

Understanding the Caste System in Indian Society through Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*"

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Abstract

This study examines Raja Rao's book "*Kanthapura*" as a literary ethnography. It shows the everyday life of ordinary people in a tiny South Indian hamlet to demonstrate how the caste system influences all spheres of life. The caste system defines people into rigid categories based on their birth, therefore affecting their daily lives and sense of identity. Inspired by the young man's life, enthralled with Gandhi's beliefs, the book examines the accepted caste system and related injustices. The book also connects the caste system to broader political and social events, including British colonization and the beginning of reform movements. It explains how the upper castes used religion and culture to subjugate the lower castes, therefore limiting their access to rights, power, and education. Moorthy's attempts to bring about change draw attention to the challenge of facing the firmly rooted systems of discrimination, even with upper caste resistance. Though this is a small rural hamlet, this conflict provides a window into the problems many underprivileged Indian communities face. Although it is a small rural hamlet, its plight helps one grasp the issues many impoverished Indian villages deal with. This study examined how the hamlet is physically divided along caste lines, with members from higher castes living in better conditions. Sometimes referred to as untouchable, the Dalits live in poverty concurrently. The way the book portrays gender through Achakka, the female narrator, adds another degree of intricacy to the work. Particularly from lower castes, women endure unfairness on multiple levels; caste and gender are interwoven, and this is abundantly evident. Rao's *Kanthapura* transcends historical documentation by functioning as literary historiography of India. Examining these themes shows how reading could help us grasp the nuances of caste discrimination and the continuous struggle for equality.

Keywords: Caste system, Society, critical study, literature.

فهم نظام الطبقات في المجتمع الهندي من خلال كتاب "كانثابورا" لراجا راو

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المخلص

يتناول هذا البحث دراسة نظام الطبقات في الهند باستخدام كتاب كانثابورا لراجا راو، حيث يبين الحياة اليومية للناس العاديين في قرية صغيرة في جنوب الهند لتوضيح كيف يؤثر نظام الطبقات على جميع مجالات الحياة. يحدد نظام الطبقات الناس في فئات صارمة بناءً على ميلادهم، وبالتالي يؤثر على حياتهم اليومية وشعورهم بالهوية. مستوحى من حياة الشاب المفتون بمعتقدات غاندي، يدرس الكتاب نظام الطبقات المقبول والظلم المرتبط به. يربط الكتاب أيضًا نظام الطبقات بأحداث سياسية واجتماعية أوسع نطاقًا، بما في ذلك الاستعمار البريطاني وبداية حركات الإصلاح. ويشرح كيف استخدمت الطبقات العليا الدين والثقافة لإخضاع الطبقات الدنيا، وبالتالي الحد من وصولهم إلى الحقوق والسلطة والتعليم. تلفت محاولات مورثي لإحداث التغيير الانتباه إلى التحدي المتمثل في مواجهة أنظمة التمييز المتجذرة بقوة، حتى مع مقاومة الطبقة العليا. على الرغم من أن كَنَثَابُورًا قرية ريفية صغيرة، إلا أن صراعها ومعركتها يقدمان نافذة على مشاكل المجتمعات الهندية المحرومة، كما تساعد المرء على فهم القضايا التي تواجهها العديد من القرى الهندية الفقيرة. وقد بحثت هذه الدراسة في كيفية تقسيم القرية فعليًا على أسس طبقية، حيث يعيش أفراد الطبقات العليا في ظروف أفضل. ويشار أحيانًا إلى الداليت باعتبارهم منبوذين، وهم يعيشون في فقر متزامن. وتضيف الطريقة التي يصور بها الكتاب الجنس من خلال أشاكا، الراوية الأنثى، درجة أخرى من التعقيد إلى العمل. وخاصة من الطبقات الدنيا، تتحمل النساء الظلم على مستويات متعددة؛ حيث تتشابه الطبقة والجنس، وهذا واضح تمامًا. يأخذ هذا الفن كانثابورا إلى ما هو أبعد من مجرد سرد تاريخي للهند. ويُظهر فحص هذه الموضوعات كيف يمكن للقراءة أن تساعدنا في فهم الفروق الدقيقة للتمييز الطبقي والنضال المستمر من أجل المساواة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: نظام الطبقات، المجتمع، دراسة نقدية، الأدب.

1. Introduction

Indian Society is caste-based, whereas European Society is class-based. The economic class plays a significant role in the classification and separation of social groups. As Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar argues, Marx is irrelevant to the issue of caste discrimination in India. As a foreigner studying in India for a year of post-graduation course, I found that it is very difficult to understand the caste system, but reading the novel 'Kanthapura' made it easier for me. In India, the division of labor is not based on economic class but on caste hierarchy. Indian Society is grouped into four broad sections: Brahmin, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Sudras. Each class has been allotted its duties, and students cannot change them. Destiny is fixed when they are born into that particular family [1]. The Brahmins were worshippers of God.

