



**Colonialism and Resistance: Themes of Nationalism and Identity in Raja Rao's
'Kanthapura'**

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Abstract

Raja Rao's novel *Kanthapura* intricately weaves together the themes of colonialism and resistance in the context of rural India during the Indian independence movement. Set in a small village in South India, the novel follows the protagonist, Moorthy, and his fellow villagers as they navigate the challenges posed by British colonial rule and the awakening of nationalist sentiments among the local populace. This abstract explores how Rao employs narrative techniques, symbolism, and character development to depict the complex interplay between the oppressors and the oppressed, highlighting the resilience and spirit of resistance among the villagers. The novel begins with the arrival of a charismatic young man named Moorthy, who has been educated in the city and returns to Kanthapura with nationalist ideas learned from Gandhi's teachings. Through Moorthy's character, Rao introduces the concept of passive resistance and non-cooperation with the British authorities. The villagers, initially skeptical, gradually embrace these ideas as they witness the injustices perpetrated by the colonial administration, such as the oppressive taxation policies and the exploitation of local resources for the benefit of the British.

Keywords: Resistance, Nationalism, Identity, symbolism, colonialism.

Kanthapura

- ✦ Kanthapura by Raja Rao is an English Indian novel that deals with the influence of Gandhi's freedom movement in a South Indian village named Kanthapura.
- ✦ The novel portrays the situation in India during the tumultuous period from 1919 to 1931.
- ✦ Kanthapura and its action scenes represent what happened in India during those years.
- ✦ Gandhi does not physically appear in the novel as the leader of the nation, but his presence is always felt in the various nationalist movements and resistance against British dominance that were gaining ground during that era.
- ✦ The protagonist of the novel is a young and city-educated man named Moorthy.



- ✦ He is one of Gandhi's staunch followers. The civil disobedience movement finds its way into this remote south Indian village, Kanthapura, with the arrival of Moorthy from the city, who has some messages from Gandhi to deliver.

Raja Rao's novel *Kanthapura* portrays colonialism and resistance during India's struggle for independence. Set in a fictional village in South India, the novel captures the intricate dynamics of British colonial rule and the villagers' collective resistance against it. This essay explores how Rao explores these themes and their implications for nationalism and identity. Rao employs a distinctive narrative style, utilizing the voice of an anonymous, omniscient narrator who represents the collective consciousness of the village. This narrative technique provides a communal perspective and emphasizes the solidarity and unity among the villagers in their struggle against colonial oppression. The village becomes a symbol of resistance, transforming from a passive observer to an active participant in the nationalist movement. Symbolism plays a crucial role in *Kanthapura*, with the river Moorthy and the sacred tree serving as symbols of endurance and spiritual strength. The river, flowing through the village, symbolizes continuity and the timeless struggle against external forces, while the sacred tree represents the rootedness of the villagers to their land and traditions. These symbols reinforce the theme of resistance, illustrating how the villagers draw strength from their cultural heritage to confront the challenges posed by colonialism. Character development further enriches the novel's thematic exploration of colonialism and resistance. Moorthy's transformation from a hesitant young man to a determined leader mirrors the evolution of the village itself, as both undergo a process of awakening and empowerment. Other characters, such as the wise older woman Ratna and the skeptical priest Achakka, represent different facets of the villagers' responses to colonial rule, ranging from steadfast resistance to cautious skepticism.

Raja Rao's English-language Indian novel *Kanthapura* explores the impact of Gandhi's liberation movement on the village of Kanthapura in South India. The state of India is depicted in the novel during the turbulent years between 1919 and 1931

The events in *Kanthapura* reflect what was happening throughout India in those years. As the national leader, Gandhi does not physically appear in the book as Mulk Raj Anand's *The Untouchables* does. However, his influence was constantly felt by the numerous nationalist movements and the resistance to British domination that was gaining momentum at the time. The book's protagonist is Moorthy, a young, well-educated man from the city. He is a devoted follower of Gandhi, and when Moorthy from the city arrives with some words from Gandhi



to deliver, the civil disobedience movement makes its way into this isolated village in south India, Kanthapura. He tries to visit every home in the community, including the pariah areas, to spread Gandhi's message and emphasize the significance of the independence movement. Moorthy exhorts the locals to choose charka spinning to produce their clothing and shun imported items. In due course, the hamlet establishes a Congress Committee and a volunteer corps, and Kanthapura receives free distribution of city-produced publicity materials. The volunteers receive the necessary training to continue their nonviolent stance throughout government persecution. When Moorthy started the freedom struggle, the village's progressive woman Ratna and Patel Range Gowda—the Patel of Kanthapura—supported him.

