



THE DOMINANT ROLE OF WOMEN AS DEPICTED BY RAJA RAO IN KANTHAPURA AND R.K.NARAYAN IN WAITING FOR THE MAHATMA: A NOTE

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt not only to show how the Great Soul Mahatma Gandhi saw the need for improving the status of women in Indian society by standing up as a great prophet of human equality, especially equal status of women in all spheres of life, but also to project both Raja Rao and R.K.Narayan as excellent literary artists in the art of characterization especially in terms of portrayal of women characters bringing home the point that woman is the companion of man gifted with equal mental capacities having the right to participate in the minute detail, of the activities of man and the same right of freedom and liberty as man has.

Keywords: *Great Soul, Status of Woman, Incarnation, Great Prophet, Human Equality, Freedom, Liberty, Womanhood, Literary Artist, Touch of Irony, Extreme Devotion.*

Truly speaking, Mahatma Gandhi was the Great Soul who saw the need for improving the status of women in Indian society; for it was he who considered women as the incarnation of Ahimsa and personification of self-sacrifice. He stood up as a great prophet of human equality, especially equal status of woman, in all spheres of life. Gandhiji evidently observes:

“Woman is the companion of man gifted with equal mental capacities. She has the right to participate in the minutest detail of the activities of man and she has the same right of freedom and liberty as he. She is entitled to a supreme place in her own sphere of activity as man is in his... But education is essential for enabling woman to assert these natural rights, to exercise wisely and to work for their expansion; again, the true knowledge of self is unattainable by the millions who lack such education”(PP 4-5).

During the movement for Indian Independence, it was under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi that the theory of women's rights acquired a new significance. He believed that if India had to be free, everyone had to be marshaled for the movement and “if India was to be success and recapture her past glory, Indian womanhood, which constituted half the population, would have to be educated and contribute its share to the shaping of the destinies of the nation” (Nannithamby 47). Hence, female education and freedom of women in the social, economic and political fields was emphasized by Indian leaders. Naturally, the literature of the different languages of India dealt with these movements for the progress of Indian womanhood. The major themes treated by the various literatures in India, written during and after the Independence movement, are the Indian concept of womanhood, women's education, marriage problem, woman's role and in the family and society, the position of widows woman's place in politics.

Raja Rao's **Kanthapura** is a Gandhian novel depicting the struggle for Independence in a small South Indian village **Kanthapura**. Though the Mahatma is not directly present in the novel, his spirit pervades the whole story. One can find his God-like presence, visible nowhere, but operating behind everybody's thoughts and deeds. Moorthy is the hero of the novel and is a faithful disciple of Gandhi. But H.M.Williams writes:

“Moorthy is more a walking slogan than a real character. Real lively characterization is only found in the villagers, especially in the women who join Moorthy in the great struggle” (P 47).

These simple village women do not understand clearly the meaning of the Nationalistic Movement. But when they are convinced that Gandhiji is right in the tradition of Hindu avatars, they work whole-heartedly for him. Their uneducated minds picture the Mahatma as large and blue pilgrims climb to the top. One of them, Rangamma, who is a person understanding the meaning of the New movement, becomes a leader and keeps the fires of Nationalism burning. She is elected one of the members of the Congress Committee in Kanthapura. Sanka, the advocate requests her to stay with him and to arrange his papers and look after the Congress correspondence. She is looked upon as a good and pious soul by the villagers and when Ramakrishnayya, who explains the Vedantic texts to the villagers, dies, it is Rangamma who narrates to them many stories from the Veda and Purana. The Kanthapurians wonder at her learning. She tells them that she has acquired this learning only through meditation. She meditates everyday as had been taught by Sadhu Narayan, her guru.



The village women request Rangamma to teach them to meditate and very willingly Rangamma does so. She relates to the women the story of the heroic deeds of Rani Lakshmi Bai who defied the British and the Rajput women. She does induce courage in them. They should be ready to fight against the British when time demands. She says:

“... We are but unworthy of all these people and of all the people who are in the Congress – Kamala Devi and Sarojini Naidu and Anni Besant all the heroic daughters who fight for the mother and we, we think of nothing but the blow pipe and the broom-stick and the milking of the many cows. We, too, should organize a volunteer corps, and when Moorthy returns, we shall go to meet him like they do in the city” (**Kanthapura**, 151).

