



Gandhism in Raja Rao's novel *Kanthapura* : A Review of Moorthy's Character as an Avatar of Gandhi

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ABSTRACT :

*"However as an artist, Raja Rao does not introduce Gandhi directly as a character in the novel, and novelist has used artistically the Indian people's traditional faith in avatars for the purpose of writing his novel. Thus, the central myth of **Kanthapurais** analysed through the mythical analogy of lord Rama and Mahatma Gandhi. Since everybody in India is familiar with the story of **Ramayana**, the **Kanthapurians** are supposed to well follow Gandhi's fight with foreign rulers in terms of Rama Ravana opposition. What attracts most is the mythicization of the current situation to the extent that Gandhi is accepted as an avatar in his own life time. Nevertheless, on the surface **Kanthapuram** may appear to be a political novel, but the complex of political events in it follows mythical patterns. Although the theme of **Kanthapurais** seen to be Gandhi and our village, the style of narration makes the novel more a Gandhi-Purana than a piece of mere fiction. Therefore, **Kanthapurais** undeniably a veritable grammar of the Gandhian myth, which, incidentally, is poetic translation of reality. Subsequently, the present paper highlights the character of Moorthy in the perspective of Gandhism."*

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INTRODUCTION :

The fact is that Gandhi's impact on the freedom movement is the main theme of the novel **Kanthapura**, yet Gandhi appears in it the incarnations who come on earth again and again in order to destroy sin and re-establish religion on a firm footing. Raja Rao presents Moorthy as an idealized avatar of Gandhi. He is **Our Gandhi**. He is the saint of our village. Since Moorthy conveys to them ideas of Gandhi whom the villagers consider to be an avatar of God, they consider Moorthy to be a smaller avatar. It also reminds one of the well-known shloka of **The Gita** in which Lord Krishna exuviates objectives of his incarnation:

“Whenever any great calamity occurred in the world, or the wickedness of any of its inhabitants proved on unbearable nuisance to the gods, Vishnu, as preserver, had to lay aside his invisibility, come to earth in some form, generally human, and, when his work was done, he returned again to the skies”.¹

Actually, the modern avatar of **Kanthapurais** Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi's weapons are non-violence, self-reliance, simplicity, moral resistance and perseverance. Raj Rao has tried to show the total impact of Mahatma Gandhi and his philosophy by describing the emergence of national consciousness in **Kanthapura**. By placing Gandhi in the line of incarnations like **Rama and Krishna** Raja Rao succeeds in mythologizing a living person and thereby also the national freedom struggle under his leadership. It is difficult to differentiate between myth and reality in this case. Nevertheless, the impact of Gandhi's free India movement



and his philosophy of non-violence and equality of all people in *Kanthapura* have the effect of a dynamic religion.²

Subsequently, as we know that the national movement gained strength, it produced many smaller Gandhi's in this town for example, Moorthy, Rangamma and Ratna. As such, the freedom movement of Gandhi also assumes the mythic dimensions of a sustained fight between good and evil, corresponding to similar

“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, men followed him, as they did Krishna, the flute player and so he went from village to village to slay the serpent of the foreign rule” (P. 22)

mythical themes associated with incarnation. The Mahatma attains the status of a god in the novel, as remarked:

Furthermore, just as Krishna slays the serpent Kali in the well-known legend, Gandhi slays the foreign rule. The serpent of the foreign rule stands for evil, which must be destroyed at all costs. This suitable comparison of a political situation with a mythic one is suggestive. It is understandable that behind the urge to sacrifice everything to face atrocities and suffering into the bargain is the firm conviction of the villagers that the Mahatma is not an ordinary mortal. He never appears behind everybody's thoughts and deeds. This also shows Raja Rao's skillful handling of myths. In this tale Moorthy is presented as a figure much above the common run of humanity: “A dedicated, selfless soul, he is idealized to the extent of being regarded as a local Mahatma.”³If the real Mahatma always in the back-ground is thought of by the village women as Sahyadri mountain, big and blue, Moorthy is regarded by them as the small mountain. Range Gowda, the village headman, describes Moorthy thus :

“He is our Gandhi. The state of Mysore has a Maharaja but that Maharaj has another Maharaja who is in London, and that, one has another one in heaven and so everybody has his own Mahatama, and this Moorthy who has been caught in our knees playing as a child is now grown up and great, and he has wisdom in him and he will be our Mahatama”. (P.109)

However, Moorthy has a high faith in the values preached and practiced by Gandhi. Yet we don't see Gandhi face to face in this novel but we are told that Moorthy saw his once a vision and since then he is altogether a changed personality. There is but one force in life and that is truth and there is but one God in life and that is the God of all.⁴These convictions which complete Moorthy's unusual imitation, have already been introduced earlier in continuation of the first fantasy of Gandhi's incarnation as:

“Fight, says he, but harm no soul. Love all, says he, Hindu, Mohamedan, 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 verify, it is the only God I know". (P.22)

