

## Resistance as Response: Gandhian Model of Anti-colonial Resistance in Raja Rao's 'Kanthapura'

\*Shohib Bashir , M.A. English, NET

shohibbashir1021@gmail.com

\*\*Rangnath Thakur, M.A. English, NET

Rangnath1995@gmail.com

India carries a unique past because it witnessed multiple invasions from various regions of the world which include the invasion of Alexander, Mongols, Mughals, and Britishers. The last control which was established on India was by the colonial rule. This colonial control in India was different from the previous rules in many senses. The 'real' rise of nationalistic discourse, in modern sense, happened in this era of colonial rule where people came to know about the concept on 'nation' for the first time in History. It's notable that during the colonial regime, India's nationalistic discourse cannot be imagined without Gandhi, whose way of showing dissidence against the colonial power was distinguished from the other ways of showing dissidence. He developed the method of Satyagrahara and emphasized a peaceful violation of government's law, and for this he prepared Satyagrahis. In this method of resistance, the oppressor is not harmed physically, and any kind of violence is strictly prohibited. Before Gandhi entered the freedom struggle, India's nationalistic discourse was confined to the elitist class, but after Gandhi, it was the middle class who started to participate in the anti-colonial resistance, and it became nationwide. Gandhi invigorated nationalistic feelings in the common folk of India. Gandhi, an unflinching truth- seeker, influenced not only peasants but also the intellectual and wealthy class, including writers, journalists, lawyers, *zamindars*. Among writers, he became a common hero, and his ideas and works became a common theme. Writing in English in India was there before Gandhi, but it was 1920's onwards that we see a proliferation in writing, especially novel writing. So along with the rise of novel in Indian English Writing, the rise of Gandhian influence on novelists can be noticed. All the major writers of Gandhi's time including Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, R K Narayan, Jawaharlal Nehru incorporated Gandhian theme in their writings. Later Manohar Malgoankar, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Chaman Nahal, Sudhir Kakkar, Aashish Nandy also infused Gandhian theme in their fiction or non-fiction writings. As Iyenger rightly puts it- "it was that Gandhi exercised a potent influence on our

languages and literatures, both directly through his own writing in English and Gujarati and indirectly through the movements generated by his revolutionary thought and practice." (Iyenger, p-248).

Raja Rao, an acclaimed English writer, was deeply influenced by the cultural renaissance that Gandhi brought to India. Rao not only incorporated Gandhian theme in his writings, but he wrote with a purpose of social awareness. He wanted to spread awareness among the Indians about Gandhi and Gandhian ideas,

which shows his great concern for India's freedom struggle. His very first seminal novel *Kanthapura* reflects Gandhian mode of anti-colonial resistance. His other writings like- *The Cow of the Barricades and Other Stories* and *The Serpent and the Rope* also deal with the Gandhian theme. Among the nine stories of his story collection, three stories deal with India's independence struggle. Rama Jha in her 'Gandhian Thought and Indo-Anglian Novelists' rightly remarks, "The theme of Rao's novels, particularly *Kanthapura*, is the liberation of India's spirit by Gandhian ideas. It is through this perspective that Rao reconstructs in his novels the India of the 1930's and 40's." (Jha, page- 92)

### ***Kanthapura***

*Kanthapura* is a novel of Rao's deep concern for the Gandhian approach of resistance against the inhumane British rule. It is primarily a story of struggle against the exploitative colonial rule where native people had become 'other' in their own native land. The period which it covers is from Gandhi's Dandi March in 1930 to Gandhi-Irwin Pact in 1931, but it is a microcosm of India's whole struggle against the colonial power. It is notable that albeit this novel deals with Gandhian way of resistance but unlike other novels of Gandhian influence like, *Untouchable*, *Waiting for Mahatma*, *The Sword and The Sickle*, it does not have any direct presence of Gandhi, but the narrative is so beautifully structured that we find Gandhi everywhere. In all the nineteen chapters, we associate with Gandhi with no exception. In other words, Gandhi is present in absence. Apart from that, the novel has been localized in a remote village of south India. The setting of the novel is suggestive of Gandhian faith in village people and their devotion to the liberation of the country.

