

Reclaiming Indigenous Epistemologies: Indian Knowledge Systems and Decolonial Thought in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*

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Abstract

This paper explores the depiction of indigenous epistemologies in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938) and asserts that the novel is a groundbreaking literary act that serves as a beginning in decolonial thinking and the assertion of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) in Indian writing in English. Based on the decolonial theories of Aníbal Quijano, Walter Dignolo, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Gauri Viswanathan, as well as the framework of IKS which is highlighted in India's National Education Policy 2020, the study investigates the novel's narrative form, linguistic experimentation, Gandhian philosophy, mythology, ritual practices and communal knowledge production by doing a close study of the text. It argues that Achakka's oral, digressive and devotional narration offers a critique of the linear conventions of the Western narrative and legitimizes stories, memory, embodied ritual and spiritual experience as kinds of knowledge. The study also shows how English is Indianized by Rao with vernacular rhythms, idiomatic structures, and culturally embedded expressions, which turns the colonial language into one of epistemic resistance. The use of the concepts of satyagraha, ahimsa, swaraj and swadeshi in the novel is read as an indigenous ethical-political system that combines spirituality, social responsibility and anticolonial struggle. It also explores the issues of subalternization of indigenous traditions, especially those that incorporate a caste hierarchy, gender inequality and limited subaltern voices. The novel, then, continues to be relevant in the contemporary debates on epistemic justice, curriculum decolonization, and embedding of IKS in higher education.

Keywords: Raja Rao, *Kanthapura*, Indian Knowledge Systems, decolonial thought, indigenous epistemologies, Gandhian philosophy, narrative form, epistemic resistance, NEP 2020

1. Introduction

It is a special place of *Kanthapura* by Raja Rao in the history of Indian writing in English. *Kanthapura* is one of the first Indian novels in English to define and portray the Indian nationalist movement from the point of view of a rural village community, making it a critique of the conventions and assumption of the English novel form, while articulating an epistemology based upon Indian cultural and spiritual traditions. The novel's narrator, Achakka, an old Brahmin widow, narrates the history of the village's involvement in the freedom movement led by Gandhi in an oral, devotional and culturally and spiritually embedded voice. Achakka's first passage is a call that sets the spiritual foundation for the story:

Our village, I may tell you, is called Kanthapura, and our caste is Brahmin, and our god is Kenchamma. Kenchamma is our goddess, and she is the protector of our village. She sits on the hill, and she watches over us. (Ch. 1)

This narrative voice, often the subject of intensive criticism, is not only a stylistic technique, but a statement of epistemology, a declaration that what the village knows, tells and does is equally valid and valuable as a form of understanding.

Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) gives an idea about the epistemological aspects of *Kanthapura*. IKS denotes the long history of philosophical, spiritual, scientific and aesthetic thought that has come out of the Indian subcontinent throughout history. Institutional support for the recovery and revitalization of these knowledge traditions have been given through NEP 2020's focus on 'IKS'. *Kanthapura* offers an analysis of a decolonial epistemology in the light of decolonial theory. As theorized by scholars like Walter Dignolo (2011), Anibal Quijano (2000) and Enrique Dussel (1998), decolonial thinking suggests that colonialism included not only the political and economic domination of non-Western societies but also the epistemic domination of non-Western knowledge systems.

2. Theoretical Framework: Decolonial Thought and Indian Knowledge Systems

The decolonial thought has come from the Latin American experience of colonialism and its consequences, and yet the lessons it brings, have a deep relevance to the Indian context. The coloniality of power (Quijano, 2000) is a concept which suggests that the European ways of knowing were regarded as universal and superior while non-European ways of knowing were defined as primitive and superstitious or irrelevant.

The idea of 'epistemic disobedience' (2009, 2011) developed by Walter D. Mignolo is used for the comprehension of the decolonial project of reclaiming indigenous knowledge. Mignolo is saying that a decolonisation is not about the political independence of the formerly colonised countries, but also about an 'epistemic delinking' from the western epistemological frameworks which are proposed as universal standards of legitimate knowledge.

