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CHAPTER-II

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I

Raja Rao's first novel Kanthapura was written when he was just twenty one, and it was first published by George Allen and Unwin in 1938. Dr. M.K. Naik considers Kanthapura as,

... a story of a small South Indian village caught in the maelstrom of the freedom struggle of the 1930's and transformed so completely in the end that 'there's neither man nor mosquito' left in it.¹

K.R. Srinivas Iyengar comments, "Gandhian Politics, half poetical half whimsical, sets the tone of Raja Rao's first novel Kanthapura."² While C.D. Narasimha rightly observes,

There are at least three strands of experience in the novel: the political, the religious and social, and all the three are woven inextricably into the one complex story of Kanthapura.³

The opinions and remarks of eminent critics of Raja Rao mainly uphold Kanthapura as a classic of the Gandhian movement and struggle for independence and its impact on the Indian masses, or a novel of village in the mainstream of national and international happenings or a saga of village life with its various facets like socio-economic divisions, superstitions, religious and caste prejudices, blind faith in gods and goddesses, poverty, petty jealousies, dirty lanes, shady gardens,

snake-infested forests, dirty pools, hills, rivers and changing seasons.

II

In addition to the aforementioned observations, Kanthapura, according to me, is eminently a novel about women. In fact, women characters of various social backgrounds and temperaments dominate the action of the novel so much so that the main character of Moorthy is overshadowed by them, like his 'passive resistance'. I feel this is a novel of women, their emancipation, awakening and enlightenment. Gandhian struggle for freedom is only an impetus, a background. Raja Rao has realistically portrayed a wide range of women characters who can be said to represent the women of towns and villages in the 1930's. As Meena Shirwadkar aptly comments,

No other novel has shown at once so delicately and so broadly a picture of what happened to the women in hundreds of villages in India. We have here a vivid picture of women living in their village world, unchanged from ancient times, waking at last to absorb knowledge transmuting it into their personal experience.⁴

The emphasis on women characters becomes obvious from the author's use of certain images and techniques. For example, the very beginning of the novel is made with an introduction of the mother-principle embodied by goddess Kenchamma. Raja Rao's

Kanthapura is situated high on the Ghats, up the Malabar Coast. The two most important landmarks in it are the Himavathy river and the Tippur Hill. On the outskirts of the village is the Skeffington Coffee Estate presided over by Red-Sahib. The village is divided into the Brahmin quarter, the potters' quarter, the weavers' quarter, the pariah quarter and the sudra quarter. Right in the centre of the village is the temple dedicated to goddess Kenchamma which completes the picture.

Religion, god and goddesses are the important elements in the mental make-up of the villagers. Kenchamma is the presiding deity. The novel begins with a description of the mother-image of Kenchamma. The goddess steps down from heaven to settle among the villagers. She saves them from the demon. They are her children and go to her with their complaints. Kenchamma protects the villagers "through famine and disease, death and despair."⁵ Kenchamma sends rain and saves the younglings and when there is a good harvest, her grateful children bring her as offerings rice and fruits and pray her. Mother Kenchamma takes care of her children only like the human mother caring for the children in the family. Kenchamma operates within her jurisdiction only. She does not concern herself with outsiders for they are children of other goddesses. Kenchamma is the mother of Himavathy and Kanthapura lies like a child on her lap. The mother principle is manifested everywhere in Kanthapura.

Secondly, the narrator herself is a mother. She sees the villagers and herself as children of the village goddess. She is Achakka, an old Kanthapurian Brahmin widow of the Veda Sastra Pravin Krishna Sastri's family, who whole-heartedly devotes herself to the freedom struggle. Raja Rao makes her to present a panoramic view of the liberation movement of women of Kanthapura. The choice of the old woman as narrator serves a technical purpose also. As Meenakshi Mukherjee rightly comments,

The theme of Raja Rao's Kanthapura, for example, is essentially determined by the author's choice of the old woman as narrator. Had Moorthy instead of the old woman been the narrator, the novel would not have had the essential simplicity and directness that it has now, and the complex realities of the Satyagraha movement would not have crystalized into living folk-lore.

