

Postcolonial Literature

Lecture 12

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Welcome back to this course on postcolonial literature. Today we are going to continue with our discussion on Raja Rao's novel *Kanthapura*. Now as you will remember, we are reading *Kanthapura* vis-à-vis the Gandhian discourse of nationalism and decolonisation and in our previous discussion we had primarily focussed on two aspects of this Gandhian discourse. The first of these two aspects is the notion of return to the village. As you will remember, 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 civilization and return back to the villages where the traditional Indian ways of life had remained unaffected by the colonial intervention. The second aspect of the Gandhian discourse that we had focussed on in our previous lecture is Gandhi's insistence to connect with the masses and make nationalism mass based. So for Gandhi, the nationalist project of creating a decolonised future for India 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 codes of the coloniser's culture, but rather was an attempt to go "down" to the level of the masses and reconnect with them.

Moorthy, who is the central figure in Raja Rao's novel, initially appears in *Kanthapura* as an embodiment of both these two aspects of the Gandhian discourse. Thus, 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 which convinces him that his university education is "foreign", as well as the clothes that he is wearing, and Moorthy promptly gives them up to return to the "dumb millions of the villages".

In the novel, Moorthy's return to Kanthapura leads him to organise the people of his village and the nearby Skeffington coffee estate into a non-violent struggle against the colonial authority and his efforts to reform the village society also earns the reputation of being a local Gandhi. 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 appeal of the figure of Gandhi as a mass leader. But in this novel Raja Rao also introduces a strong element of criticism as far as the Gandhian discourse is concerned and though this note of criticism is subtle, it is nevertheless all pervasive in the text. To understand Raja Rao's novel as a critique of Gandhianism lets go back to the two points of return to the village and mass based nationalism and see how they are presented *Kanthapura*.

Return to the village

So let's start with Moorthy's return to the village. If you read the novel you will see that the narrator here is an elderly Brahmin lady of the village Kanthapura. And it is important to remember this because the novel uses the unique perspective of this narrator, Achakka, to subtly undercut the Gandhianism that Moorthy represents. We see this in play quite early in the novel when Achakka introduces to the reader her native village of Kanthapura and its inhabitants. While talking about the Brahmin quarters, Achakka mentions a character called Doré who was from Kanthapura but who had then gone to the city to become a "university graduate". Though he was not very successful in his studies, Achakka tells the reader that Doré picked quite a few habits in the city. 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 Doré was exposed in the city, and also brings convey a sense of disapproval. This should immediately remind us of Gandhi's own characterisation of the western style university

education and the “foreign” ways of the city which, according to him, one should shun so as to escape from the evil influence of the Satanic Western civilization.

The irony here is of course that Achakka also classifies “becoming a Gandhi-man” as a new-fangled idea that one contracts from the city. So from Achakka’s perspective Gandhianism, just like the city ways and the city books is a thing that Doré picks after he moves out of the ambit of village life. So ironically, the very city which the Gandhian discourse nationalist presented as the den of vices and diseases is in Kanthapura presented as the space where young villagers like Doré gets exposed to the Gandhian ideals that turns them into foreigners. Achakka’s contempt for this Gandhi-man Doré who adopted city ways and city habits is therefore unequivocal.

Now the reason I dwelt on this assessment of Doré by Achakka for so long is not because Doré is a significant character in the novel. Indeed, Doré is not even mentioned after this initial stage in the novel. But the importance to Achakka’s reference to Doré lies in the fact that immediately after expressing her displeasure regarding him, Achakka introduces the character of Moorthy for the first time and in contrast to Doré, praises him highly. Now we must remember that the career graph of Moorthy is almost an exact replica of Doré’s in the sense that like Doré, Moorthy too went away from the village to the city to pursue the “foreign” education of the university and he also, like Doré, 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 Doré. Whereas Doré earns her displeasure, Moorthy is highly praised for leading his life in almost the exact same way. The reason for this is not because Achakka takes a different view towards Moorthy’s Gandhianism, but rather because Moorthy was a childhood friend of Achakka’s own son Seenu. Indeed, rather than praising Moorthy for becoming one of the Gandhi-mans, villagers like

Achakka, at least in the initial stage remains highly sceptical about the changes that Moorthy seeks to make in the village to spread the ideals of Gandhi.

