

## POLYPHONIC FEMALE VOICE IN RAJA RAO'S KANTHAPURA

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### Abstract

The novel *Kanthapura* traces the psychological revolution that accompanied the emergence of the woman from within the twin incarnations of the devil and the dasi, that has reigned in the imagination of the patriarchy since age. Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* is a refined study of the profound change that the Gandhian movement of the theories brought into the life of Indian women. Different female characters portrayed in the novel take on various roles as per the demand of situation and need. The novel throws light on the importance of female voice in Indian society especially during the time of freedom struggle. Some women are represented as having a modern viewpoint, others orthodox and stereotypical in their attitude. Some are satyagrahis and rational and there are others who are portrayed as housewives and widows. They play the leading roles in their respective pursuits. History, in the novel is looked from the female point of view as opposed to the analytical power of the male view. Raja Rao describes through the novel that women can also take part in the affairs of state as well as of religion. *Kanthapura* is also a novel which criticizes the orthodoxy of Indian culture and patriarchy. The paper is an effort to study polyphonic female characters who face various hurdles in the event of freedom struggle. They face the lathi charge, bullets, riots, rampage boldly along with their male counterparts. They are ready to take charge whatsoever come their way. They are at peace in the end ready to face on new challenges of their life. The woman characters represented here are in sharp contrast to the weak, humble, meek, subdued and victimised women as represented in other novels of those times. The paper tries to refurbish the identity of women despite all odds.

### Introduction

The women in India and other areas where patriarchy is dominant is a symbol of weakness, as something inferior. She is supposed to lead a miserable and dependent life. Our culture has not given her the right to remain free and independent, or to act on her own. She is represented as a cultural entity rather than a material being. But with the emergence of western education, the society has undergone various changes and gradually the views on the women and her own outlook has got a transformation. Towards the end of nineteenth century, various social reformers and philosophers tried to uplift women and gave her freedom. Various movements like widow remarriage, child marriage, dowry system etc were introduced in the society that helped in the betterment of women up to some extent. These changes were also depicted in various forms of writing, especially novels.

Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* was published in 1938. The time period of Indian freedom struggle is depicted in the novel, where people are guided by the ideas of freedom fighters like Mahatma Gandhi and Pandit Nehru. The narrative deals with the struggles of village folks, especially women in facing and fighting out different phases of freedom struggle in a rather challenging way. The book is a work of fiction which reflects the social and cultural aspects of the small village. The book discusses the events, struggles, experiences and trauma which the villagers have to face under the impact of British rule. The impact and persona of Mahatma Gandhi is throughout reflected in the narrative although he does not figure as a character in the novel.

*Kanthapura* is a political novel describing the impact of the Gandhian satyagraha movement on the life of simple, ignorant but well behaved villagers of *Kanthapura*. The story has a little plot but proceed in a leisurely manner. From one incident to another, it describes the people and the events in the form of a narrator told by a woman to her listeners.

### Discussion

The woman has always been the unacknowledged, unapproved and indispensable core of the Indian society, without which patriarchy would fall apart. She is never allowed a voice in the seminal aspects of life, the woman yet defines its traditional and cultural aspects. From the defined and prominent images of all pervading and all powerful goddess Kenchamma and the pariah Rachanna's wife who would spin only if her husband tells her to emerge, the women in the village becomes the one who defies conventions and lead the war of independence. Multiple female voices are reflected in the novel who come out of the paradigm of devil and dasi to chart out a territory of their own.

The narrative unfolds in the form of a story which is described by Achakka, the grand old lady in the novel. The story has the element of fable, myth and an epic. As the novel begins, we learn about the mythical story of Kenchamma, the

female deity who came from heaven to fight against a demon who was spreading violence in Kanthapura. In the fierce battle, which ensued Kenchamma becomes victorious and the demon is defeated. The blood of demon makes one side of the hill red. Kenchamma after killing the demon lives with the people of Kanthapura and helped them in their times of need, this is the common belief of people in the village. Whenever they face the problem the deity who is a female is the symbol of power and might. Motherhood is represented by Kenchamma as she protects the villagers from sickness and disease.

