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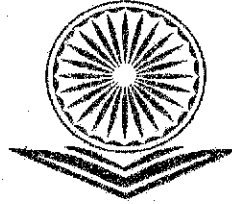
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20. Retelling the History: A Post-Colonial Reading of Raja Rao's Kanthapura

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Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* was first published in 1938 from London when India was still a colony. The purpose Raja Rao might have in mind and the impact it must have created in India and abroad is an altogether different issue. However, the novel does address to some of the issues which are central to the post-colonial approach and easily lends itself for an analysis on these lines.

What is central to the post-colonial conscious is the fact that the images of the colonized peoples, societies, countries, and communities had always been biased and unfair. In the imperialistic writings the colonies were always projected as devoid of any culture and civilization and the colonized as no better than the Calibans. The European colonizers with their self-righteousness and self-assured notions of culture always presented the colonies as the 'hearts of darkness' where they intended to take the light of wisdom and civilization. This was, in fact, a part of their shrewd strategy to cover their ulterior motives and to dominate and control the colonized by creating a sense of inferiority in them. Being basically the politicians and traders, they were themselves not properly equipped to understand and appreciate the native cultures which were very much different from their own. Unable to comprehend the different but complex cultural ethos of the colonized, they simply denied its existence. Another notion which the colonized continually propagated was that they came to the colonies only with the reformatory purpose and that their arrival was beneficiary for the colonized in many ways. It was they who brought order, discipline, and integration to the chaotic societies, and it was they who bore the 'white man's burden'.

However, things changed gradually. The colonized mastered the language of the colonizers which they had thought them to perpetuate their rule. But as Caliban used the language thought to him by Prospero to curse him, the colonized began to use English language and literature to counter the colonial hegemony. (Nonetheless, it is also important to remember that being primarily the critique of imperialist rule, the post-colonial response itself often

becomes narrow, limiting, and unidirectional, concentrating on the exploitation and ignoring the reforms, developments, and the ensuing benefit.

The title of the text also supports the point. Thus Raju Rao has tried to create the social and cultural ethos of India in microsm by making Kanthapura a typical representative Indian village. As a post colonial text Kanthapura succeeds in providing a vivid picture a long-lived society and culture. However baffling it might appear to the Western colonizers, it does have an ancient civilization deeply rooted in the religious and spiritual traditions of the East.

Raju Rao begins to accomplish this task by first creating an authentic narrator and then portraying the locale in minute details. The story or history of Kanthapura is narrated by an old widow, Achakka, in the typical Indian idiom and style of ancient Puranas, epics, folk-lores, and 'Hari-kathas'. "The narrator, with all her whimsy and garrulity, is a symbol of the Indian sense of the past. She is a superb raconteur and myth-maker, who combines art and acumen, and the narration, accordingly takes a meandering course flowing backwards and forwards 'mixing memory with desire".¹

This typical mode of narration is an important part of the plan to create the Indian ethos. Raja Rao tried to infuse the tempo of Indian life into English expression:

Episode follows episode, and when our thoughts stop our breath stops, and we move on to another thought. This was and still is the ordinary style of our story telling. I have tried to follow it in myself in this story It may have been told of an evening ,when as the dusk falls, and through the sudden quite, lights leap u~ m house after house, and stretching her bedding on the veranda, a grandmother might have told you, newcomer, the sad tale of her village.

The very beginning of the novel sets the mood of the narrative and we get a clear picture of a specific village placed in a specific geographical and linguistic province of India. This is how Achakka begins:

Our village--I don't think you have even heard about it - Kanthapura is its name, and it is in the province of Kara High on the Ghats is it, high up the steep mountains that face the cool Arabian seas, up the Malabar coast is it, up Mangalore and Puttur and many a centre of cardamom and coffee, rice and sugarcane. Roads, narrow, dusty, rut-covered roads, wind through

the forests of teak and of jack, of sandal and of sal, and hanging over bellowing gorges and leaping over elephant-haunted valleys, they turn now to the left and now to the right and bring you through the Alambe and Champa and Mena and Kola passes into the great granaries of trade. There, on the blue waters, they say, our carted cardamom and coffee get into the ships the Red men bring, and go across the seven ocean into the countries where our rulers live.'

Within a short paragraph the narrator sketches such a vivid picture of the scene and evokes the atmosphere in such a way that the reader feels himself breathing the same air, sitting relax listing to the 'old wife's tale'.

