

INDIAN ENGLISH LITERATURE



Basavaraj Naikar

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Imagery in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*

BRAHMA DATTA SHARMA

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The images employed in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* have been derived from such sources as Hindu religion, mythology and folklore, social relations, animal husbandry, horticulture, forestry, wildlife, domestic animals, reptiles and insects, human anatomy, garments, buildings, household activities and articles, geology, musical instruments, and social celebrations, and such objects of nature as birds, water and mountains.

Some of the images from Hindu mythology, religion, forms of worship, and festivals are there, for example, when the hill Kenchamma is described as a goddess for being bounteous *Kanthapura* (K, 2)¹, India as a goddess for doing penance (K, 14), Swaraj as Shiva (K, 14), self-purification, Hindu-Muslim unity, and *khaddar* as Lord Shiva's three eyes (K, 14), India as the goddess of wisdom and well-being (K, 15), Mohandas Gandhi as Krishna for having a large number of followers (K, 16) and as Harishchandra (K, 171), the foreign rulers in India as the serpent Kali (K, 16), Moorthy as child Krishna on a pipal tree (K, 90), a wife as goddess Lakshmi (K, 137), Usha as god for her gentle nature (K, 137), Surya Menon as Dharmaraja for being righteous in his ways (K, 143), the rising sun as camphor censer alit (K, 144), India as the soul engaged in a quest (K, 146), the Congress Party as a temple (K, 169), Moorthy's followers as pilgrims trying to go up a mountain (K, 176), breaking an unjust law as walking through the holy fire at the Harvest Festival, and Moorthy as the Lord fighting the tyrants (K, 192). The distribution of these images is such that most of them figures on the first

twenty pages and then around page 140 but not at all on the last twenty pages.

The images derived from the folklore are there when the village Kanthapura in the starlight has been likened to a night procession of the gods (K, 82), the British rulers of India have been described as monsters for their cruelty (K, 229), and bullets have been likened to flying snakes having taken fire (K, 244).

We have images from the field of social relations when the Kenchamma and the Himavathy have been described as a mother and her daughter playing together (K, 2, 69), the cobra as a Maharaja (K, 69), snakes as tongues of village hussies for being as silly and large (K, 70), gold to be having wiles *like* a wanton woman (K, 79), Moorthy to be as dear as a son (K, 97), Rani Lakshmi Bai as a Rajput for fighting in a battlefield (K, 149), India as an enslaved mother (K, 149), the wind as a prostitute for changing its ways (K, 161), Kanthapura inside the valley of the Himavathy as a child lying curled on the mother's lap (K, 190), and the policemen as persons unlike uncle dons for not being friendly (K, 251).

Images from human life are there when the cheerless morning light has been likened to a smiling corpse (K, 222-23), and both to a few motor cars plying in a line (K, 224), and several gas-lights have been likened to a marriage-procession (K, 234).

Images derived from animal husbandry are about one and a half dozen in number. They are there when Moorthy is described first as a noble cow for being generous, quiet, serene, defiant and Brahmanic (K, 12-13), and, then, honest as an elephant (K, 12-13), the youngest child as a holy bull for receiving more affection than any other child (K, 47), Bade Khan as a goat for his beard (K, 86), Venkamma as a buffalo for looking important (K, 112), Rangamma as a cow for being submissive and tame (K, 136), the person who is described as a young man as a buffalo for being ignorant and not having read even Mahatma Gandhi's paper *Young India* (K, 138), Dasi as a first calved cow for being hale (K, 140), people

fighting for the *swaraj* as fellow oxen (K, 170), the coolies as clogged bulls (K, 196), and as goats for a particular expression of their eyes (K, 197), Seetharamu as an ass and a pig for not being willing to work (K, 205), women in trouble as mad elephants (K, 213), women sleeping soundly as asses (K, 214), the agitators, by policemen no doubt, as pigs (K, 241), and the moving shadows as buffaloes (K, 242). The most frequent of them is the image of the buffalo. The images of the cow, the calf, the bull, and the oxen have been employed to laud persons. But the images of the pig and the ass have been employed exclusively in pejorative senses.

