

## Inscribing with Time: Towards a Legendary ‘History’ in Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura*

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### **Abstract:**

This paper deals with the issues that emanates with Raja Rao’s handling of the primarily western notion of ‘history’ in the novel, *Kanthapura*. And how various themes of the novel are contextualized in a specific thought paradigm to profess the existence of a historical continuum of which the novel is a part. This notion of history presents itself as a counter discursive process to the West and at the same time produces a connection with it. The ‘Oriental’ notion of history is something that has been quite different from its western counterpart. It is a history, that is to say which is ‘living’ and it is this version of history that the author attempts to propose in a primarily western form of literature. In the purview of postcolonialist times it is essential to note that the ‘Orientalist’ version of history standing antithetical to its Western counterpart has often been termed as ‘non-history’ or the ‘Other’. Raja Rao uses certain methods to place his text within the Indian historical continuum; the ‘sthala-purana’ and weaves a mythical structure through which we see the current changes in Indian political scenario. The paper tries to assess how through the methods of using language, characterization, content, narrative style and even the microcosmic setting, the author creates a diversified in-betweenness in the novel.

**Keywords:** History, East-West, postcolonialism, sthala-purana, nationalism, microcosmicness

Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore remarked that *The Mahabharata* is not a history written by an individual or a historian. But it is the self fashioned history of an entire race. The influence of the epics on the consciousness of Raja Rao is definitely well documented (Rao, “Books Which Have Influenced Me”, *Illustrated Weekly*, 1963, 45). Also in this context we can iterate the statement made by Charuchandra Basu in his Preface to *The Dhammapada*, that, in India, no examples of European history can be found and associates the history of Europe as being the history of action. In such an assertion lies possibly the unsaid remark that the history of India is perhaps otherwise. Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura* is an attempt to bear that historical lineage.

The significance of history in the discursive studies, and particularly postcolonial studies, lies in the modern origins of historical study itself, and the circumstances by which ‘History’ took on itself a mantle of a discipline. For the emergence of history in European thought is coterminous to the advent of colonial expansion and its formulation of the unknown as the ‘Other’ and the subsequent annexation of the non-European world. It found in history a prominent, if not ‘the’ prominent tool for the exertion of control over the subject. The well known Foucauldian scholar, Edward Said in his *Orientalism*, exposed how this works. In this work he argues how a text purporting to contain knowledge about something can create not only knowledge but the very

reality they appear to describe. Said says that in the course of time this knowledge fashions out what Foucault terms as 'discourse', whose historical and material weight influences the texts produced out of it. The hidden agenda that fashions this is the very act of nomenclature of a new world. To name a world is to own it, and to own it is to control it, define it, its past and its identity in your own terms; with you as the centre.

The very concept of writing back to the centre was an attempt at opposing this orientalist viewpoint. It tried to create an alternative space of historical thought and therefore legitimize the past of the colonized. Hence a postcolonial writer becomes one who attempts to find the slippages within the unified established history and in turn fashion out a counter-historical consciousness affirming that there exists 'histories' and not a definite legitimizing history. For the colonized writer the process follows firstly from the blind adherence to colonial modernity, followed by ambivalence and then the establishment of a separatist and relational identity which is marked by a genuine reaffirmation of the indigenous sensibility. However, current postcolonial discourse largely rejects this notion of an authentic, unified, homogeneous recovery of traditions, putting instead an emphasis on the need to find an in-betweenness of thought.

Raja Rao in his novel *Kanthapura* (1938) makes an attempt and one must say a pretty good one to chart something of this sort. He uses the western literary form of the novel and fuses it with Indian expressions and sensibilities and charts a progress of the typically Indian novel which would portray the Indian sense of history and hence a distinct Indian identity. Raja Rao was one of the earliest of the Indian novelists to assert that the '*Indianness*' of his writing should make for not only a typically Indian content but a characteristically Indian form as well. As he himself says: "The Indian novel can only be epic in form and metaphysical in nature. It can only have story within story to show all stories are only parables" (Rao, "India's search for self-expression", *The Times Literary Supplement*, 1962). It is clearly something that Raja Rao himself affirms at the very outset of the novel, in its now equally famous *Foreword*.