The NEP 2020 and more recent scholarship on IKS offers a structure for the revival and incorporation of the Indian knowledge traditions in the academic discourse. The NEP 2020, it is raised that IKS needs to be mainstreamed systematically in the education system of higher education, and the importance of acknowledging the value of indigenous knowledge traditions that have been marginalized by the colonial educational system. The decolonial approach works well in conjunction with IKS to read *Kanthapura*. The community of the village as the site of knowledge production, the articulation of a Hindu epistemology, and the construction of a different modernity from the Western one mirrors the decolonial project of epistemic delinking and the IKS project of recovering and revitalizing indigenous knowledge traditions.

3. Narrative Form as Epistemological Statement

One of the most unique and discussed aspects of *Kanthapura* is its narrative format, which is almost considered a hallmark of the film. Achakka is the voice of the old Brahmin widow, whose voice is oral, who digresses, who is devotional, who is embedded in the cultural and linguistic traditions of the village.

Achakka's narrative voice can be read as an enactment of a decolonial epistemology in various ways. First, the oral quality of her narration exemplifies the oral knowledge traditions that prevail in the village community, in which knowledge is not acquired through written texts, but rather by means of storytelling and ritual recitation as well as through communal conversation. In Achakka's digressive style:

And so our village, I was telling you, is called Kanthapura, and we are all Brahmins, and our god is Kenchamma. She is our goddess, and she sits on the hill, and she watches over us. And the river, the Himavathy, flows through our village, and the fields are green, and the paddy grows tall, and the areca palms stand straight. (Ch. 1)

Achakka's style of narration, which relies on digressions, circularity, asides, and elaborations, reflects the oral epistemology of the village community, where knowledge is not linear, but associative, repetitive, and communal.

Secondly, the non-separation of knowledge and spirituality in many Indian knowledge traditions is evident in the devotional tone of Achakka's narration; her frequent invocation of the goddess Kenchamma, her references to Hindu mythology and her incorporation of spiritual and secular knowledge. Achakka says that the village's involvement in the Gandhian movement was "a religious devotion":

And the Mahatma, he has come to us, and he has told us to spin, to spin the khadi, to wear the khadi, and to fight for our freedom. And we have spun, and we have worn, and we have fought, and we have suffered. And Kenchamma has watched over us. (Ch. 8)

The political (Gandhian movement) and the spiritual (Kenchamma's protection) are seen as an integration of two, a characteristic of the Upanishadic vision, that knowledge and spirituality are not two distinct entities; knowledge is a spiritual practice itself.

Third, the communal aspect of Achakka's narration, whether the events are told from the point of view of the people of the village or from the point of view of a community of people, mirrors the communalist epistemology that is found in many Indian knowledge traditions. In the West, the knowledge is created by a set of individuals, knowers, who are autonomous from the object of knowledge. In the Indian knowledge system that Achakka's voice represents, knowledge is developed in collective ways, by the shared practices, rituals and experiences of the community.

3.1. The Language Question: English and the Vernacular

Language becomes an essential part of the decolonial aspects of *Kanthapura*. Rao's choice of writing in English, the language of the coloniser, and trying to imbue his prose with rhythms and spirit of the Indian languages raises fundamental questions regarding the language, knowledge and colonialism.

Rao's approach to infusing Indian linguistic rhythms into the English language could be considered as a form of linguistic decolonization; a way of bending the colonizer's language to indigenous knowledge. He uses Sanskrit compounds, Kannada syntax, and Indian idiomatic expressions in English prose, which creates a hybrid language that does not follow the purity and authority of English, but rather Indian languages are part of the English text.

The strategy, however, brings forth issues from the perspective of IKS regarding the extent to which decolonization can take place with the coloniser's language. But if one wants to be de-colonized, the use of the English language, even in a hybridized version, might not be enough, as it would imply the adoption of western epistemological frameworks as universal. If epistemic delinking – a refusal to accept the epistemological frameworks of the West as universal – is an objective of genuine decolonization, then writing in English, even in a hybridized version, may not be enough.

