

ENGLISH AS A LANGUAGE OF DECOLONIZATION IN POST-COLONIAL INDIA: A STUDY OF RAJA RAO'S *KANTHAPURA*

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“The aesthetics is that, sometimes I like to write like a *Purana*. I like the *Puranic* conception. That is the only conception of the novel for me. I don't want to compare my novel with any foreign novel. I am very much an Indian and the Indian form is the *Puranic* form. Form comes naturally to me. Hence, it is wrong to study my novels in the light of the Western conception of a well made novel”.

Raja Rao

“Raja Rao has written in English, which is not one of the fourteen languages of the constitution, but his novels are Indian because he has progressively evolved for himself a definition of India which gives a certain unity of purpose to all his work”.

S. Nagarajan.

Gone might be the days when India was considered a country of villages, but the history of villages has a profound truth in it and Raja Rao, one of the most celebrated writers in the field of Indian English Literature was well aware of this truth. Raja Rao occupies the pride of place among the Indo-English novelists. His writings work as a bridge between the man and the circumstances of his being and has shown unquestionably, an access to the truth. This has become a reality on account of his introducing the theme of 'Indianness', a new form and most importantly, the factor of dislocating the syntax of the English language. Raja Rao successfully discovers man's inner essence in most of his fictional characters. Most of his writings are completely embedded in the, as he says, '*puranic* form' of India. Rao has retained the indigenous flavour, by giving it a new resonance in the theme, form and medium of his works. He experiments not only with the fictional form but also with a foreign language, which he considers 'alien'. He gives a completely new form to the alien language and purifies it beyond recognition. The language that seemed to be 'the language of the intellect' and not that of the emotions, could now accommodate easily, the day-to-day feelings as a result of the purificatory process that Raja Rao performed on it by way of subversion of the 'standard British English'.

His profound knowledge of Indian life, especially that in the villages and his literary quest for an inspiring language have got expression in his debut novel *Kanthapura*. The novel is in the form of a story told by Achakka, an old woman in a village by the same name, in Karnataka. The method of narration is very expressive, effective and very close to the *Puranic*

mode... a technical achievement of a very high order. The story revolves around the lives of the people of *Kanthapura*, and their vigorous participation in the freedom struggle. In *Kanthapura*, Rao evokes the image of a village with all its myths, superstitions and rituals. *Kanthapura* portrays Pre-Independent India in all its realistic fervour.

Considering the linguistic aspects of the novel, it is evident that he succeeds in his attempt to dislocate, or at least reduce the addiction to British English in Indian literature, with his innovative use of language. In the novel, Rao experiments with the language of the colonizers. Standard British English is not to be found in Rao's work in the way it was used by other writers of the colonial period. The norms regarding the use of the coloniser's language is subverted in *Kanthapura*. The language used in *Kanthapura* conforms to the ideal that a novel in English by an Indian author must be essentially 'Indian'. The language of the novel reproduces the speech patterns of Indians using English and represents the way the people of India talk and think. The words used in the novel are English but the organisation of the sentences is in an 'Indianised' way. The syntax of the English language (i.e. the SVO structure) is subverted. Usually, in Standard English proper nouns appear at the beginning of any sentence. But Raja Rao breaks the syntax of the Standard English language and forms his own by using the proper nouns in the middle of the sentence or at the end, for instance, "She was a pious old woman, Narasamma, tall and thin", (Rao, 39) "She has never failed us, I assure you, our Kenchamma"(Rao, 65), "From that day on they never spoke to each other, Narasamma and Moorthy"(Rao 48). To a native English speaker it might feel strange, but for an Indian, it sounds absolutely natural.