She further adds,

In Kanthapura the constant shutting back and forth in time is easily justified as an old woman's leisurely manner of story telling.⁶

Dr. S.K. Desai comments on Raja Rao's experimentation with language in Kanthapura,

His (Raja Rao's) main strategy consisted in creating new words, new idioms, new turns of expressions ... in keeping with the language of the people whom he chose to depict in his novel.⁷

This experimentation is especially meaningful when Raja Rao introduces the women characters in the novel. For instance, Raja Rao's women of Kanthapura are portrayed with their special characteristics and distinct marks by adding adjectives before their names as 'waterfall' Venkamma, 'nose-scratching' Nanjamma, 'front-house' Akkamma, 'the mother of post-master' Suryanarayana, Venkatalakshamma, 'Moorthy's mother' Narsamma and old Ramkrishnayya's three daughters' Seethamma, a 'childless widow' Rangamma, Kamalamma and her 'child widow' Ratna. This is a veritable portrait gallery of women characters etched by Raja Rao. Women characters form the major dramatis personae in Kanthapura.

The Gandhian struggle for independence as described by Raja Rao in this novel, gives a great impetus to the social change in the consciousness of women, and the novel is a watershed in the emancipation of women in this country. The movement evokes an awakening to such ideas as equality, widow remarriage, removal of untouchability, abolition of purdah, child marriage, education of women, and improvement of the lot of the widows.

The simple illiterate, unsophisticated, rural women from all strata of Kanthapura, shed their age-old taboos of caste, orthodoxy and come out. Though they do not understand the full implications of the Gandhian movement and only know that the Mahatma is a great supporter of their rights, they are convinced that he must be right. Women fight shoulder to shoulder with men

for the national freedom. Gandhiji himself has observed, 'If non-violence is the law of our being, the future is with women' (Young India, 10 April 1930). And he assured that 'if the woman of India rose, no one could stop the country's march to freedom.' As Aparna Basu rightly says,

It was only with the advent of the Gandhian era that women really played a significant role in nationalistic politics.⁸

The Hindu woman is still bound by the ancient code of behaviour formulated by Manu that emphasizes her submission, obedience, devotion and absolute dedication to the husband and his every wish. Her husband is almost a God and the home is her life and her career. As S.N. Sinha observes,

In India, girls are apt to be relatively docile and are considered 'good' by conforming to adult expectations. This tendency may be partially explained by the fact that it is possible to initiate girls, directly into many important aspects of adult feminine behaviour, such as housekeeping and looking after younger children, at an early age.⁹

According to Manu a woman should not have independence or property rights. In childhood, she should be protected by her father, then by her husband and in old age, by sons. He further declared that the age of marriage of a girl must be eight.

But the Gandhian movement worked like a swift lightning

process. The entry of women into the political field is the landmark in the history of women's emancipation. Women's liberation remained no longer the ideal of a few social reformers, but part of a much bigger political crusade. As women took to political activity many of the taboos and restrictions which had been placed on them were either lifted or overlooked. Political upheavals helped in bringing about social change, and it is doubtful if a century of preaching and social work would have brought about the same change in the position of Indian women as was achieved in the wake of political struggle in India. By their participation in political movement, Indian women helped their own struggle for liberation. In India, feminism and nationalism were closely inter-linked. As the national movement gained momentum, the goal of independence became the only concern for both men and women. The cause was India, the goal India's freedom. The women's movement in India had none of the man-woman antagonism, characteristic of the women's movement in the west. In India, women were accepted as political comrades and given equal opportunities for participation in the freedom struggle and they have a distinguished record of achievement of which they might well be proud of.