4. Gandhian Philosophy as Indigenous Epistemology

Kanthapura's political philosophy is based on the Gandhian movement, which is considered one of the indigenous epistemologies, a political philosophy that rejects the Western modernist concepts of colonialism and nationalism. The principles of Satyagraha (truth force), Ahimsa (non-violence), Swaraj (self-rule) and Swadeshi (self-reliance) are not only political tactics, but ideas deeply rooted in Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist philosophy.

The *Kanthapura* movement is a movement of the Gandhian, not a western political movement but a spiritual movement that creates a revolution in the whole village. Achakka talks about the impact of the movement on the village:

And the whole village has become one, and the Brahmins and the Sudras and the Pariahs have become one, and we have spun and we have worn the khadi, and we have marched to the city, and we have been beaten, and we have been put in prison. And Kenchamma has watched over us. (Ch. 12)

The Gandhian movement's skill of breaking the caste barrier – Brahmins and the Sudras and the Pariahs have become one – is a kind of social transformation that is not based on political ideology from the west but on indigenous spiritual values.

What Gandhi did say, that means and ends are one, that separation of politics and ethics is Machiavellian, questions the Western political system that judges the effectiveness of political action on its results, not on its ethical character. The Gandhian framework depicted in *Kanthapura* lays emphasis on the political action in the name of truth and non-violence, and not just for strategic calculations.

Gandhi's idea of swaraj is based on the restoration of native knowledge and traditions. Swaraj in *Kanthapura* is seen as the process of uncovering and asserting one's own knowledge traditions and their importance, in a fight against the colonial system that has left them marginalised.

5. Hindu Mythology and Ritual as Knowledge Systems

The Hindu mythology and ritual that suffuse *Kanthapura* are not just cultural embellishments, but are operative knowledge systems that offer the village community a way of structuring their world, of manoeuvring through social domains, and of living their ethical lives.

The references to the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the Puranas and the local mythology of the goddess Kenchamma are not filler, but are part of the village epistemology. Achakka talks about the practices of ritual life in the village:

And on the day of the festival, we have bathed in the Himavathy, and we have dressed in our best clothes, and we have gone to the temple of Kenchamma, and we have offered her flowers and fruit and coconuts, and we have sung her praises, and we have danced before her. (Ch. 3)

From viewpoints of IKS, ritual is not just superstition or meaningless ceremony; it is also a knowledge in the flesh: knowing with emotions and bodies which is not simply the kind of knowledge that Western epistemology prefers.

The goddess Kenchamma is an interesting character in the novel because of her articulation of an indigenous epistemology. Kenchamma does not belong to the Sanskrit pantheon of deities, but is a local deity, whose origin is completely geographical, historical, and cultural of the village. Her narrative—her struggle with Muslim invaders, her defense of the village—gives the community a way to know their history and to know the connection of their community to the nationalist movement.

In *Kanthapura*, mythology, ritual and politics are combined, a challenge to the western epistemological separation of religion and politics, mythology and history, and ritual and knowledge. The village community's involvement in the Gandhian movement, which is portrayed as a religious ritual, a yajna (sacrifice) that is made for the liberation of the nation, establishes an epistemology that is political, spiritual, and communal.

5.1. The Transformation of the Village

The depiction of the village's change through the Gandhiana movement offers a strong illustration of how indigenous epistemologies can be "used for political ends. Describes the change by Achakka:

And the whole village has become one, and the Brahmins and the Sudras and the Pariahs have become one, and we have spun and we have worn the khadi, and we have marched to the city, and we have been beaten, and we have been put in prison. And Kenchamma has watched over us. (Ch. 12)

The Gandhian movement's success in breaking the barriers of caste and 'the Brahmins and the Sudras and the Pariahs have become one' is a social transformation that is not oriented towards Western political ideologies but rather towards indigenous spiritual values. The movement does not impose any external framework upon the village, but rather it brings forth the village's own indigenous knowledge traditions, changing them from within.

