

A STUDY OF MYTHOLOGY OF RAMAYANA IN RAJA RAO'S

KANTHAPURA

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ABSTRACT

The most celebrated ancient heroic text of India is the 'Ramayana'. It provided themes for important later literary works in Indian languages. The poet Valmiki, who lived around the 3rd century BC, put the Ramayana into form. This epic tells the story of the hero Rama, the prince of Ayodhya and incarnation of the god Vishnu. Rama willingly accepts exile in the forest to redeem a promise made by his father. Rama's wife Sita is then kidnapped and Rama rescues her by slaying her abductor, the demon king Ravana. There was great impact of Ramayana on the work of the Indian English novelist and the winner of the Sahitya Akademi Award, Raja Rao. For him, literature is Sadhna, not a profession. Raja Rao first of introduced the elements of an epic breadth of vision, a metaphysical rigour, a philosophical depth and a symbolic richness in Indian English novel. He has learnt the art of narration from Valmiki. He has been influenced by Vedas. This research paper modestly attempts to study the mythology of Ramayana in Raja Rao's 'Kanthapura'.

KEYWORDS: Raja Rao, Kanthapura, Ramayana, myth, Mahatma.

Introduction:

The novel Kanthapura has been described as the 'most satisfying of modern Indian novels'. Dr. M. K. Naik considers Kanthapura is "..... a story of a small South Indian village caught in maelstrom of the freedom struggle of the 1930s and transformed so completely in the end that 'there's neither man nor mosquito' left in it."1 S.K. Srinivas Iyengar comments, "Gandhian politics, half poetical, half whimsical, sets the tone of Raja Rao's first novel Kanthapura"2 while C. D. Narasimha rightly observes, "There are at least three strands of experience in the novel: the political, the religious and social, and all there are woven inextricably into the one complex story of Kanthapura."3 The opinions and remarks of eminent critics of Raja Rao mainly upholds Kanthapura as a classic of the Gandhian movement and struggle for independence and its impact on the Indian masses, or a novel of

village in the mainstream of national and international happenings or a saga of village life with its various facets like socio-economic divisions, superstitions, religious and caste prejudices, blind faith in gods and goddesses, poverty, petty jealousies, dirty lanes, shady gardens, snake-infested forests, dirty pools, hills, rivers and changing seasons. It is a story of how Gandhi's struggle for independence from the British came to a typical village, Kanthapura, in southern India. Kanthapura is an obscure, out-dated and slumbering South Indian village which comes suddenly to life due to Gandhian Movement in the twenties. It sketches the step by step social development of a south Indian village Kanthapura, and its people, who following Gandhiji becoming successful not only in forming a Swadeshi or anti-colonial group and performing anti-colonial protests but also redeeming their village from the social evils of untouchability, racial discrimination, women backwardness, dis-unity and toddy or wine drinking. It experiences a total reformation from place with a common term, 'village' to village in a real sense of the term, in the end, where there is no caste distinction, backwardness and religious fanaticism, but self-employment, women emancipation, love, and social awareness. The enthusiasm that Gandhiji generated, the expectations he aroused and the attack he launched on the British authority, had all combined to initiate the very first anti-colonial movements in the peasant India which could lead to the conceptualization of an over turning of the power structure not only in its international aspect between British and India but also within the country where a peasant could now dare to violate a landlord, a farmer the unjust priest or police, or a high class – a pariah. The development is gradually noticed in form of the incidents through out the novel, from the mouth of the narrator, Moorthy and the village folk, in an interesting and story telling manner. The development is prominent and is bound to take place as we find the villager equating Gandhiji with Brahma, Shiva and Krishna who were all Saviours in our Hindu Mythology and anything said by them is bound to be true.

Raja Rao subtly weaves Indian sensibility, tradition, myth, mysticism, religion and narrative technique in his themes. The plots are naturally and effortlessly developed. Rao's first novel Kanthapura combines three strands of experience – the political, the religious and the social – in the Gandhian era. The novelist has inextricably interwoven these experiences deftly interpreting them through Indian myths and symbols into the one complex plot related with the village Kanthapura. In the plot of Kanthapura Raja Rao uses myth as technique which aims at an intermingle tale. He consciously uses mystical situations, characters and parallels in a contemporary or modern context. He seeks to illuminate the predicament of

contemporary man, viewing him in a larger perspective of time. Meenakshi Mukherjee calls Raja Rao “the most outstanding exponent”⁴ of this technique. Raja Rao says that “love of myth is inborn in an Indian.”⁵ Raja Rao writes in the Foreword:

*There is no village in India, however, mean, that has not a rich ‘sthala-Purana’, or legendary history, of its own. Some God or godlike hero has passed by the village – Rama might have dried her clothes, after her bath, on this yellow stone, or the Mahatma himself, on one of his many pilgrimages through the country, might have slept in this hut, the low one, by the village gate. In this way the past mingles with the present, and the gods mingle with men to make repertory of your grandmother always bright. One such story from the contemporary annals I have tried to tell.*⁶

For K.R.S. Iyengar, Kanthapura is the one of the finest examples of the use of myth as technique. He remarks that the villager in India is an inveterate myth-maker, and he has lost his links with the gods of tradition: the heroes and heroines of epics jostle with historic personalities, and time past and time projected into time future; Gandhi Mahatma is Ram, the Red-foreigner or the brown inspector of police who flourishes a lathi is but a soldier in ten-headed Ravana’s army of occupation and oppression. Nay more; the Satyagrahi in prison is the divine Krishna himself in Kamsa’s prison!