Carts after carts groan through the roads of Kanthapura, and on many a nights, before the eyes are shut, the last lights we see are those of the trains of carts and the last voice we hear is that of the cart-man who sings through the hollows the night. The carts pass through the Main Street and through the Potter's Lane, and then they turn by Chennayya's Pond, and up they go, up the passes into the morning that will rise over the sea. Sometimes when the Rama Chetty or Subba Chetty have merchandise, the carts stop and there are greetings, and in every house we can hear Subba Chetty's 350-rupee bulls ringing their bells as they get under yoke. 'HO', says Subba Chetty, 'he- ho', and the bulls shiver and start. The slow moving carts begin to grind and rumble, and then the long harsh monotony of the carts axle is through the darkness. And once they are on the other side of the Tippur Hill the noises suddenly dies into the night and the soft hiss of the Himavathy rises into the air. Sometimes people say to themselves, the Goddess of the River plays through the night with the Goddess of the Hill.⁴

Like all other Indian villages, Kanthapura also has its legendary history or sthala purana which is deeply rooted into the consciousness of its inhabitants. The village has been protected and sustained by the great and bounteous goddess Kenchamma who has:

Killed a demon ages, ages ago, a demon that had come to ask our young sons as food and our young women as wives. Kenchamma came from

Heaven-it was sage Tripura who had made penance to bring her down-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 Thank heaven, not only did she slay the demon, but she even settled down among us 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.' ... that very night, when the doors are closed and the lights are put out, pat-pat-pat, the rain patters on the tiles, ... then there is the smallpox, and we vow that we shall walk the holy fire on the annual fair. And child after child gets better, ... then there was cholera. We gave a san and a gold trinket."⁵

Raja Rao does all this through Achakka in the very beginning to create the authentic milieu of an Indian village. Such strategies constitute the efforts to enhance the 'Indianness' in the novel because, as the author himself explains in the foreword:

There is no village in India, however mean, that has not 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 cloths, after the bath on this yellow stone, or the Mahatma himself, ... 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. ⁶

Before setting the action in motion the author cinematographically focuses on the concrete presentation of the village setting.

Our village had four and twenty houses. Not all were big like Postmaster Suryanurayana's double-storied house by the Temple Corner. Out some were really not bad to look at. Our Patwury Nanjundia had a varanda with two rooms built on the old house. He had even put glass panes to the window, ... Then there were the Kannyya-Housc people, who had a high varanda, and though the house was I know not how many generations old, it was still as fresh and new as though it had been built only yesterday. ⁷

Till now I've spoken only of the Brnhmin Quarter. Our village had a Pariah quarter too, a potter's quarter, a weaver's quarter, and a Sudra quarter ... It was in the middle ... there were some fifteen or twenty huts in all.⁸ ... Between my house and Subba Chetty's shop on the Karwar Road was the Kanthapureshwari's temple ...⁹

Kanthapureshwary became the center of the villager's lives. Comer-House Narsamma's son Moorthy once found a Half-sunk linga and suggested to consecrate it, and Postmaster Suryanarayana suggested starting sankera-jayanthi. People came forward to offer dinners to the devotees everyday during the jayanthi. Later on Moorthy suggested having Rama festival, Krishna festival, and Ganesha festival. Everybody agreed to contribute and they started having bhajanas and Hari-kathas regularly. Moorthy contacted everybody in this connection. He went even the pariah quarter as he was:

One of these Gandhi-men, who say there is neither cast nor clan nor family; and yet they pray like us and they live like us. Only they say, too, one should not marry early, one should allow widows to take husbands and a Brahmin might marry a pariah and a pariah a Brahmin .¹⁰

On one of those evenings Moorthy invited Jayaramachar who told a strange Hari katha, mixing gods and men and indirectly awakening and directing the people to the political situation.

Today, he says, 'it will be the story of Siva and Parvati.' And Parvati in penance becomes the country and Siva becomes heaven knows what! 'Siva is the three eyed,' he says, 'and Swaraj, too is three-eyed: Self-Purification, Hindu-Muslim unity, Khaddar. And then he talks of Damayanthi and Sakunthala and Wasobha and everywhere there is something about our country and something about Swaraj.'¹¹

Jayaramachar also introduced Gandhi, the Mahatma, to the villagers by telling the story of his birth. Sage Valmiki went to Brahma and informed him that his chief daughter, Bharata, is being tampered upon by the people who come from across the seas. Brahma promised to help by sending Siva himself in the form of an avatara. As he was speaking, a son, Mohandas, was born in Gujarat. Like Krishna, he soon began to fight the enemies of the country. Thus Jayaramachar found an opportunity to explain the Gandhian ideas in details to the villagers, But before he

could complete, Sankur Police Jamadar appeared on the scene and Jayaramachar was never heard of again. Two days later, policeman Bade Khan came to stay in Kanthapura.

