

Towards a Limited Emancipation: Women in Raja Rao's "Kanthapura"

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STUDIES UNDERTAKEN OF *Kanthapura* thus far have focussed for the most part on the manner in which the novel characterizes the "Indian renaissance" under Gandhi's leadership. The approaches taken by M. K. Naik and K. S. Ramamurti are typical in this regard. Naik declares, in *Dimensions of Indian English Literature*, that

Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938) is easily the finest evocation of the Gandhian age in Indian English fiction. This story of a small south Indian village caught in the maelstrom of the Gandhian movement successfully probes the depths to which the nationalistic urge penetrated, and getting fused with traditional religious faith helped rediscover the Indian soul. (105-06)

K. S. Ramamurti, similarly, considers *Kanthapura* a "miniature version of resurgent Bharath in which we see the pilgrim's progress of a great nation marching towards the promised land of freedom carrying on its shoulders the burden of poverty and hunger" (64). While these "standard" approaches are significant to the study of Rao's *oeuvre*, they often fail to recognize that the novel could be read also as a *rite de passage* undertaken by Indian women during the struggle for Swaraj—a process which led these women to re-examine archaic institutions that they had unquestioningly accepted for so long, to abandon many of their prejudices, and to control their destiny in a way they were not able to do before. The level of emancipation achieved, of course, is very limited; what is patent, however, is that these women who initially banded themselves together to battle the Raj succeed in initiating a movement which is imbued with its own dynamic

and rationale—a movement that could be thwarted but not destroyed.

It is now commonplace to draw parallels between colonialism and the position of women in society. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin claim in *The Empire Writes Back*, for instance, that women

share with colonized races and peoples an intimate experience of the politics of oppression and repression, and like them they have been forced to articulate their experiences in the language of their oppressors. Women, like post-colonial peoples, have had to construct a language of their own when their only available “tools” are those of the “colonizer.” (174-75)

Feminist commentators take this argument a step further. To Susan Sontag, all women

live in an “imperialist” situation in which men are colonialists and women are natives. In so-called Third World countries, the situation of women with respect to men is tyrannically, brutally colonialist. In economically advanced countries (both capitalist and Communist) the situation of women is neocolonialist: the segregation of women has been liberalized; the use of physical force against women has declined; men delegate some of their authority, their rule is less overtly institutionalized. But the same basic relations of inferiority [sic] and superiority, of powerlessness and power, of cultural underdevelopment and cultural privilege, prevail between women and men in all countries. (184-85)

Kanthapura, of course, was written long before the upsurge of interest in Women’s Studies; still, it is apparent that the claims made by these commentators are to some degree valid for this novel. Soon after the women establish a Sevika Sangha in *Kanthapura*, Najamma experiences this nightmare:

I dreamt my husband was beating me and beating me, and I was crying and my bangles broke and I was saying, “Oh, why does he beat men [sic] with a stick and not with his hands?” and when I saw him again, it was no more my husband, it was Badé Khan. (106-07)

Badé Khan, the most odious representative of the Raj in *Kanthapura*, merges with Najamma’s husband in this dream. Clearly, the two forms of authority are not always separable, and Rao, here, anticipates the observations of later critics.¹ Because Rao privileges the struggle against British rule, however, these other

concerns are often buried in the text; consequently, it is necessary, on occasion, to "read against the grain" (Spivak 25). Such a reading strategy indeed helps to produce the "Other text," which is "a narrative hidden from the official story" (Said vii).

