



JOURNAL OF ELT AND POETRY

A Peer reviewed International Research Journal

Articles available online <http://www.journalofelt.in>

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



AN ANALYTICAL STUDY OF GANDHIAN THOUGHT IN RAJA RAO'S *KANTHAPURA*

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ABSTRACT

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Article Info:

Article Received: 12/06/2014

Revised on: 25/06/2014

Accepted on :29/06/2014

The Indian National Movement gathered remarkable momentum during the 1930s and 1940s—a time when both prominent national leaders and the common masses were united in their struggle for freedom. Literature of this period echoed the spirit of nationalist movement and many novelists drew their themes directly from it. Writers such as Mulk Raj Anand, Bhabani Bhattacharya, and several Indian novelists were committed deeply to Gandhian thought, often portraying his ideology in their narratives. Among these literary works, Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1937) stands out as a seminal work which delineates Gandhian ideology through Indian freedom movement. Rao wrote about a slumbering Indian village which awoke to the clarion call of Indian freedom and transformed itself into torchbearer of freedom struggle. Rao depicts in *Kanthapura* the reach and power of Gandhi's principles—non-violence, truth, satyagraha and a profound love for humanity. This paper examines the depiction of Gandhian philosophy, especially its principles such as truth, non-violence, social welfare (*Sarvodaya*), and decentralized governance in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* and demonstrates how the novel portrays these ideals through its characters and narrative

Key Words: Gandhi, Satyagrah, Truth, Non-Violence, Moorthy, Decentralization

INTRODUCTION

Kanthapura mirrors the social, religious, and political transformation that Gandhi's leadership inspired in countless villages during the independence movement. The novel captures the growing dissatisfaction with British rule and dramatizes the major events across the decade of the 1920s which culminated in the Gandhi-Irwin Pact of 1931 which marked a compromise between the Indian National Congress and the British government. This pact was itself the outcome of the Civil Disobedience Movement, launched in 1930 after Jawaharlal Nehru's resolution for complete independence. *Kanthapura* does not attempt to be a historical

record but it vividly conveys the change in the spirit of the nation and the emotional upsurge that followed Gandhi's leadership.

The novel's narrator, Achakka, weaves myth and reality, blending Gandhian ideals with age-old Hindu imagery, rendering Gandhi as part-saint, part-divinity, and the villagers as disciples in a contemporary moral revolution. Raja Rao, a prominent Indian writer, drew heavily from these Gandhian ideals in his novel *Kanthapura*. Born in 1908, Rao was deeply influenced by the Indian freedom movement and Gandhian philosophy. The novel highlights the villagers' collective non-violent resistance against colonial rule while emphasizing the social justice, spiritual values, and communal harmony, all central to Gandhian thought. The blending of Gandhian philosophy with literary expression in *Kanthapura* documents a critical historical period and also celebrates the enduring power of Gandhi's vision on Indian society and culture. Critics often describe *Kanthapura* as an epic for its amalgamation of mythic narrative style with the realities of the Indian freedom movement while emphasizing the spiritual and ethical essence of Gandhi's political activism.

The village of Kanthapura is set as the microcosm of Indian society. Divided by caste, it is primarily agrarian in nature. Rao focuses on the four social quarters of the village—Brahmin, Potter, Weaver, and Sudra— that echo the pervasive divisions Gandhi sought to transcend. Raja Rao delineates the spread of Gandhian ideology not just as a political event but a radical social and spiritual transformation. The political motif is built upon Gandhian values—*satyagraha*, *ahimsa* and *khadi*-- which are interwoven throughout the fabric of the novel. Although Gandhi does not appear as a character, the force of his convictions reverberates in the actions and beliefs of Moorthy.

