

## Gandhian Values Reflected in Raja Rao's '*Kanthapura*'

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### **Introduction**

Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938) is one of the earliest and most powerful works in Indian English literature, weaving Gandhian ideals into the social, cultural, and political life of a South Indian village. More than just a novel, it is a narrative experiment that blends myth, oral tradition, and history to dramatize India's struggle for independence. The central thrust of the novel lies in its reflection of Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy—truth, non-violence, satyagraha, swadeshi, self-reliance, and the moral awakening of the masses. This research paper explores how Gandhian values permeate the characters, structure, and themes of the novel, and how Rao uses fiction to transform nationalist ideology into lived village experience. Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* is a foundational text in Indian English literature, praised for its unique narrative structure and its ambitious attempt to represent an Indian experience in a foreign language. The village of Kanthapura, nestled in the Western Ghats, serves as a microcosm of colonial India, reflecting the broader social, political, and spiritual transformations of the 1930s. The narrative documents the village's journey from a traditional, caste-ridden society to a community united by Gandhian ideals, ultimately facing defeat and displacement. By mythologizing the freedom struggle, Rao transforms a historical event into a timeless epic, or sthala-purana, of good versus evil.

When *Kanthapura* was published in 1938, India was in the throes of the freedom struggle. Raja Rao, deeply influenced by both traditional Indian storytelling and Gandhian philosophy, chose not to write a straightforward political treatise but to embed Gandhian ideals into the

life of a small village. The novel thus becomes a microcosm of India: Kanthapura's villagers mirror the awakening of the rural masses, and the struggle in the village echoes the national movement. The novel is set against the backdrop of the Indian independence movement, specifically the period of the Salt Satyagraha and Civil Disobedience campaigns led by Mahatma Gandhi. Key historical events referenced in the novel, such as Gandhi's Dandi March, provide a framework for the village's own resistance. However, Gandhi himself never appears directly. Instead, his influence is felt through his follower, Moorthy, a young, city-educated man who brings the Mahatma's message of satyagraha (non-violent resistance), swadeshi (self-reliance through hand-spun cloth or khadi), and the eradication of untouchability. Gandhi's message—of non-violent resistance and spiritualized politics—found its most effective vehicle in literature that could communicate with the common man. Rao's novel does precisely this, showing how Gandhian values reshaped not only politics but also social reform, particularly in matters of caste, gender, and collective identity.

**The political struggle in Kanthapura unfolds in several stages:**

- **Initial Awakening:** Moorthy's return and his efforts to spread Gandhian philosophy initially meet with resistance from orthodox Brahmins, but his personal piety and sacrifice win over many villagers, including Pariahs (untouchables).
- **Escalation and Exploitation:** The British-owned Skeffington Coffee Estate and its oppressive manager, the "Hunter Sahib," symbolize colonial exploitation. This tension is heightened by the local Indian allies of the British, like the corrupt Brahmin Bhatta and the police officer Badè Khan, who represent a collusion between colonial power and entrenched social hierarchy.
- **Women's Mobilization:** Following Moorthy's imprisonment, the women of Kanthapura, led by the educated widow Rangamma, take charge of the movement, participating in picketing and facing brutal police repression.

- **Destruction and Dislocation:** The climax involves the destruction of Kanthapura by the authorities. Though the villagers are defeated and forced to flee, their spirit of resistance, symbolized by their willingness to lose their land for a greater cause, remains.

### Literary Context

Raja Rao belongs to the triumvirate of early Indian English novelists, along with Mulk Raj Anand and R.K. Narayan. While Anand focused on social realism and Narayan on middle-class life, Rao fused philosophy, myth, and politics. *Kanthapura* was his first novel, written in exile in France, yet rooted deeply in Indian tradition.

The narrative technique itself—told by an old village woman, Achakka—emulates oral storytelling, making the novel both accessible and authentic. Through this style, Gandhian principles are not presented as abstract concepts but as part of everyday life, shaping rituals, conversations, and conflicts.

