

AN ECOCRITICAL APPROACH TO RAJA TAO'S KANTHAPURA**DR. GITANJALI JAIDEEP RAMPAL**Assistant Professor of English,
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This research paper aims to study the ecocritical aspects in the Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*. Since ages literature is well known for reflecting society, contemporary issues and human activities. There is an abundance of literature which uses nature and landscape as its background. Man and nature interact on various levels, beneficial or mutually destructive. At the same time the continuous interference of man in natural activities has posed a threat both to himself and to the environment. If this is not attended to, it will lead to irreparable damage.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, contemporary issues, society, Indian fiction.

Literature and environment are always intertwined in an intimate relationship as is evident in the works of writers through the ages. The consciousness of writers has brought the two disciplines, ecology and literature, together again and again. Ecocriticism is an umbrella term used to refer to the environmentally oriented study of literature and the art, and the theories that underline such critical practice. It is a new critical method available to critics to analyze the literature. It is concerned with nature writing and ecological themes in all literature. Eco-critics try to study a literary text from the point of view of the environmentalist, and the fear of the impending threat to the world. The binaries of man/ nature, and culture/ nature, as opposed or interconnected are also concerns and areas of study as a text is evaluated. The wild and the wilderness are attractive settings to many literary works and these provide ample opportunities for ecocritical study. According to Peter Barry, an eco-critic's major concern is "to re-read major literary works from an eco-centric perspective, with particular attention to the representation of the natural world" (Barry 264). The common view in such traditions, as effectively pointed by M H Abrams, envisions the natural world as a living, sacred thing, in which each individual feels intimately bonded to a particular physical "place", and where human beings live in interdependence and reciprocity with other living things. (Abrams 99)

Raja Rao has brought novelty and distinction to Indian English Novel, for him writing was a vocation and not a profession. He has a high sense of dignity of his vocation as a writer. Raja Rao believes that one cannot become a successful writer without spiritual and metaphysical knowledge. He has commendable knowledge of Sanskrit and modern European literature. As a writer he was influenced by the Italian, German and Russian literature. He was greatly influenced by his contemporary writer Andre Malraux. He was also impressed by Ananda Coomaraswamy. He is contemporary of R.K. Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand. As a writer he is the: Child of the Gandhian age and reveals in his works, his sensitive awareness of thwarting or the steadying pulls of past tradition. (Iyengar 386). Philosophically and culturally he is an Indian and an ardent believer in Advaitic truth of "Shivoham, Shivoham". For him writing is Sadhana.

So the idea of literature as anything but a spiritual experience or Sadhana, a much better word is outside my perspective. Literature is "Sadhana" - the best life for the writer. (Narayan 48).

The Indian philosophical system has influenced and shaped the characters of one of the great writers, one from the East, right from the formative years of the writing career. Raja Rao's main characters go through, in a steady progression, the four stages of man's life as outlined in the Indian philosophy system. We come from a source unknown and again go back to a Source unknown after filling the gap between birth and death, otherwise known as one's lifetime. The key Sanskrit phrase *tat tvam asi* meaning 'that thou art' emphasizes the invisible connection between the human soul and the Soul unknown. Sankara's Advaita philosophy highlights this fundamental connection, rather the identity between the Brahman (the Supreme Absolute) and the Atman (the Self). In other

words, the Brahman or the deeper eternal self is imminent in all human beings, the union of the one with the other is nothing but identity which "the sages call nirvana" (Hirayanna. 359).

