

HIS FIRST NOVEL : KANTHAPURA VIEWS IN THIS LIGHT

Kanthapura, Raja Rao's first novel written in 1938, is a classic of its own kind. It portrays the Freedom Movement launched by Mahatma Gandhi in the 1920s to liberate India from the imperialistic hegemony of the British. India's struggle for independence, with its powerful impact on Indian sensibility, forms the nucleus of the novel.

Kanthapura is a monumental work. It describes the Gandhian movement against the British rule in India and how it reaches a south Indian village, Kanthapura. This movement quickens the process of social change in Indian villages from which starts the action of the novel centred on Moorthy who is the confluence of the three strands of experience that make up the action of *Kanthapura*: the political, the social and the religious. These three ideas of the movement are deeply rooted in the culture and motive of the people. Thus the entire atmosphere of the novel bristles with the Gandhian struggle and movement which increases the frontiers of human consciousness in India and later on assumes the form of global consciousness.

The time of action in the novel is 1930, and the scene of action is Kanthapura, a typical south Indian Village on the

slopes of the Western Ghats. Moorthy, the central figure, is a youngman educated in the city. He is a staunch Gandhi man, and the Gandhian civil disobedience movement comes to this remote secluded village, when Moorthy come from the city with the message of the Mahatma. He goes from door to door, even in the Pariah quarter of the village, and explains to the villagers the significance of Gandhi's struggle for independence. He inspires them to take to charka-spinning and weaving their own cloth. Soon the Congress Committee is formed in Kanthapura, publicity material is brought from the city, and freely circulated in the village. A volunteer corps is formed, and the volunteers are trained and educated so that they may remain non-violent in the face of government repression. In this task of organizing the freedom struggle in Kanthapura, he is helped by Ratna, a young lady, of progressive and enlightened views and Patel Range Gowda, the Sardar Patel of the village.

The Red-man's Government, on its part, takes prompt steps to counter the moves of the Gandhi-men and to contain the movement. Policeman, Bade Khan, is posted in the village, and he is actively helped and supported by Bhatta, the Brahmin. Bhatta enlists the support of a Swami in the city, who seems to be a powerful religious authority and wields much influence on the ignorant people of the village. He threatens to excommunicate all those who fraternize with the Pariahs.

Moorthy is actually ex-communicated and a few desert him, but, on the whole, the people remain undaunted and firm in their support to the Gandhi movement. Reports regarding the Dandi march of the Mahatma to break the Salt law, and the enthusiasm it had evoked throughout the country, reach the village and do much to boost the public morale.

Soon there are satyagrahs and picketing. The villagers under the leadership of Moorthy offer Satyagrah outside the toddy plantation. There is police lathi-charge and many are wounded and hurt seriously. A large number of people are arrested and sent to jail. This is followed by the picketing of the toddy booth outside the Skeffington Coffee Estate. Government repression is even more ruthless this time. Even women, children and old men are not spared. The suffering of the fellow-villagers touches the hearts of the workers of the Skeffington Coffee Estate and they too join their suffering brethren. The atmosphere resounds with shouts of, Mahatma Gandhi Ki jai". Even large numbers are arrested. Moorthy is also arrested and sentenced to a long term of imprisonment. In his absence Ratna looks after the Congress-work in the village. Women are organized and trained.

Then comes the no-tax campaign. The people are directed not to pay land revenue to the unjust Red men. They should remain peaceful and non-violent even if their fields, crops, cattle

and houses are auctioned and occupied. They remain non-violent in the beginning, but soon violence breaks out. Government is ruthless in its repression. There are merciless lathi-charges, and even shootings. The atmosphere resounds with shrieking and crying as well as with shouts of “Mahatma Gandhi Ki jai”.

The villagers put up a brave resistance but ultimately they are compelled to flee. Their moral is broken. They have to leave Kanthapura, trudge along for miles over unknown territory and finally find shelter in a remote village. They have been defeated, but in their very defeat lies their victory. Their brave resistance has given a jolt to the government and as such jolts were being administered all over the country, the British government was bound to be shaken and overthrown in course of time. The heroic struggle of the people of Kanthapura is thus a milestone in India’s march towards independence.

In today’s India, in literature as in any other field of activity, women speak of themselves. They no longer need men to defend them and to present their case. Many a sociologist would probably date this tendency of self expression back to the turbulent thirties, when the Mahatma openly encouraged women to commit themselves in the freedom movement. The thirties were the decade in which the three founding fathers of modern Indo-Anglian literature, Raja Rao, R.K.Narayan and Mulk Raj

Anand brought out their first novels. Each according to his own philosophy, they tried to convey the spirit of the Indian revolution that was going on and they projected an image of India to the European reader they were writing for. Raja Rao's India was torn between tradition and modernity, between a past that should no longer be and a future that was in the making. Their early novels gave a comprehensive vision of a society in which women were allocated a definite place. Women did play a very active part in society but this part is like the unseen, underwater mass of the iceberg. Women were at the heart of family life. They are the hub around which everything gyrates; they see to the respect of traditions, particularly when it comes to marriage:

“She remains the still centre, like the centre in a potter's wheel, circling to create new forms, unfolding the continuity of a racial life, which in turn has encircled and helped her acquire a quality of concentration. ‘The nobility of her being does not depend merely upon race though but upon ideals, is the outcome of a certain view of life.’”¹

It is a narrow margin that separates the grandmother, regarded as a saint by the whole joint family of which she has eventually become the spiritual leader from the ordinary woman who, throughout her life willingly slaved for men. The

Gandhian ideal, however, offers women the chance to actively take part in the ongoing revolution and in the fight against the British occupant. Moorthy, Gandhi's mouthpiece in *Kanthapura*, is one such male character who helps women come out of their shells.