Moorthy also brings piles and books and spinning wheels from the city. He begins to educate, explain and convince the people to spin for the Mahatma and the country. Free spinning wheels are distributed and Rangamma's house becomes a sort of congress office. People begin to be attracted. Only Bhatta would have nothing to do with the Gandhi bhajanas. He begins to oppose them fearing that they will bring trouble in the village like the city. He is an orthodox, pontifical Brahmin who is more interested in money and status than religion. By his pleasing manners and always smiling face he becomes a popular money-lender and becomes very rich. He would neglect his religious duties to go to city for mortgaging the properties but never miss the obsequial dinners. The narrator innocently informs: "the children are playing in the shadow; the elderly people are all in the side room, waiting for the holy brahmins to finish their meal. But Bhatta goes on munching and belching, drinking water and then munching again."¹² However on such occasions his wife Savitri has to eat only dal-soup and rice at home. Fearing that the Gandhi business and modern education will bring an end to the brahminical hegemony, he begins to relate every problem to the new movement. Realizing village folk's anxiety about getting their daughters married as early as possible, he complains:

It is so difficult to find bridegrooms these days. Every fellow with Matric or Inter asks, "What dowry do you offer? How far will you finance my studies?-I want to have this degree and that degree." Degrees. Degrees. Nothing but degrees or this Gandhi vagabondage. When there are boys like Moorthy, who should safely get married and settled down, they begin this Gandhi business. What is this Gandhi business? Nothing but weaving coarse hand-made cloth, not fit for a mop, and bellowing out bhajanas and bhajanas, and mixing with the pariahs. Pariahs now come to temple door and tomorrow they would like to be in the heart of it. They will one day put themselves in the place of the Brahmins and begin to teach the Vedas. I heard only the other day that in the Mysore Sanskrit College some pariahs sought admission. Why, our Beadle Timmayya will come one of these days to ask term marriage.¹³

Waterfall-Venkamma is a wicked and venomous widow who is deadly against Moorthy because he has refused to marry her daughter. Bhatta joins hands with her and tries to ignite communal feelings in the Brahmins suggesting that the Swami plans to excommunicate Moorthy. Sixty-five years old Narsamma, Moorthy's mother, is terrorized but he is firm and adamant. The relation between the son and the mother becomes estranged. He angrily goes to Bhatta and retaliates:

Let the Swami do what he likes. I will go and eat with them if necessary. Why not? are they not men like us. And the Swami, who is he? A self-chosen fool. He may be learned in Vedas and all that. But he has no heart. He has no thinking power.

When Moorthy takes part in the funeral of a pariah's wife, Bhatta runs down to the city and returns with the words that the Swami has excommunicated Moorthy, his family and all the generations to come. Narsamma dies of the shock the same night and Moorthy leaves the village. However, he soon comes back and starts living in Rangamma's house. They give him food by the kitchen door as Narsamma used to do. He continues his work even among the pariahs. He decides to go even to Skeffington Coffee Estate. There were also pariahs and they also wanted to learn reading and writing. Skeffington Coffee Estate is situated beyond the Bebbur Mound over the Bears Hill. Governed by the 'Red-men' it becomes a symbol of industrialization and the 'East India Company'. As it requires more and more labors, its-agents bring innumerable poor, landless, and starved villagers from even the adjoining states by making false promises to them. These coolies:

Brought with them their old men and their children and their widowed women armies of coolies marched passed the Kenchamma Temple, half-naked, starving, spitting, weeping, coughing, shivering, squeaking, shouting, moaning coolies ... the maistri before them, while the children clung to their mother's breasts, the old men to their son's arms ... (p 48)

This section vividly describes the course exploitation and the miserable lives of the labors. Men, women, and children are put to hard work ruthlessly like animals. They are terrorized, beaten, and even refused the money promised to them.

Suddenly there is neither crunch nor cough, but the maistri's cane has touched Vannamma and Siddamma, and every body is at his axe or scissor and never a word is said. And they work on with axe and scissors till the

sun's shadow is at dead, and then they go back to their huts to gobble ragi paste and pickles, and when the maistri's whistle pierces the air, they rise and go, each one to his pit and plant. (p 54)

If the old sahib exploits them physically and financially, after his death, the new young one exploits them sexually. This is how the behavior of the cultured and civilized western colonizes is. In this way Raja Rao explodes the myths of the reformatory spirit of the colonizers.

He will have this woman and that woman, this daughter and that wife, and every day a new one and never the same two within a week. . . . he wanders into the plantation with his cane, pipe, and puppy, and when he sees this wench of seventeen or that chit of nineteen, he goes to her, smiles at her, and pats her on her back and pats her on her breasts. And at this all women know they have to go away, he lies down there and then, while the puppy goes round and round them, and when the thing is over he takes her to his bungalow and gives her a five-rupee note and he sends her home to rest for two days.(p 59)

Bhatta continues his campaign, threatening the community with excommunication. People become nervous and fearful. Something has to be done urgently. Hence, Moorthy goes to Range Gowda and suggests starting a congress group in Kanthapura which will join the Congress of All India. But a congress member will have to promise to practice Ahimsa, love even the enemies, and always speak the truth. When the powerful Patel agrees, most of the villagers also agree. Moorthy also goes to the house of pariah Rachanna's house and drinks milk. They also join the congress. A committee is formed with Moorthy as the president. He is the Gandhi of the village. Thus in Kanthapura Raja Rao has presented an insider's unique version of the history of the nation at a given point in time.

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