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CREATING THE NATION ON THE PAGE: THE IMAGINED NATIONHOOD IN RAJA RAO'S *KANTHAPURA*

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Abstract

Raja Rao's Kanthapura (1938) focuses on the story of how Gandhian ideology reaches the village of Kanthapura and changes the villagers' lives drastically. Rao's portrayal of national identity, by putting the village in the center, relies heavily on the use of centuries-old Indian culture and traditions in order to create a sense of shared history and collective sense of belonging against British colonialism. In the novel, the villagers re-discover their shared cultural and religious past in their attempt to find the strength to fight against colonial domination and envision a new society. Thus, the narrative's imagining of the future society follows a past-oriented trajectory, namely combining the past, present and future in the microcosmos of the village. I contend that the temporal origin of the projected nationhood determines the limitations and possibilities for the formation of the idea of nation and the future society.

Keywords: Postcolonial literature, India, national culture, Raja Rao, Kanthapura

ULUSU SAYFAYA TAŞIMAK: RAJA RAO'NUN *KANTHAPURA* ADLI ESERİNDE ULUS TAHAYYÜLÜ

Öz

Raja Rao'nun *Kanthapura* adlı eseri, Gandhi'ye ait fikirlerin ve ideolojinin Kanthapura adlı köye ulaşması ve buradaki yaşam üzerinde yarattığı kapsamlı değişime yoğunlaşmaktadır. Rao'nun köyü merkeze koyan ulusal kimlik betimlemesi, İngiliz sömürgeciliğine karşı ortak bir tarih ve kolektif aidiyet bilinci yaratma amacıyla yüzyıllara dayanan Hint kültürü ve geleneklerinin kullanılmasını temel almaktadır. Romanda, kolonyal baskıyla mücadele etme ve yeni bir toplum tahayyül etme gücü arayan köylüler, ortak kültürel ve dini geçmişlerini yeniden keşfederler. Böylelikle anlatının gelecekteki topluma dair tahayyülü geçmiş odaklı bir yol izler ve geçmiş, şimdi ve geleceği köy mikrokosmosunda bir araya getirir. Bu çalışma,

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tahayyül edilen ulus fikrine ait zamansal kaynağın ulus ve gelecekteki toplum fikrinin oluşumundaki olanak ve kısıtlamaları belirlediğini ileri sürmektedir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Postkolonyal edebiyat, Hindistan, ulusal kültür, Raja Rao, Kanthapura

Introduction

Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* focuses on the story of how Gandhian ideology reaches the small village of Kanthapura and changes the villagers' lives drastically. Written during the Indian Nationalist Movement and greatly affected by the historical and political circumstances, the novel represents the emergence of Indian national consciousness and the promise of a better future through the recovery and revival of the Indian (more specifically Hindu Brahmin) past. Published in 1938, *Kanthapura* falls into the category of novels marked with nationalism as well as the influence of Gandhi. Rao, along with Mulk Raj Anand and R. K. Narayan, presented a new form of writing, "an Indian English prose, which was capable of moving beyond a crass mimicry of the British intelligentsia and was able to offer a uniquely Indian contribution to the cosmopolitan world of English letters" (Shingavi, 2013, p. 16). While the initial reaction to the novels of this period underlined their attempts to present "India in its entirety", using the terms "Indian," "nationalist," and "Gandhian" to describe them, later critical approaches have drawn attention to their inclination to homogenize the differences in the Indian nation in favor of an almost mythical national unity. In *Kanthapura,* Rao revisits traditional Hindu practices and rituals in order to portray an Indian national identity that takes its strength from a shared cultural and religious past. While this attempt underscores a desire to engender a collective belonging in the face of British colonialism, it nonetheless leads to a certain kind of Indianness that privileges Hindu background as the basis of national identity. In this article, I contend that the temporal origin of projected nationhood, as represented by the novel, determines the limitations and possibilities within the formation of the idea of nation and national identity.

Benedict Anderson's oft-quoted definition of nation as "an imagined political community" provides a starting point to conceive the different ways the nation is imagined and mapped onto the page in Rao's novel (Anderson, 2006, p. 6). Anderson (2006) elaborates on the significance of the word community here by stating that "the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately, it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings" (Anderson, 2006, p. 7). As he examines the

cultural roots of nationalism to provide possible sources for the emergence of such a powerful sense of belonging, his remarks on the continuity of the cultural history of nations bear importance for the analysis of this novel. If nation-states are generally assumed to be both new and historical, then the nations they are aligned with not only "loom out of an immemorial past" but also, and more importantly, "glide into a limitless future" (Anderson, 2006, p. 11-12). Thus, both the past and future figure in the present of the nation and hold it together. While the nation relies upon its shared past, it also envisions a common future that will ensure its continuity. He states that a better understanding of nationalism is possible through aligning nationalism "with the large cultural systems that preceded it, out of which – as well as against which – it came into being" (Anderson, 2006, p. 12). In this view, national identity and consciousness emerge through a complex process that involves a negotiation about the past cultural values and norms to make sure their compatibility with the imagined ideal future society.

