

A Betweenness in the Language of Enactment in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*

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The examination and analysis of the contexts and divergences of the literatures of different peoples of the world *Weltliteratur* was a term coined by Goethe which was of all nations and peoples, and which, by a reciprocal exchange of ideas, mediates between nations and helps to enrich the spirit of man. Philosopher-novelist Raja Rao has been termed as the most brilliant master of Indian writing in English. When Raja Rao's first novel *Kanthapura* was published in 1938, the "profound simplicity of a classic"(Kantak 188) broke new grounds in the history of Indian English writing, offering a wonderful paradigm of the synthesis of the cross-cultural experience. It was through this novel that Indian English literature had established its credentials all over the world, which at that period of time had some sharp misnomers concerning the impact of multiculturalism.

Regardless of which position one takes on any of these issues, the nature of the process of interpretation becomes central to negotiating cultural boundaries of the changing landscape that is South Asia. Rightly, "the power of the novel as a bearer of culture is especially magnified when it traverses across cultures, impinging upon the consciousness of a colonized people"(Paranjape 13). This raises the big question of "Can the power of the word make a difference? Can it lead to bonding across borders overcoming cultures of exclusion?"(Iyengar ed.5) And additionally will this lead to the issue whether "The strong bonds of shared tradition, culture and faith" which gives the people of the South East Region "the strength to weather the direst of crises" (ibid). And rightly it was Rao, who in *Kanthapura* initiated and helped "to recover and revitalize the Indian cultural, intellectual and spiritual traditions" (Paranjape 19).

I intend to examine here the oscillating transferences and counter-transferences of plurality in discourses of alternative hybridity, enquiring into a betweenness in the language of enactment in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*. I think that a clear statement of ideas based on Raja Rao's novel reveal a play with poetics, the mythical and the philosophical, the literary and the folk. Not only does the novelist grapple with issues like Truth, Reality and the Absolute, but see it through a reassessment and reclaiming of identity, which is based on language, in both form and substance

The novel *Kanthapura* is set against the backdrop of a southern Indian village in the 1930's where the villagers are content and dependent in their own homogenous culture and tradition. The novel is a

long oral tale narrated by Achakka, an old Brahmin grandmother of the village. Into this sociocultural life of set rituals comes a firebrand Gandhian, the educated and radical Moorthy. The novel relates the villagers involvement with the Indian freedom movement and an extremely lifelike presentation of the Gandhian struggle for independence from British colonial rule. Raja Rao merges the myth ridden beliefs of the villagers with that of rational explanations of Moorthy, who as the central character is highly pragmatic yet deeply traditional.

Raja Rao's "Foreword" to *Kanthapura* where he starts by linking the umbilical cord with the past, has itself become quite a landmark in world literature:

"There is no village in India, however mean, that has not a rich sthala-purana, or legendary history of its own. Some god or godlike hero has passed by the village—Rama might have rested under this peepal tree. Sita might have dried her clothes, after her bath, on this yellow stone, or the Mahatma himself, on one of his many pilgrimages through the country, might have slept in this hut, the low one, by the village gate. In this way the past mingles with the present, and the Gods mingle with men to make the repertory of your grandmother always bright. One such story from the contemporary annals of my village I have tried to tell"(Rao v).

When considering the distinction in Indian poetics between 'the classic' termed as the *marga* and 'the folk' as the *desi*, it becomes natural that these are recurrent categories in Indian culture, a mingling of the past and the present, signifying the complex and interdependent relationship *between* the national and the local, *between* the literary and the folk, and *between* the classical and the vernacular. **Rao's** ideas of language, especially the celebration of sound and word has a long tradition of linguistic speculations ranging from Patanjali, in the 2nd Century BC. Following the Vedic concept of the four levels of consciousness ascribed to language, which is *para* (transcendent), *pasyanti* (the illuminated), *maadhyama* (the articulate mentally), and *vaikari* (the gross language of everyday discourse), he makes do also with the evocative use of silence, the possibilities of unspoken words.

