, the novelist locates the action of the novel in historical time, but not in illusory space, for it provides a concrete representation of a significant aspect of Indian freedom struggle, in which the focus is on demonstrating Gandhi's main achievement of arousing the consciousness of the Indian masses against the British. Rao, of course, mythicises Gandhi and his mission, for purely strategic reasons. In the theoretical stimulation of Kanthapura tradition and modern sensibility absorb each other and flow to foster society.

Both the matter and manner are equally good and grand in the novel. The use of tone, tenor, cadence and diction, the irony and humour and the sublimity in language make the novel delightful. The whole of the Indian tradition is brought up-to-date. Kanthapura proves to be a milestone in combating the colonial complex and winning respect for the Indian—Indian in form and content. Hence, it becomes a powerful weapon for creative use of English for the expression of a truly Indian sensibility. Nowadays the novel has become a good book of life and one of the effective means of education of the sensibility of the young it is a breathless story illustrating in the age-old Indian tradition of story-telling. Structurally the novel operates on the village level and all the knowledge and wisdom that come to it or go out of it can only be at that level. It is a tale told by a grandmother. Thus, it can be said that 'Kanthapura' is a supreme example of Raja Rao's grand style elaborating Indian thought and tradition.

Raja Rao has brought Indian thought and tradition through myths in the novel. Rao himself affirms:

Episode follows episodes, and when our thoughts stop, our breath stops, and we move on to another thought. This was, and still is, the ordinary style of our story-telling. I have tried to follow it myself in this story Kanthapura.⁸

He has employed three types of myths in his novels- (a) Puranic Myths (b) Localised Myths and (c) Rites and Rituals. The Puranic myths pertain to the binary opposition of the good and the evil symbolized through the character of Rama and Ravana. The Rama-Ravana myth seems to be the central thematic motif in 'Kanthapura'. The novel is a fictional rendering of a localized myth such as that of Kenchamma. It is the legendary history of a remote village in the South India. In order to create the mythic atmosphere in the novel, Rao has resorted to the depiction of rites and rituals of ploughing, of worship and sacrifice. Kanthapura is the legendary history of a place that Rao calls the 'sthalapurana'. **The 'rites and rituals, according to Mukherjee, do not form part of myth but provide a frame of reference. For instance, the offering of coconut and betel nut at the altar of the deity are frequently found in Rao's Kanthapura. Through the telescoping of the past, through myths and legends and relating it to modern context or contemporary. Raja Rao has presented viable picture of the native reality.⁹** He has mythologized contemporary reality. In Kanthapura, we have the use of the myths which are intimately connected with the religious beliefs and practices of the people. As novel of political resurgences, Kanthapura is strewn with many myths which have been deftly woven into the fictional canvas of the story. The Puranic myths have been depicted to dramatize selfless action as expounded in the Bhagvad Gita:

*Karmanyevadhikaraste.*¹⁰*deZ.;sokf/kdkjLrs***References**

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