KEY GANDHIAN THEMES IN KANTHAPURA

i) Truth and non-violence

The core of Gandhian teaching in *Kanthapura* is truth and non-violence. According to Mahatma Gandhi, *Satyagraha* is the practice of resisting injustice through voluntary suffering. Literally translated, it means 'insistence on truth' or 'firm adherence to truth.' Gandhi's strategy of peaceful resistance—*satyagraha*—becomes the bedrock for Moorthy's political leadership. Inspired by Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* and his vision for self-government, Moorthy embodies transformation: he abandons education and orthodoxy to unite villagers in non-violent protest against British colonialism. Even in the face of police brutality, Moorthy and his followers refuse to retaliate, symbolizing Gandhi's call for temperance, justice, and fearlessness. Moorthy's character is portrayed vividly through his actions and beliefs during his arrest and subsequent imprisonment. He exemplifies the true principles of Gandhism by advocating peace, harmony, and restraint, reflecting the spirit of a Satyagrahi. Moorthy earnestly urges the villagers to uphold peace and love while strongly disapproving of their violent resistance against the police force. Displaying humility, he declines all legal assistance, expressing his faith in truth: "Between truth and me none shall come"¹ (Rao 2). The village, inspired by Gandhi's philosophy, transforms into a centre of activism and social change. The picketing of toddy grooves and shops arises in response to exploitation, particularly the economic drain caused by them, which wastes the hard-earned money of poor labourers. Instead of resorting to violence, the protestors maintain discipline and self-control, even when brutally assaulted by the police. The British colonial authorities treat even women and children with cruelty, yet the Satyagrahis endure suffering as part of their moral struggle.

The conflict between the villagers and the colonial power forms the central action of the novel. Inspired by Gandhian teachings of truth, non-violence, and self-sacrifice, the people of Kanthapura burn foreign clothes and boycott imported goods, embracing the call for *Swaraj* (self-rule). Moorthy gradually emerges as a true follower of Gandhi and insists on peace and order even during his arrest. He disapproves of the villagers' aggressive retaliation against the police and refuses legal assistance. He proclaims that nothing should come between him and the truth. His arrest, combined with the villagers' awakening, symbolizes the deep impact of Gandhian ideology on simple villagers. His insistence on the truth transforms an ordinary community into a revolutionary force for political and social change.

ii) Sarvodaya and Social Equality

An important feature of Gandhian ideology is his campaign against untouchability. Moorthy's actions—visiting pariah quarters, eating with untouchables, opening temples to Harijans—bring Gandhi's

message to life. It shocks Brahmin orthodoxy and challenges deep rooted notions of people. The initial resistance and eventual acceptance by the villagers portray the nationwide struggle with this social evil. Through Moorthy, the author brings attention to the Gandhian progressive ideas, such as advocating widow remarriage, promoting education for women and campaigning against the cruel practice of untouchability. While these concepts represent societal progress, their reception within the village is mixed. Many villagers resist such reforms which is evident in characters like Venkamma and Bhatta.

Nevertheless, some figures enthusiastically embrace the liberal and democratic notions that Moorthy preaches as Rangamma, Ratna, Patel Range Gowda, Sankar, and Rachanna. They are noteworthy examples of villagers who illustrate the evolving attitudes within the community. The author thus paints a picture of an Indian society in flux—where outdated beliefs and customs are gradually replaced by more enlightened and progressive ways of thinking. Moorthy adopts the Gandhian ideal of *Sarvodaya* (welfare of all) and social equality as the foundation of his struggle. He Rejects the rigid boundaries of cast and freely visits every household in the village, including those of untouchables, who were traditionally marginalized and excluded from social interaction.

iii) Decentralization in Politics and Economy

Kanthapura depicts decentralization through the formation of a local Congress committee, where villagers manage their own affairs and make decisions and do not rely on distant authorities or upper-caste leaders. Regular village meetings are conducted and they form a platform for discussions and collective problem-solving. It reflects Gandhi's vision of local governance through community councils. Leadership roles begin to shift from traditional elites to grassroots activists such as Moorthy. Moorthy distributes *charkhas* (spinning wheels) to every household in Kanthapura. During the first month, both the charkhas and cotton are provided free of cost, and thereafter, only a minimal price is charged for cotton, ensuring fairness for the villagers. He explains that this measure is necessary because the large-scale import of foreign cloth is draining India's wealth, pushing the nation deeper into poverty.

