

# Portrayal of Gandhi in Raja Rao's Kanthapura



**V. Bhuvaneshwari**

Assistant Professor,  
Deptt. of English,  
Shri Venkateshwara University,  
Gajraula, Uttar Pradesh

**Sanjana Kumari**

Research Supervisor,  
Deptt. of English,  
Shri Venkateshwara University,  
Gajraula, Uttar Pradesh,

## Abstract

Kanthapura the masterpiece of Raja Rao portrays the impact created by Gandhian ideology among the Indian masses. It can be considered as a Gandhian epic and the novelist successfully carves a village called Kanthapura with a character called Moorthy who reflects the ideas of the novelist in a successful way. Raja Rao has created a realistic picture of the casteism political, social and economic status of the nation under the British rule. Gandhiji's ideals could be clearly witnessed in the work. Raja Rao who had a great admiration towards Gandhi brings out the different aspects of the Great man. Kanthapura can also be called as an epic of freedom struggle as it elaborately mirrors Indian spiritualism and nationalism.

**Keywords:** Gandhian Ideology, Epic, Indian Spiritualism, Nationalism.

## Introduction

Kanthapura (1938) is the first novel of the Indian novelist and turned out to be his 'Magnum opus'. The entire novel is based on the Indian freedom struggle in a small village called 'Kanthapura'. It takes the form of 'Sthalapurana' and is narrated by an elderly woman of the village called Achakka. She gives a picturesque description of the place which gives a good ambiance to the novel. The novel gives us a vivid view of the freedom struggle led by Gandhi during the British Colonial rule. It serves to be a strong illustration of the impact created by Gandhi's leadership and his principles even in the rural parts of the nation.

## Aim of The Study

The aim of this study is to present how Gandhiji is pictured by Raja Rao particularly in his epic novel 'Kanthapura'. This article also intends to bring out the elevated view of Gandhi and his ideologies.

## Brief History of Raja Rao

Raja Rao was a great writer and a professor born on 8 November 1908 into a Brahman family at Hassan in the state of Mysore. His father H.V. Krishnaswamy was a teacher at Nizam College Hyderabad and his mother Gauramma, was a homemaker. His native language was Kannada but all his literary works and publications were in English. Raja Rao is the most influential novelist of the nation and has authored many novels, short stories and non-fictions. Some of his notable works are; 'Kanthapura', 'The Cat and the Shakespeare: A Tale of India', 'The Serpent and the Rope', 'Comrade Kirillov', 'The Chessmaster and his moves', 'Companions', 'The Little gram Shop', 'On the Ganga Ghat', 'The Meaning of India', 'The Great Indian Way'.

Raja Rao was also the recipient of Sahitya Akademi Award (1964), Padma Bhushan (1969), Neustadt International Prize for Literature (1988) and the Padma Vibhushan (2007). Apart from literary contributions Rao was also an eminent activist and played an active role in Quit India Movement.

## Theme of the Novel - Kanthapura

Kanthapura clearly depicts the freedom struggle that started in the early twentieth century by Gandhiji. This freedom movement influenced the masses to a greater extent which in turn is reflected in this novel. It speaks particularly about a village called 'Kanthapura' in the South and elucidates the influence of Gandhian ideals in it through his characters. The idea along with a spontaneous and superfluous expression is the main ingredient for the success of a literary piece. The style and portrayal of a character in writing stands for the nature and intellectual content of the author. This style and narrative technique varies with individual and is also influenced by the society in which he lives.

In this novel 'Kanthapura' Raja Rao follows the traditional style of oral story telling. This proved to be natural and appealing to the masses in

comparison to the western style. This narrative technique proves to be in a friendly conversational style and clearly reflects the narrator's view. *Kanthapura* proves to be the masterpiece of Raja Rao as it includes various moods and the language of the literate and illiterate people and people of all ages. In addition to this the characters speak out their mind without any inhibition. The narrative style adopted by the character Acchaka reminds us of the traditional folk stories. The novelist eminently brings out different characters in a lively manner.

The novel gives an artistic description of the Indian Freedom struggle when India was under the clutches of the British. It highlights the cruelty met out to the Indians by the British colonists. Raja Rao has elucidated the role of Gandhiji in the Indian freedom movement and the influence of Gandhian ideals among the masses. The novel is an illustration of gradual renaissance that was brought about amidst the masses under the leadership of Gandhiji. The solidarity of the people is seen in the way they observe fast and show their support during Gandhi's Dandi march. The novelist attempts to awaken the people about the moral values and ethics of Gandhi's principles. Raja Rao being a staunch follower of Gandhi uses Moorthy as a reflection of himself.

