

Postcolonial Literature
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Lecture No. #12
Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (II)

Welcome back, to this course, on Postcolonial Literature

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Raja Rao's
***Kanthapura* (1938)**

Today, we will continue, with our discussion, of Raja Rao's novel, *Kanthapura*. Now, as we remember, we are reading Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, vis-a-vis the Gandhian Discourse of Nationalism and Decolonisation. And, in our previous discussion, we had primarily focused on two aspects, of the Gandhian Discourse. The first of these two aspects, is the notion of a return to the village.

Now, you remember, that for Gandhi, the journey to reconnect oneself, with the glorious India of the Precolonial past, involved a turning away from the urban centres, where one is exposed to the "Corrupting influence of the Western Civilisation", and return back to the villages, where the traditional Indian ways of life had remained unaffected, by the colonial intervention. So, this trope of return, is very significant, in the Gandhian Discourse of Nationalism.

But, there is also another aspect. And, this second aspect, which again, we had discussed in a previous meeting, is about Gandhi's insistence, to make Nationalism, mass based, to connect

with the masses, right. So, for Gandhi, the nationalist project of creating a decolonised future for India, for instance, was not the solitary affairs of English educated individuals from the Middle Class, who were engaged in an attempt to elevate themselves, through their learning the code of their coloniser's civilisation.

Rather, for Gandhi, it was not this alleviation, that informed the true path of Nationalism. But, rather, it was an attempt to go down to the level of the masses, and to reconnect with them. So, these are the two aspects, the two salient aspects of Gandhian Discourse, that we had talked about. And, I had also said that, Moorthy, who is a central character in Raja Rao's novel *Kanthapura*, initially appears in the novel as an embodiment, of both these two aspects of the Gandhian Discourse.

Thus, for instance, the novel tells us about, Moorthy's return to his native village *Kanthapura*, from the city where he had gone to study in a university. Moorthy has a vision of Gandhi, while he is in the city. And, this vision convinces him, that his university education is "Foreign". And, his cloths too, are foreign. And, this realisation makes Moorthy, promptly give up both his university education, as well as his foreign clothes, and return to the dumb millions of the villages.

This is how, Gandhi speaks of the villages, in his *Hind Swaraj*, if you remember. Now, in the novel, Moorthy's return to *Kanthapura*, is also connected with the Gandhian notion of making Nationalism, mass based. Because, Moorthy's arrival in *Kanthapura*, leads him to organise the people of his village, as well as the nearby *Skeffington* coffee estate, into a non-violent struggle, against the colonial Authority.

And, his efforts to reform the village society, earns him the reputation, of being a local Gandhi, a local saint, who replicates the figure of Gandhi, for the villagers. Thus, Moorthy's portrayal in this novel, not only brings together the various traits of Gandhian ideology, but also beautifully presents in a fictional form, the charisma and the appeal of the figure of Gandhi, as a mass leader.

but today, I will argue, that in this novel, Raja Rao also introduces, a strong element of criticism of the Gandhian Discourse. And, this note of criticism, though it is subtle, yet nevertheless, it is all pervasive, in the novel. So, today, the Lecture will primarily focus on

this subtle, but all pervasive critique of Gandhian Ideology, and Gandhian Discourse, that informs the novel Kanthapura, and to understand this element of criticism, that is there, in Raja Rao's novel.

Let us go back, to the two points, that we have already discussed. First, the return to the village. And second, the mass based Nationalism. And, let us see, how Kanthapura, both represents these two aspects of the Gandhian Discourse, and also undermines them, undercuts them, criticises them. So, let us start for instance, with Moorthy's return to the village. If you read the novel, you will see, that the narrator, that Raja Rao uses in Kanthapura, is an elderly Brahmin lady, of the village Kanthapura.

And, her name is Achakka. And, it is important to remember this, the fact that, Kanthapura is narrated by someone like Achakka. And, the reason for this, is because, Raja Rao uses the perspective of this elderly village lady Achakka, to subtly undercut the Gandhianism, that Moorthy represents. And, we see this in play, quite early in the novel, when Achakka introduces to the readers, her native village, and its inhabitants.

