

Gandhian Ideals in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*

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Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* is one of the finest depictions of the Freedom Movement commenced in the early twentieth century by Mahatma Gandhi to lead India towards freedom from the colonial British rule. India's freedom struggle which exerted considerable influence on the demeanor of Indian population is the central thrust of the novel. *Kanthapura* illustrates how Gandhian ideals and struggle for freedom against the British arrived to a characteristic South Indian village Kanthapura. The novel is a striking example of the impact of Gandhian leadership and value that affected even the distant Indian villages. *Kanthapura*, the "dynamo" of the Gandhian ideals communicates the fresh impetus that propelled the freedom struggle against the British. Iyengar identifies, in *Kanthapura*, the "veritable grammar of the Gandhian myth." The novel illustrates two faces of Gandhian vision: the political and the social. This paper is an attempt to critically elucidate the manner in which Raja Rao appropriates Gandhian vision through his creative imagination in *Kanthapura*.

There is no village in India, however mean, that does not have a rich *sthala-purana*, or legendary history, of its own. Some god or godlike hero has passed by the village – Rama might have rested under this papal-tree, Sita might have dried her clothes, after her bath, on this yellow stone, or the Mahatma himself, might have slept in this hut, the low one, by the village gate... One such story from the contemporary annals of my village I have tried to tell (Rao vi).

Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* is one of the finest depictions of the Freedom Movement commenced in the early twentieth century by Mahatma Gandhi to lead India towards freedom from the colonial British rule. India's freedom struggle which exerted considerable influence on the demeanor of Indian population is the central thrust of the novel. *Kanthapura* illustrates how Gandhian ideals and struggle for freedom against the British arrived to a characteristic South Indian village Kanthapura. Sing notes that, "*Kanthapura* can very easily be placed at centre of Gandhian literature for depicting truthfully and artistically the upsurge of Gandhian movement" (qtd. in Raizada 38). The novel is a striking example of the impact of Gandhian leadership and value that affected even the distant Indian villages. Dayal observes that the novel is "predominantly political in inspiration" which is uncharacteristic of Rao's novels which is rich in "metaphysical preoccupations" (Dayal 10). *Kanthapura*, the "dynamo" (Kumar 19) of the Gandhian ideals communicates the fresh impetus that propelled the freedom struggle against the British. Iyengar identifies, in *Kanthapura*, the "veritable grammar of the Gandhian myth" (Iyengar 396).

I

Gandhi was, Nehru acknowledges, "like a powerful current of fresh air...like beam of light that pierced the darkness and removed the scales from our eyes; like a whirlwind that upset many things, but most of all the working of people's minds" (qtd. in Dayal 10). He kindled the nation awakening the non-violent movement within the Indian minds through non-cooperation

and disobedience movement. Besides the political freedom, Gandhi also strived for economic sovereignty and a spiritual renaissance. Raja Rao demonstrates Gandhian ideals of non-violence, eradication of untouchability and love for one's enemies in a graphic manner. Embedded within these premises is Raja Rao's Gandhian quest for truth. Gandhi, *Kanthapura* suggests, never visited in Kanthapura. "He is a saint, the Mahatma, a wise man and a soft man" (*Kanthapura* 23), testify the villagers. He strengthened patriotism across the nation through his beaming ideas more than his presence. However, the influence that Gandhi exerted even without his presence in this village is massive and almost divine. The villagers were announced of Gandhi in one of the village festivals. The villagers believed that Brahma has delegated Gandhi with the task of freeing Brahma's daughter, India from the clutches of Imperial rule. The weapon that Gandhi wielded against the British is mind power.