*Kanthapura* is a novel that unfolds the religious, political, social and economic aspects of the nation during the times of freedom struggle. The entire novel spins around the transformation which people undergo under the spell of Gandhian movement.

#### **Political and social aspects of the novel**

This masterpiece novel deals with the political, cultural and religious situations of the pre-independence period of a south Indian village called *Kanthapura*. One could see a tremendous effort made by the novelist to highlight various issues related to economic, social, cultural and religious facet of the nation under the British colonial rule. In this novel Raja Rao vividly describes the way Gandhi tried to grab the masses by infusing spiritualism into politics. This unique experiment gathered momentum and made the people stand fearless and fight against injustice and suppression of the colonial rule.

Moorthy the protagonist is deeply influenced by Gandhian ideals and gets transformed. He tries to motivate people to get involved in the various movements initiated as a protest against the British rule. He launched Satyagraha movement confronting the high taxes, land revenue levied by the Britishers and the atrocities met to the poor peasants. Moorthy succeeds in involving even the women and the old rich and poor of the village to actively be a part of the freedom movement. Gandhi believed in fighting the British by non-violence which would ultimately shake the roots of the British. Rangamma a notable character utters that, "Oh no, the Mahatma need not go so far as the sea. Like Harichandra before he finished his vow, the gods will come down and dissolve his vow, and the Britishers will leave India, and we shall be free, and we shall pay less tax and there will be no policemen"(Kanthapura:171). During

this period Moorthy tries to involve the women of the village in the panchayat. The characters Rangamma and Ratna prove to be an inspiration for the women of the village and this serves to be an important political move. At one point the novel takes a turn when the freedom fighters of the village were brutally beaten up by the Britishers and were resort to mass arrest and tortures. The state of mass casualties is given a picturesque description by the novelist.

The prominent slogans like, Gandhi Mahatma ki Jai! Inquilab Zindabad! Vande Matram! Mahatma, Mahatma, Gandhi Mahatma! Influenced the entire nation in its fight against the Britishers.

The freedom fighters sung:

O fire, O soul,  
Give us the spark of God eternal,  
That friend and friend to foe,  
One shall we stand for Him  
And the flame of Jatin,  
And the fire of Bhagath,  
And the move of the Mahatma in all,  
O, lift the flag high,  
This is the flag of the revolution.

This spirit among the people turned almost the entire nation into a revolutionary field.

*Kanthapura* also presents the social aspects of the nation. It says about the division of the people based on caste and communities like Brahmin, potters, weavers and pariahs. The caste system that prevailed in those days was staunchly supported by Gandhiji. It also shows the superstitious belief, orthodoxy and myth that prevailed in the Indian villages. Moorthy tries to bring about a unity among the people by breaking off the orthodox belief of the villagers through Harikatha combined with Gandhian ideals. The entire freedom struggle is compared to the Mahabharata war like a war between the good and the evil. Moorthy functions as a mediator along with his women team Rangamma and others to save the mother land. Social beliefs, customs, tradition and social belief is fabricated vividly in the novel. Raja Rao a strong follower of tradition and customs and wanted the reader to comprehend the soul of Indian tradition. It also discusses about the social issues such as dowry system, child marriage, untouchability etc.

#### **Gandhian ideology**

The entire novel can be considered as a saga on Gandhi as it revolves around the impact created by Gandhi and his ideology in the minds of the people. Moorthy stands for the fascinating personality and presents Gandhi's views in an impartial way. The novel proves to be a classic piece of literature during the Indian freedom struggle for its narrative technique.

