



# Awakening of Women and Their Role in National Freedom Movement: In Special Reference to Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*

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**Abstract**— *The history of Indian struggle for independence is replete with stories of tremendous sacrifices made by the countrymen. Though the participation of women in freedom struggle was there since it's beginning but it was sporadic, men played the role of protagonists for the major part of the movement and women only came to the forefront after Gandhi's Ji initiation in the second and third decade of 20<sup>th</sup> century. These tradition-bound women fought with exemplary courage and commitment, side by side with their male counterparts, even so, many of them were left unsung. Raja Rao's 'Kanthapura' accounts the story of such brave Indian women using fictional characters. These women of village Kanthapura collectively represent the disadvantaged position of Indian women who were fighting a twin war, one at home with the patriarchal society trying to break away the shackles that limited their role to do household chores and the other with Britishers. The novel is told through a feminine point of view using the voice of Achakka, an old woman. Achakka traces the story of the immense changes that occurred in the life of these marginalised women of pre-independent India by Gandhian movement that was brought to their village by Moorthy, the hero of the novel. The novel articulates how Mass political movement like Non- Cooperation helped Indian women to cross the conventional boundaries to certain extent and in the manner the awakening of these women benefitted the Independent struggle in return. The characters of Rangamma and Ratna are presented as emerging new women who defy conventions and lead the war of independence. The present paper tries to explore the agonies suffered by hundreds of volunteer women, who following the Gandhian way chose the path of ahimsa to fight against the British raj. In order to voice against a foreign power these women came out of their well defined roles of goddess of the house and took on the role of Jhansi ki Rani, the fearless queen. The paper acknowledges the indelible sacrifices made by Indian women in India's freedom struggle.*

**Keywords**— *Freedom, Indian Independence Movement, Non- Cooperation movement, Women emancipation.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Kanthapura is a fictitious village, which can be identified as a hamlet in south India's Karnataka, caught in the freedom struggle of the 1930s and transformed so completely by the end that "there's neither man nor mosquito left in it". A grandmother through the medium of harikatha narrates how the surge of nationalism initiated by Mahatma Gandhi transcended all differences and revolutionised the docile villagers into freedom fighters.

Kanthapura is based on *Fontamara*, an Italian novel written by Ignazio Silone. *Fontamara*, is a story of an archetypal south Italian village, delineated in European sensibility, when fascist regime ruled Italy. The novel is a story of how poor are exploited by the rich as depicted by anti-Fascist and socialist behaviour in 1930s. Unlike *Fontamara*, *Kanthapura's* message is political, spiritual and cultural. From the foreword of *Kanthapura*, Rao tries to create a rich 'sthala-purana' or a legendary history of India where men

and Gods intermingle. Citing the mythological heroes and heroines, the writer recognizes our ancient traditions as Indian, giving the freedom struggle a mythic flavour, in the beginning itself. He has also tried to make the story more authentic by bringing in an oral narrator, thereby setting the Indian village backdrop in all its purity.

*Kanthapura* is a politically motivated novel, as it is bound up with the national movement. It is characterised by its postcolonial theme, which is quite noticeable and well-cared by the novelist. The novel demonstrates how myth, religion and legendary history are incorporated to decolonise the mind and instill nationalism. In the interests of motivating people, and shaping historical consciousness, *Kanthapura* must be seen within the genre of historical fiction emerging in the country in British-era. Apart from the political circumstances in which the genre evolved, the pre-existing narrative traditions contributed to situating narratives remote in time.

The author sympathetically explores the Gandhian values of loving ones enemies, non-violence and abolition of untouchability. In *Kanthapura*, Mahatma Gandhi has been portrayed as a symbol of divine power as well as a perceptible reality. As an incarnation of Krishna, he will remove the suffering of the Indians. He would slay the serpent of British rule as Krishna had killed *Kalia*, the serpent. As a statesman, Gandhi preaches the spinning of yarn to his countrymen, for if they spin, the money that goes to the British will be retained in India to clothe the naked and feed the hungry. As a God, Gandhi possesses the divine power of slaying the enemy of freedom. The idealism of Gandhi into an avatar further turns contemporary politics into a religious saga in an attempt to build a national-popular movement in a society acutely divided by language, caste and class. To present a unitary identity of the country was an important task in the face of British domination. Consequently, *Kanthapura* is securely mapped within an identity encapsulating the complete nation.