Raja Rao's first novel *Kanthapura* (1938), expresses his attitude towards woman. The person who tells the story in *Kanthapura* is not Raja Rao, the omniscient novelist, but a woman named Achakka. He abandoned his position as story teller, giving it over to his fictive female person. *Kanthapura* is the story of a village with that name. Much of the early part of the novel is spent developing a sense of the village itself, establishing its ambiance. The communal point of view is established immediately and placed in its colonial context – the Red-man. (“Standard Hindu Colloquialism for the British, “The author states in his note to the novel, p.185), the colonial power manipulating the villagers from thousands of miles away.

The most significant of the characteristics is Achakka's Brahmin position and the fact that she is female. Achakka's Brahmin status initially presents some problem for her as a narrator. Flexibility, however typifies her character quite early in the story. She adopts Gandhiji's teaching. In the riots that culminate at the end, Achakka is out there, proudly marching

with the others – Brahmins and pariahs, potters and weavers, coolies, even Mohammedans.

The female point of view, however, is much more important than her Brahmin status giving us, something a typical of most Third World Fiction. Much of the novel's power is Raja Rao's determination to keep the viewpoint entirely feminine. For this goddess, Kenchamma, not a god has been depicted as the ruling deity of the village. Her power resides in her past action and the origin of the village is attributed to her initial accomplishments.

The people of Kanthapura invoke Goddess Kenchamma on all occasions, 'auspicious or 'inauspicious'. She is the protector from all sorts of calamities – natural or manmade such as famine and disease:

“Kenchamma, Kenchamma,
Goddess benign and bounteous,
Mother of earth, blood of life,
Harvest Queen, rain-crowned.”²

Like Kenchamma the Goddess of the Hill, Himavathy, the Goddess of the river is also a living presence. She is a child of Kenchamma.

The villagers celebrate Shankara Jayanti and arrange Harikathas. This occasions social interaction besides developing organizational ability among the villagers. They hold melas and

mass-melas in turns. With all their superstition and ignorance, illiteracy and impoverished conditions of life, they respond readily to the clarion call of Mahatma Gandhi to fight the forces of British Raj. Gandhi's influence not merely arouses political awareness in them, but also changes their whole attitude of life.

Kenchamma is our goddess. Great and bounteous is she. She skilled a demon ages ago, a demon that had come to demand our young sons as food and our young women as wives. Kenchamma came from the heavens – it was the sage Tripura who had made penance to bring her down – and she waged such a battle and she fought so many a night that is why the Kenchamma Hill is all red... “Thank heaven, not only did she slay the demon, but she even settled down among us and this much I shall say, never has she failed us in our grief.”³

Symbolically, Kenchamma's power incarnated in the women of Kanthapura such as Achakka, who engaging in a similar battle brings about the great social change that radicalize the village, for Gandhi and Moorthy are only, the catalysts, the inspiration for what eventually happens. They become increasingly insignificant as the narrative continues, Moorthy even disappearing from the village itself. The women are the force, they bring about the real revolution, since their husbands have had to hide in the jungles around the village. Without the

force of the women, there would not, in fact, have been a revolution in Kanthapura.

It is true the women are subordinated in Kanthapura society but they are not treated with outright contempt. When Rangamma is nominated by the men on the Congress Committee, the reason Moorthy gives is “We need a woman in the Committee for the congress is for the weak and the lowly”⁴ While the hierarchical structure of the Congress and the subordination of women in the family allow them to emerge only as a second rank leadership, the novelist perceives them to be the strength of the movement and of the village too, in a more vital sense. A good example is that of the pariah women’s reactions to politics.

When Moorthy visits the pariah quarters, and addresses the women, he wants them to vow that they will spin at least a 100 yards of yarn every day. They refuse, and Moorthy, feeling desperate, appeals to Rachanna’s wife who replies “If my husband says ‘Spin’, I shall spin, learned one.”⁵ Thus, his direct approach to the women proves fruitless and it is only his approach to the men which works. Moorthy asks the men whether the women will participate, “They will do as we do,’ said Rachanna”.⁶

Clearly, the structure of the husband – wife relationship intervenes between women and the movement. This question,

however, does not surface as a conflict except briefly when the men object to the Sevika Sangh saying that it will interfere with the women's performance of domestic duties. Rangamma's response is not to question the sex-based division of labour but to say, "If we are to help others, we must begin with our husbands."⁷ She also tells Satamma to be more regular in cooking. The Choric comment is "...we all say, 'we should do our duty. If not, it is no use belonging to the Gandhi group.'"⁸

Ruth Vanita comments:

"This is faithful reflection of how the Gandhian movement, by and large, envisaged women's role – that of a given whose giving extends beyond the family but does not exclude it; a mother and sister not to a few individuals but to the country and to the world. Yet the novelist, very subtly, goes on to point out that the self view of the giver, and the way other view her, does change, by the fact of her political activity, even if the assertion of an individual identity, is not their primary goal."⁹

Ruth Vanita further comments: "Gandhi often said that he wished he had been born a woman, and would like to be reborn as one. The identification here of Gandhi with a mountain topped by a temple recalls the Kenchamma hill. While the visible leadership may be male, the envisioned goal is non-male.

Kenchamma's presence as female protector pervades the book. India is referred to throughout as "The Mother", and these symbols are identified with the heart on whom survival depends."

Towards the end of the novel, when nothing can stop the women from marching against the soldiers sent in by the British, the change has been so complete that the women (in spite of the fact that many of them have been killed) make the voluntary choice to continue their protest. They are driven by an uncontrollable force – not Moorthy, not Gandhi-a new revolutionary consciousness.

