

Rendering of Indian Sensibility in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*

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"I alone know I am incapable of writing, what people say I have written".

Raja Rao

India is one of the ancient civilizations in the world with its rich cultural heritage, classical traditions, idealizing a god like hero, the list is endless. It has achieved multi faceted socio-economic progress during the last five decades. It has moved forward displaying remarkable progress in the field of agriculture, industry, technology and above all literature. Though Indians like Ram Mohan Roy started writing in English way back since the Indian Renaissance of the 19th Century. This legacy got full bloom during the 20th Century with the writings of pioneers like Sarojini Naidu, Rabindranath Tagore and Aurobindo Ghosh. While English prose for social and political purposes was written by Indians from earliest times, the excellence in the writing of creative prose could be achieved much later than the verse. But despite its late start the Indo Anglian novel has gone far ahead and it was only with the Gandhian struggle for freedom, the Indo Anglian novel came of its own. The ideas of the struggle are reflected in the masterpieces like K.S.Venkataramani's *Murugan. The Tiller* (1972) Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935) and *Coolie* (1936) and Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938).

Raja Rao one of the triad, while staying in France wrote his first major novel in English *Kanthapura* which established him as a unique stylist in fiction writing. Written in France thousands of miles away from India, the novel gives the most graphic, vivid and realistic account of the suffering and extreme poverty faced by the working class in villages under the British Rule but, against the background of increased support for Mahatma Gandhi. The present paper attempts to discuss the Indian sensibility found in Raja Rao's novel *Kanthapura*. My intention here is to highlight the use of various Indian imageries traditions, style of Indians by Raja Rao and not to compare him with any other Indian writer.

Kanthapura portrays the participation of a small village of South India in the national struggle called for, by Mahatma Gandhi. Imbued with nationalism, the villagers sacrificed all their material possessions in a triumph of the spirit, showing how during Gandhian Movement people shed their narrow prejudices and united in the common cause of the nonviolent civil resistance to the British Rule. The story of the novel is based on the theme of eternal struggle between good and evil narrated by a widow Achakka. The good and the evil spirits are personified by Gandhi and Gandhians on the one hand and the British rule on the other. The educated youth of the *Kanthapura* village respond to the call of non cooperation and Harijan upliftment given by Gandhiji and they suffer on the account of the age old traditions bound society, as a result of which Moorthy, the non violent hero is put behind the bars and all the Gandhians are driven out of the village.

Raja Rao through this novel gave finest and fullest expression of the village life in India. This village is a microcosm of the traditional Indian society with all the shades of the village with its socio-economic division, superstitions, religious and caste prejudices, blind faith in Gods and Goddesses, petty jealousies, dirty lanes, shady gardens, hills, rivers and changing seasons. He has captured the tempo of Indian village life very beautifully in this masterpiece. Rao's choice of the village setting is strategic in view of his Gandhian loyalties. Gandhi locates his politics in the villages of India where the majority of Indian's population resides as Prawer Jhabwala has rightly said, "as yet unwritten ideal Indian novel would be bits of prose poetry, anecdotes, lots of philosophizing and musing and oblique kinds of wit and an ultimate self surrender a sinking back into formlessness, into eternity" "Raja Rao's novel comes nearest to this ideal."¹

Kanthapura is thus remarkable in many ways, firstly the story teller is a 'grand mother', the most gifted of story tellers because the art of the story telling is second nature to the Indian Grandmother who narrates the stories for the benefits of the new comer, years later. Here Achakka is just such a grandmother whose narrative style is typically Indian with gossipy digressions. Rao has used the ancient Indian way of narration. It is a breathless story, illustrating the age old tradition of the story telling as Rao says " We in India think quickly, talk quickly and when we move, we move quickly" that is what can be easily seen in Achakka's inordinately long meandering sentences, use of blanks, digressions and expressions like 'this and that' 'here and there' are meaningful. In the words of Mulk Raj Anand " the reader can almost hear grandma talking : Episode follows episode and each one is integral to the story."²

