

---

©2011 eNotes.com, Inc. or its Licensors. Please see [copyright information](#) at the end of this document.

## Kanthapura

### The Novel

Rather than being a traditional novel with a neat linear structure and compact plot, *Kanthapura* follows the oral tradition of Indian sthala-purana, or legendary history. As Raja Rao explains in his original foreword, there is no village in India, however mean, that has not a rich legendary history of its own, in which some famous figure of myth or history has made an appearance. In this way, the storyteller, who commemorates the past, keeps a native audience in touch with its lore and thereby allows the past to mingle with the present, the gods and heroes with ordinary mortals.

The story is narrated in flashback by Achakka, a wise woman in the village. She, like her female audience (whom she addresses as “sisters”), has survived the turbulence of social and political change which was induced by Mohandas K. Gandhi’s passive resistance against the British government. Achakka provides a detailed picture of the rural setting, establishing both an ambiance and a rhythm for the novel. It is clear that her speech and idiomatic expression are meant to express a distinctively feminine viewpoint an extraordinary achievement for a male Indo-English novelist. Achakka quickly creates a faithful image of an Indian way of life, circumscribed by tradition and indebted to its deities, of whom Kenchamma, the great and bounteous goddess, is made the village protectress. She is invoked in every chapter, for the characters never forget that her power resides in her past action. It is she who humanizes the villagers, and their chants and prayers ring out from time to time.

The narrator establishes the parameters of the story within old and new legends. While Kenchamma and Siva are remembered for their marvelous feats and interventions in human affairs, analogies are sometimes drawn with contemporary figures such as Gandhi who serve to turn fact and history into folklore, and who provide the motive for political struggle. At the beginning, while there are simply rumors of Gandhi’s activities, the villagers follow their customary routines. Then, Moorthy, a young, dedicated Brahmin, inspired by Gandhi, returns to Kanthapura to propagandize the cause of the Indian National Congress and Gandhi’s satyagraha (truth-force) movement. The colonial masters (nicknamed “Red-men” for their ruddy complexions) are a palpable, tyrannical presence but are sensed only obliquely at the beginning via the mysterious passing policeman who is treated as a spy and who, consequently, seeks refuge on the Skeffington Coffee Estate run by a brutal gang-boss.

Moorthy does not immediately win favor. He is opposed by Bhatta, a reactionary who sneers at “Gandhi vagabondage,” and by fellow Brahmins who are increasingly upset by Gandhi’s acceptance of Untouchables. The caste system, so much a part of Indian history, is shaking apart under Gandhi’s example, and the social pattern of Kanthapura delineated by separate quarters for Brahmin, Pariah, Potter, Weaver, and Sudra is disturbed by the progress being made by the Untouchables.

Even Moorthy’s own mother is revulsed by his Gandhian precepts, and Moorthy brings matters to a head by eliciting Patel Range Gowda’s help in starting a Congress group and encouraging the villagers to vow to speak only truth, wear no cloth but homespun khadi, and use all forms of passive resistance. This Gandhian nonviolence provokes a brutal response from the authorities, and the villagers are attacked by the police.

Moorthy and advocate Rangamma are arrested as Bhatta is uncovered as a traitor and some Brahmins are deployed to stir fear among the villagers. Patel Range Gowda is dismissed from his hereditary office as village executive chief, and the villagers turn to the gods for help.

The radical change in the political nature of India, however, becomes apparent as the women stir into action. Rangamma, who always links Indian scripture to contemporary events, manages to inspire the womenfolk to dire deeds as the men are forced to hide in the jungles around the village.

After Moorthy is released from prison, the political crisis deepens, and the villagers' suffering increases. There is a sense that the issue is now more than mere politics. The world resembles a jungle in battle with itself, and only Gandhi transcends this tumult, for he is like a huge mountain, unvanquished by the confusion and violence. Moorthy suddenly finds himself less in sympathy with Gandhi and more attuned to Jawaharlal Nehru, the emerging modernist.

The villagers, however, remain faithful to Gandhi. Toward the end, when nothing can stop the women (in spite of horrendous casualties) from marching against the soldiers sent by the British, the change in the social and political nature of the country is profound. The women decide to burn down what is left of their village, rather than return to it. Life, they realize, can never be the same without their Moorthy, husbands, sisters, and children who have perished in the struggle. Yet the women also recognize that they are part of history on the march.

The climax of the novel is the great violence of chapter 18, with the men in retreat, the women in the vanguard of resistance, and the soldiers in unrelenting assault, wreaking devastation. The concluding section (chapter 19) brings the tale full circle, fourteen months later, where there is eager anticipation of Swaraj, or independence for India. Of the male heroes, only Patel Range Gowda returns briefly to Kanthapura, yet the villagers feel blessed by the goddess Kenchamma.

## The Characters

The numerous characters in this novel demonstrate the sense of community that unifies the plot and gives substance to the political and social conflicts. There is a sense of teeming life, and because the larger question is not about an individual's fate but about a group destiny, Raja Rao's mode of characterization is impressionistic. Dialogue is kept to a minimum, and the focus encompasses both the masses in the background and certain salient figures in the foreground.

