

Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* : A Sthala-purana in fictional narrative

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ABSTRACT

Raja Rao, one of the 'Big Three' of the Indian English fiction, differs from the other two stalwarts in respect of narrative art. He constantly deals with India's freedom struggle in terms of Hindu mythology. His essential Indian sensibility is well reflected in the Puranic characteristics of his *Kanthapura* which is a *sthala-purana* in fictional narrative. The whole history of Gandhian revolution and its impact on Indian people have been epitomised in the fictional space of the work in purely Puranic terms with Gandhiji deified as a legendary figure, as an incarnation of God, an 'avatar' like Lord Krishna and Rama.

1. Introduction

Whenever we speak of the established classics of the Indian English fiction we esteem Raja Rao as one of the 'Big Three' of the Indo-Anglian fiction, the other two being Mulkraj Anand and R.K.Narayan. In spite of his extremely meagre literary output Raja Rao occupies an esteemable position in this literary trinity. Roughly a contemporary with the two other literary stalwarts he is affiliated with them only in terms of time and choice of themes but he completely differs from them in terms of his fictional art or very impressive prose style. He is not, like Anand, a politically committed writer, and he is very different from Narayan in being poetic, metaphysical and Lawrencian. Again "Where Anand sticks to social realism, excluding religion and Indian philosophy as irrelevant to the struggle for economic and political power by the under privileged, Raja Rao constantly discusses the nationalist struggle and its revolutionary implications in terms of Hindu mythology, religion and culture ..." (H.M.Williams) In respect of narrative art Raja Rao differs not only from the two celebrated novelists who are usually bracketed with him but also from almost every other Indo-Anglian novelist, so to say.

2. Rao's Indian sensibility

Raja Rao made a significant contribution to Indo-Anglian fiction by setting a new literary tradition for it. India's freedom struggle has been a stock-in-trade to the writers of modern Indian languages, but Raja Rao was the first writer of remarkable talent who exploited this field in English without any reservations so much so that his *Kanthapura* is regarded in various respects as a Gandhi-purana or a Gandhian epic. It is a notable example of the embodiment of Rao's peculiarly Indian sensibility in English creative writing. The Indianness of the work is well marked in its theme as well as in the novelist's handling of it. Excepting its medium the work strikes the reader as a typical narrative coming from an old grandmother. As Narasimhaiah observes, *Kanthapura* is a breathless tale fascinatingly told in the age-old Indian tradition of story-telling. It is a striking fact that for the first time an Indian novelist writing in English has handled the novel in such a way as to make it a means of enlarging the frontiers of human consciousness. It is a story like those an old grandmother might tell from her rich repertoire. It is this which has rendered the novelist's task more

difficult because he is required to assimilate and harmonise things which are seemingly contradictory. Perhaps the Indian metaphysical notion of the oneness of all life, and life's phenomena has come to his aid here.

3. What is Purana

Raja Rao's conception of the narration of his *Kanthapura* is thoroughly Indian and he approaches the story as a *sthala-purana* or the epic of a place. The word 'puranas' literally means "ancient, old", and it is a vast genre of Indian literature about a wide range of topics, particularly myths, legends and other traditional lore composed primarily in Sanskrit, but also in regional languages. Several of these texts are named after major Hindu deities such as Vishnu, Shiva and Devi. The puranic genre of literature is found both in Hinduism and Jainism. Puranas are the life-blood of Hindu society. They have been called the fifth Veda. They are a fine blend of religious teachings, narration, description, digression and philosophical reflection. Exaggeration is the key-note of most of the accounts of the happenings and miracles in them. Some of these are not authentic either. They have tarnished the image of Hindu religion. Excepting the last characteristic *Kanthapura* has all puranic characteristics. It is an example of peculiarly Indian art-form, *sthala-puranai*. e. the legendary history of a place or a place-piece. It tells of the legendary history of a South Indian hamlet caught in the maelstrom of the freedom struggle of the nineteen thirties – a tale told by an old grandmother. Thus the novelists integrates myth with history and fact with fiction.

4. About the Preface to the novel

In the interesting foreward to the novel Rao while discussing the problem of the style of writing talks of his debt to Puranas as a model for his writing :

There is no village in India, however mean, that has not a rich *sthala-purana*, or a legendary history of its own. Some God or god-like hero has passed by the village---- Rama might have rested under the peepal tree. Sita might have dried her clothes, after her bath on this yellow stone, or the Mahatma himself, on one of his many pilgrimages throughout the country, might have slept in this hut.

Thus in the Preface to the novel Narayan talks of the type of novel he has written which he describes as a *sthalapurana*.

