

Kanthapura, a cultural study

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Kanthapura as a novel of village or rural sensibility: Raja rao's Kanthapura is a tale of atypical south Indian village in the kara area of Mysore. The novel is a saga of village life with a political bias. There is no conventional hero or heroine in it. The village of Kanthapura itself; with its presiding deity Kanchamma, with its live giving river Himavath, with its rustic topography, crops, weeds and diseases, with its characteristics, superstitions and customs is one of the main character.

The people of the village with Moorthy as the Gandhi man of the village, under whose leadership the villagers of her non-violent resistance, take up the work of village uplift. In depicting Kanthapura, the novelist has presented to us a real India in microcosm. What happens in Kanthapura is what happens everywhere in India, particularly in rural India. That Kanthapura is novel of village life is evident from its topographical details. The novel opens with a graphic description of the physical features of Kanthapura.

In the beautiful valley of the river Himavathy, the village lies curled up like a child on its mother's lap. As the novel opens we hear the grinding and rumbling of carts, indicating the busy agrarian life. The hills, valleys and rivers which form the setting of the village, are most vividly depicted. Raja Rao has an eye for the details of nature's phenomena which he presents with vividness. It's said of Thomas Hardy by David Cecil that he could realise the different noises made by the wind when it blows through a hollow a heather and bare stones.

Raja Rao, too, is unique in his precise yet poetic depiction of the outdoor rural life. In the month of Vaisakh men of Kanthapura plough the fields. The rains come and skip over the bronze mountain, tiptoe the crags, and leaping

into the valley go splashing. The coconuts and the betel nuts and cardamom plants choke with it and hiss back. And there, there it comes over the Bebbur hill and Kanthur hill and begins to paw upon the tiles, and the cattle come running home. The people pray to Kenchamma, “ There, there the rains have come, Kenchamma; may our house be as white as silver”.

In the Kartik festival of lights, lights glow from banana trunks and mango twigs behind yellow leaves, green leaves: ‘ Kartik is a month of the Gods’. In scenes like this, rural life in all its concreteness gives the novel its essential rurality. The novelist describes the caste wise quarters for Brahmins, Pariahs, Porters, Weavers and Sudras. The economic distinctions between one villager and another are precisely described. Post master Surya Narayana has a two storied house, Patwari Nanjundaa has put glass panes to the windows. Pock-marked Sidda has a real thatched house.

Thus the persons who stand out among the men and women of the village are the moneyed people like Kamayya, a coffee planter and Range Gowda. Even a casual glancing through the names and nick names of the Kanthapurians is a thing of great interest. The villagers wear tell-tale nicknames. The names contribute greatly to the individualisation of the village character and places to the evocation of proper rural sensibility. The untouchable quarters, full of the stench of the hide and pickled pigs where Moorthy dare to step in for the uplift of the village people are also described.

The dramatist persona in the novel includes a good number of villagers. They work as coolies on the coffee estates and are poor. The harrowing (suffering) tale of the half-naked, starving, spitting, weeping coolies is touchingly told in the coffee estate episode. The villagers are not depicted as epitomes of

virtue nor are they condemned as useless creatures. They are as they usually are. Their character evokes the rural atmosphere in the novel. Their life is not complete without the perennial presence of God or Goddess. Goddess Kanchamma is installed in a temple right in its centre.

A river a hill and a temple with the presiding deity complete the picture of the village. The villagers offer the Goddess their first rice and first fruit of a tree; they appease her by singing song. The Goddess is the protector, the life and the breath of the village. She gives meaning to every activity of the villager and is a witness to all affairs in the village – birth, death, marriage, funeral, sickness, ploughing and harvesting – and what not. Vows are made to her. Oaths are taken in her presence. She protects the villagers through though famine and diseases.

Except Goddess Kanchamma, there are also often local Goddesses like Talassanamma and Kanthapureshwari mentioned in the novel. Even their jurisdictions are fixed. Religion has a firm hold on the villagers' mind. The villagers observe Shankar Jayanti and listen to the recital of Harikathas and celebrate the festival of Lord Krishna and Lord Ganesha. The evocation of village life is accomplished apart from the inter relation of theme and characters, through means like description of festivals, ceremonies, social customs, superstitions and the apt use of rustic idioms.

Various ceremonies and rituals such as hair- cutting, rice-eating, wedding, consecration and the seventh month ceremony finds a place in the novel. The novel shows how the villagers cling (hold tightly) to their age-old faiths for succour and relief. Beliefs and superstitions govern the sensitive minds of the Kanthapurians. There is a scene in which the treasures of core are

counted as “ Three-Hm-Four-Hm -Five” and because of the superstition which forbids the mention of six, it becomes, “ God’s extra”.

Moorthy’s horoscope doesn’t agree with that of the daughter of Ramayya and hence the bride’s family get disheartened. The clucking of the wall-lizards indicate propitiousness, auspiciousness. On seeing a shooting star seeping across the sky, the villagers say: “ Some good soul has left the earth”. When someone has been attacked by Malaria, they used to do some rituals instead of taking quinine pills believing that those rituals will eradicate the disease.

Before filling the earth the “ peasants throw handfuls of puffed rice in the eight directions for warding off evil and for a good harvest”. Again it’s through the use of the rustic idiom a flavour of rurality is captured. The idiom and rhythm of the regional language are sometimes reflected in their novel. There are similes, comparisons and vituperative (harsh/abusive) terms which smell of the agrarian soil and culture. Fine and detailed agrarian imagery is seen in many descriptions throughout the novel.