

## HEROINES AND SUBALTERNS? THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN RAJA RAO'S *KANTHAPURA*

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The chief duty of a woman is to sacrifice herself to the physical and emotional needs of others, and above all, submit herself to her husband, ... woman's power was problematic, if not entirely illusory.<sup>1</sup>

The statement above, though restricted to the woman in the Victorian age, is relevant to all patriarchal societies across cultures, and therefore, across literary periods and genres including the Indo-Anglian novel. The sacrifice and submission of a woman is prevalent in both the domestic and socio-political spheres. The question that arises is, torn between sacrifice and submission, can women be truly heroines or are they continually subaltern? If they are heroines, to what extent?

The paper examines the representation of women in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, especially within the socio-political realms. This will be done in relation to Mahatma Gandhi's principle of *Satyagraha*. The paper surveys the role played by women in the Indian fight for independence against the British rule and attempts to establish whether their role is a heroic/dominant or subaltern one. Are they heroines or victims of their own society, i.e. are they being used to sacrifice their 'physical and emotional needs' for the victory of men? Who gets the medal in the end?

*Satyagraha* is Gandhi's system of non-violence. It is a system of non-violent resistance to tyranny or oppression and is largely based on moral principles, one of which is truth. It is a 'moral war' against the oppressor and its cornerstones are civil disobedience, truth, and non-injury. Qualities at the heart of the system are patience, non-cooperation, self-reliance, determination, and freedom from covetousness. Gandhi believed in non-cooperation as a way of peacefully resisting British tyranny and oppression. This involved rejection of honors, titles and honorary offices, and the boycott of British goods. This principle of non-violence is captured clearly in an Indo-Anglian novel, *The Great Indian Novel* by Shashi Tharoor, where one of the characters, Ved Vyas reports, through a character called Ganga:

Shall I tell of the strange weapon of disobedience, which Ganga, with all his experience of insisting upon obedience and obtaining it toward himself, developed into an arm of moral war against the foreigner? Shall I sing the praises of the mysterious ammunition of truth-force; the strength of unarmed slogan-chanting demonstrators falling defenseless under the hail of police lathis; the power of wave after wave of khaki-clad men and women, arms and voices raised, marching handcuffed to their imprisonment? Shall I speak, Ganapathi; shall you write of the victory of non-violence over the organized violence of the state; the triumph of bare feet over hobnailed boots; the defeat of legislation by the awesome strength of silence?<sup>2</sup>

The fictional passage lays bare the cornerstones of *Satyagraha*; the moral war against the foreigner (British), civil disobedience, truth, and non-injury. One also notes the Indians victory over the strong, armed foreign power. The victory here lies in the spiritual strength that the Indians have. On spiritual strength (an important ingredient of *Satyagraha*), Gandhi writes:

I am not pleading for India to practice non-violence because she is weak. I want her to practice non-violence being conscious of her strength and power. I want India to recognize that she has a soul that cannot perish, and that can rise triumphantly above every physical weakness and defy the physical combination of a whole world.<sup>3</sup>

Now, where do women fit into this noble self-sacrificing, non-violent endeavor to conquer the foreigner? Since women are of the weaker sex, and are physically weak, how can they ever rise 'triumphantly above every physical weakness and defy the physical combination of the whole world?' Their relevance in *Satyagraha*, one may suggest, lies in their ability to suffer quietly and being able to sacrifice and submit to the other.

When asked about the protection of the honor of women, Gandhi answers:

In the teaching of Ahishma, woman will not regard herself as dependent, weak or helpless. She is not really helpless when she is really pure. I know women are capable of throwing away their lives for a much lesser purpose (suicide)... it is not the external light but the inner light that is needed.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Shashi Tharoor, *The Great Indian Novel* (New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1989), 46.

<sup>3</sup> M.K. Gandhi, *My Non-Violence*. Ed. and Compiled. Sãilesh Kumar Bandopaya,(Ahamedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1960) 4.

