Women in Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura*

Prabal Jagadeesh Roddannavar  
Dept. of Studies in English,  
Karnataka University Dharwad-580 003 (India).

**Abstract:** The paper makes an attempt to examine the representation of women in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*. The novel has several reasons to call our attention; mainly because women's role during the freedom movement. The novel witnesses women’s take part into the freedom struggle against the British, the men’s power over women, influence of Gandhism, condition of women in an orthodox society etc.

**Key words:** Gandhian movement, Women’s education, Indian patriarchy, Sexual oppression

**Introduction:**

*Kanthapura* is the first novel by Raja Rao, and in many ways his most perfect and satisfying work. It was written in France, thousands of miles away from India and yet it gives a graphic, vivid and realistic account of the freedom struggle in India. This novel is a social document about a village in turmoil (Tabassum, p. 202). The political movement of 1930s that caused the upheaval in pre-independent India is reflected in this novel. Its historical action covers nearly ten years of India's struggle for freedom, including Gandhi's famous Dandi march during the Salt Satyagraha and the Civil Disobedience Movement. Whatever was happening on the political scene in India in those years finds its due reflection in the novel. It is a story of collective action, collective heroism and collective suffering of the people of Kanthapura (Tabassum, p. 202).

Raja Rao is a highly learned, sensitive and imaginative author. He is extolled for the delineation of his vast range of characters—especially his female characters who are believed to be representatives of `shakti' or the Feminine Power (Parmeshwaran, 1998). He has a very high idea of the position of woman in the world and constantly idealizes them. For him, womanhood is the primeval fact in the whole of evolution - she is the creative element in the human race. However, the perspective adopted by him for the delineation of his female characters in his works has not been consistent. At one time, he eulogizes woman for being an inspiration to men, but at other times, he criticizes her severely for being an impediment to a man's search for truth. He is not only eulogized but also castigated for the controversial depiction of his female characters who in spite of being the manifestations of `shakti' are helpless and helpless creatures eternally dependent on men. (p. 201)

This novel ushers in a fresh-breath of change with the depiction of women who shed the age-old bars of custom and orthodoxy and assert themselves by having active shares in the fight for the independence of their nation and awakening a new consciousness among the people (p. 203). The enthusiasm of both men and women and their equal participation in the freedom struggle reflects that women of Kanthapura have taken a great leap from the past to the present. But reality is different from what it appears to be. Women of Kanthapura have definitely come out of their households to fight for a bigger and noble cause but it is an illusion that these women have broken all the patriarchal paradigms of the social order and are leading a free and unfettered life. This world may be an illusion, as per Raja Rao's Advaitic belief, but the vicissitudes and vagaries of life faced by women of Kanthapura are certainly not of an illusory nature (p. 203)

Raja Rao emphasizes, at the call of Gandhi, the need of the participation of women in the freedom struggle. He finds a fine reason for bringing women out of the four walls by describing freedom struggle of the women of Kanthapura as a part of the continuing Ramayana. Gandhi is an Avtaara (incarnation) of Rama sent from heaven to rescue India (Sita) from the British (Ravana). No cause can be better than this to bring women out of the four walls. Thus this war against British becomes a crusade for the women to make their Mother India free. They are out fighting for their country unaware of their own existence (pp. 203-204)

Raja Rao presents the legend of Kenchamma, the Goddess of the hill, and raises it to the level of a myth (p. 204). Goddess Kenchamma slays the demon who comes to ask for the young men of the village as food and the young women as wives. Her name is repeated throughout the novel. At all times of trouble, the villagers turn to Kenchamma to come to their rescue, as she once did in the remote past. She is their powerful saviour who can overcome even the most formidable of enemies. Women of Kanthapura try to emulate the path of Goddess Kenchamma and become freedom fighters to bring freedom to Mother India. Thus, they become manifestations of `shakti' - the power (p. 204). This hidden power of women is used to get freedom from foreign hands. They become
mothers and protectors in the footsteps of Goddess Kenchamma (p. 204):

Kenchamma, Kenchamma
Goddess benign and bounteous,
Mother of earth, blood of life,
Harvest-queen, rain crowned,
Kenchamma, Kenchamma,
Goddess benign and bounteous. (Rao)