He affirms,

There is no village in India, however mean, that has not 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 pipal-tree, Sita might have dried her clothes, after her bath, on this yellow stone, or the Mahatma himself, on one of his many pilgrimages through the country, might have slept in this hut, the low one by the village gate. In this way the past mingles with the present, and the gods mingle with men to make the repertory of your grand-mother always bright. One such story from the contemporary annals of my village I have tried to tell (Rao, 2008, 5).

Raja Rao in his very first novel goes out to assert the need to place his novelistic discourse not in the fashion of the Victorian English Novelist, but to draw his inspiration from the Indian epics, the ancient Indian texts as he stylistically tries to fuse the Indian sensibility in a primarily bourgeois western literary form. The attempt to place the novel in its own relative space is clearly there and it is something that Raja Rao consciously does.

In *Kanthapura* Raja Rao adopts the Puranic art of story-telling and also shows considerable skill of handling the modern experiments made by the European novelists, says critic Kaushal Sharma. Prof. M.K Naik rightly points out,

The story in *Kanthapura* is told with the breathless garrulity of the Puranas. Where the style rests principally on the spoken word. There is little attempt at formal organization and a long continuous outpouring is the only structural principle at work. It is highly that the novel is not divided into parts or chapters but is a continuous narrative punctuated only by breaks which must, of necessity, occur in any narrative of considerable length and proportions. The Puranas abound in digressions, in episodes and passages connected by only a tenuous thread with the main stream of the narrative (Naik, 1982, 67).

Kaushal Sharma himself opined that, “The correct narrative technique enables a novelist to portray his vision of reality and communicate to the reader the meaning and significance of his narrative” (Sharma, 2005, 14). Raja Rao’s narrative technique in *Kanthapura* achieves this precise purpose. It places the novel in its long line of Puranic tradition. The ancient Puranas, collectively called ‘the fifth Veda’ are a repository and a popular encyclopaedia of ancient and medieval Hinduism. Some of the later Puranas deal with holy places connected with them and hence the name ‘Sthala-Purana’. The Puranas are a blend of narratives, description, philosophical and religious teaching. The style is often simple, flowing and digressive. There is a lot of similarity with this in *Kanthapura*. Everything around has that feel of timelessness. The village, the hallowed presence of Goddess Kenchamma, the legend associated with her, all adds to this effect. It creates this sense of timeless history that is highlighted by the choice of the narrator Achakka.

The choice of Achakka is significant. Raja Rao uses the traditional as well as colloquial form of ‘story told by the grandmother’ which in actual reality accounts for the major source of the folklore knowledge for most Indians. Based on the Puranic style its narrative technique is based on traditional methods. Written from the point of view of ‘I’ as the witness narrator, it lends a sense of realistic credibility to the otherwise mythical narratives. Achakka is a simple old village woman with profound wisdom. It is she who like Eliot’s Tiresias has fore-suffered all. She weaves the past and present, Gods and men in her narrative.

As a matter of fact Raja Rao chooses a narrator who conforms to the requirement of the novel. Achakka is a woman who is gifted with rare insight and discrimination and has seen the transformation of the village from the timeless past to the scope-changing reality of the Satyagraha movement. The details of her narration add to her qualities of story-telling keeping the listeners on the edge. She knows fully well the characters in the village as she remembers all the legends associated with gods and goddesses. She describes with vividness the happenings in and around from the temple of Kenchamma to the Skeffington coffee-estate. Her position and requirement in the narrative process of the novel is paramount and undeniable. It is through her that Raja Rao finds a way to unify the multivarious strands of the novel. Meenakshi Mukherjee quite aptly sums up her role,