The village women are at first terrified at the thought of defying the police, but it is Rangamma who backs them up. She wants them to stand without moving a hair if the police should fall on them. The women shiver at this but Rangamma quotes from the Gita and removes their fear. She says,

“We shall fight the police for Kanchamma’s sake and if the rapture of devotion is in you, the lathi will grow as soft as butter and as supple as a silken thread and you will hymn out the name of Mahatma” (P 154).

With Rangamma’s help, the women organize a volunteer corps and celebrate religious festivals with the sole intention of creating a spirit of service to the community and a sense of commitment to the achievement of India’s political freedom. To them, Gandhi is their Krishna, the demon-killer or Rama, the slayer of Ravana. They believe that the Mahatma will slay Ravana so that Sita may be freed. They fight the battle with all innocence and sincerity, daring boton-charge, bayonet charge and gun-fire, courting arrest and suffering imprisonment under the spell of those cries with magic effect so “Mahatma Gandhi ki jai “and” Vande Mataram”. When the women are beaten up by the police and arrested during their march to Boranna’s toddy grove, they feel proud. They feel they have done something big “and felt as though we had walked the holy fire at the Harvest Festival” describes the narrator. Even after Rangamma is arrested and jailed, the **Kanthapura** women carry on the battle against the British.

Among the women, Ratna, a fifteen years old widow plays a dominant part in the novel. Though she is not the heroine proper as she doesn’t contribute much to the development of the novel, she symbolizes the new widowhood advocated by Gandhiji. When all the villagers of Kanthapura raise a hue and cry against Moorthy the Gandhi man” and the Swami, the custodian of the Santhana Dharma, threatens to communicate the whole Brahmin community of the village, it is only Ratna, the young widowed daughter of Kantamma, who turns out to be a spirited helpmate of Moorthy. In a backward village like Kanthapura, a widow’s life is hell. The widows are not allowed to live like married persons. The village folks should never see them wearing good clothes and ornaments or doing their hair in the style. This has been depicted in the character of Ratna. She wears her hair to the left and is called a “concubine”. The villagers are offended at her wearing nose-rings and ear-rings. But Ratna boldly defies the village women and remarks furiously;

“... if these shifting old country hens thought that seeing a man for a day, and this when one is ten years of age, could be called a marriage they had better eat mud and drown themselves in the river. “ (PP 48-49).

Yet she is ridiculed by her own mother for being so repulsive. When the villager’s fields are seized by the English, women like Satamma want to go away to the town. When the other women force Satamma to stay back and follow them to the house of Ratna who is their chief now in Moorthy’s absence, Satamma immediately declines the advice saying,

“What, to that bangled widow?
She will lead us all to prostitution,
and I am not going to have my
daughters violated” (P 225).

At a wedding, Ratna says that she would sing an English song but the old ladies do not relish this idea.” Let our marriage at least be according to ancient ways, “they say scornfully. They are shocked at the forwardness of Ratna. Ratna leads the women courageously in the battle against the foreigners. At times when the women lose heart, it is Ratna who encourages them. Though despised by the men and women of Kanthapura at first, at last she gains their admiration. She is arrested and after her release, she follows Moorthy to Bombay. Thus, in Ratna, “we find the spirit of the social revolt against the age-old traditional prejudice against the widows” (Deva 50). In 1947, addressing a gathering of women, Gandhiji had said,



“Indian women are not ablas. They are famous for their heroic deeds of the past, which they did not achieve with the help of the sword, but of character. Even today they can help the nation in many ways. They can do some useful work by which they cannot help themselves but also the nation as a whole, thereby taking the country near her goal” (P 198).

Bharati of R.K.Narayan’s **Waiting for the Mahatma** is depicted as such a genuine, fearless and dedicated Satyagrahi. R.K.Narayan, the novelist, does not reveal anything of the childhood of Bharati. It is understood that she is an orphan and was found by Gandhiji who named her “Bharati” meaning “the daughter of India.” She had been brought up by the local Seva Sangh and had not known any other home. She tells Sriram,

“I do what ever I am asked to do by the Seva Sangh. Sometimes they ask me to go and teach people spinning and tell them about Mahatmaji’s ideas. I attend to Mahatmaji’s needs” (**Waiting for the Mahatma** 39).

