

## *Kanthapura* Protagonists as Representation of Gandhi

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### Abstract

This article focuses on how the protagonist of *Kanthapura* brought the social conditions and value of Indian society. It delineates the Gandhian impact and his participation in India's struggle for Independence. Additionally, Gandhi is regarded as the 'builder of the nation' whose weapon of Non-Violence did tremendous change in the justice of Indian society. Moreover, the novel *Kanthapura* is the elucidation of Gandhian ideology and spread Gandhism.

**Keywords:** *Kanthapura*, Gandhism, Patriotism, Non-Violence, Nationalism, Philosophical ideas.

There is no denying the fact that Mahatma Gandhi is regarded as the 'Builder of this nation' and 'the Architect of Free India' whose strong weapon of Non-violence and novel technique of 'Satyagraha' did tremendously regain and restore justice to the Indian society which could see and enjoy the presence of Gandhi and his forceful activities through his participation in India's struggle for Independence. No doubt, Gandhi and Independence were found to be inseparable companion to each other, for he is said to have been credited with the Indian National Movement almost 'a mass struggle' earning a great momentum in the political movement in India. Non-violence was used by him as a powerful weapon on some occasions against the British Dictatorship. What is generally held is that India's political struggle and Gandhiji became synonymous with each other His 'political heir' 'Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru rightly said:

“Difficult as it is to write a life of Gandhi, it becomes far more so because his life has been an intimate part of India's life for a half century or more yet, if any attempt to write his life they may succeed in throwing light on some of this unique career and also give people some understanding of this memorable period of past history” (Agnihotri 10)

Literature being an expression of society, Indian literature automatically felt the need and stress of Gandhian spirit, thereby making the influence of Gandhi getting nourished and spread rather abundantly in the realm of Indian literature one could see a close link between the freedom-fight movement on the political scene and the rise of the Indian novels in English and a few other regional languages. The novels like *Kanthapura* and *Kallukkul Eram* brought the social conditions and values of Indian society, social and political awareness with the writers' creative expressions. *Kanthapura* and *Kallukkul Eram* did obviously delineate the Gandhian impact in a convincing manner. "Gandhi" is, according to Naik, "a colossus who bestrides almost over the entire field of Indian writing in English in several forms either as a character or as a subject or a pervasive influence upon the social and political scene depicted by the writer" (P 370). The greater value of opposition was shown to the British Government after the 'Jallianwala Bagh tragedy' at Amritsar on 13<sup>th</sup> April 1919. The Government made all possible efforts to curb individual freedom so as to suppress the popular uprising. People were suppressed in all ways and Gandhi raised his opinion against the suppressive measures by writing about the situation to the Viceroy but to no avail. Finally, he opined the 'valuable weapon' namely 'Satyagraha' struggle to oppose these measures. As the Government continued suppressing the people severely persons like Jawaharlal Nehru were very sensitive to such things and came under the influence of Gandhi's 'Satyagraha'.

Gandhi's non-co-operation programme was accepted by the Congress with some initial difficulty. In 1920, there was a new turn in politics. The Khilafat question was agitating the Muslim minds and the Hindus could not forget the Jallianwala Bagh tragedy. The thirty-fifth regular session of All Indian National Congress was held at Nagpur in 1920. His resolution of Non-co-operation was finally accepted. It was a great personal triumph for Gandhiji to whom, the Khilafat issue provided the capital opportunity to establish Hindu-Muslim communal harmony and to oppose the British policy of High-handedness by launching non-co-operation movement. To bring the influence of 'Gandhism' on the novels, it sounds imperative to identify the ideals and philosophical ideas of Mahatma Gandhi, for which he stood. 'The ism' signifies the individual effective experimental results of 'Gandhi' in his attempts towards the practice of his ideals. The basic aspects of 'Gandhism' are based on 'truth' and 'Non-violence'. He himself said once thus:

"I have nothing to teach. The words truth and Non-violence are as old as hills. All I have done is to try to experiment on both as vast a scale as I could" (Mukherjee 203).

Being a man of action in all respects, Gandhi's whole life has been 'an experiment with truth', for towards the end of his life, he himself said, "My life itself is my message" (P203). He further said:

"Ahimsa is my God; truth is my God, when I took her ahimsa, truth says, find it out through me; when I look for truth,

ahimsa says, find it through me”.