*Kanthapura* is narrated by an old woman to a hypothetical listener...Raja Rao’s choice of this narrator serves several purposes at once. Making this old woman the narrator enables Raja Rao to mingle facts and myths and in an effective manner. For the old woman, Jawaharlal is a Bharatha to the Mahatma who she

believes will slay Ravana so that Sita may be freed. For her Gandhi has attained the status of God and Moorthy is regarded *Avatar* in Kanthapura. The characteristically concrete imagination of the uneducated mind pictures the Mahatma as large and blue like Sahyadri mountain on whose slopes the pilgrims climb to the top, while Moorthy is seen as a small mountain. To her the Satyagraha becomes a religious ceremony to which she devotes her sacred ardour (Mukherjee, 1971, 141).

Other narrative features too act as a trope to further the oriental sensibility that this novel sets out to portray. Possibly for this purpose the large gallery of characters has unique epithets added to their names. Corner-House Moorthy, Front-House Akamma, Nose-scratching Nangamma, left-handed Madamma, Pork-marked Sidda, shop-keeper Chetti, Post-master Surya Narayan, waterfall Venkamma, Coffee-plant Ramayya, Street-corner Beedle Timayya, Rice-pounding Rajamma, Trumpet-Lingayya, Jack-tree Tippa, One-eyed Lingayya, Snuff Shastri, Gap-toothed Siddayya, Corn-distributing Barber Venkat. These constant uses of epithets conform to the Indian traditional class divided society where each has a distinct societal identity. The Kanthapura society too is separated in traditional structure. There is the Pariah quarter, the Brahmin quarters and the Sudra quarter. Right at the centre of the village is the temple dedicated to the Goddess Kenchamma.

Kenchamma is the centre of the village. She is that mythical and mystical force that binds the village together. Kenchamma is the presiding deity of Kanthapura, who watched over everything the villagers did and went through; marriage, funeral, sickness, death, harvests, arrests and release are all watched over by her. The narrator tells us about the devastation caused by a demon who took young sons as food and young women as wives. In order to save the village from such a colossal disaster, sage Tripura, underwent a long penance to bring down the Goddess from Heaven. The narrator in a matter of fact language (to perhaps lend authenticity to the stories) tells the story of Kenchamma.

And she waged such a battle and she fought so many a night that the blood soaked and soaked into the earth, and that is why the Kenchamma hill is red (Rao, 2008, 8).

Thus Goddess Kenchamma, having being brought from the heavens by sage Tripura, protects the villagers all through their lives in the time of famine, disease and death. Convinced with the miraculous power of the Goddess the narrator argues with authentic details about the miracles.

If not, tell me, sister, why should it be red only from the Tippur stream upwards, for a foot down on the other side of the stream you have mud, black and brown, but never red. Tell me, how could this happen, if it were not for Kenchamma and her battle? (Rao, 2008, 8).

The story of Goddess Kenchamma settling permanently in Kanthapura has a mythic parallel to the arrival of Ganga on this earth from heaven for the purification of the ancestors of Bhagirath. *Ganga-Purana* is abounding with such details. Like Ganga, Kenchamma has come to the rescue of the people of Kanthapura who worship this Goddess and the Goddess wields too immense influence on their daily lives.

...never has she failed us in our grief. If rains come not, you fall at her feet and say "Kenchamma, goddess, you are not kind to us. Our fields are full of younglings and you have given us no water. Tell us, Kenchamma, why do you

seek to make our stomachs burn?”[...]. That every night, when the doors are closed and the lights are put out, pat--- pat---pat, the rain patters on the tiles, and many a peasant is heard to go into the fields squelching through the gutter and mire. She has never failed us, I assure you, our Kenchamma (Rao, 2008, 8).