The influence of Rao's mother-tongue, i.e. Kannada can be seen in *Kanthapura*. To give an example, Rao frequently changes the usual structure of sentences and the order of words, and tries to construct the language in a pattern of his own. For example, consider the description of the village – "High on the Ghats is it, high up the steep mountains that face the cool Arabian seas, up the Malabar coast is it"(Rao,1), and the expression that he uses several times during the story "Defend one must against evil"(Rao, 86) etc. The verbs and pronouns are placed in the way they are placed in Indian languages, as is evident in the case of the first example. The novel is crowded with such constructions. Besides, Kannada words and local expressions are used extensively. The new technique gives the sentences a look which is unfamiliar but not objectionable, because of the content which is denser with significations. This novel use of the English language by Raja Rao, is a reflection of the essence of regional realities flavoured by his native language.

The narration is flooded with Indian phrases and proverbs. One can locate many examples of the literal translation of Kannada expressions into English, for example,

Every squirrel has his day" (Rao, 77), "The policemen are not your uncle's sons" (Rao, 162), "If you are the sons of your father", "we are the lickens of your feet"(Rao, 52), "you cannot straighten a dog's tail"(Rao 140), "with his week's earning at his waists"(Rao 140) etc.

Needless to say, all these have sprung directly from the peculiar Indian situations. The writer is obviously trying to give a comfortable location for local expressions in an 'alien language'. This endows the work with an authenticity and 'Indianness'. It becomes more intense when one finds the language of the novel packed with Indian flavoured abuses, for instance - the abuses thrown by Venkamma are especially noteworthy. She says about her sister-in-law, Rangamma:

“If her parents are poor, let them set fire to their dhoti and sari and die. Oh, if only I could have had the courage to put lizard-poison into their food.” (Rao 10), “then there is such a battle of oaths – ‘son of concubine’ – ‘son of a widow’ – ‘I’ll sleep with your wife’ – ‘you donkey’s husband’ (Rao 59).

And Moorthy’s mother can be noted when she says – “Oh, you prostitute of a wind. She is showing her tricks again. Stop, you bitch.”(Rao, 17)

The literal translations of the speech are deliberate attempts by Rao to give ‘Indianness’ to the language. It is more evident that the use of English in the novel is quite distinctive – and it has a regional flavour, and a recognizable style which well presents ways of thought and feeling for an Indian audience.

Rao’s technique of mixing the oral traditions of India and the written form compels us to explore the kind of ‘reality’ he attempts to represent. Folk tales and epics, play a very significant role in the novel, while describing the freedom movement in the form of *Hari katha*. For instance Rao uses his technique of *Puranic* narration in the form of oral narration to describe the month of Kartik or autumn. Nature is personified:

Kartik has come to Kanthapura, sisters – Kartik has come with the glow of lights and the unpressed footsteps of the wandering gods; white lights from clay-trays and red lights from copper-stands, and diamond lights and glow from the bowers of entrance-leaves; lights that glow from banana-trunks and mango twigs, yellow light behind white leaves, and green light behind yellow leaves, and white light behind green leaves; and night curls through the shadowed streets, and hissing over bellied boulders and hurrying through the dallying drains, night curls through the Brahmin streets and the Pariah street.(Rao, 87)

This passage echoes the localised myth of the Kartik festival. The structure and construction of the sentences show explicitly, the influence of Kannada, especially in the use of the connector ‘and’. Rao employs a profusion of archetypal regional words like, ‘Ayyappa’, ‘Ayayyoo’, ‘Nay nay’, ‘hobli’, ‘khanda’ and so on. He moulds the ‘alien language’ in such a way that it doesn’t give any sense of the bizarre while using these indigenous terms. Moreover it helps one identify with the characters, thereby increasing the appeal of the novel.