Awakening about the freedom struggle comes to the women of Kanthapura through religious stories by Harikathamam, as the women are not educated to read and write. The traditional wisdom,

culture and contemporary situation are taught by the Harikathamam, a religious teacher whose vernacular discourses on religion, philosophy are listened to with wrapt attention by all of them. The Harikathamam tells them that the earth, Brahma's daughter, is enslaved by men coming from beyond the seas; that Mohandas goes from village to village to slay the serpent of foreign rule. Spinning Khaddar has great meaning in Gandhian philosophy. It taught people from all walks of life the lesson of self-reliance, village economy, its importance as a movement of defiance of foreign rule in incalculable. The women of Kanthapura recognise this significance. The spinning unconsciously leads them to be bold, enterprising and articulate. The source of inspiration was an array of the eminent congress women who themselves were inspired by Gandhiji's leadership. There were many outstanding, forceful women prominent in public life. But such women were very few. Kamaladevi, Sarojini Naidu and Annie Besant were the heroic daughters who fought for motherland and contributed a valuable service to uplift the position of women. They are the constant and dauntless spirit behind the women of Kanthapura. The rapid stride to emancipation is accelerated by Gandhian struggle and women of Kanthapura become assertive. This movement climaxes in the achievement of adult franchise. As S.N. Sinha aptly observes,

Hindu women have been in the political arena since the days of British domination over India. They have shared the political burden since 1857, when the crusade for Indian Independence was started and wars of independence were waged against the British. During the pre-independence period of the 1930's, women began to hold high offices in provincial Government. Indian women exercised adult franchise by 1935, as seats were reserved for them in each provincial legislature.¹⁰

The character of Rangamma can be said to be a representative of the woman of Kanthapura. Rangamma, though belonging to a priestly and rich family, is quite modern in her outlook. She is illiterate, but educates and develops herself by reading widely in a number of subjects. She is a self-made woman, a Gandhian product. Rangamma's source of global consciousness and widened awareness is newspapers like 'Tai-nadu', 'Vishwakaranataka', 'Deshabhandu', and 'Jayabharata'. She learns from these papers about the botanical discoveries of Jadesh Chandra Bose, Darwin's theory of evolution, about bacteria, virus and worms which spread diseases and death, about the planets and their moons, about the milky way and the telescope. She knows from a travelling merchant about aeroplanes and wireless communication, and most remarkable of all, about Russia, the country of hammer and sickle. She tells the women of Kanthapura of a land ten times as big as Mysore where women work like men night and day, and get three months holiday when they are going to have a baby and milk for the child when it is born. In that country, she informs other women about Russia

where,

All men are equal - every one equal to every other, there were neither the rich nor the poor.

She taunts them saying, "we would not sit alone in the kitchen that night or the night after."¹¹

The widening awareness and knowledge enlightens and forces the women of Kanthapura to come out of kitchen where they have been confined since time immemorial. Gradually, they learn to challenge the age-long taboos and traditional restrictions. They realise for the first time their tragic plight by conventional bondage and orthodoxy.

The formation of Sevika-sangha is a step towards feminist assertion. This struggle diverts them to new directions and makes them abandon their slavery. To participate in the movement they form volunteer corps, under the able leadership of Rangamma and call themselves Sevis. They are trained and they practise drill in Rangamma's courtyard in the afternoon to strengthen themselves and to face police atrocities fearlessly. They prepare themselves for the final confrontation.

The reaction of the traditional men of Kanthapura is as expected. For a woman her only refuge is her house, her husband, her family, her children and when she comes out of the burdensome fullness of house, the husband-gods become jealous and suspicious;

and Radhamma's husband beats her 'though she was seven months pregnant'. They ban the Sevika business because 'The milk curdles or a dhoti is not dry'.

But Rangamma is quite competent and mature to persuade the men, to leave their wives free to prepare for the struggle when their household duty is over. The sevika sangh with its drill steadily makes the women ready, mentally and physically, for the liberation movement. Picketing at Boranna's Toddy Grove, Satyagraha at the Toddy Booth and the final Government action and actual battle, bring the women of Kanthapura together. If one becomes nervous and loses courage, the other soothes her in a familiar speech which both understand; together, they brave police atrocities. It is a new awakening among them that they can face any calamity unanimously unitedly and save one another; their shyness and fears have gone. The experience of suffering atrocities together brings them closer and gives them a sense of strength in unity.