The presence of the deity as a supreme force in the lives of the villagers has its parallel in many Puranic lore. The legends about Kenchamma and the river Himavathy recall the descriptions of the rivers Narmada and Godavari in *Matsyapurana* and *Bhagvatpurana* respectively. What this achieves is again a continuous attachment of the present with the past. The present of Kanthapura is as much shaped by the past as the past is shaped by the present. History here is not a recording of events and the past is not just confined to almanacs. The historical past in Kanthapura is very much living.

It can be argued that this trope of historical expression attempts to foreground a particular history and possibly alienate all other histories in its pretext. In that case possibly Raja Rao is himself affected by the very tendency he is standing up against. But this is a problem that plagues the Indian writer in English as he is dealing with a multitude of cultural, linguistic, societal and historical repository and the need to find a distinct pan-Indian identity will force a certain sort of hegemonizing practice.

We must in this case realize where *Kanthapura* as a novel must be placed. Its primary purpose of actually writing to the centre on the distinctness of Indian sensibility as a different and not an offshoot of Western European sensibility would require this hegemonic process to vouch for an identity that is ‘Indian.’ The very choice of Kanthapura as a setting depicting in microcosm the entire Indian nation is evident of the fact that Raja Rao is attempting a homogenizing exercise to establish an Indian national identity. Also the novel needs to be placed into the nationalistic discourse of the time as the novel primarily deals with the process of nation building and the struggle for freedom from the colonial masters, primarily through the ‘Satyagraha’ of Gandhi.

Rabindranath Tagore we must recall was critical of the concept of nationalism, having seen its ugliness in western civilization. He defined it in his *Nationalism* as “a political and economic union of people... that aspect which a whole population assumes when organized for a mechanical purpose” (Tagore, 2001, 13). Raja Rao’s attempt in *Kanthapura* is to an extent building the conception of an Indian nation. However he is averse to use any of the western tenets of nationalism. He understands the need to find the nationalism to suit the peculiar sensibility of the Indian, to cater to a distinct postcolonial identity. He understands fully well when Tagore says, “...our history has not been of rise and fall of kingdoms, of fights for political supremacy...Our history is that of social life and attainment of spiritual ideals”(Tagore, 2001, 10). He understands Tagore’s warning that “We, in India, must make up our minds that we cannot borrow other people’s history and that if we stifle our own we are committing suicide” (Tagore, 2001, 107). Raja Rao thus attempts to forge a marriage between the Western concepts of nation which was imported during the colonial expansion and fuse it with typical Indian sensibilities and mythical histories. He finds that in-between hybrid space where there can be an expression of possibly an authentic Indian nationalism.

The trope that favours Raja Rao for this purpose is merging the real with the mythical ideal. Social change brought to this slumbering village in the form of Gandhi's Satyagraha struggle brings the village out of its ennui into frantic action and shakes it to its roots. In depicting the intricacies of the freedom struggle the novelist most realistically and artistically captures the social milieu of India during the days of 1919-1930. Raja Rao did not follow the likes of Mulk Raj Anand's socio-realistic style as exemplified by *The Sword and the Sickle* and *Untouchable*, and neither did he take the overtly sentimentalizing form of K.S Venkataramani's *Kandan the Patriot*. Both these writers express the western tragic overtones by placing a character in heroic struggle against the dialectics of sociological forces which are out to exterminate him. Raja Rao instead, places his novel in a small village like Kanthapura, whereby speaking of its people he attempts to grant them a legitimate place in the history of the freedom movement in India. He endeavours to give them a voice, otherwise denied by the combined weight of the struggle's canonized icons.

The choice of a Gandhian struggle is also important as it allows the novelist to blend the mythical with the real. The figure of Gandhi was in itself a hallowed presence which facilitated this. We recall what Jawaharlal Nehru in his *The Discovery of India* remarks: Gandhi was, "like a powerful current of fresh air... like a 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" (Nehru, 1989, 358). So a call for freedom from such a hallowed figure would generally be perceived as a call from God into pilgrimage. Hence the nationalistic fervour does not remain just realistic action but assumes legendary status.