To thwart the nationalist movement and punish those who adhered to Gandhi's ideas, the government made a concerted effort to implement strict measures. Individuals who vehemently oppose Moorthy's freedom effort include agents of the British government such as Bade Khan, Bhatta, and Swami. Bhatta and Swami also excommunicate Moorthy for his meeting with the outcasts. Even though a small percentage of people are impacted, most are still enthusiastic about the independence struggle movement. The villagers' excitement increased when word spread of Mahatma Gandhi's Dandi March and his violation of the Salt Law. Then, the Satyagraha movement is sparked nationwide, significantly affecting the villagers. Under the leadership of Moorthy, the village organized Satyagraha outside the toddy plantation.

As a reaction to this, the police took to lathi-charging, and a large number of people were injured. Some were sent to prison, but the movement did not stop. The villagers also adopted picketing outside the Skeffington Coffee Estate, and this time, the opposition from the government was more severe. The majority of them suffered injuries, and women and children who were gravely injured were not exempt from the repression. The estate workers were significantly impacted by this circumstance and took part in the movement as well. The place reverberated with slogans, and many yelled, "Mahatma Gandhi ki jai." Among several others, Moorthy received jail sentences, and a lengthy sentence was announced. Ratna is in charge of running the village Congress while Moorthy is away. Many women are gathered and given training in preparation for the impending fight for independence.

The next move of the villagers is the no-tax campaign. People were made aware of the fact that the British were unjustly taking land revenues from the ignorant and poor people, and so they offered resistance against paying the taxes. Even in the most dire situations, the



villagers are inspired to continue the struggle nonviolently. However, violence gradually flares up, and the government uses brutal tactics to put an end to the mob. They put up a valiant fight against ruthless oppression, but in the end, they gave up. The inhabitants are forced to flee and take sanctuary in a village far off Kanthapura. The British government was eventually defeated in 1947 due to the courageous resistance displayed by the people of Kanthapura and other nation regions.

Characterisation in the Novel

Moorthy is referred to as the Village Gandhi and serves as the novel's main character. In the village of Kanthapura, he launched his independence movement, motivated by Gandhi's ideas. As an educated guy, he strives to remove the villagers' superstitions from their thoughts and teaches them the value of charkha and the Khadi economy. He motivated the peasants to rebel against the British administration and pursue their independence by adopting Gandhi's teachings.

Ratna-She is a youthful, intelligent woman with a progressive, liberal attitude on life. Despite being a young widow, she does not live the typical widow's life. Even though it is strictly forbidden for widows to wear gowns and makeup, she disregards social censure. She is fearless, forges her course in life, and decides to back Moorthy in the fight for independence. In addition to managing the congress work in Moorthy's absence and training the female volunteers, Ratna is a crucial figure in the movement that organizes Harikathas.

Patel Range Gowda- Because of his solid and authoritative demeanor, he is known as the "Tiger" of the community. He is a government employee with great authority in the community, and everyone complies with his directives. However, he is also captivated by Gandhi's principles and ideas, and he gives Moorthy all the support and assistance he needs to lead the campaign successfully. He is a giving and compassionate man who aids the underprivileged and needy.

Bade Khan- Bade Khan is the village policeman of Kanthapura. He has trouble finding a home to live in because he is a Muslim. Following a protracted battle and a successful resolution, he gathers intelligence from the community in secret and provides it to the authorities. In addition to being tasked with upholding law and order in the community, he opposes the Gandhian movement there.

Bhatta- He is the first Brahmin who is perceived as being in opposition to Moorthy's persona. In his capacity as a British government agent, he collaborates with Swami and Bade Khan to undermine the Gandhian movement that was occurring in the hamlet. He was poor in his early years but eventually became wealthy by annexing numerous acres of peasant holdings to his



domain. He embodies the values of the older generation of Brahmins, who used the ignorant for their gain.

Advocate Shankar- Advocate Shankar, another Gandhian, is a devoted disciple of his ideas. He contributes to the national liberation movement in his unique manner. He rarely attends gatherings where people are seen wearing outfits made of foreign material because he wears khaki. Gandhi fasts during his incarceration because he sees it as a means of achieving spiritual power and self-purification. He carefully adheres to the road of truth and does not fight matters founded on lies.