On another occasion, Kanthamma, Nanajamma and Vedamma help Ratna at the nick of time, when a police is about to molest and exploit her. Timamma helps Radhamma in her premature delivery and Vedamma carries her to sanctum. Kamalamma, Satamma, Ningamma, Kanakamma accompany them to the temple where they are imprisoned till Rachi rescues them next morning.

Yet another important theme handled by Raja Rao is the

plight of the widows and he presents a glimpse of the changing reality in the life of widows of Kanthapura. K.R. Shrinivas Iyengar aptly comments, "The leading spirits of the Gandhian revolution of Kanthapura are Rangamma ... and the girl Ratna."¹² Rangamma is a generous and gentle widow. She is the prominent woman leader who challenges the Hindu orthodox traditions and educates herself. The initially rich, simple, unsophisticated rural housewife emerges to be a fiercely patriotic freedom-fighter and devotes herself to the Gandhian movement for liberation of the motherland. She is elected as a woman representative of the Congress Panchayat Committee of Kanthapura. She can stimulate acute political awareness among the illiterate housewives of Kanthapura and takes the freedom struggle to every doorstep by organising Volunteer Corps. As K.R. Rao appreciatively says,

Rangamma, one of their own folk, comes into the breach and keeps the movement going. The 'Sevika Sangh' organizes passive resistance against wickedness of the foreign rule.¹³

Rangamma helps Advocate Sankara in looking after Congress correspondence in Karwar. She attends meetings, holds classes, makes a speech in honour of Moorthy. She trembles with stage fright but gains self-confidence.

Thus Kanthapura turns to be the story of the dawn of

women's emancipation under Rangamma's leadership who asserts her own distinct individuality by dominating the total scene and transcends the stereotype image of the widow.

Another rebel character is Ratna. Raja Rao sympathises with the silent suffering of widows and particularly child widows. Ratna, a child widow of fifteen, carries the banner of liberation courageously, left half way by Rangamma's imprisonment. She devotedly supports the cause of the country's freedom and helps Rangamma to form Volunteer Corps, though consequently, beaten and tortured in the prison. Finally, she turns to be a full-time devotee of the Mahatma's Mission.

Ratna is educated though the society has prejudices against women's education; and literacy among Hindu women is almost zero due to child marriages. She is a symbol of plight and cruelty involved in child-marriage. But Ratna's education turns her to be a rebel challenging her own conventional child-marriage also; she refuses to recognise it. Raja Rao describes her rebellious attitude in the following words:

She not only went about the streets like a boy, but even wore her hair to the left like concubine and she still kept her bangles and her nose-ring and earrings and when she was asked why she behaved as though she had not 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.¹⁴

It is instructive to study the status of women today and those of the past in juxtaposition. Women in the Vedic times enjoyed a very high status and had many rights like men. Woman was a friend, a co-worker and never his inferior. She had the property rights and access to the property of her father and husband. Woman in the field of intellect was man's equal. There was an eminent lady philosopher Gargi in the court of King Janaka of Videha. She defeated Yajnavalkya in philosophical debate. Atreyi was another lady student of Vedanta who studied under the sages Valmiki and Agastya. Women discussed political and social problems freely and composed and chanted Vedic hymns at the holy sacrifices. Lopmudra, wife of Agastya was a famous composer of the Vedic hymns. Women were earnest students and participants of philosophical debates. Some of the lady philosophers remained unmarried to study spiritualism. Education of Vedic age was centred in the family. Brothers, sisters, cousins, studied together under the family elders. For specialisation, students went to distant places to study under celebrated teachers.

