



## Crossing the cultural frontiers in the narrative of Kanthapura.

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### Abstract

Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* was written in the colonial period. But Rao's handling of the theme of India's struggle for independence and his technique undoubtedly posit the text in the postcolonial context. This paper aims at unraveling some aspects of postcoloniality in the narrative of *Kanthapura*. If postcoloniality is viewed as a critique of the colonialist perspective which constructs the relationship of the East and the West in the subjective terms of the West, the discourse of the *Kanthapura* can be read as a very strong dismissal of the East-West binarism.

**Keywords:** postcolonial, anti-colonial, escapism, narrative, language, political.

### 1. Introduction

'Postcolonial', is a highly contested term, but the application of the postcolonial perspective in literary discourse by the writers and the theorists presence of some qualities and conditions. This condition of post-coloniality are subject to individual writers own way of modification and appropriation. Nevertheless, postcolonial studies have resulted in the intense scrutiny of the relation between imperialism and textual production both in the colonial and in the decolonized period. Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* was written in the colonial period. But Rao's handling of the theme of India's struggle for independence and his technique undoubtedly posit the text in the postcolonial context. This paper aims at unraveling some aspects of postcoloniality in the narrative of . If postcoloniality is viewed as a critique of the colonialist perspective which constructs the relationship of the East and the West in the subjective terms of the West, the discourse of the can be read as a very strong dismissal of the East-West binarism. The subversion of the colonial construction of hierarchies as the superior, self sufficient West vs the inferior, dependent East find a variety of manifestations in the story and discourse of this novel.

### 2. The European perspective

The European historian's subjective view that it was the Western Project of Enlightenment which taught the colonized the lessons on freedom and nationalism is proved as mere falsification of fact since it is the political reading of the India's mythological past which is invoked to teach the people of the lessons of freedom and nationalism. The people of this remote village, Brahmins, Pariahs and all got political knowledge on one subject of freedom, anti-colonialism and nationalism not from the educational institutions set up by the west, but from their own indigenous tradition. For these native people, their struggle against the foreign rule is a reenactment of the Ravana-Sita-Rama myth in the present context. It is also the contextualization of the pre-historic tale of 'Kalia daman' for the sake of getting liberation from evil forces, embodied in the colonial regime.

Thus, the glance back at the past has become more than a nostalgic, romantic escapism to the past to forget the suffering of the present. The revising of the past is motivated by the present need and commitments. Therefore, the chanting of "Harikantha" has become more than a mere religious performance; it has taken

a political character aimed at reinvigorating the dormant political awareness of the people for the cause of the nation. It also dismisses another nation of the Europeans about the colonized that the colonized people are ignorant, inactive and fit only for suppressions.

### 3. The context of *Kanthapura*

As Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak has pointed out the danger of revisiting the precolonial past, since the past is not free from the contamination of the colonial rule, taking a postcolonial stance, Raja Rao has gone to the extent of exposing internal fissures and loopholes in India's own native tradition inherited from the precolonial time. The narrative of *Kanthapura* is not blind to the danger of the indiscriminate retrieval of the indigenous past. The native Indian past which can take pride in such heroic incarnations as Rama and Krishna is also shown to have been infected by the negative of casteism. The colonial power is not responsible for generating the divide between the Brahmins and non-Brahmins, but they attempt to perpetuate the class-divisions for the implementation of the imperialist agenda. The interesting point is that the narrative of this novel is not merely a tale of anti-colonial struggle, it basically focuses on the need for dismantling some deep-rooted social hierarchies which are indigenous in origin.

The story of *Kanthapura* stresses the fact that subversion of the political hierarchies is not possible without annihilating the social hierarchies like the Brahmins, Pariahs and the Coolies. If India is to recover itself from the political and cultural margin set by the West, it must strive, first of all, to give freedom to all those marginalized groups like the Pariahs and the Women. It is to be noted that in the narrative of *Kanthapura*, woman is posited as the agent of change and the whole tale of anti-Colonia struggle is mediated through the voice of the woman narrator. Thus, the assumption that the subalterns cannot speak is dismissed through the writer's endeavor to foreground the voice of such subaltern groups as the untouchables and the women.