While Anderson's concern with the general paradigmatic style of imagining the nation proves helpful to think about the idea of nation and culture, discussion on the history of nationalism in societies with colonial pasts necessitates a more nuanced reading of how cultural systems – both local and adopted – figure in the imagining of the nation. Partha Chatterjee's (1993) criticism of Anderson's modular model paves the way for an examination of anticolonial nationalism and how it engages with cultural systems before becoming a political movement. For Chatterjee, the problem with Anderson's theory is that it does not leave room for postcolonial imaginings of nationhood since his theory relies on the fact that "the historical experience of nationalism in Western Europe, in the Americas, and in Russia had supplied for all subsequent nationalisms a set of modular forms from which nationalist elites in Asia and Africa had chosen the ones they liked" (Chatterjee, 1993, p. 4-5). Instead, Chatterjee (1993) argues for an anticolonial nationalism that depends on difference with the modular forms mentioned by Anderson. Chatterjee asserts that anticolonial nationalism operates on the division of "the world of social institutions and practices into two domains – the material and the spiritual" (Chatterjee, 1993, p. 6). While the material domain signals "the domain of the 'outside', of the economy and of statecraft, of science and technology" aligned with Western superiority, the spiritual domain is "an 'inner' domain bearing the 'essential' marks of cultural identity" (Chatterjee, 1993, p. 6). This differentiation marks the spiritual domain as the manifestation of cultural difference from the colonizer, where the colonized can claim its own superiority. The domain of national culture with language, religion and elements of personal and family life emerges as the domain of sovereignty for the colonized,

and, for Chatterjee, it should be kept free of colonial influence to maintain the cultural distinctiveness (Chatterjee, 1993, p. 26). Here, what we see is the cultural systems occupying a central role in the construction of anticolonial nationalism, underlining not only the significance of the continuity of cultural history but also its fundamental position in the self-imagining of the nation against colonial discourse.

Chatterjee (1993) aptly points out that the spiritual domain does not remain unchanged. Nationalism, while preserving the distinctiveness of national culture, attempts to create a "'modern' national culture that is nevertheless not Western" (Chatterjee, 1993, p. 6). Although Chatterjee's model has received criticism on the grounds of creating another universalistic outlook against Anderson's modular model, his emphasis on the preservation and transformation of cultural elements draws our attention to what tools are employed in the creation of the idea of nation. If, as Chatterjee suggests, "a nation, or so at least the nationalist believes, must have a past," then it is the cultural systems coming from this shared past that take precedence in shaping the nation (Chatterjee, 1993, p. 73). If we go back to Anderson (2006) at this point and the dual perspective toward preceding cultural systems, Chatterjee's (1993) model favors, and in fact underlines, the larger cultural structures out of which nationalism comes into being rather than challenging them. In his approach, the struggle against colonial superiority implements and revives these elements to create a sense of national consciousness that is both old and new, having its roots in the past yet transforming itself for the needs of the present as well.

In the novel, the village of Kanthapura is represented as a microcosm of India in which the past cultural systems, reinvigorated by Gandhian ideology, are used to create a sense of national belonging and collective destiny as the foundation for the struggle for independence. In the narrative, Achakka, a grandmother from Kanthapura, recounts "the sad tale of her village" (Rao, 1963, p. VI). Achakka's tale, heavily informed by the Indian oral storytelling tradition, depicts the development of nationalist movement in the village led by Moorthy, one of the young villagers who has become a Gandhi man and dedicated himself to promoting Gandhian ideology in his own village. Moorthy's nationalist campaign in Kanthapura primarily focuses on reviving religious festivals and celebrations in an attempt to bring the villagers together and instill a sense of collective belonging through their shared cultural past. The success of his campaign eventually attracts the attention of the authorities, leading to a violent intervention resulting in the villagers' forced departure from Kanthapura.

Achakka, along with the others, has taken refuge in the neighboring village Kashipura, where she tells the tale of her village and its inhabitants.