They were allotted the duty of intellectual things. They were allowed to study scriptures, give judgments, educate the Kshatriyas, and perform religious rituals. Shatriyas were allotted the work of soldiers and farmers. They guarded the territory and worked on farms. Vaishayas were the businesspeople, and they were the shopkeepers. The lowest grade in the Society was Shudras. Shudras served communities such as barbers, carpenters, cobblers, ironsmiths, and coppersmiths. There was one more class, and that class was called Ati-Shudras. They were denied all freedoms. They had no access to education, property, and drinking water. They were not allowed to live in the villages. Their houses were made from huts and thatches, and they lived outside the villages. They served as cleaners, particularly toilet cleaners and sweepers. Literature is a rich source for understanding these sociocultural issues. As rightly said by R. Parthasarathy,

"Kanthapura is a mine of information about the sociocultural life of peasant society in southern India"
(P- XIII)

The scriptures have made these divisions, and the people must abide by these rules. Anyone violating these rules was harshly punished. The borders of castes were seriously guarded. Women were also part of the lowest strata of Society, and they, too, were denied all individual rights.

2. The Concept of Untouchability

There were different types of discrimination in the world, such as class discrimination in European Society, color discrimination in America, and religious discrimination. However, the concept of untouchability was only practiced in India. It was inhuman to consider people from the same religion as untouchables. Their touch would defile or pollute the high-caste Hindus. These people were denied entry to religious places like temples. They were not allowed to collect water from the standard water sources. Any accidental contact between a Dalit and a high-caste Hindu could provoke extreme violence, which might cause death. This harsh reality is clearly depicted in literature. In Mulk Raj Anand's novel titled 'Untouchable,' Bhaka touches a Brahmin, and he is slapped and abused bitterly. It was a Muslim Tongawala who rescued him from the clutches of the high-caste Hindu [2]. It was tough for non-natives of India to understand the concept of untouchability.

3. Antonio Gramsci and Edward Saied on Cultural Imperialism:

Karl Marx started a revolution of the labor classes, which was based on the theory of economics. Marx explained in his treatise 'Das Capital' that the upper class controls production and the mode of transport. He also proposed surplus labor theory and explained how labors work for the upper classes. Antony Gramsci went one step ahead, and he linked the exploitation of the lower classes with religious and social problems. He explained in his 'Prison Notes' how religion makes people crippled and puts restrictions on their thinking. They accept injustice, exploitation, and discrimination without any regret. Cultural imperialism is the worst kind of imperialism. This crippled thinking makes the lower class accept all the problems as their fate. The higher class purposefully keeps the lower class from reforms, education, infrastructure, property, and political rights. In the words of Gramsci, "In Marxist philosophy, **cultural hegemony** is the domination of a culturally diverse society by the ruling class who manipulate the culture of that society—the beliefs, explanations, perceptions, values, and mores—so that their imposed, ruling-class worldview becomes the accepted cultural norm; the universally valid dominant ideology, which justifies the social, political, and economic status quo as natural and inevitable, perpetual and beneficial for everyone, rather than as artificial social constructs that benefit only the ruling class" [3].

This paper researches the concept of cultural hegemony and the thinking of the lower classes through a literary text. It analyzes the caste system in India through the study of Raja Rao's Kanchipuram.

3.1 British Imperialism and Social Reforms in India:

India was a very cultural and religious country where the caste system was prevalent. Indians followed the code written by Manu, which is named 'Manu Smruti.' This book has punishment for every crime and violation of rules. The book worked as the constitution of India. There was no education, and the people were ignorant and superstitious. Religion had the strongest hold on the minds of the people. Women and the Sudras were the worst sufferers in that system. With the arrival of British and English education, people began to question the logically and ethically wrong practices. They began to think unbiased and unprejudiced. The great reformers started reforms in religion and Society. The first such a great reformer was Raja Ram Mohan Roy from Bengal. He abolished the Sati system with the help of the British government. There were reforms in the caste system, the status of women, and religion. The Sati system has a sympathetic approach towards women. Mahatma Jyotiba Phule gave equal rights

to women and the untouchables [3]. His book, 'Slavery' clearly gives details about the exploitation of women and the Sudras.

Indian Society was very traditional and conservative. This Society had oppressive rules regarding lower communities and women. There were child marriages, a sati system, and widow remarriages were not allowed. The lower class mainly lived faced structural violence in India. The great reformers like Ram Mohan Roy from West Bengal urged the British Government, and the Sati system was legally banned. They had great reformers in Maharashtra: Rajashree Shahu Maharaj, Mahatma Phule, and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. These three reformers, along with the help of the British Government, brought many reforms like education rights to the lower castes and women, reservation in government jobs, and the right to equality and justice. Credit for social reforms in India goes to some social reformers and the British rule in India.

