

The social vision of Raja Rao with special references to Kanthapura

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Abstract

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. The Indian people, on average, are even today closer to their traditions than the modern European people are to their own lures. In comparison to the European writers, the Indian English writers seem to have made very scant use of myths in their works. 'Kanthapura' is the story of the impact of Mahatma Gandhi and the Satyagraha movement on a small South Indian village which is the microcosm of the rural India. But Kanthapura is not merely a political novel; its economic and social concerns and the religious undertones are sub mused into myth and legend. There are great metaphysical questions also in the novel. The spiritual and metaphysical questions are masked by the romantic realism of the novel. The novelist probes the deeper questions of order and disorder, good and evil by equation the freedom movement with the 'Ramayana'. Though Kanthapura is a small village yet its activities reflect the whole nation.

Key words: Indian thought, Social vision & Kanthapura.

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. The Indian people, on average, are even today closer to their traditions than the modern European people are to their own lures. In comparison to the European writers, the Indian English writers seem to have made very scant use of myths in their works. In the use of tradition of mythicizing contemporary events, Kanthapura offers a rich field for study. It should be understood that this mythicizing is not something unnatural. Eliade tells us that, **even today people live unconsciously but demonstrably by the remains of perennial mythologies.**¹

'Kanthapura' is the story of the impact of Mahatma Gandhi and the Satyagraha movement on a small South Indian village which is the microcosm of the rural India. But Kanthapura is not merely a political novel; its economic and social concerns and the religious undertones are submersed into myth and legend.

One finds a number of mythical or puranic devices in Kanthapura. It is an excellent example of the combination of puranic and folktale elements. The myth of Kenchamma's descent to earth to kill a demon is puranic one but when the narrator connects the story with the color of the Kenchamma hill, the elements of legend and purana get blended together to make the story a sthalapurana. Though conforming to the puranic pattern, Rao liberally introduces elements of oral tradition of story-telling in Kanthapura in the character of the narrator. Moorthy and Mahatma Gandhi are idealized; Gandhi is regarded by the village women as mountain big and blue, and Moorthy as the small mountain. Range Gowda, the village, headman, describes Moorthy, 'He is our Gandhi, The state of Mysore has a Maharaja –and this Moorthy has wisdom in him and he will be our Mahatma'. The pattern of having two figures larger than life, one beyond the other, can be seen in Raja Rao's earlier short Stories also, where, an idealized local character referred to as 'master' appears, occupying an all-pervasive god-like position. Regarding the mythicizing of the characters, Indians, by nature appear to discover in their heroes the unmistakable analogies of the mythological heroes who permeate their religious life, especially in the villages. Thus, in Kanthapura, Jayaramachar, the Harikathamman raises Gandhi to the level of a god by identifying Gandhi with Lord Rama protesting the demonic rule of Ravana.

None of these analogies can be systematically followed through to find exact points of correspondence, yet they temporarily illuminate the historical situation of the thirties and give an insight into the unlettered mind of the village people that Raja Rao presents in the novel, the kind of mind in which myth and fact are not clearly distinguishable. Moreover, as Meenakshi Mukherjee observes:

For such a mind a fact does not become significant until it can be related to a myth.²

Myths and rituals are seen renewing the life of the community in Kanthapura. Certain rituals are described in the novel like the yoking of bulls to the plough under the Rohini Nakshatra, the different modes of worshipping goddess Kenchamma; or the Kartik Festival of Lights where folk spirit is elevated to the grand myth of seasonal renewal and cyclical return. The description of Moorthy's fasting is raised to the level of ritual. Character becomes symbol, action is ritual, and speech is 'mantra'. Surface realism, based on the literalness of factual narration, is subordinated to the mythical narrative. For instance, events may not follow the ordered sequence of the chronometer, and instead follow a cyclical, non-

causal order. The immense of the spiritual in the mundane is the condition of the novel as myth: it unites man and beast and tree and earth.

The quest for form seems central in Raja Rao's creativity as is his perception of the relationship between fiction and reality. Kanthapura is, in a sense, a world of realism in fiction. Even then, it is not purely realistic. This is combined with the strains of myth, of gods and goddesses, of superstitious beliefs and uncanny insights. One means by which the realistic is made to point to the reality or often made to symbolize it is presenting events as kind of 'sthala-purana.

The total effacement of Kanthapura towards the end of the novel '....there's neither man nor mosquito in Kanthapura.....' is not a terminal cataclysm; rather it is a purgatorial process beyond which comes up a renewed life. Kashipura is a phoenix arising in burnished purity out of the ashes of the old Kanthapura. It signifies the permanence of India, as a concept, an idea transcending space and time. India may be conquered, but never vanquished, **destroyed but never defeated.**⁴ The simple story of Kanthapura becomes by alchemic touch of Rao, not merely a 'Gandhipurana' but an historical saga of Indian nationalism, invested with the solemn dignity and religiosity of a piece of ancient mythology. Thus, the political is 'assimilated into the racial heritage as myth and legend.' C.D. Narasimhaiah observes:

**For the first time in modern times in India the novel in Raja Rao's hands
has become a mature means of enlarging the frontiers of human consciousness.³**

The penetrative light into 'Kanthapura' shows that the novel is soaked in Indian thought and tradition. The village goddess, the very village, the temple, the rows of different castes, Harikatha, Upavas Bhajan, Satyagrah, worship, Devasur Sangram, Durga Ji, Kali Ji, Hanuman, Sita, Rama, Ravana, Krishna and Kansa etc. themselves speak of Indian thought and tradition. The novel depicts social, cultural, and religious aspects of Indian Life. Almost all the old Indian traditions and thoughts are mingled with the present ones in the novel.