So, while talking about the Brahmin quarters, and she talks about these distinct caste-based quarters, that form the village geography. And, we will return to these caste segregations, later on, in our discussion today. But Achakka, while describing the residents of the Brahmin quarters, talks about, a character called Dore. And, who is Dore? Well, Dore is a young man, who is from Kanthapura, but who had left his native village, and had gone to the city, to become a university graduate.

And, Achakka tells us that, though he was not very successful in his studies, Dore picked up quite a few new habits, while he was in the city. So, he had, in Achakka's words, developed city ways, read city books, and even called himself a Gandhi man. Now, this repeated stress on the word, City, both shows an effort by Achakka, to underline the foreignness of these new ways and new books, to which Dore was exposed in the city.

And, also this repeated stress, conveys a sense of disapproval, on the part of Achakka. Now, this should immediately remind us, of Gandhi's own characterisation of the western style university, and the foreign ways of the city, as evils, that Indians should shun, so as to escape

from the corrupting influence, of the Satanic Western Civilisation. And, so far, Gandhian Discourse, and Achakka's point of view, is almost the same.

But, the irony here, is of course, that Achakka also classifies, Dore's becoming a Gandhi man, as a new-fangled idea, that he gets from the city. So, from Achakka's perspective, Gandhianism, just like the city ways and the city books, is a thing, that Dore picks up, after he moves out of the ambit of his native village.

So ironically, the very city, which the Gandhian Discourse of Nationalism, presented as the den of vices and diseases, is in Kanthapura, presented as a space, where young villagers like Dore, gets exposed to the Gandhian ideals, and they turn themselves into foreigners, who are hardly recognisable, by elderly villagers like Achakka. And therefore, Achakka's contempt for this Gandhi man Dore, who adopted city ways and city habits, is unequivocal.

Now, the reason, I dwelt on this assessment of Dore by Achakka, at such great length, is not because, Dore plays a very significant role, in this novel. He is not a very significant character. In fact, he is hardly mentioned, after these, for first pages. But, Dore's significance, the reference to Dore, the significance of that, lies in the fact, that immediately after expressing her displeasure regarding him, Achakka introduces the character of Moorthy, for the first time.

So, after this description of Dore, Achakka then immediately after that, goes on to describe Moorthy. And, Moorthy is introduced to the reader, for the first time. And, in contrast to Dore, Achakka praises Moorthy, highly. Now, we must remember here, that the career graph of Moorthy, is almost an exact replica of Dore's, in the sense that, just like Dore, Moorthy too went away from the village to the city, to pursue the foreign university education.

And, he also just like Dore, came under Gandhian influence in the city, and became a Gandhi man, which eventually resulted in his return to the village. But, as I mentioned, Achakka's attitude towards Moorthy, is in sharp contrast to her attitude, towards Dore. So, whereas Dore earns her displeasure, Moorthy is highly praised for leading his life, in almost the exact same way.

And, the reason for this, is not because Achakka takes a different view, towards Moorthy's Gandhianism. But rather, and this becomes very clear in, how Achakka tells us about Moorthy. Her approval of Moorthy, comes from the fact that, Moorthy was a childhood friend of Achakka's own son, Seenu. Indeed, rather than praising Moorthy, for becoming one of the Gandhi man, villagers like Achakka, at least in the initial stage, remains thoroughly sceptical, about the changes that Moorthy seeks to make in the village, to spread the ideals of Gandhi.

So, to understand this skepticism, let us look at a few instances. Let us take for instance, Moorthy's attempt to popularise, the use of Charka, among the villagers. Now, the Charka and the weaving of Khadi, were perhaps the most important Gandhian symbols, of the return to Indianness, and the boycotting of the Satanic Western Civilisation, in the Gandhian Discourse. So, Gandhi's call, therefore to weave Khadi, was always accompanied by his call, to do away with the foreign made clothes.

