

Tracing the Absent-Present Gandhi in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*

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ABSTRACT

The paper tries to analyse the role of Gandhi in the nationalist movement which can be witnessed in the novel *Kanthapura*. The figure of Gandhi is not present in the text as one of the characters (apart from the interaction which Moorthy tells about that he had with Mahatma) but the whole narrative revolves around him. It is through media and Moorthy that women in the text get to know Gandhi and they are all united in spirit though they have never met Gandhi in person. This paper also tries to explore that how Gandhi challenges, contests, and redefines masculinity and femininity, thus blurring the lines between genders. The binaries of pure and impure, the issue of caste are examined and a new meaning to pilgrimage has been given. The political thinking of Gandhi seems to transform traditional meanings and one gets an alternative vocabulary of “home” and “masculinity”.

Keywords: *Nationalist, Caste, Moorthy, Gandhi, Truth.*

The moment one utters nationalism, the ideas of oneness, brotherhood/sisterhood, love and respect towards one's country begin arousing. The novel *Kanthapura* (1938) deals with the nationalist movement in the pre-independence era. It beautifully brings to light the role of Mahatma Gandhi in the movement. The title of the paper tries to point towards the absence of Gandhi in terms of being a character in the text; he is not one of the characters in the text as Moorthy, Ratna, or Rangamma are yet the whole narrative revolves around Gandhi. Therefore, the absence of Gandhi as a character also makes it for the presence of Gandhi as a theme. The Gandhian ideals of ahimsa/non-violence, truth, and propagating the use of khadi could be traced in the text. Gandhi also challenges, contests, and redefines masculinity and femininity, thus blurring the lines between genders. Home, pilgrimage, fasting, harikatha, nation are altogether seen in a new light. The songs included in the text also talk about the teachings of Gandhi. The initial songs talk about Kenchamma, their Goddess who protects the people of *Kanthapura* from all the negativities. They are religious in nature. Later, the subjects of the songs transform to Moorthy and Gandhi. Bhajans of Lord Siva are sung to make the police believe that women are taking out a religious procession but it turns out to be Gandhian the next minute.

The first reference to Gandhi is made in the Foreword of Kanthapura where he is associated with staying in one of the huts, “the low one, by the village gate” (Rao v), during his pilgrimage. Along with commenting on the rich history of Kanthapura, the description also establishes Gandhi as a spiritual and divine figure. The next reference to Gandhi is made with respect to Moorthy as one of the Gandhi-men:

So Moorthy goes from house to house, and from younger brother to elder brother, and from elder brother to the grandfather himself, and what do you think? he even goes to the Potters ’quarter and the Weavers ’quarter and the Sudra quarter, and I closed my ears when I heard he went to the Pariah quarter. We said to ourselves, he is one of these Gandhi-men, who say there is neither caste nor clan nor family, and yet they pray like us and they live like us. Only they say, too, one should not marry early, one should allow widows to take husbands and a brahmin might marry a pariah and a pariah a brahmin. Well, well, let them say it, how does it affect us? We shall be dead before the world is polluted. We shall have closed our eyes. (Rao 09-10)

The above lines highlight the role of men in the nationalist movement. Despite a female narrator (but a male writer), the conditioning is such that the use of language is gendered. Moorthy, a man is seen going to each house addressing the male members- brother and grandfather. The narrator and the society around her cannot come to terms with a society which should exist without any caste system and for her, inter-caste marriages would pollute the world but towards the end of the text she tries to overcome her fear and that could be seen as progressive. Not everyone in Kanthapura could like Gandhi. Bhatta and Narsamma, Moorthy’s mother could not come to terms with the community of brahmins being “polluted”. There is a clash between Gandhi and Swami because Gandhi is against any caste-based discrimination whereas Swami would excommunicate any brahmin who would touch a pariah. This caste system became even more problematic in case of Muslims. An instance of this could be seen with the issue of location that Badè Khan had to face, “To tell you the truth, Badè Khan did not stay in Kanthapura. Being a Mohomedan he could stay neither in the Potters’ Street nor in the Sudra Street, and you don’t of course expect him to live in the Brahmin Street” (Rao 14). Eliot in *The Waste Land* (1922) used a neologism “foresuffered” in the following lines, “(And I Tiresias have foresuffered all / Enacted on this same divan or bed; . . .)” (Eliot) in order to point towards the fact that Tiresias could foresee the sufferings that were to come in future through the incident in which the typist would be seduced by the “young man carbuncular” (Eliot). Similarly, the issue of location could also be seen as a fore suffering in terms of how difficult

it becomes for a lot of Muslims to get a house on rent in a lot of places even today. In an article published in *The Times of India* in 2015, the hostility towards Muslim is argued, “Tanvir Aeijez, an associate professor in Delhi University, said Muslims don’t want to live in ghettos. “Who wouldn’t want to live in good areas? But it is because of the discrimination that community-specific residential complexes are growing. Ghettoization happens because of discrimination of this kind and not because Muslims want to live in Muslim-only areas.”” (Shakil). Moreover, the novel could be seen as having no proper representation of Muslim characters since the characters like Badè Khan and Rahman Khan are portrayed in a negative light. There is an attempt to overcome the barriers of caste in Kashipura when Rachi comes with rice or dung-cakes to the brahmin quarters but she doesn’t stay with the brahmins.