Raja Rao, as a great writer, devotes himself to writing *Kanthapura*, an epoch of all times which grows enchantingly, an ingenious work of art. His works also include *The cow of Barricades* (1947), *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960), *The Cat and the Shakespeare* (1965), *Comrade Kirillov* (1976) and *The Policemen and The Rose* (1978). Raja Rao wrote *Kanthapura* in 1938 when he was at the threshold of his writing career. The spirit of freedom for the Indian masses dominated the political and social scene in the pre-independence India. In tune with the time the early phase of Indian freedom struggle under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi provides the setting to the novel. The liberation of India from the clutches of the British was the sole aim of all right thinking people. Gandhi considered political freedom as the destination of a pilgrimage. Religion the manifestation of the spiritual and politics, the temporal matrices, interacted in the Gandhian way of struggle. The very concepts of Truth and Non-violence depend on, and interact with, the nature of meaningful life for an individual to realize the goal of freedom.

Raja Rao, in *Kanthapura* initiated and helped "to recover and revitalize the Indian cultural, intellectual and spiritual traditions" (Paranjape 19). *Kanthapura* is a legend. As the writer comes out in his foreword so is the yarn of the novel. It has a village with a rich *Sthalapurana* or legendary history of its own. *Kanthapura*, the village, is high on the ghats up the steep mountains that face the cool Arabian seas. The setting is not that of a modern novelist's description. The place has its guardian angels and protecting Goddess *Kenchamma*. The idyllic scene is nowhere dreamy as in reference to the play of Goddesses, e.g., the Goddess of river, the *Himavathy*, plays with the Goddess of the hill throughout night as *Kenchamma* is the mother of the river. Raja Rao tells us not the superstitious nature of the Hindus but describes the scene of the epic. We fail to understand if we concede that Raja Rao is critical of superstition. It is a legend's part. The novel presents a graphic description of village life. In South India and the village *Kanthapura* may well be regarded as a microcosm of India and by extension, of the world.

The theme of the *Kanthapura* is the continuity of Indian traditions naturally in the Indian air from the soil just as wild flower from the jungle. Samares C. Sanyal regards Indianness as "the spontaneous flow of the heritage of Indian culture and not just tricks that develop an imaginative talent. It is an artistic involvement that affects the Indian creative spirit...It is the under-current of Indian consciousness – an off-shoot of traditional wisdom that matters with the creative activity at large" (Sanyal x). Moorthy, Rangagowda, Bhatta, Ratna, Subhha Chetty, Ranganna and many other men and women seem to be rising from soil of *Kanthapura*.

Kanthapura is a spectrum coloured with three hues the social, political and mythological. *Kanthapura* presents Indian ideal in which Indian cultural, sociological and political realities have been dealt with vividness and candour. Poverty, illiteracy, superstitions, untouchability and exploitation and the various painful evils found in Indian villages are in existence in *Kanthapura* too. It is in a sense, a work of realism in fiction and yet it is not purely realistic or naturalistic. This is combined with the strains of myth, of gods and goddess, of blind superstitious belief and uncanny insights. It is an image of real life observed in a visionary state of mind. The village has its goddess, its legends, and its ploughing season, its epidemic of small pox, its toddy boot etc., its village priest, its village bully and a village money lender. It is a beautiful small village of simple people who still belongs to the old world of superstition.

The novel begins with a vivid description of the village *Kanthapura* which is "high on the Ghats" and "in the province of Kara". The village is divided in five districts, namely in a "Brahmin quarter", a "Pariah quarter", a "Potter's quarter", a "Weaver's quarter", as well as a "Sudra quarter". From this point of view, it results that every caste group has a particular social environment and an area in the "caste ridden traditional rural society", where its members live and work. By portraying the landscape and introducing her acquaintances, the narrator Achakka, an old woman of the village, takes the reader on a walk through the village. Mentioning the vicinity like the *Tippur Hill*, the river *Himavathy* and the red *Kenchamma Hill*, the novel creates a tranquil atmosphere. Unfortunately, the noise caused by labour, when Indian goods are shipped off across the sea, destroys the peaceful tranquillity for a moment. But as soon as the carts, which contain Indian commodities, have reached the hilltop, calmness returns to *Kanthapura*.