Bharati is the only character who understands and knows all that Gandhi stands for. In short, “she is what Gandhi stands for” (Rao 38). Sriram himself says, “only Bharati knows exactly what Mahatmaji will say or think ... “ (114). Bharati can be called the novels heroine, who in the end gets the blessing of Gandhiji to marry Sriram, the “unheroic hero” (Naik 60). Sriram meets her for the first time on one of his market going days. She was collecting, as a Congress volunteer, a fund for famine-stricken people. When she asked for contribution for poor people, Sriram wanted to ask her about her age, caste, horoscope and her consent to marry him. He meets her again during Gandhiji’s first public meeting on the Sarayu Bank in Malgudi. She stands on the dais and is in a khaddar sari, white home – spun and Sriram notices how well it suited her. Sriram is attracted towards Gandhiji and the national movement gracefully near the Mahatma on the dais. “If that girl can be with Mahatmaji, I can also be there” (21), he tells himself. Bharati is seen again at the Congress Camp directing Sriram to meet the Mahatma and counseling him to speak only the truth. “.... you will have to speak the truth if you speak at all” (P 40).

Bharati loves Sriram as much as he does but she does not reveal it and is not sentimental in her love. Her utmost concern was for Gandhiji. She would give up her life for the sake of Gandhiji. Her love for Sriram does not affect her in any way. Throughout the novel, she remains a staunch patriot. She never allows the hero to go beyond the limit and she strives to change the carefree Sriram into a patriotic gentleman. She proves herself to be a very hard task-mistress when she teaches him spinning and feels joyful only when he “had spun enough yarn free from entanglement for a dhoti and a short shirt” (65). When Sriram flinches from going to jail, Bharati backs him up and says he has to do it for Gandhiji. After her release from prison, she goes to Delhi to accompany Bapu to Bihar where there is trouble. She requests Sriram also to leave Malgudi and to come to Delhi. She later relates to Sriram how she had accompanied Mahatmaji to Calcutta, Noakhali and Bihar – places affected by communal riots. Bharati’s asset is her fearlessness and she tells Sriram that she had forced the Mahatmaji to take her along with him to the affected places. They (Gandhiji and his followers) had passed through burning villages and anything might have happened to them anywhere. Bharati herself had encountered the danger of being assaulted, but had faced it bravely. She tells Sriram, “.... Mahatmaji had advised women as a last resort to take their lives with their own hands rather than surrender their honour. There was no sense of fear where Mahatmaji was. But ... if any unexpected thing happened, I was always prepared to end my life”. (P 167).

During their tour to all the affected places Bharati had taken pity on the orphaned children. “My special charge mere children whenever I saw them, she says. She had gathered all the refuge children and brought them to Delhi. Sriram sees how she tends to the refugees children with all love and affection. “She was always attending on children changing one’s dress, combing another’s hair, engaging another group in dance or play.... She gave the children a wash, fed them, put them to sleep on mats in various sheds, drew their blankets over them, said something to each one of them ... (P 164). Her love for the downtrodden children shows her to be a real Gandhian. She has imbibed from the Mahatma all his virtues.

M.K.Naik asserts that it is possible to be a fleeting touch of irony in Narayan’s portrait of Bharati. She is a far more devoted and disciplined follower of Gandhi than Sriram. Though, as Srinivas Iyengar remarks, “She is a masterful young heroine, a Malgudi Portia rich only in her natural endowments.... who makes a patriot and man of Sriram.” (Iyengar 373), She is a blind follower of Gandhiji. She is a follower whose extreme devotion to the master makes her a little more than a puppet, all of whose actions are manipulated by the strings in the master’s hand.” She decidedly tells Sriram that they cannot do anything other than what Babuji asks them to do. She is not prepared to take any step without the prior permission of Gandhiji even in her private life. “Babuji alone can decide” (Narayan 165) about their marriage she feels. She will marry Sriram only if Gandhiji permits.



Conclusion

To conclude, Bharati is fully and highly dedicated to Gandhian norms of life. Like Gandhiji when she goes to jail, she takes along with her the spinning wheel, a copy of the Ramayana and Gita and she advises Sriram to do the same. H.M. Williams calls her a “politically –minded priggish girl” (58) and declares that though she is an intelligent and dedicated Satyagrahi, she is quite blind to any ‘truths’ other than those of the political cause she champions.

Thus, in both the novels, **Kanthapura** and **Waiting for the Mahatma**, the women characters have been given dominant roles. Ratna, the widow who defies the whole society and who later blooms out as a patriot gains our admiration. She is able to lead a whole society of women in the battle against the foreigners and continues assisting Moorthy in his political work. Bharati, though depicted as a beautiful, level-headed, intelligent, genuine Gandhian, is not as active character as Ratna. With her purity of character, she fails to transform Sriram in to a true patriot. Both Raja Rao and R.K.Narayan may be said to be excellent literary artists in the art of characterization especially in terms of portrayal of women characters.

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