3.2 Indian English Literature

English literature in India flourished in the first half of the nineteenth century. It was the first time that Indian authors had a different perspective. These authors were first-generation men who looked at India from a different perspective. They were writing for foreign readers [4]. The first novel in English, 'Untouchable' (1939) by Mulk Raj Anand, tells us about a particular day in the protagonist's life. It was the first time in the history of Indian literature that a lower-caste person was the protagonist. Indian English literature was written then for foreign readers, so the authors had to employ a different perspective. The outsider view was impossible when the Indian authors wrote for the Indian readers [5].

The prose texts deal with the social and political problems of Indian Society. 'Kanthapura', until chapter VI, presents detailed information about the caste system, reformers' problems, problems of untouchability, reforms and English education, conflict between conservatives and modernists, and problems of widows and women.

4. Representation of Dalits in Indian English Literature in the First Half of the Twentieth Century

4.1 Infrastructural and Land Resources Distribution in 'Kanthapura':

The novel describes the village of Kanthapura, and the narrator tells us about the village's infrastructure. She tells the readers that there were twenty houses of the higher-class Hindus [6]. There are different colonies for different caste groups. The cobblers have separate lanes, and the potters, too, have separate lanes. Their houses are made of stone and marble. On the contrary, the houses of the untouchables are made of bamboo leaves and thatched roofs and are plastered with cow dung. The narrator does not precisely know the number of houses of the untouchables. She mentions that there might be about a hundred houses of the untouchables. The borderlines of each community are strong. There is no violation, and the social groups observe it very seriously. When the police, Bade Khan, came into the village, he could not find a place to live. When he contacts Range Gowda, Range Gowda also tells him there is no house for a Mohanmaden. As there is no Muslim in the village, the problem of Bade Khan is serious. Finally, he lives on the tea estate, which a Christian owns. The narrator describes lanes as.

It mentions that the infrastructural resources are very disproportionately shared in the village. Bhatta has more land, and he is planning to buy more. On the contrary, untouchables have no land resources. As they have no land, there is special belonging. They find themselves easily scared, and that is the reason that they must undergo exploitation. They take it as their destiny and never try to improve their situation. The upper castes' success in naturalizing the cultural hegemony that is spreading the culture and taking injustice mutely.

4.2 Narrator's Approach towards the Sudras

The researcher has read the novel as the narrator is an old lady, Achakka. She starts telling us the story of an Indian village named Kanthapura. She describes the village in detail. She knew about the Brahmin community, the potters' lane, the washer-men lane, and the carpenter lane, but she had never been to the Pariahs quarter. She thought a lot and tried to recollect information about their houses but did not remember anything. She, at last, guesses and writes. It shows how the untouchables were marginalized. There was no space for them, and all the higher classes ignored them. In the Preface, R. Parthasarthy clarifies that the lower classes were not given attention, and their condition was pathetic. *"Space within an Indian village is cut up and allocated to the different castes. Social relationships are interpersonal but hierarchical, with the Brahmin and the Pariah at the ends of the spectrum"* [4].

The narrator describes the poverty of these people. She depends on the information she has seen or shared by other people of higher classes. She tells us about their clothes, which were shabby and torn. They had to pay heavy taxes, and their resources were limited. So, they were harassed and burdened with taxes. The narrator says,

"The other Sudras were not badly fed householders, and they had, as usual, two or three sons and a few daughters, and one could not say they were rich or poor. They were always badly dressed and always paid taxes and debts after several notices" [3].

The narrator gives information about the higher status of the Brahmins. They were privileged to get everything first and the best. When there was the fair in the village, the Brahmins were served the food first, and then it was served to all. Even the children and the elderly must wait until all the Brahmins take their meals. Achhaka says,

"and the elderly people are all waiting in the side room, waiting for the holy Brahmins to finish their meal" [7].

4.3 Narsama:

Narsamma, Moorthy's mother, embodies the traditional Brahmin worldview shaped by Kanthapura's conservative social order. She is not educated, and she has not been to the city. She is unaware of social reforms, equality, discrimination, and exploitation. She does not see anything wrong with the system of her days. She is concerned with her son's future, marriage, and job. When she learns about the decision of Swami to excommunicate her and Moorthy, she expresses her fear and shock,

"Ex-communication! Truly, ex-communication? ... truly? No, not my son. No, my son will never bring dishonor to his family. Never, never, oh, Moorthy, you must never do that! Never!"

"Oh, they will excommunicate us- they will excommunicate us, the Swami will excommunicate us."

