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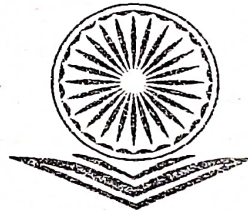
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## 26. Role of Women in Indian Struggle for Freedom with Special Reference to Raja Rao's Novel *Kanthapura*

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Woman has been playing a vital role in each and every sector of life from the beginning of human existence. Her invention of agriculture helped humanity to settle down in colonies. The history of every country in the world proves that she has shouldered critical responsibility in the development of the countries. India is the largest country in the South Asia region and here too women have played a significant role in the development of the country. Women have special historical and cultural significance in each country. Being a prominent and rich country with a grand cultural heritage, India has been attracting the attention of many intruders from the globe. British colonialists were one of them who ruled India for near about one and a half century.

The establishment of the British Raj had a profound impact on all the spheres of Indian life. After their arrival, new ideology and new knowledge were introduced in the traditionally bound Indian society. The awareness that no country can develop by keeping half of its population (women folk) in darkness had just started to take root. Because if one studies the status, role and influence of women throughout the history of a country one would find that society has conferred security upon them but the bondages of morality and chastity always controlled them and kept them away from social, political and financial issues. A woman's status was secondary due to a lot of orthodox traditions, religious practices and rituals. The commencement of British education started to broaden the views of educated generations who started to put a question mark on the unjust traditions and rituals regarding women and their unequal status in society. They began to think that their secondary status was responsible for the deterioration of the country. They came to know the fact that a woman's progress could lead the country towards development. The progressive ideology of the nineteenth century created positive effects on their life and the note of self-actualization started to germinate for this class.

History witnessed that woman has an instinctive capacity to bring out a change in any situation; she has proved her capacity in adverse conditions as well. Indian woman has become successful in winning significant sectors on the basis of inbuilt virtues in like patience,

endurance, bravery, chivalry and calmness. Indian National Congress was established as well in Mumbai to fight against Britishers. The movement was lead by Gokhale, Lokmanya Tilak, Annie Besant etc, time to time. In 1920 father of Nation, Mahatma Gandhi has entered into Indian politics and a new era began. The movement has refreshed once again from 1920 up to the independence. He led the movement live Civil Disobedience, Quit India movement, Dandi March, Non-cooperation etc. Mumbai has become center for the activities. Many enthusiastic women equally with men participated in these movements under the able leadership of Gandhi. He spread the movement throughout the nation and from urban to rural areas which in the real sense lead the movement towards the freedom of the country from the foreign clutches.

The paper aims at studying the role of women in the Indian freedom struggle with special reference to India's celebrated novelist Raja Rao's famous novel 'Kanthapura.'

Indian Writing in English as a branch of British Literature progressed from being undeveloped to a prestigious position within a very short period. Now days it is considered as a respectable area of serious studies. Novel is a popular genre of the nineteenth century in English Literature, and it has got the same popularity and is a widely read genre in the newly introduced offshoot i.e. Anglo Indian literature later known as Indian Writing in English. Raja Rao is one of the 'big trio', the others being R.K. Narayan and Mulkraj Anand. He is the recipient of prestigious awards like Neustadt International Prize, Padma Bhushan, Padma Vibhushan and Sahitya Academy Award. Raja Rao is a significant novelist of India who has received his higher education in France and he could create qualitative writing throughout his life. He achieved an enviable position due to his most celebrated novel *Kanthapura*, which he published in 1937. It has been described as the 'most satisfying of modern Indian novels'. It is the story of how Gandhi's struggle for independence against the British reached a typical village, *Kanthapura*- in southern India. The dramatic tale told by the old woman Achakka evokes the spirit of India's traditional folk-epics, the Puranas. The novel is a landmark in the history of Indian fiction in English, as it points to a definite stage in the formation of art later called Indian style of writing in English.

The novel depicts the story of the people of *Kanthapura* and their active participation in the struggle for independence under the leadership of the protagonist. Women's role has become an important aspect. It was equally important for the national movement led by Gandhi throughout the country. Thousands of women breaking out of the four walls, unfamiliar with the social environment jumped out into the epicenter of the movement. In the cities women



conducted big processions and soon became more determined than men. Quite often, they became the congress conveners in their areas and districts.

By taking inspiration from Mahatma Gandhi, Moorthy, the protagonist of the novel wages his war on three fronts for his village. The first is against the Britishers whose tyrannical rule was exploitative for Indians. Secondly against the unjust caste system that had denied basic human rights for low caste people and forced them to lead a life of humiliation at every step. Third is against gender discrimination which denied equal status for the weaker sex and the orthodox patriarchal system that degraded her in comparison to the male members of her family and society. The protagonist is successful in his battle as he successfully raises his voice against the Britishers who take serious notice of it and appoint Bade Khan and an equal system to keep an eye on the movement led by him and he is supported rigorously by the villagers. He is faithful in bridging the gap between low caste and high class people as he himself mingles with the so called low caste people irrespective of his belonging to an allegedly high caste origin and gets their active participation in the movement and incurs the wrath of the local orthodox people. His devotion to his mission reaches the extreme level when he doesn't quit even after his mother's death due to his involvement in violating caste rules.

He is victorious in bringing women of his village on the fore front of the freedom struggle. Following the footsteps of Gandhiji, he convinces women that it is necessary to spin their own clothes for the success of the movement and thus makes them to enter the movement. He is aware of the fact that only women can truly and thoroughly support him in his noble cause. When he is sent to jail, the women keep the movement alive despite great difficulties and obstacles. They are not supported by their society and even male spouses. The women's contribution in his absence and presence is valuable because only Range Gowda, Jayaramachar and a few men strongly support Moorthy in his mission, and otherwise only women are the backbone of the movement.

The following are the women contributors for the freedom struggle:

### **1. Rangamma**

She plays a vital role in the freedom struggle movement as compared to the rest of the women. She is a soft-voiced and gentle-gestured rich Brahmin widow who neither wastes her money nor is a miser. She likes to help the poor and use her money for the welfare of the village. Her generosity leads her to offer free dinner for the villagers during the month long reading of 'Sankara-Vijaya' (local festival). Her progressive outlook, her interest in science, Darwin's theory of evolution, her knowledge about aeroplanes and wireless communication in spite of her rural

background makes her different as the narrator describes her as "Rangamma was no village kid like us" (22). Moreover her humanistic attitude has made her unique like Moorthy and that she thinks, "there were neither rich nor poor" (21).

Because of her attitude she gets the support of all villagers and particularly the 'Pariahs'. She is one of the few educated women in Kanthapura who keeps herself busy with daily reading of the newspaper and keeps herself updated about the current affairs going on in the country, particularly affairs regarding the freedom struggle movement. A blog writer Vikrant Sehgal puts it in his blog, "one of the most interesting factors that played a role in the sea change in the lives of women is the letter or the alphabet in the form of newspaper" (litteritt.blogspot.com)

She creates a group to take their active participation when there is a deadlock and increases their interest in the movement. She helps Moorthy a lot in organizing the congress work in the village. It is aptly observed in an internet article:

Moorthy like Gandhi knows the importance of women in struggle movement and hence makes Rangamma a rich and educated widow, a member of congress committee for the congress is weak and lowly." (<http://englishsummary.com>)

Rangamma proves that the selection of Moorthy is perfect, as she makes her rich home the centre of congress activities. She supports Moorthy whole heartedly without any expectations and even meets Shankar (an advocate) at Karwar when Moorthy's trial is going on. She keeps alive the movement in the absence of Moorthy in the village and becomes confident about her ability to lead the movement though she is a woman (being a part of a patriarchal village). There are a majority of women in her group in whom she instils a sense of patriotism by telling about Rani Laxmibai, Lokmanya Tilak, Chittaranjan Das, Sarojini Naidu and Annie Besant and their contribution to the freedom movement. The major work done by Rangamma is to face the Government repression. She organizes the women's volunteer corps (Sevika Sangh) and makes them participate in a drill irrespective of the opposition of their husbands. In the preparation of the coming struggles, she strictly compels women to join her corps after fulfilling their household duties. She leads the women of the corps and motivates them to remain non-violent no matter whatever the consequences. She even supports Ratna to come up and lead the women.

Under Rangamma's leadership the women of Kanthapura participate in the struggle for independence. On several occasions they rebelliously join the Dandi March, picketing of Toddy and Opium Booths and brothels, no-tax campaign, welcoming and supporting the rebellious Moorthy, regular publication of political pamphlets and sponsors etc. The women faced harsh opposition; they were roughly beaten, tortured and even raped by the police. Rangamma taught



them Gandhi's way of Ahimsa to remain silent and protest. Overall, Rangamma's role remains crucial in the novel.

## 2. Ratna

Ratna is a child-widow and plays a vital role in the struggle for independence. Daughter of Mamamma unfortunate Ratna is only fifteen years old and had been married off when she was only ten years old, and had seen her husband only for a day. She is a rebellious kind of girl who doesn't follow any rules laid by the orthodox patriarchal system for a widow. She was taunted and tortured by the orthodox Brahmin males like Bhatta and Venkamma. Irrespective of all the comments she used to wear colourful bangles and ornaments in her nose and ear -which was not supposed to be worn by a widow. She likes to listen English songs and even sings in the gathering of women at the marriage of Venkamma's daughter. Being a free thinker she doesn't involve herself in traditional villagers' routine activities.

Her participation in the Congress movement is her obsession. She passionately joins it as she loves Moorthy and remains active in each and every step taken by him. Being his ardent supporter in the movement she ignores traditionalist villagers. Moorthy too has a natural attraction for her but his passion for the independence movement led him to curb his desire and at a certain moment both of them are involved purely as volunteers in the movement like brother and sister, "and the idea that he could ever think of her other than as a sister shocked him and sent a shiver down his spine" (20). She takes care of Moorthy when he fasts for three days, Dhaval Diyora observes in his blog:

It is to be noted that in the last phase of the peaceful resistance, it is Ratna, a woman, who takes over from Moorthy and leads the Sathyagrahis.

(dhavalddiyora.blogspot.com)

Ratna persists as an unconditional supporter of both Moorthy and Rangamma to contribute wholeheartedly in each and every turn of the freedom struggle movement of Kanthapura. After the death of Rangamma she takes full charge of the women's front and finally goes to Bombay but remains active by sending letters. Her enthusiasm is well explained in the book:

Ratna stands for educated, progressive womanhood of India whom Gandhi had enthused with his own ideals and who came out of their homes in their thousands to fight shoulder to shoulder with their men folk for the freedom of their motherland. She is the female counterpart to Moorthy.

(Raja Rao's Kanthapura: www.tmv.edu.in: 148)



She is a noteworthy woman character being a selfless and active Congress woman who has devoted herself to the movement when orthodox society has categorized her in the list of unfortunate widows 'good for nothing'.

### 3. Achakka

An open minded Brahmin woman, she plays a significant role in the novel as volunteer for independence movement and as a narrator of the novel. Raja Rao considers woman as Shakti so the women characters including the mother figure of the novel goddess Kenchamma and the myth regarding her is the backbone of the villagers.

The entire novel opens up from a woman's point of view rather than from a man's and thus the novelist challenges the orthodox views. As she tells us the story of the contribution of Kanthapura people in the freedom struggle movement she reveals minute details from her point of view and her role in that movement.

There are also women who have contributed to the success of the movement, like Rachi, a low caste woman, Rachanna's wife who helps Moorthy to initiate the movement among the Pariah's quarters of their village. Her mingling whole heartedly with the surrounding women for the movement leads her to open the doors of the temple when the village women are locked inside by the police. Towards the end when the protest reaches its height, it is Rachi who ultimately burns the village Kanthapura by saying, "In the name of the goddess, I'll burn this village". Puttamma is a villager and Gandihan woman who tolerates the atrocities by the police in that she was tried to be raped behind the bushes at the time of the protest. Satamma is a high caste woman who is a confused initially about joining Rangamma but later she joins them. Najamma is a woman who joins Rangamma's volunteer group. In this way, knowingly and unknowingly a majority of Kanthapura women contribute in their own way to make the movement powerful.

The most important aspect of the national movement led by Gandhi was the contribution of women. Thousands of women breaking out of the four walls, unfamiliar with the social environment jumped into the middle of the movement. They had a large share in picketing shops, selling foreign clothes, liquor shops. In cities women took out big processions and soon became more determined than the men. Quite often, they become the congress conveners in their areas and districts. This is the greatness of the great leader Mahatma Gandhi and, by taking inspiration from him little Gandhi's were born throughout the country. The best example is Raja Rao's novel Kanthapura where Moorthy the hero is supported by local women rather than men. His Swadeshi movement, spinning the wool is totally successful just because of women's active

participation and there are all the protests which are actively participated and bravely faced by Kanthapura women. One of the movements, no-tax campaign turns violent; there are merciless lathi-charges and even shootings. The villagers, especially women put up a brave resistance ultimately they are compelled to flee and take shelter in a remote village, Kashipur by burning Kanthapura so it cannot be at their disposal. They prove they are on right path because they are warmly welcomed and honored in Kashipur by being addressed as 'Pilgrims of Mahatma'. Towards the end of the novel after their men, children and Moorthy were arrested the women have to take such extreme step to message to British government that opposition against them is at its height. Their condition is aptly observed in an internet article, "they are molested, tortured, raped and even beaten but they do not lose hope and bearing all the violence they resist the foreign rule"(englishsummary.com). They are left out. They have been defeated but in their very defeat lay their victory. Their brave resistance gave a jolt to the Government and such jolts throughout the country are responsible to shaken and overthrown British Government. The heroic struggle of the women of Kanthapura is a milestone and representative of the spirit of crores of Indians marching ceaselessly towards independence. It is observed that Raja Rao has crossed threshold by bringing women in the limelight and managing all the affairs of their village single handed (apart from Moorthy). Unlike his contemporaries he beats orthodoxy and explains the importance of the power of women- how they can easily surpass the so called feminine boundaries and prove their metal. Proving true to Simon d Beauvoir the wrong and imaginative conception of the patriarchal society that 'women are not born but made'.

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