Creating a "National" Narrative Style: Oral Storytelling Tradition and Novel Genre

Rao's focus on Indian culture and traditions also reveals itself in his narrative style, where the reader witnesses the use of Indian oral storytelling tradition in novelistic form. Thus, the formal characteristics of the novel contribute to the nationalist spirit which the narrative espouses. A brief look at the development of the Anglophone Indian novel can help us to comprehend how form and content inform one another, creating a national identity rooted in the past in *Kanthapura*. Priyamvada Gopal argues that the Anglophone Indian novel has been closely engaged with the idea of India, giving rise to two literary challenges: "writing prose and writing national history" (Gopal, 2009, p. 13). According to Gopal, these two challenges have their roots in the desire to prove that India has its own history and can produce its own works of prose (in addition to poetry) against the imperialist claims about India's lack of intellectual and cultural achievements (Gopal, 2009, p. 19). This approach highlights the foreignness of the novel genre to the Indian literary tradition, illuminating the challenging task of writing national history in prose. The difficulty presents itself in representing national cultural history and the nation in a literary form that needs to be nationalized as well. Gopal states that the emergence and development of the novel in India is closely linked to "experiments in prose, realism and the writing of 'national' history" (Gopal, 2009, p. 20). What is important here is that elements from the already existing literary tradition, such as "fantasy, wonder and poetry," make their appearance in novels too, which leads to the idea that prose, realism and the novel are "appropriated and reworked rather than simply imitated and absorbed" (Gopal, 2009, p. 20). In *Kanthapura*, Rao's stylistic experimentation, namely his utilization of Indian oral storytelling tradition in the English language, illustrates an innovative approach by combining the old and the new in his attempts to represent the nation-in-the-making.

Rao's (1963) short foreword to the novel describes the nationalist framework of the narrative and elaborates on his aim to achieve an authentic portrayal of the Indian spirit in the English language. This foreword prepares the reader for what is coming next: a combination of myth and reality; gods and men, the Indian nation, and daily life and customs all presented in a unique style of the English language. Rao illustrates a storytelling tradition that acts as a bridge between past and present, capable of bringing Rama and Mahatma together (1963). According to Rao, English has become the language of the "intellectual make-up" for Indians

but not the "emotional make-up" (Rao, 1963, p. V). His desire to present Indian life in its authenticity can only be achieved through a style that would reflect the "emotional make-up" of Indians: "We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians. … Our method of expression therefore has to be a dialect which will someday prove to be as distinctive and colorful as the Irish or the American" (Rao, 1963, p. V). John McLeod, in his discussion of two important challenges for the postcolonial writer, echoes Rao's concern with creating a language capable of expressing the Indian spirit:

> [T]he first concerned subject matter and content – the task of putting into words the environments, languages, social codes, issues and struggles of colonized people [and] the second challenge revolved around style: how to find a mode of writing that would give the realities of these places and experiences proper expression. (McLeod, 2013, p. 450)

The second challenge is almost a direct reference to Rao's situation as stated in the foreword. McLeod further states that, "in seeking to articulate local experiences using non-local models and conventions, postcolonial writers have had to contend with, to resculpt and refashion, a sense of what constitutes the literary: its genres, languages, themes" (McLeod, 2013, p. 450). Rao's appropriation of the novel genre through implementing an Indian storytelling form exemplifies what McLeod says about the use of non-local models and conventions to represent local experiences. Rao, in the novel, utilizes the technique of *Purana* which is described by M. K. Nair as such: "The Puranas are a blend of narration and description, philosophical reflection, and religious teaching. The style is usually simple, flowing, and digressive, and exaggeration is the keynote of most accounts of happenings and miracles" (Nair, 1982, p. 63). His employment of the *Purana* form in the novel strives to create a mode of expression that can bring together the intellectual and emotional "make-up" in the English language while revisiting the Indian literary past as part of his project of recovering Indian cultural heritage in order to describe the Indian national consciousness.

According to Anumapa Mohan, Rao constructed *Kanthapura* on two central structuring elements, namely the depiction of the emergence of national consciousness, and the narrator's weaving of current events with Indian history and mythology through oral storytelling techniques (Mohan, 2012, p. 95). He argues that "the primary impetus for the novel comes from the crafting of Gandhi's influence through a linear depiction of events and occurrences" (Mohan, 2012, p. 96). Gandhian ideals, through Moorthy's leadership, reach the village and transform it as villagers become involved in the nationalist movement, eventually leading to their being expelled from the village. The narrative provides a detailed account of the emergence and development of the nationalist movement in Kanthapura. Mohan states

that the narrator's "local and contingent realities" accompany the linear depiction of events, and bridge Kanthapura's present to the centuries old Indian traditions (Mohan, 2012, p. 96-97). The narrator brings together characters from Kanthapura with mythological and religious figures from Indian history and culture, thus melding the story of this small village and the larger Indian cultural heritage. The unique narrative voice contributes to the representation of nationalist sentiment by providing an inherently Indian style. In other words, the formal and thematic elements work together to present the Indian national spirit within the broader framework of Indian history and culture.