Kanthapura depicts the novelist's deeper understanding of *swaraj* struggle and its implications that affected the Indian citizens. Gandhi elaborates on the importance of the spinning yarn stressing that the money that is given to the colonizer will be preserved to nourish and clothe the naked. Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* commences propels a conscious progression on a counter culture as a response to machination culture. Though diverse meanings are attached to Gandhi's concept of *swaraj*, fundamentally he implied *swaraj* in terms of autonomy, individual economic and political freedom, self-realization, self-rule and freedom from the oppressors. Key to the understanding of Gandhi's *swaraj* is the "collective freedom" from foreign rule. Gandhi prefers *swaraj* for independence as it essentially emphasizes the self-rule. Individual is the key in achieving *swaraj* and it cannot be impressed on others. "Self government requires transformation of the self, which includes not only the refusal to use violence and coercion but also adopting virtues like temperance, justice, charity, truthfulness, courage, fearlessness and freedom from greed, which would reinforce political ethics" (Bahl 17). *Kanthapura* is a compelling narrative that illustrates Gandhian self-governance through Moorthy and other Gandhians. Moorthy, the protagonist in *Kanthapura*, endeavors to propagate the Gandhian notion of *swaraj* in traditional caste based Brahmanic society. His attempt to proliferate the Gandhian ideal of *swaraj* is a characteristic ratification of the the *Harijanodharana*. *Swaraj*, as put forth by Gandhi, envisages an essential alteration of temperament. Self-rule becomes detrimental without self-discipline and in the wake of the freedom struggle may not be accommodating to counter the imperial rule. Moreover, Gandhi consciously appropriates the significance of religion to convey his ideals and also to revolutionize the traditionalist society. Gandhi was not religions specific but proposed religion that inspired all religions. "Gandhi became a polysemic text, enabling marginalized groups, in society to undertake 'distinctly independent interpretations' of his message" (Gopal 49). The subversive schemes authorized by Gandhi countered the manipulative landlords and the caste-ridden society on the basis of looming *swaraj*. Therefore, *swaraj* has to overcome resistance which is internal, which Gandhi considered hazardous than the imperial British.

Untouchability was a blemish on the visage of the Indian society. *Kanthapura* depicts a radical gusto in countering the malevolent practices prevalent in the society. Recommending acknowledging every human soul autonomous of their caste-connection, Gandhi opened up the possibilities of breaking artificially created human barriers. Gandhi writes:

...I want to say something about untouchability. If you want to do some real service, and want to save your Hindu *dharma*, you must remove this. If you fail to get rid of this, be sure that Hinduism itself will be rid of you. That religion cannot be a holy religion in

which hatred is taught against even one man. Let a man be a very great criminal; the least you can do is to reform him and not to hate him (Gandhi 69).

Gandhi's conception of the elimination of untouchability envisaged the transformation of soul, that attitude of a human being towards his fellow being. Human beings share dignity equally. Gandhi supposed that because untouchables are the poorest of all, they are the in close proximity to God. In opposition to the divinely ordained caste system, Gandhi bestows divine status to the untouchables, names them *Harijans*. Gandhi being highly critical of the tradition, he considered untouchability as a blot to Hinduism.

Village, a consummate social unit, "the site where soul-force' could find regenerative expression away from the corrupting regimes of technology and modernity" (Gopal 47) is key to the change of a nation. Raja Rao, in *Kanthapura*, skillfully gets into the depth of nationalistic cause not in the urban set up but in a remote South Indian village, Kanthapura. Kanthapura is beforehand instilled with profound religious essence which is quickly taken over by Gandhi's ideological squall.

The circuit of collusion is, however, shown to be short-circuited by Gandhian nationalism, at first in conflict with orthodoxy and latterly in conflict with colonialism. By this point, the orthodox space of the village has been replaced by an incipient Gandhian space, a process initiated at the moment of the Swami's exposure. The new era is consummated by the villagers' commitment to Gandhism (Mondal 112).

The nationalist scheme of employing the "creative imagination" to prompt national consciousness and non-interventionist subjecthood is indicated by the emblematic position of Gandhi (Sekhar 150). Gandhian ideology engages in a particular critique of historicity that implies a denunciation of the caste system. Gandhi attempts to determine the question of caste and the simulated hierarchy through praxiological censure focusing to maintain the ascendancy and redemption for the population of the untouchables. *Kanthapura* expressively presents these issues and the efforts of the "split-nationalist worldview" communicated through composite ways. The split psyche and the contrapositioning of the subject of the nationalist privileged Brahmanic elite are unambiguously explicated through the "narrative structure and voice." Augustine Thomas observes that, "The introduction of Gandhian nationalism upsets the appercarts of the Brahmin orthodoxy and the British colonialism" (1551). While the "great act of self sacrifice," of discarding the age-old Brahmanic elitist legacy of purity and pollution is personified in the character of Moorthy, young, rebellious and forward looking, the textualization and narration of this complicit and precarious social transformation is recorded and rendered through the mature voice of an old Brahmaic female subject who lends the weight of hegemonic and hierarchical worldview to the process" (Sekhar 151).