The people of Kanthapura see Gandhi in religious terms. He is being compared to Lord Krishna. Lord Rama and Krishna who used be the subjects of harikatha are now replaced by Gandhi. Harikatha which required translation earlier, towards the end, needed no translation as the people of Kanthapura began reciting it without someone’s help from outside. Ratna reads the texts and Rangamma does the commentary after Ramakrishnaya’s death. Moorthy wanted those pariahs should be taught as how to read and write so that they can directly talk to the Sahib/authority instead of having a mediator. There are efforts made in the direction of being *aatm nirbhar* (self-reliant). Gandhi’s teachings include:

Fight, says he, but harm no soul. Love all, says he, Hindu, Mohomedan, Christian or Pariah, for all are equal before God. Don’t be attached to riches, says he, for riches create passions, and passions create attachment, and attachment hides the face of Truth. Truth, must you tell, he says, for Truth is God, and verily, it is the only God I know. And he says too, spin every day... (Rao 12)

His ideals of ahimsa, equality, and being immaterialist could be witnessed in the above lines. The importance given to Truth by equating it with God also makes one draw a parallel with an inter-textual reference, “Beauty is truth, truth beauty, —that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know” (Keats). God, permanence, beauty, truth, wholeness, universality all seem synonymous. This novel has to be seen as a product of its age. Propagating the use of khadi and the use of Hindi over their regional language Kannada among the people of Kanthapura were preferred parameters for being a part of Gandhian movement but today if one sees, it is a question of choice. Extremism of any kind is not nationalism and nationalism shouldn’t be political as Tagore puts it rightly:

Nationalism is a great menace. It is the particular thing which for years has been at the bottom of India’s troubles. And inasmuch as we have been ruled and dominated by a nation that is strictly political in its

attitude, we have tried to develop within ourselves, despite our inheritance from the past, a belief in our eventual political destiny” (Tagore).

Some critics might question this propagation of Hindi as a loophole of the novel but today we are able to exercise this freedom of choice only because someone back then fought for this freedom. Even the brides in the wedding were asked to wear khadi saris. Spinning is seen as a Gandhian activity irrespective of caste and gender. It is equated to praying by Gandhi. Even brahmins are motivated to spin and spinning is no longer a woman’s job because Mahatma himself spins. So, it does away with the caste and gender boundaries. Swaraj is compared to Siva as both are three-eyed. The three elements of Swaraj are Ahimsa which is drawn from the Hindu principle but expands over that, Hindu-Muslim unity which would point towards cultural restructuring, and Charka which would bring economic autonomy. There is deification of nation which is seen as a new dharma.

Moorthy and Ratna could be seen as two characters who transgressed the norms of the orthodox Hindu society and so did Gandhi. Moorthy’s interaction with Mahatma makes him give up foreign clothes and foreign university. Moorthy is labelled as an outcaste. He relates the two aspects: violence and fasting. He fasts each time there is violence in the Gandhian movement. He convinces Rangè Gowda to not commit violence and teaches him Gandhian ideal of loving even their enemies. There is a dramatisation of Moorthy when he enters pariah Rachanna’s house. There is turbulence in Moorthy’s mind since he hasn’t done any of it before. He even takes a sip of milk offered by Rachanna’s wife and immediately keeps it aside. Anshuman Mondal in “The Ideology of Space in Raja Rao’s Kanthapura” comments on Moorthy,

Moorthy the central Gandhian character, rejects the colonial matrix by symbolically dumping his city clothes and adopting khadi clothing, and he rejects the hierarchical calculus of the orthodox matrix in his embrace of the village pariahs, which results in his excommunication” (Mondal 111).

Moorthy is considered the Gandhi of Kanthapura because it is through Moorthy that the people of Kanthapura get to know about Gandhi. It is only Moorthy who has met Gandhi in person. Mahatma is seen as the “Big Mountain” (Rao 128) and Moorthy as the “Small Mountain” (Rao 128). There is some hypocrisy that could be seen in Moorthy when Rangamma asks him to take a bath and wear fresh clothes after coming from pariah’s house as he immediately does so. Though he refuses to change his holy thread as he has to go to the pariah quarters every day but he does not refuse to take Ganges water with him which Rangamma gives him to have some each time he has ended up touching the pariahs. Moorthy is considered impure after he visits the pariah quarters. His Brahminic identity which is considered to be pure is unsettling.

Also, many coolies of Godaverri at the end of the novel come and join them but they are accommodated in Pariah Street, therefore, the segregation still exists but at the same time there is also an inclusion of coolies in the nationalist struggle. Going to prison becomes equivalent to going on a pilgrimage. Bhatta also went for pilgrimage to Kashi so that his sins could be washed away. There is an alternate pilgrimage of Gandhi going on, that is, the Dandi March. Gandhi even refused to use a motor car or a horse carriage, thus aligning with the principle of being environment-friendly. When it becomes difficult to choose for the villagers whether to go for a brahmanic feast in the village or to go and receive Moorthy after he returns from the prison, the elders go for the feast but they make sure that the younger children go to receive Moorthy who still has a divine aura around him.