.....some strange fever rushed up from the feet, it rushed up and with it our hair stood on end our ears grew hot and something powerful shook us from head to foot, like Shamoo when the goddess had taken hold of him, and the lantana and the silent well about us, such a terror took hold of us, that we put the water jugs on our hips, and we rushed back home, trembling and gasping with the anger of the gods..... Moorthy forgive us: Mahatma forgive us: Kenchamma forgive us: We shall go. Oh, we shall go to the end of the pilgrimage like the two hundred and fifty thousand women of Bombay. We will go like them, we will go.....¹⁰

The women aim at a nation-wide women's revolt, liberating all of India. Kanthapura has become insignificant – it is simply the village where the riots began. That is why these same women decide to burn what is left of the village, rather than return to it. For them life can never again be as it was in Kanthapura. The revolution is now self-perpetuating.

In retrospect, this change from passivity to activity is explained by Achakka as a kind of uncontrollable religious passion growing out of the foundation of the villagers beliefs.

Kenchamma forgive us, but there is something that has entered our hearts, an abundance like the Himavathy on Garui's night when lights come floating down the Rampur corner. Light come floating down from Rampur and Maddur and Tippur lights lit on the betel leaves, and with flower and kumkum and song we let them go, and they will go down the Ghats to the morning of the sea, the lights on the betel leaves, and the Mahatma will gather it all, he will gather it by the sea and he will bless us.¹¹

At the end of the story, when Range Gowda tells Achakka "There's neither man nor mosquito in Kanthapura....."¹² It might be easy to conclude that what has taken place in Kanthapura is essentially negative. But this is not so. Though the value and the vision of peaceful, happy co-existence that the

women and the novelist identify with the Mahatma have not been fulfilled today any more than they were in 1937 when the novel was written in 1947 when independence was attained their conception remains an uplifting one, of a day when “Ravana will be slain and Sita freed And we shall be happy,”¹³ Kanthapura’s women perform heroic deeds like Kamala Devi Chattopadhyaya, Aruna Asaf Ali, Sarojini Naidu and Hansa Mehta. They are not only good mothers and sisters but also great freedom-fighters. Neither R.K.Narayan in *The Dark Room* nor Mulk Raj Anand in *Gauri* could show such heroic deeds in their women characters.

RATNA

Ratna is presented in *Kanthapura* as a young and educated widow and she is among of the group of characters who are with Moorthy. Her education stands her in good stead in conducting the freedom struggle. Her talents are first recognized when, after the death of Ramkrishnayya, someone is needed to do the reading and elucidation of the shastras. It is only Ratna who reads them and Rangamma, who explains the text. Ratna is a sensible woman and very soon a seed of love grows in them. Ratna supports and help Moorthy in his every political activity. She is the daughter of Kamalamma. She was married in Childhood and became a widow at the very age of fifteen.

Ratna is a brave lady, for she could wash clothes on the river alone, and came back all by herself, walking through the field and the business. She is child-widow who has never actually lived with her husband, but she is still expected to behave like a widow and not live the life of a normal girl. She does not wear the dress like a widow. She wears bangles, coloured dhotis, and puts the mark of Bindi on her forehead. She refuses to satisfy the whims of stupid village cronies and dresses herself as she likes and moves and romps about according to her pleasure and wishes.

Ratna is a source of encouragement and inspiration to Moorthy; she helps him in almost every occasion. She likes him too. There is just a hint of love-affair between two. In her relation with Moorthy she gets transformed-

Ratna came to see him (Moorthy), he felt there was something different in his feeling towards her. Her smile did not seem to touch his heart with delicate satisfaction as it did before.

There are also some hints of love between Ratna and Moorthy but Raja Rao does not develop this because the love theme is out of place in a patriotic novel which is taken up with giving up even such things as land cultivation and looking very odd if Moorthy had married Ratna, or any one after he cut short his studies, burn his books, incurred ex-communication because of mingling with the pariahs and lost his mother in consequence.

Moorthy comes to control the lascivious thoughts with regard to Ratna. He has now to give her such consideration which is given to a sister. When she asked him if there is anything she can do for him, he replies that she should only pray with him so that the sins of others may be purified with their prayers. It is a case of sublimation of sexual desire and as such an individual effort of Moorthy which is laudable.

Ratna is brave and is not afraid of anyone. She takes active part in the Gandhian Movement and after Moorthy is arrested, she provides fine leadership to the villagers. She faces the police's lathis bravely and goes ahead. She does not care for any critic in the village. Although the other women in the village do not like her for her unconventional attitudes, but she pays no attention for such criticism. Ratna washes clothes on the river, all alone and comes back, walking through the fields and the bushes-fearlessly. During the non-tax campaign, when the police lets loose its repression on the people, Ratna is in grave danger of being raped by a policeman but she kicks and bites him and protects her honour until she is helped and rescued.

She questions the established norms of patriarchy, Just as we see transformation of Moorthy in the course of action we also witness Ratna's transformation from being just a strong headed girl in the beginning she becomes a responsible leader in the absence of Moorthy and Rangamma.

She leads the movement from the front. She devolves compassion and understanding. Towards the end we see that she has joined the main stream politics.

Ratna is next in importance to Rangamma. She is widowed daughter of Kamamma, the sister of Rangamma. She wanders the streets like a boy, with her hair to the left like a concubine wearing bangles, nose-rings, and ear-rings. She is in revolt against the traditional widow norms because she saw a man at the age of ten for a day-this could not be called a marriage. "Ratna's father was Bhatta's second cousin and he was sure than she belonging to the Chanderhalli family will bring shame to none."¹⁴ People dislike her 'modern' ways with her sari falling over her shoulders and baring her bodice. At the time of action of the novel, Ratna is only fifteen and does not follow the spirit of prayer, she only makes prostrations before the temple and has sympathy for Moorthy. "She keeps watch on fasting Moorthy and prays for his strength and virtue and rising holier and greater from the fast."¹⁵ Rangamma chooses Ratna for reading the sacred texts though the village women regard it as strange because no woman in Kanthapura had "less interest in Philosophy" than Ratna. Ratna is psychologically justified in her rebellion to the orthodox concept of child widows and perhaps in this she is the mouth-piece of Raja Rao himself. She becomes an active Congress volunteer and takes care of Satyagraha in the

absence of Moorthy and Rangamma. “She was tactful enough to lie on her belly when the policeman tied her legs and wanted to rape her.”¹⁶ Her positive leadership qualities are further described as, “She gives consolation and guidance to women in Satyagraha during action.”¹⁷ Ladies have faith in her as their ‘chief’ who will take them out of their trouble. She plays a key role in taking out of Satyanarayana Puja procession later to be converted into a Congress procession, and it is she who blows the conch. “She exhorts procesionists to avoid violence even when they are beaten by police.”¹⁸ This is quite a brave work on the part of a girl of barely fifteen years.