In the 3rd century B.C. girls could remain ~~un~~married till the age of 16 and this period was utilised to impart education to them. Till about the beginning of the Christian era initiation

into Vedic studies was common to girls and boys. Grown up and educated girls played an important part in household management, receiving guests and looking after their comforts in the absence of their parents.

Grown up brides had exclusive right to select their own husbands of their choice. There was the custom of Swayamvara or self-choice. Swayamwaras of heroines like Sita, Droupadi, Rukmini, Savitri, Damayanti are well known. Dowry system did not stand as an impediment in daughter's marriage in ancient India.

A husband addresses his wife in the Vedic hymn, "A friend thou shalt be, a friend thou hast become, may our friendship be everlasting." This indicates the true spirit of marriage. The Mahabharata concurs with it. A wife is the surest choice-solace, and only friend who never forsakes her husband in adversity.

गृहिणी सचिवः सखी मित्रः प्रियशिष्या ललिते कलाविद्यौ।

(Raghuvansa, VIII, 67)

After 300 A.D., child marriage came into vogue. By the beginning of the Christian era, marriage-age was lowered to 12 or 13, and girls education suffered. Gradually there was no initiation ritual (upnayan samskar) and like sudra they were not allowed to recite or to hear Vedic prayers. By about 8th or 9th century A.D. marriageable age for the girls was 9 or 10; that was a death-blow to their education.

Widow-remarriages prevailed in Vedic society, but a widow married a near relative preferably. Atharva Veda refers to a woman marrying a second time. Dharmasutras allowed remarriages even when the death of husband was only presumed and not proved. The famous Emperor Chandragupta Vikramaditya had married his elder brother's wife after the death of her husband. Social thinkers and writers had sympathetic attitude towards the child-widow. But gradually widow remarriages, even of child-widows, were prohibited.

Manu lays down that a widow should never think of remarriage after her husband's death. Many young widows found it a hard ordeal to lead a life of enforced celibacy and began to prefer to die with their husbands rather than live behind them; and so the custom of Sati became more general. Those who had no courage to die with their husbands or to live upto the high ascetic ideal were driven to the life of concubinage.

The Rani of Jhansi was not even eight when she married Maharaja Gangadhar Rao, who was a widower of twentynine who died ten years after the marriage, leaving behind the widow of eighteen. Parshurambhau Patwardhan, one of the Peshwa generals, had the misfortune of his daughter being widowed at the age of 8. Reformists like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Mahatma Phule attacked these cruel customs and propogated women's education. Feminist leaders such as Annie Besant deplored the state of ignorance into

which Indian women had fallen. Mahatma Gandhi castigated those men who would marry child brides as motivated by lust and counselled young men to disobey parents who would force them into such marriages.

Raja Rao is well-versed in the ancient Vedic literature as well as modern western education. Also, being a follower of Gandhiji, Raja Rao has created women characters who are rebels. Ratna is a nonconformist, fearless rebel to challenge the orthodox system of child-marriage. She develops a fragile and tender link towards Moorthy and to welcome him she says,

I shall part my hair to the left and wear just
a tiny Kumkum mark and wear the sari till it
reaches to the toes and it will float and flutter
so well.¹⁵

But being an ascetic, Moorthy snaps the link with Ratna and purifies himself with fast. Ratna sublimates her love by directing her youthful emotions to spiritualism and freedom struggle and proves herself to be a dauntless and spirited soldier of freedom struggle. As Shantha Krishnaswamy remarks, "She cannot forget Ratna the child-widow whose romantic link with Moorthy is submerged in the struggle for independence."¹⁶

But there are examples of traditional widows also. Raja Rao is realistic in presenting their plight in contrast with the rebellious widows. For instance, Narsamma is an example of a

traditional widow who refuses to change. The hardest taboo is of caste and Moorthy's mother who is an orthodox Brahmin widow of sixty five, cannot bear her son mixing with the Pariahs and who expects her son to be a subcollector; but he turns to be a Gandhian, refusing all offers of marriages. She does not allow her son to enter her kitchen due to his pariah connections. Moorthy's excommunication, social and religious boycott proves to be a fatal and deadening shock which makes the woman mad and she dies of a heart attack. A conventional stereotype woman succumbs to the blow.

