



# Raja Rao's Presentation of Life in an Indian Village 'KANTHAPURA' and Use of Mythical Technique in the Novel KANTHAPURA

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**Kanthapura**, 1938, is Raja Rao's first novel. At that time he was just a youngman of twenty-eight years of age. However, by this time he had acquired considerable experience as a writer. He had already written a number of essays and short stories. The short stories were later on collected and published as **Cow of the Barricades and Other Stories**, 1940. The collection includes such fine stories as **Javni** written as early as 1933. Thus he had acquired considerable experience as a writer, and had already mastered his craft when he came to the writing of **Kanthapura**. Moreover, as it was written in France thousands of miles away from India, the novel has that artistic detachment and objectivity which would not have been possible, had he written it in India in the very midst of the **Gandhi Movement**.

The novel cannot be dismissed as immature, and it has many artistic merits. However, it remained unknown and obscure till Raja Rao won international fame and recognition with the publication of his next novel **The Serpant and the Rope**, 1960. **Kanthapura** was then discovered, read with interest, and gradually came to be recognised as a classic of the Indo-Anglian fiction, as one of the most authentic and most remarkable village novel ever written by an Indian in English. It is also remarkable for its realistic and impartial presentation of the impact of Gandhian movement. The novelist has succeeded in capturing the very spirit of those stirring days when Gandhi transformed the entire nation into an army of freedom fighters. As the novel is entirely free from philosophical and metaphysical concerns of the novelist, which become too obstructive in his later novels. It remains an updated novel. Considered purely as a work of art, it ranks very high.

The title of a novel should be apt and suggestive. Just as a sign board tells us of the contents of a shop, so a good title should indicate the contents of the novel. It should at once tell us what the novel is about. The title **Kanthapura** is apt and suggestive for the novel is about a South Indian Village named **Kanthapura**, and if there is any hero in the novel it is the people, the community, of the village named **Kanthapura**.

The novel opens with an account of the situation, the locale, of the village. We are told in the very beginning that **Kanthapura** is a village in **Mysore** in the Province of Kara. It is situated in the valley of **Himavathy**, there it lies “**curled up like a child on its mother’s lap**”. This single image makes the village spring into life, and the readers are able to visualize it as it lies sheltered and secluded like a child in its mother’s lap. More detailed account of its topography then follows: “**High on the Ghats is it, high up the steep mountains that face the cold Arabian seas, up the Malabar coast is it up Mangalore and Putture and many a centre of cardamom and coffee, rice and sugarcane. Roads, narrow, dusty, wind through the forests of teak and of jack, of sandal and of sal, and hanging over bellowing gorges and leaping over elephant-haunted valleys, they turn now to the left and now to the right, and bring you through the Alambe and Champa and Mena and Kola passes into the great granaries of trade. There, on the blue waters, they say, our cardamom and coffee get into the ships and Red-men bring and, so they say, they go across the seven oceans into the countries where our rulers live.**”

Having given an account of its topography, the novelist comes to the village itself. It has a complex structure. It has four and twenty houses in the Brahmin quarter. It has a Pariah-quarter too, a Potters-quarter, a Weavers-quarter, and a Sudra-quarter. These socio-economic divisions in a village which has in all 60 or 100 houses, at once strike one with its novelty. The novelty is not an invention of the novelist, it is there in the village. It has always been there over many years. In this way, by telling us of the various quarters into which the village is divided, the novelist has highlighted the fact that the Indian villages are caste-ridden, that there is no free mixing of the people even in the small and limited community of a village.

Having described the village, the novelist comes to the people. There is Postmaster Suryanarayana with his two-storeyed house. Patwari Nanjundiah who had even put glass-panes to the windows. The thotti-house of pock-marked Sidda which had a big veranda, large roof and a granary: Waterfall Venkamma roared day and night. Zamindar Bhatta had gone on adding peasants lands to his own domain. The young, idealistic corner-house Morrthy who is destined to shake the village out of its complacency and put it on the map of Mysore and India; and the nine-beamed house of Patel Range Gowda, the vigorous peasant chief of the village wedded so the soil from Immemorial generations, a Tiger to the authorities. According to Narasimhaiah, “These stand out among the men and women of Kanthapura. As for the rest, one could not say, the novelist tells us at the end of the introduction of his dramatic personae, whether they were rich or poor-they were badly dressed and always paid their taxes after several reminders. It is obvious he knows them just as well but if he does not individualize them it is obviously because he doesn’t like to crowd his canvas. But even then he would not dismiss them without a thought, for he has felt for them in their wretchedness. It is by means of such concrete particulars that the inhabitants and their residences are known to us and these are helpful in visualizing the scene of action”. Thus we are told of the people, their poverty, their ignorance, and their petty jealousies. According to Prof. Atma Ram, “The villagers are depicted in realistic colours. Their names are made descriptive in nature- it is a typical rural way. For instance: Bentlegged Chandrayya, Cardamom-field Ramachandra, Coffee-planter

Ramayya, Corner-house Moorthy, Front-house Akkamma, Gold-bangle Somanna, Nine-beamed House Range Gowda, Nose-Scratching Nanjamma, Temple Rangappa.”

