



---

## **The Emergence of New Woman in ‘Kanthapura’**

Dr Geeta Gupta

Associate Professor, Dept. of English

Aggarwal College Ballabgarh

### **Abstract**

Before independence, Indian society was full of prejudices and malpractices against women who were discriminated regardless of their class. Many orthodox traditions were prevalent like Sati Pratha, child marriage, prohibition of widow remarriage etc. Literature of at that time depicted plight of women and widows. Raja Rao, in his first and best-known novel, presents a fictional south Indian village Kanthapura which gets influenced by Gandhi philosophy and transformed after participating in freedom struggle. He weaves the story with emergence of new women who rebel against conformists, challenge the exploitation and exercise their authority. The present paper intends to highlight the progressive outlook of the writer to depict transformation of women physically, mentally and psychologically.

Keywords: Emergence, women, transformation

Indian society has been a male-dominated patriarchal society where a woman was confined to household chores. Her presence outside the home was not considered significant. The history of the Indian struggle for independence is replete with stories of enormous sacrifices made by the people. Though women's participation in the freedom struggle has been present since its inception, it has been sporadic; men played the role of protagonists for the majority of the

movement, and women only came to the fore after Gandhi's initiation in the second and third decades of the twentieth century. Even though they worked side by side with their male counterparts, many of them went unnoticed. Using fictional characters, Raja Rao's 'Kanthapura' tells the story of such brave Indian women. These women collectively represent the disadvantaged position of Indian women who were fighting a dual war, one at home with patriarchal society, trying to break free from the shackles that limited their role to household chores, and the other with Britishers. 'Kanthapura' is a novel by Indian author Raja Rao that was first published in 1938. The novel is set in a fictional rural Indian village, and depicts the lives of the villagers during the Indian independence movement. In the novel, women are depicted as being oppressed and marginalized within the patriarchal society of the village. Women are expected to obey their husbands and fathers, and their primary roles are limited to domestic tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and caring for children etc. However, despite their marginalized status, the women of Kanthapura play an important role in the village's struggle for independence. They actively participate in protests, rallies, and other activities, even when it puts them at risk of violence and imprisonment. Throughout the novel, there is a sense of women's empowerment and emancipation, as they challenge traditional gender roles and assert their rights to freedom and equality.

The status of women in "Kanthapura" is complex and multifaceted. On the one hand, they are oppressed and marginalized within the patriarchal society of the village, but on the other hand, they also play a significant role in the village's struggle for independence and are depicted as empowered agents of change. The novel is told in the voice of Achakka, an elderly woman, from a female perspective. Achakka tells the story of the enormous changes that occurred in the lives of these marginalised women in pre-independence India as a result of the Gandhian movement brought to their village by Moorthy, the novel's hero. Rangamma and Ratna are presented as emerging new women who rebel against conformists and challenge the exploitation. The village is thought to be guarded by a local deity named Kenchamma. She fought a demon "ages, ages ago" and has since protected Kanthapura's people. The villagers frequently pray to her for assistance, hold ceremonies to honour her, and express gratitude to her for their good fortune.

Textual inconsistencies reveal the contradiction between women's desires and their permitted sphere of participation, allowing us to see how they are marginalised in existentialist representations of nationalist discourse.