Waterfall Venkamma- The lady is known as Waterfall Venkamma because she frequently appears to be crying like a waterfall. She is a pathetic person who enjoys seeing other people fail. She is envious of others that succeed, especially Rangamma since she owns a large home. Because Moorthy rejected her invitation to marry her second daughter, she despises him. Additionally, she despises Ratna for being unusual and constantly mistreats her. Venkamma opposes the liberation movement and stands with Swami and Bhatta in their opposition.

Narsamma-Narsamma, Moorthy's mother, is an orthodox and conservative woman who does not know the liberation struggle her son was involved in. However, she has high expectations for her kid because she thinks he will have a successful career. Sadly, she breaks down upon hearing that the Swami has excommunicated her son and fears death as a result of this shock.

Rangamma- A widow with forward-thinking views, Rangamma is an educated lady. She reads newspapers to stay informed about the daily happenings in and around her, demonstrating her enlightened nature. She supports Moorthy in arranging the Congress operations in Kanthapura and is actively engaged in the fight for independence.

Achakka-She is the narrator of the novel. Achakka, who is presented to the readers as a traditional Indian storyteller, is a grandmother who tells a newcomer about events that happened in her village. She tells the story and offers commentary on the people's lifestyle and Kanthapura's history.

Colonialism in *Kanthapura*

Colonialism in *Kanthapura* is depicted through various facets that illustrate the pervasive influence of British rule on the village and its people. Economically, the British exploit the villagers through taxes and economic policies that benefit the colonial administration at the expense of the local population. Rao vividly portrays the impact of these policies on the villagers' livelihoods, highlighting their struggles with poverty and economic hardships. Culturally, the British impose their values and norms on the villagers, clashing with traditional Indian customs and beliefs. This cultural imposition is seen in various aspects



of daily life, from language and education to social hierarchy and religious practices. The imposition of English as a medium of education and administration becomes a symbolic tool of colonial hegemony, alienating the villagers from their own cultural heritage. Administratively, the British exert control through their bureaucratic machinery and legal systems, which often oppress and marginalize the villagers. The novel illustrates instances where the British legal system is used unjustly against the villagers, leading to injustices and further fueling resistance.

Nationalism and Resistance

Central to *Kanthapura* is the theme of nationalism and the villagers' resistance against colonial rule. The protagonist, Moorthy, emerges as a pivotal figure who embodies the spirit of Indian nationalism inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolent resistance (Satyagraha). Moorthy's journey from a young man influenced by Gandhi's ideas to a leader of the resistance movement in Kanthapura reflects the broader awakening of nationalist sentiment among ordinary Indians during the freedom struggle. The novel portrays various forms of resistance adopted by the villagers under Moorthy's leadership. These include boycotting British goods, protests against unjust policies, and establishing a Congress-inspired committee in Kanthapura to organize and coordinate resistance activities. Through these actions, Rao underscores the collective agency of the villagers in challenging colonial authority and asserting their rights to self-determination.

Identity and Community

Identity and community play a significant role in shaping the villagers' response to colonialism and their participation in the resistance movement. Rao portrays the villagers as deeply rooted in their cultural identity, traditions, and customs, which become symbols of resistance against cultural imperialism. The preservation of language, religious practices, and social customs becomes integral to their defiance against British attempts to homogenize and assimilate them into colonial culture. Gender also intersects with identity in *Kanthapura*, as women play active roles in supporting the nationalist cause despite the patriarchal norms of the society. Their involvement in protests, marches, and even civil disobedience challenges traditional gender roles and contributes to the broader narrative of resistance and empowerment.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Kanthapura* by Raja Rao is a powerful testament to the complexities of colonialism and resistance in India. Through vivid characters and a rich narrative, Rao portrays the economic, cultural, and administrative dimensions of British colonial rule and



the villagers' steadfast resistance against it. The novel highlights the harsh realities of colonial oppression and celebrates the resilience and courage of ordinary Indians who fought for their freedom and cultural identity. Raja Rao's exploration of these themes resonates with readers today, offering insights into the enduring legacy of India's struggle for independence and the ongoing challenges of postcolonial identity and nationalism. *Kanthapura* remains a timeless work that reminds us of the importance of cultural heritage, collective action, and the pursuit of justice in the face of oppression. *Kanthapura* by Raja Rao is a profound exploration of colonialism and resistance, portraying the indomitable spirit of a rural Indian village in the face of external domination. Through its narrative techniques, symbolism, and character development, the novel underscores the power of collective action and cultural resilience in the struggle for independence. By examining these literary elements, this abstract illuminates how Rao's novel continues to resonate as a powerful commentary on the enduring legacy of colonialism and the timeless quest for freedom and justice.

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