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## Image of Mahatma Gandhi in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*

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### Abstract

The objective of this article is to highlight the essential elements in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* and the impact of Mahatma Gandhi on it. *Kanthapura* is known as a Gandhi-Puran. It presents the Indian Freedom movement and Gandhi's influence on it. Nowadays people are forgetting the role of Mahatma Gandhi and therefore this is very important to depict him in this research paper. This article is a detailed account of all this.

**Keywords:** Indian freedom movement, Raja Rao, Mahatma Gandhi, historical events, from north to south, people, harikatha, politics, religion, social condition

### Introduction

Raja Rao is regarded as one of the greatest Indo-Anglian novelists. His novel *Kanthapura* is his masterpiece which portrays the theme of the Indian Freedom Movement and the role of Mahatma Gandhi in independence. In those days, Mahatma Gandhi was only one national figure, by which, and the entire masses of India were ready for anything said to him. He was a national figure and he had a wide impact on society, politics, religion, and all other aspects. India was going on his research for freedom based on nonviolence, noncooperation, civil disobedience, fast, agitation, and procession – and all under the state of peace and harmony. Raja Rao is one of the greatest novelists in Indian English novels. He is quite indifferent to R.K. Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand who were his contemporaries in art and style. His prose style is enchanting mixed with the traditional and modern. His works had achieved an international fame which includes his short stories *The Cow of Barricades*, *Kanthapura*, *The Serpent and the Rope*, and *The Cat and Shakespeare*. His early works depict the social and political concerns of the silent heroism and selfless sacrifice of Indians. His *Kanthapura* is a classic of the Gandhian movement for freedom and its impact on the Indian masses finds its best and fullest expression. M.K. Naik rightly observes,

*“Kanthapura is thus a brilliant attempt to probe the depths to which the nationalistic urge penetrated, showing how, even in the remote villages, the new upsurge fused completely with traditional religious faith, thus rediscovering the Indian soul.”* Naik, M.K., 2005, A History of Indian English Literature, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, (Page 167)<sup>[1]</sup>

*Kanthapura* deals with the theme of the Indian Independence Movement showing the events in a southern Indian village and one of the remotest parts of India, and the impact of Mahatma Gandhi. *Kanthapura* is the centre and Moorthy is the central character – all the actions in the village move around him - and other boys are Dore and some city boys who participate with Moorthy. Moorthy organises the Gandhi work in the village, which is the life and spirit of the freedom struggle in the village as was Mahatma Gandhi the life and spirit of the struggle in India. As people were ready to do or die following Mahatma Gandhi all over India the same was the condition with Moorthy and the other people of *Kanthapura* were under the realm of Moorthy doing anything for the freedom of India. They all were actively involved with him. The novel reveals their heroic sacrifice. People have been enthused with the spirit of Gandhi, and they marched ahead heroically despite all the suffering and hardship they have to undergo.

*“Gandhi’s influence on Indian literature, however, extends far beyond the fictional representations of his own image and philosophy. He set a new direction for Indian writers in matters of both style and subject matter.”* Mundra, J.N. & Sahni, C.L., 1991, *Advanced Literary Essays*, Prakash Book Depot, Bareilly (Page 239)<sup>[3]</sup>

Some critics say that *Kanthapura* is a mythology. Some say that *Kanthapura* is a Gandhi-Puran or a kind of sthala-puran, where some of the characters are gods and other beings larger in power than humanity. Moorthy has been presented as a figure who is much above the common run of men. He is a dedicated selfless soul – he is idealised to the extent of being regarded as a local Mahatma. He is also a real mahatma who is physically present before the villagers. The women in the village think of Mahatma Gandhi as the Big Mountain and Moorthy as the Small Mountain. People of *Kanthapura* said,

*“He is a saint, the Mahatma, a wise man and a soft man, and a saint. You know how he fasts and prays. And even his enemies fall at his feet.”* Rao, Raja, 2006, *Kanthapura*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi (Page 17)<sup>[2]</sup>

