

An Exploration of Gandhian Thought and Philosophy in Raja Rao's Kanthapura

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Abstract:

Raja Rao's novel "Kanthapura" (1938) is a classic novel in the realm of Indo-Anglican literature that explores the struggle for independence in India, which was led by Mahatma Gandhi during the early 20th century. The novel is set in the backdrop of Kanthapura, a typical South Indian village, and vividly depicts the influence of Gandhi's principles of peace and non-violence during the British colonial rule. The novel embodies the essence of Gandhi's teachings through the character of Moorthy, the protagonist, particularly emphasizing the importance of truth and non-violence in achieving freedom. Moorthy symbolizes Gandhi and unites the villagers in their quest for independence. The novel draws parallels between the freedom movement and the teachings of the Bhagavadgita, with Moorthy advocating for non-violence and truthfulness among his fellow villagers. The novel employs elements like communal prayers, the recitation of Harikatha, and the adoption of Khadi clothing keeping the perspectives of Gandhian ideals that are deeply ingrained within the community. This research article explores how Gandhi's ideas shaped Raja Rao's portrayal of the character Moorthy in his novel. It highlights Moorthy's efforts to motivate people to join the Freedom Struggle, influenced by Gandhi's principles. For Raja Rao, Gandhi serves as a guiding light, much like how Moorthy sees Gandhi's ideology as his guiding principle in life.

Keywords: Raja Rao, Kanthapura, Gandhi, Non-violence , Independence

Introduction:

Kanthapura is widely regarded as the magnum opus of Raja Rao, masterfully portrays the profound influence of Gandhi's ideology on a tranquil and secluded village. Raja Rao, with great success, skillfully crafts a vivid and authentic depiction of Indian village life during the pre-independence era. Kanthapura, in all its essence, serves as a microcosm of the traditional Indian society, encompassing all that transpired in the village during the years of 1919-1930, coinciding with the events that unfolded in the larger context of India. This novel, however, transcends the boundaries of being solely a political work, as it delves deep into the realms of socio-religious and economic transformation that transpired during the arduous struggle for independence. Despite the wandering nature of his narratives, Raja Rao's heart remains firmly attached to the profound and transcendent ancient Hindu tradition. The novel at hand can undoubtedly be deemed an epic dedicated to Gandhi, as it impeccably depicts the profound impact of his ideology on the paralyzed masses of India. Although Gandhi himself does not make a personal appearance within the pages of this novel, his ideology serves as the driving force behind the entire plotline. The pervasive influence of Gandhi's powerful persona and his compelling ideology permeates throughout the entirety of the novel. In essence, this novel stands as a testament to the indelible impact of Gandhi's ideology on the Indian masses, intricately woven into the fabric of the narrative.

Objectives of the Study:

1. To analyze the portrayal of Gandhian ideals in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*.
2. To explore the transformative impact of Gandhi's philosophy on the characters and community of *Kanthapura*.
3. To examine the relevance and enduring significance of Gandhian principles in the context of Indian society and the freedom movement.

Methodology:

This study employs a qualitative approach to analyze Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, focusing on close textual analysis and thematic exploration. Primary data will be drawn from the novel itself, supplemented by secondary sources such as critical essays and scholarly articles on Gandhian philosophy and Indian literature. The analysis will be guided by thematic frameworks, allowing for an in-depth examination of the novel's portrayal of Gandhian ideals and their impact on social dynamics.

Discussion:

Raja Rao, a renowned figure in Indian English Literature, was greatly influenced by the philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi, as portrayed in his novel *Kanthapura*, published in 1938. The narrative unfolds in the rural backdrop of *Kanthapura*, a village in southern India, where the central character, Moorthy, embodies the Gandhian principles of truth and non-violence. Amidst the backdrop of Gandhi's significant impact on Indian politics during the 1930s, *Kanthapura* emerges as a center of the freedom movement, reflecting the larger revolution taking place in Delhi. Rao presents Moorthy as a manifestation of Gandhi's ideals on a smaller scale, emphasizing the transformative power of Gandhian beliefs. The story is narrated by Achakka, an elderly woman, who offers an impartial perspective on village life and events. The inhabitants of *Kanthapura* are portrayed as humble, devout individuals who hold nature in high regard and uphold traditional practices, including the art of storytelling through *Harikatha*. Nevertheless, the rigid caste system persists, with a segregated pariah quarter inhabited by untouchables. Despite being born into the Brahmin caste, Moorthy rejects discrimination based on caste, aligning himself with Gandhi's vision of equality and the eradication of untouchability. Through *Kanthapura*, Rao skillfully captures the essence of Gandhian principles and their impact on grassroots movements, challenging societal norms and advocating for social justice and equality. Moorthy, the protagonist, hailing from the Brahmin community, defies the notion of treating individuals differently based on their caste. He strongly upholds the belief in equality, which is influenced by Gandhi's teachings aimed at eradicating untouchability. Within the tradition of '*Harikatha*' storytelling, Gandhi is compared to the heroic figure of Ram, while the British colonizers are depicted as embodiments of evil, akin to Ravana. Just as Ram triumphed over evil, Gandhi is perceived as the savior of Indian society, fighting against oppression, caste discrimination, violence, and riots. The novel spans from Gandhi's Dandi March in 1930 to the Gandhi-Irwin pact in 1931, highlighting the profound impact of Gandhi's ideology on the village of *Kanthapura*,

which transforms into a citadel of Gandhian values. The story delves into Gandhi's principles of non-violence, truthfulness, forgiveness, and the abolition of untouchability, illustrating their relevance and influence within the community.

