
Mahatma Gandhi's Vision for Women and the Feminine Spirit in 'Kanthapura''

Dr Kavita Singla, Associate Professor
Department of English
S.A.Jain (P.G.) College, Ambala City,
Email: kvt.singla@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper explores the enduring relevance of Mahatma Gandhi's vision for women's empowerment as portrayed in the literary work 'Kanthapura' by Raja Rao. While the novel captures the spirit of India's independence movement, its narrative resonates deeply with contemporary discussions on gender and equality. Gandhi's call for women to actively participate in the struggle for independence is a precursor to ongoing efforts for women's political and social engagement. Today's women continue to break barriers in leadership, politics, and various professions, echoing Gandhi's call for active involvement. The novel's depiction of women challenging traditional gender norms aligns with present-day global movements advocating for gender equity. 'Kanthapura' offers a historical perspective on intersectionality, emphasising the interconnection between the struggles for gender equality and other social justice movements. This study highlights the enduring relevance of Gandhi's vision for women's liberation, inviting readers to draw parallels between the historical context of 'Kanthapura' and the pressing issues of gender in the present day, demonstrating the timeless nature of these issues.

Keywords: patriarchy, women's liberation, freedom movement, breaking of conventions

Like all progressive and visionary thinkers, Gandhi believed that patriarchy was the most formidable bastion to overcome in the pursuit towards an egalitarian social order. Discrimination on the basis of caste, religion and wealth may be overcome in some distant future but the idea of achieving gender equality seems most elusive. Patriarchy is deeply entrenched in the human mind as well as in the social order. Tradition, social structure, religion, and eventually capitalism have all played their role in according a lower status to women. Women, consisting of half the population, have always had a minuscule share in wealth, property, jobs and other important social roles. This fact of an unequal distribution of roles is as true of the past as the present. Gender discrimination is, by all accounts, the biggest social problem confronting humanity. How did Mahatma Gandhi understand this question and try to cope with it?

Gandhi's engagement with the gender question did not start on a clean slate. The question of child marriage, denial of opportunities to widows and girls' education had been at the centre of concerns of the 19th century reformers. Gandhi shared these apprehensions to the core. But he was different from them in one respect. Instead of being the passive recipient of the reforms, he accorded great agency to women and saw them as active agents who would alter their conditions through their endeavours.

Deeply influenced by Gandhiji, Raja Rao weaved Gandhian ideology in his novel "Kanthapura" (1938). Raja Rao is considered one of the most popular writers in the realm of Indian English Writings. He was writing when the Indian freedom struggle was at its peak. Mahatma Gandhi emerged to be a great leader in socio-political turbulences. Gandhi not only gave political leadership but also worked to eradicate rotten social conventions. Child marriage, the absence of second marriage, widowhood, purdah system and living within the four walls of the house were some of the diseases that plagued the women of India. No comprehensive and widespread education was available for anybody and the uneducated masses were lost in darkness. Bhatt, the village Brahmin would manipulate horoscope-matching for marriage to suit his personal goals. The Social reformers including Gandhiji spoke for the widow's remarriage and women's empowerment through education.

In the whole narrative of "Kanthapura", Gandhi never appears physically as a character, but he constantly leads the masses not only in political movements but in social reforms too.

Kanthapura is a special novel for the young generation of the twenty-first century, in more than one sense. The novel narrates the long battle of Indian freedom struggle. Apart from the importance of Non-violence, Truth, and Perseverance as the tools to liberate a country from the clutches of colonisers, the young people feel amazed at women's participation on such a massive scale.

Set in a small village in south India, the novel represents a typical Indian village. It shows how the Gandhian movement brought great changes in the lives of many women bringing them out of the purdah. Many women depicted in the narrative are widows and refuse to conform to the laws of society set for them. They wear coloured clothes and ornaments. They are satyagrahis and lead from the front.

Rangamma is an educated and rich Brahmin widow who actively leads the people of Kanthapura in the socio-political movement along with Moorthi, the protagonist. She breaks the social barrier when she starts rendering religious discourse after her father, Ramakrishniah's death. She is the one who reads the newspaper to the villagers and keeps them up-to-date with the latest events. As the narrator tells us: "Our Rangamma is no village kid. . . she knows so many, many things, too, of plants that weep, of the monkeys that were the men we have become, of the worms" (p 25)

Rangamma also tells the rustics about a new country where women get childbirth leave of two months and so many other related facilities. Achakka quotes her

"There are women who worked like men, night and day, men and women . . . and when they felt tired, they went and spent their holiday in a palace - no money for the railway, no money for the palace . . . in that country Pariahs and Brahmins are the same" (p 26)

These lines written by the novelist vividly describe Gandhi's vision for modern women. Some of the women of the 21st century do avail some of these opportunities but new challenges await them with their working status.