RANGAMMA

Rangamma is a rich widow of Kanthapura. She has younger brothers in Bombay. Her brothers are city-bred, and it is not liked by Venkamma. Rangamma’s father, Ramkrishnayya, is a learned man. Although she has no children, yet she loves Moorthy as her son. She is one of the few literate women in Kanthapura. She knows many things of general interest.

It is Rangamma who helps and supports Moorthy in organizing the women of the village to join the Congress and during his absence she carries on the Gandhian movement. She is quite different from other village women. Though she could

have a good verbal wrangle with Bhatta yet she does not choose to do this as without her patronage, the Gandhian movement in the village would have been incomplete.

Rangamma is the elected member of the Congress Panchayat in Kanthapura and plays her part dutifully and sincerely. She takes an active part in the defence of Moorthy when he is to face a trial and even goes to the town and lives there for many days for this purpose.

Rangamma's sister-in-law, 'Waterfall Venkamma' is jealous of her. She does not like Rangamma and her works.

She is one of the strongest women characters of Raja Rao. Her parents live with her and have become an integral part of Kanthapura. When Moorthy takes the initiative of forming Congress Committee in Kanthapura, Rangamma becomes the first choice of the women members. She takes this role very seriously. She is the one who lends support to Moorthy when no one else does. She lets her house be used as Congress Office.

Ramkrishnayya being dead, Ratna reads the holy texts to the people and Rangamma interprets them. Rangamma fills the vacuum created by Moorthy's arrest and recruits women volunteers from the village and prepares a Sevika Sangha for future Satyagraha who exercise daily in the afternoon in a closed house. The novelist is able to create verisimilitude by presenting the Vaiakh tilling ceremony on grand scale. Moorthy's release

manifests the play of imperialist nationalist forces against in so far as Venkamma arranges the nuptial of her daughter on the same day to make the former's welcome in the village look poor and petty.

NARSAMMA

Narsamma has been portrayed as the mother to Moorthy, the hero of the novel. She is a widow. Although there are eleven children in her family, but she loves and pays more attention to Moorthy, because five of her eleven children have died and of the remaining six, Moorthy is the only son.

Narsamma is old-fashioned and orthodox. She is a typical woman of her class. She does not like Moorthy's interest in lower castes. When Moorthy joins with pariahs (harijans), she rebukes him-

Oh! to have a son ex-communicated! Oh! to have gone to Benaras, and Rameshrwaram and to Gaya and to Gokuran, and to have a son ex-communicated! I wish I had closed my eyes with your father instead of living to see you polluted, Polluted! go away, you pariah.

She loves her son profoundly and has high dreams of his career, but all her hopes and desire are shattered when he joins the freedom movement. Instead of becoming a sub-collector, as

Narsamma wishes, Moorthy would become a freedom fighter. She is told he has frequent intercourse with the lower castes i.e. pariahs (harijans), this incident shocks his mother deeply. However, her love proves stronger than her dreams and wishes, and she consoles herself-with the thought that Moorthy can now look after the ancestral land and lead a comfortable life in the village. She is so much against the pariahs that she spites at the hutments owned by them in the village.

Narsamma is the most pathetic character in Kanthapura. She has been portrayed with the decadent ideas and complexes of the unthinking Hindu woman, particularly the old ones.

Narsamma is under great mental strain. Leaving her home, she rushed down to the river. She spat on pariah Bedayya and shouted at him for not standing aside to allow her pass by. She considered this the fault of her son and decided to leave for Benares to die a “holy death”. But no sooner did she come to the river, she started banging her clothes upon the stone and soon forgot everything, after reaching home, she cooked her food waiting for Moorthy to return:

Put where was Morthy? He would come. He was only at Rangamma’s house. Oh, he was no wicked child to leave the village without telling her. Oh, the fold that she was to have been so angry with him! Age brings anger. It is just passing rage.¹⁹

She sat down to meditate but her uneasy mind made her behold the gods, the royal sacred flame, the flowers and even the walls as “angry and empty”. The anti-Gandhi lobbyists repeatedly disturbed Narsamma, accumulating complaints against her son’s ‘so-called’ forbidden activities. The subsequent news of her son’s excommunication from Kanthapura becomes the proverbial straw on the camel’s back. The very thought of being restrained from going to temples, obsequies dinners, marriage parties or hair-cutting ceremonies weighed upon her soul. Unable to face the recriminations and accusations of fellow villagers, she escaped into the darkness of the night. The fear of ghosts, spirits and shadows of night made her shudder and she fell unconscious on the ground. The chill of night pierced her very soul and the next morning she was found dead. It may be concluded that the clash between her responsibility as a mother and as a member of the village community killed Narsamma.

After being excommunicated by the Swami. Moorthy was not able to attend the marriage party of Venkamma’s daughter. Wandering along the riverside for the whole day, he pondered over the vital question on “how is one an outcaste” Towards the conclusion of the novel, Moorthy is depicted vacillating from the stance of an extreme idealist to a dabbler in socialism. It also reveals the fact that the struggle in his self to reach his destination was inconclusive.

