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## **RAJA RAO AS A PIONEER OF INDIAN ENGLISH NOVELISTS: A STUDY OF KANTHAPURA**

### **Abstract**

The success of a literary artist lies not only in his ideas but also in his expression. The style reveals the nature and the intention of the writer. Raja Rao has achieved this by using language creatively. To begin with, instead of the western narrative technique, he has used the ancient Indian Puranic method of storytelling, which according to him would be natural and true to our climate. Raja Rao uses various other stylistic devices too, like repetition, additional modification in sentences, in order to bring the rhythm and structure of the Indian languages.

**Key Words: Indian English, puranic, storytelling, banana trunk, mango trees, big mountains**

One of the most serious difficulties faced by the Indian English novelist is the problem of finding a suitable medium of expression. He must use English in a way that is distinctively Indian and still remains English. He must so use, bend or break the language he uses as to convey through it the feel of Indian life, the attitudes and responses that are characteristically Indian. In other words, he must evolve an Indian English, just as there is American, Canadian

and Australian English. Raja Rao refers to this problem in his famous *Preface to Kanthapura*, which is a minor classic in itself. He writes,

“The telling has not been easy. One has to convey in a language that is not one’s own but in 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 I n our own language and in English. We cannot write like the English. We should not. We can write only as Indians. We have grown to look at the large world as part of us. Our method of expression, therefore, has to be a dialect which will someday prove to be as distinctive and colourful as the Irish or the American.”(1)

Various Indian English novelists have experimented with the language they have used, and each has tried in his own way to evolve a suitable medium to express Indian sensibility, the very flavor of Indian life. These efforts have usually taken three directions. *First*, there have been literal translations of Indian Idioms, phrases, proverbs, etc. *Secondly*, changes have been introduced in the syntax or structure of the language. It has been modified, bent or broken according to need. *Thirdly*, Indian imagery has been profusely used to convey the flavor of Indian life.

Recent years have witnessed a good number of Indian English fiction writers who have stunned the literary world with their works. Their works have enriched the world literature, and they have been awarded with accolades and prizes in the field of works. But a careful study of their development makes it clear that there are two kinds of writers who contributed to the genre of novel: The first group of writers’ focused on the various social problems of India like poverty, class discrimination, social dogmas, rigid religious norms etc each of which has an appeal to the west. The second group of writers includes those who are global Indians, who are Indian by birth but they have lived abroad. They see Indian realities objectively. They are at ease with the English language and have enriched English language with their creativity. Even though in handling Indian sensibility these writers are no longer

the slavish imitators of English, they have used English so creatively that the freshness becomes a prominent feature in their language. They have experimented with the language and fused Indian spirit in the foreign language. They have coined new words and idiomatic expressions in English and added a new flavor to English language. Some of these terms are now accepted as English words. The west relishes it with zest and they have their permanent place in the world literature.

There was a time when the west used to recognize the ‘Third World’ writers with a sense of obligation rather than genuine acceptance. It is often argued that if one wants to be noticed in the west, one should present the East in unfavorable light. Often the Indian writers who present India, its culture in the unfavorable light are considered for the awards. The west has a typical notion about the third world, where their eyes only see poverty, wretchedness, terrorism, lack of system, failure of democracy and so forth. And the writers, voicing one of these are sure to be recognized by the west. But in the last few years; the scenario has changed. The Indian writers are major contributors to the English fiction and they are no longer a “sympathy seekers”. They have their English and their genuine experience to share.