The images from the fields of agriculture, horticulture and forestry are there when Narsamma has been described as the banana bark for having shrivelled (K, 61), creating an enemy as pulling out a lantana bush in the backyard (K, 99), friendship as a jasmine hedge (K, 99), a foreign government in one's country as a thorny pit (K, 146), a dame as a pumpkin-kernel for her softness (K, 161), the Indians united together as the mustard-seeds in a sack (K, 170), one's heart as a seed (K, 170), the threshing floor (K, 170), and an April pomegranate (K, 182), Moorthy as an aloe for his straightforwardness (K, 178), the coolies' legs as bamboo plants for thinness (K, 197), light as the champak for its brightness (K, 222), young and bright boys as banana trunks, and lean and thin Range Gowda as an areca nut tree (K, 259).

Images from the wildlife are there when Range Gowda has been described as a veritable tiger for his impressive physique (K, 8), Moorthy as a deer for being an adversary to the exploiter (K, 98), Bhatta as a jackal for not opposing the British (K, 98), Moorthy as a tiger in deer's skin for opposing the exploiters (K, 98), the prisoners sitting behind the bars as crafted elephants (K, 154), the Congress boy volunteers protecting women volunteers as the veritable mother elephants round their young (K, 236), a barricade on the road as an elephant's carcass (K, 239), the silence of the Congress workers as the silence in a jungle after a tiger has roared (K, 240), the hissing sound as the bristling up of a thousand porcupines (K, 240), the noise made by the Congress agitators as the

jungle cry of crickets, frogs, hyenas, bison and jackals (*K*, 240). The images of the tiger and the elephant have been employed to praise persons while that of the jackal to express derision.

There has been employed the canine imagery in *Kanthapura* when a snake running into a thicket has been likened to a barking puppy (*K*, 70), Range Gowda to a dog's tail for having become Bhatta's follower (*K*, 97), the policemen serving the British rulers for money to dogs (*K*, 199) and dung eating curs (*K*, 212), and the feline imagery when Moorthy has been described as a simple cat (*K*, 88).

The images which owe their origin to the world of insects and reptiles are there when Range Gowda is regarded as a bug by Bade Khan as the latter thinks he can squash the former (*K*, 21), the boy referred to as a school-going boy is described as a mosquito for his small stature (*K*, 132), Moorthy is described as a squirrel for moving ahead successfully (*K*, 110), one of the women characters describes herself as a rat for slipping stealthily (*K*, 155), the child Moorthy on his mother's lap is described as a rat (*K*, 193), and the toddy settlers are described as scorpions (*K*, 198). Here the images of the squirrel, the mosquito and the rat are not pejorative but those of the bug and the scorpion are.

The images derived from anatomy, garments, and ornaments are there when the spectacles are described to be as large as a man's palm (*K*, 67), a rain-drop is described to be as big as a thumb (*K*, 73), the blue sky is described as a marriage-shawl (*K*, 75), a supple lathi is described as a silken thread (*K*, 153), a white house is described as silver (*K*, 159), a streak of light is described to be as wide as a sari hem (*K*, 159), rice is described to be as white as filigree (*K*, 161), mangoes are described to be as yellow as gold (*K*, 161), a small piece of land is described as a loin-cloth (*K*, 207), and the moon has been likened to a full-bosomed lady (*K*, 251).

The house-keeping imagery is there when the granary has been described as a mourning-house (*K*, 26), Vasudev's mother has been described to be harsh like sour-milk (*K*, 82), darkness

has been likened to thick sugar in a cauldron (*K*, 73), a lathi has been described to be as soft as butter (*K*, 153), a dame has been described to be as soft as the pumpkin kernel (*K*, 161), the coolies' faces have been described to be dark like the mops (*K*, 196), and hurting somebody's heart has been described as squeezing the wet cloth.

