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**Moorthy the Torch-Bearer of Gandhian Ideals in Raja Rao's
Novel *Kanthapura*: A Study**
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Abstract

Moorthy is said to have had a vision of Gandhi addressing a public meeting and receiving inspiration by Gandhi's utterings who walks out of the college turning a Gandhi man. He throws his foreign clothes and his foreign books into the bonfire thereby practising and preaching Gandhian ideals. Taking religion for a sacred thread for binding village folk together Moorthy initiates his task. He unearths a half sunk linga, consecrate it and arranges Sankara Jayanti, Harikaths, Bahajans. His dedication to nation's cause and social concerns in the line of Gandhian sermons encourages the common Kanthapurians to embrace the Gandhian doctrines and fight out the social evils, form a collective selfhood and overthrow the British Raj from India in the process. To win over the unlettered and traditionalist villagers, Moorthy makes Gandhi projected through religious approach and arranges Bhajans, Harikathas to induce Gandhi's ideas in the minds of the common people and ultimately helps them not only to struggle against the British oppression but also to fight a greater battle against the deep-rooted conservative forces that fragment the society. Moorthy not only practices Ahimsa, speaks the truth, holds fast but also sermonizes eradication of untouchability, women emancipation, boycott of foreign clothes, Satyagraha, Sarvodaya, economy of Charka and social awareness of unlettered village folk and the coolies of Skettington Coffee Estate. Moorthy integrates religion with politics and likens Gandhi to Ram and Redman to Ravana and calls Swaraj, the three-eyed. It is he who explains the people about the economics of the Charka and Swadeshi. The present article seeks to highlight the practices of the Gandhian ideals in the novel as revealed through the character of Moorthy.

Key words: Gandhian, Harikatha, Charka, Kadhar, Caste, Untouchability.

Published in 1938 Raja Rao's first novel *Kanthapura* mainly portrays the waves of the Freedom Movement launched by Mahatma Gandhi in the 1920s in a typical South Indian village in the colonial India called 'Kanthapura' where Moorthy, a university drop-out young Brahmin chap from the Corner House becomes the torch-bearer of Gandhian ideals in expression and action and sermonizes to the villagers the chief doctrines of Gandhian

philosophy. With immense pride the villagers embrace those doctrines and join their hands with the freedom movement via *satyagraha*. It is apt to quote Meenakshi Mukerjee: "The characteristically concrete imagination of the uneducated mind pictures the Mahatma as large and blue like the Sahyadri Mountain on whose slopes the pilgrims climb to the top, while Moorthy is seen as Small Mountain. To her the Satyagraha becomes a religious ceremony to which she devotes her sacred ardour." (Mukherjee, 1974: 141)

Gandhi's actual visits in Karnataka in 1921 and 1927 motivated the youth of its cities and villages alike and Moorthy, the protagonist of the novel, is said to have had an imaginary encounter with the Mahatma that gave him spiritual strength and divine revelations. He 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' (Parthasarathy, 2014).

In his vision of the Mahatma Moorthy finds himself sitting beside the platform. He stands up and sees there, by the legs of the chair the sandal and the foot of the Mahatma, and says to himself 'That is my Place'. He jumps on to the platform and falls at the feet of the Mahatma, Saying, 'I am your slave'. The Mahatma lifts him up and advises him to seek truth and help countrymen by going and working among the dumb millions of the village. On Mahatmas insistence he throws his foreign clothes and his foreign books into the bonfire and walks out a Gandhi's man from the college.

Moorthy agrees to carry the Mahatma's message to the villagers and educate the dumb millions in nationalism who are divided by castes, gender and religion which in turn fragment the collective selfhood of the village. Moorthy by introducing the Mahatma's message does manage to form a collective selfhood that posits itself against the other identified with the British raj.

Moorthy invariably sermonizes to the villagers the Gandhian principles of non-violence, love of Mankind and abolition of untouchability. He fans their zeal in making cotton yarn on the spinning wheel instead of wearing foreign-made clothes and asks them to wear such clothes as are spun and woven by their own hands. He persuades the villagers to speak the truth, hold fast for self-purification and practise ahimsa. He flocks to the city and returns with cotton and spinning wheels along with instructions. He goes from house to house the Potters' quarter, the Weavers' quarter and the Sudra quarter and the Pariahs' quarter to collect contributions for arrangement of *Harikathas* as according to him, there is neither caste nor clan nor family; all live alike. Moorthy initiates his job by unearthing a half-sunk linga followed by its consecration ceremony. It is the temple premises that Moorthy adapts for the purpose of the religious- political gathering. In the wake of Khadi spread Moorthy frees himself from caste prejudices and starts eradicating untaouchability. He freely goes to Pariah quarters and even has *Harijan* boys as his friends. He is threatened by the traditional Brahministic attitude but he does not budge like Gandhi. He understands it is man who creates caste and the same for the human welfare can be eradicated. So he starts working for improvement of the lives of *Harijans*. Taking other village boys with him Moorthy