Waterfall Venkamma is another traditional widow. Ratna's mother Kamalamma also repents over her daughter's education and she does not like Ratna's audacious statement or derecognition of her own child-marriage and she calls her shameless and wicked-tongued creature. She is another stereotype of a traditional widow. Savitri is yet another example of a silently suffering housewife. After quoting Nirad C. Choudhari that, 'there is a proverb in Bengal to the effect that the fortunate man is he who loses his wife, but the luckless man loses his live stock, Shyamala Narayan observes, "Raja Rao presents many such fortunate men, widowers who marry girls young enough to be their daughters and get handsome dowries in the bargain."¹⁷ Bhatta, whose wife dies leaving behind a small daughter, soon marries a girl of twelve-and-a-half year old. Not only Bhatta gets married, but

Advocate Seenapa whose wife has just died, a middle aged man with two fallen teeth and a father of three children, one of them is soon to be married, marries Venkamma's daughter.

"The famous Sarda Act of 1929, technically known as Child Marriage and Restraint Act of 1929, prohibited throughout India, marriages of girls under fourteen and boys under eighteen."¹⁸ Even this legislative provision does not provide solace to Raja Rao's women in Kanthapura. When the pathetic and miserable conditions prevail, the newly awakened and conscious women strive hard to come out and discard conventional restrictions. Gandhi's struggle provides them an opportunity to protest against such inhuman customs in the Hindu society. Thus Kanthapura is a story of women's emancipation.

Caste is a dominant factor in the village, as S.N. Sinha comments on caste system in our villages:

Caste plays a significant role in both town and country. In terms of self-identification, however, rural people tend to appraise their own status and role primarily on the basis of caste. Caste appears to be the predominant frame of reference for the villagers.¹⁹

Awakening of Pariah or untouchable women is yet another feature of woman's emancipation. The prevailing spirit of freedom infects the Pariah women also, making them bold and courageous to

contribute their major share in the great undertaking. Puttamma calls the police 'Cur! Cur!' and she is caned and raped by a police. She feels a great sense of sin and becomes sad. Seethamma goes to her neighbour Lingamma, an old woman, police bangs lathi at her and she falls. Rachi cannot bear the sight of atrocities and sets fire to the houses; Lingamma, Madamma, Boramma and Sidhamma follow her.

While newly conscious and politically aware women of Kanthapura throw away the taboos of orthodoxy and march admirably to the goal of liberation, the poverty-stricken plantation labour-women of 'the Skeffintion Coffee Estate' fall victims to the Imperial Britishers' lust and slave for two anna bits and have an extremely hazardous life. The Redsahib whip the labourers, if they refuse their women. He shoots Seetharam, a Brahmin clerk calling him imprudent brute, who denies his daughter Mira. The Red man's court forgives him and Indian maistri helps the Sahib to exploit the women miserably.

III

Kanthapura can be regarded as a novel, in microcosm, about women's unprecedented struggle to fight against not only the foreign rule, but also against the people who uphold the ageold traditional orthodoxy with regard to caste barriers, child-marriages, widow's plight, etc. Raja Rao who is deeply involved

in the ancient Indian wisdom of the Vedas and the Upanishadas, is, after all, a modern man influenced by the Western concepts and ideas of equality and freedom for all. He has captured the atmosphere of the freedom movement in the novel; but, at the same time, he has strongly advocated the cause of women as they are awakened to the new realisation of life and who are inspired by the Gandhian movement. Raja Rao has dramatically juxtaposed the age-old orthodoxy of women's thralldom alongside the progressive liberalism prevalent in the Gandhian movement. Kanthapura, in short, is a watershed in the Indo-Anglian novels, heralding the progressive times ahead for the emancipation of women in India.

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