*Kanthapura* is a small village, with just twenty four houses. The people are mostly Hindus. Raja Rao has projected the complexity of life of an Indian society. He has used Indian terms and simple English to add to the local flavor of the novel. He knew the Indian traditions and customs well so he has built up his characters and situations in terms of Ramayana and Mahabharata. India is represented as Sita and Britishers as Ravana, the mythological characters. So, to grant freedom to her, Rama has to come to her aid. This has also been connected to the myth of Gitasaar as propounded by Lord Krishna in Mahabharata. Mahatma Gandhi is represented as the incarnation of God and a savior. India is represented as feminine who needs the help of males to come out of the clutches of demon.

Rao's selection of an old grandmother as the narrator in *Kanthapura* is one of the finest stylistic devices of the novel. We witness the immense change that is gradually brought about in the psyche of the narrow-minded, prejudiced and uneducated widow as she mingles facts with fantasy to describe how the world changed for her and her companions under the influence of Moorthy's preaching and Rangamma's Sevika Sangha. This is one of the rare instances where history is looked at from a female point of view as opposed to its analytical, power-structured male version that inevitably leaves the women folk out.

There are variegated characters which are portrayed in the novel, both male and female characters. Male characters as per the tradition are presented in dominant shades but for a change feminine characters have also been given an equally powerful role. Some of the important female characters which play a dominant role are discussed :

Achakka is the main character who is telling a story to his grandson in flashback. She is the open minded Brahmin female narrator, who recounts the rise of Gandhian movement during the time of British colonial rule. She weaves Kanthapura legends and Hindu myths into her story, she envisions the wisdom and daily routines of village life while recalling her own conversion to Gandhian philosophy. Although she is a grandmother who survives by subsistence farming, she seems ageless in her strength and charity. As she becomes more and more involved in the resistance, she studies vedic texts and yoga with Rangamma and participates in boycotts of foreign cloth and in picketing against tobacco and liquor shops. She is also beaten by the cops during her protests. She is a representative of how women can embrace change and can be an active agent of reconstructing reality. Towards the end, she goes and settles in Kashipura. She is presented as a tough character although a mature one. She is a symbol of strength and highly spirited lady.

The women leaders in *Kanthapura* are both educated widows, Rangamma and Ratna. Rangamma acts as a source of information, knowledge, advice and inspiration to the village women. She is a wealthy young Brahmin who is converted to Gandhian values by Moorthy. She is widely respected and nurtures curiosity about other countries. Apart from telling them about other galaxies on the one hand and the equal rights that women share with the men in a far-away country on the other, Rangamma is a regular subscriber to newspapers from the city – the *Tantrikam*, *Vishwakarnataka*, *Deshabandhu*, and *Jayabharatha*. These papers supply the villagers with the latest developments in the revolutionary struggle in the other parts of the country and later as to the trial and judgment of Moorthy and his fellow satyagrahis. As the movement grows, she publishes a weekly political pamphlet and sponsors daily discussion on the nationalist movement turning her home into the centre for Congress party activities. She is bold as well as traditional. She refutes Bhatta's self serving religious concerns and inspires villagers to follow Gandhi's teachings. She has a fair knowledge of Puranas. She is also endowed with modern scientific spirit and also knows about evolution of life. When her father, a vedantic teacher dies, she continues both as an organizer for the Gandhian movement and yoga teacher also. Rangamma is the one who tells the women about Laxmibai and trains them to resist the lathi blows of the police passively. She modulates the deep core religious zeal in the women and adds a nationalist dimension to it, '...we shall fight the police for Kenchamma's sake, and if the rapture of devotion is in you, the lathi will grow as soft as butter and as supple as a silken thread, and you will hymn out the name of the Mahatma.'(110) She organizes the women of Kanthapura as the sevis, who lead non violent resistant marches, a role that results in her being beaten and imprisoned. She is a highly gritted woman who is ready to face anything. She is highly educated and is ready to take charge in male domain. She is a true example of the enlightened female voice.

