

A HISTORICAL, SOCIAL AND POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE OF INDIAN ENGLISH FICTION WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO RAJA RAO'S KANTHAPURA

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Writers from the earliest stages of Indian English writing like Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Sri Aurobindo and others were treating the novel as a document for social change and as a weapon of the nationalistic struggle. This idea was taken up by the early greats of the Indian English fiction namely M.R.Anand, R.K. Narayan and others who used the novel in an attempt to portray social truths and as a vehicle of change and reform.

This phase in the development of the Indian English novel was the interest in social issues brought about by the unique social structure of India- the caste system, the joint family, rituals and customs etc, all of which served as materials for the Indian English novel. The novels dealing with social realism were ushered in by famous novelists like Munshi Prem Chand in Hindi and Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay in Bengali during the 1920s. The problems of social life of the common people soon became amalgamated with burning public issues of the day, particularly by the Indian Freedom Struggle, which provided rich and ready material for the writers. Around the 1930s, the Indian English novel acquired a distinctive shape and character when it started voicing the aspirations of the people against colonial oppression and awakening them to the need of putting their society on the path of freedom, hope and aspiration. This can be said about Mulk Raj Anand whose novels embody a strong sense of consciousness about the evils of social injustice, particularly exploitation, caste divisions, caste wars etc. In short, the Indian social novels subject the social system to a thorough scrutiny.

Even today, these novels continue to be relevant for their, engaging cultural and social debates. A discussion about the social and political aspects of the Indian English novel is incomplete without talking about the Indian Freedom Movement. The Freedom Movement made a sporadic start from around the later part of the nineteenth century after the First War of Indian Independence (1857) and gained great impetus during the 1920s and 1930s until the achievement of independence in 1947. The freedom struggle provided rich and ready material for the writers, particularly the Indian poets and novelists in the regional languages, and Indian English writers were no exception to the rule. The Indian Freedom Movement contributed greatly to the mass social emancipation of the Indian people. "It (the Civil Disobedience Movement) accomplished in weeks what three-quarters of a century of social reform movements had failed to do so....". (Chandra 121)

"Mahatma Gandhi's emergence as the undisputed leader of the Indian National Congress is an interesting story by itself....". (Chandra 121). The creative writers of Indian English have made use of the country's freedom struggle and the Partition as the background of their novels. In many of these novels, Gandhi figures prominently as also his ideology and philosophy. As for example, Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K.Narayan, who published their first works during the 1930s were strongly influenced by Gandhi. Gandhi appears in different roles as a sage, an eccentric, a moralist, a shrewd politician, a fundamentalist or just a simple man with a special sense of humour. For example, the early *Kanthapura* (Raja Rao) to Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*.

Raja Rao is one among the 'trio' who has brought the Indian English Fiction to the main stream. The era of this 'trio' - Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand and R. K. Narayan may be regarded as the 'Renaissance' in the history of Indian English because it is these three writers who have given a rebirth to Indian English Novel by adding originality, novelty, variety and grace, which were absent in the novels prior to the novels of the 'trio':

Although Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's incomplete romance *Rajmohan's Wife* (1864) is considered to be the first Indian English novel, it was only in the 1930s that this genre began to demonstrate the maturity and accomplishment of a major literary mode. This

coming of age was heralded by the publication of Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935), R. K. Narayan's *Sunny and Friends* (1935) and Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938) (Paranjape ii).

The plot of *Kanthapura* is woven around the theme of freedom movement, which is rightly endorsed by Avtar Singh:

Indian struggle for freedom is rightly chosen as a repeat performance of the great war of the *Mahabharata* and *Kanthapura* becomes a veritable Kurukshetra where the 'battle royal' between the forces of good and evil is waged. It is a war between the forces of freedom and slavery, love and hatred, truth and untruth, and thus it is fought both in the inner world of the spirit and in the outer world between the British Raj and the nationalists (123)

The time of action is 1930 and the scene of action is *Kanthapura*, a typical South Indian village on the slopes of the Western Ghats. Moorthy, the central figure, is a young man educated in the city. He is a staunch Gandhi man and the Gandhian Civil Disobedience movement comes to this remote secluded village when Moorthy comes from the city with the message of the Mahatma. He goes from door to door even in the Pariah quarter of the village and explains to the villagers the significance of Mahatma Gandhi's struggle for independence. He inspires them to take to charka - spinning and weaving their own cloth. Soon the Congress Committee is formed in *Kanthapura*. Publicity material is brought from the city and freely circulated in the village. A volunteer corps is formed and the volunteers are trained and educated as so that they may remain non - violent in the face of government repression. In this task of organizing the freedom struggle in *Kanthapura*, he is helped by Ratna, a young lady, of progressive and enlightened views and Patel Range Gowda, the Sardar Patel of the village.

Kanthapura is a mirror held to the historic event of the transformation of the Freedom Movement into a full-fledged national movement under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. The author makes use of this situation and incorporates the religious flavour with the theme of freedom struggle. Thus a prayer is sent to Lord Brahma, the God of creation, to rescue the motherland through a divine incarnation:

O Brahma! deign to send us one of your gods so that he may incarnate on Earth and bring back light and plenty to your enslaved daughter...' - 'O Sage' pronounced Brahma, 'is it greater for you to ask or for me to say "Yea"?' Siva himself will forthwith go and incarnate on the Earth and free my beloved daughter from her enforced slavery. Pray seat yourself, and the messengers of Heaven shall fly to Kailas and Siva be informed of it (Rao 17)

Moorthy, the protagonist, hailed as Mahatma Gandhi by the people of *Kanthapura* which is a dramatization of the influence of Gandhi all over the nation. The first of Gandhian doctrine, which has been vividly portrayed in the novel is Khadi Movement. The novel depicts the propaganda of the Khadi movement by the followers of Gandhi in a spectacular manner: "They went to the Sudra quarters and the Potters' quarters and the Weavers' quarters and they cried, 'Free spinning-wheel in the name of the Mahatma!'" (Rao 23) The evil of using foreign cloth has been communicated to the illiterate mass and awareness is created as how the native wealth has been looted by the British government through the use of foreign cloth. The villagers are educated on the need to manufacture / spin their cloth in order to defeat the exploitation of the foreign rulers.

Next the novel depicts the Gandhian doctrine of transforming the fragmented society in the name of caste into a homogeneous one. Gandhi's service to the untouchables under the banner Harijan Seva Sangh was rejected by some Brahmins. But Gandhian follower Moorthy does not lose heart because of the bitter criticism from his caste people. He shows a great sense of perseverance and persistence in his mission of promoting the welfare of the untouchables. He continues to supply cotton to them, encourages them to spin more and teach them to learn. The movement, which was subjected to gain momentum gradually, emerged as a mass movement with the passage of time. The author has employed the mode of fancy to depict how Moorthy is drawn into the active participation of the national movement. Gandhi is not a character in the novel but appears in the imagination of Moorthy and others.

Conclusion

The novel depicts the support of the people of Kanthapura for Gandhiji's salt Satyagraha. The transformation of Freedom Movement into a national movement is portrayed vividly in this instance. The information of Gandhiji's pilgrimage from his ashram to Dandi from the first day to the end is communicated to the people of Kanthapura and the emotion of the people for the success of Gandhiji's mission is picturesquely narrated in the novel. Kanthapura's chief interest is in the depiction how Gandhiji turned the Freedom Movement into a mass movement and in the glorification of Gandhian doctrine. Therefore, the novel dwells upon not only the programmes and strategies of freeing India from the clutches of the British rule, but also upon the programmes to make India as Swaraja a reality, where in all sections of society are integrated irrespective of caste and creed.

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