

INFLUENCE OF GANDHI ON RAJA RAO'S *KANTHAPURA*

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Abstract:

*To most people of the present generation, Gandhi is only a name and we sometimes find it hard to believe that such a man ever walked on this earth in flesh and blood. Yet the history of the half of the twentieth century in India is largely the history of a man called Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and the tremendous influence he exercised on the socio-politico-economic scene of the subcontinent, if not, the entire world. The present research paper attempts to study Gandhian influence on Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*.*

Key Words: *Gandhism, history, ideology, philosophy.*

Gandhism as a distinct influence on Indian Writing in English was felt in the mid-1930s with the publication of Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*, *Coolie* and *The Sword and the Sickle*, and Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*. Later, the Mahatma's influence is markedly discernible in such works of fiction as Kamala Markandaya's *Some Inner Fury* Abbas's *Inqilab*, K. Nagarajan's *Chronicles of Kedaram*, Babhani Bhattacharya's *So Many Hungers*, Anand Lall's *The House at Adampur*, Lambert Mascarenhas's *Sorrowing Lies My Land*, Nayantara Sahgal's *A Time to be Happy*, Manohar Malgonkar's *A Bend in the Ganges* and R. K. Narayan's *Waiting for the Mahatma*. Each of these novelists has viewed Gandhi and Gandhism in his or her perspective and drawn individual conclusions. The various facts of Gandhism—truth, non-violence, non-cooperation, ends and means, emancipation of women, eradication of untouchability and love for the underdog—have all been interpreted and explored differently from their peculiar standpoint.

Being a child of the Gandhian age, Raja Rao was very much influenced by the Gandhian ideology. Gandhiji was a respectable leader in India and abroad due to not only for his constant struggle for Indian independence, but also for his immaculate character. His age had experienced two dire world wars. Every effort to gain freedom proved to be futile. Indians were frustrated as they were unable to realize their hope of gaining independence. Education, politics, economics, religion, social life, language and literature were, more or less, influenced by Gandhian philosophy and ideology. Gandhiji had very strongly influenced language and literature by his writings in English and by his revolutionary ideas, ideals and practice in the freedom movement through his weapons of non-violence, passive resistance, non-cooperation, and truthfulness which had permeated deep into all the echelons and caused a sea change in the minds of Indians.

Gandhi galvanized an entire nation to fight for the country's independence on the planks of truth and nonviolence. He was also a great social reformer who strongly believed in the removal of untouchability, the propagation of swadeshi and in the empowerment of women. All these facets have been impressively brought out by Raja Rao in his first novel, *Kanthapura*. The village of *Kanthapura* and its people are the protagonists here and Rao shows us how the Gandhian movement affected their lives and inspired them to take part in the country's freedom struggle by adopting Gandhian methods and tactics in the early 1930s.

Kanthapura is an obscure, out-of-the-way, slumbering village in South India on the Malabar Coast, facing the Arabian Sea. This village suddenly comes to life. Thanks to the non-violent, no-cooperation

movement of Gandhi. It is in the handling of this theme that Raja Rao quickens it to activity and thus gives us an insight into the appalling social and economic conditions of Indian villages, as also into the values that have preserved the people against flood, fire, famine and exploitation from within and without-and more than that, the incomparable manner in which Gandhi tapped the deeply religious and spiritual resources of the people living in the remotest parts of India and built up a national movement in one lifetime.

But *Kanthapura* is no political novel any more than was Gandhi's movement a mere political movement. No other book of this scope and size on this theme pictures so vividly, truthfully and touching the story of the resurgence of India under Gandhi's leadership: its religious character, its economic and social concerns, its political ideals, precisely in the way Gandhi tried to spiritualise politics, the capacity of our people in response to the call-of one Gandhi not the spectacular sacrifices of the few chosen ones who later became the country's rulers-but the officially unchronicled, little, nameless, unremembered acts of courage and sacrifice of peasants and farm hands, students and lawyers, women and old men, thanks to whom Gandhi's unique experiment gathered momentum and grew into a national movement.

The hero of this epic is no doubt Gandhi himself though he does not personally appear anywhere in the novel. *Kanthapura* is thus India in microcosm: what happened there is what happened everywhere in India during those terrible years of our fight for freedom.

There are, however, Gandhian characters in *Kanthapura*, Moorthy being the most conspicuous of them. He endeavours to put Gandhi's principles and teachings into practice. At the Mahatma's call he abandons his studies and makes a bonfire of his foreign clothes. He also seems to have taken a vow not to marry and to observe celibacy because the needs of the moment require that at least some people should devote themselves entirely to the cause of the Gandhian movement and sacrifice their personal life and feelings. Moorthy not only sacrifices the pleasures of married life but almost willingly makes a sacrifice of his mother since he knows that she would be unable to bear the shock of his excommunication. He continues working among the pariahs of *Kanthapura* and the neighbouring Skeffington Coffee Estate, regardless of the warning of the Swami conveyed to him through Bhatta.