Mahatma Gandhi is Rama who is unseen in the village but his spiritual and symbolic image is seen in the mind and hearts of all the villagers in *Kanthapura*. Red foreigners are indeed the armies of Ten-headed Ravana. The past and the present have been brought together. Satyagrahi in prison is just Lord Krishna himself in Kanasa’s prison as portrayed in the novel. Raja Rao very beautifully narrated the story in the following lines:

*“...a vision of the Mahatma, mighty and God beaming, and stealing between the Volunteers Moorthy had got on to the platform, and he stood up by the Mahatma, and the very skin of the Mahatma seemed to send us the mellowed force and love...”* Rao, Raja, 2006, *Kanthapura*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi (Page 47)<sup>[2]</sup>

Those days, during the Indian independence movement, there were several myths prevalent and mixed with the traditional stories related to Ramayana and the Mahabharata. In *Kanthapura*, we also see such a story that is modern Harikatha. In it, the past and the present have been juxtaposed and contemporary events and personalities are constantly linked up with traditional gods and goddesses. There is a famous store or Harikatha that is related to Mahatma Gandhi’s birth. According to it, Mahatma Gandhi was born with a plan to liberate Bharatmata from the chains of slavery. Sage Valmiki met Brahma and he brought a piece of good news regarding his birth. How beautifully Jayaramachar narrated the story mixed with the past and the present:

*“Brahma offered him in hospitality, there was born in a family in Gujerat a son such as the world has never beheld. As soon as he came forth, the four wide walls began to shine like the Kingdom of the Sun, and hardly was he in the cradle when he began to lisp the language of wisdom You remember how Krishna when he was but*

*a babe of four, had begun to fight against demons and had killed the serpent Kali. So too our Mohandas began to fight against the enemies of the country.”* Rao, Raja, 2006, *Kanthapura*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi (Page 16)<sup>[2]</sup>

Thus, the use of the mythical technique is also a very significant way of telling the story of Mahatma Gandhi and his influence on *Kanthapura*. This technique makes Mahatma the invincible God and Moorthy the visible God who struggles to break up the chain of slavery which was of hundreds of fears. The reign of the British was regarded as the reign of the asuras (devils) in the ancient age as has been mentioned in the Ramayana and other texts of Hindu mythology. It also mentions the resistance to the foreign rule by Devas and Satyagrahis. Jayaramachar jumbles with splendid unconcern traditional mythology and contemporaneous politics. According to the story, narrated by Jayaramachar, Shiva is the three-eyed, and the swaraj is also three-eyed – self-purification, Hindu Muslim unity, and the use of Khadi. Gandhi portrayed Himself as Shiva in the human shape. A number of bhajans and Harikathas mix religion into politics freely and often with a purpose. The novel also reveals that the villagers adopted the Gandhian rituals of hand spinning and daily prayer. All this has been broadly narrated in the novel by Raja Rao. Thus, it can be said that *Kanthapura* is a Gandhi-Purana.

*“...the harvest reaped is the Gandhian whirlwind. Raja Rao offers no dreamland vision of the freedom struggle. In fact, their initial reaction of *Kanthapura* to the Gandhian thought is one of bored apathy. But young Moorthy, the Gandhian, who knows that the master key to the Indian mind is religious, puts the new Gandhian wine into the age-old bottle of traditional Harikatha (legendary narrative of God) and thus indoctrinates the *Kanthapurans*.”* Naik, M.K., 2005, *A History of Indian English Literature*, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi (Page 167)<sup>[2]</sup>

This juxtaposition of the old and the new of men and gods has been thoroughly presented in *Kanthapura*. It continues till the end of the novel. When Mahatma Gandhi went to England to participate in the Second Round Table Conference, this scene has been also presented in a puranic manner. They said that He went there to release Mother India (to bring swaraj) and to free India from foreign rule as Rama went to Lanka to release mother Sita.