Undoubtedly, the production of a nationalist ideology in particular narratives and its role in captivating as many people as possible is significant. Within the colonial situation, the figuration of a common identity does lead to unitary nationalism for it is only through collective religious or linguistic sentiments that political ends can be reached. These strategies are motivated by desire to dominate, which is accomplished through the imposition of the idea of ethnic superiority of a social group. For instance, the rhetoric of nationalism in India has always been built on Hindu ideology and brahminic superiority since Hindus are in the majority. For a better realisation of Rao's model of cultural identity, it is imperative to locate the women of *Kanthapura* in the national freedom movement. Also, since the novel

draws on Gandhian nationalism, we must see how the role of women was outlined by Gandhian philosophy within the nationalist agenda. This will give an understanding of Rao's view of women's position in society as affected by the extent to which they were allowed to participate in the national struggle by Mahatma Gandhi. The Indian nationalism seen by both Mahatma Gandhi and Rao, however has presented women within their traditional Hindu roles, not giving them a complete liberation. Within the context of the novel, the contradiction between women's desires and their limited sphere of participation in the national struggle as accepted by the society will be brought out by demonstrating that the ideological movement of the novel, in some respects, is opposed to its action. It would be useful therefore to focus the study in terms of two different models—the ideological and the novelistic/dramatic. While the author, as we shall see, can be associated with the former, the latter includes the essential properties of the novelistic form. The issue of women's participation in the national movement is seen here in terms of the wider theme of peasant unrest.

Gandhi's involvement of women in India's freedom struggle offers comparisons and contrasts with the Rao's participation of fictional heroines who in response to Gandhi's call, join the satyagraha. The novel displays a reworking of Gandhi's esteem of women in combination with their role in the national movement. Despite the extensive domination of brahminic patriarchy in the novel, it is surprising to see that women are permitted equal participation as men in Gandhi's programme. The author goes way beyond to permit Indian women to assemble themselves into true satyagrahis by forming 'Sevika Sangha'. Mahatma Gandhi's sympathetic treatment of women too threatened the grip of chauvinist brahminic culture which condescended his encouragement to women to come forward.

Mahatma Gandhi in many ways worked against the predominantly patriarchal order and evoked a response in women. The feminine nature of his protest touched women's sphere of domesticity in an environment where they did not have the official power of taking positions in a male-dominant system. But by penance and fasting, which were the hallmarks of Gandhi's protests and essentially female instruments, both women and Mahatma Gandhi could pressurise the men into acquiescence. Mahatma Gandhi gave the movement a moral quality in its emphasis on the virtues of female perseverance. Although his adversaries contended that his approach was unmanly and would lead to their impairment subsequently, Gandhi's method of resistance was useful in drawing women into the national movement since he revealed through the adoption of non-violence that women were not completely

resourceless in spite of being a prisoner to the formal structure of patriarchy.

By encouraging equal rights for women in different spheres, Gandhi asserted the importance of women to a non-violent struggle aimed at a fair social order. He also maintained that "to postpone social reform till after the attainment of Swaraj is not to know the meaning of Swaraj" and further that "when the women in the country have woken up, who can hinder swaraj?" Accordingly, the heroic role of women lay in spearheading the revolution against abuse, inequality, and social injustice, both for themselves and for other exploited groups in the society. The programme of national integration initiated by Gandhi worked for the improvement of the harijans and women, to change the course of our society.

