



Conceptualizing nationalism: A study of Raja Rao's Novel Kanthapura

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Abstract

This paper helps to comprehend the concept of Nationalism in the novel Kanthapura. Kanthapura is the first prominent Indian novel in English by Raja Rao. Nationalism existed as a theme of many of his works. The novel Kanthapura is a description of Mahatma Gandhi's teachings. It is the story of a national struggle from the viewpoint of a village, Kanthapura, in Karnataka. His most famous novel Kanthapura deals with the village of Kanthapura, incorporating the socio-political, cultural, and ecclesiastical situations of the pre-independence period. Like other novels of the modern period, Kanthapura also emphasizes the very impression of the Nation. He powerfully demonstrates a deep and honestly rooted fascination for India's effort for Independence. His patriotic and nationalistic zeal and spiritual concerns began with this novel. Kanthapura is remembered as the epic of the freedom struggle and is an elaborate reflector of Indian Nationalism.

Keywords: Kanthapura, nation, nationalism

Introduction

Nationalism is a political doctrine which holds that the political and the national unit should be harmonious. Historically, the notion of Nationalism has been divided between "civic" and "ethnic" Nationalism. The former is related to the ideas of the French political philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau in the context of the French revolution. According to Rousseau's civic Nationalism, the Nation is constructed on demos – the people – and sovereignty thus belongs to the Nation and the people. Civic Nationalism is levelled in inclusionary values of Freedom, tolerance and equality. The German philosopher Johan Gottfried Herder (1744-1803), in distinction, conceptualized Nationalism as a form of "Volkgeist", a remarkable spirit of an ethnic nation rooted in their ancient characters, where the genuine "people" were linked to a specific territory, history and culture. Such ethnic Nationalism emerged in Germany and influenced nation-building processes in Eastern Europe and Scandinavia, focused on belonging defined by ethnic identity, language, religion, and similar traits. Kanthapura is a fictional but realistic account of the considerable majority of people in India who lived their lives under the British administration and how they reacted to the views and ideals of Indian Nationalism. It depicts the participation of a tiny village in India in the national struggle called by Mahatma Gandhi. The town is a part of the conventional Indian community with its ingrained caste hierarchy. Thus, Kanthapura stimulates a sense of society and Freedom, construed as a spiritual quality which overcomes all bounds and crosses all barriers. To allow an easy interchange between the world of men and the world of gods, contemporaneity and antiquity, Rao thus suits his story with a protagonist whose role is to motivate the villagers to join the political cause of India's battle for Freedom without reservation. In Kanthapura, there are many castes, including Brahmin, Sudra, and Pariah. Raja Rao portrays the regular involvement in different religious rituals to express a sense of natural unity in the village Kanthapura.

At the Congress meeting, Moorthy recites the following words,

"Our country is being bled to death by
Foreigners. We have to protect our mother".

Here he compares India to the mother and tries to unite the people under a single country. We know that there are many castes in the village of Kanthapura, and people are separated from one another due to the caste factor. However, our protagonist Moorthy tried to bring them under a single identity as the Nation.

"We are out of action. A cock does not make a morning, not a single man a revolution, but we will build a thousand pillared temples, a temple more firm than any that hath yet been built. Each of you has ye pillars in it, and then the temple is constructed, stone by stone, man by man, and the bell hinged to the roof and the Eagle tower-shaped and planted, we will gather the mother to reside with us in dream and vitality. India then will live in a temple of our making".

Here Moorthy tried to explain how India would become a nation, and he wanted to bring all people under a single identity that is a nation. He further says

"And put aside the idea of the holy brahmin and the untouchable pariah".