To Gandhiji, Ahimsa and Truth are synonymous. Talking about the power of Ahimsa, he said:

“My Ahimsa is neither maimed nor weak.  
It is all powerful. Whether there is Ahimsa,  
there is truth, and truth is God. How he  
manifests Himself, I cannot say. All I know,  
is that, “He’ is all-pervading and where ‘He’  
is ‘all is well” (Anand 227).

To Mahatma, ‘Truth was the highest law while non-violence was the highest duty. When he witnessed the play ‘Harishchandra’, it captured his heart. To follow truth and to go through all the ordeals Harishchandra went through, was the one ideal that did greatly inspire. Gandhiji at the beginning of his life spirit. Later he examined the values of both religion and politics and jumped up to conclude that both are meant the same ideals – the service of mankind. He observed:

“Most religious men I have met are politicians  
in disguise; I who wear the guise of a  
politician, am at heart a religious man”  
(Radhakrishnan 14)

He is said to have led the life of ‘saint’ in the political career. He said in South Africa thus:  
“Men say I am a saint losing myself in politics,  
The fact is I am a politician trying  
My hardest to be a saint” (Fischer 35)

Throughout his career, almost for the fifty years, he lived with the co-existence of saint and politician. He believed that all the true politicians and all the true saints are saints and politicians respectively. ‘Khadar’ is the breathing air to Mahatma. He requested all men and women to spin the Wheels. He was of the opinion that to spin Khadar is to spin our nation itself. As a true devotee to truth and justice, Gandhi laid emphasis on the necessity of recognising women as equal to men. Paying more attention towards the wealthy being of womanhood, he struggled hard for the equality, thereby calling women as ‘the incarnation of Ahimsa’ (Sarvodhaya 57). All his ideals, ideals, thoughts and philosophical notions got reflected in the field of ‘Indian Writing in English’. For example, Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura* in English, being placed under the category of Gandhian reflections, effectively exemplifies the Gandhian ideals, philosophies and his experiments with truth and non-violence. The novel *Kanthapura* is nothing but an elucidation of Mahatma’s valuable ideology for all the characters of the novel are the reflectors of Gandhism. The political, social and religious activities are woven inextricably into the one complex story of *Kanthapura* mainly based on Gandhism. Though the Mahatma is not directly presented as one of the characters in action, the entire action is sustained by

the spirit of Gandhi. Even though to RajaRao, *Kanthapura* is his first attempt, it describes the whole gamut of the Gandhian revolution in a microscopic way. In the words of one critic C.D. Narasimhaiah;

“Kanthapura is India in microcosm and what happened there is what happened everywhere in India during these terrible years of our own fight for freedom” (P 249).

Raja Rao chose the life of rural India as the representation of real life. *Kanthapura* is a miniature India reflecting the attitudes and the conflicts of people all over the country. Gandhiji’s assertion is that India lives in villages. Raja Rao took it as a prime notion to this novel *Kanthapura*. Though Kanthapura village is in the far interior of Karnataka, it does represent all Indian villages by its social structure of a caste-ridden society, agrarian economy, superstitious and traditional customs. The basic principles well-knitted in this novel by the characters are nothing but truth, non-violence and universal love. All these things have been picturized in the form of ‘Sthalapurana’ (legendary history). Raja Rao adopted this Sthalapurana, a good-old Hindu mythological technique in this novel, the very purpose of which being the story of the novel ‘Gandhi-Purana’. So the novelist Raja Rao is said to have used this story-telling method for highlighting the goodness and greatness of Mahatma. Raja Rao himself said so;

“There is no village in India, however mean that has not a rich Sthala-Purana, on legendary history of its own. Some God or God like hero has passed by the village-Rama might have rested under this pipal-tree, Sita might have dried her clothes, after her bath, on this yellow stone, or the Mahatma himself, on one of his many pilgrimages through the country, might have slept in this hut, the low one, by the village gate” (P 5).

