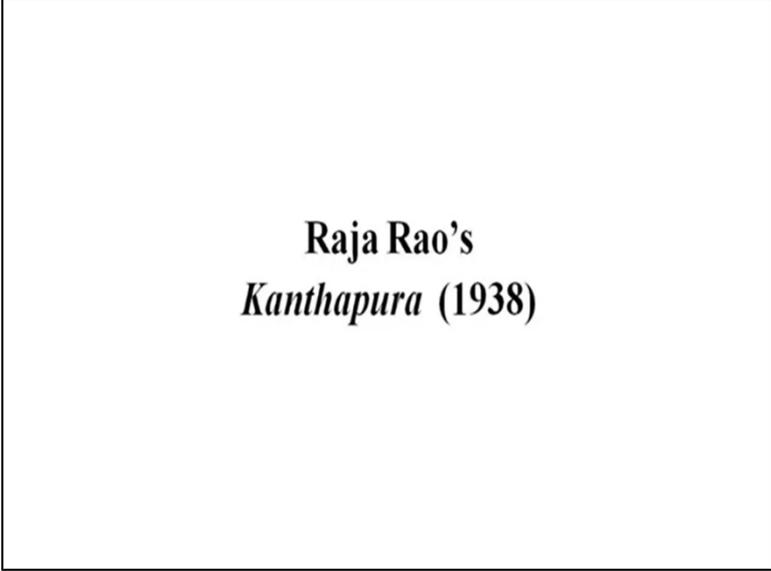


Postcolonial Literature
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Lecture No. #12
Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (II)

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, under curse 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 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 of 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 are 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 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 spends 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. 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, though 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.