In order to further his purpose of the novel elevates the Gandhian struggle to a mythological plane, through a marriage between western nationalism and Indian myths and metaphysics. Raja Rao exalts the freedom struggle by use of myths and fables drawn from Indian culture and expresses the nation building process on those terms. India's nationalism will be thus intricately Indian bearing its own identity mark. Mother India, which is the goddess of wisdom and well-being, represents the enslaved daughter of Brahma and therefore there must be the incarnation of the gods to free the beloved daughter. At the command of the creator Brahma, Shiva incarnates as Gandhi to liberate India from her enforced slavery. The inscription from the *Gita* on the inner title page of the novel "Wherever there is misery and ignorance, I come" also echoes Raja Rao's sentiments about Gandhi. To the people of Kanthapura too Gandhi was a symbol of divine benevolence.

And lo! when the sage was still partaking of the pleasures Brahma offered him in hospitality, there was born in a family in Gujerat a son such as the world has never beheld[...]. You remember how Krishna, when he was but a babe of four, had begun to fight against demons and had killed the serpent Kali. So too our Mohandas began to fight against the enemies of the country (Rao, 2008, 17-18).

In *Kanthapura* Mahatma Gandhi is portrayed as a symbol both of divinity and reality. He is the incarnation of Krishna (Mohandas literally meaning 'servant of Krishna') and would hence fight the demons and free the Indians from the yoke of the British rule. Also Gandhi finds his place as a statesman and his ideals find place even in purely socio-economic context. Gandhi preaches the spinning of the yarn and if the spinning takes place the money that is filtered to Britain will be retained in India for the poor and the naked. This dualism of attitude accounts for the existence

of Gandhi in the in-between space of a predominant statesman who fashions a nationalistic discourse and also as a God like mythical figure existing since time immemorial in one form or other in the consciousness. Mythologizing Gandhi as both Rama and Krishna in *Kanthapura* makes him a legendary hero.

The effect of myth in this novel creates its own self-fashioned history of the nationalistic struggle and acts on the freedom movement and elevates it. The national movement does not only remain in a claustrophobic space of time and place but acquires a timeless mythic dimension of epic proportions. Mother India is the Sita in chains to be freed by Mahatma Gandhi who is Lord Rama. The freedom movement becomes the mythical struggle between Rama and Ravana and Jawaharlal Nehru becomes Rama's faithful brother Bharatha. This mythicising adds a new dimension to the freedom movement, for the "exaggeration of reality by myth is the necessary way of achieving the eternity in space" (Dayal, 1991, 11). This makes the nationalistic movement acquire eternity and symbolic significance as it surpasses the dialectics of history. To the people of *Kanthapura* what this does is to make them aware of the intensity of the freedom struggle by drawing it with a mythic parallel.

The Gandhian hero Moorthy too has been idealized as an extraordinary person. Rangamma describes Moorthy as "Moorthy the good, Moorthy the religious and Moorthy the noble" (Rao, 2008, 105). The village women consider Moorthy as the sage of *Kanthapura* and have bestowed on him the belief that he would always do good deeds. The villagers think him to be a local incarnation of the Mahatma, and the pariahs feel Moorthy to be God and feel sanctified by his touch. Moorthy's image in *Kanthapura*, both novel and place, is aptly summed up. He is, "...an idealized character who like Christ takes all the sins of the people upon himself and undergoes penance for purification, a young man who conquers physical desire and self-interest" (Mukherjee, 1974, 141). And even Moorthy did not have a direct contact with Gandhi, but a vision. Moorthy is idealized and idealized beyond the specificities of the space and time which the novel emanates; even by the author, who refers Moorthy as a noble cow leading a quiet, deferent, brahminic and princely life. Possibly it is this idealization from the villagers and the author simultaneously, which eventually at the end of the novel, puts Moorthy on a saintly ladder.