Rangamma takes the reins of the freedom movement in her hands in the absence of Moorthi. Despite being a Brahmin, she minces no words taking a fight with Bhatta when the

latter instigates her in the name of caste. She retorts: “The Pariahs could always come as far as temple door, couldn’t they? And across the Mysore border, in Belur, they can even enter the temple once a year . . .” (p 23)

However, keeping in line with Gandhiji’s vision of modern women, Rangamma keeps herself as a deferent, soft-voiced, gentle-gestured woman.

Another significant female character is Ratna, the fifteen-year-old, who is shown to be a fearless young woman both in action and spirit. Bhatta describes her as one “who went about the streets alone like a boy but even wore her hair to the left like a concubine, and she still kept her bangles and her nose rings and earrings.” (27)

Ratna refuses to conform to the norms of widowhood set by society as hers was a child marriage. She actively contributes to the political movement. Disliked for her defiance, she eventually gets acceptance through her active role in the freedom movement. She displays great courage in challenging social norms and charting her own independent trajectory. Through Raja Rao’s Kanthapura, Gandhian thoughts of bravery, courage, defiance and independence are highlighted labelling them not as masculine traits. Men had no monopoly over them. He projected them as feminine virtues too. Thus it was not a question of gender for him. All he believed in was effective leadership, men or women didn’t matter.

The women in Kanthapura form “Sevika Sangh” and encourage other women to join it. They strengthen themselves physically and mentally through exercise, Yoga and meditation. The husbands resent in some families but they handle the situation. With such reservoirs, women are able to pursue their chosen ideals. The portrayal of these female characters by Raja Rao is very modern and reflects Gandhi’s vision.

In the interweaving of Indian mythology in the narrative, Gandhi’s vision is propounded. As religion is central to Indian culture, gender question is woven through this also. The religious discourses reiterated that Sita was Ram’s wife who made an enormous contribution to his life as an equal partner. Draupadi was an example of self-reliance and fierce independence, fully capable of defending her honour by herself. The tale of Rani Luxami Bai inspired the rural women in the Sevika Sangh.

However, while invoking tradition, one has to be very careful. It is interesting to note that women have suffered a double whammy when put on a high pedestal as mothers and wives. An aura of self-denial and sacrifice is planted in their identity. They have lived in perpetual subordination. Curiously, the industrial civilisation destroyed that aura while retaining the subjugation of women. They remain ‘inferior’ in modern times, but this inferiority was not sugar-coated by noble and pious words. The capitalist society valued success as the greatest virtue.

Gandhi was acutely aware of this double trick played by history and of the pitfalls of relying on tradition. He believed that it was good to swim in the waters of tradition, but to sink in them was suicidal. He was aware that religious texts were heavily pitched against women and therefore, tradition and religion could not be fully relied upon while removing the injustices done to women.

The trouble is, if tradition is pitched against women, modernity is even more so. It replaced the sacralisation done by tradition with a masculine gaze. Gandhi’s appeal to all women was to fashion a new identity for themselves as sisters as sisterhood was universal. This sorority of sisterhood can be perceived in Raja Rao’s Kanthapura too. Gandhi believes that men and women are equal but he believes in the dictum of men for the field and women for the hearth, too. The women in the novel are supposed to fulfil their household chores first and then come to the Sevika Sangh.

One may say that Gandhi treated women as conscious and active agents of change. He reiterated that the onus of social transformation rested on their shoulders. He created great openings for more public participation by women. Gandhi called spinning and weaving “a woman’s full lesson in the school of industry.” In Kanthapura, the spinning wheels are distributed free to all.

With the Civil Disobedience Movement, women’s participation in public activities increased manifold. They participated in Salt Satyagraha and also picketed Toddy shops selling illicit liquor. From spinning to picketing was certainly a great leap forward for women. Kanthapura depicts this in a vivid manner.

The large participation by women owed itself to Gandhian principles with its focus on non-violence, open demonstrations, transparency and public defiance. All these features of new politics made it quite easy and attractive for women to participate and attain leadership positions. Raja Rao presents Rangamma as a leader who is accepted by all. The novel shows that given a chance women prove to be better managers and it was unimaginable to get freedom without the contribution of half the people(females).

Mahatma Gandhi's concern for women's empowerment, as woven into the fabric of the literary gem 'Kanthapura,' connects the past to the present. Gandhi, the emblem of non-violent resistance, extends an inclusive invitation to women to join the epic saga of India's struggle for independence. The novel's portrayal of women defying conventional gender roles ushers a new beginning in society. The struggle for gender equality, intertwined with the unshakable principle of recognizing the innate dignity of all, remains an indomitable force in human rights activism today. In today's world, this reminder is more critical than ever, as women have to confront new challenges arising out of new situations. In the grand narrative of humanity, Gandhi's vision for women and 'Kanthapura' are not mere artefacts of the past; they are living legends. Their spirit continues to guide and inspire the modern quest for a world where gender is not a barrier but a bridge to empowerment, equality, and dignity.

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