We have images from geology when the worms have been described as the particles of dust (*K*, 41), the coolies have been described as one rock for rising and falling together (*K*, 67), and Mahatma Gandhi has been described as the Sahyadri Mountains (*K*, 175) and Moorthy as a small mountain (*K*, 176), getting taxes by force has been described as squeezing water out of stone (*K*, 207), the women agitators shocked by the circumstances have been likened to the earth (*K*, 213), and the tired legs have been likened to clay (*K*, 222).

A few images refer to musical instruments. For instance, the sound of thunder has been described as the sound of the temple cymbal (*K*, 73), the stomachs are described to be being beaten like drums (*K*, 220), and the heart too is found to be being beaten like a drum (*K*, 260).

Raja Rao uses bird imagery when he describes Moorthy's entering without making any sound to be sparrow-like (*K*, 90), a shadow to be wailing like an ominous crow (*K*, 94), and the British government to be clean like a swan in the Himalayan lake (*K*, 98).

Water imagery is there when the steeds have been likened to white foam (*K*, 116), tears have been described to be immense like an ocean (*K*, 137), and falling and rising lathis have been likened to daring and dipping fishes (*K*, 243).

A study of these images brings one to certain facts about Rao's attitudes, views and experiences. Since the hill Kenchamma which the narrator admires a great deal has been described as a bounteous goddess, it is evident that Rao regards prosperity and bounteousness as a desirable state and, unlike Jesus Christ,² he does not regard poverty as a desirable state.

About forty per cent of the images derived from the Hindu religion and mythology here refer to Lord Shiva and his

associates, and about fifty per cent to Lord Krishna or his associates. The fact leads one to infer that Raja Rao likes Lord Shiva and Lord Krishna more than any other Hindu god. It is interesting to note that neither Shiva nor Krishna regarded non-violence as a creed for him as Lord Shiva himself burnt Kamadeva to ashes, and Lord Krishna not only himself killed King Kansa, who was a tyrant, but also made Arjuna fight his cousins in the battlefield of Kurukshetra. This signifies that in his heart of hearts Raja Rao does not consider it wrong for one to resort to the use of violence in a fight against temptation to vice, injustice and tyranny. Since in *Kanthapura* there is no image referring to Brahma, the Creator, one of the Trinity, and none referring to any other incarnation of Lord Vishnu including Rama, whom even Gandhi regarded as the ideal ruler, it appears that for Raja Rao Krishna's fighting oppression even at the cost of conventions, rules and traditions was more imitable than that of Rama who refused to violate established practices even if they caused him terrible inconveniences. Since both Gandhi and Moorthy have been likened to Lord Krishna, it is evident that Rao considers Lord Krishna as the most admirable character in the Hindu mythology.

The images from the field of social relations cover a wide field as their range extends from an emperor to a slave. The images of people possessing power, self and courage and providing protection like those of the Maharaja, the prince, the mother, the father and a Rajput have been employed here to laud people, that of a wanton woman to express contempt, and that of the slave to show one's misery and helplessness. This makes it evident that Raja Rao admires people providing protection, pities the helpless, and has in his heart nothing but contempt for the wanton. The family relations he talks of in these images are those of the mother and the daughter, the mother and the infant son, the father and the son, and cousins. In almost every family we have the father, the mother, the daughter, and the son living together, but cousins can be there in a family only when it is a joint family. The fact signifies that Rao must have had some experience of living in a joint family too. But what is surprising is that in no image

does he refer to the relations between a husband and his wife, a brother and his sister, two brothers and two sisters. May be he considers the relations of a husband and his wife to be too intimate to be referred to in his images, and may be either he had no brother and no sister, or, if he had one, he had no intimate relation with either. Since he refers to wanton women in several images, it is evident that he has deep-rooted contempt for them in his heart.