The eminent critic Kachru sees how in the "Foreword" to *Kanthapura* " Indian English said farewell to British English in 1938 when Rao wrote his credo for creativity"(Kachru 81). Since it is here that Raja Rao defined the suggestiveness of transcreating and the use of cultural authenticity:

"The telling has not been easy. One has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought- movement that looks maltreated in an alien language. I use the word 'alien', yet English is not really an

alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up- like Sanskrit or Persian was before---but not our emotional makeup. We are all 'instinctively' bilingual"(Rao v)
Fact and fiction are old acquaintances, since both are derived from Latin words. Taking the two extremes of the factual and the fanciful, there are many shades of colour in *Kanthapura*. In Rao's hands fiction is a breathless movement, and as the language of narration moves, there arises a betweenness, a synthesis of retention in design, structure and overall poetics:

"We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians. We have to look at the large world as part of us. The tempo of Indian life must be infused into our English expression. We, in India, think quickly, we talk quickly, and when we move we move quickly. There must be something in the sun of India. And our paths are paths interminable"(Rao V)

But differences do crop up, either in narratology or in the narratives themselves. So difference has to be respected. "Perhaps, nowhere is the difference more remarkably represented than in postcolonial literatures"(Kirpal 11). And definitely it "is the islands of difference within and across societies that carry the potentials of justice, freedom, and transcendence, overcoming oppression and exploitation, liberating the social person to creativity, responsibility and fulfillment"(Ostor 91).

The most suggestive and loaded metaphor indeed to critics of Indian English was Caliban's tongue. It symbolized how Caliban had acquired a voice and used it as a linguistic weapon. "But not for Rao. There is no Caliban here, nor is Rao using English from the periphery. He brings English, and its functions, to the centre of his creativity, to the centre of Indianness. In his hands the crossover of the language is on Rao's terms"(Kachru 78)

The opening paragraphs of *Kanthapura* begins with shifts in perspectives, which passes through scattered stage of transition where everything is in bits and pieces with a preparation to be reassembled again. The breathless narration by the garrulous Achakka, playing many roles, recalls the orality of past traditions:

"Our village---I don't think you have ever heard about it---
Kanthapura is its name, and it is in the province of Kara. High on the ghats is it, high up the steep mountains that face the cool Arabian Seas, up the Malabar coast is it, up Mangalore and Puttur and many a center of cardomom and coffee, rice and sugarcane"(Rao 1).

It is Achakka who goes on to show how the village is presided over by the overpowering legend of Goddess Kenchamma:

"Kenchemma is our goddess. Great and bounteous is she. She killed a demon ages, ages ago, a demon that had come to demand our son's as food."(Rao 1-2)

In this wide range of themes and styles, and the various mechanisms that determine the reception, there is an attempt made to foreground a common universal pattern, despite differentiating factors in structures and visions. And even if we are to valorize differences, the arrangement persists in a “betweenness” which aptly describes Rao’s first fictional adventure, fusing the folk idiom and myth, the aural and visual with a certain amount of levity and understanding. He could well perceive that the world that the characters of his first fiction lived in was a *virtual seeing, listening, hearing* world, and he strove to refurbish the *seen, the heard and the felt* as a tool to transform the understanding and the experiences of the world as a visual domain. Herein lay the close links with the visual and the verbal as sites of identities. This interplay between the verbal

and the visual registers has thus compelled us to re- think many of our theoretical premises to set up a dialogue of cultural encounters .

The protagonist Moorthy is introduced by the narrator Achakka in familiar terms: “Cornerhouse Narsamma’s son Moorthy-our Moorthy as we always called him”(Rao 7). To describe with consummate skill a character as “paradoxical as Moorthy and a theme as complex” (Sankaran 43) with its intricate mingling of the mythic and the rational, required great skill in narrative strategy. Framed within the theory of verbal discourse let us look at the patterned flow and pace the rhythm and diction, the phrasing and intonation and repetition of speech, usage and tone as Moorthy persuades the peasants of Kanthapura: “Brothers we are yoked to the same plough, and we shall have to be press firm the plough head and the earth will open out, and we shall sow the seeds of our hearts, and the crops will rise God-high.”(Rao123)

Moorthy’s entering into the untouchable’s house before being imprisoned as a revolutionary is an important step for enlightenment. Again here there is a combination of polarities and this is the “mystical and the practical”(Sankaran 42), where there is a confrontation of the past and the present when Harijan Rachanna’s wife invites him into her house:

“ ‘Come and sit inside, learned one, since you are one of us, for the sun is hot outside’ and Moorthy, who had never entered a Pariah’s house... thinks this is something new, and with one foot to the back and one foot to the fore, he stands trembling and undecided, and then suddenly hurries up the steps and crosses the threshold and squats on the earthen floor...”(Rao 75)

Moorthy becomes a participant in the act of a spatial consciousness communicated through this use of a cultural experience. Through Moorthy, Rao seeks to realize a sort of collective bonding called *parampara*, which carry coils of suggestion about man’s pilgrimage to seek deliverance from the self into the Self. In Raja Rao’s works there is constantly an exploration of the many ways to Truth. “In this ongoing

lifelong preoccupation with the phenomenon of 'being' and 'knowing,' literary activity for Raja Rao remains a part of an infinitely larger *sadhana*" (Abhilash & Shashikumar np).

It is not to say that Rao's protagonist becomes completely initiated or turns a philosopher only towards the end. He was all through-out on an ontological quest to shed all polarities and arrive at the true meaning of sacrifice; which is a sort of the renunciation of the ego to the higher, universal Self. Moorthy offers a vision of reconstruction and of integration of the possibilities and impossibilities of the philosophic whole, where even intense inward questionings betrayed no jarring collusion or confrontation. The culmination of the conversion of Moorthy is Saint Sankaracharya's chant:

" ...and closing his eyes tighter, he slips back into the foldless sheath of the Soul...and sends out rays of love to the east, rays of love to the west,... And when he opens them to look around, a great blue radiance seems to fill the whole earth, and dazzled, he rises up and falls prostrate before the god, chanting Sankara's 'Sivoham, Sivoham, I am Siva.I am Siva.Siva am I.' "(Rao 67).

This variability in interpretation integrates certain terms such as taste or essence (*rasa*) and sound (*dhvani*-), which reconcile theories of linguistic expressionism with emotional nuances. "What Rao's *mantra* did was to create what has been called "unselfconsciousness' about English, about creativity in this language, about Indianness"(Kachru 82), where "English is ritually de-anglicized"(Parthasarathy 13). Combined with the common use of everyday speech is also this enquiry carried into psychological realms with "questions of how and by whom the *rasa* is experienced and what are its cognitive criteria. Indeed *rasa* is reconceived as an experience, one that resembles the liberating cognition (*moksa*).... determining the fictive play than being determined by them.... then comes the techniques of that communication, that direct the reader from the surface to the many sided and the hidden context in which they are embedded (upama), based upon comparison, hyperbole, punning"(Preminger, ed. 930-33).

In *Kanthapura*, we encounter a unique process of projection of thought movements, evoking the quintessential spirit and discourse of folk tales. In the translation of patterns, there are correspondences between macrocosm and microcosm, linking the gross and the subtle, with deep sense perceptions and emotive states. We can see the instrumentality of the suggested power of the word and meaning by use of figures of speech like *rupaka* (metaphor), *upama* (similie), together with *atisayokti* (hyperbole). The detailed descriptions, sobriquets and labels of persons, as for eg. "Waterfall Venkamma"(Rao 16), "Maddur

Coffee planter Venkatanarayana”(Rao 37), “pock marked Sidda”(Rao 5), and of local sights- “Now when you turned round the potters’ Street and walked across the Temple square, the first house you saw was the nine beamed house of Patel Range Gowda”(Rao 60), combined with the abiding presence of the great river Himavathy: “The slow-moving carts begin to grind and to rumble, and then the long harsh monotony of the carts’ axles through the darkness.the noise suddenly dies into the night and the soft hiss of the Himavathy rises in the air” (Rao 1). The reversal of the sentences, the flavour and nuance of the long sentences joined by idioms and expressions, as in the dialect of spoken Kannada of South India simulates *the* suggestive word, implying suggestive meaning and the power of suggestion.

The language is simple and conversational; “The English that Raja Rao’s characters speak here has its correspondence in the contours of thought, feeling and sensibility which couldn’t fail to make an immediate impression on people.”(Narasimhaiah 55)There is the beautiful poetry of perception and lyrical outbursts of landscape too:

In Vaisakh men plough the fields of Kanthapura.The rains have come, the fine, first footing-footing rains that skip over the bronze mountains, tiptoe the crags, and leaping into the valleys, go splashing and wind-swung, a winnowed pour, and the coconuts and the betel-nuts and the cardomom plants choke with it and hiss back(Rao114).