Kanthapura is Indian both in theme and treatment. To put it simply the novel is about Gandhi and our village. Gandhian faith is initiated into Moorthy. He becomes a dynamic force in the village. He becomes a Gandhian slowly and steadily. He has mysterious power to move the villagers. He organizes the Gandhi work in the village. He forms the Congress Committee in the village. He keeps the people constantly in touch with national events through newspapers and other publicity materials. He invites Harikatha man, mixes religion with politics. He preaches Swadeshi Movement, use of khadi, spinning of Charakha and eradication of the untouchability in the village by mixing and dining with Pariahs. He goes from door to door and explains the economics of the charakha and swadeshi. He inspires women to take to charakha spinning. Moorthy, the miniature Mahatma, in the story, experiences an epiphany and it is Gandhiji’s loving touch and words that makes him a Gandhi-man, leading him to boycott foreign goods and quit foreign university. In progressive meeting, Moorthy counsels a woman:

To wear cloth spun and woven with your own God given hands is sacred, says the Mahatma. And it gives work to the workless and work to lazy. And if you don’t need the cloth sister, ‘give it away to the poor’....Our country is being bled to death by foreigners. We have to protect our mother (p-23)

The most interesting matter that one must note is that the entire change or transformation, social and civic, as carried on by Moorthy, the representative of Gandhiji, is done only by different modes of communication through group discussions, religious chants, Ramlilas, gram sabhas etc. based on Gandhi-talks and no non-violent measures are needed or introduced. The novelist describes successfully the national upheavals under the impact of single personality – Gandhi. There are dharanas, picketing and Satyagraha. People including children and old men are injured and wounded in a large numbers. Women like Ratna, are beaten up and dishonoured but their spirit is not crushed. Shouts of ‘Gandhi Ki Jai’, ‘Vande Mataram’, ‘Inquilab Zindabad’ resound in the air and boost the morale of the people. There is a mass arrest and people are sent to jail. When Moorthy is arrested, Ratna continues his work to the movement continues. There is no tax. Campaign people refuse to pay the revenue. Their lands are laid waste and they are forced to leave the village. The villagers of all castes and professions and the labourers of the Coffee Estate readily meet the onslaught of the police and government. Satyagrahis are maimed; broken and scattered. Some face trials and some leave their native place Kanthapura and settle down in another village like Kashipura. Rangemma, Ratna, Moorthy etc. spend an allotted span in jail but the Gandhi-Irwin Pact and the political truce release the Satyagrahis. In the end, Moorthy leaves Gandhism. He writes a letter to Ratna, in which he expresses his disapproval of the philosophy of the Mahatma and professes his faith in Jawaharlal Nehru. He also writes “Is there now Swaraj in our states and is there not misery and corruption and cruelty there? Oh no, Ratna, it is the way of the master that is wrong. And I have come to realize bit by bit...” (183). Though the magical effect of Gandhiji was found bulleted through, to a certain extent, by the introduction of other idealism, for the common people it was like the God imprisoned for His wrong ways and the huge mass of disciples found no soil under their feet, but still they managed to keep faith on the Lord as He still was the source of strength and existence in their lives. Though Moorthy leaves Gandhi and Kanthapura, yet the other village members stay back firm rooted in Gandhi. They hope that he will return. Here is fine blend of a story and myth of Ramayana. Gandhi’s trip to England to attend the second Round Table Conference is invested with Puranic significance. As influenced by Vedas and Valmiki, Raja Rao has used the myth of Ramayana to focus the spiritual image of Gandhi and his work. The dominant myth of ‘Kanthapura’ is of ‘Ram-Sita-Ravana’ which is used to illustrate the fight between the Mahatma and the British. Raja Rao sees towards Gandhiji through the imaginative characters in the novel as ‘Rama’ the divine hero of the ‘Ramayana’, the foreigner, the red-

ruler, as Ravana, and release of Gandhi from the prison is pictured as the return of Rama from Lanka. The common people in 'Kanthapura' say:

The Mahatma will go to the Red-man's country and he will get us Swaraj....and Rama will come back from exile, and Sita will be with him, for Ravana will be slain and Sita be freed, and he will come back with Sita on his right in a chariot of the air, and brother Bharata will go to meet them with the worshipped 'sandals' of the master on his head. And they enter Ayodhya there will be a rain of flowers. Like Bharata we worship the sandals of the Brother saint....(p-183).

The faith and religious coating on the bitter political truth is prominent and 'Rama', i.e. the Mahatma, will go to England in the Round Table Conference and bring back 'Sita' i.e. independent India from the 'Ravanas', i.e. the British, and Pandit Nehru, i.e. 'Bharata' will welcome the Mahatma as the Ramayana dictates. Besides, myths are blended with politics through the Harikathas read by Jayaramchar and Ratna. The Harikathas on Parvathi's winning of Siva through penances easily explains the dilemma of motherland. It is said that the sage Valmiki entreated Brahma to send a god in human form who can save Bharata, the enslaved daughter, from the Red-men who are exploiting her economy, her people and her culture.

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