

Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*

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The Summary of *Kanthapura*:

Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* is a seminal 1938 novel that depicts the impact of Mahatma Gandhi's freedom movement on a remote South Indian village. The story is told through the perspective of Achakka, an elderly Brahmin widow, who narrates the events in the style of a Sthala-Purana—a traditional legendary history of a specific place.

Setting and Main Protagonist:

The village of Kanthapura, located in the valleys of Himavathy in Mysore, serves as a microcosm of India during the 1930s. The story centers on Moorthy, a young Brahmin who undergoes a spiritual and political transformation after having a vision of Gandhi. Rejection of worldly possessions and the hierarchical caste system, Moorthy returns to the village to lead a non-violent resistance movement. He is often referred to by the villagers as the "Small Mountain," with Gandhi himself being the "Big Mountain".

The Movement in *Kanthapura*:

Moorthy initiates the Gandhian struggle by:

- **Abolishing Untouchability:** He disregards caste barriers to mix with the pariahs (the lower-caste community), which leads to his own mother's untimely death from the shock of his excommunication.
- **Promoting Khadi:** He encourages villagers to spin their own yarn and wear handmade cloth to boycott foreign British goods.
- **Religious Fusion:** The movement is communicated to the unlettered villagers through Harikathas (traditional religious storytelling), where Gandhi is mythicized as an incarnation of gods like Rama or Shiva, and the struggle for Swaraj (self-rule) is likened to the rescue of Sita.

Conflict and Colonial Exploitation:

The movement faces opposition from Bhatta, an orthodox Brahmin moneylender who represents the entrenched traditional hierarchy and acts as a government informant. Another symbol of colonial power is the Skeffington Coffee Estate, a nearby plantation where coolies are subjected to brutal labor conditions and exploitation. Badè Khan, a policeman stationed in the village, lives at the estate and serves as an instrument of government intimidation.

Escalation and Repression:

As the movement grows, the villagers engage in more direct forms of Satyagraha:

- **Toddy Shop Picketing:** Protesters squat before toddy booths to stop the consumption of alcohol, which the government profits from.

- **No-Tax Campaign:** The villagers eventually refuse to pay land revenue despite government threats to auction their property.

These actions result in severe police brutality. Moorthy is eventually arrested and sent to prison, and leadership passes to other villagers like Rangamma, an educated and wealthy widow, and Ratna, a young widow who becomes a bold leader of the women's Sevika Sangha (Volunteer Corps).

The Destruction of the Village:

The novel reaches a violent climax when the British authorities and soldiers launch a final assault on the village. The villagers are brutally beaten, shot, and trampled; in the chaos, the village of Kanthapura is burned to the ground. The survivors are forced to flee across the mountains, eventually settling in a village called Kashipura.

Conclusion:

By the end of the novel, the original village of Kanthapura is effectively destroyed and taken over by "men from Bombay". Although the physical village is lost and the immediate movement in the village fails, the narrator interprets the experience as a spiritual victory. Moorthy himself eventually feels disillusioned with the slow pace of Gandhism and moves toward the more radical "equal-distributionist" socio-political principles of Jawaharlal Nehru.

Use of Myth as a Narrative Technique in Kanthapura:

Raja Rao's Kanthapura uses myth as a central narrative technique to elevate a contemporary political struggle into a metaphysical and timeless epic. The novel is structured as a Sthala-Purana (legendary history of a place) or a Gandhipurana, where the present Gandhian movement is transformed into a mythical past.

The author artistically blends pan-Indian myths with localized folk myths. Local myth centers on the village deity, Kenchamma, who is believed to have killed a demon ages ago, staining the Kenchamma Hill red with his blood. The villagers invoke her for protection, viewing the freedom struggle as a movement requiring her divine grace for success.

A primary mythical device is the Harikatha, used by the chanter Jayaramachar to explain complex political concepts to unlettered villagers. Through these stories, Mahatma Gandhi is deified as an Avatar of Shiva or Krishna, sent by Brahma to liberate the daughter Bharatha (India) from the "Red-men" (British). The struggle for Swaraj is paralleled with the Ramayana: Gandhi is Rama, Swaraj is Sita, and Nehru is Bharata. Gandhi's trip to England for the Round Table Conference is likened to Rama's journey to Lanka.