Moorthy educates the villagers about the exploitative economic structure of colonial India. Although the rural people cultivate rice and cotton, they gain little benefit from their labour since the agents and British-backed industrialists purchase raw materials from them at very low rates. These raw materials are then processed in factories and sold back, often at exorbitant prices, to the very producers who had grown them. Moorthy conveys to villagers that self-reliance and the revival of indigenous industries like hand-spinning are essential to resist exploitation and build a just economy. The practice of pooling resources for communal celebrations, like Sankar Jayanthi, promotes collective contribution for a cause. Additionally, efforts by Moorthy to educate estate labourers demonstrate the villagers' commitment to literate the marginalized communities.

iv) Women in the Gandhian Movement

Kanthapura highlights Gandhi's inclusive call by depicting women as active agents in the freedom movement. The formation of the *Sevika Sangh* by Rangamma and Ratna is direct repercussion of Gandhi's ideology wherein he professes that women should participate in freedom struggle, be self-reliant, and show collective strength. Women in *Kanthapura* step forward not only to spin for the Swadeshi movement but to lead protests and endure suffering alongside men. The women of the village are guided by Rangamma, whose character undergoes a significant transformation after her exposure to Sadhu Narayan in the city. The other women, curious about her newfound confidence and strength, turn to her for inspiration. Rangamma introduces them to practices of yoga and meditation which she had learned in the city and begins teaching these to cultivate discipline and inner strength. She also narrates patriotic tales of sacrifice—such as those of Rani Lakshmbai—and emphasizes Gandhian virtues of patience, perseverance, devotion, and non-violence. The narrative suggests the emergence of a new national consciousness among women long immersed in ignorance and illiteracy. The novel celebrates both historical heroines, such as Sarojini Naidu, Kamaladevi, Annie Besant, and unnamed Rajput women, and the village women themselves. Women of Kanthapura step into leadership roles at a time when men withdrew out of fear of police brutality. They discard traditional roles to assume responsibility in leading the freedom struggle. The text subverts conventional gender norms by

showing women not merely as silent, obedient figures within the domestic realm, but as bold leaders who mobilize masses, sing bhajans, and organize active forms of protest.

v) Spiritual Regeneration

Gandhi's ideals percolate in politics, religious and spiritual spheres. Rao's mythic narrative compares Gandhi to incarnations of Lord Krishna and *Shiva*, positioning him as a cosmic redeemer who has taken birth to liberate Mother India from colonial oppression. *Harikatha*, the traditional method of storytelling, becomes a tool for delivering the Gandhian message. Moorthy employs fasting as a means of self-purification, embodying the belief that voluntary suffering cleanses the soul and can inspire others to abandon evil. Within the narrative, Mahatma Gandhi acquires mythic dimensions, often depicted as a divine incarnation—an avatar of *Rama, Krishna, or Shiva*. Jayramchar's Harikatha performances weave together religious lore and nationalist ideals that convey Gandhian thought through a familiar spiritual and religious framework.

Religious festivals in the text are intricately connected with political activities. Cultural celebrations are turned into opportunities for asserting national identity. The notion of Swaraj is presented as a political aspiration interwoven with local deities and sacred beliefs. The hierarchy of gods and divine myths merges with the ideals of the freedom struggle, enabling the villagers to view their political movement as a sacred duty. Both Gandhi and Moorthy are venerated, elevated above ordinary villagers, and idealized as moral and spiritual guides. Through the fusion of religion, politics, and spirituality, the novel portrays the freedom struggle as a process of national as well as spiritual awakening.

vi) Myth and Reality: Gandhi as Symbol

Raja Rao's use of myth heightens the narrative impact, making Gandhi not only a historical figure but a symbolic redeemer. Gandhi's absence in person is compensated by his overwhelming presence in spirit and ideology. Moorthy's vision, is similar to divine *shaktipata* by a guru in Hinduism that grants him personal awakening. Gandhi's weapons of truth, non-violence, and self-control forged a new moral order. People were reminded of their cultural heritage and spiritual greatness through integrating religion with politics, which created a strong sense of collective pride against foreign rulers. Raja Rao effectively incorporates this religious-political awakening as the background for his story in *Kanthapura*. Religion thus becomes a vital force in the freedom struggle. In *Kanthapura*, Gandhi emerges as the epic hero whose simplicity and moral authority transforms a nation into a collective force for attaining freedom.

CONCLUSION

Kanthapura serves as a vivid literary example of Gandhian philosophy put into practice by the ordinary people of *Kanthapura*. Rao's literary work depicts Gandhian thought as a potent weapon for modern man's struggles against injustice, making *Kanthapura* a timeless critique and celebration of ethical resistance.

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