Throughout the novel, the language shines with vivid illustrations and there is a continuous building up of fluid images, an extraordinary openness and mobility and wide sprinkling of proverbs “You be like Rani Laksmi Bai once, and you will then put on a turban, and he will put on a kumkum mark on his face”(Rao 110). As the book closes:“There is neither man nor mosquito in Kanthapura”(Rao 190) side by side with an ablution: “I drank three handfuls of Himavathy water, and I said, ‘Protect us Mother’ to Kenchamma and I said ‘Protect us Father’ to Siva.”(Rao 190)

Reading this parable like tale is a recollection and recreation of “not only myth but ‘social transactions’ rendered authentic in terms of art by the villagers patois, their sing song syntax...”(Narasimhaiah 54). Whereas the story here as such is involved in arrangement and sequence of juxtaposition, whose endless play of meanings against the visual and graphic is constantly breaking itself off, with the repetitions of images and metaphors, in a design which is often a flow of words, a perspective of the whole order.

Since language is culture specific, writing involves a transfer of meaning from one to the other, through interplay of assimilation, interpretation and transformation. These cultural hybridities indicate the

extraordinary power of poetics to go beyond linguistic boundaries, of decoding and encoding the distinct “grain’ of the source to the target language. Rao’s credibility was the rediscovering of the expressiveness of the narrator, which made his narrative a rugged, ongoing mantra. It was as if “a whole new dialect seems to emerge fully formed, and, in his hands, fully responsive to the intricate tasks of the narrative structure” (Kantak 187).

Rao celebrates the crossover as a sort of native *parampara*, which is a sociocultural bonding. With the passing years since *Kanthapura* was first written “we see that Rao’s *mantra* established a subtle connection between the English language and India’s linguistic and cultural *parampara* and its assimilative literary culture” (Kachru 81). In infusing his language with a distinctive Indian idiom, Rao maneuvered and moulded the figurative and the literal, making schematic distinctions fade, combining and interacting between the various sound patterning to enunciate a different kind of essence, the soul of Indian poetics, of *rasa-dhvani*, a completeness of response in an all aesthetic experience.

Raja Rao’s romantic iconography enfolds a scholarship whose range and reach is inexplicable. If there is a narrative strategy, it is a patterning of plurality, in voice, in distance, in focalization. Raja Rao would make no claim to be a spiritual teacher though what differentiates Rao from the other novelists is certainly that “certain meditative quality”(Ramchandra 11). He is, on the contrary, “himself a devotee-but his novels are profound explorations of the interaction of the two contrasting civilizations from the standpoint of a follower of the Indian dharma...”(Raine 4) It would be safe “to assert that there is no one else who has even attempted to do what Rao has accomplished: to portray and justify the wisdom of traditional India to the modern world(Paranjape ed. iii).

It would be most appropriate here to quote from Raja Rao’s acceptance speech when the Neustadt Prize was presented to him on 4th June 1998:

I am a man of silence. And words emerge from that silence with light, of light, and light is sacred. One wonders that there is the word at all—*sabda*-and one asks oneself, where did it come from? How does it arise?... The word seems to come first as an impulsion from nowhere, and then as a prehension, and it becomes less and less esoteric-till it begins to be concrete...

The writer or the poet is he who seeks back the common word to its origin of silence, that the manifested word becomes light...where does the word dissolve and become meaning? Meaning itself, of course, is beyond the sound of the word, which comes to one only as an image in the brain, but that which sees the image in the brain (says our great sage

of the eight century, Sri Sankara) nobody has ever seen. Thus the word coming of light is seen eventually by light..."(Paranjape ed.xxv)

R.Parthasarathy had observed that "When a non native English writer, such as Rao, chooses this specific genre rather than one that is traditional to his own culture, the epic, for instance, and further chooses this genre in a second language, he takes upon himself the burden of synthesizing the projections of both cultures. Out of these circumstances, Rao has forged what I consider a truly exemplary style in South Asian English.in fact in World Literature.He has above all.tried to show how the spirit of one culture can be possessed by and communicated in another language."(Parthasarathy 9)

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