

ISSN: 2278-9529

# GALAXY

International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

*September 2019 - Vol. 8, Issue- 2*

**Editor-In-Chief: Dr. Vishwanath Bite**

[www.galaxyimrj.com](http://www.galaxyimrj.com)

About Us: <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/about-us/>

Archive: <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/archive/>

Contact Us: <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/contact-us/>

Editorial Board: <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/faq/>



## **The Exploration of Folk Myth and Its Integrity in *Kanthapura*: A Study**

**Parimal Kumar**

Research Scholar,  
Department of Folklore,  
University of Kalyani,  
Kalyani, Nadia.

**&**

**Tapan Kumar Biswas**

Professor,  
Department of Folklore,  
&

Dean, Faculty of Arts and Commerce,  
University of Kalyani,  
Kalyani, Nadia.

**Article History:** Submitted-25/08/2019, Revised-10/10/2019, Accepted-11/10/2019, Published-15/10/2019.

### **Abstract:**

Folk myth, an imaginary tale that passes from generation after generation in oral tradition concerning the emergence of deities or elucidation of inextricable natural phenomena, is confined to a specific place and folk community. Kenchamma is a folk deity worshiped by the folks in the novel *Kanthapura*. The hills, the folks believe, are created out of the blood of a fierce demon. The folks beg to the folk deity for healing incurable diseases like chicken pox cholera etc. and vow to offer her special worship for it. The deities are not worshipped according to the 'Brahmanical' rules and the folks themselves frame and chant songs to their deities. The paper will endeavour to elucidate how folk myth is included in the play, how it is influenced by standard myth, process of emergence of folk myth and rituals and how the fiction achieves meaningful coherence, integrity and significance by the use of myth.

**Keywords: Folk; Myth; Rituals; Oral tradition.**

Myth is a traditional tale that passes from one generation to another generation through oral tradition involving supernatural elements or events and explaining the early history of mankind, natural or social phenomenon. Like legends or folktale it is a sub branch of oral tradition of folklore. Folk is, again, a group of subalterns who have a tradition bearing at least one characteristic in common. Hence, folk myth is distinctly different from the mainstream Puranic myth. Folk dwell side by side in the society with those considered to be superior but they

have given birth to a different discourse in the society. Puranic myth is chiefly adored by the Brahmins while folk myth is an outcome of the folks but the latter is obviously influenced by the former. Northrop Frye opines that literature is also a sort of mythology that is written down either consciously or unconsciously and as the society progresses, its mythical elements become an archetype or a structural pattern of story-telling. According to C.G. Jung myth emanates from the human psyche and it again gets express in the form of culture and societal norms. The collective unconscious influence the formation of culture and its progress. Inclusion of myth is integral in literature since time immemorial. According to Frye, no society can exist without myth. R. Parthasarathi in his introduction to *Kanthapura* avers “Told by an old woman, Achakka, the story evokes the spirit and discourse of the traditional folk narrative.” (ix). *Kanthapura* has oral tags like once upon a time, and this is how it all began etc. Other characteristics of oral narrative include the use of songs, prayers, proverbs, epic, lists, and catalogues. Rao in his foreword to the novel states:

There is no village in India, however mean, that has not a rich sthalapurana, 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... and the gods mingle with men to make the repertory of your grandmother always bright. (xxxix)

Incidentally enough the Sthalapurana that the author makes mention, is the folk myth. It emerges in a specific locality of a certain community and becomes an integral part of their culture ever since. The idolization or attributing God like traits on local characters for their sorrowful or heroic deeds is a cultural process among the folks. The worship of the folk Gods like Tusu or Vadu in West Bengal or mythological accounts ensued concerning them, substantiate this cultural practice. The story of the novel is told by a village woman who resembles much of that of a narrator of a folktale. Kenchamma is her name. In the preface the author provides the time and setting of the story:

It may have been told of an evening, when as the dusk falls, and through the sudden quiet, leap up in house after house, and stretching her bedding on the veranda, a grandmother might have told you, newcomer, the sad tale of her village. (xxxix)

The villagers think that they are protected by a Goddess named Kenchamma. They have other goddess as goddess of river and goddess of hill. Himavathy, the goddess of hill, is the daughter