The novel shows Gandhian conservatism, that is, return to the Hindu roots in the Vedas. Ahinsa, cloth-spinning, simplicity, generous thoughts, national self-sufficiency, rejection of Western technology, agriculture etc. speak of our thought and tradition. There is abundance of such points in the novel. It is worth considering here that M. R. Anand was able to unite nationalism with socialism against exploitation but Rao's novel suggests a conflict between tradition and modernity, though it is not apparent. Moorthy doubts whether all the problems would come to an

end after political freedom or not. He thinks that independence from the British will be only a prelude to the liberation of the toiling masses.

There are great metaphysical questions also in the novel. The spiritual and metaphysical questions are masked by the romantic realism of the novel. The novelist probes the deeper questions of order and disorder, good and evil by equation the freedom movement with the 'Ramayana'. Gandhi himself had seen the political struggle in ethical terms, as the Harikathamana had seen it in mythological terms. Rao's purpose in the novel is to display India, especially her countryside where there is originality of thought and variety of traditions and customary practices. Though Kanthapura is a small village yet its activities reflect the whole nation.

The village schoolmaster and the village prostitute form an interesting 'duo' in the novel. They have their own importance. The schoolmaster and the village prostitute both are against the nationalists. They prefer the British rule. There have been so many selfish Indians during the freedom struggle who sided with the red-men. The prostitute stands for tradition as prostitution has been a trait of Indian society. There are plenty references to it in 'Manu-Smriti' which is a guiding book for Indian social system. The novelist makes us think why they prefer the foreign rule. Of course, there had been a section of Indian society that was doubly enslaved. For such people, political freedom was not a serious concern the social disparity that existed and still does exist, has been a responsible factor for such thinking. By introducing such characters, Rao aims at social equality and economic independence.

By developing the character of an Indian village, Rao shifts from realism to symbolism. The novel conveys an uncanny impression of the immense longevity of Indian history and the essential survival into the 20th century. Raja Rao goes back to the customs which existed in India even before the Aryan Immigration. In fact, the village Kanthapura is a symbol of India with her past, present and future. Gandhi is the present but at the same time, he is an avatar of Rama and Krishna and Shankara. Thus, he is the present and the past; the 'Ramayana' and the 'Mahabharata'. In the cart of the Kartik festival, Gandhi's picture is put next to Rama, Krishna and Shankara. The struggle led by Gandhi points to the socio-political future of India. Cow-worship has been a common tradition in our country since ages. It happens so in Kanthapura also. When the cow Gauri mounts the barricade, a British officer shoots her to death. The episode suggests that Gandhi's pacifism is useless before the British guns and the workers temporarily justified for using force, but the novelist is committed to ahimsa. So Gandhian idealism is described to be the ultimate solution. The villagers do not believe in scientific theory, they are confident of Gandhi's ideals as they do not take him for blood and bone only, rather take him for an incarnation

of Rama, reborn in Gandhi[‘s shape. All this is due to Indian thought that honesty is the best policy, and truth may be harassed but cannot be defeated. The faith of the villagers on Gandhi is absolutely Indian. It is timeless and trans logical. Their only conviction is:

The Mahatma may be all wrong about politics, but he is right about the fullness of love in all creatures. ⁴

Most of Rao’s critics are of the opinion that he explores the ‘real’ nature of India, and with this view, he goes to trace back ancient glory that is to be found in the Vedas and the Upanishads. In this connection, H. M. Williams observes:

A realistic level is supported by numerous under levels of metaphysics, history, folk-memory, racial self-consciousness. Raja Rao constantly invites us to see life as symbolic, to see the surface reflecting a reality that is beyond; similarly, to see life as constantly reflecting and repeating the past as in the Hindu concept of successive re-births and the return of the Gods as avatars. ⁵

The fiction work of Raja Rao can be broadly described as literature of social vision. He writes for the sake of universal well-being. He examines physical and spiritual in relation to each other. The works of Raja Rao show secular and spiritual aspects of Indian experience. His approach is not like a journalist or a sociologist, but it is the outcome of a close perpetual search of a vision of reality, that is complete. In ‘Kanthapura’ Rao has displayed social reality along with spiritual Quest. The rituals described again and again in the novel, show how traditions are preserved and to what extent they affect our thought process. The novel shows the evolution of the author’s social vision. Though there is much emphasis on contemporary political reality in ‘Kanthapura’ yet it is beyond that. The novel contains several native and traditional features of India. A Sudhakar Rao’s observation of the novel is very befitting to it:

In Kanthapura..... Action is physical and the novel is set in a distinct spatio-temporal setting. The novelist used mythical motives to interpret the immediate reality in terms of eternal recurring experiences. He combines the secular and spiritual forces in his portrayal of the Indian struggle for freedom. It appears that the villages of ‘Kanthapura’, while agitating for political freedom, are also engaged in a Quest for inner freedom, Freedom, as it emerges here is not merely a political condition, it is an ennobling experience of

liberation. In striving for the freedom of their nation, the peasants of Kanthapura are at once engaged in the movement for self-realization.⁶

What exacts our attention most from the vies-points of thought tradition and Quest in ‘Kanthapura’ is tradition. While going through the novel, one feels as if he were in Indian villages where every action is related to some tradition. These traditions do not stand against modernity, rather empower and embolden the present. They do not look incongruous. In this connection, T. J. Abraham maintains:

Raja Rao, Arun Joshi and Sudhin N. Ghose capture in their fictional mould the pulsating vitality of the core of the Indian tradition and its fluid continuity even as they shape the dominant fictional pattern in the latter half of the 20th century. Without hanging on to a rigid demarcation one could say while Raja Rao is uncompromising in his advocacy of the undiluted Vedantic tradition.⁷

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