And indeed, Moorthy's return to the village from the city, is initiated by his burning in a bonfire, his foreign clothes, along with his foreign university books. But, his return to Kanthapura, does not automatically mean, that he returns to a life, where the Charka, and where weaving of the Khadi, is predominant. In fact, when Moorthy asks the villagers, to shun the foreign clothes, and to weave Khadi for themselves, a character called Nanjamma, points out Moorthy, that Brahmins do not spin.

And, that such spinning is properly, the occupation of the weaver caste. Now here, in Nanjamma's opposition to weaving, we come across a significant point, which complicates our understanding of the Gandhian return, as represented by Moorthy. Moorthy's activism in the village, is strongly characterised by his opposition, to the system of caste segregation. In fact, Moorthy spend almost as much time, trying to break various caste taboos, as he is trying to mobilise the villagers, for the Anticolonial cause.

This makes Moorthy, confront age old caste prejudices, around which the entire village life is organised. And, this is evident, even in the way Achakka introduces, the village, in the first pages of the novel. So, for instance, as I told you, that Achakka introduces the village landscape, as divided into various quarters, inhabited by specific castes. So, the village is a unity, which has a number of segregating lines, separating one caste from the other.

Indeed, when the character Bhatta, and we will talk about Bhatta, more later. So, Bhatta is the Village Priest, and the Moneylender. And, he also becomes the sort of primary enemy, the arch enemy of Moorthy, in the novel. So, when he also criticises Moorthy, his criticism is based on the fact, that Moorthy is attacking, the age-old traditional caste system.

So, Moorthy's return to the village, is therefore marked less by the desire, to accept the traditional ethos of the village life, and more by the desire, to transform the village population into a homogeneous mass, which can then be directed against the colonial Authority. Thus, the story of Moorthy's return, is not that of his smooth integration into the village, which is otherwise, so exalted in the Gandhian Discourse as the repository, of the true Indian way of life.

Rather, the story is of Moorthy, disrupting the regular pattern of the village life, in Kanthapura. And, this is not only evident in his efforts, to break the various caste taboos, but also in his efforts, to politically mobilise the women, and bring them out of the domestic confines, which the patriarchal way of the village life, imposes on them.

Thus, we see Moorthy's Anticolonial movement, foreground a figure like Ratna, who as a young widow, with a mind of her own, is detested by the patriarchal order of Kanthapura, and is shunned as a "Concubine". So, here again, we see Moorthy to be a disruptive, and even foreign influence, in the village life. And, rather than, he returning as a prodigal son, who tries to assimilate himself into the existing rhythm of the village life, Moorthy emerges as a major force, which destroys many of the age-old practices, that held the village together.

But, here I need to clarify, that I am not judging any of Moorthy's actions here, in terms of whether, they were morally the right things to do or not. What I am trying to point out, is that Moorthy's physical return to the village, cannot be interpreted as a simplistic assimilation into the village life. In fact, Moorthy's desire to transform the village, to which he returns, and his efforts to confront the evils of caste segregation and of patriarchy, renders questionable, the very idea of return.

So, we are confronted with a question like, is the return to a golden age possible, just by physically going back to the village life, which has largely remained untouched by the colonial influence, even though, it is written by caste and gender discrimination. Now, here

you see, what Raja Rao is doing, Chinua Achebe is going to do the exact same thing, in his *Things Fall Apart*.

Because, like Achebe's novel, *Kanthapura* too brings out the fault lines, that already plague the traditional indigenous society, even when it is bereft of the corrupting influence of colonialism. Thus, these two novels, both *Kanthapura* and Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, make the notion of a simplistic return, problematic as a decolonisation strategy. Now, I would like to end this discussion on *Kanthapura*, by talking about how, apart from the idea of return, the novel also criticises the Gandhian attempt, to make Anticolonial Nationalism, mass based.