### ***Resistance against the colonial power***

The novel uses all the techniques of Gandhi to fight against the inhumane colonial rule. All the major, as well as minor characters, are associated with the Gandhian movement. They use Gandhian techniques like- Harikatha, fasting, peaceful march, Satyagraha, repentance for violence, burning of clothes, the boycott of foreign goods, use of khadi, use of spinning wheels to go against the exploitative rule of the British government. Early in the novel, the protagonist Moorthy saw a vision of Mahatma and after that, he left all his bad habits and started to practice the Gandhian ways of passive resistance. He started to behave like Gandhi, and people used to call him 'local Gandhi'. He started to explain Gandhian ideas to the common peasants. He became a truth seeker and convinced people to do so. He says, "There is but one force in life, and that is truth, and there is but one love in life, and that is the God of all." (*Kanthapura*, p- 38). He is entirely against any kind of violence. The way Gandhi reacted against the violence occurred at Chauri Chaura in 1922, Moorthy reacted in the same way when violence occurred at Coffee State House. He took the responsibility of the violence and went for fasting and convinced people to do so. He always wears khadi clothes and worked for the local Congress committee. He created a Congress committee in the village where he is the president, Range Gowda is the super-president, Rangamma is the women representative, people from Pariahs (Rachana) are also its members. Like Gandhi who worked for national integrity, Moorthy worked for integrity at the local level. He successfully convinced almost the whole

village to participate actively in the struggle against the brutal government rules. He goes to jail many times but never became pessimistic. Moorthy, not only followed the Gandhian approach of resistance, but he also followed him in his personal life. So, this journey from personal to political is noteworthy in his character. He made himself distant from all the evils of an ordinary human being. He followed the rules and regulations of a brahmachari and dissociated himself from lust and money. He becomes spiritual and talks of God and Mahatma only. The kind of confidence which he shows in his struggle is remarkable. "That is great; we shall win. We shall win the battle, and we shall defeat the government". (*Kanthapura*, P.168)

Apart from the protagonist, other characters are also deeply involved in the contention against the colonial rule. All of them are led by Moorthy, but all of them had their individual contribution to the struggle. Their struggle, like Moorthy's, followed Gandhian way of showing

dissidence. After Moorthy, it was Shankar, an advocate by profession, who led the movement. He is deeply influenced by Gandhian thoughts as well as Moorthy's. He wears only khadi clothes. Like Gandhi, he does not charge from poor men for legal help and never goes by the false side. He always goes for truth, and if someone lies to him, he withdraws himself from the case, and its instance is there in the novel. About him the narrator speaks, "No, no, he follows the principles of the Mahatma.... Shankar does not take a false case, and before he takes a client, he says to him, 'swear before me you are not the criminal!'... you know if you do not tell me the whole truth, well, I may be forced to withdraw in the middle of the case." (*Kanthapura*). He is also the Karwar Congress Committee's secretary, and he organized a rally at Gandhi Maidan, where all the volunteers had presented themselves in khadi clothes and wore Gandhi topi. He takes charge of the movement after Moorthy is sent to jail on the false charge of "the assault of the Pariahs on the police." After that Range Gowda, and other Gandhian men, worked for the movement and also arranged financial support for the movement. Moorthy convinces him because he is the most powerful man of the village, and without his help, the movement could not be carried out. Other men from the Pariahs community, like Rachna, belonging to the lower caste in the village, also participated in the movement. Many men from that community went to jail and became violent against the police of the colonial rule.