The people are ignorant, poor and superstitious. But they are also deeply religious. They have full faith in goddess **Kenchamma**, the presiding diety of the village. Right in the centre of the village there is a temple dedicated to **Kenchamma**. “Great Goddess, Benign one.” There is a folk song which evokes in us images and attitudes to what Kenchamma means to the people of Kanthapura:

*Kenchamma, Kenchamma*  
*Goddess benign, and bounteous*  
*Mother of Earth, blood of life*  
*Harest queen, rain crowned*  
*Kenchamma, Kenchamma*  
*Goddess benign and bounteous*

Kenchamma is in the centre of the village, forms the still-centre of their lives and makes everything meaningful. Marriage, funeral, sickness, death, ploughing, harvesting, arrests, release-all are watched over by Kenchamma. “There may be small-pox or influenza around but you make a vow to the goddess, the next morning, you wake up and you find the fever has left you. Didn’t she kill the demon who killed their children and molested their wives? And so she will continue to protect them, come wind, come rain, come any distress.”

As the novel proceeds, the picture of village life is filled up by giving further accounts of the grinding poverty, illiteracy, and the conflicts and tensions that mark the Indian village life. Indeed, there is a constant shifting and ordering of material, selection of significant details so that Kanthapura acquires a symbolic significance. It becomes a microcosm of the macrocosm, one out of the lakhs and lakhs of Indian villages in which live 80% of the people of India.

It is to this remote South Indian Village that there comes the Gandhi movement through Moorthy, Dore and other city boys. It is Moorthy who organizes the Gandhi work in the village, he is indeed life and spirit of the freedom struggle in India. But very soon the people of **Kanthapura** as a whole are actively involved and the novel becomes an account of their suffering and their heroic sacrifice. The people of Kanthapura have been enthused with the spirit of Gandhi, and they march ahead heroically despite all the suffering and the hardship they have to undergo. According to Srinivasa Iyengar, “In the end it truly becomes a mass movement, the villagers comprising men and women of all the castes and professions and the labourers of the Coffee Estate readily meeting the onslaught of the bureaucracy. An unequal fight it inevitably proves to be for the Satyagrahis are maimed and broken and scattered, and a remnant reaches – after sore trials and vicissitudes – another village, **Kashipura**, beyond the border where they settle down. Some of the Satyagrahis - Rangamma, Ratna, Moorthy spend an allotted span in jail, but the Gandhi-Irwin Pact and the political truce that comes in its wake hasten the release of the Satyagrahis. Young men like Moorthy doubt the wisdom of the truce, and would rather

follow the lead of Jawaharlal Nehru, “the equal-distributions”; for the mass of the people, however, Gandhi can do no wrong, he can be guilty of no miscalculation, and they accept the truce contentedly and wait further developments patiently.”

Thus **Kanthapura** is not a novel dealing with the life and doings of any individual hero. It is certainly not the story of Moorthy, but of the masses of the village, of their suffering, of their exile, of their momentary defeat, a defeat which has in it seeds of ultimate victory. It ends with an account of their life in Kashipura and gives us a sense of abiding fulfillment which they have attained. Hence if there is any hero in the novel, it is **Kanthapura** itself and its people. The title is apt and suggestive. The novelist was right in calling it **Kanthapura**.

#### **Mythical Technique :**

In **Kanthapura**, Raja Rao has made effective use of the mythical technique used with such success by English writers like T.S.Eliot and James Joyce. The use of the mythical technique means that the past is juxtaposed with the present and in this way the past may serve as a criticism of the present or it may be used to heighten and glorify the present. In **The Waste Land**, T.S. Eliot has used the mythical technique to criticize the present, and in **Kanthapura**, Raja Rao has used this very technique to glorify the present, and to impart to the novel the dignity and status of an Epic or Purana. It is in this way that the Gandhian movement, “is assimilated into the racial heritage as myth and legend”. By the use of the mythical technique, the novelist has enriched the texture of his novel and imparted to it a rare expansiveness, elevation and dignity. According to **Meenakshi Mukherji**, “*kanthapura* is again another and a larger attempt at creating a Sthala-purana i.e. a legendary tale of a specific locality.” Just as in a myth some of the chief characters are gods and other beings larger in power than humanity. In this tale Moorthy is presented as a figure much above the common run of men. A dedicated, selfless soul, he is idealized to the extent of being regarded as a local Mahatma, And of course, there is the real Mahatma also, always in the background, though nowhere physically present. The village women think of him as the Big Mountain, and of Moorthy as the Small Mountain.