Gandhi's role for women, however, was mostly limited to the domestic sphere and was hardly seen outside the freedom struggle, although he attacked the practices purdah, the custom of devadasis, prostitution, child marriage, widowhood and dowry. He believed that men and women play complementary but different roles and insisted that service to the husband, his family and the country (in the same order) needs to be accepted as the primary duties of women. As a matter of fact, service to the country must be performed only if it did not affect the first two. Gandhi's ideal was Sita, who epitomized sacrifice, devotion and moral strength of womanhood. But within the traditional archetype he wanted to break with the traditional stereotype of weak and inferior woman, rendered by custom over the years. He asserted instead that women were not weak, because they possessed moral strength against the sheer brutal physical strength of men. Yet he did not visualise a complete transformation of women's roles and on the other hand, at some instances, his writings appear to indicate their immovability within the system irrespective of their inner strength. Besides, the moral strength that he attributes to Indian women, it has little or no relation to generations of exploitation, humiliation, and hardship. His gaze remained fixed on the symbology of the mother, even as he sought social reform, enabling him to establish links with Mother India and Mother Goddess conveniently. Mahatma Gandhi broke down the family resistance of his women associates with the assurance that women would not step outside their traditional household roles by extending women's roles beyond the limitations extended by the patriarchal system, he. He had himself relinquished the desire for children and wealth altogether and began living the life of a brahmacharya, for women he advocated the performance of primary duties as it was certainly impossible to combine public and domestic.

The Gandhi model accepted women's role in the national movement, while discharging their family responsibilities. However, there were a few contradictory levels to the Gandhian attitude to the women's participation in freedom struggle too. Those women having the responsibility to look after their children and the ones who were aged were not to give up their primary responsibilities for the sake of the national movement. However, there was a second group of women from whom he expected a sacrifice of the pleasures of housekeeping and childbearing. For the sake of the nation such married women were expected to remain celibate. Also, the full-time workers were expected to stay unmarried and dedicate their lives entirely to the national movement. Gandhi is also said to have opposed the marriage of the Kriplanis, as he was afraid of losing a devoted worker. Thus, while he was trying to protect the traditional images of Indian women, he could not always avoid breaking this model.

Gandhi's roles for women are dictated by different circumstances and various levels of participation. Mahatma Gandhi, in general allocated issues like swadeshi and prohibition to the women's domain since they were the principal victims in this area: "Only those women who have drunkards as their husbands know what havoc the drink devil works in homes that once were orderly and peace-giving". Since women from all classes suffered from the excessive drinking of men, only they could bring in some momentum to toddy-picketing within the national movement. Notwithstanding the degree of their recruitment, their participation was defined by and formed within the national movement.

The mobilization of Indian women in the long run had no clear objectives in Gandhian philosophy, as was the case with non-questioning of caste hierarchy in India while denouncing untouchability. Mahatma Gandhi also did not envisage overturning the traditional and social circumstances concerning women. The involvement of women in the nationalist domain seemed to be a strategic tactic, one not intended to empower them at all. Mahatma Gandhi "tried changing women's position without either transforming their relation to the outer world of production or the inner world of family, sexuality and reproduction"

In *Kanthapura* the level of participation depicted does not showcase the political activity of the villagers. Though Rao offers a political perspective that can ideologically mobilise a divided Indian society into a harmonious entity, his position within the brahminic intelligentsia, alongside the intrusion of his own political interests, has also to be considered. Congruently, the key female characters in *Kanthapura* are Rangamma, Ratna, and the grandmother-narrator Achakka, brahmin widows,

who come from a niche in society, as recognised by the author. Ratna and Rangamma are the female protagonist and the natural leaders of the village women. By having a brahmin widow narrator, the author is able to invite sympathy on the involvement of other two women in the uprising. Moreover, Ratna and Rangamma, who are presently widows, have not always been entirely in control of their sexuality. Hence, marriage, being an institution of social control over female sexuality, is not absolutely dispensed with. Within the text, both Ratna and Rangamma are mother figures. Ratna displays concern for the fasting hero and Rangamma is a surrogate mother for Moorthy, after the death of his mother;. Notwithstanding, it should be remembered that these women belong to a caste which has always imposed grievous restrictions on its women, particularly the widows. By following Gandhi, Rao tries to 'liberate' these women from their given image by allotting them more space. But so far, as their primary duties collide with the national activity as members of the Sevika Sangha, they are advised to perform their key role first:

*'If we are to help others, we must begin with our husbands,' and she [Rangamma] tells Satamma, 'Your husband is not against Sevika Sangha. He only wants to eat in time ...' Rangamma tells her to be more regular in cooking, and we all say, 'We should do our duty. If not, it is no use belonging to the Gandhi group.' Rangamma says, 'That is right, sister,' and we say, 'We shall not forget our children and our husbands'*