Apart from this, yet another reason for which Indian writers are also recognized is their innovative experiments in the genre. These writers, who have created a new form, have been handsomely rewarded. It can be a narrative innovation or linguistic experimentation. Such writers have native-like proficiency of the English language; they know how to handle English creatively. For them form and style are equally important in their story. Often we find autobiographical elements in their works. These writers have reached the height from where they can tell their own tale in the language suitable for their native set. Such writers are often awarded for their linguistic experimentation and genuine tale. Among all these writers Raja Rao is a towering personality he used all these devices with extraordinary success. Right from ‘Javni’ onward, Raj’s works can be read as the writer’s experiments in the field of language and style. He addresses himself to a very difficult task in this respect; *he tries to infuse the rhythm of Sanskrit and the melody of Kannada in English language. While English is an analytic language, Sanskrit is a synthetic language. Analytic languages make extensive use of prepositions and auxiliary verbs and depend upon word order to show other relationship; synthetic languages indicate the relation of words in a sentence by means of inflections. Raja Rao “alters’ the “expression”, breaks English language and the formal syntax, as it were to create the desired effect. He frequently uses “be” for “are”. For*

example; “what wonderful animals there be in our land” (*The Serpent and the Rope* .27). He also attaches the name of the subject to the end of the sentence to explain the pronoun that has gone before; “He is the whole of ourselves, Uncle Charles” (*The Serpent and the Rope* p.87); “He was so noble and humble, grandfather was’ (*The Serpent and the Rope* 17); “I tell you, he was not a bad man, was Bhatta”; “He will bring us Swaraj, the Mahatma.”

In *Kanthapura*, as the mode of narration requires, long sentences are written without punctuation and without appropriate use of prepositions:

And Range Gowda, who has stood silent by the tamarind, when he sees this, rushes down and, stick in hand, gives one bang on the head of a policeman, and the policeman sinks down, and there is such a clamor again that the police inspector shouts “Disperse the crowd!” and he slips round the byre with Moorthy before him, while policemen beat the crowd this side and that side, and groans and moans and cries and shouts and coughs and oaths and bangs and kicks are heard, while there is heard, “ Mahatma Gandhi ki jai ! Mahatma Gandhi ki jai!” (2).

Raja Rao brings about numerous syntactic changes and at times his language becomes archaic, but this enables us to understand the overall pattern of his work. “The conversational and the colloquial phrasing and cadence breaks through the formal syntax and the philosophical jargon and comes to us as art’, in *The Serpent and the Rope*. This technique naturally requires a lot of effort on the part of the novelist, since “all forms of literature are only capable of indirect statements” (3). But once the beginning is made, the labor is amply rewarded.

Raja Rao often uses words from Indian languages and transcreates or translates a few others. This, however, does not jolt the reader. It is to be noted that the novelist reflects and recollects for a long time. He is not a prolific writer, and he has published novels at a slow speed: *Kanthapura* in 1938, *The Serpent and the Rope* in 1960, *The Cat and Shakespeare* in 1965, *Comrade Kirillov* in 1976, and *The Chessmaster and his Moves* in 1978. For ten long years the subject-matter of *The Serpent and the Rope* has been gestating in his mind; he took four years to write *The Chessmaster and the Moves* and two years to correct it. All this enabled him to transcend the regional pointedness of words. In the process the peculiarities tend to be smoothly absorbed in the text. As Prof. Kantak observes: “The transformation of language takes place at a high artistic pressure .... The word has become the perception” (4) .

The difficult tangles are dealt with at times in simple yet effective manner as the following conversation between Govindan Nair and Lakshmi shows;

“Are you happy?” asked Govindan Nair. The girl threw a bit of her sari over her body.

“Are you?” She asked.

“Can’t you see I am happy?”

“Where does it come from?”

“From the tap,”

“And the water in the tap ?”

“From the lake,”

“And the water in the lake?”

“From the sky,”

“And the water in the sky ?”

“From the ocean.”

“And the water in the ocean?”

“From the rivers .”

“And the river waters?”

“They make the lakes.”

“And the lake water ?”

“Is river water.”

“And so ?”

“Water comes from water, “she said.

“I am a kitten?” he said

“I let the mother cat carry me”

“And so?”

“And the river flows.”

“And then?”

“The lake gives water to taps”

“Then?”

“Man is happy.

