

Discuss Kanthapura as a Gandhian novel.

Kanthapura is a Gandhian novel. It describes the impact Gandhi had on the Indian nation. Gandhiji virtually converted the whole nation into an army of freedom fighters. To be more precise, the novel basically depicts the impact of the Gandhian freedom movement on a village called Kanthapura. The novel can also be called a 'Gandhipurana' (a Gandhian myth) simply because it turns the present of the Gandhian movement into a mythical past.

By reading **Kanthapura**, one gets an idea of the Gandhian principles and strategies of political action. As C. R. Larson points out, this novel gives us an idea of the relentless onward march of history. No doubt, much of this sense of history is generated by a reference to the political actions undertaken by Gandhiji. Gandhiji appears only once in **Kanthapura**: in his single meeting with Moorthy, the novel's protagonist and the leader of the Kanthapura villagers' Gandhian resistance movement. He is a calm and quiet, generous and respectful (in behaviour) young Brahmin who rejects the hierarchical caste system in favour of social equality. The effect of Gandhiji on Moorthy is almost magical: he gives up his studies, his worldly possessions. Gandhiji's 'don't touch the government' campaign is referred to in the text: and his revolutionary movements are repeatedly mentioned. In the concluding summary, the narrator, a brahmin elderly woman, Achakka, interprets what happens in Kanthapura as essentially positive;

'They say the Mahatma will go to the Red-man's country and he will get us Swaraj.'

Otherwise, with the one, single exception, Gandhiji never actually appears on the scene of action of the novel. He remains in the background: but his influence on the villagers of Kanthapura is tremendous. Gandhiji was a national hero and it was not without reason that he was reverentially called 'Mahatma'. The spiritual aspect of his revolutionary movement is specially made apparent in the character of Moorthy.

Like thousands of Indian young men of his times: Moorthy gave up his studies and joined the freedom movement. He decided to dedicate his life to the nationalist struggle, after he had a vision of Gandhiji. He burned his foreign clothes and started to wear 'khadi'. He did not get married: rather, he devoted his life entirely to the struggle for Indian independence. Moorthy kept a strict fast for three days because he felt that he had not been able to live up to the ideals of the Mahatma and as a penance for the violence that was caused because of him. This is because Moorthy held himself responsible for the violence in the Skeffington Coffee Estate. Moorthy, following the Gandhian principles, disregards the caste barrier and starts mixing with the low-caste pariahs; causing his mother's untimely death.

Like many other young "satyagrahis", Moorthy felt that following Gandhiji's principles, they may not be able to achieve their goals. He still respected the Mahatma: but felt that Gandhiji's principles will not enable them to attain their objective. Moorthy was rather attracted by the "equal-distributionist" socio-political principles of Nehru.

The characters in the novel can be divided into two categories. There are characters like Rangamma, Ratna and Sankar who follow Gandhiji's principles. The other category consists of characters like

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Bhatta and Venkamma: who are opposed to the Gandhian principles, specially his abolition of the caste system. Speaking of the former group, Rangamma actively participates in the work of the Congress party. Her house becomes the party-office of the Congress in Kanthapura. The freedom fighters use to assemble at her house; discussing their plan of action. She takes an active part in mobilising and organising the women of Kanthapura for the freedom struggle. She motivates the women, and tries to prepare them to bear police tortures calmly. She reads the newspapers, and is aware of what is going on in the outer world. She and the widow, Ratna, shake off the fetters of Indian womanhood under Gandhiji's influence.

The barbarism of the police is seen when they torture the women who go to picket the toddy booths and groves. The police force dirty water into their mouths and under their saris. The narrator gives a graphic description of what happened when the people of Kanthapura refuse to pay taxes, despite repeated reminders. Many people are arrested; the entire village becomes full of policemen. Thus, Raja Rao's Kanthapura is an epic story of the Indian freedom struggle; under the leadership of Gandhiji. So, it can be described properly as a Gandhian novel.