Outwardly it seems that *Kanthapura* is a village novel, but the fact is broader than this. It indeed depicts the impact of the Gandhian freedom movement on the life of a remote and obscure village like *Kanthapura*. It also depicts the events that occurred in *Kanthapura* under the impact of Mahatma Gandhi. It shows lakhs and lakhs of Indians of the entire nation were armies of freedom struggling in his leadership. They were disciplined and nonviolent and fought for the freedom of a nation. It depicts three strands of the Gandhian movement political, social, and religious. All three were woven inextricably into the complex story of the regeneration of *Kanthapura* as a result of the independence movement. It does not depict only the political theme of the freedom struggle, but also the social economic, and religious condition of then India. Raja Rao writes,

“...and the crowd shouted ‘Mahatma Gandhi ki jai!’ And someone took a kerosene tin and began to beat it, and someone took a cattle bell and began to ring it, and they cried, With them, brothers, with them! And they leaped and they ducked and they came down to lie beside us, and we shouted ‘Mahatma Gandhi ki jai! Mahatma Gandhi ki jai!’” Rao, Raja, 2006, *Kanthapura*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi (Page 198)<sup>[2]</sup>

Kanthapura is a remote Indian village, but it is the centre of all the activities related to the freedom struggle under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. It is the power of struggle and suddenly comes to take a dip in the nonviolent, noncooperation movement of Mahatma Gandhi. The movement of the struggle for freedom also spread into some other social movements which were then relevant as, they started movements against flood, famine, pandemic, fire, exploitation, etc. they followed the manners which were practiced by Gandhi at the national level. Nehru also presented his impact in his *The Discovery of India*. According to him, “Mahatma Gandhi was a powerful current of fresh air, a beam of light that pierces the darkness like a whirlwind that upsets many things, but most of all the working of men’s minds.”

Raja Rao’s motive was to highlight the essentials of the freedom struggle under Mahatma Gandhi and his image even in the mind and hearts of the people of India while all were participating to see mother India free from the chains of slavery caused by the British people. It is not merely a novel on political movement but much more. There is no other book of this time that depicts this picture so vividly truthfully and touchingly story of the resurgence of India under Gandhi’s leadership. This novel also reveals its social and economic concerns, political ideals, and religious character. It shows how Gandhi spiritualises politics, the capacity for sacrifices of the masses in response to the invitation of only one man like Gandhi. None can say that it presents the chosen few people who struggled for freedom and post-independence became our rulers. This is the fact that India could get independence not because of a few freedom fighters, but there was the sacrifice of numberless nameless peasants, farmers, students, lawyers, women, old men, and many more. There were few, officially non-chronicled, unremembered but their role in the struggle for freedom is indelible and unforgettable. The entire masses thank the greatest spirit like Gandhi and his unique experiment for freedom. Gandhi knew the result of violence and its terrible beauty and therefore he practiced the weapon of nonviolence and noncooperation for the first time in the world. K.R. Srinivas Iyengar rightly observes,

“*Kanthapura is a veritable grammar of the Gandhian Myth – the myth that is but a poetic translation of the reality. It will always have central place in Gandhi literature.*” Iyengar, K.R.S., 2019, *Indian Writing in English*, Sterling Publications Private Limited<sup>[5]</sup>

Mahatma Gandhi was the only figure in the nation who alone in a single lifetime could so enthuse the people and so transform the entire nation into a situation for a fatal change that was then not expected. That was no less than a wonder. Hitler openly said that the Indian world never gain freedom, because it used the weapon of nonviolence and noncooperation. He said that all this was stupid – all this

was meaningless. Mahatma in Kanthapura never appeared on the scene, but he is in the mind and heart of the entire masses of Kanthapura – and broadly speaking all over India. M.K. Naik has rightly observed in his book,

“*Kanthapura (1938), which is perhaps the finest evocation of the Gandhian age in Indian English fiction. It is the story of a small South Indian village caught in the maelstrom of the freedom struggle of the nineteen thirties.*” Naik, M.K., 2005, *A History of Indian English Literature*, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi (Page 166)<sup>[1]</sup>

### Conclusion

In this way, it can be said that *Kanthapura* is a Gandhi-Puran that deals with the theme of the Indian Independence Movement and the influence of Mahatma Gandhi on it. Widely observed, it is the mythical technique that makes Kanthapura a unique tale surpassing the ancient and the modern. It is also a Gandhi epic and for Raja Rao, it is indeed a *Ramayana* of the Indian freedom struggle and the role of Mahatma Gandhi in it. This is an impartial tale told of a writer who has witnessed everything in his lifetime and has presented a unique piece of writing that is artistically and realistically a book of history, too.

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