The suffering is represented in the novel, as the village is beaten, imprisoned and even killed, but is also situated within the indigenous epistemological system. Achakka says that the killing of the villagers was a sacrifice:

And they have gone, and they have suffered, and they have died, and Kenchamma has taken them to her bosom. And we have suffered, and we have fought, and we have been beaten. And Kenchamma has watched over us. (Ch. 15)

This is a type of meaning making that is embedded in Indigenous spiritual practices, through the framing of suffering and death in the context of Kenchamma's protection. The suffering of the villagers is not random, but is made significant by the spiritual context of their suffering. This is resilience stemming from the indigenous knowledge traditions, a resilience that helps the community to survive without losing its purpose and meaning.

5.2. The Role of Moorthy: Gandhian Leadership

Moorthy, a young Brahmin, who brings the Gandhian message to *Kanthapura*, is a symbol of the confluence of Gandhian philosophy and indigenous epistemology. The shift from a Western-educated youth to a Gandhian activist is a process that Moorthy has undertaken, through an epistemic delinking, from Western modernity towards the indigenous spiritual values. Achakka writes about the metamorphosis of Moorthy:

And Moorthy has come back from the city, and he has thrown away his foreign clothes, and he has put on the khadi, and he has told us that the Mahatma has called us to fight for our freedom. And he has told us to spin, to spin the khadi, and to wear the khadi, and to fight for our freedom. (Ch. 5)

Moorthy's use of 'foreign clothes' and khadi is a symbolic gesture of rejection of western modernity and return to indigenous values. The khadi – hand spun cloth is not only a piece of wear but a symbol of self-reliance, spiritual discipline and a protest against the colonial exploitation. Moorthy's use of the khadi entails an act of epistemic resistance, that is, an opposition to the colonial discourse that makes Western modernity the universal benchmark of progress.

Moorthy's involvement in the Gandhian movement is a type of political mobilization which is indigenous, and thus is a challenge to the Western model. The involvement of the village is not done in the form of political parties or electoral campaigns, but rather in the form of the social and spiritual framework of the village community. Colonial resistance is resisted through existing networks of kinship, ritual and communal solidarity in the village, the satyagraha.

Moorthy's imprisonment by the colonial authorities is a response of the colonial state to indigenous political organisation. The colonial state will not be able to absorb the Gandhian movement as it functions on a logic that has not the same roots as the political modernities of the west. Nonviolence, a central concept of the Gandhian movement, is also at odds with the colonial paradigm of religion and politics and tradition and modernity, as is its appeal to indigenous spiritual traditions.

5.3. The Role of Rangamma: Women and Indigenous Knowledge

A voice linking indigenous knowledge traditions within the village with the larger Gandhian movement, the character of Rangamma, the educated widow, embodies the role of women as voices that articulate and transmit indigenous epistemologies. Rangamma's expertise of the Sanskrit texts and village traditions allows her to mediate between the formal philosophies of IKS and the knowledges of the village community. Achakka describes Rangamma:

And Rangamma, she has read many books, and she knows the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, and she can tell us the stories of the gods and the goddesses. And she has told us about the Mahatma, and she has told us about the freedom of our country. (Ch. 7)

Rangamma's ability to link indigenous knowledge traditions of the village, the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the stories of the gods, as well as the Gandhian movement constitutes a type of epistemic bridging, central to the novel's decolonial project. This knowledge helps the villagers to grasp the Gandhian movement as an expression of indigenous spiritual values rather than an outside political movement.

Rangamma's contribution to indigenous knowledge transmission as a woman also disrupts the patriarchal perceptions that have been predominant in both the Western and indigenous knowledge systems. As an educated widow, outside of the usual frameworks of patron-client, she participates as an intermediary between various knowledges. It is important to recognize, as her character does, that the project of reclaiming indigenous epistemologies cannot be restricted to the recognition of men in the transmission and transformation of indigenous knowledge, but must include the recognition of women.