‘Sthalapurana’ a branch of literature praises local deities who fight against *asuras* or *demons*. Here, Gandhi is a local deity, fighting against the white demons. In *Kanthapura*, Rajarao has created a veritable Sthalapurana – a legendary history out of the Indian life in the Pre-Independence era. The story is narrated by an old woman Achakka, to a hypothetical listener. As Meenakshi Mukherjee says;

“... making the old woman the narrator enables Raja Rao to mingle fact and myth in the effective manner. For the old woman, Jawaharlal is a Bharata to Mahatma – the Mahatma, who she believes, will slay Ravana so that Sita may be freed. The characteristically concrete imagination of the uneducated mind pictures

the Mahatma as large and blue like the Sahayadri Mountains” (PP 38-39).

The theme of the novel is the organised national struggle for Independence from the fetters of foreign yoke. ‘Kanthapura’ the village carries the promotion of Hindu-Muslim unity, removal of untouchability, Khadar prohibition campaign, the eradication of child marriage, widow remarriage, campaign against labour exploitation and other items of Gandhian deeds. Saving the country from the shackles of colonialism was the very first and foremost mission of Gandhiji in his life. The central theme of the whole novel is ‘the nationalist movement’, which takes its birth from the innocent religious activities of the village-folk. It is linked with the deep-rooted religious faith. To Gandhi, all action of all kinds has its grounding in religion. In the words of Dr. Radhakrishnan, “a man without religion is like a horse without bridle”. Attesting to this idea, the very first part of the novel contains tremendous religious activity.

The action of the novel begins with the unearthing of a half-sunken lingam by Moorthy and its consecration. The novel also points out the religious ceremonies like Sankara-Jayanthi, and regular recitations of Sankara vijaya and Hari Kathas which reveal their religious spirit and unity. It is in the handling of this theme that the novelist quickens it to activity, thereby giving us an insight into the appealing ‘conditions of our village in an incomparable manner in which “Gandhi tapped the deeply religious and spiritual resources of our people living in the remotest parts of India and built up a national movement in one life time” (Narasimaiah 248). Through the religious men, Gandhiji has introduced and preached his doctrines. To him, ‘religion’ is the basic thing for all human activities. When Moorthy, who had been fashioned after Gandhi threw out a hint that, ‘Somebody will offer dinner for each day of the month, there was spontaneous response from everyone” (P 15). Bhajans and Harikathas mix religion with politics freely and often purposefully. Politics divorced from religion, has absolutely ‘no meaning’ said Gandhi. Gandhiji was very much aware of the Indian minds and he believed that the master key to the people’s rustic mind was religion.

Generally speaking, people of India believed that Gandhiji was not an ordinary man. He was considered to be ‘avatar’ and he came to this earth in order to redeem the mankind. So, religious ceremony led to initiation in the ideas of Gandhian philosophy, though the two remain united throughout the novel. The great technique ‘Harikatha’ stirred the mind of the people about the political feelings. The birth of Mahatma is narrated by Jayaramchar, the famous Harikatha man, in the puranic manner;

“And lo! When the sage was still partaking of  
the pleasure Brahma offered him in hospitality.  
There was born in a family in Gujarat a son  
such as the world has never be held. As soon as  
he came forth, the four wide walls began  
to shine forth like the kingdom of the sun, and hardly  
was he in the cradle than he began to lisp

the language of wisdom” (Kanthapura 22).

Raja Rao raised the level of Gandhi from an ordinary man to the level of ‘Mahatma’. He used his power of imagination to bring the birth of Gandhi into a divine one. The puranic style and the use of fantasy are employed once again while describing Moorthy’s initiation in Gandhism that came to him in the form of a vision, ‘mighty and God-being’ in which he felt the touch of Mahatma and through that touch was revealed to him as the day is revealed to the night the sheathless being of his soul” (P 52). It is clear that Gandhi’s birth was only for ‘preach and practise’. To Gandhi, preaching without practice was meaningless. There is but one force in life and that is the truth and there is but one love in life and that is the love of mankind, and there is but one God in life and that is the God of all” (PP 52-53). These ideas are completely Moorthy’s unusual initiation of Gandhi and his philosophical ideas. It is crystal clear that the seed of Gandhism is sown in the hearts of the people through Harikathas. But fantasy soon gives place to realism. Even Gandhi’s personality has also occupied so many people’s mind and it won him many disciples and followers like Moorthy. Moorthy in his first view of the Mahatma, feels:

“The very skin of the Mahatma seemed to  
send out a mellowed force and love” (P 52)