*Kanthapura*, introduces the question of women's political right, though the basic terms of the patriarchal society remain unchallenged. (In one of the scenes, a female activist asks her female friend to bear with police atrocities as she submits to her husband's beating without complaint). The movement is presented as representative of the subaltern voices- the women and the pariahs, the marginalized in the

politics of gender and class. The argument for unilateral operation of colonial power is deconstructed by the presence of such character as Bade Khan and Bhatta in the narrative. The colonized, far from having a fixed identity, are implicated in the operation of the colonial power, as the people of had to guard themselves more against the Bade Khans and Bhattas rather than against the foreign rules. The British presence itself is marginalized in the tale except in the form of a few unnamed officials of the *Skeffington* coffee Estate. The colonized identity is also shown as further divided as they play the double roles of the oppressed in relation to the British and oppressor in relation to the untouchables. The narrative of *Kanthapura*, highlights the non-essentialist identity of the colonized, which makes any neat classification of the colonized/colonizer in terms of the self and the other virtually impossible, Colonialism is shown as a practice fraught with ambivalence that can be duplicated from within, with complicity of natives in the process.

In the opinion of a noted post colonial critic Partha Chaterjee, while the public/ political sphere of the native statecraft and economy was transformed by direct colonial influence, the cultural sphere remained shielded from direct political intervention of the colonial rule. The ideas of national culture were defended and nurtured in this private sphere. But a reading of *Kanthapura*, unravels how the so-called contamination-free cultural sphere opens up its own boundaries for the entry of outside resources and prepares the ground for cultural assimilation. The narrative focuses the need for cultural hybridities rather than cultural nationalism. Raja Rao uses the technical resources of modern European novel developed by Henry James, Proust and James Joyce- such as interior monologue and retrospective narrative. The old women's narration of the anti-colonial struggle takes the form of retrospective recollection. The retrospective narrative is however, not written, but oral in form or spirit, as the female narrator addresses her listeners as "sister"- this narrative is rooted in the ancient folk tradition of the East. Rao has used the European genre of historical novel but the borrowing is invested with a difference. What he has done results in the subversion of the basic codes of writing historical novel. History means a linear progression of events and the events are great events with a few national figures in the limelight. But in *Kanthapura*, the temporal dimension of history and the chronological order of events are interrupted by

repeated references to mythical deities and heroic figures. The mythologizing of the contemporary political reality results in a mixed genre in which history as temporal narrative is invested with metaphysical dimensions. Again, the people who represent the historical moment of anti-colonial struggle do not have the grandeur normally associated with the protagonists of historical novel. The narrative, on the other hand, foregrounds the political activities of the peasants and workers, not any national hero or heroines. Though the novel makes frequent references to Gandhi, he is not given a fictional presentation in the narrative and Moorthy, the local avatar of Gandhi does not have a recognizable stature outside the boundaries of village. Rao's borrowing of the form of the historical novel therefore has provided the novelist with a platform to problematize the East-West hierarchies and purities. Significantly enough, the novel begins with a reference to the narrative subject in the plural form : "Our Village", from the coloniser's perspective, the mark of the plural is a sign of the colonized depersonalized or lack of individual self — an anonymous collectivity. But in the context of *Kanthapura*, the plural subject stands for a collective political consciousness. It brings into focus a sense of community which locates the center of the novel in a community of people rather than in the consciousness of the individual. In *Kanthapura*, on the other hand, a politically subversive gesture is seen in the use of the allegorical phrase "*Red-men*" to denote the colonial authority without giving them any distinctive individual identity.