<sup>4</sup> Gandhi 150-151.

It goes without saying that women, though physically weak, are capable of inner strength, and therefore, can face death cheerfully in the performance of one's duty (In *Sati* or *Satyagraha*). Determination to endure pain in the face of violence is one of the qualities one needs to be a true *Satyagraha*, which makes women heroines. Hosburg maintains that:

Gandhi's emphasis on fearlessness (which he equates with courage) has the source in his basic principles as well as in the demands of non-violent social action. He saw it as an attachment to truth... The coward in Gandhi's view is the man who shrinks from reality, refusing either to understand or to deal with the truths that are relevant to his situation... Fearlessness is needed if one is to renounce the use of violence and yet continue to resist those who have the power to kill or injure. Such fearlessness is to be the non-violence of the strong.<sup>5</sup>

In *Kanthapura*, the *Satyagrahis* (men, women and children) demonstrate fearlessness in their struggle for independence:

...and somebody began to clap hands and push forward, and we all clapped hands too and began to sing, the police began to push us this way and that, when Pariah Rachanna was torn down from the toddy tree, our hearts began to beat so fast that we cried out, 'Hoye-Hoye!' and we pushed forward with the men. And the police inspector this time shouted 'Attack!' and they lifted the lathis and bang-bang they brought them down on us, and the lathis caught our hair and rebounded from our backs, the Pariah Ningamma bit her mouth and wailed...and we say 'Now Rangamma we'll forward...and we'll all cry out; Mahatma Gandhi ki jai! Mahatma Gandhi ki jai!' and we deafen ourselves before the onslaught, and we rush and we crawl, and swaying and bending and crouching and rising, we move on and on, and the lathis rain on us.<sup>6</sup>

This depicts the characters' adherence to Gandhi's principles and qualities of *Satyagraha*: courage and determination. In spite of the lathi blows which fall on them like 'rain', they persevere in their non-violent march to 'the holy city of freedom'. This is quite a determined sacrifice for the attainment of the country's independence. Here women like other *Satyagrahis*, are conscious of their strength and power, and consciously endure pain in the face of brutality, cruelty and inhumanity of the police, the British Raj's instruments.

<sup>5</sup> H.J.N. Horsburgh, *Mahatma Gandhi* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1972) 22.

<sup>6</sup> Raja Rao, *Kanthapura*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1974) 133-134.

In *Kanthapura*, Raja Rao portrays the role of women in the political struggle. There is evidently a shift from the normal or traditional place of women within the patriarchal Indian society to their place in the political forum. The questions that remain are, to what extent did Gandhi assist in or initiate women emancipation; did he actually help emancipate them, or did his ideas only serve as another form of subordination within the patriarchal system? How useful are women in the political struggle as disciples of Gandhi's ideals of Ahimsa and self-sacrifice?

An understanding of the traditional values relating to women in society will make comprehensible Gandhi's ideas on women's rights. Maitrayee Mukhopadhyay sheds some light on the place of women in the Indian culture and tradition. According to her, Manu, a famous law giver of Circa 200 BC stated that, "in childhood a woman must be subjected to her father, in youth to her husband, and when her lord is dead to her sons."<sup>7</sup>

It is clear from the above argument that women in India have no independent identity outside the patriarchal domain. They are subject to the whims of the males, they are to be seen and not heard. Their vocation is "...to fetch, to carry, to cook, to wash, to meet the lust in bed, to bear year after year, a submissive silent slave sold to life for nothing."<sup>8</sup>

Gandhi came up with ideas pertaining to the role and status of women in India; the cornerstones of the issues of women's emancipation. Although Gandhi believed that a woman was an equal partner of a man mentally, and that men unjustly subordinated women to their patriarchal value system, his view of women's equality was located within the patriarchal system. His view projected a concept of women's roles as being complementary to those of men and embodying virtues of sacrifice and suffering. Because women have greater capacity (than men) to endure suffering, they could play a key part in the movement. Jayawardena asserts that as a result "Indian women themselves were soon to take up the Gandhian ideology and to advocate *Satyagraha* as a form of struggle particularly suitable for women."<sup>9</sup>

