



STRUGGLE FOR FREEDOM – KANTHAPURA

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Abstract

Kanthapura is one of the finest depictions of the Indian freedom struggle started in the early 20th century by Mahatma Gandhi. Indian freedom struggle which left influence on the minds of people of India is the central thrust of the novel. Kanthapura illustrate how Gandhian struggle for independence against the British reached to a characteristic South Indian village Kanthapura. The novel is a wonderful example of the impact of Gandhian philosophy that affected even the far flung villages of India. This paper is an attempt to analyse the manner in which Raja Rao appropriates Gandhian philosophy through his creative writing in Kanthapura.



Keywords: Freedom Struggle, Mahatma Gandhi, Moorthy, Philosophy, Satyagraha etc.

Introduction

Kanthapura, a bold attempt at the assimilation of contemporary history into freedom, treats the impact of Gandhi on the people. Through Moorthy, the novel introduces almost all the major events of the Indian struggle for freedom in which Gandhi was the leading voice. Actually Gandhi's character was not introduced; only his voice leads the plot. Civil Disobedience Movement including the Dandi March, Satyagraha, Non-cooperation with the alien government, the crusade against untouchability, spinning chakhra and wearing khadi find vivid mention in the narrative. The novelist renders Gandhi's influence on the people with skill and understanding. Kanthapura is in India, in microcosm and the narrative is the story of rural India responding to the call of Mahatma Gandhi for freedom. Rao has also made a conscious use of myth as a part of his narrative technique to delineate the impact of Mahatma Gandhi on the unlettered villagers in an obscure village. By virtue of his legend-oriented genius, Rao's treatment of the freedom struggle is "neither anachronistic nor over-indulgent but satisfying aesthetic instinct and demand of relevance" (Chakravorthy 4). The immediate concern of the novelist is Gandhian struggle for freedom.

Moorthy, a fearless Brahmin boy, is studying in a college in the city. He listens to Gandhi's address and is totally changed. He gives up his college education because it is rooted in foreign culture, burns his books as well as Western clothes, becomes a 'Gandhi man' and returns to Kanthapura. There are two men in Kanthapura who obstruct Moorthy's reformist



zeal - Bhatta, a Brahmin astrologer-turned-moneylender and the police constable, Bade Khan who has been sent by the Government to spy on and sabotage Moorthy's Gandhian activities. Bhatta is in alliance with a self-seeking Swami in the city who in turn has been bribed by the Government to decelerate Gandhi's efforts to uplift the untouchables. The Swami asks Bhatta to mobilize like-minded Brahmins to oppose Moorthy's plans. Through Bhatta, the Swami conveys his threat that whoever associates with pariahs will be excommunicated. Moorthy does not care for the Swami's threat. He attends a pariah's funeral and, what is worse, carries the pariah's body on his shoulders. The infuriated Swami excommunicates Moorthy. Hearing this bad news, Moorthy's mother dies heart-broken.

The period covered in the novel is the period between Gandhi's Dandi March in 1930 to the Gandhi-Irwin Pact in 1931. All the major activities of the Congress committees in far flung villages, Nehru's progressivism, Gandhi's round table conferences, various Gandhian constructive programmes like removal of untouchability, picketing of toddy booths, satyagraha by Congress volunteers, fasts by Gandhi's followers and police atrocities on demonstrators are integrated into the narrative of this novel. The events that occur in the remote village of Kanthapura closely parallel the events of the mainstream nationalist struggle.