distributes free *Charkas* to them and explains the economy of the *Khadi* and the importance of the *Charka* to the ignorant and superstitious villagers. He states "Because millions and millions of yards of foreign cloth come to this country, and everything foreign marks us poor and pollutes us. To wear cloth spun and woven with your own God-given hands is sacred, says Mahatma and it gives work to the workless, and work to the lazy..." (Ibid. 19). He explains when one buys foreign yarn, it is bought with country money and all this money goes across the oceans. But gold of the land should be in the land along with the cotton of the land to keep the country bounteous and economically sound. It is Moorthy who helps to form a women volunteer troop 'Swayam Sevikas' that works for socio-political causes in Kanthapura and thus Mahatma's aim to preach gender equality in economic rewards and political decision making is solidified. When Moorthy is taken to prison Rangamma organizes the 'Sevika Sangha', a voluntary faction of women that confronts the foreign. They are also not spared by the police who take brutal and drastic steps against them but they remain determined in their regulation. When Rangamma also gets arrested, Ratna takes over the leadership of the group. Moorthy also instills in them a religious fervour and they take part in all the religious gathering and prayer meeting. Along with maintaining the rituals and tradition they also take care of the household in the Gandhian line. Moorthy's preaching of Gandhian ideals blazes their imagination to such an extent that they become energetic volunteers in *Satyagraha* movement led by Moorthy. They fight shoulder to shoulder with Moorthy against the British exploitation. When Moorthy is arrested Rangamma comes to the fore front and even arranges for newspapers to be delivered from the city to inform the villagers about the activities of the Congress. Moorthy forms the Panchyat Congress committee in the village. He spreads Gandhian movement through it and the village becomes part of All Indian Panchyat, a territory to be ruled by a parallel government; all the workers inspired and sing:

*"There is One Government, Sister,
There is One Government, Sister,
And that is the Government of the Mahatma."* (Ibid., 167)

He maintains constant touch with the city Congress committee. He keeps people posted with the latest development and events in the various parts of the country. Moorthy as a disciple of Gandhi grasps the fact that any radical social or political change in the society would be impossible without equal contribution of our women folk. With Gandhian zeal Moorthy wants the womenfolk of Kanthapura to break the shackles of traditionalism for attaining political socialization. Moorthy sees the women of Kanthapura as a potential force in the struggles to build a new social order. Moorthy encourages Ratna Rangamma and other women to participate in active movement to push the British rulers out of India. He makes them projected as new avatars of revolution and equal partners in congress meetings and processions in Kanthapura. Moorthy wants them to shed age old prejudices like untouchability. He wishes them to involve in economic activities so as to supplement income in the household. He wishes them to eke out a living by spinning yarns thereby making them economically independent. Moorthy's constant encouragement to women to

join *Satyagraha* receives enormous response and they involve themselves in activity like boycotting of foreign goods and non-payment of taxes. Under Moorthy's leadership many women of Kanthapura organize public meetings, sell *Khadi*, *Pickets* toddy boots and shops at Skeffington Tea Estates and other places. Moorthy opens up the avenues of liberation for the coolies and womenfolk of coffee Estate and they revolt against the injustice, exploitation inflicted upon them by the British masters. Moorthy in the Gandhian line works for the upliftment of village. He attempts to de-mechanise textile production through a return to the *Charka*. As a true advocate of *Khadi* Moorthy envisions *Khadi* as a concrete symbol of unity too that is supposed to drive away the British rule, untouchability and Hindu Muslim strife. It is Moorthy who undertakes fast, organizes picketing and *Satyagrahas*, courts arrest and leads the society in Kanthapura to form a collective selfhood. Being a member of the orthodox society Moorthy very well grasps the sweeping power of religion over the dumb millions and uses it to unite the villagers and instill nationalistic feelings in them as to enable them fight out the social evils and the foreign rule. Under his leadership many ceremonies, rituals and festivals are held. He encourages the villagers to involve themselves in *Sankara-Jayanti*, *Kartik-Purnima*, *Ganesh-Jayanti*, *Satya Narayan Puja* etc. that help building a natural unity and cohesion of the village society that defy the deep rooted evil like caste-system even. Religion is the most potent force at Kanthapura and Moorthy begins in the Gandhian line with religion starting from in vocation to Kanchamma Goddess. With the consecration of Linga Moorthy holds a grand feast to celebrate the occasion followed by *Sankara Jayanti*, *Ganesh Jayanti* etc. Thus the political struggle is largely ritualized, and nationalism filters down into the village ranks through religion.

Moorthy is a man of social concerns. He goes even to the Sheffington Coffee Estate to teach the coolies the art of weaving. Even he teaches them alphabets, grammar, arithmetic and Hindi. A small event that involves Moorthy to violence at Coffee Estate indirectly makes him repent. Nothing other than a three days' fasting makes him happy. When he sits for fasting at the Kenchamma Temple there comes all the villagers to stop him. but he does not. Yet success lies in his convincing others of the importance of fasting. An insult Venkamma showers upon him while meditating since he did not marry her daughter. Moorthy reacts:

*"The road to the city of Love is hard, brother,
It's hard
Take care, take care, as you walk along it"* (Ibid. 73)

Singing this Moorthy shines with a rare radiance in his face. He utters, truth is God and God is truth just echoing Gandhi.