Because he knows he lives in a house three stories high.”(5)

It is, indeed, in the handling of dialogues that the creative writers are most original and effective. When Mulk Raj Anand went to W.B Yeats during his first pilgrimage to Ireland, the great poet remarked to Anand: “Let us learn construction from the classics and dialogues from ourselves” (6). It is in dialogue that Raja Rao stresses the difference in regard to language and philosophy. The characters are described through their language and beliefs. For instance, Satamma is portrayed through such outbursts:

“That is horrible.....After all, my son, it is the Kaliyuga-floods, and as the shastras say, there will be the confusion of castes and the pollution of progeny. We can't help it perhaps....” (7)

Raja Rao incorporates symbolic patterns in his works which amply justifies the adoption of Indian English. In *Kanthapura*, Kenchamma is a symbol of “goddess, benign and bountiful.” The image enlarges as the various types of experience converge into one. The religious, social and political issues become one and the same. The blend is achieved when the villagers consider Moorthy “a small Mountain”, because the Big Mountain is Shiva, their protector. Here the Gandhian ideal and the religious spirit merge together:

“And what shall we call Moorthy?” said Radhamma.

“Why, the small Mountain,” said Rangamma, and we all said

“That is it”, and so from that day we knew

there were the small Mountain and the Big Mountain to protect us.(8)

Raja Rao dissociates the English language from those elements which identify it with purely western experience and culture. There is a profusion of ‘local color’ in the speech of his characters in *Kanthapura*. It is a deliberate distancing effort to make the language shed its European connotations, and so to transform it into what is generally known as ‘Indian English’. Raja Rao borrows extensively from Kannada to replace the English idiom and proverbs that he discards. For instance, he writes ‘a crow-and –sparrow story’ instead of ‘a cock-and -bull tale’, and replaces the English ‘nip in the bud’ by the Kannada ‘crush it in its seed.’ When the poor untouchables of Kanthapura get their free spinning wheels from Moorthy, ‘they go back with their spinning wheels upon their shoulders, their mouths

touching the ears with delight;’ this is another example of Raja Rao using non-English forms of expression. Elaborating on this theme, Esha Dey writes:

Then there is a sprinkling of words connected with the physical reality of India and Hindu behavior patterns, like *pollution, caste coconut, camphor, lantana, bamboo, ablution, banana puffed-rice*, etc. In short the items which ‘indianize’ the language essentially for their semantic function in respect of Hindu/Indian culture. But linguistic patterns remain the Same, in the effort to present reality as actually Perceived by the senses.(9)

There is a poetic quality in Raja Rao’s prose in *Kanthapura*, and this is especially noticed in his descriptions. He gives lists of sonorous South Indian names, indulges in repetitions, and strings together number of clauses to build a rhythmic effect that sounds almost like verse. This is noticed in the opening pages of the novel where the author leads the reader up the winding road of the Ghats to the Kanthapura village. The same touch is again noticed in Rao’s narration of how Goddess Kenchamma fights a demon to save the people from his attacks. As he says in the “Foreword” *Kanthapura* is written as a sthala-purana (the exclusive mythic tale of a particular place), its language has the tone and quality of an epic. This is particularly true of the story of Mahatma. And then, the description of the Kartik Festival of Lights is an excellent piece of rhythmic prose:

Kartik has come to *Kanthapura*...with the Glow of lights and unpressed footsteps of the Wandering gods; white lights from clay-trays And red lights from copper-stands, and diamond Lights that glow from the bowers of entrance-leaves; Lights that glow from banana trunks and mango Twigs, yellow lights behind white leaves, and Green lights behind yellow leaves, and white Lights behind green leaves;...(10)

Raja Rao’s prose style in *Kanthapura* has an orientation towards oral speech, and that is only natural since the story is told by a narrator who has a socially distinct manner of telling a tale. Achakka, a grandmother of the village, humble of origin but rich in experience, has a memory full of folk-lore and traditional myth. She uses these assets to enrich the narrative. Rao decorates her descriptions with repetitive phrases and sentences that are full of

sound-erects in alliteration and assonance. This adds to the distinctive quality of his language and style. Raja Rao's skilful use of long sentences complements his descriptive power which he achieves through animated and rhythmic English prose. S.C. Harrex describes the overall effect in apt words as follows:

Considered in terms of the development of the Indian novel in English, *Kanthapura* clearly has a special place as the first work to demonstrate convincingly, in terms of form and content, that the novel in English was a medium which could be adapted to the Indian sensibility. (11)

*Kanthapura* is also a daring and highly meaningful experiment in the field of language and style- and experiment which Raja Rao had already embarked upon in his short stories. In order to catch the full flavor of Indian speech in English, Raja Rao has put the whole story in the mouth of Achakka, an old Kanthapurian- a Brahmin widow of the Veda Sastra Pravina Krishna Sastri's family. Children call her "the aunt who tells such nice stories." The narrator's style is distinctive in a variety of ways. The structure and rhythm of the opening sentences indicate something different from the intonations of the King's English: "Our village- I don't think you have ever heard about it- Kanthapura is its name, and it is in the province of Kara." The syntax of this sentence is interesting. "In English, the most emphatic part of a sentence is to be found at its end; and the next most emphatic, at its beginning, though words and phrases that would normally come towards the end gain emphasis by being put at the beginning, from the very fact that this is abnormal." (12) In the English of *Kanthapura* the abnormal is very often the normal, as here, and also in : 'High on the Ghats is it, high up the steep mountains that face the cool Arabian seas, up the Malabar coast is it, up Mangalore and Puttur' ( 1). The hurried and breathless tempo of Indian, especially the south Indian speech, is suggested by a liberal use of long, flowing sentences. A sentence running to the length of more than half a dozen lines represents the common pattern of syntax, a single sentence occupying a whole paragraph not being uncommon, each long sentence is made up of short sentences simply joined together by a liberal use of the connective "and" and of comma. Here is an example:

And old "Rachi can bear the sight no more, and she says, "In the name of the goddess I will burn this village," and we say "Nay, nay Rachi," but she spits once, twice, thrice towards the Bebbur mound, and once, twice, thrice at the

village gate and she rushes towards the Pariah lines, and Lingamma and Madamma and Boramma and Siddamma follow her, crying. “To the ashes, you wretch of a village!” and they throw their bodies and their sari-fringes on the earth and they raise a bonfire beneath the tamarind tree, and they light this hatch and that hatch, and we cry out “our houses, our houses,” and they say, “Go, ye widows, don’t ye see the dead and the dying?” and more and more men and women go this side and that and say “If, the rice is to be lost let it be lost in the ashes,” and granary and byre and haylofts are lighted. (176)

The syntax and rhythm here have a quaint flavor which has a parallel in the style of the Bible; but it is certainly not modern style, which usually prefers the complex pattern of the periodic sentence to the linking of clauses with “and”.

Repetition is another useful device, as in:

“They say Rangamma is all for the Mahatma. We are all for the Mahatma. Pariah Rachanna’s wife, Rachi, and Seethamma and Timmamma are all for the Mahatma. They say there are men in Bombay and Bengal and Punjab, who are all for the Mahatma. They say there are men in Bombay and Bengal and Punjab, who are all for the Mahatma. They say the Mahatma will go to the Red-man’s country and he will get us Swaraj. He will bring us Swaraj, the Mahatma”(12).

Superficially viewed, this appears to be similar to Gertrude Stein’s method of repetition, which she called “insistence,” in which, with each subtly different repetition, the emphasis is changed. But in the repetitions in *Kanthapura* there is not much change of emphasis involved. They simply indicate the garrulous, gossipy style of talking of an old Indian rustic woman. It is significant to note, in this connection, that Fowler frowns upon rhetorical repetition of this kind: he prefers repetition designed to secure better clarity.(13) The repetition in *Kanthapura* is obviously not of the latter type.