Thus, at one level, the novel functions as a realist narrative firmly grounded on historical facts. At another level the novel transcends the historical, temporal limitations to raise itself to the level of timeless, eternal myth. This enables John B. Alphonso Karkala to explore the world of Kanthapura as a mythical world. He defines myth in his essay "Myth, Matrix and Meaning in Literature and in Kanthapura" in the following words:

Myth in its essence is a necessary explanation of the human condition, balancing the known experience and vaguely recollected facts against the unknown and unknowable, or partly known, or not easily discernible psychic, social or natural phenomena. (76)

By interweaving subordinate narratives into the matrix of the primary narrative, Rao is able to operate at various narrative levels. This enables a description of Kanthapura which works simultaneously as a realistic description of a small South Indian village and as a microcosmic representation of events that happened on the national scale. Kanthapura belongs to the mythic past but it also belongs to the contemporary present. It is a picture of the resurgence of



a small and slumbering village under the impact of Gandhi. In Kanthapura, Mahatma's word is accepted as the word of God and the spiritual ideal of dedication of truth and Ahimsa is adopted as a means to achieving the political end of freedom as much as a means of liberation.

Kanthapura is the story of an entire village community caught in the maelstrom of Gandhian politics. If a novel is marked by growth and development in the character of its hero, we can trace a similar growth and development in the political consciousness of the entire village. There is little space for individualization of the various characters in the community. The most powerful passages of the novel are those in which an entire crowd tests the might of an alien government. By being a participant in the action, the narrator draws our attention to the communal nature of the activities. Moorthy is central to the novel in the sense that finally it is his example that inspires the other villagers to martyr themselves. But the character is fully formed from the moment that we meet him first. And the world that he inhabits, Kanthapura, finally becomes an extension of himself. There is no ambivalence or ambiguity in the narrative voice of the novel. It is a celebration of Gandhi's mobilization of the peasants and labourers of India against the tyranny of British rule.

Rao laid as much stress on the organisation of the Congress as he did on the religious and philosophic aspects of Gandhi. We know that in the thirties, Gandhi had proceeded to carry out a reorganisation of the Congress, transforming an annual meeting into a permanent body, centralised on the level of its executive and delocalised on the level of cities and villages through local sections. Moorthy hence plays in the village of Kanthapura the same role as the Mahatma on the level of the nation: he organises a section of the Congress, and by himself setting the example, he preaches religious tolerance and political commitment by all against the outside power. Rao shows the English as economic exploiters, an extension of the Indian system of exploitation, he also depicts them as destroyers of moral values. Moorthy wants to demolish the toddy shops which have turned the coolies into a degenerate race of alcoholics. Rao laid stress each one on that aspect which matches with his own political and religious convictions.

Rao evocatively suggests how Gandhi had prepared people including the women to undergo sufferings in the cause of freedom. There is strong freedom- consciousness among the people of Kanthapura and they are eager to keep the national flag flying. Everyone readily steps into



the position of responsibility when the occasion demands. Such is the impact of the Mahatma on the masses. The new nationalistic fervour has not only blended completely with deep-rooted religious faith, but has also revitalized the spiritual springs within. When the village women are arrested and marched to the police station, they feel that they had walked on the holy fire during the harvest festival. After they are beaten by the police, they feel as though they have done the pilgrimage to the holy city of Kashi, where the Gods are supposed to watch over the sleeping pilgrims. Moorthy first abolished untouchability at Kanthapura. He sets an example to others by entering the Pariah's street and trying to teach them to read and write. The Pariahs admired this Brahmin boy who has condescended to their level.

Conclusion

Gandhi's vision of life finds an outlet in Kanthapura. Raja Rao through Moorthy, who is called village Gandhi, spreads Gandhian ideals and thoughts among Indian population. Moorthy is a self sacrificing young man, who has no personal ambitions. He cares for poor villagers. The people of his village refer to Moorthy as "Gandhiman". He tries to imitate Gandhi in every respect. Moorthy duplicates every action of Gandhi in his village that Gandhiji imitates in his struggle for independence. He reads the Bhagwad Gita, plies the spinning wheel, and even mimics Gandhi's Dandi March. This action of Moorthy makes him out to be a parody of Gandhi. This paper presents Moorthy as the replica of Gandhi who follows Gandhian philosophy and appeals to the people of village to follow the same and actively participate in Gandhiji's freedom struggle.

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