5. *Kanthapura as a sthalapurana*

As Raja Rao himself implies in the Preface to the novel, it is a *sthalapurana*. The narrator is an aged village woman. So the story takes on some characteristics of a folk tale. In the first chapter itself there is rather an elaborate story about the legend of Kenchamma, the presiding deity and protectress of the Kanthapurians. She is a great and generous Goddess. The narrator then explains some of the exploits of the goddess. Many years ago the village of Kanthapura was troubled by a demon who came seeking the young sons of the people of Kanthapura as his food and their young daughters as his mistresses. It was the sage Tripura who appeased the goddess by making a great penance and begged her intervention. Then the bounteous deity descended upon the earth and killed the demon. After that she had stood the people of Kanthapura in good stead whenever any great difficulty faced them. One could pray to her for help whenever one faced trouble and the prayer was always granted. They had only to make a vow of walking on the holy fire on the day of annual fire, and their children recovered from even such diseases as small-pox and cholera. The Kanthapurians always prayed to Kenchamma to protect them through famine and disease, death and despair. They vowed to make a sacred offering to her of their first rice and first fruit. They danced before her throughout the harvest night and sing hosannas to her with great reverence :

Kenchamma, kenchamma,
Goddess benign and bounteous,
Mother of earth, blood of life,
Harvest queen, rain – crowned,
Kenchamma, kenchamma,
Goddess benign and bounteous.

The theme of the novel may be summed up as 'Gandhi and our Village', "but the style of narration makes the book more a Gandhi-purana than a piece of fiction." (Iyenger) Though Gandhi is absent from the plot of the novel as a character his invisible presence is felt throughout the entire novel. "Gandhi is the invisible God, Moorthy is the visible avatar." Gandhi is here treated not only as a living leader and a holy man, but as a legendary figure, an incarnation of God, an *avatar* like Rama and Krishna. Gandhi in the novel has been much idolized and deified like that of Rama in the *Ramayana*. Like Rama Gandhi is the *avatar* of the Almighty. The Britishers have been compared to Ravana. Like Ravana they came to despoil our political freedom. Gandhi's visit to England to attend the Round Table Conference has been invested with puranic significance :

They say the Mahatma will go to the Red-man's country, and he will get us Swaraj... 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 Bharata will go to meet them with the worshipped sandals of the Master on his head. And as they enter Ayodhya there will be a rain of flowers. Like Bharata we worship the sandals of the Brother saint...

Again Gandhi is also compared with Raja Harishchandra. As Rao puts it, "like Harishchandra before he finished his vow, and the Britishers will leave India and we shall be free, and we shall pay less taxes and there will be no policemen.

The fight between the Britishers and the Indians has been represented in terms of the fight between 'asuras' (evil forces) and 'suras' (good forces) is a recurrent motif in Hindu mythology. The Skeffington Coffee Estate is a micro-world dominated by the 'asuras' who are devoid of mercy, kindness, humanity and humaneness. The *asuric* British police there unleash a reign of terror in the name of estate management. Gandhiji launches with his Satyagrahis his campaign against the British officials to safeguard Satyagrahis from the exploitation and injustice of the estate officers. The British soldiers who had resort to atrocities upon the Satyagrahis have been compared to the soldiers of the army of the ten-headed demon, Ravana and Satyagrahis who were mercilessly thrashed, arrested and imprisoned have been compared to Lord Krishna himself in Kansa's prison.

The use of the mythical technique in the novel is seen at its best in the strange kind of *Harikatha* recited by Jayramacharan, the Harikatha-man in the novel. In the novel Jayramachar, the Harikatha-man from the city tells the story of the birth of Gandhi in the manner of the Puranic tales of the birth of gods and goddesses. The sage Valmiki, as the Harikatha-man says, meets Brahma and relates to him sinister news about the earth on which his favourite land of Bharata lies. Aliens from across the seas have come to trample on India's ancient wisdom and spit on virtue itself. They have made India a land of darkness and poverty. Valmiki therefore prays that Brahma may send an 'avatar' to ameliorate the lot of the land of ancient wisdom. Brahma is greatly moved to hear this and promises to send Siva himself to the earth as an avatar who would deliver his beloved daughter India from her wretchedness and misery. Then Siva took birth in a human form in a family in Gujrat. Soon after his birth the four walls of the room began to shine brilliantly. When the child was still in his cradle, he began to lisp the language of wisdom. He began to fight against the enemies of the country right from childhood, just as Lord Krishna killed Kali when he was still a child. When he grew to boyhood, men and women began to follow him, just as the Gopies followed Krishna the flute-player. Gandhi went from village to village to slay the serpent of foreign rule. He taught people to fight for independence but with non-violence, and he taught them to love all men and to regard them as equal, without distinction of caste and creed. His message was to avoid passions and seek Truth. He asked people to spin and weave every day, for Mother India was in tattered weeds and badly needed clothes to cover her sores. By buying Indian cloth they will provide money to feed and clothe thousands of poor sons of Mother India. The Mahatma, the katha-man said, was a saint, and even his enemies fell at his feet. At the end of the novel the myth is again taken up by Rangamma and her companions when they learn that Mahatma is going to England to get Swaraj :

He will bring us Swaraj, the Mahatma. And we shall be happy. And Ram will come back from exile, and Sita will be with him, for Ravana will be slain and Sita freed...

6. Conclusion

Thus *Kanthapura* is a brilliant attempt by Raja Rao to probe the very depths to which India's nationalistic urge penetrated, showing how even in the remote villages the new

upsurge fused completely with traditional religious faith, thus rediscovering the Indian soul in the peculiarly Indian art-form *sthala-purana*, and mythicising the contemporaneity thereby.

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