

# The Creative Launcher

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## Unique Blending of Myth and Reality in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* : A Critical Study

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### Abstract

This paper deals with the importance and significance of using the myth and reality in Raja Rao's famous novel *Kanthapura* (1938). Myth is an inseparable part of the culture of any country. Every Village of India has its own story of origin through it may or may not be true. But Raja Rao in his *Kanthapura* very carefully uses several myths to establish the plot of the story. Through various symbols he used a lots of myths only to portray the cultural, economical and social condition of the then India under British rule. The central myth of *Kanthapura* is analysed through the mythical analogy of Lord Rama and Mahatma Gandhi. Achakka, Moorthy and the village Kanthapura itself stands as prominent mythological symbols throughout the whole story. Although the theme of the novel is clearly discusses here. Subsequently the present paper clearly highlights the various hidden cultures, rituals and customs of ancient India and their existences.

**Keywords-** *Myth, Reality, Symbols, Gandhism, Freedom Movement, Untouchability*

Chief among the great trio of Indian English fiction Raja Rao is a celebrated and well received Indian Literary artist. Actually he is remembered mainly for his employment on Hindu mythology, religion and culture in his novels. *Kanthapura* is Rao's first novel which is published in the year 1938. Most of the critics assume the fact that the contents and characters of his novels are taken from ancient Indian culture and ideals. That is why he uses mythological references to establish the ideals of Indian culture and philosophy, particularly during the time of freedom movement. *Kanthapura* is about the traditional idea of religion and political vision of religion. It depicts the close alliance between politics, religion and spirituality which was Gandhi's main contribution to the public life in India and also the influence of Gandhism up on the common masses of India. Because of the fact that even the

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most illiterate Indian is well acquainted with mythological stories, myths play a significant part in Indian life. It is common for the Indian preachers to give a mythological and spiritual significance to physical phenomenon. Raja Rao expressed the political struggle for freedom in mythological terms: Gandhi/Rama fights to redeem India/Sita from the Red-men/the demon British from overseas.

Raja Rao in his novel *Kanthapura* had made myth one of the primary factors that continue the novel. In spite of being residing and educating in foreign, he shows his faith in mythology. When we define the word 'Myth' in colloquial terms, we often refer to a false, fabricated story or anything that is opposed to reality. It can be defined in words of M.H. Abrams,

Myth is one story in mythology - a system of hereditary stories which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group, and which served to explain (in terms of the intentions and actions of deities and other supernatural beings) why the world is as it is and things happen as they do, to provide a rationale for social customs and observances and to establish the sanctions for the rules by which people conduct their lives.

Raja Rao has used the Judeo-Christian-Islamic myth of the unknown and unknowable. Instead, to make his tale of modern India more meaningful, he goes deep down into the roots of continuing Indian cultural tradition and draws out the mythic conception in terms of the unitary principle and its energy (which is more akin to Einstein's Generalised theory of Gravitation). Such a view is symbolized in the human imagery of Siva and the dance suggests the sustenance of all movements in the cosmos.

The novelist takes the myth of suffering more directly self-imposed to absorb the evils of others, in the manner of an Avatara or a Bodhisatta. Gandhi is presented as an incarnation of God. He is a living part of India's 'collective consciousness'. When Mahatma Gandhi is identified with the satvic principle, we have no difficulty in identifying with the adversary. We are ready to identify that adversary in the Red-men, the British military colonial establishment, in the encroaching Skeffington Estate, a wing of British industrial empire that is choking Indian industry and commerce. In the myth that Jayaramachar invents about the divine birth of Gandhiji, the latter is held to be an incarnation of Rama, while India to be Sita. Gandhiji's going to England to participate in the Round Table Conference is compared to Rama's exile, and the foreign rulers are compared to Ravana and Gandhi is to kill this demon and bring back enslaved Sita i.e India. The followers of Gandhiji are compared to the battalions of Hanuman. Actually the whole novel is based on the patterns of Ramayana. The way in which Ramayana is narrated by Sage Valmiki here also Achakka is the narrator and commentator of all the incidents in the novel. Hence in a sense the novelist had described the

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same old mythical story of *Ramayana* in a new way. Although the characters are changed yet the story is the same.