However, Moorthy's idealization comes with a strong disapproval. And through it, despite upholding the values and judgments of the traditional Indian ethos, the novelist problematizes this same ideology that he upholds. For Moorthy becomes the crossroads at which tradition and modernity meet. He is the axis where the orient and occident converge from which the new India is born out of. As that return to the distinct pre colonial past is impossible for a postcolonial environment. What is left is the building of new identity formations whose authenticity would be vouched for by its upholding of its roots and at the same time it will have welcomed western modernity with open arms. As in Tagore's words, build a "deep association" between the two worlds and create a vibrant hybrid in-between space. Moorthy's task in the novel seems just that.

Though the main impetus may be said to rest with Gandhi but in the forefront it is Moorthy who struggle against the orthodoxies of his village. Throughout the novel he has to suffer ridicules and criticisms of his 'Gandhi business' and his 'Gandhi vagabondage'. 'Waterfall Venkamma' would 'give him a fine welcome with a broomstick'. She even sneers at him, saying Moorthy's

asceticism is only the forerunner of committing more sins. He even had to face the wrath of religion and the threat of excommunication from the Swami because of his overt 'friendliness' with the Pariahs. His mother was completely destructed imploring him of his lack of respect towards his departed father.

Even then, like the true artist, Raja Rao knew that if he has to portray Moorthy as the harbinger of the new identity of Independent India (born out of the convergence of the ideal in many things), Moorthy would himself have to go through the fire ordeal and silence the psychomachia that is generated in a revolutionary of this kind. Moorthy had to bear the weight of his past and entire history and therefore his entire existence and together take his own belief in modern consciousness of abhorring caste segregation, and fashion out of that his own self, his own revolutionary image. And it is with remarkable courage and honesty that he achieves that in Pariah Rachanna's house. Moorthy being a Gandhi man has preached brotherhood, equality, and abolition of untouchability. He calls Pariah Rachanna as brother, but still tradition's weight would prevent him from entering the house. However on a day he goes to meet Rachanna and he is not at home, his wife asks him in. In a remarkable passage, Raja Rao shows what ensues:

Come and sit inside learned one, since you are one of us, for the sun is hot outside', and Moorthy who had never entered a pariah house ---- he had always spoken to the pariahs from the gutter -slab---- Moorthy thinks this is something new, and with one foot to the back and one foot to the fore, he stands trembling and undecided, and then suddenly hurries up the steps and crosses the threshold and squats on the earthen floor. But Rachanna's wife quickly sweeps a corner, and spreads for him a wattle mat, but Moorthy, confused, blurts out, 'No, no, no, no', and he looks this side and that and thinks surely there is a carcass in the backyard, and it's surely being skinned, and he smells the stench of hide and the stench of pickled pigs, and the roof seems to shake, and all the gods and all the manes of heaven seem to cry out against him, and his hands steal mechanically to the holy thread, and holding it, he feels he would like to say, 'Hari-Om, Hari-Om'. But Rachanna's wife has come back with a little milk in a shining brass tumbler, and placing it on the floor with stretched hands, she says, 'Accept this from this poor hussy!' and slips back behind the corn-bins ; and Moorthy says, 'I've just taken coffee Lingamma...' but she interrupts him and says, 'Touch it Moorthappa, touch it only as though it were offered to the gods, and we shall be sanctified'; and Moorthy with many a trembling prayer, touches the tumbler and brings it to his lips, and taking one sip, lays it aside (Rao, 2008, 77-8).

Moorthy enters, drinks and his transformation is complete. This is possibly the climax of Moorthy's identity formation. Through an effort of ordeal he becomes a new person.

What makes Moorthy go through successfully through this ordeal is his passion and zeal for action. The character moves out of conventional clutches and goes his own way. Action is something that is not traditionally associated with the Indian intellectual. In India, the intellectual has always been a man of disinterested action. However what Moorthy displays is primarily a western philosophy. He is saved from the convention's clutches by the impulse of action inherent in him.