Raja Rao selects an elderly Brahmin widow, Achakka, to narrate the story of the novel Kanthapura. Her name appears only once in the novel, but it is through her eyes and her point of view that we see everything that happens in it. Achakka, who also participates in the Satyagraha led by Moorthy, narrates the events of the struggle with a sense of pride and achievement. She is a wonderful storyteller, who at once grips the attention of the reader and holds him captive as a listener to the end. Apart from her remarkable memory, she has a vivid imagination to be able to visualize things. That is possible because Raja Rao employs her as a mouthpiece, and grants her the author's privilege of omniscience (p. 204). After all, whatever she says in her narrative is what Rao himself allows her to say. But it goes without saying that she appears to be an authentic and convincing narrator because Achakka belongs to an upper caste Brahmin family. Being an elderly grandmother, she has seen life in Kanthapura for a long time, and has a good deal to say about it. Also being a devout Hindu who knows the Puranas, she has a good collection of stories from legends and epics, which she refers to frequently while narrating the story. This story is like any other Grandmother's tale but with a difference because Achakka, the narrator is only Rao's mouthpiece, not the creator of the story. That is the way Raja Rao justifies the authenticity and the credibility of the narrator, who is a woman (pp. 204-205).

The world of Kanthapura is full of widows (p. 205). All the major characters of the novel are widows. Whether it is Rangamma, Waterfall Venkamma, the narrator Achakka, Kamlamma, Seethamma, Ratna, or Narsamma. Rao deliberately chooses most of his female characters of Kanthapura as widows (p. 205). It can be said that Rao is the man who brings these widows to the forefront by making them Satyagrahis and places these women on the high pedestal. He states in The Serpent and the Rope "Virtue is virile. Behind every 'virtuous' Indian woman I felt the widow" (Rao). For him, widows are bundle of power, a 'shakti' which is to be used in the best possible way by making them Satyagrahis (p. 205). He makes them tell stories from the legends and the puranas and of Mahatma Gandhi not only to their grandchildren but also to the people of Kanthapura and promote the feelings of patriotism. They arrange Hari-Kathas and call everyone to listen to the myths and the legends, and this storytelling has not only a religious significance but also political significance; it serves a great deal by arousing the feelings of the people to fight for the nation (pp. 205-206).

Rao's orthodox upbringing could not allow him to think beyond the traditional belief that widows were a curse on the society who were forced to sacrifice themselves on the very pyre of their husbands' (p. 206). Widows were considered a great threat to society and were to be contained by appalling restrictions. Rao allows them to participate in the freedom struggle but he is not totally free from the orthodox belief that is evident in the climax of this novel when these women, being part of the national movement, bring curse to the village. Their movement is ruthlessly suppressed and they are forced to leave Kanthapura (p. 206).

The women are not supposed to be in the arena of power seekers (p. 207). They are trained to be passive followers of men who are destined to be the lead actors, be it in politics, the labor market, or society. The women of Kanthapura play a dynamic role in the national freedom struggle but they continue to exist on the periphery of the socio-economic and political scene. No doubt their sacrifices are second to none but they do not shift from their roles as supportive auxiliaries to being direct participants in the struggle. When Moorthy is in prison, Rangamma organizes the 'sevika-sangh'. She arranges newspapers to be delivered from the city so that the villagers remain informed about the activities of the Congress. When Moorthy is released, she arranges a proper welcome for him. When Rangamma too is arrested Ratna takes over the leadership of the group. But these women only perform a supportive duty rather than taking any bold decisions and therefore the movement virtually slows down in the absence of men. When Moorthy is released, Satyagrahis become enthusiastic again and it gives them a renewed hope for the success of their unequal fight against their colonial rulers (p. 207).

Raja Rao is against excessive subordination of women to men, but is not averse to women generally playing a subordinate role on the social level and he perceives women's political participation as an extension of their familial roles as the scriptures sanction it (p. 207). He urges upon the women to perform service in the following order: service towards the husband, the family and the country (p. 207). In case of any conflict arising between duty towards family and duty towards country, familial duties are expected to be their prime responsibility. These role models designed for the female have invariably deprived her of self-respect and declared a role for her not as a person in herself, but vis-à-vis her relationships with men (pp. 207-208). To render it in the words of Rehana Ghadially, "In a patriarchal culture, what we get is
a masculine’s definition of ideals and images of women.” Therefore, Rao carefully chooses widows as his Satyagrahi heroines because widows have no husbands at home and most of them are elderly and they have almost finished their duty towards their family. Rangamma is an issueless widow, Ratna became a widow when she was ten years old, and Achakka has only one grown-up grandson. These women of Kanthapura perform their household duties, a primary occupation for women, first and foremost and then go out to perform the work as Satyagrahis. The housework is highly intensive and is yet unpaid and free (p. 208):

The following Tuesday was a market-day in Kanthapura, and we

had risen early and lit the kitchen fires early and had cooked the

meals early and we had finished our prayers early, and when the

food was eaten and the vessels washed and the children sent with

the cattle- for this time they wouldn't come with us- we all

gathered at the temple. (Rao)