Rao thus brings out Gandhi's belief in protection of women within the household. In a speech at the meeting of textile workers at Ahmedabad, Gandhi had said in a similar manner:-

*If the workers find it necessary today to send their wives and children to work in factories, it is our duty to see that they do not have to ... Work is not for children. Nor is it for women to work in factories. They have plenty of work in their own homes. They should attend to the bringing up of their children; they may give peace to the husband when he returns home tired, minister to him, soothe him if he is angry and do any other work they can staying at home ... If we send them to the factories, who will look after our domestic and social affairs? If women go out to work, our social life will be ruined and moral standards will decline ... I feel convinced that for men and women to go out for work together will mean the fall of both. Do not, therefore, send your women out to work; protect their honour; if you have any manliness in*

*you, it is for you to see that no one casts an evil eye on them.*

Both Rao and Gandhi are forgetful of the women workers in rural areas who work together with men in fields/ plantations. Such women would be surprised at the traditional, accepted sphere of women's participation encouraged by nationalists. The image of women Gandhi develops is that of physical fragility and distinctive strength. Hence, in *Kanthapura*, at the formation of the Congress, Rangamma is elected as a Congress representative because 'the Congress is for the weak and the lowly. Gandhi's ideas pertaining to the second group of women—the more nationalistic and celibate—are also interlaced into the lives of Ratna and Rangamma. They adjust well within the Gandhian scheme, since neither of them has a husband or children,. Rao also creates categories of women (like Gandhi)—those who first owe their services to their home and those who do not have household responsibilities and can therefore serve the country. In other words, Rao maintains the important position of marriage and woman's role as a dedicated wife and a sacrificing mother from the primeval models of upper-caste Hindu women which conform to the modern, middle-class Hindu society. It is only this class of women who can respond readily to the image of Sita who sacrificed her extravagant life-style to follow her husband, Ram, into exile when he was ousted from his kingdom. On the other hand, contemporary Indian society was full of women who could neither afford to possess even one sari, nor had any clothes/ jewellery to give up. They did not need any persuasion to spin and wear khadi, since they had no alternative but to wear inexpensive handlooms. By this, Gandhi and Rao consciously show an ideological preference for the urban middle-class women who used foreign cloth.

The grandmother's narration on various occasions gives us an insight into women's voices outside the limits within which they are supposed to be viewed. After a reversal of their roles, Achakka cannot be party to Rangamma's advice about having 'space-in-the-home':

*But how can we be like we used to be? Now we hear this story and that story, and we say we too shall organise a foreign-cloth boycott like at Sholapur, we too, shall go picketing cigarette shops and toddy shops, and we say our *Kanthapura*, too, shall fight for the Mother, and we always see the picture of Rani Lakshmi Bai that Rangamma has on the verandah wall, a queen, sweet and young and bejewelled, riding a white horse and looking out across the narrow river and the hills to where the English armies stand (Rao, 1938, pp. 152-53).*

Significantly, Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi, who died fighting the British in the 1857 rebellion, is both "sweet and young and bejewelled" yet courageous, what may be described as "a model of female as opposed to feminist-valour". She can therefore be represented as part of tradition (virtuous), yet imbued with contemporaneousness (liberated). This model ensures women to not overreach the specific social imperatives they are used for. In the present context, Achakka's aspirations and sentiments are a challenge to the building of a feminine identity within her home, advocated by Gandhi, consumed by Rao. Here, the difference between the dramatic and nationalistic levels of narration is apparent: the grandmother separates herself from being an oral storyteller, becoming a character who is no longer prepared to do what Rangamma advocates. On the other hand, she wishes to dedicate herself to the nation, like Lakshmi Bai. Achakka too is possibly not prepared to contribute only in terms of spinning. That shrewd intervention by Gandhi was an effective strategy for enlisting women in the national struggle without shifting the terrain of their involvement from the household. Achakka engages with more than simply the domestic; she feels magnified into Rani Lakshmi Bai, and is possessed by shakti or the primal, original power which renders the male principle in the godhead, purusha, passive, weak, and inferior