Village life is certainly more closely at the heart of the novel than any of the other works, in spite of the fact that Raja Rao describes the movement of the village from solidarity to complete and utter annihilation. Much of the early part of the book is spent developing a sense of the village itself, establishing its ambience. In the first paragraph, Achakka informs us of its geographical location:

Our village – I don't think you have ever heard about it – Kanthapura is its name, and it is in the Province of Kara. High on the Ghats is it, high up the steep mountains that face the cool Arabian seas, up the Malabar Coast is it, up Mangalore and Putter and many a centre of cardamom and coffee, rice and sugarcane. Roads, narrow, dusty, rut-covered roads, wind through the forest of teak and of jack, of sandal and of sal, and hanging over bellowing gorges and leaping over elephant – haunted valleys, they turn now to the left and now to the right and being you through the Alambi and Champa and Mena and Kola passes into the great granaries of trade. There, on the blue waters, they say, our carted cardamoms and coffee get into ships the Red-men bring, and, so they say, they go across the seven oceans into the countries where our rulers live. (KP 1)

Nature plays a significant role among the population of the village, because the mountains around the village and the river have always been present, even long before the first child was born in Kanthapura. All elements of nature have strong power over the village. The attention is drawn to the river Himavathy as well as the Kenchamma Hill. According to the narrator Achakka, a legend has grown up around their origin. It is said that after a long and hard fight Kenchamma “the Goddess of the Hill” finally put an end to the terror caused by a demon in the village. His blood coloured the hill, named after the goddess, red. After having defeated the demon, Kenchamma started to live in Kanthapura. Her daughter Himavathy became the “Goddess of the River”.

Apart from being an inexhaustible storehouse of beauty, Nature is also a source of never-ending wonder to the unsophisticated rustic mind. Pariah Siddayya's long, rambling disquisition on serpent-lore in which hard fact and footloose fancy are blended together is a fine example of this M. K. Naik writes:

The logic of 'through Nature up to Nature's God' is readily acceptable to a mind receptive to the beauty and the wonder of Nature. Hence, the promontory near the village is an 'abode of Siva'; and the river is the daughter of Kenchamma, the Goddess of the Hill. Animal creation too shares this divinity in its own way; the eagle is the 'feature of God' and the vehicle of Kenchamma must appear in the sky at the ploughing ceremony so that the Kanthapurians can be assured that the goddess has blessed their first agricultural operations for the year. Furthermore, the ceaseless and regular operation of forces of Nature is itself an external manifestation of the divine moral law that governs the universe... it is precisely because of this noble nexus that there is perfect empathy between Man and the external Nature including the animal creation. (Naik 36)

Ramakrishnayya declares: “There is still many a good heart in the world else the sun would not rise as he does nor the Himavathy flow by the Kenchamma Hill” (KP 131). Hence, when his remains are burnt on the banks of Himavathy, the river pays homage to him by rising and sweeping the bones and ashes away; and that night... as no other night, no cow would give its milk, and all the night a steady rain kept pattering on the tiles and the calves pranced about their brothers and groaned. (KP 145)

It is because of this imperishable bond between Man and Nature that human experiences and attitude are described in terms of forces of Nature, as and when the narrator describes the sea- change that has come over Kanthapura as a result of the Gandhian movement in these terms: “There is something that has entered our hearts, an abundance like the Himavathy on Gauri's night; when lights come floating down the Rampur Corner.” Since the community of Kanthapura believes in religion and in myths, it shows great respect and admiration towards its mighty goddess. Watching over the villagers, Kenchamma helps them, when they need rain or when hunger or danger threatens them. The villagers pray for improving their situation, when powers like nature bring illness and misery. By donating a share of their crops, by dancing and celebrating, men and women give their thanks to Kenchamma. The villagers trust Kenchamma, because they are sure that their goddess will never let them down.

When Moorthappa, the member of the rural society and the initiator of the rebellion against the colonial rule, is obviously falsely accused, the villagers appeal to Kenchamma begging her to “destroy this Government”. Nevertheless, they do not wait inactive for the wondrous deed of the goddess. Together with men from other regions Moorthy’s followers march to toddy-booths in order to boycott them. Despite of attacks by the policemen, they still stick to their plan.