The literal translation into English of Indian – in this case, Kannada – phrase and idiom is another factor which imparts an Indian flavor to the style. Mulk Raj Anand had effectively used this device earlier, but he is apt to confine its use mostly to oaths and swear words. Raja Rao spreads his net wider. Apart from translating literally such picturesque nicknames as “Waterfall Venkamma” and “nose-scratching Nanjamma,” he does the same

with expression and idiom too, as in “You are a traitor to your salt-givers”, “As you like says the licker of your feet”, “They Don’t touch the Government Campaign”. Nobody....will believe in such a crow and sparrow story”, “, “Your voice is not a sparrow voice in your village”, “You cannot put wooden tongues to men”, “Why? Go and ask the squirrel on the fence!”, “The leaf is laid” (dinner is served); “to the mire with you”, “The sinner may go to the ocean but the water will only touch his knew”, “A tiger-jawed person, she could speak like a man”, “You forget it. But this stomach that has borne eight children cannot forget it.” Again, the use of expletive words as “He”, “He”, “Hoye!” “Hoye!” Hoyee-la”, and of the honorific plural in proper names as in “Bhattare” – contributes to the same effect, which is further heightened by homely similes drawn strictly from the Indian scene; for example: “Venkamma plants herself like a banana-trunk in front of her”, “Rangamma stood by her helpless as a calf”, “Every enemy you create is like pulling out a lantana bush in your backyard. The more you pull out, the wider you spread the seeds.

....But every friend you create is like a jasmine hedge. You plant it following, smells powerfully of the soil: “Range Gowda, Ranga Godwa,” says Moorthy, “there’s something I want of you.” “Come in, learned one, and seated like a son, explain to me what you need. If there’s anything this fool can do, do but open your mouth and it shall be done.” Some of these idioms and phrases are actually not translations from Indian usage but the author’s own coinage. “Your voice is not a sparrow voice in your village” is an instance. But these are completely in harmony with the actual translations made from Kannada.

The experiments in the field of language and style Rao’s central preoccupation is with India. Naturally, of all Indian English writers, he is the most Indian and his works project the essential India in her wholeness. He is Indian mainly in sensibility and values, and not subject-matter alone. He thoroughly examines the mystery, complexity, philosophy and magnitude of India, bringing out fully the Indian sensibility and values. In *Kanthapura*, Raja Rao achieves a fusion of theme, form and narration. He superimposes the Indian tradition of romance over the Western form of the novel. *Kanthapura* is structured as a *Sthalapurana*, a legendary history of a particular place. The three strands of action – politics, society and religion – are woven together to form the fabric of this novel. As elements of his narrative technique, Raja Rao employs reflection, dream, flash-back, and episodes. He retains the native Indian style of telling a story in spite of opting for the foreign medium of English. His retains the native Indian style of telling a story in spite of opting for the foreign medium of

English. His digressions help to fill the gaps in the story. The continuous monologue of the narrator is particularly suited for psychological analysis of characters. Achakka, who tells the story, in her peculiar flowing style, is a garrulous grandmother of the village, interested in all the happenings, gossip and inter-relations of characters.

Jayaramachar's *Harikatha* about the birth of Gandhi is a special device, through which religion is mingled with politics. We are told that the Mahatma is going to slay the Serpent of foreign rule just as Krishna killed the serpent Kaliya. Jayaramachar's *Harikatha* is an allegory of India's freedom struggle. Apart from this, Raja Rao also uses myth and symbolism in *Kanthapura*. A significant myth is that of Goddess Kenchamma of the Hill, which is given at the very beginning of the novel. Gandhi is transformed into a mythical figure in the *Harikatha*. But the central myth in *Kanthapura* is that of equating Gandhi's slogan of striving after Swaraj with that of the coming of Ramarajya, the victory of good over evil. And, then, most of the characters in the novel are projected as symbols, which add to the significance of their roles in the story.

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