Some critics are not prepared to search for this "Other text," however. Shantha Krishnaswamy claims, in *The Woman in Indian Fiction in English*, that "sex does not enter the picture as a differentiating factor" (32) in *Kanthapura*. This critic adds, subsequently, that nowhere in Rao's work

do we find the woman having a role equal to that of the man. She neither determines her life, nor defines herself as man does. She can be a part of his transcendent vision only by denying her own reality. (56)

Krishnaswamy is surely wrong to insist that gender is not a determining factor in *Kanthapura*. The title of the novel is sufficient indication that women are the major players, and as Meena Shirwadkar—another critic who focusses on the issue of women in Indian fiction in English—so rightly observes, the narrator's constant invocation of the goddess Kenchamma ensures that a female principle pervades the novel (87). Krishnaswamy's second point is challenging, however, and must be addressed. There can be no doubt that the women follow the directives of their men, initially. They venerate leaders, like Moorthy, and are subservient to their husbands in their own homes. Indeed, the transformations would not have taken place in *Kanthapura* without the inspiration of Gandhi's message and Moorthy's leadership. At crucial moments during the struggle these women look to their men for protection. After one of the first attacks on the *satyagrahis* in *Kanthapura*, the women rest: "And when the beds were laid and the eyelids wanted to shut, we said, 'Let them shut,' for we knew our men were not far and their eyelids did not shut" (156). As the novel progresses, the women begin to have doubts about the movement not only because of the *lathi* charges, but also because they are on the verge of being evicted from their lands. Still, they shake off their doubts, and decide to continue with the struggle, secure in the knowledge that "Men will come from the city, after all, to protect us!" (162). Patent in these statements is the recognition that women need men as their

protectors, and as their spiritual and political guides because they are incapable of fending for themselves.

This subservience, this dependence is particularly evident in marital relationships. According to Kumari Jayawardena,

Gandhi's ideal woman was the mythical Sita, the self-sacrificing, monogamous wife of the Ramayana, who guarded her chastity and remained loyal to Rama in spite of many provocations. Sita was "promoted" as the model for Indian women. (96)

Such women are not uncommon in *Kanthapura*. The Brahmins, for instance, talk highly of Sankar's late wife, Usha, who was "such a godlike woman. She would never utter a word loud, and never say 'nay' to anything. And when she walked the streets, they always say what a holy wife she was and beaming with her wifehood" (95-96). Significantly, these sentiments are expressed by the female narrator who implies that this "Sita model" is a goal to which all women should aspire. Such behaviour would be regarded very highly in the kind of society Usha lived in, but recent criticism claims that these ideals were propagated to ensure that women remain subservient. Maria Mies concludes:

Gandhi was perhaps hardly conscious of the fact that his ideal of womanhood, which he considered to be a revival of the Hindu ideal, contained in fact many traits of the puritan-Victorian ideal of woman, as it was preached by the English bourgeoisie.

(Qtd. in Jayawardena 96)

When the women fail to live up to these "norms," or begin to organize their lives according to their own needs, the men use their physical strength to bring them "back into line." This phenomenon is most apparent when the women start the Sevika movement in *Kanthapura* once Moorthy and the others are imprisoned:

And when our men heard of this, they said: was there nothing left for our women but to vagabond about like soldiers? And everytime the milk curdled or a dhoti was not dry, they would say, "And this is all because of this Sevi business," and Radhamma's husband beat her on that day he returned from village inspection, though she was seven months pregnant. (105)

Clearly, the women in *Kanthapura* are exploited, and during the early part of the novel they are denied the freedom to control

their own affairs; still, the issue is somewhat complicated because Gandhi regarded a woman's ability to endure suffering as a key to the success of his non-violent protest movement. He says, "woman is more fitted than man to make *ahimsa* [non-violence]. For the courage of self-sacrifice woman is anyway superior to man" (qtd. in Jayawardena 97). It could be argued, of course, that this is yet another surreptitious move on the part of men to ensure that women remain subservient; in other words, by impressing upon women that this ability to endure suffering is a positive, the men succeed in perpetuating the *status quo*. Yet the true *satyagrahi* is supposed to employ these traits for peaceful non-cooperation. Gandhi advocates passive resistance to oppression not passive acceptance:

Non-violence in its dynamic condition means conscious suffering. It does not mean meek submission to the will of the evil-doer, but it means the pitting of one's whole soul against the will of the tyrant. Working under this law of our being, it is possible for a single individual to defy the whole might of an unjust empire to save his honour, his religion, his soul, and lay the foundation for that empire's fall or regeneration. (49)

The significance of the relationship between men and women is neither fully explored nor resolved because the men are eventually taken away by the forces of the Raj; consequently, there is very little interaction between the sexes towards the end of *Kanthapura*. The novel then focusses on the freedom struggle that in one village at least is now organized by women. The women not only use their fortitude and their ability to perform *ahimsa* to combat colonial aggression, but in the process some of their number take significant strides towards their emancipation.