Narsamma is rudely shocked to learn about the excommunication of her son by the swami. The narrator's tone changes from the matter of fact statement to rolling excitement choked with pathetic details:

.....and that very night when the doors were closed and the voices had died away she (Narsamma) through the Brahmin street and the Potters street and standing at the village gate..... she ran over the fig tree bund, and she had such a shiver at the thought of all the ghost and spirits and the evil of flame..... But there was something deep and desperate that hurried her on, and she passed by Rangamma's sugar-cane field and mango grove to the river, just where the whirlpool grapes and girgles, and she looked up the moonlit sky, and the winds of the night and the shadows of the night and the jackals of the night so pierced her breast that she shuddered and sank unconscious upon the sand and the cold so pierced her that the next morning she was dead.²⁰

Achakka

Raja Rao has created an important aged woman character in Kanthapura, and presented her as the narrator of the novel. Her name is Achakka. Her son, Seenu, is one of the active

supporters of Moorthy's Gandhian movement. Achakka is a Brahmin woman. She has a peculiar manner of telling the story. This manner may be said to be typically Indian, intensely feminine and gossipy, and also natural and spontaneous.

She is perfect in her art of telling the story of every activity that took place in Kanthapura. She is just in her performance. Her style of narration enables us to gather many facts about her. She is no prude however, and she finds ways of describing even the most shocking incidents. She is very impressed by Moorthy. She has been personally involved in the events which form the substance of the novel and she narrates them years later for the benefit of a newcomer. Thus the substance of the novel is made up of the stream of her memory, in which many events and characters have been blurred by the passage of time, and many others have been heightened by her imagination.

The novel begins with the description of Kanthapura's introduction. She tells about the village, its nature, People and religion. She tells- "Our village-I don't think you have ever heard about is Kanthapura is its name, and it is in the province of Kara".

And,

High on the Ghats is it, high up the steep mountains that face the cold Arabian seas, up the Malabar coast it is, up Mangalore and Putter and many a centre of cardamom and coffee, rice and sugarcane-----Roads,

narrow dusty rut-covered roads, wind through the forests of teak and of jack, of sandal and sal, and hanging over bellowing gorges and leaping over elephant-haunted valleys, they turn now to the left and now the right and bring you through the Alamble and Champa and Mena and Kola passes into the great granaries of trade-----.²¹

The village has a romantic setting with the classical ruggedness of the places surrounding it. There is the cool Arabian sea up the Malabar coast. The agriculture consists of crops, which the villagers raise-cardmom, coffee, rice, sugarcane, etc. The forests about the place add to the romantic tone of the village, forests of teak, jack, sandal and sall. The passes and the gorges are there Achakka narrates-

Over village had four and twenty houses. Not all were big like postmaster Suryanarayan's double-storied house by the Temple Corner-then there were the Kannayya House people, who had a high veranda, and though the house was I know not how many generation old, it was still as fresh and new as though it had been built only yesterday.

The narrator, now described the village-Goddess name Kenchamma. The legend holds that Kenchamma killed a demon who visited the place asking for the young sons as food and the

young women as wives. There was a battle between the demon and the goddess Kenchamma and the hill on which it took place became red with the blood of the victim. The villagers have great faith in Kenchamma who never lets them down. The rain comes down there at the will of the goddess. Men, women and children are saved from the scourge of the smallpox, through the mercy of the goddess. According to the narrator, the people frequently pray to her-

“Goddess, when the demon came to eat our babes and rape our daughters, you came down to destroy him and protect us, Oh, Goddess, destroy this Government (British).”

The narrator is fond of poetry, drama and intense excitement etc. She narrates the incident of the movement, in which some coolies are arrested by police. They are also beaten mercilessly. Now the narrator describes the condition of heart-broken wives of those captured, in a very pathetic way:

He will never come again,
He will never come again,
He will never come again, Moorthappa
The God of death has sent for him
Buffalo and rope and all
They stole him from us, they lessoned him at nigh
He is gone, he is gone, he is gone,

Moorthappa—

He leaves us our men,

He leaves us our souls,

He leaves us our king of the verand seat

But say sisters, He is gone,

He is gone, Moorthappa,

He is gone, he is gone.

He is gone, Moorthappa

Achakka is not only a good mother but a good woman also. e.g. when she has to describe that a policeman had started raping Puttamma, before rescuers could reach her, she simply says that he was ‘on her’ In this way, she shows her womanness. She does not describe the rape-scene in detail, because she is also a woman, so she describes it in only two words ‘on her’.

Achakka is very much impressed by Moorthy. She considers Moorthy a worthy and self-respected young man. When Moorthy goes to the Pariah quarters, and drinks the milk in an untouchable home; she becomes his fan and takes it as the best contribution made by Moorthy. She has a great desire for Moorthy, since she says that if she had a daughter she would have offered her hand in marriage to Moorthy.

Achakka proves an expert narrator in her method of narrating the story. Her style of narrating the story is, characteristically Indian, feminine with a spontaneity that is

coupled with swiftness, raciness suffused with native vigour and exciting a rich sense of drama shot through and through with humour and lyricism. The telling of the story gives the whole affair an 'ithihasic' (historical), at least a puranic-dignity. The narrative is hardly very straight forward: there are involutions and digressions, there are meaningful backward glances, there are rhythmic chains of proper name (i.e. Rachanna and Chandranna and Madanna; Stamma, and Rangmma, and Puttamma and Seethamma), there are hypnotic repetitions and refrains and there are also sheer poetic iridescences. A village, a picturesque region, an epoch of social and political change, a whole complex of character and motive, reason and superstition, idealism and cold calculation, all spring up before our eyes demanding recognition and acceptance; it is almost 'a tour de force'.

