

# DELINEATION OF WOMEN CHARACTERS AND IMPACT OF FREEDOM MOVEMENT ON IDENTITIES OF WOMEN WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO RAJA RAO'S *KANTHAPURA*

Dr. Geeta Gupta\*

Associate Professor, H.K.M.V. Jind, Haryana, India

*Email ID: mangalgeet@gmail.com*

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## Abstract

*The contribution of Indian women in freedom struggle is noteworthy and admirable. They fearlessly and unflinchingly fought the hardships of patriarchal as well as British hegemony. Millions of women assisted freedom struggle by taking part in Non-cooperation Movement, Civil Disobedience Movement and Quit India Movement. They came out of sheltered existence when men were arrested and sent to prison. Raja Rao in the novel *Kanthapura* tells the story of fictional women characters who went through a radical change when they participated in freedom movement. The present paper makes an effort to examine women characters in *Kanthapura* and impact of freedom Movement on women. The unsung ordinary women of the village exhibit exemplary courage, practice drills to pose non violent resistance against the British. Irrespective of cast and clan women emerge unified against British repression. There is a profound change in their thought process engendering strong women who can fight against injustice and authority.*

## Paper Identification



\*Corresponding Author

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## Introduction

Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* is a masterpiece, a magnificent work of art that portrays Indian national movement and its impact on a small village. Seemingly, it is novel of political revitalization ingrained with myths and stories drawn from Ramayan and local mythic tales of the place. Srinivasa Iyengar writes that "This significant approach to Gandhian politics-half poetical, half whimsical sets the tone of Raja Rao's first novel, *Kanthapura*,...The tremors of Gandhi's impact on a South India village are recorded here in the chatty language of an elderly widow, and we see everything through the film of her memory, sensibility and temperament."<sup>1</sup> (390)

Raja Rao has created a splendid array of women characters in the novel. The present research paper focuses on delineation of women characters and impact of freedom movement on identities of women in the novel *Kanthapura*. Gandhi envisioned an elementary position for women in societal structure who can become an instrument in social change. He opined that women had better moral and spiritual powers as compared to men and envisioned a significant role for women in political arena which was necessary for impartial, just and non-violent society. Hundreds and thousands of women participated in Indian freedom struggle which made them come out of four walls of home and purdah system. Raja Rao was immensely influenced by Gandhian thoughts and portrays freedom struggle movement led by Mahatma Gandhi in his first novel *Kanthapura*. He depicts Gandhian values such as non violence, loving one's enemies, respect for women and abolishment of untouchability through his Brahmin hero Moorthy. While portraying impact of freedom movement on the simple people of the village, Raja Rao indirectly delineates the condition of women in 1940's in rural area of India and impact of freedom struggle on them. Women in the novel *Kanthapura* also play a significant role in *Satyagrah* Movement. Ordinary women of the village are ablazed with fervor for national movement. Their non descript self, comes out of their drab veneers to unite and fight for the country. This momentous effort on their part forges their new self which begins to question their earlier identities and their journey from *Kanthapura* to *Kashipura* symbolizes their new self.

Raja Rao portrays feminine sensibility through perspective of Achakka-a grandmother of the village. In her usual voluble manner, she conveys the story in *Sthal Purana* manner. The novel opens with geographical description of the region and delineation of goddess Kenchamma, whom the narrator affectionately calls 'our goddess'<sup>2</sup> (2) and 'Great and bounteous'<sup>3</sup> (2). She is living presence among the villagers and pervades every aspect of their life. She is protector, nurturer and life giver. Conversely, Mother India 'chief daughter Bharata, the goddess of wisdom

and well-being'<sup>4</sup> (15) is captivated by the Britishers and is in miserable condition. Mother India is equated with Sita, who is in exile, and must be freed from clutches of the wicked Ravana-the Britishers. The political strand in the garb of religion is introduced in the novel with the *harikatha* man Jayaramchar telling the story of Gandhi in the manner of sacred story of 'Lord Krishna' related in *Shrimad Bhagwat Geeta*. As temples are centres for women activities, they come to know about Gandhian thoughts through *harikatha*. Moorthy, a young Brahmin boy, becomes torch bearer of movement of freedom struggle and instills Gandhian Philosophy among the villagers. He distributes free *charkhas* given by congress committee among women of all castes and asks them to spin daily and contribute to the betterment of India's economy. There is initial resistance to the idea of spinning coarse cloth by Brahmin ladies and other women but gradually they come to terms with it.