Ratna is one individual in the novel to defy both the oppressors of the Raj and the conservative traditions of the village and to achieve some measure of success. To be a Brahmin widow in a rural environment during this period was to be placed in an unenviable position. Widows were either required to perform *sati* or to shave their hair and to lead a very secluded life. Ratna challenges the constraints imposed by widowhood, although the first Brahmin, Bhatta, and the spiteful Venkamma challenge her at every turn. Her rebelliousness is best captured here:

Bhatta rose up to go, for he could never utter a kind word to that young widow, who not only went about the streets alone like a boy, but even wore her hair to the left like a concubine, and she still kept her bangles and her nose rings and earrings, and 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 she was ten years of age, could be called a marriage, they had better eat mud and drown themselves in the river. (30)

Rao, in such passages, comes perilously close to propounding a thesis, for some of Ratna's words echo Gandhi's stated views on widowhood:

Voluntary widowhood consciously adopted by a woman who has felt the affection of a partner adds grace and dignity to life, sanctifies the home and uplifts religion itself. Widowhood imposed by religion or custom is an unbearable yoke and defiles the home by secret vice and degrades religion. (Qtd. in Jayawardena 96)

What is noteworthy, however, is that Ratna gradually wins the respect of the others to the extent that, when Moorthy and Rangamma are imprisoned and their land is on the verge of being auctioned to the "sahib-looking people" (157) from the town, some of the women confidently declare, "come, we will go to Ratna; for Ratna is our chief now and she will lead us out of it" (158). The women, of course, demand too much of Ratna. (In Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood*, Nyakinyua and Wanja, though formidable leaders of the community in their own way, are unable to prevent Ilmorog from being taken over by Chui, Nderi, and the other odious people from the city; Ratna, similarly, does not prevail over the stooges of the Raj who have bayonets, bullets, and the full force of the law on their side.) Her transformation from a despised widow to a leader of the *satyagrahis*, however, is remarkable.

Even more influential than Ratna is her aunt, Rangamma. Rangamma, as the narrator declares, is "no village kid" (28). Rangamma proves that this confidence is not misplaced when, after Moorthy's incarceration, and the death of the local interpreter of Hindu texts, Ramakrishnaya, she takes on both roles. One of the strategies adopted by the *harikatha* man, and later, Ramakrishnaya, to educate the villagers on the iniquitous rule of

the Raj is to draw parallels between the ancient Hindu texts and the struggle for Swaraj in India. Rangamma, too, utilizes this strategy to convince the villagers: "Sister, if for the thorny pit the illusioned fall into, you put the foreign Government, and for the soul that searches for liberation, you put our India, everything is clear" (102), she says at the beginning of one meeting. The narrator concludes: "and the more we listened the more she impressed us, and we felt there was a new strength come in Rangamma" (102). In Khushwant Singh's *I Shall Not Hear The Nightingale*, which is also situated in a period when the agitations against British rule in India were gathering momentum, Sabhrai attempts to inspire her cowardly son by relating the deeds of their ancestors; Rangamma, similarly, exhorts the *satyagrahis* by reminding them of the contributions made by women in India's past:

And the worthiest of them was Rani Laksmi Bai of Jhansi. Why, she rode the horse like a Rajput, and held her army against the British, beating them on the left and on the right, and the British went back and back, but one day they defeated her and she died upon her horse fighting to the last, fighting for her enslaved Mother [India]. (104)

Rangamma not only has the ability to inspire the other women with her original interpretations of Hindu texts and her recuperation of heroic deeds, but she also acts as a practical organizer, rivalling Moorthy. When Moorthy is imprisoned, she organizes a *Sevika Sangha* in the village, and when she meets with resistance from the men, she displays tact and the ability to compromise. Once again, like Moorthy, she persuades the women to "stand without moving a hair" (100), when confronted by the *lathi* charges. But even more impressive is the manner in which she urges the men to continue with the struggle and to establish associations of their own, when after Moorthy's confinement, the men choose to be lukewarm towards the cause because they do not want "to sit behind the cage-bars like kraaled elephants" (107).