Most of the Indian English novelists do not merely offer myths as analogies but make them their central theme, so did Raja Rao, he made a digressional use of myths in *Kanthapura*. He used three types of myths i.e. Puranic myths belonging to the binary opposition of the good and evil symbolizing the character of Rama and Ravana, localized myth pertaining to Goddess Kenchamma and finally the myth of rites and rituals marked by the offerings of coconut and betel nut at the altar of the deity. The villagers of India are inveterate myth makers and they have not lost their links with the Gods of tradition : the heroes and heroines of epic jostle with historic personalities, and time past and time present are both projected into time future : Mahatma Gandhi is Rama, the Red foreigner or the brown inspector of police who flourishes a lathi is a soldier in ten headed Ravana's army of occupation and oppression. To add more the satyagrahi in prison is the divine Krishna himself in Kansa's prison. So the technique of juxtaposing past into present in this novel gives it the status of an epic or Purana and hence in the words of Meenakshi

Mukherjee: "Kanthapura is again another and larger attempt at creating a Sthala-Purana, i.e. a legendary tale of a specific locality."³

Just as in myth some of the chief characters are Gods and other beings larger in power than humanity, in this tale Moorthy is presented as a figure much above the common run of men. A dedicated selfless soul, he is idealized to the extent of being regarded as local Mahatma. Of course there is the real Mahatma also who is already a legendary figure to the villagers and is the subject of bhajans and Harikathas. But because of the Mahatma's visible absence at *Kanthapura*, Moorthy becomes their Gandhi, as the strong man of the village, Range Gowda states: "He is our Gandhi, the state of Mysore

has a Maharaja, but that Maharaja has another Maharaja who is in London and that one has another one in Heaven, and so everybody has his own Mahatma and this Moorthy who has been caught on our knees playing as a child is now grown up and great and he has wisdom in him, and he will be our Mahat (Pg-106). Raja Rao resorts to the localized myth of Kenchamma who protects the villagers from harm and presides over their destiny. The Kanthapurians are ardent devotees of Goddess Kenchamma. They chant hosannas to her which reminds us of 'Durga Stuti' "Kenchamma, Kenchamma Goddess, benign and bounteous, mother of earth, blood of life, Harvest Queen rain-crowned, Kenchamma, Kenchamma Goddess, benign and bounteous." (Pg-10) There are certain local rites and rituals in the novel also, apart from offering coconut and betel nut at the altar of the deity, there is the ritual of yoking the bulls to the plough under the Rohini star or there is the traditional belief that at the beginning of Kartik, Gods can be seen passing by "blue gods and quiet gods and bright eyed gods."⁴ All these references are a means of establishing the atmosphere in which the villagers live in India.

Rao does not marginalize the role of women in the freedom movement and highlight their individual contributions. Different forms of Shakti are manifested through the women of Kanthapura, Indian women is coy, delicate and submissive on one hand, she is also firm as rock and great in suffering on other occasion. We can find Shakti rising in every woman at certain pivotal points of life and this can be seen in the last phase of peaceful resistance, it is Ratna, a woman who takes over from Moorthy and leads the satyagrahis. As in the words of Uma Parameswari, "Volatile, with an infinite capacity for love and for passing malice, quick to spark into enthusiasm and into cynicism, the women of Kanthapura are more human than those created by Raja Rao anywhere else."⁵

In order to convey an impact of Indian sensibility – Raja Rao has implied a unique style which is not 'Babu English' though the words are English but their organization is Indian. The language used in the novel is full of Indian idioms, imagery and rural colour. For example words like Ahimsa, Dhoti, Hari katha, Mandap are used in their original form. Similarly we can find various village proverbs like: "The policemen are not your uncle's sons" "Saw you like a rat on your mother's lap," or "you can't straighten a dog's tail." "Land lust and wifely loyalty go badly together." (Pg-62) At times the villagers also use an abusive vulgar language and Raja Rao does not hesitate in using this language in order to give truly Indian colour to his work and also to the demand of the occasion, for example when the wind or rain lets them down the peasants burst out like "May your house be destroyed - may your wife die childless - I'll sleep with your mother" and many more. This is in fact the natural speech of the rural folk translated into English and after using dialect and village material, Rao has succeeded in conveying "in a language not one's own, the spirit that is one's own."⁶

Hence after going through the above discussion it can be concluded that Rao's Kanthapura is significant as a cultural passage which rewrites true history against the inauthentic historical accounts compiled by Europeans, and because it effect cultural revival through the use of indigenous themes, myths and foreign art form, a sensibility, which is essentially Indian. In the words of Francis .C. Assisi "India, Raja Rao implied, is open to whoever can attain it, wherever they may be. And reading his works was an invitation to taste that eternal India of the Mahabhartha and Ramayan, of the upnishads, of the sanskara, of Aurobindo, of Tagore, of Vivekananda and of Gandhi. India is not a country, it is a perspective."⁷

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