Characters are also mythicized within this framework. Moorthy is regarded as the "Small Mountain" (a miniature Gandhi) to the Mahatma's "Big Mountain" (Sahyadri). Women like Ratna are compared to forms of Shakti when leading the resistance. This mythical-cum-symbolic design allows Rao to infuse social realism with spiritual significance, making the village a microcosm of the entire nation's struggle while imparting the novel with the dignity of an Indian epic.

Sthalapurana:

Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* is famously structured as a Sthala-purana, a traditional Indian genre meaning the legendary history of a specific place. In his foreword, Rao explains that there is no village in India so small that it does not possess its own rich Sthala-purana, where gods mingle with men and local landmarks are imbued with divine significance. This narrative framework allows the author to transform a contemporary political movement into a timeless and metaphysical epic.

The novel functions as a "Gandhipurana," elevating Mahatma Gandhi to the status of a mythological deity. Through the medium of Harikathas—traditional religious storytelling—the chanter Jayaramachar deifies Gandhi as an avatar of Shiva, sent to liberate "Mother Bharatha" from the "Red-men" (the British). This creates a structural parallelism with the Ramayana: Gandhi is envisioned as Rama, Swaraj is represented as the captive Sita, and the British authorities are cast as the demon-king Ravana.

A central element of this Sthala-purana is the village deity, Kenchamma. The local geography is mythicized through the legend of her battle with a demon; the Kenchamma Hill is believed to be red because it was soaked in the demon's blood. The villagers view the freedom struggle through this spiritual lens, believing that the movement's success depends on the goddess's grace.

The narrative technique further reinforces the Sthala-purana form. The story is told by Achakka, an elderly Brahmin widow whose oral-style narration is characterized by digressions, rhythmic repetitions, and a lack of traditional Western chapterization. By using a grandmother as the narrator, Rao captures the "interminable" quality of Indian storytelling, where past and present are inextricably fused into a single, continuous folk epic.

***Kanthapura* as a Gandhian Novel/Gandhipurana/ Moorthy as a Gandhian Hero:**

Kanthapura is the quintessential Gandhian novel, functioning as a "Gandhipurana" by transforming the 1930s freedom movement into a timeless myth. It depicts how Mahatma Gandhi's ideology—though he only appears once in a vision—pervades every aspect of village life, converting common people into an army of freedom fighters.

The protagonist, Moorthy, is the central Gandhian hero, frequently referred to as the "Small Mountain" to Gandhi's "Big Mountain". After a life-changing vision of the Mahatma, Moorthy rejects his Brahmin status and worldly possessions, burning foreign clothes to wear Khadi. He embodies Gandhian self-sacrifice by abolishing untouchability, mixing with the Pariah community even when it leads to his own excommunication and his mother's death. Moorthy leads through non-violence (ahimsa) and Satyagraha, resorting to fasting for self-purification after violence erupts at the Skeffington Coffee Estate. He even refuses a legal defense in court, believing a Satyagrahi must be his own advocate.

The novel captures Gandhi's influence through traditional Harikathas, where Gandhi is deified as an avatar of Shiva sent to liberate "Mother Bharatha" from the "Red-men". The villagers

adopt Gandhian strategies such as the boycott of foreign goods, spinning the Charka, and picketing toddy booths to halt economic exploitation. Other characters also reflect this ideology: Rangamma organizes the Sevika Sangha (women's volunteer corps), and the lawyer Sankar adopts Gandhi's strict ethical codes. Although Moorthy eventually moves toward Nehru's radical socio-political principles, the novel concludes that the villagers have achieved a spiritual victory, leaving an authentic portrait of India's struggle for Swaraj.

Role of the Narrator/ Portrayal of Achakka:

Achakka, an elderly Brahmin widow, serves as the first-person witness narrator of *Kanthapura*. Her identity as a "grandmother" figure aligns the novel with the Indian oral tradition, presenting the story as a "sad tale of her village" told during a quiet evening.

