

## A Postcolonial Critique of Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, *Comrade Kirillov* and Short Stories "Narsiga" and "The Cow of the Barricades".

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### ABSTRACT

The critique focuses on the colonial and postcolonial strands in the fiction of Raja Rao with a particular focus on the short stories "Narsiga", "The Cow of the Barricades" and novels *Kanthapura* and *Comrade Kirillov*. The protagonists of these novels are the main focus of the study but that doesn't mean that the other characters are completely set aside. They are also kept in the loop to understand these works. These works of Raja Rao are viewed from the perspective of Mahatma Gandhi as a decolonizing agent for the colonized people of India. His main tools of Truth and Non-violence will be the focus to explain his impact on the people. All these works pertain to the pre-independence period when the struggle for independence was in progress. In this paper an attempt is made to identify and analyze the different factors which were obstructing the decolonizing process and how Gandhi through his creative and revolutionary approach could forge unity among the people to carry forward the freedom movement to its logical conclusion.

### Introduction:

India's phase of colonization started from 1800 and got entrenched from 1858 onwards. It continued till 1947. But there were undercurrents and overt display of anger and protest against the colonial regime of the English. Gandhi with his indigenous tools of Satya, Ahimsa, Satyagraha and Non-cooperation spearheaded the independence movement for decolonizing India. Before actively becoming a part of the freedom struggle in India, he fought incessant battle against the Natal Government of South Africa for restoring the dignity and honor of Indians by reclaiming voting rights for them and by keeping intact the honor of their married life. South Africa was the nursery for initiating freedom struggle in India. In the Great Indian way Rao as the mouthpiece of Gandhi says, "In satyagraha. I repeat, death is no defeat, Truth ever the victor. And Truth is love..."

Raja Rao, along with Mulk Raj Anand and R. K. Narayan started his literary journey in the 1930s when the freedom struggle under the patronage of Gandhi was at its peak. These creative beings have reflected Gandhian influence from their works. Anand through his *Untouchable* and Narayan through his *Waiting for the Mahatma* have projected Gandhi as a symbol of hope for all especially for the untouchables because they were the most neglected and discriminated section of society. Gandhi wanted to uplift their lot to make them part of the mainstream in the freedom struggle. Of this formidable trio, Raja Rao had a reverential attitude towards Gandhi throughout his creative span. It is reflected from his works, especially the Gandhian biography *The Great Indian Way* (1998) which he penned as a tribute to Gandhi. In this paper Raja Rao's short stories "Narsiga" and "The Cow of the Barricades" along with two novels – *Kanthapura* and *Comrade Kirillov* – are taken up for discussion and are analyzed from the Gandhian ideological framework.

### Discussion and Analysis:

Raja Rao's creative odyssey started with short stories "Narsiga" and "The Cow of the Barricades". These stories were influenced by the persona and ideology of Gandhi. Narsiga, a small boy who lives in the Ashram of the Master (a representative of Gandhi) overhears him about Gandhi's imprisonment and about Mother India being beaten by the red-man. This innocent boy combines fact and fancy to have an image of Gandhi as a saint. His hatred towards the white rulers is reflected from his action of throwing stones at the train carrying white men. When he learns about Gandhi being released from the prison, his joy knows no bounds and he asks his uncle to stop the work and rejoice the occasion. He says, "Uncle, He, Uncle Sampanna! The Mahatma is released. Leave the fields and rejoice..." "The Cow of the Barricades" also relates to Gandhi's approach of Ahimsa and Satyagraha. But the workers gathered to face the Redman's army try to subvert the Gandhian principle of non-violence. Against the wishes of the master they erect barricade with stones, bamboos, and bedsteads and carry picks, sticks scythe and swords to face the Redman's army. Disappointed and dejected, master gives up his leadership and goes for meditation. When the situation becomes very tense with workers on one side of the barricade and the Redman's force on the other, Gauri as a symbol of Mother India comes at that crucial moment to save the situation. When she jumps on top of the barricade the military is confused if it is a flag of truce. "But when they saw the cow and its looks and the tear, clear as a drop of Ganges, they shouted out, 'Victory to the Mahatma! Mahatma Gandhjiki jai!' and joined up with the crowd. But their chief, the red man, saw this and fired a shot. It went through Gauri's head, and she fell a vehicle of God among lowly men." Gauri being a symbol of peace and non-violence unites the people on both sides of the barricade and acquires the status of goddess. The workers also start realizing the worth of mahatma by confessing that he is right about the fullness of love in all creatures.

*Kanthapura* was Rao's first novel which unlike *Untouchable* and *Waiting for the Mahatma* – wherein Gandhi makes personal appearance – projects Gandhi as an invisible spirit which transforms a tranquil and remote South Indian village Kanthapura into a fully alive and charged up place involved in freedom struggle. It happens through Moorthy – the protagonist of the novel – who feels inspired by Gandhian persona when he sees him in a vision addressing a public meeting. Moorthy says, "There is in it something of the silent communion of the ancient books." After that vision, he gives up his western clothes and college studies to embrace Gandhism completely and gradually earn the status of a local Gandhi in the village Kanthapura. Srinivaslyengar says, "Gandhi is the invisible God, Moorthy is the visible Avatar." Kanthapura becomes metaphor for freedom struggle and symbolizes lacks of Indian villages which observed the Gandhian call for Satyagraha and Non-cooperation. This novel in spite of being colonial so far as time period is concerned is anti-colonial in its spirit. Moorthy being the



representative of Mahatma is able to muster up people for successful execution of commands of Mahatma and the Congress Committee. He forms a Village Panchayat Committee and conducts a proper election. He gets elected as its President and inducts other responsible persons like Patel Range Gowda, Rangemma, pariah Rachanna as its members. 'Charkha' an important Gandhian symbol of Swaraj and economic independence is made use of by Moorthy when he distributes charkhas to all the villagers. The decolonizing effort of Moorthy is sabotaged by orthodox elements like Bhatta, Swami and Venkamma who act like stooges of the ruler. Bhatta gets Moorthy excommunicated for his mixing with the pariahs. As a result of his excommunication, Moorthy's mother exposes herself to dangers of the night and dies. Even the loss of mother fails to deter Moorthy from the Gandhian path. Moorthy in his interactions with the villagers sensitizes them in the Gandhian ways of truthfulness and non-violence. When his visit to Skeffington Coffee Estate workers results in a violent exchange with Badekhan, the policeman of Redman's government, he is very remorseful and goes to observe fast for three days as an act of atonement. The narrator Achakka speaking about Badekhan says, "What is the policeman before a Gandhi's man? Tell me, does a bear stand before a lion or a jackal before an elephant." Moorthy's popularity can be gauged from the response of people when he gets arrested. They pray to local deity Kenchamma for his release. Rangemma camps at her cousin Sankar's place at Karwar for getting Moorthy released. Bhatta and Venkamma being the pro-colonial figures try to scuttle the impact of Moorthy in the village but they fail to do so as the whole village under the leadership of Moorthy joins the Don't-Touch-The-Government Campaign. Moorthy's leadership qualities are reflected from the instructions imparted by him before starting the campaign.

When Toddy booths are picketed and the Skeffington Estate coolies are persuaded to join them in the campaign Redman's police resorts to merciless lathi-charge and violence. Moorthy, Rangemma and others were arrested. During their absence Ratna leads the charge joined by city boys. When the villagers refuse to pay land taxes their crops and property is attached. In spite of brutal repression and reckless charge by the police, villagers face them bravely and are able to win the confidence of harvesting labour and the coolies of the Coffee Estate. In the end the whole village suffers destruction and devastation but the spirit of the Gandhian Satyagrahis remains intact and they hope Gandhi will go to Redman's country to get them freedom. Thus Moorthy in his efforts remains successful in instilling the Gandhian values of Truth and Non-violence in the people of the village who remain undeterred till the end.

*Comrade Kirillov* can be seen as Raja Rao's effort to dabble in communism through the protagonist Padmanabha Iyer. Unlike the previous novel where the protagonist is completely influenced by Gandhi, in this novel *Comrade Kirillov* has love-hate relationship with Gandhi. Padmanabha Iyer, an educated Brahmin belonging to a rich family of landed aristocracy joins Theosophical Society of India founded by Annie Besant. The primary aim of the society is to ameliorate the lot of the poor, especially the peasants. The other important purpose is to free India from the devilry of the British. When Jiddu Krishnamurthy who was the messiah of the society leaves, Padmanabha also leaves the society and feels drawn towards Socialist and Marxist literature. He lands at Liverpool with a heavy load of books and becomes active member of the Labour party. The British Museum squeezes all his energy and he leads a life of frugality and starvation. He becomes the perfect example of a prisoner of an ideology: "Kirillov will die – but India shall be free. Kirillov will kill himself – but the new communist state will rise." Like other expatriate communists he dreamed of Utopian conditions in India. He had no faith in Gandhian ideal of Non-violence.

His marriage with Irene, a Czech working nurse having communist views brings joy in his life and they are blessed with a son named Kamal. When Stalin gives the command to all the communists



to support England in World War II against Germany, He writes a brilliant thesis on the necessity of supporting the British in the war. He wins accolades from the British Council and finds publishers for his other manuscripts "India and our Struggle" and "Quit India Movement". That's how he establishes himself as a communist. Unfortunately his wife dies in childbirth and the girl child born is also dead. Kirillov in the end is seen going to Moscow after sending his son Kamal with a glass casket containing the ashes of his mother and sister in the company of 'R' the narrator.

Gandhi who is the guiding spirit in Kanthapura, may not be the direct inspiration for Kirillov and may even be the focus of criticism by him, still continues to influence him. Though he calls Gandhi "an old puritan humbug", "that fine moral hypocrite", he feels thrilled when he speaks of him. This ambivalent attitude is further revealed when Irene speaks to him: "At heart Gandhi is your God. You tremble when you speak of him sometimes. I once saw a tear, one long tear; it was when you spoke of Gandhi to S." He cannot tolerate any European speaking anything against Gandhi. His emotional connect with India and Gandhi remains alive in spite of his embracing communism in a conscious manner. He also writes a book titled Mahatma Gandhi – A Marxist Interpretation wherein he establishes Gandhi as a lover of humanity, evangelist and a messiah of the downtrodden. But still he says Gandhi cannot fulfill the purpose as a communist.

Analyzing the journey of Comrade Kirillov from India to California, then to London, followed in the end to Moscow and Peking we find in him a hungry soul in search of reality. In spite of his conscious choice of communism, he cannot alienate himself from the root of India and the towering persona of Gandhi. Being an expatriate like Raja Rao he never forgets his roots. Shyamala A. Narayan says: "... P becomes a communist, though in his heart he still believes in Mahatma Gandhi and his principles."

### Conclusion:

The present paper tries to establish how Gandhian spirit and his tools of Truth and Ahimsa awakened the spirit of freedom in the people of India and they came forward to do away with shackles of slavery to make the country a free nation. Gandhi is used as a great decolonizing force in the short stories and in the novel *Kanthapura* to induce the spirit of freedom in the people. Even an ambivalent and eccentric *Comrade Kirillov* continues to admire Gandhi in spite of embracing communist ideology.

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