

## **Postcolonial Literature**

### **Lecture 11**

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Welcome back again to this series of lectures on postcolonial literature. As you know, we have been discussing the rise of the middle class nationalist discourse in India over the past few lectures. And as we have seen, this middle class discourse of nationalism and of decolonisation was underpinned by certain particular patterns of thought whose development can be traced from the early nineteenth century writings of Henry Derozio down to the late nineteenth century novels of Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay. In our previous lectures, we have focussed on two significant characteristics of this discourse. The first one is the cyclical pattern of a golden past, a degenerate present and a promise of future recovery. The second one is the deep regard for the knowledge and the cultural and civilizational values of the coloniser which were used as a template to script the path towards decolonisation and recovery of the golden past.

In today's lecture we are going to see how, by the second decade of the twentieth century this nationalist discourse and its underlying patterns and assumptions was starting to get transformed. The main figure responsible for bringing about this transformation was of course MK Gandhi and in this lecture today we will explore Gandhi's impact on the underlying thought patterns of the middle class nationalist discourse. We will then move on to Raja Rao's novel *Kanthapura* to see how this discourse as well as the charisma of Gandhi as an anti-colonial leader was moulded in the form of fiction.

#### **Gandhi**

But first let's focus on the figure of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi who emerged as the supreme nationalist leader of India in the years immediately following the First World War. Gandhi's dates are from 1869 to 1948 and again, if we study his career graph we will come

across the trajectory of a typical Indian middle class. Gandhi too received an English education and indeed like many of the middle class nationalist leaders studied law in England. By profession he was a barrister and he spent his early career as a lawyer in South Africa. It was in South Africa that Gandhi emerged as an anti-colonial political leader, and if you remember, South Africa like India was a British colony in the early twentieth century. When Gandhi arrived in India in 1915 to participate in the freedom struggle at the behest of Gopal Krishna Gokhale, he was already an established political figure. In fact, by the time he arrived in India in 1915, Gandhi had already published his seminal text *Hind Swaraj* which would significantly transform the nature of the middle class nationalist discourse.

Contrary to the version of the nationalist discourse that we have traced till the late nineteenth century writings of Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, the Gandhian discourse undermined the earlier intertwining of the respect towards the civilizational attainments of the Western colonisers and the desire to decolonise India in two different ways. The first way was through questioning the fact that West represents a superior civilization, and the second was by making nationalism mass based.

### **Questioning Western Civilization**

The late nineteenth-century argument that in order to become a "true" Indian/Hindu it was imperative to learn from the European colonisers and become more like them was necessarily informed by an ambiguous attitude towards European rule in India. Thus, someone like Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, in spite of being convinced that anyone with a dark skin did not stand a chance to receive fair treatment in any employment under the British colonial authority was, as I have said earlier, also equally convinced that the rule of the British was essential to teach the "uncivilized" and "uneducated" people of present day India elements of civilization that they once possessed but have now lost. Gandhi in his turn completely rejected

this argument. For him, the loss of Indian civilizational values can be traced back precisely to the European incursion in colonial India and to the importation of "Western civilization" in the subcontinent during the course of the colonialism.

It is important to note here that for Gandhi not every European was tainted by the "Western civilization". In fact, in his *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi specifies that he derives a significant part of his critique of "Western civilization" from the works of such "westerners" like Tolstoy, Ruskin, Thoreau and Emerson. However, Gandhi's text also makes it evident that these intellectuals represent a minority that stands beyond the pale of the "Satanic civilization", which has otherwise "taken such a hold on the people in Europe that those who are in it appear to be half mad".

Hence, whereas for Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, it was important to learn from the colonisers, for Gandhi it was important for India to "unlearn what she has learnt for the last fifty years". According to Gandhi, "Western civilization" was essentially different from "Indian civilization" and was therefore fundamentally incompatible with it. Thus, in his *Hind Swaraj* he argues:

"The tendency of Indian civilisation is to elevate the moral being, that of the Western civilization is to propagate immorality. The latter is godless, the former is based on a belief in God".

Gandhi further states that the essence of this deeply moral and theistic "Indian civilisation" had been perfected by the ancestors of the modern day Indians and "found true on the anvil of experience". Therefore, for India, there was "nothing to learn from anybody else". Thus, according to Gandhi, any attempt to emulate Western civilization was, for an Indian, tantamount to becoming detached from his or her ancestral heritage and deviating from one's "true" identity. And in here we arrive at a fundamental critique of the desire to emulate the

colonisers' civilization. For Gandhi, such an emulation is not a necessary step towards recovering the lost glory of the past. On the contrary it is regarded by him as a deviation from that path of recovery. Indeed, for Gandhi, attempting to imitate the Westerners was equivalent to contracting the disease of a "Satanic civilization".

### **Cure for the Western "disease"**

Gandhi, however, argues that the spread of this "disease" of Western civilization in the subcontinent was not complete but was limited merely to a section of the society. According to Gandhi, this was the section of people who had, out of their own moral frailty, become enamoured with Western civilization and who now sought to get rid of the English so that they could rule over India just like the English. In other words, they were to perpetuate the English rule without the Englishman.