At this point it should be mentioned that Kanthapura is far away from the city, but also from other villages. Forming a special, individual unit, the village exists autonomous. In this novel, the author wants to show that the structure of the village differs from the city. Whereas anonymity predominantly prevails in the city, in the small community of the village, however, many people know each other, because they cooperate. Concerning the Brahmins like Achakka, they own several acres of land they cultivate to live off its fruits. Other members of Kanthapura have different tasks. Some of them e.g. lease their services by spinning cloth. Leading a simple, religion-affected life, the Brahmins are used to “meditate”, but also to “pray”. Although the village is separated from other communities, the society of Kanthapura is united by various celebrations. The Brahmins organize a “Sankara-jayanthi”, a regular festival which takes place alternately in different houses. When the villagers pay tribute to one Hindu god or another, the “very learned” old Ramakrishnayya reads the “Sankara-Vijaya” and, thereafter, men and women talk about the “Vedanta”. In order to celebrate “the Rama festival, the Krishna festival, the Ganesh festival” and to finance the next festival, Moorthy requests contributions of different people. A “Harikatha-man” tells stories of gods. Regularly, the villagers are reminded of the nearness of the deity. Thus, myths and legends strengthen the solidarity of the community as well as its religious faith.

The Indian Folk tradition, as is elsewhere, has its roots in nature; it reveals close ties between man and nature. People accept women to be an embodiment of this nature and they worship nature in the form of a woman as a saviour to protect them from possible dangers. Sometimes the same woman becomes a daughter of a farmer, a wife of a common man. Sometimes she comes to the same people as the benevolent mother. This tradition, unaffected by the superimposed culture of the colonialists is a preferred area for all the post-colonial writers- be it in India or elsewhere in the world. Raja Rao made it clear in the Foreword of his famous novel Kanthapura when he made reference of Sthalapurana :

There is no village in India, says Raja Rao. However mean, that has not a rich SthalaPurana or legendary history of its own. Some god or god like hero has passed by the village-Rama might have rested under the pipal tree. Sita might have dried her clothes, after her bath, on this yellow stone, or the Mahatma himself, on one of his many pilgrimages through the country, might have slept in this hut, the low one, by the village gate. In this way the past mingles with present and the gods mingle with men to make repertory of your grand mother always bright. (KP V)

and about the goddess Kenchamma in the novel as the saviour-deity of the village:

Kenchamma, Kenchamma
Goddess benign and bounteous,
Mother of earth, blood of life,
Harvest queen, rain crowned,
Kenchamma, Kenchamma
Goddess benign and bounteous (KP 4)

The goddess of the village people is Kanchamma. The legend holds that she killed a demon who visited the place asking for the young sons as food and the young women as wives. The sages Tripura underwent penances to bring such a goddess down to the place. There was a battle between the demon and the goddess Kenchamma and the hills on which it took place become red with the blood of the victim. The villagers have great faith in Kenchamma who never lets them down. Kenchamma stands both as the source of inspiration as well as a symbol of power that drives the evil force out of the village.

Rangamma is the oracle, the Cassandra of Kanthapura. She tells the people of plants that weep, of the stars above, of the universe, of God, of countries beyond Lahore, Kabul, Bhukara, of Gandhi and of Dharma. She is the soothe sayer of Caesar, like Moorthy and later a Panthselia leading her tiny brigade of women soldiers in the great battle. How is the battle? It is a war between a coward of enormous physical strength (Red man) and Satyagrahi of oceanic spiritual strength; between the man who robs (cardamons and coffee) and the spirit that tries to persuade the robber against his crime. Like Rabindranath Tagore's Gitanjali the Satyagrahi wants freedom to move into an endless world of truth. Started with lathi charge after three-day fast of Moorthy, the battle is waged through-out with no suggestion of a possible end. It is not a physical catastrophe. It is a spiritual battle captained by the Mahatma. Kenchamma, the Goddess, Siva the three-eyed, and Narayan, the Lord of Heaven, shall come to save the seeker of truth. The battle as it progresses takes obvious spiritual turn. Borannatoddy episode makes Satyagrahis feel as if they walked through fire in harvest time. Or in the picketing before Skeffington Coffee Estate the Satyagrahi feels a "secret exaltation" even though Rangamma is kicked in stomach or Ratna slapped to sleep.