#### 4. The use of language

*Kanthapura*, hybridizes not only the novelistic form, but the medium of expression as well. In his prefatory remarks Raja Rao has written: "One has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own-yet English is not really an alien language to us." This authorial admission can be interpreted as an acknowledgement of the need for accommodation the European modes of thought and expression in the indigenous context. His apparently apolitical selection of English, the colonizer's tongue for handling the theme of anti-colonial struggle has a post colonial dimension as what it results in is cultural hybridity. Rao courageously makes expression in a foreign tongue. A detailed description of the methods adopted by Raja Rao to subvert and finally appropriate an alien language and the literary implications of such a language is and engrossing study in itself. The

language of Raja Rao is such that from it a westerner would get a correct idea of the way Kannadas' think, feel and speak. The transfer of Indianism in Indian English may involve equivalence of formal items of L1 and L2 in two ways :

1. Translation of an Indian item : Translation may be defined as establishing equivalent or partially equivalent formations in Indian English from the formation in Indian languages. Here we can consider examples like

- (i) "*lick your feet*"
- (ii) *You cannot straighten a dog's tail.*
- (iii) *Every squirrel has his day*
- (iv) *You are traitor to your salt givers*

2. Shift based on an underlying Indian source item : A shift is different from translation in the sense that in a shift no attempt is made to establish formal equivalence. They are better explained and understood if considered with their appropriate contextual units from Indian culture. Clauses like '*only a pariah looks at the teeth of the cow*', or phrases like '*Learned Maharaja*' or '*Learned one*' used by the pariah and peasants to address people who are socially superior can be taken as examples. In the latter example, whether the person referred to is learned or not doesn't matter. This is an example of what we may call a contextually deviant shift which involves the transfer of meaning from the native culture of Indian English, in addition to the transfer of collocations from Indian languages. Besides this we have to mention the accommodation of Indian words like — *kumkum, arthi, thail, Taluk etc.* and also the hybrid or mixed formation like *Congress pandal, Kumkum mark etc.*

But all these cannot be considered enough to convey Indianism. The tone of Indian speech need also be reproduced. Hence syntactical deviations become a must. Raja Rao reorganized the structure of the English sentence to convey the feelings of our countrymen on different occasions. Rendering of the Kannada intonation to English sentences is highly original and indistinguishable from an essentially Indian sensibility. For example, we can consider the wide range of feelings and attitudes from the behaviour of an Indian crowd in clauses like — "*While the policemen beat the crowd this side and that side and groans and moans and cries and shouts and coughs and bangs and kicks are heard, while there is heard, Mahatma Gandhi Ki jai*". Then we have the rhythm of the Sankrit language in the invocation to the goddess like "*O Kenchamma, protect us always like this through famine and disease.*" Then we have the lingo

of the cart-man, 'He ho', the vigorous musical counting of measures of rice and ragi in "one, two three, Hm, four, Hm five, and the superstitious "God's extra"; and the more intimately used language of the dining hall in "Take only this much milk, just this much" or "take it, Bhattare only one cup more, just one", - Whose English equivalent would have been something like "Wont you have a second helping?" Raja Rao has also taken care of our way of referring to extended forms of family relations like "He is my wife's elder brother's wife's brother-in law" - "Dhirappa's brother's son". He has also not forgotten about our way of emphasizing things in phrases like "ages and ages ago", "sing, sing, sing" etc. all these are manifestations of Raja Rao's attempt to create a hybrid context within the realm of language.

The funny nick names of the characters of *Kanthapura*, also retain a very strong Kannada flavour, like-post office House young Chinnamma, Nose-scratching Nanjamma, Waterfall Venkamma, etc.

There are also coining of new compound world like "Do-not-touch- the Government Campaign", "that house people" etc. The nativization of the English language results in a new kind of English

which illustrates that the mimicry is not merely 'black skin in white mask'. On the other hand, it creates the post colonial condition of cultural polyvalency and counter discourse to deconstruct the master narrative of the west.

#### 4. Conclusion

To conclude, the intermingling of forms derived from indigenous and European literary traditions undoubtedly carries a political message as it calls for a creative transcendence of cultural frontiers and intellectual cross fertilization for deconstructing the binarism of the West-East, colonizer-colonized, in the postcolonial world. The novel ends at a tragic note-Kathapura is now a deserted place with the painful memories of those killed in the encounter with the colonial power. Such an ending seems to raise question regarding the power of the Gandhian policy of resistance in the face of the foreign military power. Perhaps, the narrative intends to point out that the Gandhian political and economic ways are inadequate answers to the British policy of imperialism and the natives have to appropriate heterogeneous practices in this public sphere as well.

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