Although Raja Rao has put the story into the mouth of a grandmother, although the feminine touches and mannerism, the seemingly effortless rotation of the tongue, the meandering sentences and massive paragraphs are characteristic of the narrator, there is nevertheless consummate art in all this riot of artlessness, there is careful selection behind the apparent abundant details.²²

The function of the Narrator is representative and her strength lies in being anonymous. She is just one of the many

women of Kanthapura who responded to the call of the Mahatma, conveyed through Moorthy. Her faith in the Goddess Kenchamma, her respect for the local scholar Rangamma, her unquestioned affection for Moorthy and her trust in him, all these feelings she shares with other women of the village. She gives examples of the things that she and other have come to know through her.

Venkamma, a woman of the village generally known as 'Water fall Venkamma', has a grouse against Rangamma. Water fall Venkamma is a woman of a petty, jealous nature. She cannot bear to see others prosperous or successful. The sight of the happiness of others arouses her wrath and she rails and rails against them. She is jealous of Rangamma because she has a much larger house and constantly rails against her. She says-

Why should a widow, and a children widow too, have a big house like that? And it is not her father who built it..... It's my husbands ancestors that built it. I've two sons and five daughter's and the shaven widow hadn't even the luck of having a bandicoot to call her own.

She is also against Moorthy, because he refused to marry her second daughter. Raja Rao has depicted Venkamma as an ignorant woman, who needs to be reformed as she represents the various social evils of the society.

Akkamma

Another house in the village is the Front-House, where Akkamma lives. Ramayya, the cousin of her sister-in-law, a coffee-planter, often comes and stays with her, sometimes spending a night there. He often drops at the place of Akkamma while on his way to Karwar. Since the ferry would not pay in the night he would leave his car on the side and would pay a visit to her. There is such a dinner in his honour that the village patwari Nanjundia and his son-in-law would be invited to partake of the delicacies. All the important people of the village come to see Ramayya.

Radhamma

Radhamma is a minor character in the novel. She represents the ill-fated women who become victims of the patriarchal society. Among them was pregnant Radhamma. She was trying to run with the other women. Fortunately she saw them as they were passing by. They wanted to get her to a safe place. But she twisted with unbearable pain. Suddenly her baby slipped out of her womb. A woman tore the cord and put the child in her sari fringe. Others, trying to escape from the unwelcome attention of the policemen, were locked up in the temple, and they refused to come out or open the door. They found that Puttamma was ill

and wailing. She asked for her child and pressed it to her heart and threw it over the bed and said- “I’m not your mother, the earth is your mother, your father is your father I have sinned.” But other women said-

“No, no, Puttamma, the God will forgive you,” But she broke into sobs and her mother in law came, threw water over her face and cooled her down. We clearly see that Puttamma too has been presented as a victim of atrocities.

After Moorthy’s arrest, along with other satyagrahis, power comes into the hands of the women, making it their movement. They respond whole heartedly to the Mahatma’s call, readily participating in political mass movements, picketing toddy booths, facing lathi charges, bayonets and bullets without caring for their lives. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, a worthy representative of women of the Gandhian era, puts it thus:

Women with pale eyes and blushing cheeks, they who had been gently nurtured behind silken curtains, women who had never looked upon a crowded street, never beheld a strange face..... flung themselves into the blinding glare of a day, unshaded and unprotected....They faced perils and privations with a happy light in their eyes and a spring in their limbs. Almost overnight their narrow domestic walls had given away to open

a new wide world in which they had a high place.²³

Behind the spirit of sacrificing everything and bearing atrocities of the red man, there is an unflinching conviction in the Mahatma being an incarnation of Lord Shiva himself. Toward the end of the novel, Kanthapura is destroyed completely. Men are arrested and women flee to Kashipura for safety. Though it may seem that they appear utterly frustrated, yet, it is not so. In spite of having lost everything, including their houses and husbands, the political experience contributed to their spiritual reawakening. The narrator, Achakka, explains:

No, sister, no, nothing can ever be the same again.

You will say we have lost this, you will say we have lost that, Kenchamma forgive us, but there is something that has entered our hearts, an abundance like the himavathy on Gauri's night...²⁴

This is in accordance to Mahatma Gandhi's statement that "satisfaction lies in the effort, not in the attainment".

In *Kanthapura*, Moorthy calls upon women to actively engage in the political reforms going on. Rangamma is the typical modern woman by Rao's standards. She has studied and understands the difference between the objective knowledge given by a scientific approach and the religious approach to things. One is by no means exclusive of the other. She can

explain to the villagers the evolutionist theories together with life in the Soviet Union and the Hindu sacred texts:

Our Rangamma is no village kid. It is not for nothing she got papers from the city.....and she knows so many, so many things too, of the plants that weep, of the monkeys that were the man we have become, of the worms, thin-as-dust worms that get into your blood and give you dysentery and plague and cholera.²⁵ (p.46).

On the other hand Rangamma has also been describe:

But there was one thing she spoke of again and again.....the country of the hammer and sickle and electricity..... And she told us so many marvelous things about the country and, mind you, she said there all men were equal – every one equal to every other – and there were neither the rich not the poor.²⁶ (p.47).

Rangamma is open minded, open to all novelties. Rangamma finds herself entrusted with religious responsibilities which is rather unconventional but which proves that a woman should explain the Vedas if she happens to be the best qualified person in the community.²⁷ (p.147). Following the death of Ramakrishnayya, only Ratna is qualified to read the Vedas on the account that he is a Brahmin. However, the village

community objects to his reading on two grounds: one, because he can only read the texts but he is utterly unable to explain them, two, because he objects to the Congress policy and hence belongs to the reactionary group in the village. Women find the issue to the problem: Ratna shall read the text but Rangamma shall give the explanations. The law (text read by a Brahmin) and the spirit (texts commented by the most competent person) are thus respected. Rangamma gives a very modern version of the texts, constantly referring to the actual situation prevailing all over the country, hence bringing to light the relevance of those texts to the present:

And so every afternoon Ratna began to read the text to us, and when it came to discussion, Rangamma would say, 'Sister, if for the thorny pit the illusioned fall into, you put the Foreign Government, and for the soul that searches for liberation, you put our India, everything is clear'. And this way and that she would always bring the British Government into every page and line.²⁸ (p.147, 148).