The battle or struggle for freedom sweeps the epic to cosmic significance. The war has different episodes like that of an epic. It has true beginning in the shrieks of Parish women in Non-co-operation Movement in the main street of Kanthapura. This episode ends with Puttamma's unhappy event. For the occasion everybody is lost. The steadfast desire to conquer vice meets suspicion – "and we think neither of Puttamma nor Seethamma nor Moorthy nor the Mahatma, but the whole world seems a jungle in battle, trees rumbling, lions roaring, jackals wailing, parrots piping, panthers screeching if mother Earth had opened herself and said, "Come in children." How real the epical battle is! Radhamma delivers there! Nature's violence selects the universal violence.

The first one is called Satyagraha movement (lathi charge after fast). The last episode like the second one has no hero but heroes. An epic has many—the city boys and women (of Bombay)—and of Kanthapura, nearly three thousand people. Rachappa, Rudrappa, Ammayya and Siddayya fall down in service to truth. The legend has finery and primaeval simplicity. Ramakrishnaiah, the very learned father explains Maya-Vada; Jayaramachar chants the story of God. Karthik comes with the glow of light and unpresed footsteps of the wandering gods, with lights from clay trays and red lights from copper stands and diamond lights from bowers of entrance leaves; and Visakha with fine, first footing rain, running cattle, Rohini Star and yoking of new bulls to the plough, slides always in Kanthapura. The writer adds element of song to make us aware of the element of music which is a part of soul. Song is always an outlet for tragic or cosmic feeling except in the first few pages, e.g., Rangamma and Santamma and Ramakrishnaiah are troubled and silent; from the lit front house comes the "Rock, Rock," which being joyous and in contrast to character's burdened heart, brings out inner human frailty. Song is highly scripture-like sometimes. It touches the heights of heaven.

Laugh, laugh, laugh away
The King of Heaven is coming,
He, the King of Heaven is coming,
Say Bodhayya. (KP 65)

As far as the form and technique of the novel is concerned Rao makes a deliberate attempt to follow traditional Indian narrative technique and it is Indian sensibility that informs Kanthapura. In fact both the spirit and the narrative technique of Kanthapura are primarily those of the Indian Puranas, which may be described as a popular encyclopedia of ancient and medieval Hinduism, religious, philosophical, historical and social. Rao at the outset describes his novel as a sthala-purana - legend of a place. The Puranas are a blend of narration, description, philosophical reflection, and religious teaching. The style is usually simple, flowing, and digressive. Even Tagore emphasises, as reflected in song no 11 of Gitanjali:

He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground and
Where the path-maker is breaking stones. He is with them in sun
And in shower, and his garments is covered with dust. Put off thy

Holy mantle and even like him come down on the dusty soil! (Tagore 43)

The message is that people should respect those people who work hard for the sake of the mankind in the scorching heat. And he feels that God is also with them in the form of sun and shower, not in the temple. So, the best way to worship the God is to respect these people even as they are engaged in the physical labour. But, at the same time they live their lives amidst the nature or in very natural surroundings against the materialistic life. He always pleaded for preservation of nature in its original form. According to him nature was a creation of God and in order to achieve the Godliness or the perfection one needed to look at the nature and rejoice in it without making any harm to it. He was worried about the man's greed to try to exploit nature for his own small purposes. He was always in favour of the keeping nature intact and pollution-free.

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