The assertion near the end of Bankimchandra's *Anandamath* about English rule being beneficial for India is therefore turned on its head by Gandhi. For him, a rule by the people, who transform themselves into "Englishmen" by acquiring their knowledge, was inevitably going to be as foreign as the English rule. Hence, the process of regaining the golden past and the "true" Indian identity of that past did not involve being under colonial tutelage. Rather, it involved moving away from the sphere of influence of "Western civilization" into the remote villages of the subcontinent "where the modern civilisation has not reached". So the "Editor" in the *Hind Swaraj*, who speaks on behalf of Gandhi, tells the "Reader":

“And where this cursed modern civilization has not reached, India remains as it was before. The inhabitants of that part of India will very properly laugh at your new-fangled notions. The English do not rule over them, nor will you ever rule over them. Those in whose name we speak we do not know, nor do they know us. I would certainly advise

you and those like you who love the motherland to go into the interior that has yet not been polluted by the railways, and to live there for six months.”

### **Gandhi and the Masses**

This statement about not knowing those "in whose name we speak" and the appeal to try and connect with them, leads to the second point regarding how Gandhi complicated the nationalist discourse of the earlier period. Indian middle-class nationalism as it developed during the nineteenth-century was in essence largely elitist. As noted earlier, for someone like Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay becoming a "true" Hindu/Indian and to regain the glory of the past was to move away from the state of ignorance in which the ordinary Indian has fallen at present.

In contrast, as the Indian leader who was most successful in channelizing mass protest against colonialism, Gandhi repeatedly emphasised the need to integrally connect with the masses "in whose name we speak". Thus, rather than trying to elevate oneself from the masses, Gandhi's emphasis was on consciously getting "down" to the level of the villagers and the peasants and becoming one of them. In his words, "the so-called upper classes have to learn to live conscientiously and religiously and deliberately the simple peasant life, knowing it to be a life giving true happiness".

### ***Kanthapura***

So now that we have summed up the basic features of the Gandhian nationalist discourse and how its thoughts about decolonisation differed from those present in the nationalist discourse of the nineteenth century, let us move on to the novel *Kanthapura* and see how it makes use of this Gandhian discourse. *Kanthapura* was published in 1938 and was the first novel of the Indian author, Raja Rao. Raja Rao's dates are 1908 to 2006. He was born in the princely state of Mysore and spent his early life in Hyderabad. Later on he moved to France to pursue higher

studies, and it was here in France that Rao wrote his English novel *Kanthapura*. This novel by Rao belongs to the new cluster of Indian English fiction which came up in the 1930s and indeed, Rao was one of the three fiction writers who completely changed the course of Indian fiction in English post 1930s. The other two writers of this group were of course Mulk Raj Anand and R. K. Narayan.

Now, coming back to the novel *Kanthapura*, though it was written in France, it did not contain any trace of Rao's life and experience in that country. Rather in *Kanthapura*, we see Rao engaged with the transformative effect that Gandhi brought about in the social and political lives of Indians during the 1920s and 1930s. On the one hand, *Kanthapura* is an attempt to represent in fictional form the Gandhian discourse of nationalism which by the time Rao was writing his novel, had gained significant traction in India. But on the other hand it is also an attempt to trace the fault lines that run through the Gandhian discourse. So *Kanthapura* is simultaneously a representation and a critique of the Gandhian discourse.

We will come back to this point of critique in our next lecture, but today let us see why *Kanthapura* is widely recognised as a novel about Gandhi and Gandhianism. The main focus of this novel is on a character called Moorthy who journeys to the city from his native village Kanthapura to gain Western style university education. But then he subsequently comes back to the village, and the novel is primarily about this return and the Gandhian influence that inspires Moorthy to make this return. As we learn during the course of the novel, Moorthy, while in the city, had a grand vision in which he saw Gandhi urging him to give up his foreign clothes and foreign university education and go back to the "dumb millions of the villages". This is of course an exact echo of the sentiments that Gandhi expresses in his *Hind Swaraj*. And in this we can see Gandhi's version of the cyclical pattern of the golden age—fall—and return that we have traced in Derozio and Bankim.

In this Gandhian pattern, the golden age of civilization is not represented by a distant past but by the present generation of Indians who have remained unaffected by the Western civilization. These are the people about whom Gandhi talks about in the quotation that we discussed earlier – people of the villages where railways have not yet reached and have not yet connected them to the urban centres where the disease of Western civilization is rampant. The fall in this Gandhian pattern is thus a journey to the city where one contracts the disease of the satanic civilization of the West, and as we see in the novel, when Moorthy has his vision of Gandhi he is already in that “diseased” state. The return to the golden age in Gandhian discourse is in turn a spatial return to the village and an attempt to reconnect with the aspects of Indian civilization which had remained uncontaminated by Western values. So the vision of Gandhi that Moorthy has, makes him give up his “foreign” education as well as his “foreign” clothes that he had obtained in the city, and return to his village where he tries to fulfil Gandhi’s socio-political agenda by organising the people of Kanthapura and the nearby Skeffington coffee estate to wage a non-violent war against colonial rule.

Now this effort to organise the villagers is not merely political in its intent but also has a social and cultural aspect. So Moorthy, while trying to organise the villagers to fight colonialism also makes them fight caste segregation and segregations imposed by patriarchy. Thus in the novel we see Moorthy himself becoming transformed into a local Gandhi who wages an incessant war not only against colonialism but also against the social evils which Gandhi considered pernicious to the Indian society.

In our next lecture we will see how Raja Rao uses this character Moorthy not only to fictionalise the real-historical figure of Gandhi but also to criticise the Gandhian intervention into the social political and cultural lives of Indians. Thank you.