### Gandhian Values and Their Literary Reflection

#### 1. Satyagraha (Truth-force)

The backbone of Gandhi's political struggle was satyagraha, the power of truth combined with non-violent resistance. In *Kanthapura*, Moorthy becomes the embodiment of this principle. His refusal to retaliate against violence—whether from the colonial police or orthodox villagers—demonstrates the moral strength of truth.

Example: When Moorthy is imprisoned for picketing foreign cloth shops, he upholds Gandhi's teaching that suffering for truth purifies both the self and society. The villagers, initially skeptical, slowly recognize that passive resistance has transformative power.

#### 2. Ahimsa (Non-violence)

Ahimsa is not merely the absence of violence but a positive love toward all beings. Rao illustrates this value vividly. The villagers are provoked by police brutality, yet Moorthy insists they must never strike back.

Even caste conflict is approached through ahimsa: rather than fighting the Brahmins who excommunicate him, Moorthy accepts their rejection, hoping love will dissolve prejudice.

### **3. Swadeshi (Self-reliance and Indigenous Identity)**

Swadeshi was Gandhi's call to boycott foreign goods and revive indigenous industries. The burning of foreign cloth in *Kanthapura* is both a symbolic and literal act of rejecting colonial exploitation. Women take the lead in spinning khadi, turning household labor into political resistance. The act of wearing hand-spun cloth becomes an assertion of dignity and national pride.

### **4. Religious Faith and Spiritual Politics**

Gandhi spiritualized politics, often invoking religious symbols to awaken the masses. In *Kanthapura*, this appears in the villagers' identification of Gandhi with divine avatars. Gandhi is imagined as a modern incarnation of Vishnu who comes to rid the world of evil (the British rule). Moorthy becomes a saint-like figure, likened to sages in Hindu tradition, which helps the villagers accept his leadership.

### **5. Social Reform and Caste Equality**

For Gandhi, freedom was incomplete without social reform, especially the eradication of untouchability. Rao dramatizes this through Moorthy's attempts to unite Pariahs and Brahmins in the nationalist cause. His efforts to visit and dine with the Pariahs lead to his excommunication, showing the deep-rooted prejudices in Indian society. Yet women like Rangamma and Ratna begin to question caste divisions, suggesting the beginnings of reform. Moorthy's mission are not only anti-British but also anti-caste. His willingness to enter the Pariah quarters and eat from their hands, a direct violation of Brahminical orthodoxy, challenges the village's rigid social structure. The movement, by uniting villagers across caste lines, becomes a catalyst for social reform alongside political freedom.

## 6. Role of Women and Gandhian Feminism

One of Gandhi's most radical contributions was to bring women into the political sphere. Rao reflects this vividly. Women in *Kanthapura* are not passive onlookers; they take active part in marches, picketing, and spinning. Ratna, a young widow, defies societal restrictions and emerges as a courageous leader, inspired by Gandhian values. This empowerment of women mirrors Gandhi's belief that women, by their very nature of patience and endurance, were ideal satyagrahis. From Achakka's storytelling to Rangamma's leadership and the formation of women's volunteer corps, the women of *Kanthapura* step out of traditional roles and become active political agents.

## Myth, Tradition, and Gandhian Values

Rao fuses myth with Gandhian politics, creating a narrative that resonates with the villagers' imagination. The struggle in *Kanthapura* is likened to the Kurukshetra war of the Mahabharata. Just as the Pandavas fight against adharma, the villagers fight against colonial injustice. Gandhi himself is equated with Krishna, Rama, and Shiva at different moments, giving divine sanction to the nationalist movement. Figures like Gandhi are portrayed as modern-day avatars, battling the demonic "Red-men" (British). This mythic dimension provides a powerful moral framework for the villagers to understand and endure their struggle. This mythic framework elevates Gandhian values beyond mere political tactics—they become part of cosmic dharma.

## Narrative technique and style

Rao's unique narrative strategy is arguably the novel's most significant artistic achievement.