In the context of Indian literature, Rumina Sethi states that "treating historical fiction as the literary dimension of nationalist history" emerges as an important method for realizing how nationalist ideology is constructed in the cultural sphere (Sethi, 1999, p. 1). She also points out the problems presented by the employment of past cultural structures in the creation of a modern national culture. While the past is employed to create nationalist sentiment, the extent of its compatibility with the present project of modernization remains dubious. Sethi argues that "the writing of indigenous history has appeared to take two self-contradictory courses: configuration within the orientalist constellation by an emphasis on the ancient past, and an urge to break away from that very past" (Sethi, 1999, p. 17). When we consider Rao's novel, this conflict reveals itself in the narrative's emphasis on cultural and religious traditions to create a nationalist consciousness within the framework of the Gandhian ideology, which aims both for independence and transformation of Indian society, most importantly the caste system. Achakka, the narrator, serves an important role in disclosing the tension between the past as a reference point for national identity and the past as an obstacle before social change with her embrace of the nationalist campaign while retaining her view of the caste system to a certain degree.

Achakka, *Kanthapura*'s first-person narrator, is an old Brahmin widow from Kanthapura. This brief description draws our attention to her status with respect to two basic yet important elements in the novel, namely gender and caste. Her position as a storyteller is greatly influenced by these elements. She holds both marginalized and privileged positions that subsequently shape her storytelling (Mohan, 2012, p. 101). As a woman and a widow, she is marginalized; yet as a Brahmin, she belongs to a higher caste. She is the grandmother figure who carries on the oral storytelling tradition while her authority as the storyteller is shaped by her own social status. At the beginning of the novel, Achakka says:

> Till now I've spoken only of the Brahmin quarter. Our village had a Pariah quarter too, a Porters' quarter, a Weavers' quarter and a Sudra quarter. How many huts had we there? I do not know. There may have been ninety or a hundred – though a hundred may be the right number. Of course you would not expect me to go to the Pariah quarter, but I have seen from the street-corner Beadle Timmayya's hut. (Rao, 1963, p. 5)

Here the narrator not only describes the social stratification within the village, but also marks her own social status and embraces it by fulfilling the societal expectations of her caste, i.e., not setting foot in the Pariah quarters. Achakka's internalization of the caste system and its impact on the narrative will come under scrutiny when I, later on, examine her narrative voice as the representative of the village and the accompanying problems.

Achakka's narrative voice contains several characteristics of the oral storytelling tradition, such as direct address to the reader, interjections to keep the audience engaged, and the heightened rhythm and tempo created by the depiction of events one after another, with almost no punctuation. As the foreword ends with "a grandmother might have told you, newcomer, the sad tale of her village" (Rao, 1963, p. VI), the novel then opens with Achakka inviting the reader – the newcomer – to be part of her audience and learn about the fate of the village, "our village – I don't think you have heard about it" (Rao, 1963, p. 1). Her use of phrases such as "tell me," "I assure you," "you know," "to tell you the truth" and "I tell you," puts the reader in the midst of her immediate audience at Kashipura, where she lives now. The rhythm of the narrative is, in Rao's words, "interminable," namely events follow one another without punctuation or "the treacherous 'ats' and 'ons'" (Rao, 1963, p. VI). S.S. Moorty reminds us that "long interminable descriptive passages made up of sentences bound by noncommittal 'and's that show incident following incident in a continuous chain, eventually revealing an event" reflect the *Purana* form in the most exquisite way (Moorty, 1996, p. 114). One of the finest examples of Rao's mastery of the *Purana* form is Achakka's description of the Skeffington Coffee Estate and the coolies' journey, which consists of a two-page long sentence (Rao, 1963, p. 49-50). This long sentence, made up of several clauses bound by 'and's, finally ends when the story comes to a halt with the coolies' arrival to the estate grounds. Rao's utilization of Indian oral storytelling tradition characteristics in written form results in a language both familiar and alien to the reader. Achakka's narrative voice is marked with stylistic qualities born out of Indian culture, reviving the Indian storytelling tradition as a response to the dominance of colonial discourse over cultural systems. Neil Lazarus, in *The Postcolonial Unconscious*, notes how literary representations of anticolonial nationalism strive to bring new nations into being: "They [writers] 'world these nations, so to

speak, defining them through grammars, lexicons, registers, habitus that had to be fought for and fought over, seized from the grasp of colonial definition, colonial understanding, colonial discursivity, and conceptuality" (Lazarus, 2011, p. 65). The narrative voice in *Kanthapura*, taking the Indian literary and cultural tradition as its reference point, resonates with Lazarus's idea of resisting the grasp of colonial discourse and re-creating the nation on the page. The representation of Kanthapura's story as part of the broader Indian history connects it with ancient times, when the emphasis lies in the glory of Indian culture rather than colonial hegemony.

