

FOLKLORE AND FOLKTALES IN RAJA RAO'S KANTHAPURA: A CULTURAL AND POLITICAL EXAMINATION

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ABSTRACT

This research paper explores the pivotal role of folklore and folktales in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, a novel that intricately blends Gandhian politics with India's traditional village culture. By focusing on the cultural and political dimensions of folktales, this study examines how Rao integrates indigenous narratives to reflect resistance, communal unity, and the transformation of rural Indian society under colonial rule. The analysis highlights the significance of these oral traditions in fostering a collective national identity while reinforcing local values and mythologies, making *Kanthapura* not just a tale of political struggle, but a story of cultural resilience.

Keywords: Folklore, Folktales, Cultural Resilience, Colonial Rule, Upheavals, Transformation

1. INTRODUCTION

Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938) is a landmark novel in Indian English literature, set against the backdrop of the Indian independence movement. As the tale of a small South Indian village that becomes a microcosm of the broader struggle for freedom, *Kanthapura* is notable for its use of traditional folklore and folktales to narrate both the socio-political upheavals and the cultural dynamics of colonial India. Rao skillfully weaves these oral traditions into the novel's narrative fabric, allowing the reader to experience the village's transformation through a deeply Indian lens. The novel's exploration of folklore serves as a crucial narrative strategy, as it connects the present with the mythic past and roots the political struggle in the spiritual and cultural milieu of rural India.

This paper investigates the significance of folklore and folktales in *Kanthapura* and how they contribute to the novel's themes of resistance, identity, and social change. Specifically, the study will examine how Rao employs these indigenous storytelling techniques to enrich the narrative and underscore the villagers' collective consciousness, illustrating the ways in which traditional stories become a vehicle for political mobilization.

2. THE ROLE OF FOLKLORE IN KANTHAPURA

2.1. FOLKLORE AS CULTURAL IDENTITY

Rao's narrative is deeply anchored in Indian oral traditions, with folklore and mythology functioning as integral components of the villagers' worldview. From the outset, the village of Kanthapura is portrayed as a space where myth and reality coexist. The protagonist, Achakka, serves as both a narrator and a storyteller, blending historical events with religious and mythical narratives. Through her voice, the reader encounters a village that venerates gods, goddesses, and heroes from Hindu mythology, including local deities such as Kenchamma, the goddess who protects the village. Kenchamma's presence is central to the villagers' belief system, symbolizing not only protection but also a shared cultural heritage that binds the community together.

The invocation of Kenchamma and other local myths serves a dual purpose. First, it highlights the cultural continuity of Kanthapura, where folklore provides a sense of identity and belonging to the villagers. Second, it reflects Rao's attempt to present Indian culture as dynamic and evolving yet deeply rooted in the past. By positioning folklore as central to village life, Rao affirms the importance of these oral traditions in sustaining a cohesive cultural identity, even in the face of colonial disruption.

3. FOLKTALES AS INSTRUMENTS OF POLITICAL MOBILIZATION

While folklore in Kanthapura primarily serves to construct the cultural identity of the villagers, it also becomes a vehicle for political education and mobilization. As the Gandhian movement reaches the village, the nationalist cause is infused with mythic and religious significance. Moorthy, the protagonist who brings Gandhian ideals to Kanthapura, is portrayed as a modern-day avatar of Krishna or Rama, leading his people toward self-realization and freedom. The villagers' acceptance of Moorthy as a leader is mediated through their pre-existing belief systems, in which folklore plays a pivotal role.

This fusion of the political with the mythic is evident in how the villagers perceive their struggle against the British colonial government. Gandhi is transformed into a quasi-mythological figure, often likened to avatars of Vishnu or the great saints of India's past. His principles of non-violence (ahimsa) and civil disobedience (satyagraha) are integrated into the fabric of local folklore, turning political ideology into a form of religious devotion. The villagers' resistance, thus, takes on the character of a divine struggle, with Gandhi as the guiding spiritual force.

Moreover, Rao uses folk songs and popular tales to disseminate Gandhian ideals among the illiterate villagers, ensuring that the political message resonates within the framework of their existing cultural knowledge. Songs and stories of traditional heroes and gods are repurposed to glorify the ideals of freedom, self-reliance, and non-violence, allowing the villagers to see their participation in the nationalist movement as a continuation of their mythic past. The retelling of these stories, both sacred and secular, serves as a means of collective action, uniting the villagers in their quest for freedom.

4. FOLKTALES AND THEME OF RESISTANCE

4.1. THE MYTHOLOGIZATION OF GANDHI

One of the most striking aspects of Kanthapura is the manner in which Gandhi's political philosophy is mythologized within the village. As the freedom movement gains momentum, Gandhi becomes a larger-than-life figure, revered in the same way as the gods of Hindu mythology. This process of mythologization is facilitated by the oral tradition of the village, where the line between history and myth is often blurred. Through the stories told by Achakka and others, Gandhi is imbued with divine qualities, becoming a symbol of moral and spiritual purity. His teachings are treated as sacred, and his presence, though distant, is felt as a guiding force throughout the novel.

The villagers' deification of Gandhi reflects not only their reverence for him as a political leader but also their need to make sense of the larger national struggle through their own cultural lens. By transforming Gandhi into a mythic figure, the villagers are able to align their political actions with their spiritual beliefs, thus lending moral weight to their resistance against colonial rule. This fusion of folklore with political ideology is a testament to the adaptability of oral traditions, which are capable of absorbing new ideas and transforming them into culturally resonant narratives.

4.2. FOLKTALES AS SYMBOLS OF COMMUNITY AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY

In addition to serving as instruments of political mobilization, the folktales in Kanthapura also function as symbols of community solidarity and collective memory. Throughout the novel, the act of storytelling is portrayed as a communal activity that brings the villagers together. Whether it is the recounting of local myths or the singing of patriotic songs, these oral traditions provide a sense of continuity and cohesion, reinforcing the idea of the village as a united entity.

This collective memory is crucial to the villagers' ability to resist colonial oppression. By drawing on their shared history and cultural heritage, the villagers are able to construct a narrative of resistance that is deeply rooted in their identity. The folktales and myths they tell become a means of asserting their autonomy and self-determination, even in the face of overwhelming external forces. In this sense, the folklore of Kanthapura is not merely a reflection of the past but a tool for shaping the future.

5. CONCLUSION

Raja Rao's Kanthapura is a rich tapestry of folklore, myth, and political struggle, in which traditional narratives play a central role in shaping the villagers' response to colonial rule. Through the use of folktales and oral traditions, Rao not only highlights the cultural identity of rural India but also demonstrates the power of folklore as a means of political mobilization. By integrating Gandhian philosophy into the mythic framework of the village, Rao creates a narrative in which the struggle for independence becomes a continuation of India's spiritual and cultural heritage.

In Kanthapura, folklore is not merely a backdrop to the political events of the time; it is an active force that shapes the consciousness of the villagers and provides them with the moral and spiritual strength to resist colonial domination. As such, the novel stands as a powerful testament to the enduring significance of folklore in Indian society, both as a repository of cultural values and as a catalyst for social and political change.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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