Rangamma is prepared to share her knowledge with the other women in the village. Obviously, the answer is not to be found in any form of escapism or in aping the West (Savitri and Shanta Bai) but to fully integrate society so as to reform it from within.

When referring to the political engagement of women in the Liberation struggle, Rao was only pointing to a well known truth. Many were the women who fought against the Raj and these women were no novelty in India. Rao links Gandhi's efforts with other movement which took place in Indian history, particularly with the Great Mutiny:

.....(She said)..... when the Mahatma will call on us to act, we shall have to go out and fight for him, but we said, 'Nay, nay, we are not men Rangamma!' But Rangamma said : 'In the city there are groups and groups of young women, girls, married women, and widow, who have joined together and become volunteers – volunteers we call them..... why sisters, you don't have to be a man to fight. Do you know the story of Rani Lakshmi Bai, and do you know how she fought for India?'²⁹ (p.149).

Women's emancipation is no longer to be decided upon by men. It is no longer up to them to decide what a woman can be or not. Woman have to free themselves and men will have no option but accept this new behavior. This will prove difficult for them and women will also have to be careful and keep up their family chores. This means that the forthcoming change implies a new definition of the social part to be fulfilled by a woman : “ 'We shall not forget our children and our husbands'. But how

can we be like we used to be?” (K.152). Women can only change if, right from childhood, their education changes. Rangamma’s greatest success is to make boys want to play the part of women in their games:

Aunt, I was playing with Nanju. And I said to him, you shall be the British army, and Ramu will be the Kashi Maharaj and the Oudh Maharaj and the Punjab Maharaj, and I will be the Rani Lakshmi Bai, and he says he would be the Rani, and I say: ‘But, I am the woman,’ and he says ‘That does not matter’, and I say ‘I am the woman’, and he says ‘I will not play’ (p.153).

Eventually, sex equality was respected: They took turns at being the Rani. Rao’s analysis goes further than Narain’s. Women are not defeated, they can act. It is true thought that for them to act it took the initiative of Moorthy and the presence in the village of at least one woman with education and with a strong personality.

Though Moorthy is the central figure of Kanthapura, among the other characters, women have an equal role to play with their male counterparts. Again, since the narrator is Achakka, we get to know the story of the various happenings in and around Kanthapura, more from the point of view of women than from that of men. The women take a prominent part in all

the religious gatherings and prayer meetings, and also in the political activities. They take care of the households, feed the men, and look after the children. At the same time, they are the ones who are interested in maintaining the rituals and traditions. Jayaramachar's special Harikatha about Mahatma Gandhi fires their imagination to such an extent that they willingly become active volunteers in the Satyagraha Movement led by Moorthy.

The river bank is the regular meeting place of the village women, and they gather there every morning. Besides attending to their bathing and washing, they also get a chance to exchange gossip and news of the latest happenings. Waterfall Venkamma has a vicious tongue, and she enjoys using it against everybody else. She is particularly vociferous against Moorthy and his mother, Narsamma, for the former's mixing with the pariahs. But, in her heart of hearts, Venkamma is not so very bad. If one day she quarrels with Narsamma.

Among the nobler women of the village there are Rangamma and Ratna. Both of them fight shoulder to shoulder with Moorthy, Range Gowda and others against the British oppression. When the Congress Committee is formed in the village, Moorthy says they need a woman on the Committee because the Congress is for the weak and the lowly. Everybody's choice is Rangamma, and she accepts the responsibility reluctantly on popular demand. Later, when

Moorthy is arrested and taken away, Rangamma comes to the forefront and arranges for newspapers to be delivered from the city so that the villagers remain informed about the activities of the Congress in the rest of the country. When the news comes that Moorthy has been released and will return to his village, Rangamma organizes proper welcome for him. She also forms a special group of the women volunteers, and names it 'Sevika Sangha', for their aim is to serve the community. The men of the village are not very keen for the Sevika Sangha since they feel that the women will neglect them and the household affairs by remaining too busy in their political and social activities. But this does not discourage the women led by Rangamma from continuing on their chosen path. When she too is arrested, Ratna takes over the mantle of leadership from her.

During all the encounters with the police, the women of Kanthapura do not stay at home, but join the men in their defiant protest marches. They get beaten up with lathis and suffer broken bones, yet they do not give up the struggle. Ultimately, most of the houses in Kanthapura are destroyed and the village is reduced to rubble. Some of the men perish and others leave their homes to find shelter elsewhere. The women too leave. The people of Kashipura, a neighbouring village welcome them. Achakka proudly says:

They hung garlands on our necks, and

called us the pilgrims of the Mahatma.

As pointed earlier, Raja Rao has written some fine short stories and some of them are remarkable for the writer's attitude towards women. Although the synopsis of the present study does not include short stories, but it would be pertinent to briefly examine them.

It is undisputedly admitted that Rao tried his hand at story writing but did not take it seriously. Even then, he has brought out three collections of his short stories. The very first one entitled *The Cow of the Barricades* (1947) and the second one *The Policeman and the Rose* (1978), the third group of his short stories *On the Ganga Ghat* is the last one.