Moorthy is a true image of Gandhi, who remains invisible living presence throughout the novel. In this novel, not a single individual is left unaffected by the whirlwind of the Gandhian revolution. All of them turn into active members of Moorthy’s programme including women, like Rangamma and Ratna. ‘Untouchability’ is practically exercised in *Kanthapura*, for Moorthy’s free-mixing with the Pariahs shows the Gandhian influence among the followers of his own. The patronage of the Pariahs on the part of Moorthy is Gandhian in toto. He calls Pariah Rachanna, ‘Brother Rachanna’. Gandhi undertook a fast to change the British Government’s Communal Award, which treated “Harijans” as separate from the Hindus. Gandhiji said:

“The untouchables are the bone of my bone  
and flesh of my flesh. I would love to die  
so that they may live and live with  
perfect dignity and self-respect. My attitude  
is that I myself belong to the Depressed  
Classes” (Let us know Gandhi 131).

Moorthy as a true image of Gandhi turned his head only towards the welfare of this nation. C.D. Narasimhaiah is right when he says that “it was Gandhi’s greatness that he produced hundreds and thousands of little Gandhi’s throughout the country. “Moorthy was’ a brave soul and a holy soul’ and in him, there is a hunger of God. Goldsmith Nanjundiah says about Moorthy:

“Our Moorthy is like gold,  
the more you heat it, the purer

it comes from the crucible” (P 136)

Rachanna’s wife Lingamma calls Moorthy as ‘Moorthappa’ it shows the affection, which the Pariah quarter’s people have upon Moorthy. It identifies and recalls the idea that Gandhiji who was affectionately called by the Harijans as ‘Babuji’. Here, Moorthappa is one more ‘Babuji’. Rangamma’s calculation about Moorthy is ‘Moorthy the good, Moorthy the religious and Moorthy the noble, and she had found no more words as she had come down from the platform and had begun to shiver and tears had come into her eyes” (PP 144-145). The villagers in *Kanthapura* treat Moorthy as their Guru for politics and social approaches. Moorthy is the sincere tenet of Gandhian ideals like truth, non-violence and ahimsa. Moorthy’s Gandhism is nurtured by discipline and training. The fast for ‘self-purification’ sublimates and strengthens his feelings to face the forthcoming works like non-cooperation. Moorthy takes his courage from Gandhi’s predicaments. He preaches the Gandhian concept of love in the novel. He says to Ratna, ‘Pray with me that the sins of others may be purified with our prayers and to Rangamma he says:

“The greatest enemy is in us. If only we  
would show fearless, calm affection  
towards our fellowman we would be stronger” (96)

To Gandhi, spinning wheel is ‘an emotion-ladder’. The protagonist of *Kanthapura* is a veritable representation of Gandhi. He gives much attention to ‘Khadi’. Rajarao is said to have narrated the character of ‘Moorthy’, with the human threads of Gandhian ideals. He pictured Moorthy as,

“... every morning he spins for two hours  
immediately after his prayers. He says  
spinning is as purifying as prayer” (P 32)

As a practitioner of Gandhism, when he is asked to defend himself for his removal of foreign clothes and books, he says,

“I shall speak that which Truth prompteth  
and truth needeth no defence” (P 125).

Gandhiji appreciated ‘Brahmacharya’ during his course of prayer in order to control our thought and word and deed of all the senses at all times and in all places. In the novel *Kanthapura*, one can find a textual evidence of Moorthy’s ‘Brahmacharya or continence’. He sacrifices his secret love towards Ratna for the sake of his great mission. Whatever Moorthy does and wherever he goes and whatever he plans are all to strengthen Gandhian principles. As a sincere follower of ‘Satyagraha’, Moorthy, the hero of the novel *Kanthapura* raised his voice against the ‘evil of drinking under the head of Moorthy, many men and women and children go to the toddy booths and advise the drunkards ‘... do not drink in the name of Mahatma’. The Mahatma is a man of God; in his name do not drink and bring sin upon yourself and upon your community” (P 202).

Gandhi vehemently attacked the ills of child marriage. To him, the custom of child marriage is both a moral as well as a physical evil. Moorthy expresses his views that one should not marry early and one should allow the widows to take husbands. To Gandhi, widow, remarriage is no sin at all.

To conclude, *Kanthapura* is a first rate commentary on Gandhism, and Rajarao's strength lies in the strength of his conviction he aims at rendering his conviction about Gandhian ideology into art.

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