Women are engrossed in their daily chores of life from cooking to washing utensils and taking care of children. The waves of Gandhian thoughts and modernity hit towns and gradually villagers also get a whiff of it. Bhatt who is the first Brahmin of the village condemns it openly and decries it as it can hinder his money lending business. He says;

What with their modern education and their modern women. Do you know, in the city they already have grown up girls, fit enough to be mothers of two or three children going to the universities? And they talk to this boy and that boy, what they do amongst themselves, heaven alone knows.<sup>5</sup> (38-39)

The Patriarchal system can not make place for new roles of women and their vision is limited to stereotypical position of women limited to marriage and child bearing. Education for women is deemed unnecessary and child marriage is normal. Ratna, a young widow, who doesn't fulfil the parameters set for widows is criticized for her dress and demeanour. The narrator says, "He (Bhatt) could never utter a kind word to that young widow, who not only went about the streets like a boy, but even wore her hair to the left like a concubine, and she kept her bangles and her nose rings and earrings."<sup>6</sup> (44) The same Ratna wins the hearts of women when she bravely takes up leadership role during absence of Moorthy and Rangamma and steers the unprotected women during onslaught of British soldiers.

The so called-keepers of morality, the new Sahib of Skeffington Coffee Estate, do not hesitate to exploit young girls at his estate. If they deny sexual favours, they are threatened and their wages are cut. Women are married early and to men who are much older to them. But winds of change progressively touch Kanthapura's shore in conjunction with Gandhian philosophy.

Rangamma is foremost among all women characters. The narrator calls her ‘no village kid’<sup>7</sup> (43). She is educated widow and even subscribes to newspapers in her home. She is well versed with modern world and is chosen as women member of the congress committee. When Moorthy is arrested she goes to Karwar to know about latest developments in Moorthy’s case. Exposure to Sadhu Narayan’s guidance and Gandhian thoughts bring about a subtle change in Rangamma’s mental make-up. The change in her personality is also felt by other women in the village. “Why, our Rangamma is becoming a learned person and the more we listened the more she impressed us, and felt there was a new strength come in Rangamma”<sup>8</sup> (147). Rangamma forms a Sevika Sangh and teaches Pranayama and Yoga asanas to women. She commands women and conducts group meditation and drills to practice non-violent resistance. “We should all get together and stand and obey her, and that when the Mahatma will call us to act, we shall have to go out and fight for him”<sup>9</sup> (148) But women such as Nanjamma have doubts. She says “why I am not a man to fight.”<sup>10</sup> (148) Rangamma motivates them with stories of Rani Lakshmibai, Rani Padmavati, Kamala Devi, Sarojini Naidu and Annie Beasant. Alluding to ordinary activities of daily life, Rangamma says, “we think of nothing but the blowpipe and the broomstick, and milking of many calves”<sup>11</sup> (150).

Subversion of these roles is not taken up affably by the men. For each over sight in homely duties, women are beaten up and scolded. “Why soon it will be as if the men will have to wear bangles and cook, so that you women may show yourself off!”<sup>12</sup> (151). Rangamma tries to pacify men and women both and asked women not to overlook their husbands and children. But it is difficult for women to come to terms with their previous roles. Achakka gives voice to her dilemma and says, “But how can we be like we used to be?”<sup>13</sup> (152)

The silent peaceful village women slowly and steadily wake up to Gandhi’s clarion call. Along with common place concerns of their life, they are imbued with the new energy and a gradual transformation takes place. Women go along with men for picketing toddy booths. They are beaten and insulted but they keep on moving. When they come back from picketing they are venerated as pilgrims. People from distant villages offer them fresh milk and eatables. “Learned Sir, I hear some pilgrims come, and I have a new calved cow, and I can offer fresh milk to the pilgrims.”<sup>14</sup> (189)

The description is exceedingly reformist in spirit and purport. Women do away with conservative duties given to them by patriarchal world and perform a leading role in bolstering the freedom movement in the absence of Moorthy. Their conventional gender roles are switched with men doing bhajans and women playing leadership roles. Patriarchal society delegates

submissive position to women limiting them to domestic chores and servile position. But in Kanthapura women come out of four walls of home and indulge in proactive roles in public domain. Kanthapura can also be read as a feminist text that undermines the conservative gender roles assigned to them.

The unnamed women of Kanthapura show commendable courage and peaceful resistance when British forces surround them and they are devoid of any assistance from men and face worst form of repression. It is no less than a miracle that these common women become corner stone in the struggle of freedom in Kanthapura. The poor villagers of Kanthapura lose everything, but they do not lose hope and courage. Rachi, one of the women, burns the village and villagers march out of Kanthapura and reach Kashiapur. In conclusion, the women of Kanthapura show heroic courage and follow Gandhi's non-violent means to oppose British repression. They express higher moral and spiritual fortitude as compared to men in tough times. When they reach Kashiapur they adopt traditional roles again barring a few women such as Ratna and Rangamma but a new light as a seed burns in their souls that can sprout again in favourable times.

#### **Work Cited**

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