

Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* as a Gandhi Novel

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ABSTRACT

Mahatma Gandhi exercised a formative influence on our language and literature. Indian English Novels of the time came under Gandhi's epoch-making social, political and ideological ferment. The legend of our land appears in the novels of the 'Big Three' of the Indian English Fiction sometimes in person and sometime through characters representing him as well as through his revolutionary ideals. But Rao differs from the other two of his contemporaries in his treatment of Gandhi. His *Kanthapura* is a fictional account of Gandhian movement in a distant South Indian village under the leadership of Moorthy, the hero and the most notable Gandhian in the novel. Though Gandhi is absent in person, his presence is felt throughout the novel. In short, the novel is pervaded by the spirit of Gandhi and his freedom movement. Thus in a word the novel may be called a Gandhiad or a Gandhi purana.

1. Introduction

The decade of nineteen-thirties is an unforgettable landmark in the history of India's transition to a modern independent nation. This was decade packed with Gandhian Salt Satyagraha movement, the Round Table Conferences, the passing of the government of India Act of 1935, the Gandhian movements for the uplift of the horijans and so on and so forth. Most of the Indians writers of the tempestuous period could not escape the all-pervasive emotional experiences of these movements especially the powerful impact of Gandhiji's national movement upon the minds of the Indian masses of the time. Gandhi appears sometimes in person and sometimes in spirit as well in the novels of the 'Big Three' of the Indian English fiction. All of them reveal in their works their sensitive awareness of the forces let loose by the Gandhian Revolution as well as the thwarting or the steadying pulls of past tradition. Though a contemporary of Anand and Narayan Rao's mode of presenting the legendary leader is different in many respects from those of the other two major duo of the Indian English fiction.

2. What is *Kanthapura* about ?

Rao's debut novel *Kanthapura* is a breathless tale of how Gandhian revolution flourished in all fury and frenzy in the remotest parts of India. In passing, it gives us a peep into "the appalling social conditions of our villages as also the values that have preserved our people against flood, fire and famine and exploitation from within and from without, and more than all, that incomparable manner in which Gandhi tapped the deeply religious resources of our people living in the remotest parts of India and built up a national movement in one life time." (C.D. Narasimhiah.) The novelist has deftly interwoven into the texture of the novel the three inextricable strands of experience — the political, religious and social — of the Gandhian era, interpreting them through Indian myths and symbols. The novel "is a veritable grammar of Gandhi myth." The spirit of Mahatma pervades the whole novel. Though Gandhiji does not figure as a character in the novel, the spirit of the man sustains the action of the novel.

3. *Kanthapura* as a Gandhi purana

Kanthapura has been inspired by and it celebrates the Gandhian movement. The novel has been fittingly called a Gandhi purana or a Sthala purana, as Raja Rao himself calls it in his foreword to the novel, for it unfolds the legendary history of a remote village in South India caught up in the maelstrom of Gandhian freedom movement. The story of the novel is set against the backdrop of the early phase of India's freedom struggle preceding Gandhi's Dandi march and culminating in the Gandhi Irwin Pact. It focuses on the very decade when the Civil Disobedience movement reached its zenith. Although the setting of the novel is a far flung South Indian village the people of the place, at least those conscious of the state of affairs were well aware of the proceedings outside in the rest of the movement-stirred India. Through them references are made to the crucial events in the struggle vis-a-vis the British repression upon the Indian mass. In the novel Moorthy, the hero of the novel is a Gandhian man. He gives up his studies and dedicates himself to India's freedom struggle after having a vision of Gandhi. He brings to *Kanthapura* the excitement of Gandhian freedom movement in its different aspects. A Congress committee was formed in *Kanthapura*. Under Moorthy's leadership the people of *Kanthapura* organized a mass movement in the Gandhian way, though ultimately the movement failed. The methods adopted by Moorthy in conducting the freedom movement puts us in mind of those of Gandhiji himself on the actual arena, particularly Gandhi's resorting to fasting for self-purification, shouldering the blame of violence perpetrated by his followers and his devotion to stern truth. In the novel we have several references to Gandhian movement for Swaraj and its goal, and the methods adopted by Moorthy in this regard reminds us of those of Mahatma Gandhi such as Swadeshi movement on a large scale through spinning, eradication of untouchability, Hindu-Muslim unity and the upliftment of the backward people. Thus the novel is dominated by Moorthy's freedom movement on Gandhian track and principle and though the movement ultimately fails, it produces a significant arousal of patriotic zeal in the heart of the people not only of *Kanthapura* but also of

the neighbouring areas. Thus the novel is a celebration in fictional form of the Gandhian movement in India during 1930s.

4. Moorthy, a minor Gandhi

In the novel Moorthy is the *Avatar* (incarnation) of Gandhi. In fact the very name 'Moorthy' symbolically suggests that he is a true image of Gandhi who remains an invisible presence throughout the novel. The villagers of Kanthapura think that Gandhi is the Sajhyadri mountain whereas Moorthy is a small mountain. Moorthy proves himself to the people of Kanthapura the minor Gandhi, devoting himself to the welfare of the Pariah, taking a vow of celibacy, practising sexual purity, popularising Charka movement in Kanthapura, organising Satyagraha against the manufacture and sale of toddy, practicing and preaching to the people the importance of non-violent movement, non-cooperation movement, taking upon himself the guilt of violence by his followers, adopting penance and self-purification, courting arrest willingly and adhering strictly to truth. All these project him to the people of Kanthapura as a miniature Gandhi.