Kanthapura (1938) by Raja Rao highlights the massive transformation that the Gandhian movement of the 1930s carried into the psychology of the Indian woman while not allowing her to cross the conventional, so-called feminine boundaries. The novel trails the physical and psychological upheaval that supplemented the advent of the new woman having identical manifestations of the devi and the dasi that have dominated the patriarchy's imagination for centuries. Rangamma and Ratna, portrayed as new women who defy patriarchy and direct the freedom movement, appear from the polar images of the omnipresent and omnipotent goddess Kenchamma and the Pariah Rachanna's wife who agreed to spin if her husband permits her. True, the Gandhian movement played a substantial role in getting women out of purdah. Women were a significant part of the satyagrahis, and many of them rose to positions of leadership in the movement. Thus, the Gandhi of Kanthapura, Moorthy, picks Rangamma as a member of the Congress Panchayat Committee. The Kanthapura women leaders are both educated widows, Rangamma and Ratna. Rangamma is an epitome of learning, wisdom, and stimulation for the women of the village. She equips them with cognizance of equal rights, living with dignity and empowerment. She is the only woman in village who subscribes newspapers which keep the villagers up to date on the latest developments in the country's revolutionary struggle, as well as the trial and judgement of freedom fighters. Rangamma is a significant character in the novel and is depicted as a bold and empowered woman who plays a crucial role in shaping the social and political dynamics of her village. Rangamma is an elderly woman who is highly respected in the village of Kanthapura. She is known for her wisdom, courage, and her strong personality. She is not afraid to express her mind and stand up for what she believes in, even if it means going against the established norms of the society. One of Rangamma's most noteworthy contributions to the village is her role in establishing and leading the women's group 'Sevika Sangh' against the British rule. She identifies that women have a vital role to exhibit in the struggle for independence and mobilizes them to contribute in demonstrations and boycotts. She is depicted

as a daring and empowered woman who is revered and appreciated by the villagers for her strength, audacity, and astuteness. Despite the challenges she faces as a widow in a patriarchal society, Rangamma is not afraid to assert herself and speak out against injustice. She is a natural leader, and her opinions and decisions are highly valued by the villagers. She knows many things of general interest. Making a mention of her, Achakka says,

“She knew of the plants that weep, of the monkeys that were the men we have become, of the wormsthin as dust, worms that get into your blood and give you dysentery and plague and cholera.”

She never gets fooled by Bhatta. Venkamma says foul things about her and Sankar. Instead of grieving and restricting herself, she simply says,

“One cannot stitch up the mouth of others. So let them say what they like.”

Rangamma's boldness is demonstrated when she decides to go to city to get information about Moorthy. There she participated in meetings with advocate Sankar, helped him in his work and joined yoga there. After meeting Sankar, she develops into a fine leader and orator. She is one of the first people in the village to join the nationalist movement, and she stimulates other women to do the same. She organizes meetings and rallies, encourages women to boycott British goods, and even leads a group of women in a march to picket toddy shop and again second time to pass through forest. Rangamma's empowerment is also reflected in her spiritual beliefs. She is deeply religious and practices Bhakti yoga, which involves devotion to a personal god. Her faith gives her strength and courage, and she uses it to motivate others to contest for their rights and self-esteem. She declines to be confined to the traditional role of a grieving woman and instead takes on a leadership role in the village of Kanthapura. When Moorthy was ostracised, she openly owns him, patronise him and installs him as the saint of Kanthapura. She becomes the head of the women's group, organizing meetings and activities that empower the women of the village. She also supports the Indian independence movement and encourages the women of Kanthapura to participate in the struggle for freedom. She motivates the women by recounting the tales of Queen Laxmibai and teaches them to passively resist police lathi blows.

“We shall fight the police for Kenchamma'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 the Mahatma.”

Rangamma's boldness and empowerment of women in Kanthapura is a significant feature of the novel as it indicates how women can contribute to social and political revolution. It also highlights the importance of women's leadership and the necessity to defy patriarchal norms and values that bound women's potential and authority.

Ratna is at the other end of the spectrum. Ratna, for example, represents the new woman in the novel, as she takes an active role in the fight against British imperialism. She is 15 year old child widow, young educated lady of progressive views and has been powerfully influenced by modern ideas. Initially, she is despised by the village women, as well as the evil Bhatta, “for walking around the streets like a boy, wearing her hair to the left like a concubine, and wearing her jewellery despite being a widow.”

She does not regard being a widow as a matter of shame and inferiority. Though she is much criticized for her unconventional ways, she does not care for it. She elects her own path and sticks to it with determination. Ratna's retort, when confronted with people, is remarkable,

“when she was asked why she behaved as though she hadn't lost her husband, she said that that was nobody's business, and that if these sniffing 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.”