of Kenchamma. All these goddesses do not descent from Puranic line, rather the villagers have given them birth out of their reverence to inexplicable natural phenomena. The deities are all nature centric; confined to a certain locale; revered and worshipped in that place. It is believed that ages ago Kenchamma killed a demon who came to demand the villagers' young sons as his food and young women as wives. Saint Tripura made penance to make her descend from the heaven. She waged such a war and fought so many a night that the blood soaked into the earth resulting in making the Kenchamma hill red. The myth is inspired by the Puranic myth of Bhagirath who is said to be the harbinger of the river as well as the deity Ganges down to our earth and made the earth holy. Far down the hill the soil is black, so the villagers' mythical imagination has framed such a tale of her emergence. The presiding deity Kenchamma, according to the villagers, has settled down among them since then and has been a part of their daily life. She never shatters them in their grief. She is also responsible for rain and harvest. Whenever the villagers go to her pleading for rain, she smiles on them and at night it really rains. The early people didn't have the cure for fatal diseases like small pox or cholera and it was believed that if they worship the deity who causes these diseases, their diseases will be healed. Hence, there is the emergence of Shitala or Oladebi who are considered to be the goddess of small pox and cholera respectively in Bengal. On Kenchamma, the folk goddess of the village Kanthapura, is also ascribed the role of the healer of these diseases. People make vow to do certain things or to offer her valuable things in worship. There is mention of holy festival done annually in honour of Kenchamma. People vow to walk on the holy fire if the diseases of their near and dear ones are cured. Fire is considered to be holy since its invention in the ancient time, probably as its light used to keep all the hunting and dangerous animals away from human beings. It was later used as a weapon for its burning power against all the possible attacks on the ancient people. Due to its power people started to admire it and ascribed holiness on it. This holiness subsequently took the form of a deity to be worshipped. Walking on the holy fire is a ritualistic custom in the festival called 'Charak' held in the honour of Lord Shiva in Bengal. When these offerings do not work they themselves find reason behind the failures. As when Ramappa Subbanna's prayer does not work, the narrator thinks, they should have made the prayer to the Goddess Talassanamma who is the goddess of Talasana and it is this place where they reside. In spite of making the prayer there they made it to Kenchamma, that's why their plea was turned down. It also substantiates the fact that each individual place has its own folk God or

Goddess as Talassana has its own besides Kanthapura. The reverence to the deity is expressed in the narration of the narrator of the fiction:

O Kenchamma! Protect us like this through famine and disease, death and despair. O most high and bounteous! We shall offer you our first rice and our first fruit, and we shall offer you saris and bodice-cloth for every birth and marriage, we shall wake thinking of you, sleep prostrating before you, Kenchamma, and through the harvest night shall we dance before you, the fire in the middle and the horns about us, we shall sing and sing.  
(Rao 3)

Their songs in praise of the deity is also imbued with rhyme, cadence and refrain:

Kenchamma, Kenchamma,  
Goddess benign and bounteous  
Mother of earth, blood of life,  
Harvest-queen, rain-crowned,  
Kenchamma, Kenchamma,  
Goddess benign and bounteous. (Rao 3)

The novel glimpses a vista where the transition of the local characters are on the way to attain mythical fervour imposed upon them by the village folks. Hence, it's the process of the emergence of folk myth which is directly or indirectly influenced by the Puranic myth. Attaining heroic quality or rise to the level of Gods owing to earthly exploits of the local characters are feature of folk legend or myth – genre that ensue from oral tradition. *Kanthapura* is a socio-political novel concerning the Indian freedom struggle in the 1930s when the nation was swept by Gandhian political activism. Its echo also reached remote villages of which the imaginative *Kanthapura* may be an example. The movement gains its fruition when it mingles with the indigenous characters and substances thereby convincing the unlettered people of its objective. The people of *Kanthapura* have profound faith in deities and 'Harikatha' is essentially a day to day event in their life. Self-regulation or swaraj has been likened with Sita while Mahatma Gandhi has been compared with Rama and Bharatha as Neheru. Rama's journey to Lanka to bring Sita back is paralleled to Gandhi's journey over the seas to England for attending Round



Table Conference to bring back swaraj. This comparisons obtain their synthesis due to the influence of the myths, Ramayana and the undetachable folklore of the land on the villagers. These elements, due to their mutual likeliness, mingles with each other forming a concrete discourse that the villagers think to be their own. Folk heroes or heroines emerge from the folk community. They are part of the community and out of heroic deeds they are remembered and in the subsequent ages people start to idolise them as supreme beings. They are, owing to this fact, deified and are worshiped in the community or in the locality. In every part of India, all the folk heroes who are esteemed high by the folks have a heroic deeds or legendary history. In the fiction Moorthy comes out to be the hero and the entire folk community start to eulogise him and compare him to Gandhi or Rama. Ratna holds the icon of a heroine as she receives the attention of the entire community out of her bold deeds.

Power has been the source of all activities on the planet. Deities are deemed to be the incarnation of power which is why they are worshipped. When Moorthy is arrested for indulging himself in the swaraj movement, Ratna leads the entire community of women with her great leadership, eloquent oratory intelligence and boldness. She has been compared with the goddess of *Shakti* as to the humble folks she bears the same quality of a goddess in spite of being a human being. She inspires all women saying:

Well, ‘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 hum out the name of the Mahatama,’ and we all grow dumb and mutter ‘yes, sister, yes’.  
(Rao 125)

Religion, myth and folklore imbued with the lives of the villagers found an echo in the freedom struggle of India. Harikatha becomes an integral part in the lives of the villagers. Jayaramachar, the chanter, invested upon swaraj the three-eyed power of lord Shiva – “Shiva is the three-eyed; and swaraj too is three-eyed: self-purification, Hindu Moslem unity, Khadder.” (Rao 11)

Nature worship is very popular among the folks who have given birth to localised gods or folk gods on the basis of Puranic gods. Folks started to worship a linga or a pieces of stone that emerged in the village newly. The narrator reveals:

Between my house and Subha Chetty's shop on the Karwar road as the little Kanthapureshwari's temple. It was on the Main street promontory, as we called it, and became the centre of our life. In fact it did not exist more than three years ago, and to tell you the truth ...our Moorthy as we always called him – was going through our backyard on day and, seeing a half-sunk linga, said, "Why not unearth it and wash it and consecrate it?" 'Why not!' said we all'. (Rao 7)

Kanthapureshwari is the name of their new found deity which is probably modelled after Shiva.