The reformist step that is appropriated by Moorthy against the conventional and the hegemonic objectives of the Brahmanic elite presents the radical erasure between the traditional and the dissident. The conflict between the young Moorthy and the hierarchically drenched society is an archetype of Indian society that Gandhi attempted to revolutionarily alter. Gandhi, as he, envisages a paradigm of *Gramswaraj*, an independent and self-reliant villages, the traditional conviction of the hegemonic elites is fissured between the nation and the caste-identity that prevents an equitable village setting as seen in *Kanthapura*. The village segregated with caste tags, fundamentally, opposes a *Gramswaraj* as envisioned by Gandhi. "The narrative deliberately develops a discourse of rural naivete to whitewash and subdue the material conflicts

and the inhuman suppression of caste and gender issues from within the boundary of this Brahmanic caste-swaraj village” (Sekhar 151). The discourse of rural in *Kanthapura* calls for an ontological and existential appropriation that can be contextualized through the ambience of Gandhian antagonistic vision at Brahmanic hegemony that is carried out in the name of *Gramswaraj* and *Harijanodharana*.

II

Raja Rao, in *Kanthapura*, promotes Gandhian struggle for freedom offering a mythological portico by incorporating Indian myths. Raja Rao notes, “The subtlety of the Gandhian thought and the complex political situation of Pre-independence could be explained to the unlettered villagers only through legends and religious stories of gods” (*Kanthapura* 104). Mother India is assumed to have been enchained by the British and at Brahma’s behest Siva incarnates as Gandhi to unshackle her to freedom. The tussle between Gandhi and the colonial masters is imagined as the battle between Rama and Ravana symbolizing the encounter between good and evil. India is likened to Sita, Mahatma to Rama and Nehru to Bharata. “It is not for nothing the Mahatma is a Mahatma and he would not be Mahatma if the gods were not with him” (*Kanthapura* 125). Gandhi, as Rama, is expected to come out of the exile to set Sita free. Srinivasa Iyengar notes that, set into two camps the Raja Rao’s effort to mythologize the freedom struggle provides an amplification of reality “by way of achieving eternity in space surpassing the dialectics of history” (qtd. in Dayal 11). The novelist also endeavors to exalt Gandhi offering God status. Gandhi, in *Kanthapura*, assumes “a vast symbol of ideal life-code, of a holy and noble person” (Sharma 25). The divine power that Gandhi symbolizes is anticipated to eliminate the people of India from all sufferings. The villagers believed: “Oh, no, the Mahatma need not go as far as the sea, like Harishchandra before has finished his vow, the gods will come down and dissolve his vow, and the Britishers will leave India, and we shall be free, and we shall pay less taxes, and there will be no policemen” (*Kanthapura* 172).

Religion plays a significant role in *Kanthapura* suggesting the energizing power that it had among the people. The villagers who are newly enrolled as members of the Congress appear in the oath-taking ceremony that is performed in the sanctuary at the presence of God. Moorthy requests the newly enlisted members to stand before the sanctum to vow that they will never breach the law. Moreover, they vow to spin the yarn, perform *ahimsa* and involve themselves in the quest for truth. The villagers call upon the Goddess to set Moorthy free when he was arrested and believe that the Goddess would lend a hand to them and free Moorthy from the British: “The Goddess will never fail us—she will free him from the clutches of the Red-man” (*Kanthapura* 134). The villagers readily vow not to drink at the Government-run toddy booths in the name of the Goddess Kenchamma. When the people are involved with picketing the toddy trees and are battered brutally by the policemen, the people turn to Kenchemma Hill to draw muscle for renewed confrontation. Many of the satyagrahis are imprisoned but Moorthy was left out and hence attributed to God: “But Moorthy they would not take, and God left him still with us” (*Kanthapura* 200).