The novel's portrayal of Rangamma, however, complicates the decolonial reading presented in this paper, and calls for a critical examination of the gender hierarchies that are entrenched in indigenous knowledge. The decolonial project goes beyond reclaiming indigenous knowledge, it is a project of transformation in the interest of justice, equality and acknowledging the contribution of women to indigenous knowledge traditions.

6. *Kanthapura* and Contemporary Decolonial Debates

The analysis of *Kanthapura* using frameworks of IKS and decolonial thought has extensive implications for discussions of decolonizing knowledge and bringing in indigenous epistemologies into the academic realm today. The novel illustrates that the enterprise of epistemic decolonization did not only emerge in the recent period but has been a part of the literary and philosophical heritage of colonial/postcolonial India.

The novel also poses important questions in relation to language and decolonisation. Rao's native language being English and his efforts to project a rhythm of Indian language into his prose are a testament to an underlying paradox of the decolonial endeavour: the necessity of communicating indigenous knowledge in a language and a system constructed by colonialism.

The kind of reading proposed in this paper finds an institutional context in the call of the NEP 2020 which advocated for the integration of IKS in Higher education. Taking a decolonial and IKS lens, this study is part of the process of reclaiming and reasserting the traditions of indigenous knowledge that have been subjugated by colonial and post-colonial educational frameworks. The contrast between Rao's *Kanthapura* and other postcolonial novels also makes it clear how *Kanthapura* is a unique addition to the enterprise of decolonial thought. While many postcolonial novels explore the psychological and cultural consequences of colonialism on the individual subjects, *Kanthapura* is a novel of the village community as the subject which creates and maintains indigenous knowledge in the face of the challenges of colonialism.

Additionally, the novel's depiction of the village's ties with the national movement also opens up pertinent questions about decolonial politics of knowledge. The Gandhian movement in *Kanthapura* is not an external phenomenon which is imposed on the village but it is a catalyst and a means of igniting the indigenous knowledge traditions of the village. The novel also introduces caste, gender, and social hierarchy in the village community, further complicating the decolonial reading that this paper suggests. *Kanthapura* is an articulation of an indigenous epistemology based upon the village's knowledge traditions, but not a celebration of them without any critique. The novel's depiction of the caste system, the silenced perspectives

of the lower castes and the patriarchy of village life all indicate that the initiative of reclaiming indigenous knowledge should also necessitate a critique of the power structures that are woven into these traditions.

7. Conclusion

This paper trying to establish *Kanthapura*, one of Raja Rao's works, as a key document in the project of decolonial thought and reclaiming Indian Knowledge Systems in the English literary discourse. The narrative form of the novel, the representation of Gandhian philosophy, the engagement with Hindu mythology and ritual and the creation of an alternative epistemology that is grounded in the lived experience of the village community all perform a decolonial epistemology that opposes the Western epistemology imposed on us by the colonialism. Reading *Kanthapura* with an IKS and decolonial lens uncovers other ways of understanding the novel's significance that have been lost in the postcolonial critical approaches that have been the staple of its interpretation. The novel is not just a reflection of the Indian nationalist movement, but is an expression of an indigenous epistemology, one that embraces the spiritual and the communal, the oral and the practical, the secular and the sacred, and thus undermines the Western constructs of an epistemology that separates knowledge, spirituality, the individual from the community, the written from the oral, and the secular from the sacred. Rao's framing of indigenous epistemology continues to resonate today within current debates on decolonizing knowledge and incorporating IKS into academic discussions. *Kanthapura* is not only a literary depiction of indigenous knowledge, but it is also an example of the type of epistemological framework which the decolonial project aims to reclaim and revivify, in the framework of the NEP 2020 and the increasing prominence of indigenous knowledge systems.

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