The novel and the people of Kanthapura too move from a state of veritable existence to a state of action, action where religion and revolution merges in virtual simulacra. The impact of myth on the people of Kanthapura has been discussed and the idealization of Gandhi and Moorthy to mythical heroes would eventually result in the movement facilitated by them, the 'Satyagraha' too being equated on mythic and religious terms. After all, Moorthy received his inspiration from Gandhi, for whom all action was rooted in religion. It is interesting to note that prior to any mention of Gandhi or Swaraj there is a vibrancy of religious activities, from an invocation to Kenchamma to the unearthing of a 'half-sunken linga' by Moorthy and its consecration. After that soon followed rituals like Sankara Jayanthi, Sankara Vijaya which shows how the people nourish and find vitality in age-old religious customs and festivals for a political cause. C.D Narsimhaiah aptly points out in a comparison between *Kanthapura* and Ignazio Silone's *Fontamara*, "Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* is a demonstration of the dynamic power of a living religious tradition while in *Fontamara* one sees its absence. Hence also the absence of a truly motivating, controlling, organizing point in life as depicted in Silone in his novel" (Narsimhaiah, 1973, 49). Also later he comments "It is important to remember that religion became the nucleus of social regeneration in *Kanthapura* in the true tradition of India where social reformers have invariably been profoundly religious men" (Narsimhaiah, 1973, 49).

The success of the impulse religion brings is evident from the fact that when Moorthy asks for money, no one will deny and everybody offers it to him. Their poverty becomes no hindrance for their help towards Moorthy or Gandhi or the 'Satyagraha'. Though C.D Narsimhaiah comments this impulse to be paradoxical, it is the innate positivism and faith that moves the Indian psyche. Faith in Moorthy and Gandhi to godliness moves them to utmost belief in these two figures. The collected money too goes in Harikathas, camphor ceremonies and the readings from the Puranas and epics.

The Harikatha is another feature in the narrative structure and the Harikatha man or the village bard is another of Raja Rao's trope which he uses to synthesize the sensibilities of past and present together. The bard is a figure who absorbs the ebb and flow of time and with remarkable dexterity presents the Indian tradition up to the current moment and brings the entire tradition in its flesh and bones to the people of Kanthapura making them aware of it with pertinent implications to their current scenario. So much so, that this, "flows into the villagers' lingo because it is rendered in the village bard's own idiom, and tone of voice" (Narsimhaiah, 1973, 53). In fact, Gandhi's presence in the novel is facilitated by the Harikatha man, whose help Moorthy seeks for forwarding his purpose. Gandhi is reported, but more than factually, primarily as a vision. It is through the Harikatha man that the iconification of Gandhi primarily takes shape. The impact of religion takes one might argue a dual role in the novel, both as a facilitator and the obstructor to the novel's primary actors, Gandhi, Moorthy and the 'Satyagraha' movement. The Harikatha man, Jayaramchar in the guise of harikathas, deliberately fuses religion and politics within his narrative framework. He talks about Shakuntala, Damayanti and Yashoda and also talks about India and Swaraj.

If we consider *Kanthapura*, as an exercise on nation building the involvement of the women becomes paramount. Moorthy thus enthuses them too and urges them to join the movement. The joining of women in mainstream politics and revolution may be contrary to the traditional Indian ethos of women being segregated to the inner chambers, but in history it is not unknown. The

women in Kanthapura take inspiration from Rani Lakshmi Bai, Kamala Devi, Sarojini Naidu and Annie Besant. The concept of feminism as a political movement has predominantly been confined to the west. Raja Rao in this novel brings the notion of feminist empowerment to shake the time tested customs to its roots. The women shed their inhibitions and move from the inner chambers to the forefront of the freedom struggle. Their drawing inspiration from their historical past is an effort to empower the feminist history and rewrite what has previously been written from the patriarchal gaze.