Past and present are freely mixed up and gods and goddesses, and heroes and heroines of epics freely jostle with contemporary personalities. “The distinction between the time past and the time present is thus obliterated, and both are projected into the time future. Gandhi Mahatma is Rama, the red-foreigner or the brown inspector of police who flourishes a lathi is a but a soldier in ten headed Ravana’s army of occupation and oppression. The Satyagrahi in prison is the divine Krishna himself in Kansa’s prison. Events gather significance after the passage of some years, the humdrum becomes the unique, the trivial becomes the heroic, and the hectic excitement of a day becomes a permanent communal possession”.

The use of the mythical technique is seen at its best in the strange kind of **Harikathas** recited by **Jayaramachar** the **Harikatha-man**. In his Harikatha, the past and the present are juxtaposed and contemporary events and personalities are constantly linked-up with Puranic Gods and epic-heroes and heroines. One of the Harikathas he recites is about the birth of Gandhi. It runs as follows : “In the great Heaven Brahma, the Self created One, was lying on his serpent, when the sage, Valmiki entered, announced by the two

doorkeepers. ‘Oh, learned sire, what brings you into this distant world?’ asked Brahma, and offering the sage a seat beside him, fell at his feet. ‘Rise up, O God of Gods, I have come to bring you sinister news. Far down on the Earth you chose as your chief daughter Bharata, the goddess of wisdom and well-being. You gave her the sage-loved you gave her the Ganges to meditate on, the Godavary to live by, and the pure Cauvery to drink in. You gave her the riches of gold and diamonds, and you gave her kings such as world has never cardinal points of the earth, Krishna and Buddha, Sankara and Ramanuja. But, O Brahma you who sent us the prince propagators of the Holy Law and Sages that smote the darkness of Ignorance, you have forgotten us so long that men have come from across the seas and the oceans to trample on our wisdom and to spit on virtue itself. They have come to bind us and to whip us, to make our women die milkless and our men die ignorant. O Brahma, deign to bring back light and plenty to your enslaved daughter..’ ‘O Sage,’ pronounced Brahma, ‘is it greater for you to ask or for me to say “yea”?’ Siva himself will forthwith go and incarnate on the Earth and free my beloved daughter from her enforced slavery. Pray seat yourself, and messengers of Heaven shall fly to Kailas and Siva be informed of it.’

“And lo, when the Sage was still partaking of the pleasures that Brahma offered him in hospitality, there was born in a family in Gujarat a son such as the world has never beheld. As soon as he came forth, the four wide walls began to shine like the Kingdom of the Sun and hardly was he in the cradle than he began to lisp the language of wisdom. You remember how Krishna, when he was but a babe of four, had begun to fight against demons and had killed the serpent Kali. So too our Mohandas began to fight against the enemies of the country. And as he grew up, and after he was duly shaven for the hair ceremony, he began to go out into the villages and assemble people and talk to them, and his voice was so pure, his forehead so brilliant with wisdom, that men followed him, more and more men followed him as they did Krishna, the flute-player; and so he goes from village to village to slay the serpent of the foreign rule.”

Thus the use of mythical technique makes Gandhi the invisible god, and Moorthy the invisible Autar. The reign of the **Red-Men** becomes **Asuric-rule**, and it is resisted by the Devas, the Satyagrahis. Jayarajar jumbles with splendid unconcern traditional mythology and contemporaneous politics. Siva is the three-eyed, and Swaraj too is three-eyed : Self-purification, Hindu-Muslim unity, Khaddar. Gandhi is Siva himself in human shape: he is engaged in slaying the serpent of foreign rule, as the boy Krishna killed the serpent Kaliya. Bhajans and Harikathas mix religion and politics freely and often purposefully, the reading of the Gita, and hand-spinning are elevated into a daily ritual, like puja.

This Juxtaposition of the past and the present, of men and gods, is kept up throughout the novel upto the very end. Gandhi’s trip to England to attend the Second Round Table Conference is invested with Puranic significance : “They say the Mahatma will go to the Red-Man’s country, and he will get us Swaraj.. And we shall all be happy. And Rama will come back from exile, and Sita will be with him, for Ravana will be slain and Sita freed, and he will come back with Sita on his right in a chariot of the air, and brother Bharata will go to

meet them with the worshipped sandals of the Master on his head. And as they enter Ayodhya there will be a rain of flowers. Like Bharata we worship the sandals of the Brother saint...”

### Conclusion

It is the use of the mythical technique that makes **Kanthapura** a unique novel, almost a new species of fiction. In this way it becomes Gandhian or Gandhi-epic. It has a recognizable epic quality and one may be excused for calling it, **Raja Rao's Ramayana**. As **Srinivas Iyengar** puts it, “Kanthapura is a veritable Grammar of the Gandhian Myth – the myth that is but a poetic translation of the reality. It will always have a central place in Gandhi literature.

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