Rao expands the borders of the English language to make it accommodate expressions and experiences that are particularly Indian. The story begins by evoking a strong sense of place. As it unfolds, the topographical features of the landscape are revealed: the Kenchamma Hill, the Skeffington Coffee Estate, the temple of Kanthapurishawri, and the river Himavathy, which become “at once landscape, life, history, people, ideas, and ideals”. What is striking is the hidden quality of nature in the novel: that is very significant in the narrator’s tone. Nature exists, rather, as a symbol of the rooted quality of the land, exercising tremendous hold over the villagers. The river Himavathy or the red Kenchamma Hill, soaked with the blood of a demon, are presented as animate features of the landscape. Their presence in the village is presented by Rao in such a way that the story is conveyed through powerful myth and legend:

There is no village in India, howsoever mean, that has not a rich *sthala-purana*, or legendary history, of its own. Some god or godlike hero has passed by the village-Rama might have rested under this 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 the present, and the gods mingle with the men, to make the repertory of your grandmother always bright. One such story from the contemporary annals of my village I have tried to tell.” (Foreword, v)

Raja Rao, gives a new face to the Indian traditions while talking about the ‘sthalapuranas’ and folktales of India, in an ‘alien’ language. The Gandhian Movement, which was spreading fast at that time, too is depicted in a typically Indian way, when his characters sing: “There’s one Government, sister...And that’s the Government of the Mahatma” (Rao, 207), which is very similar to the way folk songs are sung. He set himself to the task of manipulating the English language to carry an Indian emotional experience. He says:

The telling has not been easy. One has to convey in a language that is not one’s own the spirit that is one’s own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought-movement that looks maltreated in an alien language. I use the word ‘alien’, yet English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up-like Sanskrit or Persian was before- but not of our emotional make-up. We are all instinctively bilingual, many of us writing in our own language and in English. We cannot write like the English. We should not. (Forward v)

The novel has been a pace-setter, and followed by the ‘practitioners’ as a pattern. The distinct way of manipulating the English language lends the novel a unique appeal. Rao’s register has its own vocabulary, its own idiom, its own morphology, and its own syntax as well. A native speaker of English will definitely find the reading of the novel a bizarre experience. Raja Rao has taken liberties – the ‘native liberties’, with the English language. The narrative techniques function as the medium of transmitting Indianness. Similarly, language becomes the medium through which Rao attempts to reclaim an Indian identity that was subsumed under the onslaught of British colonialism. In the arena of Indian Writing in English, one of the most contested elements is the use of language. It symbolizes how the authors have acquired a voice of their own and use it as a weapon. Kachru an eminent critic says: “But not for Rao. There is no Caliban here, nor is Rao using English from the periphery. He brings English, and its functions, to the centre of his creativity, to the centre of Indianness. In his hands the crossover of the language is on Rao’s terms” (As quoted in Niranjana 78).

Kanthapura is not just a tiny community of people, but rather a prototype of the innumerable number of villages which plunged themselves into the nationalist movement. This novel is Rao’s contribution to the Indian national movement. It reveals the struggle of lakhs of people who participated in the freedom movement. His remarkably successful experiments with the foreign language through Puranic traditions have inspired many of the later writers. And this has facilitated Indian literature to carve its own niche in world literature with a definite authenticity and ‘Indianness’.

Kanthapura, a postcolonial novel, written almost seven decades ago is still as relevant as it had been then, because of its undeniable contribution to the Indian canon. It is still relevant in this era where the very concept of the canon of Indian English writing is being contested on various grounds. The language which belonged to the colonizers is turned into yet another Indian language by the novel techniques in *Kanthapura*. Its ‘alien’ aura is dissolved. As a result, now

English is as much an Indian language as Hindi or Kannada or Marathi is. It is no longer the colonizer's language. As Kamala Das says in 'An Introduction',

... I am Indian, very brown, born in Malabar,
I speak three languages, writer in
Two, dream in one.
Don't write in English, they said, English is
Not your mother-tongue. Why not leave
Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins,
Everyone of you? The language I speak,
Becomes mine, its distortions, its queernesses
All mine, mine alone.

Raja Rao, with his experiments gave a whole new dialect to the language and carved a space for Indian writing in the literature of the twentieth century...a space which was undeniably Indian and cosmopolitan at the same time.

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