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**INFLUENCE OF GANDHISM ON RAJA RAO'S
*KANTHAPURA***

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Kanthapura is the story of how Gandhi's struggle for independence from the British came to a typical village Kanthapura in Southern India. *Kanthapura* is a Gandhian novel. The action takes place in a small village named Kanthapura located in the province of Kara. The freedom struggle is in the centre of the novel, the issues of caste discrimination, gender discrimination, and even religion based discriminations are ancillary themes. Raja Rao in *Kanthapura* brilliantly depicted how Gandhism reached the village and swept away Kanthapurians. The dramatic and vivid tale told by the old woman Rangamma evokes the spirit of India's traditional folk-epics and puranas. The Indo-Anglian novel reflects more or less the same patterns of growth as the novel in the regional languages. With the advent of the Gandhian Movement, along with the political consciousness, the creative sensibility stood classified under the impact of ideas and events of contemporary history, the novelists turned their attention from representational art to symbolism, from the usable part to the contemporary reality and the complex destiny of India

Raja Rao, with his attention on the Indian spirituality, brings into the Indo-Anglian novels a sense of metaphysical intensity and visionary emphasis. India as a way of life, a locution of temperament, a concept more than a country, is at the center of Raja Rao's work; the "matter" of India so conceived transforms the novels into something more than a documentary artifact, a symbolic art entailing myth and ritual. As K.R. Srinivas Iyengar points out:

Roughly contemporary with Mulk Raj Anand and R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao makes with them a remarkable triad, affiliated with them in time and sometimes in the choice of themes but not in his art as a novelist or in his enchanting prose style. A novelist and a short story writer, he too is a child of the Gandhian Age, and reveals in his work, his sensitive awareness of he forces let loose by the Gandhian Revolution as also of the thwarting of steady pulls of past tradition ...his art is effectively tethered to his immutable ancient mooring with the strong invincible strings of his traditional Hindu culture. (386)

In dealing with the natural theme, a novelist reflects important differences in historical perspectives and narrative values. Raja Rao goes beyond representational realism and naturalism and dramatizes the natural struggle as a mythic and symbolic event. His *Kanthapura* is a mythic soil, embedding in its structure the community's immemorial tradition and beliefs; it is a symbol of India, past, present and future. The main theme of the novel is the impact of the Gandhian freedom movement on the character of the people of Kanthapura. It is the picture of the resurgence of a small and slumbering village under the impact of Gandhi. The village is seen as a living entity, more vigorous than man in relation to Gandhi's freedom movement.

Kanthapura is a story of the effect of Gandhian ideals upon a small village community, how in that community caste barriers broke down, how the women took their rightful place, how the community felt no longer isolated and how for a great national cause the

people sacrificed everything, their hearths and home, their lands and ever their lies, willingly and without any bitterness. The cyclone of Gandhian movement covered the whole country and had no forced eye, with some variations, what happened in Kanthapura was repeated at several places. The novel is thus an epic of modern India. The novel resounds with the ovation "Mahatma Gandhi ki Jai" and the oblique denunciation of the British and their sycophants. The theme is not merely political; it includes in its compass, social, religious and economic aspects viewed in the light of the Ram-Sita-Ravana myth and a number of references to the history, scriptures and mythology of India. C.D. Narasimhaiah remarks:

No other book on this scope and size on this theme pictures so vividly, truthfully and touchingly the story of the resurgence of India under Gandhi's leadership, its religious character, its economic and social concern, its political ideal, precisely in the way Gandhi tried to spiritualize politics.(65)

Kanthapura presents the story of a South Indian village during the non-cooperation days. It deals with the theme of Gandhian impact on a village community. *Kanthapura* is narrated by the village grandmother by a series of happenings. Moorthy is a follower of Mahatma Gandhi. He advises people about 'Swaraja', 'Khaddar' etc. Jai Ramaarcharn's 'Harikantha' too has the overtones of 'Swaraja'. Moorthy works for the uplift of the untouchables and becomes an enemy of the orthodox Hindus. He is ex-communicated by local guardians like Swami Atmananda, the great Vedantic philosopher. He is arrested for his nationalistic activities and sentenced to three months imprisonment. After having completed his term of imprisonment, Moorthy returns and starts his Civil Disobedience Campaign among the labourers whom he incites not to pay their taxes. Soon he wins the favour of the village community. The movement gains momentum and the police opens fire in the midst of 'Vandematram' and 'Inquilab Zindabad'. The theme of *Kanthapura* may be summed up as 'Gandhi and Our Villages' but the style of narration makes the book more a Gandhi-purana than a piece of mere fiction. On the symbolic plane Mahatma Gandhi is the invisible God. Moorthy is the invisible 'Avatar'. The reign of the red is the Asuric rule and it is assisted by Devas, the 'Satyagrahis'. Bade Khan, the policeman is the symbol of oppression. The atmosphere of *Kanthapura* is surcharged with nationalism. It is the story of 'Satyagrah Movement', 'Lathi' charge, and the ruin that followed. The impact of Gandhi conveyed through Moorthy, transforms the life of an entire village community. All the people of the village play their part in the story.

The impact of the March on Kanthapura is evident in the hectic activities of the people who assemble at the river, take dips into water and take the march at the Gauri festival. The March serves a threefold purpose: defiance to the government, a device to call upon the people to spin daily one hundred yarns and to put aside the idea of the holy Brahmin and the untouchable Pariah. The call of the Mahatma signs in the hearts of Kanthapurian. The idea of March as a pilgrimage lends "religious hue" to the political issue. The Mahatma is shown as the "Sahayadri Mountain", as Raja Harishchandra, as a hero who is welcomed by thirty-thousand men, women and children on his way to Dandi. Moorthy is the "Small Mountain" and the volunteers are the pilgrims. The characters, Rangamma and Ratnamma also, like the legendary heroines of India, pursue the ideals of Mahatma Gandhi's weapon of non-violence also forms an important aspect in *Kanthapura*. "Fight", says Gandhi, "but harm no soul". Moorthy pleads for non-violence in a society in which Bade Khan threatens to squash Range Godwa like a bug, the Sahib violates the virgins and the police perpetrate atrocities on the people. He asks the Skiffington coolies to desist from violence.

The novel *Kanthapura* clearly appears to be motivated by impulses other than the artistic, however *Kanthapura* is not a political novel though assured by politics; its

economic and social concerns and the religious undertones are subsumed into myth and legend. All this is done precisely in the manner in which Gandhiji attempted to "spiritualise" politics. As Amaoury de Reincourt points out:

With Gandhiji, it was the historyless masses of India who rose to political power and attempted withdraw from contemporary history, to husk back to an imitable past. Gandhiji spoke to the masses of India in the language of the timeless religious myths. He abstracted in true Indian tradition, the element of eternity from time, sought for religious truths, not historical significance. (287)

Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* was a pioneering work in Indian fiction. The struggle of the people with the outsiders, their readiness to come out of their historical apathy and plunge themselves into 'swaraja-yajna', the Satyagraha, with a sacramental passion are projected by the author with passionate indulgence and conviction. The main theme of *Kanthapura* is the freedom struggle of 30's and 40's in full compliance of Gandhian principles of non-violence, truth, and civil-disobedience in India.

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