Ratna is the fifteen-year-old widowed daughter of Kamalamma. She is modern in her behavior and outlook speaking her mind and walking alone in the village. She is the educated, attractive niece of Rangamma who follows her aunt's example by joining the resistance movement. She breaks tradition by assisting Rangamma in the teaching of the Vedic texts as justification for

Gandhi's views, suffers beatings in the protest marches, and is nearly raped by a policeman. When Rangamma is imprisoned, Ratna assumes leadership of the Sevis and, eventually, also suffers imprisonment. After being released, she leaves Kanthapura to continue her activism in Bombay. Ratna is initially, detested by the village women along with the evil Bhatta, for walking about the streets like a boy, wearing her hair to the left "like a concubine", and wearing her jewellery – and all this being a widow. Ratna's retort when accosted for this is remarkable, "...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." (120). Ratna is a free spirited woman who is facing the stigma of a widow. She moves around, along with men, has her own set of infatuations and likings. She believes in her own self and not concerned about others.

Kamalamma is Rangamma's thirty-year-old traditionalist sister. She is a strict adherent to the Vedic caste system. She rejects Rangamma's conversion to Gandhi's teachings and her own daughter

Ratna's modern behavior and attitude. Kamalamma embodies the larger conflict within the village through her divisive stance within the family, being far more concerned with Ratna's eligibility for remarriage than with her daughter's role in the Swaraj (self-rule)

*Kanthapura* is a path breaking work in many ways, as its critics widely agree. In *Kanthapura* we find that women play leading roles. The choice of old woman as the narrator reflects that Raja Rao wanted the novel to be described from the female perspective. The novel is also rooted in the Indian myths and fable, where the myth of Rama and Sita is explored. The social taboos practiced during those have also been reflected. It reflects how an awakening spread and reached far off villages. It was the rise of the common masses that finally threw the Britishers out. Man still have a dominant role to play in the novel. Moorthy takes the centrestage though the presence of Mahatma Gandhi runs in the background. Moorthy, is as much a prophet, a freedom fighter. He leads the life of an ascetic. It is the temple premises which is used for religious and political gatherings. He is a university dropout. After experiencing a holy vision of Mahatma Gandhi, he distributes spinning wheels as a measure of resistance and is also engaged in fasts and meditation. He remains loyal to Gandhian principle despite becoming a supporter of Jawahar Lal Nehru. Moorthy knows the importance of women of his village and hence makes Rangamma a rich and educated widow, a member of Congress committee. He says, We need a woman for the committee for the Congress is for weak and lowly." (42). The women in the novel also appreciate his efforts and follow his advice. Even, a male voice recognizes the importance and need of female voices in the struggle of independence.

But Gandhi's movement was essentially against women's militancy and their public roles were entirely an extension of their domestic selves in concurrence with the patriarchal conceptions of the family and society. Despite the references to Rani Laxmibai in *Kanthapura*, the ideal woman is projected in the figure of the ever-obedient and eternally suffering Sita

There are many examples related to the Sevika Sangha from the men in Kanthapura.

"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'." (152)

A woman is beaten as a consequence of being a part of this Sangha although she is seven months pregnant. Post office Satamma's husband forbids her to go to Rangamma's house and when accosted by the latter says, 'I am a Gandhi's man, aunt. But if I cannot have my meals as before, I am not a man to starve'. (28) Rangamma in accordance to the Gandhian ideals tells Satamma not to fail in her timely services to her husband or home.

### **Conclusion**

A new outlook of the female has been projected in the work. She is portrayed as a lady who is not ready to succumb down to any pressure. She is ready to take charge in the freedom struggle along with men. Portrayal of women as dominant and role defining was a new exercise which was initiated by Raja Rao. Very many examples are given in the text which reflects the subdued and inferior role of women. Polyphonic feminine voices are reflected in the novel. Some represent the sorry state of affairs and others are projected as bold and dominating. Nevertheless, the novel, still reflects the positive change coming in the society which is realized by patriarchy.

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