

Raja Rao's Kanthapura: The Veritable Grammar of Gandhian Myth and Reform

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One of the best representations of the Freedom Movement, which Mahatma Gandhi started in the early 1900s to guide India away from British colonial authority, is found at Raja Rao's Kanthapura. The main focus of the book is India's freedom movement, which had a significant impact on the way the Indian populace behaved. Kanthapura shows how Gandhian principles and the fight for independence from the British reached the typical South Indian village. The book provides a powerful illustration of how Gandhian principles and leadership impacted even far-flung Indian communities.

The "dynamo" of Gandhian principles, Kanthapura, conveys the new energy driving the independence movement against the British. The book depicts the political and social facets of Gandhian thought, and Iyengar calls Kanthapura the "veritable grammar of the Gandhian myth." This essay aims to critically explain how Raja Rao uses his imaginative creativity in Kanthapura to borrow Gandhian vision

No Indian village, no matter how small, is without its own rich sthala-purana, or mythical history. Some deity or deity-like figure has visited the village. Rama may have slept beneath this papal tree, Sita may have dried her clothes on this yellow stone after taking a bath, or the Mahatma himself may have slept in this little hut outside the village gate. I have attempted to narrate one such tale from my village's modern chronicles

(Rao vi).

One of the best representations of the Freedom Movement, which Mahatma Gandhi started in the early 1900s to guide India away from British colonial authority, is found at Raja Rao's Kanthapura. The main focus of the book is India's freedom movement, which had a significant impact on the way the Indian populace behaved. Kanthapura shows how Gandhian principles and the fight for independence from the British reached the typical South Indian village. Singh observes, "Kanthapura can very easily be placed at the center of Gandhian literature for depicting the upsurge of Gandhian movement truthfully and artistically" (qtd. in Raizada 38).

The book provides a powerful illustration of how Gandhian principles and leadership impacted even far-flung Indian communities. Dayal notes that, in contrast to Rao's works, which are full of "metaphysical preoccupations," this one is "predominantly political in inspiration" (Dayal 10). The Gandhian ideals' "dynamo," Kanthapura, as described by Kumar (19), conveys the newfound energy that drove the independence movement against the British. Kanthapura is the "veritable grammar of the Gandhian myth," according to Iyengar (Iyengar 396).

Nehru admits that Gandhi was "like a powerful current of fresh air...like beam of light that pierced the darkness and removed the scales from our eyes; like a whirlwind that upset many things, but most of all the working of people's minds" (quote from Dayal 10). Through the non-cooperation and disobedience movement, he ignited the nation and sparked the non-violent movement within Indian minds. Gandhi aimed for both spiritual rebirth and economic

autonomy in addition to political freedom. Gandhian principles of non-violence, the abolition of untouchability, and love for one's enemies are graphically illustrated by Raja Rao. These tenets contain Raja Rao's Gandhian search for the truth. *Kanthapura* implies that Gandhi never paid a visit to Kanthapura. The people attest, "He is a saint, the Mahatma, a wise man and a soft man" (*Kanthapura* 23). Not so much by his physical presence as by his radiant thoughts, which enhanced patriotism throughout the country. Nonetheless, Gandhi's impact is enormous and bordering on divine even in the absence of his physical presence in this community.

Gandhi's arrival was announced to the villagers during one of the celebrations. The locals thought that Gandhi had been given the mission by Brahma to rescue India, his daughter, from the clutches of Imperial control. Gandhi used mental power as a weapon against the British. The novelist's greater comprehension of the Swaraj fight and its effects on Indian inhabitants is depicted in *Kanthapura*. Gandhi goes into further detail on the significance of the spinning yarn, emphasizing that the money provided to the colonizer will be kept in order to provide clothing and food for the naked. In reaction to machine culture, Gandhi's Hind Swaraj starts to deliberately advance a counterculture. Gandhi's notion of swaraj has been given several interpretations, but at its core, swaraj is understood to signify autonomy, personal economic and political independence, self-realization, self-rule, and liberation from oppressors.