Domestic violence perpetrated against the women by their partners and close members of the family continues to remain a matter of silent suffering within the four walls (p. 208). This matter is identified as a typically private matter, made invisible in the society and kept under wraps. Women of Kanthapura during all the encounters with the police do not stay at home, but join the men in their defiant protest marches. They get beaten up with lathis and suffer broken bones; bear the atrocities thinking that it is the same as the beatings by their husbands'. Keeping that in mind, they follow the path of Ahimsa patiently. When Dore's (one of the villagers) wife Sundari begins to cry out and says she is frightened, Ratna consoles her by saying (p. 209):

[when your husband beats you, you don't hit back, do you? You only

grumble and weep. 'The policeman's beatings are the like!' and we

say, 'So they are.' And we begin to get more and more familiar with it.

And we say that in a week, in ten days' time, Moorthy will say

'March!' and we shall march behind him, and we shall do this and we

shall do that, and now when we meet Bade Khan our eyes seek his

lathi and we find it is smaller than we had imagined (Rao, p. 127).

Women of Kanthapura are mostly innocent, simple and truthful (p. 210). Prayer, worship and religious practices sum up the ways of life for them. It is easy to take them towards politics through the path of religion. They are staunch believers of Mahatma and cannot disobey him. Their reverence for Mahatma is exemplified in these lines (p. 210):

Our King, he was born on a wattle-mat,
He's not the king of the velvet bed,
He's small and he's round and he's bright
and he's sacred,
O, Mahatma, you're king and we are your
slaves (Rao, p. 145).

Again:
There's one Government, sister,
There's one Government, sister,
And that's the Government of the
Mahatma. (Rao, p. 148)

As the custodian of Indian culture, a woman is supposed to be an embodiment of the qualities of endurance and adjustment and is extolled for her stoic suffering and forbearance (p. 213). Narsamma is the perfect example of this category. When Moorthy is excommunicated by the society for mingling with pariahs, Narsamma, his mother, is shocked and dies out of sheer shame and guilt. Her death shows the power of tradition over women. Venkamma is another example of this category. She does not follow Gandhi because in her village Moorthy is the leader and he propagates the Gandhian ideology of eradicating the differences between the Brahmins and the pariahs. Narsamma, having her roots deeply embedded in the tradition refuses to accept this Gandhian practice (p. 213).

It is because of the Gandhian movement that we witness a considerable change in the portrayal of women in fiction that focus on the India of the 1940s (“Role of Women,” 2013).

History as well as fiction largely ignores the subaltern woman as opposed to her upper or middle class sisters (Tara 2006). As Spivak puts it, labouring under a double colonization, she is too deep in the shadow to be generally remembered (“Role of Women,” 2013). Kanthapura records the sexual oppression of the female workers of the Skeffington estate who are subject to the whims and desires of the Sahib (“Role of Women,” 2013):

“He is not a bad man, the new Sahib. He does not beat like his old uncle, nor does he refuse to advance money; but he will have this woman and that woman, this daughter and that wife, and everyday a new one and never the same two within a week.” (Rao)
If the chosen woman’s male guardian refuses to send her, his salary is cut and he gets a whipping ("Role of Women," 2013). The Sahib is only timid when it comes to a Brahmin girl. He had shot to death a Brahmin clerk in his employ who had dared to defy his sexual demand for the latter’s daughter. Although Skeffington had subsequently offered to pay for the damages to the murdered man’s wife and children, he’d eventually paid nothing, for, as Achakka puts it, “the Red-man’s court forgave him.” (Rao) Despite its obvious unjust outcome, the trial had a sequel that might sardonically, in its historical setting, be called happy. Skeffington never again touched a Brahmin girl, and even when a Pariah said no to him, the sahib “hardly ever,” in Achakka’s words, had the girl dragged to him at night (Tara, 2006).

The attachment and love for the mother is expressed in many ways in many places, through different characters (A). Motherhood is always associated with protection and love. The children feel protected and cared when the mother is around. In Raja Rao’s Kanthapura, motherhood is represented by Kenchamma. Kenchamma the Goddess is described as having motherly affection for the villagers. She protects them from sickness, diseases, provides them food and shelter, forgives them when they take to evil ways. A mother’s affection for her son is shown through Moorthy’s mother who could not tolerate her son being excommunicated. The very thought depresses her and she commits suicide. According to Raja Rao, mother’s love protects us always (A):

"Man is protected. You could not be without a mother. You are always a child." And he feels that the woman who gives us that love and affection is like a Mother, “the wife is ‘She who make you the child’.” (Rao)

Women’s education has always been a sore point with the Indian patriarchy ("Role of Women," 2013). Arguments for women’s education in metropolitan as well as colonial contexts, according to Loomba, rely on the logic that educated women would make better wives and mothers. At the same time, they have to be taught to remain in their places.