Moorthy the leading role of the novel is greatly influenced by Gandhi's personality and principles. This brings in a great change in his life and helps him win the support and respect of the villagers. He dedicated himself to the growth and progress of the village and leaves the college for the noble cause of nation. Like the novelist Raja Rao, Moorthy also has great admiration and is inspired by the charismatic personality of Gandhi. Just like Gandhi,

Moorthy also worked for the upliftment of the downtrodden people of the society. Gandhi's struggle for freedom was three folded- Political, Social and religious. This idea was deeply rooted in Rao which led to creation of Moorthy a character in his work. Moorthy tries to spread Gandhian thought among the villagers and shows great concern for the people around him in the village. He also tries to erase orthodoxy and superstitious belief in the women by taking Gandhian ideology to them. He spreads the awareness regarding the usage of kadhi products and the importance of spinning. He inspires everyone including the character Range Gowda, the tiger of the village, who calls him 'Learned Master' and extends his hearty support to Moorthy. He follows Gandhi's style and observes fast, Satyagraha and also gets arrested and is sent to jail. Congress committee formed by Moorthy is successful in the village and enables the people to be in touch with the things going around them through newspapers and other mass medias. The novel depicts the role of women as a prominent one in the Indian freedom struggle.

Moorthy follows Gandhi's path and tries to create awareness on non-violence, untouchability and swadeshi movements. Hailing from a Brahmin family, Moorthy who is influenced by Gandhian ideologies drops out from his college, shuns his western clothes and changes to kadhi clothing as a sign of opposition towards the colonial rule. Thus Moorthy persuaded by Gandhian ideals decides to execute them in the village Kanthapura.

#### **Gandhi as A Divine and Selfless Person**

Rao considers Gandhi as a role model for the people and tries to give him universal recognition. Gandhi had a deep rooted religious belief and tried to mingle religion with politics. Rao had great admiration for the leader and elevated him to a semi-godly status. Gandhi was a divine and selfless person that he worked for the poor and downtrodden of the society and tried to be one among them.

Rao opines that anyone should lead a life setting an example for others to follow. Gandhi was a great legend whose life was beyond history and he carried the blessings of his previous birth. If Socrates was the liberator of the modern world, Gandhi was the man born to design the future of the nation (Rao, 1996, 77). Gandhi the redeemer is considered to live in the kingdom of Ram and people celebrate his victories and take part in his sufferings also. In this way Gandhi is given a divine status of celestial body by his principles of spirituality, truth and non-violence. Gandhi was born as a liberator and guide for the people in a land which was full of bounds in all aspects. As Gandhiji aimed at preaching and guiding the people, he is compared to the 'Vishwamitra' of Mahabharath.

#### **Gandhi's Patriotism and Pragmatism**

Raja Rao was one of the most widely appreciated and revered Indian English writer for his wide range of social, spiritual and intellectual thought content. The way Rao depicts the character Moorthy and the display of Gandhi's ideology through his actions is noteworthy. The novelist strongly displays

Gandhi's deep and firmly rooted passion and nationalistic zeal through the novel.

According to Rao Gandhi was a selfless person devoid of hypocrisy and was an emancipator of the poor and needy. He always had a straight forward approach, compromising and sacrificing except his principle of truth. His ideals were truly based on logic and reasoning which faced a lot of turmoil demanding a lot of critical decision and sufferings throughout his life. Gandhi was a strong follower of Hinduism and as said in the Vedas followed the path of truth and honesty. Though Gandhi's moves were slow, it was steady and continuously moving towards the progress of the nation.

Gandhi was a humanitarian with a revolutionary mindset. People continuously thronged to him for his kind heartedness. Rao's Gandhian philosophy is not only spiritualism and politics but something which has a touch of simplicity, tradition and modernism. It was an outcome of the western influences to which Gandhi was exposed in England and South Africa. His philosophy was rooted to the Vedas and Indian culture aimed at harnessing eternal and universal moral and religious principles. Gandhi was a pragmatic person which made him succeed in all his political endeavors. Rao believed that if these principles were adopted as the voice and way of the future the nation would definitely move towards progress.

#### **Conclusion**

The novel 'Kanthapura' is a great work which presents Gandhian movement in a realistic and impartial way. It vividly describes the impact of Gandhian movement on the masses. There is a parallelism in the thoughts of Raja Rao and Gandhi which led to the creation of the character Moorthy as a replica of Gandhian ideology. Raja Rao being a committed novelist takes up the task of enlightening the people about the social, political and economic conditions of the nation during the freedom struggle. He succeeds in creating an impact on the people and makes them stand up for their rights. The narrative technique of the novel is a traditional folk story style. The novel also talks about gender equality where women take an equal role as men in the freedom struggle and protest against injustice. The religious, political and social elements are artistically transformed through the incidents narrated and are purely Indian in its theme. Thus Raja Rao deals with patriotism to create consciousness among the people through Gandhian ideology.

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