Kanthapura presents a complex picture where anticolonial nationalism appears both unifying and exclusionary due to the first-person narrator's authority over the narrative. On the one hand, it delineates the growing collective consciousness in the village and the people's enthusiastic participation in the nationalist movement; on the other hand, Achakka's voice, along with other thematic aspects, underscore certain limitations, mostly due to the emphasis on the past religious and cultural traditions, with respect to the inclusiveness of the nation-in-the-making. In the novel, "I" is often replaced with "we," making Achakka the representative of the village. According to Moorty, Achakka "echoes the sentiments, the prejudices, the joys and the values of the community" (Moorty, 1996, p. 113). An early example of this would be her introduction of Moorthy:

> Corner-House Moorthy, who had gone through life like a noble cow, quiet, generous, serene, deferent and brahmanic, a very prince like, I tell you. We loved him, of course … He's the age my Seenu is, and he and Seenu were as, one would say, our Rama and brother Lakshamana. They only needed a Sita to make it complete. In fact, on that day, as everybody knew, Coffee-Planter Ramayya had come to offer his own daughter to Moorthy. But the horoscopes did not agree. And we were all so satisfied… (Rao, 1963, p. 5).

By employing the first-person plural mode, the narrator underscores that not only her, but indeed the whole village have a high opinion of Moorthy. Tabish Khair, like Moorty, describes Achakka as "a generalized and socialized narrator" who acts almost as the spokesperson for her community (Khair, 2001, p. 216). However, he differs from Moorty in also pointing out the pitfalls of this assumed role. He argues that Achakka's narrative voice tends to idealize certain characters and simplify or typify others in accordance with Rao's "philosophical conception of the Hindu/Indian ethos" primarily based on Brahmanism (Khair, 2001, p. 213). Then comes the question: How can Achakka, a Brahmin widow, represent those outside of her caste – and literally out of her reach – within the community?

The ambivalence of the narrative voice stems from Achakka's adamant desire to speak for the whole community while retaining her Hindu Brahmin social values. Mohan calls the impact of the narrative voice on the reader "a precarious mix of unreliability and empathy" in which "she [Achakka] simultaneously distances the reader with her unsubtle biases and prejudicial observations and draws the reader in with her always-engaging and dynamic narrative of rural life" (Mohan, 2012, p. 101). The novel's representation of Moorthy's first visit to the inside of a pariah hut, namely crossing the threshold that separates castes both literally and figuratively, illustrates an example of Achakka's anxiety concerning the preservation of Brahmin values. Although Moorthy thinks "the roof seems to shake, and all the gods and all the manes of heaven seem to cry out against him" during his visit, he is determined to continue visiting the pariah quarter (Rao, 1963, p. 77). Achakka expresses her relief after recounting Moorthy's decision to purify himself with the Ganges water after his visits to the pariah quarter: "After all a Brahmin is a Brahmin, sister!" (Rao, 1963, p. 77). Neelam Srivastava argues that this remark suggests a mutual understanding between Achakka and her audience in terms of caste distinctions (Srivastava, 2010, p. 315). Srivastava's claim reiterates the overarching Brahmin-oriented worldview in the narrative through this shared understanding. Achakka's portrayal of the police officer Bade Khan, the only Muslim depicted in detail in the novel, indicates a similar attitude. Upon his arrival in the village, Achakka clearly states that Bade Khan does not fit into the existing social structure: "Being a Mohomedan he could stay neither in the Potters' Street nor in the Sudra Street, and you don't expect him to live in the Brahmin Street" (Rao, 1963, p. 14). His exclusion from the village leads him to find accommodation in the Skeffington Coffee Estate, where he lives with a pariah woman. This detail, conveyed by Achakka, once again highlights the novel's exclusionary attitude toward Bade Khan based on a Brahminical worldview. While the narrator already frowns upon him because of his religion, his relationship with a pariah woman makes him entirely unacceptable. Even though Hindu-Muslim unity is an integral part of Swaraj as mentioned in the *harikatha* performance, which I will discuss below, the novel refrains from attempting to exemplify this unity within the confines of the village.

New Ideas, Old Forms

While Achakka's biases and Brahmin values frame her storytelling, it is Moorthy and the ideas he has brought to the village that shape the story of the village itself. Moorthy holds the center not only in Achakka's tale, but also in the emergence and development of the nationalist movement in Kanthapura. If *Kanthapura* recounts the emergence of a national

consciousness, it is also the story of Moorthy's gradual transformation from a village boy into an ardent follower of Gandhian ideology. Moorthy's transformation affects the whole community, as he disseminates Gandhian principles to the villagers at the cost of upsetting the status quo. All the trouble, Achakka says, starts with Moorthy's unearthing of a *linga*, its consecration, and the Kanthapurishwari temple built around it (Rao, 1963, p. 7). What follows directly is Moorthy's attempt to revive religious festivals and ensure their continuity through villagers' participation from different quarters, with the ultimate aim of instilling a sense of community regardless of caste distinctions. The new temple, from very early on, serves as the center where religion will be put to the service of politics, specifically to introduce Gandhian ideology, as exemplified by the *harikatha* ceremony. *Harikatha* is an art form composed of storytelling, dance, poetry, music, and drama, generally focusing on a religious theme, such as the life of a saint or an epic from Indian history.