Ratna's assertiveness is evident in several instances in the novel. For example, when the village women are talking about having fun in a marriage, she said that she would sing English songs. She wears bangles, nose rings and earrings like married women. She uses kumkum and wears colourful sarees. Later, Ratna guides the women when police launch a violent assault on the village after arresting Moorthy and Rangamma. She exhibits great courage and resourcefulness in the face of government repression. She is dishonored, beaten up but suffers all the atrocities patiently and unflinchingly. Ratna's character embodies the changing role of women

in Indian society during the early 20th century. The novel shows how the Indian independence movement provided a platform for women to assert themselves and challenge traditional gender roles. However, the novel also highlights the challenges and obstacles that these women faced, including societal pressure, gender-based violence, and the patriarchal attitudes of their male counterparts. The concept of the new woman in "Kanthapura" by Raja Rao refers to the idea of a modern and independent Indian woman who challenges traditional gender roles and expectations. In the novel, the new woman is represented by characters like Ratna, who defies the norms of her society by actively participating in the nationalist movement, educating herself, and denying the traditional roles assigned to women. When Ramakrishnayya dies, the women in the novel take another giant step towards liberation by determining to interpret the Vedantic texts through Ratna and Rangamma, an incredible choice given the current debate over a woman's right to explain the Vedas.

Rao's choice of an elderly grandmother as the novel's narrator is one of the novel's finest stylistic devices. She is a woman with a balanced mind and sound common sense. We see the massive transformation that ensues in the spirit of the conservative, opinionated, and illiterate widow as she combines facts and fiction to define how the world transformed for them as a result of Moorthy's preaching and Rangamma's Sevika Sangha. This is one of the few occasions when history is examined through the eyes of a woman, as contrasting to its critical, dominating hierarchy, which inevitably excludes women. Raja Rao's sensitive and realistic depiction of the advent of the modern Indian woman, whose traces we still have within ourselves, has made the novel memorable. The new woman, who fights bravely against repression and fundamentalism, is now eager to bear lathi, to march, to barricade toddy shops, and to read scripture. The concept of the "new woman" in Raja Rao's novel "Kanthapura" refers to the emergence of a new, modern, educated and assertive woman in the context of the Indian independence movement. The new woman in "Kanthapura" is characterized by her assertiveness, independence, and authority. She is depicted as someone who is not afraid to speak up and fight for her rights, both within her community and in the larger political context. Rangamma's character serves as a powerful example of how women can challenge traditional gender roles and empower themselves and

their communities. Throughout the novel, Ratna is depicted as a strong and assertive woman who is not afraid to stand up for what she believes in. She is a leader among the village women and plays an active role in organizing and leading protests when all other members were arrested by British authorities and keeps up the morale of the women.

Overall, the concept of the "new woman" in "Kanthapura" signifies a shift towards a more progressive and inclusive society in India, where women could take on new roles and assert their authority in the public sphere. The novel explores the social, cultural, and political changes that were taking place in rural India during the early 20th century. The role of women in Kanthapura is an essential theme of the novel. In Kanthapura, women occupy a subordinate position in society. They are expected to conform to traditional gender roles and are denied access to education and development. They are bound to domestic chores and childcare, and their circumference is limited to family and community. Their voices are rarely heard in public discourse as they are anticipated to be subservient to male dominance. However, the novel also highlights the resilience and strength of women in the face of oppression. Some women in Kanthapura, such as Rangamma and Ratna, are portrayed as active participants in the independence movement, despite facing social and cultural barriers. They are depicted as courageous and determined, and their contributions to the movement are indispensable. The novel also highlights the significance of female solidarity and community in supporting women's agency. Women characters in Kanthapura come together to support each other during difficult times, and they share a common sense of identity and purpose.

#### References:

- Iyengar, K.S. Srinivasa. Indian Writing in English, 1984
- Krishnaswamy, Shanta. The woman in English Fiction in India, New Delhi, 1984
- Naik, M.K. A History of Indian English Literature, SahityaAkademi, 1982
- Radhakrishnan, R. "Nationalism, Gender, and the narrative of Identity." 1992
- Rao Raja, Kanthapura: London, George Allen and Unwin, 1938