Moorthy, the protagonist of *Kanthapura*, is a replica of Raja Rao’s Gandhian self. Through Moorthy, Raja Rao assumes an apologists façade to Gandhian ideals. Moorthy, a Gandhian, is presented as a preminent personality. He is “a pebble among the pebbles of the

river, and when the floods came, rock by rock may lie buried under” (*Kanthapura* 180). Rangamma remarks him as “Moorthy the good, Moorthy the religious and Moorthy the noble” (*Kanthapura* 144). Meenakshi Mukherjee notes Moorthy as an “idealized character who like Christ takes all the sins of the people upon himself and undergoes a penance for purification, a young man who conquers physical desire and self-interest” (Mukherjee 141). Achakka, the narrator of *Kanthapura*, is the chief testimony to how *Kanthapura* reacted to the Gandhian ideology and how the people responded to the visionary call of Gandhi. She also objectively testifies the patriotic dedication with which the villagers experienced the antagonism from the appalling and cruel brutalities by the British imperialists, on the one hand and by the hegemonic Brahmanic community, on the other. Meenakshi Mukerjee observes, “The characteristically concrete imagination of the uneducated mind pictures the Mahatma as large and blue like the Sahyadri mountain on whose slopes the pilgrims climb to the top, while Moorthy is seen as small mountain. To her the Satyagraha becomes a religious ceremony to which she devotes her sacred ardour” (141).

Moorthy’s first ever encounter, though not personal, with Gandhi becomes a potential *self* changer. Gandhian vision, at the outset, exerts a conscious process of self-purification. Gandhi acknowledges: “Self-purification therefore must mean purification in all walks of life. And purification being highly infectious, purification of oneself necessarily leads to the purification of one’s surroundings” (420). The infectious self-purificatory aspect propels Moorthy to move into the society with a revolutionary heart and mind. He accrues spiritual strength from a personality that could cast spellbound positive energy which affects him: “Moorthy shines with a rare radiance in his face. He utters truth is God and God is truth just echoing Gandhi” (Patil 114). His encounter with “God-bearing Mahatma” gave him lessons of Gandhian political ideology implanted with spiritual revelations. Moorthy is wonderstruck by seeing Gandhi and the radiance of influence he could spread calmly to the inward of his soul: “There is in it something of the silent communion of the ancient books” (*Kanthapura* 52). Moorthy’s rendezvous with Gandhi is the initiation into a quest for truth. Gandhi notes: “To see the universal and all-pervading Spirit of Truth face to face one must be able to love the meanest creature as oneself. And a man who aspires after that cannot afford to keep out of any field of life. That is why my devotion to Truth has drawn me into the field of politics” (Gandhi 420). Moorthy realizes, “There is but one force in life and that is Truth, and there is but one love in life and that is love of mankind, and there is but one God in life and that is the God of all” (*Kanthapura* 52-3). Moorthy, rather than politically motivated, was offered a glance into a journey of self-realization: “closing his eyes tighter, he slips back into the foldless sheath of the Soul and sends out rays of love to the east, rays of love to the west, rays of love to the north, rays of love to the south, and love to the earth below and to the sky above” (*Kanthapura* 29). The divinity that Gandhi extended evinced a certain interest within Moorthy the political and the spiritual in equal proportion.

Moorthy follows Gandhian assertion that, it is purity of the soul that leads a human being towards victory. Purity of the soul is essential to those who lead people towards freedom. Therefore, a leader who is with pure and good intentions can achieve the good. The means to achieve goodness should correspond to the purity of soul. To love those who hate and to love even the enemies become fundamental to such a leadership. The notion of Universal Self is key understand the mutual relationship between fellow beings. It is the eternal consciousness that pervades all *jivas* irrespective of whether one is a friend or foe. The Self that traverses the