The *harikatha* ceremony by Jayaramachar is the first instance where we witness the coming together of gods and Gandhi, as well as the villagers' reaction to this *harikatha* they have never heard before. Jayaramachar starts his performance by explaining what kind of a story he will tell: "'Today,' he says, 'it will be the story of Siva and Parvati.' And Parvati in penance becomes the country and Siva becomes heaven knows what! 'Siva is the three-eyed,' he says, 'and Swaraj too is three-eyed: Self-purification, Hindu-Moslem unity, Khaddar'" (Rao, 1963, p. 10). With his reference to Swaraj, the performer brings Gandhi's national program of home-rule into the world of *harikatha*, creating an allegorical relationship between Swaraj and the goddess Siva. Once the main principles of Gandhian ideology are described in relation to Siva, the allegorical representation of India as an enslaved goddess paves the way for the coming of Mahatma as the savior. This *harikatha* depicts him as the "son such as the world has never beheld" (Rao, 1963, p. 12). He is initially compared to Krishna, who also fought against demons, and then his life story and ideology are conveyed to the audience, highlighting him as "a saint" (Rao, 1963, p. 12-13). Jayamachar ends his *harikatha* by saying that even Gandhi's enemies fall at his feet and become followers.

Gandhi's appearance in this *harikatha*, an already established cultural and religious form, surprises the audience, who expect to hear about gods. The appropriation of the *harikatha* form is reminiscent of Rao's own appropriation of the novel form while writing *Kanthapura*. Though working at different ends, both forms have undergone transformation to serve the writer's or the storyteller's purpose. The novel form is altered by the oral storytelling tradition in order to express the Indian spirit, while *harikatha*'s focus on Gandhi is

an attempt to use this familiar form to inform the villagers about Gandhian ideology and nationalist politics. Jasbir Jain claims that inherently religious *harikathas* yield to "Gandhi-kathas," in other words, "secular narratives" in Rao's novel (Jain, 2007, p. 175). However, it is the intermingling of the divine and the ordinary that elevates Gandhi to the status of a god and marks his role in Indian history as having a mission assigned to him by divine powers. Thus Gandhi, no longer regarded as an ordinary human being, takes his place amongst other mythical fighters as recounted in stories (Monti, 2001, p. 55). The mythification of Gandhi through *harikatha* helps villagers to get acquainted with his principles for the first time. Indeed, the section ends with several young men from the village "throw[ing] away their foreign clothes and becom[ing] Gandhi's men" (Rao, 1963, p. 13). While the implementation of religious practices to familiarize the villagers with Gandhi bridges the past and present through already existing cultural structures, the deification of Gandhi and the young men's embrace of Gandhian ideology immediately after listening to the *harikatha* raise questions about the narrative's portrayal of the nationalist movement's strong appeal to the emotional side of the villagers, rather than an attempt to raise consciousness about the ideological framework of the movement.

The story of Moorthy becoming a follower of Gandhi helps us to reflect on the novel's representation of the emotive appeal of the nationalist campaign and its significance for the development of national consciousness in Kanthapura. Achakka recounts how Moorthy, all of a sudden, leaves the university and comes back to the village: "For, as everybody knew, one day he [Moorthy] had seen a vision, a vision of the Mahatma, mighty and God-beaming" (Rao, 1963, p. 35). In the first place, the use of "vision" here creates an ambiguity since it is impossible to determine whether Moorthy really experienced what happens in the rest of the account or only imagined it. However, when we look at the rest of the account, we realize that what really matters is how and why Moorthy decides to become a Gandhi man. The passage describes the ecstatic state of Moorthy as he listens to Gandhi:

> Moorthy stood by the Mahatma and the fan went once this side and once that, and beneath the fan came a voice deep and stirring that went out to the hearts of those women and men … and the hair and the nails of Moorthy into the very limbs, and Moorthy shivered … he said to himself 'Let me listen,' and he listened, and in listening heard, 'there is but one force in life and that is truth, and there is but one love in life and that is the love of mankind, and there is but one God in life and that is the God of all,' and then came a shiver… (Rao, 1963, p. 35-36)

While in this emotionally overwhelmed state, Moorthy gets the chance to ask Gandhi for guidance. His advice determines Moorthy's path: seeking Truth, wearing khadi, leaving

foreign university, and helping the country by working among people in villages (Rao, 1963, p. 36). When we examine the course of the events, we see that Moorthy's conversion to a Gandhi man essentially depends on a real or imagined encounter in which his emotions take over. Moorthy's decision to follow Gandhi is depicted without any obvious reference to the political aspect of Gandhi's campaign and the nationalist movement. The suddenness of his decision underscores a personal and emotional attachment to Gandhi rather than a politically informed one. The aforementioned passage about the young villagers' decision to become Gandhi men after the *harikatha* ceremony reiterates the same pattern with the exception of Gandhi's physical absence in the scene. The same issue will be of great importance when we consider how Moorthy attempts to recruit villagers to commit themselves to various activities related to the nationalist campaign. These attempts mostly indicate his tendency to appeal to the emotional side of the villagers when he realizes the difficulty, and sometimes impossibility, of conveying the political message of these activities.