Offering something to the gods for realising their dream is a folk custom. Ratna is seen making plea to the god to provide offering to the gods for better health of Moorthy as he goes on to fast and his success in the fight against the British. She says:

'God, God,' she said, 'keep him strong and virtuous, and may he rise out of this holier and greater; God, I shall offer ten coconuts and a kumkum worship. God, keep him alive for me.'

Then she rose and fell prostrate before the gods in the sanctum. (Rao 77)

The way of worshipping the folk gods differs and also the rituals. They lit lights in the open fields and think that Gods will pass by that ways. Lights are lit to ward off evil influence and to welcome the auspicious powers that the gods are believed to embody. Achakka, the narrator of the fiction narrates:

Kartik is a month of lights, sisters, and in *Kanthapura* when the dusk falls, children rush to the sanctum flame and the kitchen fire, and with broom grass and fuel chips and coconut rind they peel out fire and light clay pots and copper candelabras and glass lamps. Children light them all, so that when darkness hangs drooping down the eaves, gods may be seen passing by, blue gods and quiet gods and bright-eyed gods. And as they pass by, the dust sinks back into the earth, and light curls again through the shadows of the streets. (Rao 95-96)

Fire marks the beginning of civilization and people since the ancient time have been praising it for its utility. It is for this reason that fire is deemed to be purifier which burns down sins. Walking on the holy fire has become thus a ritual of penance done on the premises of a temple. Again, people also vow before the deity to walk on holy fire to fulfil their prayers. It is a typical ritual done by the folk. When Moorthy is arrested, people started to beg to god:



And Rangamma vowed she would offer a Kanchi sari to Kenchamma if he were released, and Ratna said she would have a thousand-and-eight-flames ceremony performed, and Nanjamma said she would give the goddess a silver belt, and Pariah Rachanna said he would walk the holy fire. (Rao 108)

As Sanskrit hymns or mantras is chanted while worshipping any Puranic deity, local people praise the folk deity by their own simple words. Those words of praise becomes religious folk songs of a certain community in a specific place. Such a song is seen to be coined by the simple village folks – When the women go to cut grass for the calves, they make a song, and moving the grass they sing:

Goddess, Goddess, Goddess Kenchamma,  
The mother-in-law has wicked eyes,  
And the sister-in-law has a hungry stomach,  
Betel-nuts never become stone,  
And a virgin will never become pregnant,  
Red is the earth around the Goddess,  
For thou hast slain the Red-demon.  
Goddess, Goddess,  
The mother-in-law has wicked eyes,  
Betel-nuts will never become stone. (Rao 110)

Myth is a part of early culture in the civilization of any nation. From the time of its emergence it becomes an integral part of people ever since. India has a diverse and rich heritage of myth. The standard eighteen classical myth written in Sanskrit and *Ramayana* has been influencing our culture, art and literature even today. It also keeps a tangible role in the creation of a local folk myth and folk culture of a specific place. The villagers observe some typical folk rituals to please the deity as walking on the fire or dancing beside the fire. They are seen to worship a stone like structure considering as Lord Shiva as it emerges from the shrub. Some of the characters have been invested with the stature of mythical semblance making themselves as

folk mythical characters. The narration of the fiction impresses us to be the narration of a mythical story told by a narrator verbally. These myths, rituals and customs get infused with the events of struggle for India's independence and achieves universality. *Kanthapura* links itself with the root of its folk culture to the situation of the then time thereby making the fiction relevant to the readers of all level and becomes popular as in it people find the echo of their own culture. The fiction is a fusion of history, myth, folklore and contemporary events that lays its breadth on the simple folks dwelling in villages uniting the nation into a perfect whole. Thus, the fame of *Kanthapura* rests chiefly on its folk elements.

**Works Cited:**

Bala, Suman, and Ranu Uniyal. *Raja Rao's Kanthapura*. Prestige Books, 2010.

Dundes, Alan, and Simon J. Bronner. *The Meaning of Folklore*. 1st ed., Utah State University Press, 2007.

Hein, Carolina. *Raja Rao's Novel Kanthapura - The Example of Uniting Fiction and Reality*. Grin Publishing, 2011.

Rao, Raja. *Kanthapura*. Penguin Books, 2014.

Rinku, M. Abou Raihan. *Studies in Raja Rao's Kanthapura*. Ababil Books, 2019.

Sims, Martha C, and Martine Stephens. *Living Folklore*. 1st ed., Utah State University Press, 2005.

Thorat, A. *Five Great Indian Novels*. Prestige Books, 2000.

Walker, Barbara. *Out of the Ordinary: Folklore and the Supernatural*. 1st ed., Utah State University Press, 1995.