### ***Women's participation***

Gandhi's resistance transcended any boundary of caste, creed, or gender. It gave equal opportunity to women to participate in the movement. Well-known names of Sarojini Naidu, Kamla Nehru, Anny Besant, and Gandhi's wife Kasturba are there for their significant participation in the freedom struggle. In his Salt Satyagrah, out of around thirty thousand arrests, almost seventeen thousand arrests were given by women. That shows the role of women under Mahatma's leadership. Raja Rao, through his novel, incorporated this aspect of women's participation in the freedom struggle. In *Kanthapura*, women are not sitting in their homes, but they march forward to show their protest against the brutal force. When almost all of the men were arrested, the struggle did not stop, but it went into the hands of women.

Women from every community of the village participated in the struggle. Rangamma's reading of the weekly "Blue Paper" politicizes the women of the village, and almost all of them devoted their time and energy to the movement. Rangamma says, "you need not to be a man to fight." (*Kanthapura*) She and Ratna united the whole village, and they formed 'Sevika Sangh' and called themselves 'Sevis.' They took their inspiration from Rani Lakshmi Bai, Sarojini Naidu, and Anny Basant. The determination of the women of Kanthapura may be understood through these lines "...we shall fight the police for Kanchamma's sake, and if the rapture of devotion is in you, the lathi will grow as soft as butter and as supple as silken thread, and you will hymn out the name of the Mahatma." (*Kanthapura*)

### ***Fight against the Social Evils***

Gandhi wanted India's emancipation from the British rule. At the same time, he also wanted to erase all the social evils that were pervasive at that time. He fought social evils like untouchability, gender discrimination, zamindari system, and the prevalent corruption in every sphere of life. So, a parallel movement against social evils was launched by Gandhi, and he continuously did it throughout his lifetime. Raja Rao was also a man of reformist nature who, through *Kanthapura*, presented a narrative of reform. In other words, a parallel narrative was excellently used to erase the discrimination based on caste, creed, or gender. In the novel, class consciousness is deeply rooted in the characters, including the protagonist, and the novelist has presented it through the development of the novel's incidents. In the novel, the class consciousness among the characters, is so immense that even the Pariahs hesitate to join the village's upper caste. However, through his protagonist, Rao has shown a path of reformation. Albeit Moorthy is a Brahmin, he goes to Pariah's homes and unites them for better cause. For this reason, he was excommunicated by the Swami of the village. He says, "he is mixing with the Pariahs like a veritable Mohammedan, and the Swami has sent words through Bhatta to say that the whole of Kanthapura will be excommunicated". (*Kanthapura*, P.42). Because of this excommunication Moorthy's mother died, but he continued to go to Pariahs and made them

feel that they were as important as others. Rama Jha rightly says, "he is shown to be experiencing in Gandhi a force that releases him from the age-old shackles of ritualistic Brahminism and turns him into a humanist and social reformer of the Gandhian order". (P.99)

### ***Gandhian symbols and references***

Throughout the novel, there is much emphasis on Gandhian symbols, and symbols like khadi, Gandhi topi, and the spinning wheel have been used to show the mode of resistance which follows Gandhain model. They have been used not only to show resistance and dissidence, but they are also symbolic of swadeshi consciousness among the people, which was one of the main mottos of Gandhi during the movement. By burning foreign clothes, it has been shown that our country will not depend on foreign goods, but we may develop our domestic industries. Moorthy tried to convince people about the economic exploitation that

Britishers were doing. "Because millions and millions of yards of foreign clothes come to this country, and everything foreign makes us poor and pollutes us." (*Kanthapura*, P.19).

The novel also uses direct references to the incidents which were the part of Gandhian way of showing dissidence. The slogans like 'Mahatma Gandhi ki Jai', 'Vande Matram' have been uttered by the characters many times. The reference of the Chaura Chauri incident which took place in the Gorakhpur district of Uttar Pradesh in 1922 after which Gandhi called off his Non-cooperation movement. In the same way, Moorthy went for fast and repentance after the violence that occurred at Coffee Estate House. The references of Sabarmati, Congress Committee, Jaliwala Bagh, Dandi March have also been used by the novelist to make the narrative more efficient for showing the Gandhian model of anti-colonial resistance.