She tries to convince Moorthy to stop all that nonsense of mixing with the Pariahs. She makes Moorthy feel the concern and think of his marriage and community. She fears that the entire community will not keep any contact with them. They will be banned from their family and prohibited from participating in social or religious rituals.

What! Never go to the temple or have an obsequial dinner? Never go to a marriage party or a haircutting ceremony? ...” [7].

She tells her son that the life of an excommunicated person is worse than death. She is aware that a man cannot live without his community. She feels that this life is worse than death, and she expresses her wish that she would have died with her husband. She says,

“I wish I had closed my eyes with your father instead of living to see you polluted. Polluted! Go away, you Pariah!” [8].

She starts treating her son as a Pariah. Anyone who violates the rules of the caste system will be thrown out of the class and treated as a Sudras. Narsama never allows Moorthy to enter the kitchen. He must take his meals outside the kitchen. Though Narsama feels sad about it, she thinks there is no way out. She does not allow his shadow to fall on her. The distance between the mother and the son is the worst separation. Here, the mother does not recognize her son as a part of her community. She is forced to treat her son as an outsider and the lower class of Society.

“What? Do not talk like an innocent. Go and stand on the steps like a Pariah. Let not your shadow fall on me enough of it” [8].

4.4 Moorthy's Efforts for the Upliftment of the Lower Classes and Building the Feeling of Nationalism

Moorthy is a young Gandhian leader who tries to bring social equality to India. He has decided to prevent discrimination and provide a proper place for all communities. He begins associating with Pariahs when he comes to Kanthapura from Karwar. He collects funds for the religious programs, and he goes to the Pariahs to invite them to participate in the program. The narrator tells us with wonder and shock, *“So Moorthy goes from house to house.He goes to the Potters' quarter, and the Weavers' quarter and the Sudra quarter, and I closed my ears when I heard he went to the Pariah quarter.” [8].* Moorthy does not find anything extraordinary in his mixing with the Pariahs. He is not scared of Swami and his mother's warnings. He faces all criticism with bravery and keeps on with his social reforms. The Pariahs feel very happy when a higher community person mixes with them. They feel rewarded. Achaka says, *“Pariahs are so happy to see a Brahmin among them that they say Yes! Yes! they would have clothes to wear, blankets and shirts and loincloths.....” [8].* Moorthy's efforts to fight against the British and get India's freedom were not opposed by the people. However, his efforts for social reforms were seriously taken by the people. They were distraught with Moorthy's mixing with the Pariahs. They cannot ignore it. Swami appointed Bhatta to warn Moorthy to stop all the social reforms. Bhatta does not want equality between the Brahmins and the Sudras. He expresses his fear in the following lines, *“What is this Gandhi business? Nothing but weaving coarse handmade cloth that is not fit for a mop, bellowing our bhajans and bhajans, and mixing with the Pariahs. Pariahs now come to the temple door; tomorrow, they want to be in the heart of it. They will one day put themselves in the place of the Brahmins and begin to teach the Vedas. I heard only the other day that*

some Pariahs sought admission to the Mysore Sanskrit College. Why, our Beadle Timmayya will come one of these days to ask my daughter in marriage! Why shouldn't he?" [8].

Moorthy brings equality and the feeling of nationalism into the people's minds. He inspires them to participate in the freedom movement—the first six chapters of the novel deal in detail with the problems of castes in Indian Society. Through the example of Moorthy, Raja Rao has made us feel the situation in India. He tries his best to give the rights to the lower classes and the women. Ratna is a strong supporter of Moorthy. She was a widow, but Moorthy finds nothing wrong in taking her in the struggle for freedom [8].

The novel is a nice document for understanding the caste dimensions in India. Raja Rao was a great writer who used the true colors of Indian Society in his novel [9]. Many critics have analyzed 'Kanthapura' from the Gandhian influence or freedom struggle, but very few have paid attention to the novel's social reforms and caste issues [10]. Representation of the caste system in India is a nice topic for research.

5. Conclusion

Rao's *Kanthapura* is one of the key works of literature that helps to understand the nature of the caste system in India [11]. Through its portrayal of social levels, the narrative reveals the tight limitations maintained by caste divisions and the consequent socioeconomic inequalities [12]. By working for social changes and equality, Moorthy's image is a shining example of questioning the current quo. However, traditionalists and the upper castes reject his endeavors since they fear upsetting current systems [13]. Especially for the Dalits, the study emphasizes the need for literature to advance social change and raise underprivileged voices. By examining the sociopolitical and cultural elements of caste, this paper emphasizes the continuous relevance of caste-based challenges in contemporary Indian society and the capacity of literature to advance a better knowledge of such systematic concerns.

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