The female point of view assumes more significance than the author is prepared to allow, at the level of shakti. The women-power grows as it assumes identification with the power of Kenchamma, who is the village protector (goddess). The village owes its very origin to Kenchamma's accomplishments. Her legend is used to ritualise the pattern of events affecting the lives of the villagers. The women believe Kenchamma to be present in each one of them, giving them the required energy and propulsion. In fact, each of them becomes Kenchamma to the extent that they are terrified of their own unnatural valour, Kenchamma is believed to have "even settled down among them and that is why the women engage in a similar encounter as Kenchamma did to kill the demon. Kenchamma's role as a woman, who is incarnated in the village women creates a new dimension in the novel, thus releasing their latent strength. Also, the narration to a female audience from a female perspective adds to the impression of their growing power.

An audience of "sisters", does not mean that the author expects only women to be his readership. A female audience could also be an irresistible bait to attract the male readership and to increase the persuasive effect on both male and female readers. The accessibility of the story to female listeners may thus suggest Rao's investment in the seductive appeal to gather more listeners. Additionally, in

the all-female gathering in the text, men are the excluded audience, however their presence is unrestricted in the reading of it. The narration, therefore, not only covers the story to a mixed audience, but also raises the threshold of consciousness among women.

The feared womanhood aspect is associated with matriarchal societies in India where goddesses are given first place, before gods. These are areas where women have predominant rule, unlike brahminic culture in which the patriarchal social system places restrictions upon women. The story appears to support matriarchal power through Achakka, and that is why the contrast between her and Rangamma's narrations is striking. Rangamma does not envisage any fundamental change in the traditional role of women, while Achakka, as the voice of matriarchy, unconsciously assumes authority and challenges the idea of a unfair division of labour between the sexes. She is impatient to move beyond her secondary role in the freedom struggle in the same way as the many Ashram women who had urged Mahatma Gandhi to let them join the Dandi march along with men. Gandhi had seen their eagerness as a 'healthy' sign, yet refused them participation with the ambiguous reasoning that they were 'destined' to make a far greater contribution to India's programme for independence in ways other than merely breaking salt laws. In the novel too, the awakening is weakened as the power of Kenchamma (goddess) takes over from Kenchamma (woman). Just as Gandhi's programme for women complemented their household role which, to an extent, seemed to give them some sort of motivation within their simple existence, Rao also propagates their participation within limits so as to not upset the traditional Hindu image of the Indian woman.

The issue here concerns how the women were conceptualized and imagined in the national movement. Within Gandhi's philosophy, women assumed a dimension they were never given before. But although it is true that the motives for social regeneration in his rather contradictory attitudes were not fair, it was the national freedom movement that primarily interested him to drive the Indian women. Rao uses Gandhi's grounds to come out with a similar representation. Like Gandhi, he shows the women as a part of the nationalistic framework but does not connect the nationalist sentiment with their social consciousness as peasants. Consequently, their ideological role in the novel is conflicting with old feudal assumptions which define them culturally and condition them socially.

Rao consciously takes the thread of the story further away from the actual experiences of the villagers by deepening emphasis on religious philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi. The women are not permitted to seize nationalism

as a possible opening to let them out of their suppression. While the national movement might have prescribed a new dimension for women's lives, that of greater independence—interpreted as a kind of swaraj—within both domestic and public living, the *Kanthapura* women achieve little in changing the private domain. Swaraj remains loaded with religious significances for them. Towards the end of the novel, after having undergone initiation, we hear the women saying plaintively: "Men will come from the city, after all, to protect us!". Their very organisation into the *Sevika Sangha* is initiated at the behest of an individual (Moorthy).

Like many of the intellectuals before him, Raja Rao follows a Nietzschean idealism which defines history as a "larger than life" enterprise, and thereby justifies the character of historical fiction in projecting an experience that demands a suspension of disbelief. The mythicisation of contemporary events has been used to serve an important function of transcending the ordinariness of existence and reaching a plane previously inaccessible to ordinary mortals. Such a reading however, underwrites the reconstruction of a usable past by both historians and fiction-writers, which is a misrepresentation of actual events for political purposes. While the existence of self-representations is an ideal that successfully manipulates large and diverse kinds of people, it does not preclude us from contemplating, in a post-colonial climate, on the nature of history-writing.

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