Thus, the seed of Gandhism is sown in the hearts of the villagers from the very beginning, as, for example, through the Harikatha recited by Jayaramchar. But in spite of this, after some time fantasy is replaced by realism and follows a realistic account of the congress and its various activities in the village, and, of course, also of the indifference and opposition that Moorthy and his followers have to face. Actually the novelist's intention seems to be to show the double conflict in the plot - the one between the unjust rulers (The Red men) and the suffering Indian (Satyagrahis and the other between the die-hard orthodox customs (e.g.) of untouchability), and the enlightened and elevated views and actions of Gandhi men. Fearlessness, another important principle of Gandhian ideology, is heroically displayed by Moorthy and his followers in braving the grave provocations and even physical injuries with all humility and forbearance, non-violence, and above all, love for the perpetrators.⁵ Moorthy's visits to the Skeffington Coffee Estate bring about a new awakening among the coolies. Bade Khan opposes Moorthy's entrance there, but he persists. As a result so much of violence is created there. He fasts for three days. It provides an opportunity to Venkamma to mock at him. She remarks sarcastically: "Ah, the cat has begun to take to asceticism; although it was not enough to have polluted our village with your Pariahs". (P. 91). He remains firm like a rock. In the true Gandhian spirit, he says to himself: "I shall love even my enemies the Mahatma says we should love even our enemies". (P. 92)

Anyhow, Raja Rao invests the whole fasting ritual with mystical and mythical associations. Even as a child Moorthy had experienced mystical union with Prahlada, and with Krishna, who floated on the leaf. As a child he is reported to have told his mother many times that he had seen *Hari* (God). However, no other such vision of the holy had he till that holy vision of the Mahatma, when he had caught a little of that primordial radiance and through every breath more and more love seemed to pour out of him. (P. 94) Like an Avtar, he exhorts Ratna, "Pray with me that the sins of others may be purified with our prayers" (P. 95).

Therefore, Moorthy is imprisoned for his nationalistic activities. After his release, he starts a civil disobedience movement among the labourers of the Skeffington Coffee Estate against unjust taxes. He, in turn, touches the hearts of the villagers and put new vigour in them by mythicizing Gandhian politics. Thus the villagers of *Kanthapura* are exploited by the Skeffington Coffee Estate and the barbarous Bade Khan the police. To add their misery there is Bhatta, the money lender, who charges a heavy rate of interest on the loans given to the poor people. Saros Cowarjee remarks:

"Critics have described the novel as a kind of Sthala Purana, "Tale of a place which is not an apt description of its contents and technique. The village itself with its temple of the Goddess Kenchamma becomes the point of convergence for three main movements dealt with in the novel: the religion, the political and the social".⁶

Now being a true disciple of Gandhi, Moorthy was impressed by Gandhi's endeavor to uplift the untouchables. He goes to the Pariah quarter daily. He preaches that there is neither caste nor clan. Pariah considers Moorthy a God. Rachanna's wife offers him some milk in a shining brass tumbler and entreats him to take a little of it: "Touch it Moorthappa, touch it only as though it were offered to the gods and we shall be sanctified". (P. 105)

And Moorthy with many a trembling prayer touches the tumbler, takes a sip and then puts it aside. He hurries back to home, takes the Ganges water and feels a fresher breath flowing through him. The narrator does not miss telling us with a chuckle, "*After all a Brahmin is a Brahmin*". Thus the whole episode can be treated as Shabri-Rama Episode in *Ramayana*. Here Raja Rao shows his skill in handling the mythical technique through this episode.

In this way, Raja Rao has given his story the perspective of Gandhian ideology by placing Moorthy in the tradition of Rama, Krishna, the Buddha and other great saints who lead the erring humanity to economic prosperity and spiritual satisfaction. The basic principles of Gandhi are derived from the thought of the



ancient Indian scriptures especially from *The Gita* and *The Ramayana* which are integral part of Indian myth. Again Gandhi's politics is treated in a mythical manner and reality is explained through the mythical parallels from the *Ramayana*. Thus, Gandhi's journey to England to attend the second round table conference is raised to the Puranic level.⁷ The description of this conference is delineated in these words:

“They say the Mahatama will go to the Red-man's country and he will get us *Swaraj*. He will bring us *Swaraj*, the Mahatma. 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 Bharat will go to meet them with the worshipped sandal of the master on his head; as they enter Ayodhya there will be a rain of flowers”. (P. 257)

CONCLUSION:

Now concluding the discussion, we can trace out that as Rama in the *Ramayana* goes to Lanka to fight with Ravana to win back Sita, so, the narrator makes out that the Mahatma goes to red-man's country to bring us *Swaraj*. That is why; most of the people and intellectual think that Gandhi is a true profounder of Indian Freedom Movement. Here, the novelist has tried to ascribe moral values of Gandhi through the character of Moorthi in the novel *Kanthapura*. Therefore, Moorthy attains the status of a Mahatma and the villagers are devoted to him throughout the whole life.

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- **Note : All pages nos. given in brackets () have been taken from Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* published in 1971 by Orient Paperback, Delhi.**