### ***Gandhian Model of Resistance- A Success or Failure?***

The narrative of the novel *Kanthapura* is the reflection of Gandhian thought. However, at the end of the novel, it becomes complicated in the sense that instead of the movement's success, the novel results as a failure of the movement. The characters who became Gandhian and devoted everything for Gandhian cause started questioning Gandhi's approach to anti-colonial resistance at the end of the novel. The narrator herself says, "she had done nothing, and she was not a Gandhi person, and it was this Moorthy, this Moorthy who has brought all this misery upon us." (*Kanthapura*) Since the villagers of Kanthapura denied the colonial rule, the government decided to confiscate their lands and sell them to the highest bidder. For that reason, the villagers protested heavily with some congressmen from the town, but the colonial

government became more brutal, and the protesters were assaulted. Lastly, Rachi burns the whole village because the villagers were left with no other option. "The clothes she burns are likely domestic khadi cloth, which suggests that she may be rejecting the Gandhism that lead to Kanthapura's destruction and gave the villagers little in return." (*litcharts*)

### ***Conclusion***

*Kanthapura* by Raja Rao has been written with a larger social and political purpose. Gandhi's mode of anti-colonial resistance has been an integral part of this excellent narrative where the novelist has incorporated almost every idea of Gandhi. It reflects Gandhian Satyagrah through which he continuously fought against the colonial rule. The purpose of writing this novel was to spread awareness among people, and it had a program of national integrity in which people from every section have to be included. Nevertheless, the ending of the novel is debatable because it shows a kind of deviation from the Gandhian approach. Could Raja Rao as a fictional writer not give a happier ending? In the end, the village of Kanthapura is burnt, and it was evacuated. So, a sense of gloominess is there. Other aims of erasing social evils are also not fulfilled. The novel ends with the prevailing condition of British rule and social evils like, untouchability and social

discrimination persist. However, we have to understand that change is a continuous process, and sometimes it may take too much time and energy. This aspect of change is applicable to the Gandhian approach as well. Although they do not get success at that time, the long-lasting effect of the Gandhian approach cannot be denied. The confidence which the villagers got during and after the movement is remarkable. As far as a deviation from

Gandhi's approach is concerned, Raja Rao's own comment in this regard is notable. He says, "His Moorthy was a young man who felt disillusioned after he suffered a defeat. His faith in Gandhi is shaken for a moment. At one time, Nehru was also dissatisfied with Gandhi's way of struggle. But if Nehru had not been a true Gandhian India would not have been in the state, we are today. At best you can say that Moorthy was a deviating Gandhian. Nehru too was a

deviating Gandhian." (Interview with Raja Rao).

So, we may argue that it is a novel with some extensive social and political purpose, and Raja Rao has successfully fulfilled that purpose of social, political, and religious awakening.

## **Bibliography**

- Rao, Raja. *Kanthapura*. Penguin Random House India, 2014.
- Jha, Rama. *Gandhian Thought Of Indo-Anglian Novelists*. Chanakya Publication, New Delhi, 1983  
Iyenger, Srinivasa. *Indian Writing in English*. New Delhi, 1962-1983.
- Jennings, Rohan. "Kanthapura Plot Summary." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 28 Jun 2018. Web. 6 Aug 2021.
- Kumar, Dr. Rakesh. "Impact of Gandhian Philosophy in *Kanthapura*". *Quest Journals Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Science*. Volume 5, Issue 10 (2017) pp.: 35 -36.

- Naik, M. K. *A History of Indian English Literature*. Sahitya Akademi, 2009.
- Priyambada, Gopal. *The Indian English Novel: Nation, History, and Narration*. Oxford University Press, 2009.
- G, Lakshmi. "Kanthapura: An Analysis on the Conceptual Background of Raja Rao's Novel". *Journal of Advanced and Scholarly Research in Allied Education*, Vol. II, Issue No. II, October- 2011