This brief examination of Rangamma and Ratna demonstrates that the women in *Kanthapura* did possess the propensity to go beyond the confines they were placed in. Unfortunately, except for Moorthy, the characters in the novel are generally drawn "like

figures in a tapestry" (Krishnaswamy 32); as a consequence, Rao is not always able to portray all these women in depth. Rangamma and Ratna are two exceptions, but given the large number of characters in a relatively short novel, he is forced to make compromises in portraiture even with these women. Jayawardena speaks of the important role played by education in changing the position of women in India (87-90). Rao recognizes this importance, too. Consider this somewhat idealized picture of "the country of the hammer and sickle" (29) that Rangamma has imparted to the illiterate villagers:

When the women were going to have a child, they had two months' and three months' holiday, and when the children were still young they were given milk by the Government, and when they were grown up they were sent free to school, and when they grew older still they went to the universities free. . . . And she told us so many marvellous things about that country; and mind you, she said that there all men are equal—every one equal to each other—and there were neither the rich nor the poor. (29)

Even though there is some irony in this passage, Rao regards the woman's conclusions with approval. What is unfortunate is that Rao is guilty, here, of giving Rangamma extensive knowledge of politics and the scriptures without informing the reader how she came by this knowledge—a problem that has also been identified in Ngugi's portrayal of Kihika in *A Grain of Wheat*. Consequently, Rangamma is not totally convincing as a character.

Maria Mies offers this assessment of the role played by women in the struggle for Swaraj:

To draw women into the political struggle is a tactical necessity of any anti colonial or national liberation struggle. But it depends on the strategic goals of such a movement whether the patriarchal family is protected as the basic social unit or not. The fact that women themselves accepted their limited tactical function within the independence movement made them excellent instruments in the struggle. But they did not work out a strategy for their own liberation struggle for their own interests. By subordinating these goals to the national cause they conformed to the traditional *pativrata* or *sati* ideal of the self-sacrificing woman. (Qtd. in Jayawardena 108)

If *Kanthapura* is an accurate novelistic account of what took place in rural India during the struggles, it certainly reinforces some of

Mies's assertions; the issue could be viewed from yet another angle, however. Susan Sontag argues that

[t]he priorities of struggle vary from nation to nation, from historical moment to historical moment—and depend, within a given nation, on one's race and one's social class. It seems beyond question that the liberation of women in Vietnam has to be subordinated at the present time to the struggle for national liberation. (109)

Such an approach could partly explain and partly justify the subordination of the women's struggle in this novel. More to the point is that the national struggle has undoubtedly contributed to the women's struggle here. If it is true that "without the force of the women, there would not have been a revolution in Kanthapura" (Jha 221), equally valid is the assertion that the women would have remained hidebound by tradition and totally dependent on men, if the Gandhian movement had not given them the opportunity to exercise their independence.

To those who equate achievement with power and material possessions, a perusal of *Kanthapura* brings few rewards. Even K. R. Rao, whose approach to the novel is sound, becomes a shade too optimistic when he declares that, "at the end of the novel, we have the suggestion of a new village being built on the broken debris, thus symbolizing the unbroken continuity of the Indian tradition, its *élan vital*" (21). After all, the novel ends with Kanthapura destroyed, some of the villagers in exile in Kashi-pura, others imprisoned or scattered in various parts of India, and still others killed by the police. The success of the movement, as a consequence, must be measured by what the women have gained spiritually. Certainly, the narrator projects towards the end of the novel a serenity and an equanimity that she had never displayed before:

