

FORMS OF NARITVA IN “KANTHAPURA”

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Abstract

Kanthapura, a microcosm of India, represents women as both the physical and spiritual center of villagers' lives, showcasing them not only as socio-cultural leaders but also as political embodiments of 'Shakti'. The novel explores the world of women, delving into traditional 'jayanti' ceremonies and the innate wisdom of grandmothers as they narrate the 'Sthalapurana'. The intellectually curious reader is granted insight into the minds of Indian women, replete with positive emotions. This paper aims to highlight the presence of empowered, multitasking women throughout history, and how contemporary women have inherited and demonstrated this consciousness across various domains.

Introduction

Indian English Literature encompasses two significant ideas: it constitutes one of the many streams that merge into the vast ocean of Indian literature, unified despite the diversity of languages, and it is an inevitable product of the English language's nativization to express Indian sensibility. The Indian English Novel may have arrived late on the scene, but it has proven to be fertile ground. Late 19th and early 20th century novelists such as Mulkraj Anand, R.K. Narayan, Rabindranath Tagore, and Raja Rao addressed various aspects of Indian sensibility, delving into social, political, religious, economic, and educational issues.

Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938) is one of the early Indian novels in English that captures the essence of the Civil

Disobedience movement of the 1930s. Set in a small South Indian village, the narrative revolves around the villagers' participation in the national struggle led by Mahatma Gandhi. Fueled by nationalism, the villagers sacrifice their material possessions, transcending narrow prejudices to unite in the common cause of non-violent civil resistance against the British Raj.

Examining *Kanthapura* through the lens of feminism and gender studies reveals how the author skilfully delineates the women characters. The village is protected by Goddess Kenchamma, who symbolizes the powerful feminine force. Moorthy, the protagonist, embarks on the Gandhian path, causing a stir in the village. Ratna, a young widow, becomes Moorthy's spiritual helpmate, embodying the strength and resilience of Indian womanhood. Rangamma, an enlightened woman, actively supports Moorthy's cause, showcasing the powerful role women can play in political and social movements.

In *Kanthapura*, women emerge as the backbone of the village's struggle for independence. They defy traditional gender roles, embracing political activism and assuming leadership positions. Drawing from feminist theory, the novel demonstrates how women's agency and empowerment can be pivotal in transforming societies and challenging oppressive systems. Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* offers a rich exploration of Indian womanhood and its connection to the broader struggle for independence. By critically examining the novel through the frameworks of feminism and gender studies, we gain a deeper understanding of the vital role women played in shaping the destiny of the nation. Furthermore, the text serves as a testament to the enduring legacy of powerful and resourceful women throughout history, whose spirit continues to inspire and empower future generations.

Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* has been referred to as a 'Gandhi Purana', combining contemporary themes through the novel's narrator, Achakka. In fact, Achakka seems to embody the feminine creative energy, making the tale a powerful "Purana of Discovery" that explores Mahatma Gandhi's India through the living, breathing village. Achakka, portrayed as Seenu's mother, is an illiterate but wise widow with a vast repertoire of stories. Her loquacious and gossipy nature allows her to incorporate numerous details into the

story, drawing from the reservoir of her memory. She weaves a pattern out of the rambling material, painting scenes like an artist with her canvas being the soil and life surrounding Kanthapura.

Through the lens of feminism and gender studies, Achakka's role as the narrator can be seen as a powerful representation of women's voices in storytelling. Her ability to discover analogies from rustic life, such as describing heat as "an April pomegranate" or a lady as "as thin as a bamboo", showcases her intellectual global consciousness. Despite her illiteracy, her vivid imagination and understanding of the world around her challenge traditional gender norms and expectations. The jubilation and revelry on the eve of religious festivals are likened to a marriage party, while economic exploitation is projected through the metaphor of the motherland being bled to death. Achakka seamlessly intermingles contemporary politics with the rich mythical past, comparing the Mahatma's actions to Lord Krishna's slaying of the Kali serpent, and his visit to England to Rama's journey to Lanka. As she says, "And Rama will come back from exile and Sita will be with him... And as they enter Ayodhya there will be a rain of flowers..."

Paul Sharrad, in the introduction to *Raja Rao and Cultural Tradition*, highlights how Achakka's narration reveals the struggle of incorporating non-violence and the caste system into the resistance against colonial and feudal oppression. He says, "A garrulous grandmother narrates the tale of how the peasants – especially the women – are gradually enthused by a clever blend of traditional storytelling and modern nationalist propaganda, the old woman vividly evokes the rhythms, characters, and beliefs of rural life." Examining Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* through the frameworks of feminism and gender studies reveals the power and importance of women's voices in storytelling. The character of Achakka demonstrates how women can be intellectually and creatively engaged in the world around them, despite societal barriers. Her ability to blend contemporary politics, mythology, and rural life showcases the strength of women's perspectives in shaping both narratives and the course of history.