His stories need critical attention chiefly because they are “the products of an inevitable stage in the growth of a mind, in the evolution of major novelist who was cultivating his craft with the utmost care.”³¹ In his stories one finds his total vision of life. Some of his stories have a contemporary social and political relevance. Raja Rao's short stories are expressions not only of an inner joy but also something more too—a desire to satirize, a desire to reform the social scene all around. As A.R. Wadia observes, “like many Indians he adopts the art of the short story to Indian conditions and uses it as a vehicle of new ideas and means of accelerating reform.”³² Both “A Client” which exposes the evils of child marriage and hardships of high

caste Hindus in finding a settlement of a daughter's marriage and "Javani" which presents the pathetic tale of a low caste widow, evidence Raja Rao's objective social concern.

"A Client" is one of the nine stories which were published in the first collection of his short stories called *The Cow of the Barricades and Other Stories* (1947). The story is very simple but it is a fine evidence of thought and tradition. People are of the mind that marriage is a social necessity. But they do not think about its appropriate age. Ramu is a simple school going boy. He is persuaded for marriage. Here at this place, Rao castigates the institution of traditional marriage. Thought and tradition both are hit here by the writer. Rao's reformatory zeal is dominant over the evil tradition. Although the story presents the view point of the boy, but one cannot miss to visualize the plight of the girl child.

"Javani"³³ presents a woeful tale of a low-caste widow, neglected and ill-treated by her kith and kin, serves in a middle class Brahmin family more for the affection she gets from her mistress than for the bread she earns there. She is 'Good like a Cow' to her mistress and her mistress is a 'veritable goddess' to Javani. They are bound by such a bond of love as of no caste and creed for its reciprocal 'give and take.' Ramappa, the mouthpiece of Raja Rao, could not bear to see the indignities heaped upon Javani. His vehement remarks against caste and

irreligion are scattered all over the story. “Javani” stand testimony to Raja Rao’s aim of exposing the evils of the caste system.

‘Sakrit Preddeyate Kanya’³⁴, (A girl is married but only once) has been our ancestral thought. Widowhood; traditionally has been a curse in Indian society because widow remarriages were not allowed. Rao has exposed the evils of caste-system and unjust treatment given to widows by society. Javani has an unexpressed quest as to where she should go and shake off the overwhelming burden of widowhood. Rao also makes some persons think about this social evil and find out appropriate solution to the problem.

In “Akkayya” he presents the story of a high caste widow in more artistic and satisfying form. He argues for a thorough overhauling of the Indian attitude to the widow and exposes the hollowness of some of the superstitious customs down the ages. Akkayya’s happiness is a ‘helpless resignation to the inevitable.’ Though both Akkayya and Javani belong to different castes, they share the inexorable futility of tradition-bound Indian widowhood in the same measure. Yet, as Venugopal points out “Javani” is loving and is being loved, whereas Akkayya, though loving, is only tolerated.

A comparative study of “Javani” and “Akkayya” shows that a widow is, after all, a widow. It matters a little whether she

belongs to a low caste or a high one. The miserable plight of the widows as described in the two stories, reminds one of the statement given by Adam Gondavi, ‘wound of widowhood pinches alike both a ‘Kshatrani’ and ‘Sudrani’ Javani’s and Akkayya’s widowhood and exploitation bear similarity with John Webster’s protagonist in *The Duchess of Malfi*, who is made to suffer by her wicked brothers in the name of family honour although they have eyes on her property, which is in reality the cause of their opposition. None bothers about her needs and desires. When she gives a vent to her inner feeling: “We are forced to woo because none dares woo us.”³⁵

“The Little Gram Shop” is another story replete with melodrama and pathos. Motilal, a petty shop-keeper, settles down, with his wife Beti, in a small town far away from his place of birth and, through back-breaking labour; inherent miserliness and business acumen, becomes a rich man. But he does not give up his miserly ways and slaves himself-and forces his wife to slave herself-twenty four hours a day in order to add as much as possible to his hoardings. In the meantime, his only son Chota runs away with a loose woman Venku. Chota returned after a year or two and was admitted into the family and soon afterwards married to Rati, the daughter of a rich shopkeeper. But Chota did not give up the other woman even after marriage, and tortured his wife in every possible way.

Ultimately Rati caught the plague which broke into the town a few years later and died a sad death in the isolation ward of the town hospital, alone and unattended. The narrator does not lose an opportunity to grieve over the sad lot of Rati, even though it seriously affects the compactness of the plot.

“Nimka” is a great story which shows the mature art of Raja Rao. In the story Rao’s ‘Vision of mother’ crosses the boundaries of India and becomes cosmopolitan. It is the story of a poor but beautiful Russian girl who works in a hotel in France. She is admired for her beauty by so many students. She loves an Indian but fails to marry him. After that, she loves a French man but does not marry him. Finally she marries a Russian Count twenty years older. She gives birth to a son. The count loses his money in horse-racing and then quits her. She has a necklace and wants to run a small shop by selling it. But God alters her plan. Her mother dies and she is bound to sell the necklace. Even in her troubles, she has faith in God and maintains her goodness.

In this story, Raja Rao has once again glorified motherhood. Thus we see that some of Raja Rao’s short stories are remarkable commentaries on the plight and predicament of women. Rao seems to be in search for the ultimate shelter for the widow. Family ties are falling down and the condition of widows is worsening day by day. They are not given share in

parental property. They have to depend on man's mercy. Our Vedic-Puranic-Upanishadic literature is also silent regarding their life. They are merely toys in the hands of man. There is none to realize the problems of widows. Rao is in favour of a thorough overhauling of traditional Indian attitude towards widows. He is against superstitious customs coming down from generation to generation. Akkayya's happiness is helpless resignation to the inevitable. Javni and Akkayya both have to drink the sour cup of tradition-bound Indian widowhood in the same measure. Rao does not glorify satihood in a widow. He wants to break down the evil traditions of unequal marriages, child marriages and life-long widowhood. He searches for a better plane like Raja Ram Mohan Roy.

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