Understanding Gandhi's swaraj requires an awareness of "collective freedom" from foreign domination. Gandhi is a fan of swaraj since it basically stresses self-rule in the quest for freedom. The attainment of swaraj is a personal goal that cannot be imposed upon others. "Transformation of the self is necessary for self-government; this includes embracing virtues that would strengthen political ethics, such as temperance, justice, charity, truthfulness, courage, fearlessness, and freedom from greed, in addition to abstaining from violence and coercion" (Bahl 17). Gandhian self-governance is eloquently illustrated in *Kanthapura* via the lives of Moorthy and other Gandhians. The main character of *Kanthapura*, Moorthy, tries to spread the Gandhian concept of swaraj in the conventional caste-based Brahmanic society. His efforts to spread the Gandhian concept of swaraj are a defining feature of the *Harijanodharana*.

Gandhi's concept of Swaraj calls for a fundamental shift in temperament. Without self-control, self-rule becomes harmful and may not be able to withstand imperial rule after the freedom war. Gandhi also purposefully appropriates the significance of religion in order to both disrupt conservative society and to express his views. Gandhi advocated a religion that inspired all religions, not just one particular one. Gandhi turned into a polysemic book that allowed society's outcasts to interpret his teachings in 'distinctly different ways.'" (Gopal 49). On the pretext of impending swaraj, Gandhi's subversive plans opposed the caste-ridden society and the cunning landlords. Gandhi thought that internal resistance was more dangerous than that of the imperial British, hence Swaraj must conquer it.

Untouchability represented a stain on the face of Indian society. Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* serves as a profound narrative illustrating Gandhian principles, social reform, and nationalistic zeal within the microcosmic framework of a small Indian village. The novel portrays a bold and determined effort to combat the entrenched evil customs pervasive in the community. Gandhi's teachings, emphasizing the recognition of every human soul irrespective of caste, pervade the essence of the story. As Gandhi himself articulated: "If you want to save your Hindu dharma and actually do some good, you have to get rid of untouchability. That religion cannot be holy if it propagates hatred towards even one person.

Reform, not despise, even the most degraded sinner” (Gandhi, 69). These sentiments underscore Gandhi’s call for the abolition of untouchability and his advocacy for universal human dignity. He elevated the untouchables, naming them “Harijans”—children of God—challenging the divine legitimacy of the caste system.

In Kanthapura, the isolated village serves as a setting for transformative Gandhian ideology. Raja Rao’s depiction mirrors Gandhi’s vision of the village as the ideal social unit, capable of serving as the epicenter for societal transformation. The village’s simplicity offers a canvas upon which Gandhian soul-force could manifest, uncorrupted by technology or modernity. This change—a “storm” of Gandhian nationalism—gradually uproots the deep-rooted religious orthodoxy of Kanthapura. The arrival of Gandhism supplants traditional hierarchies, a transition marked by Moorthy’s youthful rebellion and self-sacrifice against the elitist Brahminical legacy of purity and pollution.

Moorthy emerges as a Gandhian hero, embodying the spirit of reform and transformation. He symbolizes a commitment to truth and equality, as demonstrated through his opposition to caste distinctions. Moorthy’s journey from a Brahmin loyal to orthodoxy to a revolutionary leader willing to embrace the “Pariahs” reflects the tension between tradition and progress. This fundamental conflict is emblematic of Gandhi’s mission to harmonize the individual’s soul-force with collective societal reform.

Gandhi’s philosophical foundation extends beyond politics, delving into a spiritual awakening that Moorthy undergoes after encountering Gandhian principles. Gandhi believed self-purification was a prerequisite for meaningful leadership and societal reform. He stated: “Purification in all spheres of life...is highly contagious; purifying oneself always causes one’s surroundings to become purified” (Gandhi, 420). This principle resonates with Moorthy, who channels his spiritual awakening into activism, advocating for social and economic justice.

Raja Rao’s Kanthapura is an illustration that showcases Gandhi’s Ideology in action by picturing it in a very remote rural area. The setting is during the struggle for independence in India when Gandhi appreciated the role of the village as not only a worshipping but a focal point of development. untouched by urban developmental forces, Kanthapura is perhaps the ideal setting where the power of Gandhiji’s soul-force could be demonstrated. To compare Gandhiji’s philosophy, it is more like a cooling hurricane bursting leisurely but still the village is made dipped in oneness and reformation as the age old inhibitions of caste, religion and traditions are exploded. The relevance of this village in constructing and charting the fate of Kanthapura is further emphasized by the fact that villagers do not have any ties to urbanization unlike today’s time where globalization has forced effects on societies. The defining moment that every Indian has successfully been able to carve out is strongly described through this simple village atmosphere; Gandhi had envisioned that every village would be crucial time during Indian civilization’s evolution exchange.