5. Other Gandhian characters in the novel

Apart from Moorthy there are several other Gandhian characters in the novel. Sankar is an advocate like Gandhi who practised law in South Africa. In his profession Sankar follows Gandhi as his role-model. Like Gandhi he believes that the motto of a lawyer is to help the court maintain administration of justice, and not surely to get a client win the case by any means. He therefore refuses to take up false case and he is used to make his client confess his guilt if the latter is found guilty. Like Gandhi he too leads a pure and simple life, undergoes frequent fasting and favours Khadi dress and loves Hindi. Rangamma is another Gandhian character in the novel. He organises the women of Kanthapura against the atrocities of the police in a non-violent way with her persuasive arguments that works wonderfully well upon feminine minds :

We shall fight the police for Kenchamma's sake, and if the rapture of devotion is in you, the lathi will grow as soft as butter and as supple as a silken thread, and you will hymn out the name of the Mahatma. And we all grow dumb and mutter 'Yes, sister, yes.'

Not only through Moorthy, the Gandhian philosophy gets manifested through other characters of the novel as well. Range Gowda, Ratna and even Jayaramachar all, in lesser or higher degree reflect and practise the principles of Gandhi, and a minor character namely Seetharamu patiently endures the tortures of the British government— this shows how deep-rooted their faith in Gandhism is. Jayachar overtly speaks of the Gandhian values in the novel.

Fight, says he, but harm no soul. Love all Says he, Hindu, Mohammedan, Christian or pariah, for all are equal before God. Don't be attracted to riches, says he, for riches create passions and passions create attachment and attachment hides the face of truth of truth. Truth must you tell, he says, for Truth is God and verily, it is the only God I know.

In fact the attempt to be economically independent, the other important aspects of Gandhi's philosophy is seen among the villagers as they readily agree to spin the yarn to retain the Indian money within India and prevent its acquisition by British. When they protest, they protest through civil disobedience, another Gandhian weapon of non-violence for freedom fighters.

6. Moorthy's vision of Gandhi

Rao projects Gandhi in person only once in the novel through Moorthy's vision of Gandhi. Gandhi manifests himself in Moorthy's vision as 'mighty and God beaming.' In his vision Gandhi spoke to him in a deep and stirring voice that made a way into the heart of Moorthy. He listened in silence to the inspiring words of Mahatma : "There is but one force in life and that is Truth, and there is but one love in life and that is the love of mankind, there is but one God in life and that is the God of all." In the vision Mahatma advised Moorthy to adhere to the path of Truth, suggested him to give up studies under the British Education system, to serve the country by working among the dumb millions of villagers. Finally Mahatma touched Moorthy affectionately and this touch produced an epiphanic effect upon Moorthy and everything seemed to manifest itself in its utmost clarity.

7. Gandhi deified and mythicized

In the novel Gandhi has been idealized, deified and mythicized. He has been consistently compared to the epic heroes and gods like Rama, Krishna and Siva. Jayaramachar narrates in one of his *Harikathas* how divine will surrounds Gandhi's birth : At Brahma's command Siva incarnates as Gandhi to liberate India from her enforced slavery. "The novelist elevates the Gandhi movement to a mythological plane." (P. Dayal) Even Moorthy's visionary meeting with the 'God beaming Mahatma' is presented as a mystical experience on Moorthy's part. When he visualizes Mahatma he feels that he is spiritually reborn ; he realises, "There is but one force in life and that is Truth, and there is but one love in life and that is the love of mankind, there is but one God in life and that is the God of all." Thus, Moorthy's visionary contact with Gandhi is, indeed, no political meeting but rather a spiritual one, an encounter with a saint. Again Gandhi has been compared to Lord Krishna. "Gandhi is engaged in slaying the serpent of foreign rule, as the boy Krishna killed the serpent Kaliya." (Iyengar) Again Gandhi's trip to England to join the Second Round Table Conference has been presented in mythical light :

"They say the Mahatma will go to the Red-man's country, and he will get us Swaraj... and we shall all be happy. And Rama will come back from exile, and Sita will be with him, for Ravana will be slain and Sita freed, and he will come back with Sita on his right in a chariot of the air, and brother Bharata will go to meet them with the worshipped sandals of the Master on his head, and as they enter Ayodhya there will be a rain of flowers." (Iyengar)

8. Conclusion

Thus the theme of the novel is the impact of Gandhi's name and ideas on an obscure South Indian village. The style of narration makes the book more a Gandhi Purana than a piece of mere fiction. It is truly "a veritable Grammar of the

Gandhian myth___ the myth that is but a poetic translation of the reality. It will always have a central place in Gandhian

literature. (Iyengar)

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