Roles of religion in arousing the feeling of Nationalism

In Kanthapura, religion, a critical part of the culture, has been used for secular and political purposes such as attaining Freedom. Here religion has got a very notable role in specifying the identity of people and the Nation. It claims the country's religious tradition, such as Harikatha, to advance matters contemporary as Swaraj and Nation. Prevalent castes like Brahmins are favoured to get the best region of the village, while more inferior castes such as Pariahs are marginalized. Despite this classist system, the town maintains its long-cherished practices of festivals in which all castes interact, and the villagers are united.

It also appropriates contemporary history, such as Indian National Movement and brings it to the fold of the religious tradition of India. The lavish events that form the focal points of the novel take place in response to events elsewhere – Lahore, Bengal, Gujarat, etc. The village gathering moves from a protected identity toward a national identity. For one reason, Kanthapura chronicles the construction of national identity within a distant village. This thematic is also supported by how the town becomes a kind of a microcosm of the Nation. His politics aims at incorporating the lower castes into the nationalist campaign. This may also operate as a shift toward containment. For instance, the discourse of Nationalism satisfies the address of religion at different levels in the novel. While Bhatta, Swami, and their followers oppose Gandhism in the name of faith, in Kanthapura, the nationalists increasingly utilize religious discourse, customs, and symbols for nationalist purposes. Spiritual resources are mobilized for the politicization of the people. However, the traditions, rituals and symbols that become tools of nationalist mobilization are primarily Brahminic: aarthi, puja, conches, bells, Vedanta, bhajan etc. They do not contain the cultural traditions of the lower castes though their participation is significant.

In the novel Kanthapura, Raja Rao narrates many beliefs and legends to stimulate patriotism among the villagers. Jayaramachar fetches an allegory with the help of Harikatha. This allegory is about Siva, Parvati, and the Nation. In this allegory, Siva is represented as swaraj. After her father's death, Rangamma elaborates on the Vedanta by comprehending British rule as hell. Raja Rao tries to unify the people by comparing Gandhi's law and British regulation; Gandhiji is portrayed as Rama, while Britishers are described as Ravana.

In this novel, many rituals and religious activities are used to arouse the feeling of Nationalism in the people of Kanthapura. In Indian Nationalism, religious politics has constantly remained prominent from the extremely beginning. The teachings of Gandhi and feelings of Nationalism are portrayed in these sacred ceremonies.

Despite their caste differences, they are united.

Moorthy motivates the villagers of numerous castes in the effort against the Britishers. Moorthy frequently visits the quarters of those considered low born to unify the people. With the efforts of Moorthy, lower caste people are also united with the upper class in the freedom movement. Moorthy also formed a congress committee in his village whose primary aim was to instruct the people about the teachings of Gandhi.

Language is depicted in unifying the people.

A nation is a congregation of people who uses the same language. We can understand how language works to unify the people with the help of the character Moorthy. We find that the language of Kanthapura is Kannada, but Moorthy does not use his local language. He uses Hindi even while talking to his mother. Here he is not presented as a local guy, but he symbolizes the Nation here.

Role of females in the nationalist movement

The British government indicts Moorthy to provoke the townspeople to inflict violence and arrest him. When Moorthy spends the next three months in jail, the women of Kanthapura take charge, forming a volunteer corps under Rangamma's leadership. Rangamma infuses a sense of patriotism among the women by narrating stories of remarkable women from the Indian narrative. The novel finishes with Moorthy and the town looking to the future and preparing to continue their fight for Independence. Rangamma is a literate woman. She can read the newspaper and keeps herself, and other people of Kanthapura informed about what is happening in society. She helps Moorthy in establishing the congress in the village. When Jayaramachar was arrested, then Ratna conducted the Harikatha.

Moreover, after the death of Rangamma, she takes the responsibility of reading newspapers and sharing information with the people. Moorthy works as the leader of Kanthapura, but at the time of protest, he was arrested then. Ratna serves as a leader.

Conclusion

In the novel Kanthapura, Raja Rao presents how the feeling of Nationalism is developed in the people of Kanthapura. He tries to show this feeling by using religious traditions and the common language of the people of Kanthapura.

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