boundary calls for a universal tenet of love that passes through all boundaries breaking the barriers of hatred and hostility. Jaramachar explains: "Fight, says he, but harm no soul. Love all, says he, Hindu, Mohammedan, Christian or Paraiyah, for all are equal before God. Don't be attached to riches, says he, for riches create passions, and passions create attachment and attachment hides the face of Truth. Truth must you tell, he says, for Truth is God, and verily, it is the only God I know" (*Kanthapura* 22). Truth being central to Gandhian ideals, the villagers should seek and speak truth which is spiritually and scripturally sponsored to bring to light the nature which is inevitably being truthful to God. The Vedantic and *Gita* consistently accentuate such a truth as significantly elementary to the nature of human being to be practiced as part of collective living. "The road to the City of Love is hard, brother, It's hard, Take care, take care, as you walk along it" (*Kanthapura* 89).

Moorthy carries Gandhian values of non-violence, elimination of untouchability and love for all into his village. He was determined to face and resist violence only through non-violent means and therefore he goes on to fast. The small incident that engages Moorthy circuitously to violence at Coffee Estate makes him be penitent and turn to fasting for three days which brings in him cheer. Moorthy reflects upon his own life to identify certain incidents in his life could have been avoided if he had practiced non-violence. Seetharamu's willing compliance to the violent persecution of the British is an illustration of how far Gandhian teachings on *ahimsa* have influenced the local villagers. Non-violence envisions purging any form of hatred towards other from one's heart because it is contempt and derision that causes hostility and violence. Range Gowda aspires to resolve his enmity with Bade Khan, the Government appointed policeman to spy on the political movements of the freedom fighters of Kanthapura, through violent means which was opposed by Moorthy. Moorthy discourages Range Gowda advocating violent means to counter Bade Khan. Moorthy stresses Gandhian principles of *ahimsa* upon Gowda when he communicates his wish to teach Puttaya a lesson for unfairly drawing the canal-water to his fields.

Raja Rao creates a young eccentric Brahmin boy, Moorthy, the mouth piece and practitioner of Gandhian ideologies. Moorthy is a university dropout who returns home, influenced by the Gandhian struggle for freedom. Moorthy puts forth the patriotic cause more than the religious statutes that distinguishes on the basis of caste (Dengel-Janic 152). Moorthy discards his city clothes and adopts *kadhi* clothing which is a symbolic renitence to colonialism. He convinces the women in Kanthapura to maintain the national cause by spinning their own clothes as advocated by Gandhi.

We should do our duty. If not, it is no use belonging to the Gandhi-group.' Rangamma says, 'That is right, sister,' and we say, 'We shall not forget our children and our husbands.' But how can we be like we used to be? Now we hear this story and that story, and we say we too shall organize a foreign-cloth boycott like at Sholapur, we too, shall go picketing cigarette shops and today ships, and we say our Kanthapura, too, shall fight for the Mother (*Kanthapura* 110).

Moorthy emphasized that to follow Gandhian ideal is to boycott the British goods is traded into India to exploit the villagers. Renunciation of the mundane finds centrality in Gandhian vision. Gandhi urged his followers to shift away from opulence and wealth and involve in the struggle for freedom without violence. His refutation of the Brahminical orthodoxy by intermingling with the village untouchables registers his resistance to the oppressive caste-ridden society. Moorthy

views the Brahmins as the benefices of the exploitative traditional socio-economic system in Kanthapura. Therefore, his resistance and struggle against the Brahmanic society is another struggle against structural violence. Bhatta, for Moorthy, is the symbol of Brahmanic structural violence which attempts to mute the subjugated untouchables of Kanthapura. The Brahmins looked down upon the Gandhian movement: “What is this Gandhi business? Nothing but weaving coarse, handmade cloth, not fit for a mop, and bellowing out bhajans and bhajans and mixing with the pariahs?” (*Kanthapura* 28). A gandhian ideal that concerns social harmony and equality seizes Moorthy. Moorthy breaks the superfluous boundaries of caste to enter into Paraiyah quarters to make harijan boys his friends.

The Swami is worried over this Pariah movement and he wants to crush it in its seed, before its cactus roots have spread far and wide. You are a Bhatta and your voice is not a sparrow voice in your village, and you should speak to your people and organize a Brahman party. Otherwise Brahmanism is as good as kitchen ashes. The Mahatma is good man and a simple man. But he is making too much of these carcass eating Paraiyah (*Kanthapura* 44).