The question that remains is, to what extent do women act as emancipated participants in the struggle as portrayed in *Kanthapura*? Senath Perera has taken an informative study on the nature of the emancipation of women in *Kanthapura*. He argues that the women's emancipation is limited. In the novel, a group of women come together and move a step beyond their traditional confinement. They have resolved to move into the political arena

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<sup>7</sup> Maitrayee Mukhopadhyay, *Silver Shackles: Women and Development in India* (Oxford: Oxfam, 1984) 7.

<sup>8</sup> Mukhopadhyay 25.

<sup>9</sup> Kumari Jawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in The Third World* (London: Zed Books, 1987) 97.

and fight the Raj. However, there is evidence in the novel that women still have to venerate their male leaders such as Moorthy and also be subservient to their husbands in their own home. This, one may argue, portrays women as subalterns. On the question of woman as subaltern, Gayatri Spivak argues that (in the context of colonial struggle):

The question is not of female participation in insurgency or the ground rules of the sexual division of labor, for both of which there is 'evidence'. It is rather that, both as objects of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant.<sup>10</sup>

In *Kanthapura*, when Rangamma tells the other women about having to fight for the Mahatma, that is, against the British Raj, they feel it is not their role to go into politics. The narrator reports:

And Nose-scratching Nanjamma said, 'Why, I am not a man to fight, sister!' and Rangamma said, 'Why, sister, you need not be a man to fight. Do you know the story of Rain Lakshmi Bai, and do you know how she fought for India?'<sup>11</sup>

This shows that Indian women characters are still tied to their social position which chains them to the home and domestic chores. Rangamma tells them about Indian heroines who fought selflessly for India, with the aim of showing them that they do not need to be men to take part in the liberation struggle.

The women in *Kanthapura* establish a Sevika Sangha, but immediately after this Nanjamma experiences a nightmare. She dreams of being beaten by her husband; a clear indication of women's subjection to male dominance and oppression, she tells the other women, "sisters, last night I dreamt my husband was beating me, I was crying and my bangles broke." (p.111). The dream reflects women's double oppression- first by the husband, and secondly by Bade Khan, who represents the British Raj.

The men's response to women's participation in public activities, in this case the freedom movement in *Kanthapura*, clearly typifies the fact that the Indian women are back benchers in the patriarchal set up. Men are too conservative to permit their women to participate in public activities:

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<sup>10</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern speak?" *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader* eds. P. Williams and Laura Chrisman, (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994) 82.

<sup>11</sup> Rao 107.

And when our men heard of this, they said: 'was there nothing left for our women but to vagabond about like soldiers?'... 'Why, soon it will be as if the men will have to wear bangles and cook, so that you women may show yourselves off!<sup>12</sup>

In conclusion, one may assert that women in *Kanthapura* have one strength as participants in the struggle: their ability to endure suffering- a key to the success of Gandhi's non-violent protest movement since according to Gandhi, women are more fitted than man for the purpose of non-violence. Their conscious suffering and endurance are heroic qualities suitable for the Gandhian principle of non-violence. The characters of Rangamma and Ratna confirm the idea that women in *Kanthapura* are capable of going beyond the confinements of the patriarchal system and hence are to some extent, heroines. However, one cannot ignore the fact that they still feel the need for male protection (men and city boys), and therefore, their limited emancipation; their subaltern position.

... and the police were so infuriated that they rushed this side and that, and from this courtyard and that garden, from behind this door and that byre... and the city boys with floating shirts and Gandhi's caps, and they swarmed around us like veritable mother elephants round their young.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Rao 109.

<sup>13</sup> Rao 173.

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