You will say we have lost this, you will say we have lost that. Kenchamma forgive us, but there is something that has entered our hearts, an abundance like the Himavathy on Gauri's night, when lights come floating down the Rampur corner, lights come floating down from Rampur and Maddur and Tippur, lights lit on the betel leaves, and with flower and kumkum and song we let them go, and they will go down the Ghats to the morning of the sea, the lights on the betel leaves, and the Mahatma will gather it all, he will gather it by the sea, and he will bless us. (180)

To Nihal Fernando, “the reference to [the] Himavathy, the daughter of the goddess Kenchamma, and a river with associations of purity, fertility, and primordial vitality” captures the “emotional and spiritual revitalization” which is a pleasing consequence of the women’s “traumatic political experience” (225). This equipoise is achieved primarily because of their involvement with Mahatma Gandhi’s movement. Yet the women secure another goal in the novel, and here Gandhi’s contribution is tangential. Significantly, the one whose heart “beat[s] like a drum” (182) when he leaves Kanthapura at the end is Rangé Gowda, who was once described as “a veritable tiger amongst us” (6). To Rangé Gowda the women would turn when they needed reassurance; however, his poignant response to Kanthapura in which there is now “neither man nor mosquito” (182) can be contrasted with the reactions of the women, when confronted with the same village in its death throes:

And old Rachanna’s wife, Rachi, can bear the sight no more, and she says, “In the name of the goddess, I’ll burn this village,” . . . and she rushes towards the Pariah lines and Lingamma and Madamma and Boramma and Siddama follow her, crying, “To the ashes, you wretch of a village!” And they throw their bodices and their sari-fringes on the earth and they raise a bonfire beneath the tamarind tree . . . (176)

At one level, these women set the village ablaze because they do not want the fruits of their toil to fall into “enemy” hands. “If the rice is to be lost let it be lost to the ashes” (176), declares one of their number. This incident, however, could also be construed differently. While a traditional approach does not allow one to draw a parallel between this passage and, say, the symbolic “bra burning” incidents of the 1960s, the episode, nevertheless, becomes emblematic when subjected to a post-modernist reading. Roland Barthes states in “The Death of the Author” that a text

consists of multiple writings, proceeding from several cultures and entering into dialogue, into parody, into contestation; but there is a site where this multiplicity is collected, and this site is not the author, as has hitherto been claimed, but the reader: the reader is the very space in which are inscribed, without any of them being lost, all the citations out of which a writing is made; the unity of a text is not in its origin but in its destination. (54)

Even though the full significance of their action is lost on the women who perpetrate the deed, and perhaps on the author himself (who, after all, could not anticipate in 1938 the vast changes that were to take place in the women's movement in the last three decades), the modern reader can recognize other layers of meaning by adopting a Barthesian approach. This "bonfire," then, symbolizes that these women are no longer totally circumscribed by the demands of hearth and home, have successfully discarded outmoded traditions that had only served to reinforce the servitude placed upon them, and have challenged, if not totally overcome, the twin forms of patriarchy that had oppressed them for so long. By reducing Kanthapura to ashes, and by leaving the village, the women make a statement to the effect that their subjugation is a phenomenon of the past. The women are now equal partners with men in the next step towards liberation.

P. C. Bhattacharya observes that to the "Kanthapurians there was no final defeat, no farewell but only fare forward, no ending but always a new beginning" (268). This assertion is particularly applicable to the women in the novel. There is, of course, much that is unacceptable and much that remains to be achieved—the female labourers in the Skeffington coffee estate no doubt continue to be harassed by their masters, and one of the final images of the novel is that of Concubine Chinna who remains in the burnt village "to lift her leg to the new customers" (182). Yet by portraying the plight of the women the way he has, Rao makes the reader aware of the necessity for change, and in his depiction of Rangamma and Ratna he demonstrates the way in which some changes could be achieved.

NOTE

- ¹ Najamma has so internalized the "logic" of this patriarchal system that her quarrel is not with the beating *per se* but with the manner in which it is carried out.

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