Paul Sharad's view of women struggling against the vices of contemporary society is embodied by Rangamma, a central character in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*. As one of the few educated women in the village, Rangamma keeps the

community informed through the Blue Paper newspaper. She is far from a traditional housewife, possessing knowledge beyond her domestic chores. Her awareness spans various topics, from the intricacies of nature to the mysteries of the cosmos. Although she is described as "deferent, soft-voiced, and gentle-gestured," Rangamma is not easily fooled. From a feminist and gender studies perspective, Rangamma represents a strong, independent woman who defies traditional gender roles. She inspires the men around her, supporting Moorthy's quest for equality, even though she may not share his belief in the inherent equality of all castes. Rangamma's transformation into a leader and skilled orator alongside Shankar further showcases her resilience and adaptability.

Rangamma's leadership abilities are evident as she guides the women of Kanthapura to form the "Sevika Sangh" organization. She understands the importance of unity among women and effectively communicates national interests using domestic examples. Rangamma advises women to care not only for their country but also for their homes and husbands, stating, "If we are to help others, we must begin with our husbands." This highlights her belief in the importance of balancing personal and political responsibilities.

Rangamma's role in fostering anti-imperialist activities in Kanthapura and supporting Moorthy demonstrates her commitment to the cause of freedom. She embodies the qualities of a freedom fighter's mother, caring for Moorthy in times of need, such as after Narsamma's death. Raja Rao's portrayal of Rangamma's nurturing nature and her relationship with Moorthy highlights the multifaceted dimensions of women in Indian society. In addition to Rangamma, Raja Rao introduces the supernatural feminine form through Goddess Kenchamma. As the village's central deity, Kenchamma influences every aspect of life, providing meaning and protection. The villagers attribute their well-being to Kenchamma and offer her their gratitude through rituals and sacrifices. The presence of Goddess Kenchamma underscores the significance of women in Indian mythology and culture.

Thus, a critical examination of Raja Rao's Kanthapura through the lens of feminism and gender studies reveals the complexities of female characters like Rangamma and Goddess Kenchamma. These characters challenge

traditional gender roles and expectations, showcasing the strength and resilience of women. Rangamma, in particular, embodies the qualities of leadership, adaptability, and balance, inspiring both men and women alike in the struggle for independence and equality.

In Kanthapura, Raja Rao crafts a world where women, far from being confined to the traditional Indian orthodox roles, emerge as social, cultural, and political 'Shakti.' The novel introduces Ratna, a young widow who defies convention and refuses to accept shame or inferiority due to her gender. Ratna chooses her own path, joining forces with Moorthy for the emancipation of the motherland rather than pursuing marriage. She embodies the spirit of those educated and enlightened women, inspired by Mahatma Gandhi, who fought alongside men for India's independence. Ratna's journey exemplifies the transformative power of feminist consciousness and agency, even in the face of adversity.

The narrative also showcases Rangamma, who possesses both leadership qualities and a deep understanding of women's psychology. In moments of crisis, she employs bhajan chanting and storytelling to inspire and uplift her fellow women, revealing her emotional intelligence and empathy. Through characters like Ratna and Rangamma, Raja Rao highlights the concept of 'naritva,' the belief in the intimate connection between power, activism, and femininity. According to scholar Uma Parameswaran, different forms of 'Shakti' manifest through the women of Kanthapura, with the indomitable spirit of 'Shakti' driving them in their Satyagraha against the British government. The women of Kanthapura are not only depicted as political 'Shakti,' but their significance extends to various aspects of life, including religious rituals and festivals. Even minor characters, such as Lakshamma, Ningamma, and Rangi, contribute to the novel's portrayal of the multifaceted nature of Indian women. These women seamlessly navigate their domestic responsibilities while actively participating in social, cultural, and political events. The same has been reflected by Tiwari and Pradyumansinh (2019) stating that the role of women "...in building and moulding of a nation's destiny". Their resilience and strength in the face of brutality and oppression reflect the enduring power of 'naritva.'

Drawing on feminist theories and gender studies, Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* demonstrates the myriad forms of women's empowerment and resistance against patriarchy and colonialism. The novel rejects the notion that Indian women are solely confined to their kitchens and homes, instead presenting a rich tapestry of women who embody various aspects of 'Shakti' and 'naritva.' Through the struggles and triumphs of characters like Ratna and Rangamma, *Kanthapura* offers a testament to the resilience and strength of Indian women, who continue to defy convention and make their mark in today's digital India. Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* serves as a powerful exploration of Indian womanhood, as it celebrates the multiplicity of experiences, roles, and strengths that Indian women possess. By utilizing feminist theories and frameworks, the novel provides an intricate and nuanced portrait of the women who fought for independence and equality, defying the restrictions placed upon them by society. Through the lens of gender studies, *Kanthapura* becomes an illuminating and inspiring testament to the indomitable spirit of Indian women, both past and present.

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