Raja Rao, a writer of great sensitivity, found profound inspiration in the ideas of Gandhi, leading him to pen "Kanthapura," a momentous novel set in an unidentified village. The narrative skillfully depicts the harmonious convergence of individuals from diverse backgrounds in the pursuit of liberation. Hindus, Muslims, Brahmins, and Pariahs stood shoulder to shoulder, united under the inclusive ethos propagated by Gandhi. As the villagers embraced the principles espoused by Gandhi, they began to regard Moorthy as their local embodiment of the Mahatma, deeply moved by his unwavering commitment to loftier ideals. Despite encountering rejection due to his convictions, Moorthy remained resolute, doggedly treading the path blazed by Gandhi. Witnessing Seetharamu endure suffering only served to reinforce Moorthy's faith in non-violence, illuminating its transformative power in eradicating animosity. When confronted with conflict, such as Ranga Gowda's thirst for vengeance, Moorthy faithfully upheld the teachings of Gandhi, proclaiming, "Good ends emerge from virtuous means" (Kanthapura 6). This resolute adherence demonstrates Moorthy's unwavering allegiance to Gandhian principles amidst arduous circumstances. Jayaramachar too echoed Gandhi's philosophy, accentuating the significance of righteous action and universal love that transcends differences. He cautioned against the perils of avarice, urging individuals to embrace the path of truth for spiritual enlightenment. Throughout the tale, the denizens of Kanthapura wholeheartedly embraced non-violence, compassion, and veracity in their struggle for emancipation. The quote, "Truth is divine, and it is the sole divinity known to me" (Kanthapura 22), underscores the pivotal role of honesty in guiding moral conduct. Rao adeptly illustrates how the ideas of Gandhi molded both personal convictions and collective endeavors, underscoring their enduring pertinence in the quest for justice and human dignity. In the rustic environs of Kanthapura, an unwavering commitment to non-violence and truth is solemnly undertaken by its inhabitants, who pledge themselves to the traditional practice of spinning yarn. Their adherence to religious rituals is deeply ingrained in their daily routines, shaping their behavior and interactions. Upon Moorthy's apprehension by British authorities, the villagers fervently beseech Goddess Kenchamma for his liberation, rooted in their unshakeable faith in her protective guardianship. They strongly believe that Kenchamma, as a nature deity, will intercede on Moorthy's behalf, securing his release from the oppressive clutches of colonial rule. Additionally, they implore Kenchamma's intervention to safeguard them against the ruthless incursions perpetrated by the British forces.

The transformative influence of Gandhian philosophy on Moorthy is profound, effecting a metamorphosis from a modest villager to a revered leader embodying the principles of self-sacrifice and unwavering dedication to the cause of patriotism. In an epoch characterized by fervent aspirations for freedom, Moorthy emerges as a pivotal figure in the struggle for liberation, galvanizing his fellow villagers under the banner of the Congress movement. Employing adept narrative techniques, Raja Rao interweaves mythological motifs, such as the narrative of Siva and Parvati, to draw conceptual parallels between Hindu deities and the ideological construct of "Swaraj," signifying self-rule. Analogous to the triadic nature of the deity Siva, Swaraj epitomizes tenets of self-purification, fostering Hindu-Muslim unity, and advocating for the adoption of indigenous fabric (khaddar). The denizens of Kanthapura perceive Gandhi as a divine agent ordained to vanquish the allegorical serpent of foreign hegemony, endowing him with a mythic stature akin to celestial deities.

Moorthy's friends ditch their foreign clothes and embrace Gandhi's principles. They distribute spinning wheels around the village, bridging the gap between upper and lower castes. Witnessing the suffering of the poor, Moorthy feels a deep sense of sadness. The Europeans mistreat the villagers due to the lack of basic facilities. When Bade Khan tries to stop Moorthy and hits him, Moorthy urges for non-violence, saying, "No beating, sisters, No beating in the name of Mahatma" (65). To confront the imperial force, Moorthy fasts for three days, following Gandhi's example. This strengthens him to launch a non-cooperation movement. Moorthy visits the pariah quarter, eating with them and preaching religious tolerance like Gandhi. He believes in the immortality of the soul, rooted in Indian philosophy, which makes Satyagrahis unafraid of death.

Gandhi aimed to empower Indian women by involving them in the freedom struggle and initiating social programs like uplifting Harijans and promoting women's emancipation and literacy. Ratna's efforts bring women from different castes together, fostering a sense of national unity. Gandhi viewed widow remarriage as not sinful, challenging societal norms reflected in Venkamma's biased attitude towards Rangamma.

In Kanthapura, Rao highlights the stark contrast between the Brahmins and non-Brahmins, revealing a significant economic disparity between the communities. Inspired by Gandhi, Moorthy returns to the village advocating for social reforms, such as discouraging early marriages and promoting widow remarriage. He encourages inter-caste marriages, sparking a transformation in villagers' mindset. Influenced by Moorthy's teachings, Ranga Gowda relinquishes his position, and Shankar, the advocate, adopts Gandhian principles in his practice. Even Ranga and Rangamma are inspired to change their ways. Rachanna and Madanna relocate from Andhra Pradesh to work in the coffee estate, while Moorthy establishes a night school for pariahs to spread Gandhian ideals. He personally teaches the laborers weaving, literacy, and Hindi, embodying the spirit of empowerment and education advocated by Gandhi.

Conclusion:

Raja Rao's Kanthapura acts as a powerful testament to the enduring impact of Gandhian ideals on shaping personal beliefs and collective action. Through the perspective of Kanthapura, Rao skillfully captures the transformative influence of Gandhi's philosophy, motivating individuals to question social norms and advocate for change. As India continues to grapple with issues of social justice and equality, the significance of Gandhian principles remains as strong as ever, providing a guiding light for individuals and communities in their pursuit of freedom and dignity.

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