A study of Rao's images derived from animal husbandry can enable one to find out Rao's attitude towards various domestic animals. The only animals he mentions in these images are the cow, the ox, the calf, the bull, the buffalo, the goat, the elephant, the pig and the ass. Since the cow, the calf, the ox, and the bull are the animals of the bovine family, it is obvious that he refers to only six animals, namely, the cow, the buffalo, the goat, the elephant, the pig and the ass. Since all these animals can be seen in our towns and villages, it is safe to infer that the novelist's observations about these animals are based on intimate knowledge of the ways and behaviour of these animals. However, what is surprising is that the horse does not figure in any of the images, and the fact can lead one to infer that the novelist is apathetic towards the equine species. What is noticeable is that Rao describes the elephant as an honest animal in one image (*K*, 12-13), and the mad elephants have been described as restless in another (*K*, 213). One who has simply seen an elephant pass through a street cannot have this much knowledge of the ways of the elephants. That is why one can safely infer that he has observed the animal quite closely. There is nothing extraordinary with his describing the cow as generous, tame, quiet, and serene as it is quite common in India to associate the cow with these traits. Likewise, there is nothing unusual with his describing the buffalo as an ignorant animal. But it is nothing short of very close observation that can bring a person to the conclusion that the first calved cow is hale. Likewise, it is again one's close observation that can bring one to the conclusion that asses and pigs are unwilling to work and that asses sleep very soundly. Raja Rao must have observed the eyes of goats quite

closely; otherwise he would not have compared the coolies' eyes with those of the goats. All this brings one to the conclusion that Raja Rao must have carefully watched the ways of the animals of these six families. Since Rao mentions the cow, the bull, the oxen, and the calf in order to laud people, it can be safely inferred that he loves the animals of the bovine family. Similar facts bring one to the conclusion that he likes the elephant too, but he does not like the ass and the pig. So far as the goat is concerned, he seems to regard its eyes as pitiable but its beard as laughable.

Rao's images derived from agriculture, horticulture, and forestry make it evident that he is familiar with the plants of bamboo, banana, aloe, and areca-nut, the bushes of lantana, jasmine, and champak, the fruits of pomegranate and pumpkin and the grains of mustard. The way he mentions these trees, plants, and shrubs in his images makes it evident that he loves the tree of aloe, the shrubs of jasmine and champak, but does not like the shrub of lantana, and that the two trees he finds unusually thin are bamboo and areca-nut.

All the three images derived from anatomy have been employed to signify the bigness of the size of things, whether it is the image of the palm, or that of the thumb, or that of the bosom. It is noticeable here that while most writers have likened ladies to the moon, here is a writer who likens the moon to a lady. The fact signifies that he considers a lady to be more attractive than the moon. In the images derived from the field of garments he speaks admiringly of the marriage shawl, sari hem and silken thread, and speaks pejoratively of the loin cloth. The fact looks like a projection of the novelist's love of most attractive clothes. Since in his images he refers to only two metals, namely gold and silver, and since precious ornaments are made of only gold and silver, it can be inferred that Raja Rao loves precious metals like most people of the world and, so, is different from the ascetics and those upholding austerity.

Since in his images derived from music, Raja Rao mentions only two musical instruments, namely the temple cymbal, and

the drum, he seems not to have been much interested in music. And since the sounds of both these musical instruments have been described as disturbing like that of thunder and the beating of the heart, it can be deduced that Rao believed the sounds produced with these two instruments as disturbing.

The other pets which have been spoken of in pejorative terms are the dog (including the cur and the bitch) and the cat. The fact signifies that Rao considers these animals to be contemptible. Since among the wild animals the tiger has been admired for its physique, Rao can be believed to regard the tiger as a good-looking animal. The jackal is the wild animal which Rao does not like as Bhatta the man who sides with the British has been called one. Since the insects spoken of in pejorative terms include the scorpion, and the bug, it can be safely inferred that Rao, like any of us, does not like either. But since the rat and the mosquito have not been spoken of in that way, Rao, unlike many of us, seems not to have been displeased with them. Since the swan and the sparrow have been praised and the crow has been spoken of in pejorative terms, it can be inferred that Rao loves the swan and the sparrow but not the crow.

NOTES

1. Rao, Raja, *Kanthapura*, ed. C.D. Narasimhaiah, New Delhi: Oxford University, Press, 1993.
(All the page references are to this edition).
2. Jesus Christ is reported to have said that a camel can go through the eye of a needle but a rich man cannot enter the gate of heaven (Matthew 19: 24).