The female narrator is a medium for storytelling as well as a character in her own right, for she expresses her own radical nature and that of changing India. Though she tells the reader little directly of herself (she admits to owning seven acres of wet land and twelve of dry, it is clear from her mode of speaking that she is willing to accept fundamental social changes. Although she is respectful of Hindu tradition, she is not bound to old ways. She is caught up in all the turmoil, and her at times breathless narration expresses the excitement of the period as well as her own recognition of a movement that is leading to India's autonomy.

The conflict between acquiescence to time-honored tradition and resistance to old tyrannies is dramatically expressed in the two factions: the Gandhians and their foes. Moorthy is the prime representative of the modern Indian struggling with dignity for freedom. He is linked to Hindu traditions from the outset, for he is the youngest son of a pious mother and is called a "holy bull," implying that he is a specially marked character. So thoroughly Gandhian is he in his creed and practice that he scandalizes his own mother by his unconventional fraternization with the Pariahs, and he is willing to suffer rejection and violence in the name of his cause. Like his mentor, he exerts both a political and a spiritual force. Yet he eventually turns from Gandhi to Nehru in an abrupt recognition that saintliness is not necessarily synonymous with political

wisdom.

Rao skillfully controls the focus of the novel by bringing forward subsidiary characters at particular moments when they can sharpen the conflicts. They are usually distinguished by a single facet of personality: Bhatta is known by his smiling, false charm; Rangamma by her eloquent disputatiousness; Patel Range Gowda by his ceremonious speech; and Dore by his scoffing manner.

Because the crux of the novel is a struggle for independence, there are the adversaries of Gandhi and, hence, independence. Although these figures are not without their melodramatic evil, they are granted their moments of fair combat when they summon up all of their arguments against Moorthy. Such is the case with the old government man who appears at a nationalist gathering and presents his cunning rhetorical attack on the Gandhians.

Finally, then, *Kanthapura* achieves a sense of continuous agitation. Even when the government soldiers lay waste to the village, dispersing the men and slaughtering many of the women, there is no victory for the old political arrangement. The new spirit of India is on the move across the vast land, and the hearts of the survivors in Kanthapura beat like a drum, with the strength of hard-won freedom.

## Themes and Meanings

The story shows the birth of new ideas in old India. The arguments against change which in the Gandhian sense is a change of soul and not simply of caste or social function are made forcefully by reactionaries who point to the disorder, corruption, and arrogance of pre-British rule. As the old government man puts it, the British have come to protect dharma, or duty. Playing upon raw fear in the populace, the antinationalists argue that reform will mean the eventual corruption of castes and of the great ancestral traditions.

Although this novel does not have the profound philosophical nature of *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960), Rao's most massive novel, its thrust is certainly didactic in that it glorifies the idea of revolt. It is surprising, indeed, that the author was not incarcerated for his views.

## Critical Context

Although dense with expressions of Indian customs, epic history, politics, and religion, *Kanthapura* is unusual as an Indo-English novel because the female characters serve in the forefront of revolutionary struggle. In her concluding summary, Achakka expresses her belief that what has happened in her village is essentially positive. Things have changed irrevocably.

In form, *Kanthapura* is an extension of the Indian oral tradition, adapted to a Western language and genre. The extensive use of songs and prayers, allusions, and digressions, and the more limited use of proverbs and epic lists, or catalogs, contribute to the folkloric nature of the writing. Sometimes the pace is heightened by a piling-on of compound sentences at a breathless tempo, and the use of tales-within-tales promotes the sense of impromptu fabrication and immediacy.

*Kanthapura* is one of the earliest examples of the Gandhian novel: fiction that derives its moral force from the figure and precepts of the great political and spiritual leader. It is not simply an exotic tale of a vanished era but also a clever use of a colonial language to serve didactic ends. Like the early novels of Mulk Raj Anand, it is a deliberately moral fiction, but unlike Anand's work, it is not almost exclusively sociological in tenor. By providing detailed notes on Indian terms and allusions, Rao is able to extend the reach of his fiction, compelling Western readers to slow down their pace of reading, examine the network of mythological and historical associations, and note the analogies which he is drawing between secular history and sacred

mythology.

## Bibliography

Guzman, Richard R. "The Saint and the Sage: The Fiction of Raja Rao," in *The Virginia Quarterly Review*. LVI (Winter, 1980), pp. 32-50.

Naik, M. K. "*Kanthapura*: The Indo-Anglian Novel as Legendary History," in *Journal of the Karnatak University*. X (1966), pp. 26-39.

Narasimhaiah, C. D. "Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*: An Analysis," in *The Literary Criterion*. VII, no. 2 (1966), pp. 54-77.

Vergheese, C. Paul. "Raja Rao, Mulk Raj, Narayan and Others," in *Indian Writing Today*. VII (1969), pp. 31-38.

## Copyright Notice

©2011 eNotes.com, Inc.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

No part of this work covered by the copyright hereon may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, Web distribution or information storage retrieval systems without the written permission of the publisher.

For complete copyright information, please see the online version of this work:  
<http://www.enotes.com/kanthapura-salem>