Moorthy plays a prominent part in popularising the *charkha* in the *Kanthapura*. He also treats the pariahs humanely, on an equal footing although he is a Brahmin and, after some qualms of conscience, even takes food in the house of one of them. He organises a peaceful satyagraha against the manufacture and sale of toddy. He attaches great importance to truth and non-violence. When some of his followers indulge in violence against the policeman Bade Khan, he takes the moral responsibility of the act on himself. Like a true Gandhian, he adopts the method of penance and self-purification by undertaking a three-day fast. He embraces arrest willingly and tells his followers to let the policemen do their duty. Ironically, he is charged by the Government with inciting the people to attack the police. During his trial, Moorthy behaves like a perfect Gandhian. He considers himself a votary of Truth and maintains that, since his cause is based on justice, he does not need an advocate to defend him. He is sentenced to three months' rigorous imprisonment.

We form an image of Gandhi through the brave sacrifices and selfless sacrifices of his followers. Even young boys lay down their lives for the honour of the Congress flag, which will one day become the flag of Free India. The British tempt them to salute the Union Jack saying that they would be released if they do so but they only chant "Vande Mataram" and "Mahatma Gandhi Ki Jai."

In Gandhi's speech, Moorthy finds something of the silent communion of ancient books. Gandhi speaks in a deep and stirring voice that goes to the hearts of his listeners and comes streaming back through the thrumming air, and seems to go through Moorthy's very limbs. He listens in silence to the inspiring words of the Mahatma:

There is one force in life and that is Truth, and there is but one love in life and that is the love of mankind, there is but one God in life and that is the God of all.

Inspired by the noble words of the Mahatma, Moorthy manages to reach him on the stage and falls

at his feet, saying, "I am your slave". The Mahatma treats him with great kindness and asks him to pursue the path of Truth. The Mahatma suggests that Moorthy should discard foreign clothes, and he vows to do so. He also promises not to continue his education under the British system. The Mahatma then tells Moorthy that he can serve his country best by going and working among the dumb millions of his village. Moorthy pledges to do so and the Mahatma affectionately pats him on the back. The touch has an electrifying effect on Moorthy and it seems that his mission in life is now clear. The piety and nobility of the Mahatma is even acknowledged by the Swami and Bhatta, who are opposed to him and his principles.

Besides Moorthy, there are several other Gandhian characters in *Kanthapura*, the most important of them being the advocate Sankar. Sankar is modeled on Gandhi himself though Moorthy is depicted only as a young disciple of the Mahatma. Sankar is mature as compared to Moorthy. Like Gandhi, he is an advocate, and his attitude to his profession is very much like that of Gandhi when he practised as an advocate in South Africa. Sankar believes that it is the duty of a lawyer to help the court in the administration of justice and not just to make his client win by hook or by crook. He never takes up a false case. If he discovers during the trial that his client is guilty, he gives up the case and makes his client confess his guilt in the court.

Sankar is passionately in favour of khadi and refuses to attend functions like marriage if everyone is not fully dressed in khadi. He understands the real significance of the khadi movement. When at one marriage one of the relatives suggests that at least the bride should be allowed to wear a Dharmawar sari, Sankar says that by buying such saris only encourages the Italian yarn-makers and the German dye manufacturers. The propose of the khadi movement is to put a stop to the exploitation of India by western industrialists and manufacturers.

Another significant Gandhian character in *Kanthapura* is Rangamma. She not only provides material and moral support to Moorthy but plays an active part in organising and training the women of *Kanthapura*. The hardest task before her is to prepare women to bear the atrocities of the police calmly, and she succeeds in this to a large extent by using arguments which work wonderfully on the feminine mind.

Kanthapura is a great work of art, presenting realistically, impartially and artistically the impact of the Gandhi movement on the masses of India. It is not a propaganda piece or a thesis novel but a work of art characterised by the necessary artistic detachment and impartiality. It is a great classic of India's freedom struggle; it gives us more essential truth about the Gandhian era than any official records or books of history. It is a valuable social document of abiding interest and significance. It is not a mere political novel but concerned with the total regeneration and resurgence of the Indian masses under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi.

Raja Rao brings out the fact about Gandhi's belief that politics and religion are inextricably mated together; *Kanthapura* evinces this divine truth that man's status in the society is spiritual as much as it is political. In fact Rao's spiritual and philosophical ideals, knowledge of ancient India and its traditional impact on the emotional and psychological make-up of the inhabitants of this South Indian Village during the period of independence movement under the leadership of Gandhi flashes through the novel. Iyengar rightly puts that "The novel is a veritable grammar of the Gandhian myth". That is why by reading the novel, one can easily feel that *Kanthapura* is a laboratory of the Gandhian thought and theory.

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