i. Khadi

Take for instance Moorthy's attempt to popularise the use of charkha among the villagers. The charkha and the weaving of khadi cloth were perhaps the most important Gandhian symbols of the return to Indianness and the boycotting of the Satanic Western civilization. So Gandhi's call to weave khadi in the charkha was always accompanied by his call to burn the foreign 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 books. But his return to the village does not automatically mean a return to charkha and khadi. When Moorthy asks the villagers to shun the foreign clothes and weave khadi for themselves, a character called Nanjamma points out to Moorthy that Brahmins do not spin and that such spinning is properly the occupation of the weaver caste.

ii. Caste

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 the caste taboo as he is trying to mobilise the villagers for the anti-colonial 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. Indeed, when the character Bhatta, the village priest and money lender opposes Moorthy he does that in the name of the age old caste system.

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 homogenous 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's disrupting the regular pattern of the village life in Kanthapura. And this is not only evident in his efforts to break the 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 foregrounding a figure like Ratna, who as a young widow with a mind of her own, was detested by the patriarchal order of the Kanthapura village, and shunned as a "concubine". So here again we see Moorthy to be a disruptive and even "foreign" influence in the village life rather than as a prodigal son trying to assimilate himself into the existing rhythms of village life.

But here I need to clarify that I am not judging any of Moorthy's actions 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. Is a return to a golden age possible just by going back to the village life which has largely remained untouched by the colonial influence but which is nevertheless ridden by caste and gender discrimination? Here we see Raja Rao doing exactly the same thing that Chinua Achebe will later do in his novel *Things Fall Apart*. 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. This in turn makes the notion of a simplistic return problematic as a decolonisation strategy.

Mass Based Nationalism

I would like to end this discussion on *Kanthapura* by talking about how, apart from the idea of return, the novel also critiques the Gandhian attempt to make anti-colonial nationalism mass based. Now, a superficial reading of the novel will perhaps convince the reader that Moorthy does manage to kindle within the villagers a spirit of nationalism and transform them into a united opposition to the colonial authority by breaking the barriers of caste segregation and patriarchal narrowness. Yet 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.

However, before we discuss the complexity of the dynamics of anti-colonial movement within the village of Kanthapura, let us consider for a moment the Skeffington coffee estate situated near Kanthapura where too Moorthy manages to organise anticolonial resistance. The Skeffington coffee estate is run by a British and the novel describes how Indians are brought there from all over the country with false promises of money and are then forced to work in the estate virtually as bonded labourers. 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. Moorthy's call to resist the oppressions of the authority of the exploitative white man thus finds ready acceptance among the labourers of the coffee estate and they rise to the occasion.

In the village of Kanthapura however, the patterns of oppression are more complex and though Moorthy tries to convince the villagers that the white man is exploiting them economically, for them the more real face of economic exploitation is the money-lender Bhatta. Now here the problem is that not only is Bhatta not a British coloniser he is also not a foreigner or even a city bred man. As the village priest, he is thoroughly integrated within the structure of the

village life and Moorthy's discourse of anti-colonial nationalism fails to address the exploitation meted out by such Indian characters. In other words, though Moorthy recognises the economic exploitation that goes on between the coloniser and the colonised, he remains impervious to the class exploitation that goes on between one Indian and another. Thus, when in chapter fifteen, 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 coerces the villagers, Moorthy is at a loss for answer. Hence while reading the novel, one is never very sure whether the villagers' resistance is directed at the white man's government, which for most villagers remains a distant entity, or at the more immediate Indian exploiters like Bhatta and the revenue collector. After all, in spite of Moorthy's elaborate explanation of the way in which the white man is economically exploiting the Indians, the villagers like Ratna and Satamma find the most pleasure when they see the granary of Bhatta go 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.

The novel in fact ends with Moorthy realising this class difference and class exploitation as the major source of crisis in the Indian society and thus as an anti-colonial activist he finally changes his affiliation from Gandhian idealism to the Nehruvian dream of egalitarianism. And so with this we end our discussion of *Kanthapura*. In our next lecture we will discuss Rabindranath Tagore and Frantz Fanon and their criticisms of middle class led anti-colonial nationalism. Thank you.