Khadi (or khaddar), handspun cloth mostly made of cotton, constitutes an important part of Moorthy's nationalist campaign in the village. Meeta Chatterjee underscores the two-fold significance of khadi: it not only "dismantles the complacent socio-political structures" but also enforces the "re-formation of the age-old caste relationships" (Chatterjee, 2000, p. 107-109). In the novel, Moorthy, along with his supporters, strives to promote spinning across all quarters of the village so as to contribute to the economic independence program and to break caste boundaries through everyone's participation in it. The reactions, however, reveal some of the difficulties Moorthy faces as he tries to spread the Gandhian principles as well as the means he employs to overcome those difficulties. For instance, Brahmin Nanjamma's skepticism toward spinning speaks to the long-standing caste-based labor division in the village: "Brahmins do not spin, do they? My son, we have weavers in the village" (Rao, 1963, p. 17). It is not clear whether his subsequent speech about the exploitation of the country has any bearing on the old woman, since she accepts spinning only after being told that "Every morning he [Gandhi] spins for two hours immediately after his prayers. He says spinning is as purifying as praying" (Rao, 1963, p. 19). Moorthy's resort to Gandhi as an exemplary figure and the accompanying religious connotations, along with the fact that Gandhi has already been represented almost like a mythical god, serve to create a connection to the Hindu past which, in itself, is unable to accommodate the social change and the sense of collective belonging that the nationalist program envisions in its challenge to the caste system.

The representation of women in *Kanthapura* discloses the tenuous relationship between cultural traditions and nationalism. Women are generally regarded as the repository of tradition and culture in nationalist narratives. Chatterjee argues that "the women's question" is a "problem of Indian tradition," in which women have been defined by their role in ensuring the preservation and continuity of national culture, which denies subjectivity to women and turns them into a sign for the nation (Chatterjee, 1993, p. 119-121). In Achakka's tale, Rangamma and Ratna emerge as role models and leaders due to their active participation in the nationalist movement. The narrative, however, allows active participation in the public domain only as long as women fulfill their duties in the private domain. Anshuman Mondal states that the emergence of women in the public sphere occurs conditionally, as a service to the nation (Mondal, 2002, p. 928). Rangamma's efforts to organize a women's branch in the struggle presents a compelling example underscoring the narrative's complicity in its delineation of a new woman figure which, in fact, is still bound with expectations based on traditional gender roles. As volunteers in this group exercise and train, the husbands start to complain about the women acting like men and their neglect of households (Rao, 1963, p. 108-110). While the men's reactions to this development can be explained in terms of their unease at women stepping outside the assigned gender roles, Rangamma and other women's responses suggest a perspective that regards women first as wives and only subsequently as volunteers:

> Of course, Satamma has to look after your comforts. If we are to help others, we must begin with our husbands,' and she tells Satamma, 'Your husband is not against Sevika Sangha. He only wants to eat in time,' … Rangamma tells her to be more regular in cooking, and we all say, 'We should do our duty. If not it is no use belonging to the Gandhi-group.' Rangamma says, 'That is right, sister,' and we say, 'We shall not forget our children and our husbands. (Rao, 1963, p. 110)

Volunteers are expected to fulfill their duties as wives and mothers before partaking in the women's branch as Gandhi volunteers. The prioritization of traditional gender roles ensures that women still remain within the bounds of the patriarchal system when they step outside their houses. The narrative clearly shows that women's participation in the public sphere does not pose a threat to their role as dutiful and obedient wives when Rangamma compares the policeman's beating to a husband's beating: "When your husband beats you, you do not hit back, do you? You only grumble and weep. The policeman's beatings are the like!" (Rao, 1963, p. 127) This example affirms Sethi's point that women in Kanthapura achieve little in altering the private domain (Sethi, 1996, p. 313). Their participation in the

nationalist movement and in the public sphere does not affect the dynamics of the private domain, where they are defined through their subordination to men. In this sense, the narrative points to, and to a certain degree supports, women's role in society as defined by past social and cultural structures, so as to ensure the preservation and continuity of traditional gender values.