Moorthy, a young Brahmin lead character who started out being achievement oriented grows up to be a true Gandhian who leads by example, in the beginning Moorthy was dedicated to achieve success by following pre established norms but he undergoes a spiritual transformation where he abandons the Patriarch cave and instead joins Gandhi Forces which are more fair and equitable – where he stands in favour of the outcasts or the ‘pariahs’. His decision to get rid of the imbalances caused by caste system embodies the core of who Gandhi was as a leader and a follower – Don't be afraid to challenge the

norms that divide and prohibit unity regardless of how painful it can be. Moving from anchorage to sea is the constant internal struggle that resonates with many followers of Gandhi and Moorthy and highlights the essence of Gandhi's mission which is to enhance one's spirituality while reforming the society.

Gandhi envisioned that every leader would carve out their own destiny through self purification and that is what influenced Moorthy the most. Gandhi once stated that, 'Clinging to the experience of self purifying is not only a distracting but highly contagious experience in all areas of life. To live in a purified society, one is compelled to purify himself.' Moorthy embodies this. He helps people to turn their spiritual truth into practice. He spurs those peasants to struggle not so much for the independence of their state but for the revolution which goes further and which places justice and equality above class and caste." Moorthy embodies this principle in the process. He makes the villagers believe not only in independence but also in the independence with a difference.

At its core, Kanthapura showcases Gandhi's vision of '*Gramswaraj*', which places great emphasis on villages being independent and self-reliant. However, Rao doesn't avoid to talk about realities of caste hierarchies that stand in the way of achieving this ideal and whilst this ideal offers hope, the story doesn't shun away from some of the bitter consequences of not achieving it. Rao explores the deep seated traditions that pose as obstructions on the progress towards Gandhian ideals and portrays the need of modernizing the deeply divided society.

Rao in his work skillfully uses Indian mythology to contextualize Gandhi's thoughts and ideas to villagers. By constructing such a figure of Gandhi becoming a Rama fighting the Ravana, the book tries to place the villagers within the context of the struggle for independence. This process of mythologizing puts Gandhi almost on the mythical level, as his purpose is raised from politics to almost the working out of the will of the Supreme God. Using prayers, performing rituals, and taking oaths of violence, the villagers saturate their struggle for freedom with religion and thus combine faith and struggle in such a way that gives a new strength to their common cause.

Gandhi's principles, especially the principle of non-violence is the most prominent trait in Moorthy's leadership. Moorthy's decision to retreat into fasting and meditation rather than retaliating when violence erupts at the Coffee estate, demonstrates his devotion to '*ahimsa*' (non-violence). This untouchables engagement comes in spite of opposition by traditional or orthodox Brahmins, which suggests that he disdains caste traditions and would rather focus on humanity. In this way, M. K. Gandhi's view that the core business of leadership is love, selflessness and an inner spirit of purity is depicted in Moorthy's character traits of compassion and servitude.

Moreover, the novel deals with the economic facets of Gandhi based nationalism. Moorthy advocates that the villagers spin khadi and refrain from purchasing British goods so as to be economically self-sufficient. Such self-reliance is both a means of resisting colonial maltreatment but also serves the purpose of bringing together villagers focused on a common target. These gestures go beyond political protest and are a way of life anchored in Gandhi's philosophy of simplicity and living for the community.

Women come to the forefront of the struggle in Raja Rao's Kanthapura. Turned by history in which women such as Rangamma and Ratna had to dare and fight the colonialists rather than remain as passive figures enduring the oppression, Gandhian courage enabled these women to go beyond the confines of

their homes so that the colonizers would feel the unbearable pain of their resistance. Their participation also brings out the 'gender' aspect of the 'Gandhi vision' of nationalism whereby women suppose and are supposing to be more than followers.

Lastly, Kanthapura reflects on the greater impact that Gandhi's ideals have had on Rao's people. Their fight has not been in vain, as the villagers still remain focused on the goal of granting themselves justice. With exquisite rage, Raja Rao weaves the strands of the spiritual and political elements of Gandhi, the man and the movement, and the success and failure of those moments in time to place a hope within the context of history. The book itself is not only a piece of art, but also one of many case studies on the quest for freedom and egalitarianism, and its implications on the society, and the reality of the world.

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