Except *Ramayana*, The Harikatha's has a dominant role in the mythical intensity of the novel. In the very beginning the local satri, a learned scholar and poet, officiated Harikatha's in *Kanthapura*. He was a fine singer and an excellent Harikatha-man. When he stood up with the bells at his ankles and the cymbals in his hands, it seemed to the people that the God became more brilliant and came nearer to the congregation. He made a superb Harikatha of the episode of Parvati's winning of Siva. Later, Harikatha was recited by Jayaramachar, a Harikatha-man, who was invited from the city. The narrator calls him a funny Harikatha-man, for he did not speak about gods and goddesses but about Mother India and its noble sons. If he narrated the story of Siva and Parvati, he would say that Parvati's penance represented the struggles of the country to win freedom. The three-eyed Siva would become a symbol for Swaraj, which, he would explain, is also three-eyed, the three eyes being Self-purification, Hindu-Muslim unity, and the making and wearing of Khadi. He would bring something about the country and about Swaraj into every Katha that he recited. Thus in Jayaramachar's Harikatha's, the past and present are juxtaposed and contemporary events and personalities are constantly linked up with puranic gods and epic heroes and heroines. His best Harikatha, however was about the birth of Gandhiji. It was through this Katha that he awoke patriotic feelings in his listeners and produced that undying faith in Gandhi which was the strongest inspiration of the freedom fighters. It runs as follows,

"In the great Heavens Brahma, the self-created One, was lying on his serpent, when the sage Valmiki entered, announced by the two doorkeepers. 'Oh, learned sire, what brings you into this distant world?' asked Brahma, and, offering the sage a seat beside him, fell at his feet. 'Rise up, O God of Gods, I have come to bring you sinister news. Far down on the Earth you chose as your chief daughter Bharatha, the goddess of wisdom and well-being. You gave her the sage-loved Himalayas on the north and the seven surging seas to the south, and you gave her the Ganges to meditate on, the Godavary to live by, and the pure Cauvery to drink in. You gave her the riches of gold and of diamonds, and you gave her kings such as the world has never seen. And you gave her, too, sages radiating wisdom to the eight cardinal points of the earth, Krishna and Buddha, Sankara and Ramanuja. But, O Brahma you who sent us the prince propagators of the Holy Law and Sages that smote the darkness of Ignorance, you have forgotten us so long that men have come from across the seas and the oceans to trample on our wisdom and to spit on virtue itself. They have come to bind us and to whip us, to make our women die milk less and our men die ignorant. O Brahma, deign to send us one of your gods so that he may incarnate on Earth and bring back light and plenty to your enslaved daughter.... 'O Sage', pronounced Brahma, 'is it greater for you to ask or for me to say "Yes"? Siva himself will forthwith go and incarnate on the Earth and free my beloved daughter from

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her enforced slavery. Pray seat yourself, and messengers of Heaven shall fly to Kailas and Siva be informed of it '.

"And lo, when the Sage was still partaking of the pleasures Brahma offered him in hospitality, there was born in a family in Gujarat a son such as the world has never beheld. As soon as he came forth, the four wide walls began to shine like the Kingdom of the Sun, and hardly was he in the cradle than he began to lisp the language of wisdom. You remember how Krishna, when he was but a babe of four, had begun to fight against demons and had killed the serpent Kali so too our Mohandas began to fight against the enemies of the country. And as he grew up, and after he was duly shaven for the hair ceremony, he began to go out into the villages and assemble people and talk to them, and his voice was no so pure, his forehead so brilliant with wisdom, that men followed him, more and more men followed him as they did Krishna, the flute-player; and so he goes from village to village to slay the serpent of the foreign rule."

Thus, the use of the mythical technique makes Gandhi the invisible god, and Moorthy the invisible Avatar. The reign of the Red-men becomes Asuric rule, and it is resisted by the Devas, the Satyagrahis. Jayaramachar jumbles with splendid unconcern traditional mythology and contemporaneous politics: Siva is the three eyed, and Swaraj too is three-eyed : Self-purification, Hindu-Muslim unity, Khaddar. Gandhi is Siva himself in human shape: he is engaged in slaying the serpent of foreign rule, as the boy Krishna killed the serpent Kaliya. Bhajans and Harikathas mix religion and politics freely and often purposefully, the reading of the Gita, and hand-spinning are elevated into a daily ritual, like puja in India which is filled with untouchability.

This juxtaposition of the past and the present, of men and gods, is kept up throughout the end of the novel. Gandhi's trip to England to attend the Second Round Table Conference is invested with Puranic significance:

They say the Mahatma will go to the Red-men's country, and he will get us Swaraj...And we shall all be happy. And Rama will come back from exile, and sita will be with him, for Ravana will be slain and Sita freed, and he will come back with Sita on his right in a chariot of the air, and brother Bharatha will go to meet them with the worshipped sandals of the Master on his head. And as they enter Ayodhya there will be a rain of flowers. Like Bharatha we worship the sandals of the Brother saint....