When we consider the overall progress of the nationalist campaign in Kanthapura, the incongruity between the existing cultural structures and the demands of Gandhian ideology emerges as a source of tension and anxiety. Revisiting Chatterjee's (1993) notion of material and spiritual domains can help us to analyze the success and misgivings of the nationalist movement as represented in the novel. If, as Chatterjee argues, nationalism insists on "'essential' cultural difference" in order to establish its sovereignty in the spiritual or inner domain, it relies on the notion that this cultural difference has its roots in the nation's past (Chatterjee, 1993, p. 26-27). In *Kanthapura*, Gandhian ideology permeates the spiritual domain, both through the intermingling of religion and the nationalist campaign in Moorthy's attempts to raise consciousness, and through unsuccessful yet repeated attempts to challenge the caste system in the village. While this intervention does not come from colonial authority, it nevertheless strives to undermine long standing societal structures governing the practices and cultural norms of daily life. The spiritual domain is subject to change as nationalism strives to create a modern national culture while preserving its distinctiveness (Chatterjee, 1993, p. 6). Moorthy's emphasis on the use of religious festivals and celebrations to promote the nationalist movement maintains a strong connection with previous social structures. However, *Kanthapura* also problematizes the difficulty of leaving behind the social and cultural system one is born into and the individual's dilemma when confronted with the need to act against ingrained social codes. Even Moorthy, the most fervent advocate of Gandhian ideology, feels discomfort when he transgresses caste-bound social expectations by stepping into a pariah house, disclosing the incompatibility between the broader cultural tradition he is part of and the modern national culture Rao's Gandhian ideology envisions.

The novel's engagement with religion on different levels also portrays Rao's attempt to return to an older and purer version of Hinduism untainted by the workings of colonialism, which brings forth a contested relationship between the representatives of Orthodox Hinduism and Moorthy, and Gandhian ideology in general. In the narrative, Orthodox Hinduism forms the strongest opposition to Gandhian ideology, especially through the First Brahmin Bhatta

and the Swami.[2] According to Khair, this should not come as a surprise since Bhatta and the Swami do not represent the Hinduism which the novel, and also Gandhian ideology, aim to promote (Khair, 2001, p. 211-212). Both characters are in a complicit relationship with the colonial government and use religious values to protect their own interests. The Swami's assertion that "governments are sent by the Divine Will and we may not question it" (Rao, 1963, p. 95) legitimizes the colonial rule vis-à-vis religious authority (Mondal, 2002, p. 110). The First Brahmin Bhatta's exploitation of the villagers as a moneylender turns him from a pontifical Brahmin into a landowner. He regards any possibility of change, whether in the caste system or regarding the status of women, as a threat to his own position. While both the Swami and Bhatta initially appear to be in the spiritual domain due to their religious positions, their dealings with the colonial authority and its economy no longer allow them to be part of it in the book's view. Their misuse of religious authority for their own benefit disqualifies them as bearers of the national cultural heritage the novel strives to convey.

It is noteworthy that Patel Range Gowda, who in fact serves as part of the colonial establishment as a patel, does not receive the same treatment as Bhatta and the Swami in the narrative due to his participation in Moorthy's campaign. In fact, the novel depicts him as part of the long standing tradition, hence part of the nation's history, through his patelship and his dismissal from his position is regarded as an act of disrespect towards the ancient traditions: "'Oh this is against the ancient laws – a patel is a patel from father to son, from son to grandson, and this Government wants to eat up the food of our ancestors […] Oh Goddess, destroy this government'" (Rao, 1963, p. 98). Rao's portrayal of the representatives of Orthodox Hinduism indicates how the established religious structure is used to confront the nationalist movement, serving the ends of colonial power rather than the nation itself. The nationalist movement distances itself from this corrupted version of Hinduism by revisiting centuries-old religious practices, thus proposing ancient religious traditions as a source for the emerging national consciousness.

Conclusion

The novel ends with villagers being forced to leave Kanthapura and take refuge in another village, and Moorthy becoming a Nehru supporter. While the ending can be seen as the loss of the villagers' dreams, Achakka expresses her faith in Gandhi "to bring them Swaraj" and instills hope in others by recounting her story (Rao, 1963, p. 189). In the end, the villagers remain dedicated to Gandhi and the promise of the nationalist movement, which first

[2] Swami is an honorific title given to a Hindu religious teacher.

awakened a sense of collective belonging and shared destiny among them. The novel represents the possibility of mobilizing populist resistance and reaching out to different segments of the society by cultural and religious means. Nevertheless, taken in a broader framework, *Kanthapura* focuses on a certain kind of Indianness defined through Hindu-Brahmin traditions. Its attempt to counter the hegemony of colonial discourse through an emphasis on religious and cultural tradition helps create an exclusionary mode of nation-formation that develops a dominant class within itself. Revisiting the Hindu past determines the contours of the projected nationhood by prioritizing a homogenous societal structure rather than a heterogenous one. The difficulty of overcoming social and religious codes in the construction of new national identity discloses both the contestation and negotiation with the already existing cultural systems, as well as the possible means for their reconfiguration and transformation. That the novel brings up Nehru and his principles at the end leaves the reader with the possibility of further transformation to the Indian identity that is still in-the-making with the potential and means to give itself a new form.

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