Now, a superficial reading of the novel, will perhaps convince the reader, that Moorthy, does managed to kindle within the villagers, a spirit of Nationalism, and transform them, into a united opposition to the colonial Authority, by breaking the behaviours of caste segregation, and patriarchal narrowness. In a careful reading will reveal, that the force of opposition and resistance, that Moorthy kindles within the villagers, does not automatically, get directed against the British rule.

But, before we discuss the complex dynamics of this Anticolonial movement, that happens within the village of *Kanthapura*, let us for a moment, consider the Skeffington coffee estate. Because, there too, Moorthy manages to organise an Anticolonial resistance. Now, the Skeffington coffee estate, we are told, is run by a British. And, the novel describes, how Indians, from all over the country, are brought there with false promises, and are then forced to work there, almost as bonded labourers.

So, in other words, the coffee estate is presented as a site of, Barbaric, Violence, and Exploitation, where the line, distinguishing between the British colonial exploiter, and the poor Indian exploited, is very clearly drawn. It is unmistakable. So, Moorthy's call to resist the oppressions of the Authority, of the exploitative White man, finds ready acceptance, among the labourers of the coffee estate. And, they almost immediately, rise to the occasion.

But, if you compare this, with the village of *Kanthapura*, there we see that the patterns of oppression, are more complex. And though, Moorthy tries to convince the villagers, that the White man is exploiting them economically, for the villagers, the more real face of economic exploitation, is the Moneylender Bhatta, for instance. And, now the problem here is that the

Bhatta, is not only not a British coloniser, he is also not a foreigner, or even a city bred man, in fact as a village priest, he is thoroughly integrated within the structure of the village life.

And, Moorthy's discourse of Anticolonial Nationalism, fails to address the exploitation, that someone like Bhatta, carries out. So, in other words, do Moorthy recognises the economic exploitation, that goes on between the coloniser and the colonised. He remains, at this stage in the novel, impervious to the class exploitation, that goes on between, one Indian and another.

So, almost throughout the novel, Moorthy's focus primarily remains on, talking about the colonial exploitation, which happens between the British coloniser and the subjugated Indians. But, he does not really think through, the exploitation of one Indian by another, which is a class exploitation. Thus, when in Chapter 15, an elderly lady asks Moorthy, whether his fight for freedom is going to free her, from the exploitation of an Indian Revenue Collector, who beats his own wife, and who also coerces the whole village.

Moorthy is at a loss, for answer. Hence, while reading the novel, one is never very sure, whether the villagers, I mean, whether they do rise and resist the oppression. But, we are left slightly unsure, whether this villagers is resistance, that Moorthy organises, is directed at the White man's government, which for most of the villagers, remain a distant entity, or is it directed to the more immediate Indian exploiters like Bhatta, for instance, or the Revenue Collector.

Because, after all, in spite of Moorthy's elaborate explanation of the ways, in which the White man is economically exploiting the villagers, for people like Ratna for instance, or Rangamma, they find the most pleasure, when they see the granary of Bhatta, going up in flames. Because, it is Bhatta, and not any White man, who lends them money at exorbitant rates, and who starves them and their children of food.

So, the anger, is very much directed, at certain Indians like Bhatta, for instance. And, therefore, within a colonial society, oppression, is not merely evident, in the relation between the British and the Indian, but also informs the class relations of one Indian to the other. Now, the novel in fact ends, with Moorthy, realising this class difference and class exploitation, as one of the major sources of crisis in the Indian society.

And, thus as an Anticolonial activist, we see that, he finally changes his affiliation, from Gandhian idealism, to the Nehruvian dream of Realitarianism. And, Moorthy therefore, I mean, though this novel, is usually read as a Gandhian novel, as almost a propaganda of Gandhian idealism. At the end of the novel, we actually see the central character Moorthy, transforming into a Nehruvian character, and shifting his allegiance from Gandhi to Nehru.

So here, we end our discussion on Kanthapura. And, in our next Lecture, we will discuss Rabindranath Tagore, and Frantz Fanon. And, we will look into their, distinct criticisms, of the Middle Class led, Anticolonial Nationalism. Thank you