The central narrative strategy is the Sthala-purana, a traditional genre meaning the legendary history of a specific place. Achakka's "unlettered imagination" allows Raja Rao to mingle gods with men, elevating contemporary political events into a metaphysical epic. To her, the Gandhian movement is not merely political but spiritual; she deifies Gandhi as an avatar of Shiva and parallels the struggle for Swaraj with the Ramayana.

Achakka's style is characterized by garrulousness, spontaneity, and native vigor. The strategy eschews Western chapterization for a continuous flow where "episode follows episode". She employs oral tags (like "once upon a time"), rhythmic repetitions, and seemingly pointless digressions. These features simulate the "thought-movement" of an Indian grandmother, making the prose feel poetic and lyrical.

Furthermore, Rao uses Achakka to nativize the English language, bending its syntax to match the "agglutinations of Kannada". This strategy includes literal translations of Indian idioms and the use of rhythmic, balanced patterns that invest the word with the power of a "mantra".

Ultimately, as a participant in the Satyagraha, Achakka provides emotional credibility and authenticity. Her perspective successfully transforms Kanthapura into a microcosm of the entire Indian nation, bridging the "little tradition" of the village with the "great tradition" of the national movement. While her narration involves "shading the truth" or "exaggerating" due to her personal beliefs, it provides a deeply realistic and humanistic portrait of the freedom struggle.

Portrayal/Role of the Women Characters:

In Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, women characters are the moral and physical backbone of the Gandhian movement, undergoing a profound transformation from domestic figures into a disciplined "army of freedom fighters". This shift is catalyzed by the ideology of Mahatma Gandhi, which encourages them to "shake off the fetters of Indian womanhood" and participate in the public struggle for *Swaraj*.

The Pillars of Resistance: Rangamma and Ratna:

The movement is primarily organized by Rangamma, an educated and wealthy widow. Her house serves as the local Congress party office, where plans are laid and volunteers assemble. She forms the Sevika Sangha (Women's Volunteer Corps), training women in drills and preparing them to bear police tortures with calm non-violence. Despite her revolutionary fervor, she continues to advocate for "the folds of domesticity," advising women to fulfill their household duties even as they participate in the struggle.

Ratna, a young fifteen-year-old widow, represents a more radical break from tradition. She refuses to follow orthodox widowhood taboos, keeping her hair and jewelry, which causes scandal among the villagers. When Moorthy is arrested, Ratna assumes leadership of the community, embodying the form of Shakti—the feminine principle of divine power. She leads the women from the front during the Satyagraha, demonstrating immense boldness and oratory skill.

Narrator and Antagonist: Achakka and Venkamma:

The story itself is told by Achakka, an elderly Brahmin widow whose "unlettered imagination" frames the struggle as a religious epic. As a witness-narrator who participated in the Satyagraha, she provides emotional credibility to the account, deifying Gandhi as an avatar and viewing the struggle as a sacred ceremony.

In contrast, Waterfall Venkamma serves as the primary female antagonist. An orthodox and bitter woman, she opposes the Gandhian movement, particularly Moorthy's attempt to abolish untouchability, which she views as "Pariah business" that will pollute the village. She acts as a foil to the progressive women, mocking their activism and aligning herself with the traditional hierarchy.

Sacrifice and Defiance: Narsamma and Rachi:

- Narsamma: Moorthy's mother represents the tragic human cost of social change. A pious and traditional woman, she is unable to reconcile her love for her son with his radical actions. She eventually dies from the shock and grief of Moorthy's excommunication for mixing with lower-caste "Pariahs".
- Rachi: A brave woman from the Pariah quarter, Rachi exemplifies the fierce resistance of the lower castes. In the novel's violent climax, it is Rachi who, in an act of desperate defiance after seeing the destruction of their lives, leads the women in burning the village of Kanthapura to the ground so that the British can gain nothing from its seizure.

The women of Kanthapura endure extreme brutality, including being beaten and kicked by the police during picketing actions. Their transformation is captured in their use of traditional folk songs and religious devotion to fuel political activism, proving that they are no longer just "unworthy... daughters who think of nothing but the blowpipe and the broomstick". Through their collective action, Kanthapura becomes a microcosm of the national movement's power to mobilize the marginalized.