The women leaders in Kanthapura are both educated widows, Rangamma and Ratna. Rangamma acts as a source of information, knowledge and inspiration to the village women ("Role of Women," 2013).

Apart from telling them about other galaxies on the one hand and the equal rights that women share with the men in a far-away country on the other, Rangamma is a regular subscriber to newspapers from the city—the Tai–nada, Vishwakarnataka, Deshabandu, and Jayabharatha (Tara, 2006). These papers supply the villagers with the latest developments in the revolutionary struggle in the other parts of the country and later as to the trial and judgment of Moorthy and his fellow satyagrahis (Tara, 2006). Rangamma is the one who tells the women about Laxmibai and trains them to resist the lathi blows of the police passively. She modulates the deep core religious zeal in the women and adds a nationalist dimension to it ("Role of Women," 2013), ‘…we shall fight the police for Kenchamma’s sake, and if the rupture of devotion is in you, the lathi will grow as soft as butter and as supple as a silken thread, and you will hymn out the name of the Mahatma.’ On the other end there is Ratna. Initially, she is detested by the village women along with the evil Bhatta, for walking about the streets like a boy, wearing her hair to the left “like a concubine”, and wearing her jewellery — and all this being a widow. Ratna’s retort when accosted for this is remarkable (Tara, 2006):

“…when she was asked why she behaved as though she hadn’t lost her husband, she said that that was nobody’s business, and that if these sniffing old country hens thought that seeing a man for a day, and this when one is ten years of age, could be called a marriage, they had better eat mud and drown themselves in the river.” (Rao)

Later, in the absence of Moorthy and Rangamma, it is Ratna who leads the women against the police as the latter launch a violent assault against the village ("Role of Women," 2013). Another great leap towards liberation is achieved by the women in the novel by their deciding to read and comment on the vedantic texts when Ramakrishnayya dies (Tara, 2006). The women choose Ratna to read the texts and Rangamma to comment on them, a remarkable decision when one considers the contemporary furor over whether a woman at all has the right to read the Vedas or not! (Tara, 2006)

Theoretically, the women of Kanthapura hold supreme importance but practically these women do not really hold the centre stage and cannot bring out a change in their traditional roles (p. 214). These women are, no doubt, women who step out of the four walls for a bigger cause at the call of Gandhi but their mental and social status remains the same. They are still dependent, financially and psychologically on men and seek help and protection from them. It is inconceivable that a woman who has hardly a say in the household matters can be a leader outside, a woman who is a weakling inside can be a bundle of power outside. This novel negates the secular reality of women’s existence. According to Rao, women are manifestations of ‘shakti’ and he uses this ‘shakti’ to serve the very purpose of men (p. 214).
Conclusion:

Most of the women characters in Raja Rao cherish traditional notions (A). Influenced by Hindu myths and philosophies and the cultural tradition, they believed in patriarchal authority and are submissive. In Kanthapura, there are many traditional characters like waterfall Venkamma, Narasamma (Moorthy's mother) and Kamalamma, who believe in caste hierarchy and gender-hierarchy. Kamalamma’s daughter Ratna is modern in her views and she does not dress up like a widow in spite of being one. Her mother Kamalamma scolds, her and the village women talk ill of her (A):

[…]I when she was asked why she behaved as though she hadn’t lost her husband, she said that that was no body’s business[…]I but Kamalamma silenced her and called her a shameless and wicked tongued creature and said that she ought never to have been sent to school and that she would bring dishonor to the house […]I and when Kamalamma was gone they would spit behind her and make this face and that and throwing a handful of dust in her direction, pray for the destruction of the house” (Rao).

However, the major concern of Raja Rao is more concerned with the metaphysical aspects of life (A). In his early short stories and his first novel Kanthapura, Raja Rao's focus is on society and the condition of women at that time. Nevertheless, there is a shift of focus from the social to the metaphysical in his later novels and short stories. Hence, the writer concentrates more on the experience of the individual and the evolution of the character (A).

Rao acknowledges that judged by any standard, Kanthapura may be a major achievement but also a confused and immature creation (p. 214). He said in an interview published in the Illustrated Weekly of India in January 1964, "For me, literature is Sadhana - not a profession, but a vocation.” This was so even when he wrote Kanthapura, ”but I was then confused and a lost person. And that was why I gave up writing for a long time.” According to Rao, one must be a man first, and a writer afterwards. By man he means a metaphysical entity, one who realizes the Absolute Truth. This truth can be realized only through a Guru, who should be a realized being (pp. 214-215).

References:


