

Portrayal of Pariahs in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*

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Abstract. Untouchability is a black mark on our society. It is a curse for hindu society. It is a curse not from God; it is a curse from humans themselves. Untouchables are called by many names e.g. dalits, Pariahs, depressed class, outcast, downtrodden class, harijans etc. Untouchability is such a heinous infliction by superior cast people upon the people of inferior cast that the sufferer is degraded to the lowest level that is even below to animal level. These people are not considered even as human beings and, thus, this dehumanizing is a black mark and shame on our brahminic social system. This heinous crime upon dalits has been done in our hindu society since ancient time and, unfortunately, it persists even today in our so called civilized society. This paper will attempt to analyse the predicament of depressed class people, the Pariahs – their dehumanised status- reflected in Raja Rao's novel, *Kanthapura*.

Keywords : Untouchability; pariahs; dalits; outcast; Gandhian movement; caste discrimination.

According to *Encyclopaedia Britannica* the word pariah originally derived from Tamil paraiyar, “drummer”- a Tamil caste group of labourers and village servants of low status. Pariahs are members of a low- caste group of Hindu Indian society who were formerly known as “Untouchables” but now called “Dalits”.

In *Manusmriti*, there are four castes in Hindu caste system. These castes are significantly made by the principle of graded social hierarchy. At the highest are *Brahmins*, below them are *kshatriyas*, further below are *Vaishyas*, and below *Vaishyas* are the low caste- *Shudras*. But there are also people who do not find any place in this social hierarchy of Hindu caste system; they are outcaste people; they are lower to even the low caste. These people are Untouchables and called by many names i.e. dalits, depressed class, outcast, downtrodden, *harijans* and pariahs.

The setting of Raja Rao's novel *Kanthapura* is a small typical village of same name in Tamilnadu, in south India where Pariahs are the people who belong to the lowest of the low caste and are untouchable. The novel is a blend of social realism, social reform and Gandhi's political

movement. It is a story of India's freedom struggle movement under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. Apart from its main theme of freedom struggle movement, the novel also reflects the social structure of the village Kanthapura. Like other villages of India, Kanthapura is divided in brahminic hierarchical social order- Brahmin at the top, then weaver, then potter, then *shudra* and then *Pariahs* at the bottom.

Although Moorthy, the protagonist of the novel, is not a pariah; by caste, he is a brahmin yet he is very sensible and very concerned about the pain and predicament of pariah. He is against untouchability and emphasizes to eradicate it. There are a significant number of dalit characters, the pariahs in the novel and their predicament and pain represent the predicament and pain of whole dalit community in India. The novel reaffirms Gandhian ideal of equality, fraternity, social unity and dignity of all sections. In the novel, Raja Rao who himself belongs to Brahmin caste, seems to express his humanism through his Brahmin protagonist, Moorthy.

Raja Rao is one of the three (the other two in this trio are-Mulk Raj Anand and R. K. Narayan) main Indian novelists who started novel writing and published his first novel in 1930s when Indian English novel began to gain its own identity. Also it was the time when Gandhi's influence was surmounted on Indian psyche. Every Indian starting from the common laymen to the learned intellectuals was deeply influenced by Gandhian ideology of equality, fraternity, social justice, equality and dignity of all sections and the trio also was not an exception. Gandhi's reformatory philosophy is very clearly visible in Anand's and Raja Rao's writings. Anand is a reformer; he, in his novels, gives a hard blow to social injustice by making his protagonists from downtrodden section of the society while Raja Rao is a philosopher; he believes in spirituality and metaphysical aspect of life, therefore, he has faith in Indian spirituality. For Raja Rao, Indian philosophy of spiritual life is superior to materialistic life of the west. His philosophy is influenced mostly by Gandhi's ideology, and Gandhiji, in his turn, is influenced by *the Ramayana*, *the Gita* and other works of ancient Indian thinkers. He was also influenced by western philosophers such as Ruskin, Karl Marx and Leo Tolstoy. P C Bhattacharya writes about Raja :

Next to Shankara and Ramanuja, Raja Rao was influenced the most by Gandhi.

The Gandhian movement was not merely a political one; it was a real social revolution, albeit without the concomitant hatred and violence. Gandhi, in his turn, was influenced by such western thinkers as Ruskin, Marx and Tolstoy. His ideas about trusteeship, social justice and non-cooperation with the evil can be traced to these sources. However, the basic principles of Gandhi were derived from the thoughts of the ancient Indian thinkers, especially as contained in *the Gita* and *the Ramayana*.

(Bhattacharya, 193)

Although the main aspect of the Gandhian movement is political: non- violence and non-cooperation to secure India's freedom from the clutches of British rulers yet, apart from political aspect, there are also some other aspects, mainly the social aspect of the movement. Raja Rao is very much influenced by Gandhi. And the social aspects of Gandhian movement- uplifting the lowest caste people, the untouchables and bringing them to the mainstream of the society- play a great role in shaping Rao's philosophical outlook. In the novel *Kanthapura* he expresses the incomparable manner of Gandhi that brought about an awakening in the masses. He very successfully attempts the Gandhian endeavour for social unity and dignity of all sections. His protagonist Moorthy is committed to uplift the pariahs, the deprived and depressed people of Kanthapura village.

Moorthy represents Gandhian men in the novel. He reaches to the homes of pariahs and starts teaching them alphabets for removing their illiteracy. He makes them aware that they are also men like other men of upper caste. And also he makes them believe that they are as important as the upper caste people in the freedom struggle movement and without their participation Gandhi could not achieve his goal – securing Swaraj.

The issue of caste discrimination is highlighted in the novel. The pariahs and the caste Brahmins live in different mohallas. The Brahmins maintain safe distance from pariahs and there is no social interaction between the pariahs and the Brahmins. The Brahmins have a pride in their pure and high blood; they always hold the Pariahs contempt

and express their indignation against them. And pariahs, timidly, submit to their fate and accept what comes to them quietly without any protest.

Rao very aptly depicts, the contemptible life of untouchables, the pariahs in Kanthapura. These people are treated by upper caste Brahmins as if they are wretched. The pariah caste itself is symbolised as an abuse. At the time when Moorthy with his followers goes to Skeffington Coffee Estate to teach the estate labourers, Bade Khan and police try to stop him. They have a scuffle with police and there is hurling of abusive language from both side :

‘Son of concubine’... ‘Son of a widow’... ‘I’ll sleep with your wife’ ...
‘you donkey’s husband’ ... ‘you pig’
... ‘you ass’ ... ‘you devil’ ... ‘Oh, you bearded monkey ... ‘Oh, you Pariah – Log’. (*Kanthapura*, 69)

Among the above abusive phrases and words the phrase: ‘*Oh, You Pariah-Log*’ is a casteist remark that has a derogatory connotation and spoken as an abuse.

Pariahs, fall at the lowest place in the caste hierarchy and the upper caste Brahmins keep the Pariahs away from themselves. They hate Pariahs and consider pariah’s touch polluting their religion. So, Moorthy’s mixing with pariahs is condemned by other Brahmins. Bhatta tries to turn other brahimins against Moorthy because he mixes with Pariahs. The Swami threatens that he will excommunicate Moorthy from the village. Even Moorthy’s own mother, Narsamma is shocked to learn about his mixing with pariahs and she says, “Oh, Moorthy, if your departed father were alive what he would think of you, my son, my son, my son?” (44)

And she tries to force him to go to Swami and do penance. When Moorthy goes close to her to fall at her feet, She doesn’t allow Moorthy come close to her saying, I wish I had closed my eyes with your father instead of living to see you polluted. Polluted! Go away, you Pariah!” (46). Brahmins don’t tolerate mixing of a Brahmin with Pariahs at any cost and, so, on account of Moorthy’s fault of mixing with Pariahs, the Swami excommunicates him from the village community.

Venkamma warns Narsamma if her son, Moorthy doesn’t stop his Pariah affair neither she herself nor any other Brahmin in the village

will give their girl to marry Moorthy and also he will not be allowed to be called himself a Brahmin. She warns, "We shall stand none of this Pariah affair. If he wants to go and sleep with those Pariah Whores, he can do so by all means. But let him not call himself a Brahmin". (42)

Pariah women are dehumanised at the worst; they are thrice subjugated- as women, as dalit women and as dalit women who perform impure task. They are portrayed by Raja Rao in the novel to show the condition of dalit women in hindu society. They are portrayed as an object of lust, as Karan Singh writes in his book *Dalitism and Feminism*, "Dalit women remain objects of lust and nowhere do they become capable of attaining an independent status" (Singh, 218). It becomes pertinent here to look at the condition of Pariah women in the novel. The Pariah women are treated as lowly as whores by Brahmins. Venkamma calls them "Pariah whores" (*Kanthapura*, 42) and saying this she is quite unhesitant. Venkamma and all other Brahmin women knows that they (Pariah women) are so suppressed in the Brahminic social hierarchy that they cannot protest for being called by any abuse.

Social discrimination is very clearly seen even in the sexual exploitation of women by the New Sahib in Skeffington Coffee Estate. The New Sahib of the Coffee Estate sends his maistri every day to bring the girl of his choice for sexual relations. If the girl happens to be of upper cast and she refuses to go then the maistri does not drag the girl up; he threatens her father / her grandfather/her husband for a cut in their salary; he gives them physical torture and eventually compels them to send the girl to the Sahib. But, if the girl happens to be a Pariah then the maistry drags her up at the night to the Sahib. When the Sahib demands Seetharam to send his daughter Mira to him for sexual relations and he, in turn, denies to do so saying, "I am a Brahmin. I would die than sell my daughter" (64), the Sahib kills him on the spot. The sahib is forgiven by the court on his commitment to pay as damage, one thousand five hundred rupees to Seetharam's wife and two thousand rupees to his children. Although the court acquitted him of the murder but after this episode the New Sahib becomes a little cautious and "now he'll never touch a Brahmin girl. And when a Pariah says, 'No', he hardly ever sends the maistri to drag her up at night" (64). It is worthy to note that before this episode the Sahib used to call any of the Pariah girls for his sexual entertainment and, if she denied to come, he would send his Maistri to drag her up at night.

Gandhi is one of the main personalities who has influenced Raja Rao. And Gandhi's ideal of uplifting the downtrodden class puts a great influence on Raja Rao's philosophical outlook. In *Kanthapura*, Rao has not only portrayed very vividly the appalling life of Pariahs but also he tries to reaffirm Gandhi's ideal of humanity by propounding that 'a Pariah must not be hated because of the blood which s/he cannot help'. He attacks on the social discrimination and, in the novel, attempts to make the untouchables, the Pariahs aware about the injustice being done to them by the so called upper cast people. Rangamma, a supporter of Moorthy and educated woman of the village gives the Pariahs examples of equality of all human being irrespective of their caste in a great country across the mountains, beyond Kabul and Lahore; she might be talking about Russia. She tells them that in that country all the men are equal; there is neither social discrimination and nor untouchability; Brahmin could marry a Pariah and vice-versa. She says, "In that country Pariahs and Brahmins are the same" (34).

Rao, through his protagonist Moorthy, attacks on upper caste Hindu's strong feelings of hatred towards Pariahs and also tries to uplift the Pariahs to bring them to the mainstream of the society, to help them to live a life with dignity. Moorthy is absolutely devoted for the cause of Pariahs' upliftment. He visits the Pariahs' homes, gives them cotton to spin and yarn to weave so that they would make their own clothes to wear. He teaches them alphabets, grammar, arithmetic and Hindi.

Moorthy follows Gandhi's ideal of 'social equality'. He does not believe in caste system and upholds the idea that Brahmins and Pariahs are same. To spread his message of equality he starts visiting the Pariahs', he mixes with them and even drinks a glass of milk offered to him by Rachanna's wife, a Pariah woman. And when all the other Brahmins of the village condemns his mixing with Pariahs ; the Swami threatens him to excommunicate from village; even his own orthodox mother, Narsamma tries to persuade him not to mix with Pariahs, then he says, "Why not? Are they not men like us?" (48) And he don't stop, rather he becomes more resolved in his work of pariah's upliftment.

Thus, in ultimate analysis, it can be argued that Raja Rao, in his novel *Kanthapura* gives us an insight into the appalling social condition of Pariahs in a village of same name in south India. The Pariahs' life is shown very contemptible. They fall at the lowest place in the caste

hierarchy. The upper caste people hate Pariahs and consider Pariah's touch and even their proximity polluting their religion. They are dehumanized even below to animal level. No one from upper caste is permitted to mix with a pariah and if someone dares to do so, he is condemned by other people of his own caste and he is eventually excommunicated from the village community.

Raja Rao is very much influenced by Gandhi's ideal of 'Social Equality'. In this novel, he attacks on the social discrimination; tries to uplift Dalits and bring them to the mainstream of the society. Moorthy, the protagonist of the novel is devoted to the cause of pariahs' upliftment and, for that, he educates Pariahs and renders help to bring them up to the mainstream and live a dignified life.

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