Moorthy turns more active and does a full time social work. The police Bade Khan's indifferent attitude towards the villagers and the coming of the more police to suppress the villagers' freedom activities strengthens Moorthy's domain of works. Even the Patel Rangegouda, the elders of Potters and Weavers and Pariah colonies agree with him to

undertake religious and social activities in the village to promote national struggle at the same time.

Gandhi's various village activities under Moorthy's leadership provokes the British authorities and Moorthy is dragged to the Santur Police station and kept in the Karwar jail. Thereafter, the secretary of the Karwar Congress committee and other meet Moorthy to convince him of the futility of *Saythagraha* but Moorthy is not diverted by shallow politics. He stands loyal as the village Gandhi is ready to concede ordeals for the cause. People get elated and hymn up in praise of Moorthy for his incorruptible nature and say he is like a gold.

Moorthy's selfless service and patriotic zeal enables him to awaken a ray of hope. Even coolies half naked, starving spitting vomiting coughing shivering, squeaking, moaning, pass by the Kaenchamma Temple to join other labourers of Skeffington Coffee Estate in order to liberate themselves from the exploitation by the British rulers. Moorthy reaches out to the majority pariah coolies who are brought to Kanthapura to take part in the Gandhi Bajan. Encouraged by Moorthy all the coolies join hands in destroying toddy business of the British. Moorthy encourages them to take toddy for a crooked tree and they take oath not to drink toddy at least in the name of the Mahatmaa. Destruction of toddy trees invites risk in their lives but they go on. Picketing of the toddy either at field or at a shop, opposing of British laws etc. leads to national struggle under the leadership of Moorthy. Moorthy is forced to Jail, but under his encouragement the *Sathyagrah* continues. The Kanthapurians take the issue of paying increased taxes, but swayed by the Gandhian Civil Disobedience they refrain from paying taxes. They carry on anti-Government activities in the line of Gandhian ideals. They sing, dance, and work for the elimination of a foreign rule :

*"Lift the flag high
O, lift the flag high,
Brothers , sisters, Friends and mothers,
This is the flag of the revolution." (Ibid. 194)*

During the Skeffington Tea Estate *Sathyagraha* the Kanthapurians adopt the means of violence against the British that challenges Moorthy's practice of Amisha and he urges a need for holding fast for three days in the temple and he says that much violence had been done because of him, but Rangamma says, 'that was not your fault, Moorthy!' (Ibid., 71) to which he replies, 'the fault of others, Rangamma, is the fruit of one's own disharmony' (Ibid.), and silently he walks down the steps, and walks up to the temple, where seated beside the central pillar of the mandap, he begins to meditate. Again during the Skeffington *Sathyagraha* when Moorthy stands by the Collies showing *Sarobodya* his Gandhian zeal comes to the fore. The following passage shows this: "Coolies are men, police sahib. And according to the laws of your own government and that of Mr Skeffington no man can own another. I have every right to go in. They have every right to speak to me" (Ibid., 68, 69). Again when the women's Sathyagrahis fall on the enemies, he cries out, 'No beatings, Sisters. No beatings in the name of the Mahatma' (Ibid., 69) testifies

Moorthy's Gandhian philosophy. Later on when the Kanthapurian *Saythagrahis* come to know about the breaking of Salt Law by Mahatma followed by many of the supporters, they also wish to start march like the Mahatma and Moorthy assures saying that as soon as they get the orders from the Karwar Congress committee they will join the venture.

Moorthy plays the role of the small Mahatma and imbibes the saintly quality of penitence and suffering for others' sins. He takes fasting for a way of rising lovingly to God. He attains oneness with the Absolute through self-denial. His appeal for boycotting foreign goods caters to crippling the efforts of foreign manufactures to exploit the impoverished India. His insistence on spinning teaches people the dignity of labour and self-reliance. Moreover, his emphasis on Gandhi's concern for education and avoiding alcohol makes the coolies of Skeffington Coffee Estate and Kanthapurians aware about their rights and ills of wine. In his effort to throw light on the character of Moorthy, Narsingh Srivastava observes that Moorthy's character is idealised in the novel to the extent of being regarded as a local Mahatma because a myth 'necessarily deals with an idealised man or a man larger than life' (Srivastava, 1980: 58). Another critic Srinivas Iyenger calls him "The visible avatar" for being mythicised in the fiction (Iyenger, 1984: 291). However, being a man of flesh and blood Moorthy sometimes falters and hesitates in his Pariah business and invites criticism on his Gandhi business. Moorthy is flawed as he is at times stimulated by his natural caste consciousness. He addresses Pariah Rachanna as brother; but being a Brahmin he stands on the gutter slab in the front of Rachanna's house and wants to talk from outside; again when Rachanna's wife offers him milk Moorthy says that he has just taken coffee, and on her insistence Moorthy with many trembling prayer touches the tumbler and brings it to his lips, and takes a sip. He fails to rise above the traditional caste consciousness. At the end of the day, he falls short of the greatness of the man called Mahatma Gandhi, but nevertheless plays the vital role of the torch-bearer of Gandhian ideals in the novel *Kanthapura*.

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