Moorthy's associates warn about the repercussions Moorthy might face for breaching the Brahmin statutes but he pays no heed to stop his Pariah business. Human welfare takes precedence over caste for Moorthy and he recognizes caste as human made frontier. Therefore, he works hard to empower the lives of harijans. The villagers counter the Brahmin subjugation: “Why should not Pariah, Ranchamma and Sampanna learn to read and write? They shall, And Bade Khan can wave his beard and twist his moustache. What is a policeman before Gandhi's man? Does a boar stand before a lion or a jackal before an elephant?” (*Kanthapura* 37). Moorthy's mother Narasaama feared a possible excommunication of her son by the Swami. Narasamma says, “He is mixing with the Pariahs as a veritable Mohammedan, and the Swami has sent word through Bhatta to say that the whole of Kanthapura will be excommunicated...he can go sleep with these Paraiyah whores...but let him not call himself a Brahman” (*Kanthapura* 57-8). Heart broken by the deeds of Moorthy, Narasamma dies.

Gandhi's vision of life finds an outlet in *Kanthapura*. Moorthy forms the Panchayat Congress Committee and keeps in touch with the City Congress Committee. Kanthapura assumes an alternative Panchayat territory. The villagers acknowledge the efforts of Moorthy and the enthused woman sing:

There is one Government, sister,

There is one Government, sister,

And that is the Government of the Mahatma (*Kanthapura* 207).

Moorthy, Patel Rgegouda, Rangamma, Rachanna and Seenu are all members of it. No doubt there is Rangamma a woman and Rachanna an outcaste. When Shankar, the Secretary of the Karwar Congress Committee and Advocate Ranganna meet Moorthy to convince him of the futility of an in-depth Satyagraha, Moorthy is not carried away by their shallow politics. He shows he is a real village Gandhi committed to the cause of the nation. This makes people at Kanthapura and outside hymn up in praise of Moorthy and Shankar, Ranganna and Dassappa make speeches about the incorruptible qualities of him.

Range Gowda names Moorthy “our Gandhi.” More like Gandhi, he stimulates the national feeling and the fighting spirit in the villagers that emanates from Gandhian visions like the realization of truth, the significance of love and the presence of God of all. Within these

visions, Moorthy situates his purpose in the Indian freedom struggle. Moorthy was persuaded deeply by the limpidness of means and ends that Gandhi proposed as the plinth for which the life-changing actions spring. Moorthy conceives Gandhi's voice in his imagination to undertake the tasks and chooses to execute them in Kanthapura. Moorthy symbolizes Gandhian consciousness. Moorthy embodies Gandhian consciousness that renovates the political, social and religious life of the village. Mohit Ray observes in Moorthy as "the confluence of the three strands of experience that make up the action of *Kanthapura*—the political, the social, and the religious" (285). The political, the social and the religious that Moorthy actively brings together alongside the villagers of Kanthapura attempt an alteration of the village community. Gandhi believed that politics and religion are inevitably bonded to each other. It is the politics of the religion that the Brahmins exemplify keeps away the so called untouchables from giving an equal space in the holy sanctuary to worship the unbiased God. *Kanthapura* demonstrates the Gandhian rejection of Hindu caste system. The motivation induced by Gandhi permeated even the remote villages which discarded the artificial and hierarchical distinction perpetrated in the name of caste system. The novel illustrates the temple being opened to the *paraiyahs* mirroring Gandhian principle of equality of human beings before God. The radical event of the *paraiyahs* worshipping in par with other villagers is an event of historical importance. The divine truth that Gandhian ideals envelop also enlightens the Indian spirit, the equitable status of human beings in the society. Raja Rao demonstrates the divine reality and the innate legitimacy of the human status in the society. "Fight says he [Gandhi], but harm no soul. Love all, says he, Hindu, Mahomedan, Christian or Pariah, for all are equal before God" (*Kanthapura* 12). The spiritual status of a human being corresponds to the political condition in the society. Therefore, within the existential frame, liberation of human beings has to embark upon the political redemption from the social evils.

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