- **Puranic Method:** The story is told by Achakka, an old Brahmin woman, in the style of a purana—a traditional folk epic or legend. Her narrative is characterized by digressions, flashbacks, repetitions, and a fluid, conversational tone, mimicking an oral tradition. This elevates the villagers' struggle to a mythic, timeless plane, framing the political conflict as a cosmic battle between good and evil, with Gandhi as a divine avatar.

- **Indianization of English:** Rao consciously moulds the English language to convey an authentic Indian sensibility. In his famous preface, he states that the Indian novel must have distinct “Indian” English. He achieves this through:
- **Literal translations:** He often directly translates Kannada idioms and phrases into English, creating a unique rhythm and flavor.
- **Indian vocabulary:** He incorporates Indian words for food, customs, and concepts that have no direct English equivalent.
- **Sentence structure:** Long, winding sentences reflect the meandering, gossipy style of the oral narration.
- **Point of View:** Achakka’s first-person, communal “we” and “I” perspective offers an intimate, emotional, and biased account of events. Her perspective, though not objective, provides an authentic window into the mindset and emotional journey of the villagers as they navigate political awakening.

### **Tensions and Limitations in Gandhian Values**

While the novel celebrates Gandhian ideals, it also exposes tensions: Non-violence often seems powerless against brutal repression; villagers are beaten and homes destroyed despite their peaceful resistance. Caste prejudices do not disappear entirely, raising questions about how far Gandhi’s message penetrated. Moorthy, though saintly, sometimes appears detached, raising doubts about the effectiveness of moral leadership in a violent world. These tensions make *Kanthapura* realistic rather than hagiographic. Rao acknowledges that the Gandhian path is difficult, filled with sacrifice, and not always successful in the short term.

### **Impact of Gandhian Values on the Village Society**

The greatest triumph of Gandhian values in the novel is the transformation of the villagers’ consciousness. From a fragmented, caste-bound, superstitious community, *Kanthapura* becomes a united force of resistance. Women, Pariahs, and youth discover new voices

and identities. Though the village is eventually destroyed, its spirit of resistance spreads, mirroring Gandhi's belief that true freedom begins in the soul, not in political victories alone.

### Critical perspectives and analysis

- **Postcolonial Reading:** As a postcolonial text, *Kanthapura* subverts colonial narratives by presenting history from the perspective of the colonized. Rao's linguistic innovations challenge the hegemonic Standard English and assert a distinct Indian literary voice.
- **Feminist Critique:** While celebrated for its strong female characters, some critics argue that Achakka's narrative is still framed within a patriarchal, Brahminical worldview. The novel's portrayal of women, while empowering, still operates within certain cultural constraints.
- **Critique of Nationalism:** Some modern scholars view the novel's romanticized portrayal of nationalism critically, arguing that it idealizes the Gandhian movement and marginalizes subaltern voices, such as the Dalit characters, whose experiences are filtered through a Brahmin narrator.
- **Symbolism:** The novel is rich with symbolism. The goddess Kenchamma represents the ancient, protective spirit of the village. The river Himavathy is another symbol of the land's spiritual essence. The destruction of the village at the end, though a defeat, symbolizes the moral victory of sacrifice.

### Conclusion

Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* is both a political novel and a spiritual allegory. By weaving Gandhian values into myth, tradition, and everyday life, Rao demonstrates how Gandhi's philosophy was not confined to leaders and intellectuals but became a living force in rural India. The novel captures the transformation of ordinary villagers into extraordinary satyagrahis, proving that freedom is not merely about overthrowing

colonial rulers but about moral regeneration and social reform. *Kanthapura* is more than a novel about a village; it is a profound meditation on how large-scale political movements are internalized and transformed at the grassroots level. By blending myth with history and Indianizing the English language, Raja Rao created a landmark work that not only documents a specific moment in India's struggle for independence but also offers timeless insights into faith, community, and resistance. Its enduring significance lies in its exploration of how a people, facing oppression, can draw strength from their own traditions to forge a new identity.

Thus, Gandhian values—truth, non-violence, swadeshi, caste reform, and the empowerment of women—are not only reflected but reimaged in *Kanthapura*. They emerge as timeless ideals, linking India's ancient traditions with its modern aspirations for justice and dignity.

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