*Kanthapura*, though written much before the advent of Women's studies, some of the claims made by those scholars hold true for this novel also. Nanjamma's nightmare soon after the establishment of the *Sevika Sangha* shows the deep tradition of women's exploitation and oppression.

I dreamt my husband was beating me and beating me, and I was crying and my bangles broke and I was saying, "Oh, why does he beat men with a stick and not with his hands?" and when I saw him again, it was no more my husband, it was Bade Khan (Rao, 2001, 106-7).

In this dream her husband and the symbol of authoritative Raj, Bade Khan gets associated exposing the emotion that Nanjamma felt towards her husband. This is definitely not an isolated phenomenon.

Many critics like Shanta Krishnaswamy assert that nowhere in Rao's work, we find the male and female sharing an equal role. She adds that 'woman' in Rao's novels neither determines her life, nor define herself as man does. She is only a part of the male vision by subsuming her own reality. Also there comes some criticism that Gandhi's model Indian women are those who are modern day 'Sita'. He too codifies the model of Indian women and defines them according to the Hindu religious terms. However critics like Krishnaswamy fail to realize that Raja Rao's oeuvre sets out to see that the tradition and myth that has colonized the feminine space will be the mode that liberates it. Hence we see the overbearing presence of the female Goddess Kenchamma as the protector of the village. Though during the struggle by the *Sevika Sangha* there were times when the women are seen saying, "Men will come from the city, after all, to protect us!" (Rao, 2008, 166). And express their predominant dependency on the male, for protection, and hence expose their fragility, we cannot but deny the scope of emancipation that they earn.

Early in the novel we see this mythical "Sita" image prevalent in describing the worth of women. Sankar's late wife Usha is an ideal woman as she never says 'nay' to anything and never utters any word loudly. So when the time to break those traditions arose, the men use to bring them back to their place in the structure. This phenomenon is evident when the women start the Volunteer movement in Kanthapura once Moorthy and the others are imprisoned,

And when our men heard of this, they said: was there nothing left for our women but to vagabond about like soldiers? And every time the milk curdled or a dhoti was not dry, they would say, "And this is all because of this Sevi business," and Radhamma's husband beat her on that day he returned from village inspection, though she was seven months pregnant (Rao, 2001, 105).

Still, the women move through to combat both colonial aggression and move towards emancipation. Figures like Ratna, as a widowed wife challenge the history that has been thrust upon them. Her aunt Rangamma too undertakes an active role in the movement, so much so that

the narrator comments that, “she is no village kid.” Global consciousness too enters Kanthapura through the hands of Rangamma, a village woman. She got papers from the city, the Tai-nadu, Vishwa Karnataka, Deshabandhu, and Jayabharatha, and also knew “of the plants that weep, of the monkeys that were the men we have become, of the worms, thin-as-dust worms that get into your blood and give you dysentery and plague and cholera” (Rao, 2001, 28). She also knew, “about the stars, that are so far that some have poured their light into the blue space long before you were born” (Rao, 2001, 28). Myth is fused with science when we hear “just as a day of Brahma is a million million years of ours, the day of the stars is a million million times our day and each star has a sun and each sun has a moon, and each moon has an earth and some there are that have two moons, and some three and out there between the folds of the milky way” (Rao, 2001, 28-9). Scientific consciousness is amalgamated in mythical terms through the knowledge of airplane, cars and telescopes.

*Kanthapura* becomes the novelistic space where science and religion, history and myth meet with effortless ease and create a unique sensibility. The characters despite belonging to distinct time and space never appear discordant to the continuum of history, which in *Kanthapura* is of a unique kind. The easeful blending of past and present, despite an overbearing hegemonic tendency, allow the blending and fusing of discordant elements and out of which possibly create in the Indian novel a rupture. By encompassing this vision of legendary history in the novel, Raja Rao was able to combine the elements of Indian tradition and history with the issues of modern Western consciousness and fashion a new identity, and new space, where time present and time past are both perhaps present in time future and all time becomes eternally present.

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