Political Realism is, obviously the major theme of the novel. The distribution of spinning wheel among the poor community is an attempt towards economic freedom and self-sufficiency. Economic exploitation made the poor villagers bankrupt. They could not pay revenue and other taxes to the Government, with the result that many of them were evicted from their lands and lost all means of earning a livelihood. The condition of the labourer of

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the Skeffington Coffee Estate cannot be lost sight off. The daily drudgery, oppression and torture of the coolies made them rebellious and as a result they participated in the Satyagrah. Although politics becomes synonymous with religion as it was a part of the agenda of Congress leaders, Gandhiji's ideals of non-violence appears to be futile and inactive. As Esle Dey puts: "Here is a clash in the novel between two world views. In the real world of men and women Gandhiji's idealism is not possible". Raja Rao is sufficiently realistic to say that Gandhiji's view is very flat to the common mass.

However, absolute realism would have made *Kanthapura* a rather dull novel, so Rao presents reality through myths. He uses the myth of creation. The creative energy that flows from the dancer, or Shakti, in the evolution is traced in the dissolution or pralaya. Such an imagery of Siva as Nataraja though evolved from the tribal consciousness is still capable of including the most modern scientific theories of cosmos ( a science-myth) , namely the so-called "Doughnut Theory" of expanding universe after the first big bang and then retraction of the expanded cosmos into the unmoved centre, the blackhole in space. Rao puts the science myth in terms of Indian culture myth about the unknown, 'Siva' dancing into creation and evolution after the big bang, and dissolution of the cosmos into pralaya upon opening the third eye absorption into Siva in meditation or 'Sava'. In other words these are the two phases in the cyclical process of continual creation and dissolution, unexplainable totally from human point of view. Such a myth that leaves something unsaid about the unknown is more dynamic than the more neatly concretized Jehovah or Yawhe myth even though both are basically myths or human explanation of the existential condition.

Rao uses almost eleven characters in his novel *Kanthapura*. Every character has a mythical background. The characters are - Moorthy, the Village Gandhi or A prince and a Cow at the same time, Ratna, the progressive widow, Patel Range Gowda, the Tiger of the Village, Bhatta, the First Brahmin, Bade Khan, the Policeman, The White Owner of Skeffington Coffee Estate, The Swami, Advocate Sankar, Waterfall Venkamma, Narasamma and Rangamma. Rao's art of characterization is also unique and praiseworthy with the plot of the novel.

Actually by using the myths the novelist has enriched the texture of his novel and imparted to it a rare expansiveness, elevation and dignity. According to Meenakshi Mukherjee, "Kanthapura is again another and a larger attempt at creating a - *sthala-purana* i.e., a legendary tale of a specific locality." She also states that, "..... A myth necessarily deals with an idealised man or a man larger than life and Raja Rao uses the device of mythicizing facts in order to give his hero that exalted status." E.M. Forster considers it as 'the finished novel to come out of India....'. Northrop Fry points out in a myth, "some of the chief characters are gods, other beings larger in power than humanity." In the novel we get several

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similarities with Fry's opinion. Probably John B. Alphanso-Karkala puts most striking opinion on the mythical intensity of the novel. He says,

Raja Rao integrates this myth of time into English literary consciousness and almost elevates the language to the epic mould with a larger conception than the one that the language has been hitherto used to, a myth which Hanuman revealed to Bhima in the *Mahabharata*, which James Joyce falteringly tried to suggest in his poem, and dramatically in his *Finnegan's Wake* by integrating Vico's circles with Yoga Cycles to serve as the matrix of the most fantastic literary dream. Raja Rao's time module in *Kanthapura* can be easily seen in the life of the living village which having evolved to Kaliyuga dissolves towards the end like a pralaya; "There's neither man or mosquito in *Kanthapura*" except the woman Chinna (the "Golden female" or Hiranyagarba), the creative womb, the maha-maya, that will burst forth into new creation in another cycle of creative evolution. The events of *Kanthapura* village seem to dwell on the plane of existential phenomena conditioned by karma causality of actions and consequences, and the resulting Kurukshetra which is also a Dharmakshetra, somehow clears the accumulated karma by the heroic struggle and sacrifice, or redemptory suffering of the people, bringing in the end of Kaliyuga, the end of a cyclical civilization, and preparing for a new beginning.

Not only in *Kanthapura*, Rao uses myth like weapon in his other novels like *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960) and *The Cat and Shakespeare* (1965) also.

Actually Raja Rao is so successful in uniting the Gandhian revolt with the Ramayana and the *Bhagvad Gita* (Krishna's coming down to earth as Gandhi). So the mythic reference makes the matrix of *Kanthapura* to participate in the epic struggle, and identify the contemporary struggle for Swadeshi, Swaraj and Swatantra (Self-reliance, Self-Government, Self Will or freedom), almost as sacred as the tradition could sanction. Hence in spite of being a political novel, *Kanthapura* is filled with myths and blind faiths and such myths and blind faiths are prevalent in all the under-developed villages of India.

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