Ratna, a young widow, on the other hand, has been described in the following terms:

. . . [she] not only went about the streets alone like a boy, but even wore her hair to the left like a concubine, and she still kept her bangles and her nose-rings and ear-rings, and when she was asked why she behaved as though she hadn't lost her husband, she said that that was nobody's business, and that if these sniffing old country hens thought that seeing a man for a day, and this when one is ten years of age, could be called a marriage, they had better eat mud and drown themselves in the river. (Rao 32-33)

Ratna redefined marriage markers and questioned the social evil of child marriage. Ratna is often compared to a boy in the way she walks. Rangamma is the educated one in Kanthapura and she tells about Gandhi through newspapers. Women are relocated from the four walls of their homes to the streets. But, women are still taught to serve their husbands first, in terms of food. Cooking has been associated with wifely/motherly duties. Women are often beaten up by their husbands for getting delayed in giving them food. The following lines portray domestic violence:

And when our men heard of this, they said: was there nothing left for our women but to vagabond about like soldiers? And every time the milk curdled or a dhoti was not dry, they would say, 'And this is all because of this Sevi business,' and Radhamma's husband beat her on that day he returned from village inspection though she was seven months pregnant. And Post-Office Satamma's husband would not talk to her: 'Why, soon it will be as if the men will have to wear bangles and cook, so that you women may show yourselves off! . . . (Rao 109)

Rani Lakshmi Bai becomes the role model for women and young children. Irrespective of gender, the young children fight to play the role of Rani Lakshmi Bai while playing. Some other women role models for the women of Kanthapura include Kamladevi, Sarojini Naidu, and Annie Besant. There is politicizing of the domestic space where home becomes a space for political discussions. Rangamma's home becomes a space where people from the city come and meet up Moorthy. The echoes of sexual corruption, in both the incidents, one where the

new Sahib assaults women and the other in which Bhatta wants to satisfy himself sexually even when the wife doesn't want it, could be juxtaposed to the Gandhian ideology. Ratna after being beaten up and tied by a policeman does not lose the strength but is in fact accepted as the leader by the women of Kanthapura.

Women initially in the novel seemed family-oriented and kept their families before the nationalist movement but by the end they could be seen working towards the nationalist movement, stepping out of their homes and taking the charge and thus calling themselves Satyagrahis. The men of Kanthapura fearing arrest leave the village and women take on the charge of fighting the police. Women imagine themselves in action and later are a part of this action too. This is the dawning of their political consciousness. They practice the drill by learning to endure pain. They ask each other to imagine as if their husbands or the policeman Badè Khan is beating them so that when they are beaten up during the nationalist movement it shouldn't hurt them mentally. The overall structure remains patriarchal in terms of understanding violence. At the end, the perspective that the narrator, Achakka has for the pilgrimage is, "We shall go. Oh, we shall go to the end of the pilgrimage like the two hundred and fifty thousand women of Bombay. We will go like them, we will go . . . ! Men will come from the city, after all, to protect us! We will go . . . !" (Rao 169). Women still feel that men will be their protectors and if they are in some trouble then men from the city would protect them. Mondal in "The Emblematics of Gender and Sexuality in Indian Nationalist Discourse" says, "The 'liberation' of women by Gandhi was extremely limited. He did not challenge the domestication of female experience neither the fundamental premises of Hindu patriarchy" (Mondal 928). At the end too, women were led by men. Achakka says:

Across it was the Mysore State, and as dawn broke over the hissing river and the jungles and the mountains, we dipped in the holy river and rose, and men came to greet us with trumpet and bell and conch, and they marched in front of us and we marched behind them, through the footpaths and the lanes and the streets (Rao 185).

One gets to see that religious elements like harikatha, bhajans of Lord Siva, Lord Rama and Krishna, and pilgrimage are associated with Gandhi hence with the freedom struggle. The binaries of pure-impure are seen in false terms. Through Gandhi, one can see the gender roles being challenged but the overall setup remains patriarchal. Though there is an attempt to deal with the caste issues by trying to bring together all the castes, despite resistance, to join in the Indian nationalist movement but the category/container of caste very well exists in the text and one cannot say that Raja Rao succeeds in portraying a completely casteless society at the end.

When Moorthy returns after his final imprisonment, he becomes a Nehruvian instead of a Gandhian. He follows the ideologies of Nehru of a casteless and classless society and identifies himself with Nehru as “equal-distributionist” (Rao 189). When one traces the presence of Gandhi as a theme in the novel then one cannot ignore that by the end the theme of Gandhi gets converted to the beginning of a Nehruvian theme. If this novel is to be seen as a Gandhian novel then the irony lies in the fact that it ends in complete demolition of the village Kanthapura and the people of Kanthapura settle down in Kashipura. An assumption which could be made is that Kashipura might in the future be associated with Nehru.

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