

Gandhian Aura and the National Movement: A New Historicist Analysis of Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*

BINUJA JOSEPH

ABSTRACT

Raja Rao's fictional text *Kanthapura* is analysed in relation to Walter Benjamin's concept of aura. Benjamin develops the concept of aura as a 'halo' which envelops a person or object of perception and emphasizes the uniqueness of that person or object of perception. He conceives the aura as something inherent but he also links it to human perception. He also relates it to a unique moment in time and space. The Mahatma's aura, generated by his unique presence in time and space, was the most influential factor in the national movement and the novel testifies to this. The fictional village of Kanthapura undergoes unprecedented transformation under the influence of Gandhian aura. Gandhism, as propagated by Moorthy, led to the incorporation of people belonging to all sections in the society, in the national movement. The new historicist method is used to study the nature and impact of Gandhian aura in the village. The fictional text is read in parallel with the texts which pertain to the social and historical events of the day and also those dealing with the real events in Gandhi's life, detailed in his biographies. In the unique context of freedom movement, which has led to the enhancement of Gandhian aura as a unifying factor in the multifaceted Indian society, Gandhism becomes hegemonic. There is an attempt in the novel to subvert the hegemony of Gandhism in the form of Nehruvian socialism, but it is short lived and ultimately the dominant status of Gandhism is reasserted.

Keywords: aura, nationalist movement, Gandhi as Mahatma, swaraj, Gandhian intervention, hegemony.

The unique nature of Gandhi's leadership, his influence and power in the nationalist movement, as delineated in Raja Rao's much acclaimed work *Kanthapura*, can be elucidated in relation to Walter Benjamin's concept of 'aura.' Benjamin's initial application of the term aura is in the sense of 'an elusive phenomenal substance' or 'halo' (517) that encircles an individual or object of perception, emphasizing their individuality and genuineness. It is in this sense that he uses the term in his work "Little History of Photography." In the essay Benjamin claims that the photographer working before 1880 had his customer "endowed with an aura that had seeped into the very folds of the man's coat or floppy cravat" (517). A metonymic relationship exists between an object and the person who uses it. In the same work, referring to Schelling's photograph, Benjamin states that his coat "will surely pass into immortality along with him: the shape it has borrowed from its wearer is not unworthy of the creases in his face" (514). This aura of Schelling's coat owes to the long term material relationship with the wearer's physical appearance.

Despite being a self-styled Marxist, Benjamin's aesthetic conception is beyond materialistic, acknowledging the metaphysical aspect of a work of art. Since the existence of art depends definitively upon human perception, the metaphysical quality arising out of human contemplation of art has become central to Benjamin's concept of aura. His initial development of the concept reflected on a natural, intrinsic aura and aura as a function of perception. Benjamin affirms in "Little History of Photography":

What is aura actually? A strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close it may be. While at rest on a summer's noon, to trace a range of mountains on the horizon, or a branch that throws its shadow on the observer, until the moment or the hour become part of their appearance—this is what it means to breathe the aura of those mountains, that branch. (518-519)

Outlined in the context of a specific time and space, the mountains and branch put on the aura, altered to something unique. Here the significance of these objects is linked to a particular moment and space.

The reference in the text to the natural scene emphasizes the dual aspect of the aura, as something inherent and as something linked to human perception; thus illuminating both metaphysical and physical. Visual and temporal perceptions intermingle when the visual perception activates also a complex spatial sense, not being restricted to the object's external appearance. While the object remains spatially near its aesthetic essence remains distant. Thus the auratic perception makes the subject aware of 'closeness' and 'natural distance' simultaneously. The object too is subjected to this transformation, as Benjamin explains in "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" that "To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look back at us" (188). Thus Benjamin defines auratic experience as the effect on us when we feel an object of perception, that is, a person or a work of art, returning our gaze. So the concept of aura is more concerned with the subject, rather than with the object of perception, that is, with a particular way of perceiving the world.

In Joseph Lelyveld's impartial and meticulous work on Gandhi, *Great Soul: Mahatma Gandhi and his Struggle with India*, he portrays Gandhi's popularity among the masses; the ordinary Indians giving Gandhi the accolades due to a god or a sage. An incident is mentioned in the work which occurred in February 1921, and narrated in Mahadev Desai's diary. Gandhi was on another one of his inevitable train journeys, this time between Gorakhpur and Benares. At each of the rural stations a crowd had been waiting to see him, even blocking the tracks. It was the last of these stops, and once again a huge crowd had gathered outside Gandhi's third class carriage and their cries saluting

Gandhi filled the air. Gandhi, who was trying to sleep after a tiring day became really furious. The narrative continues:

Once again, a clamorous mob made up of supposed followers is hanging from the footboards of the train, preventing it from moving on. The apostle of nonviolence later admitted that he felt an urge to beat someone at that moment instead of lashing out verbally; he beats and smacks his own forehead in full view of the crowd. Again he does it, then a third time. The people got frightened, he wrote. They asked me to forgive them, became quiet and requested me to go to sleep. (142)

According to Mahadev Desai the particular incident reflects “the people’s love mad insolence” (142). The crowd’s adulation was so irritating that Gandhi had to beat himself to drive them away. In another part of the work Lelyveld presents Gandhi’s campaign against untouchability from November 1933 to August 1934, which also witnessed similar idolatrous responses from the masses. A British official notes that “at several places people were seen carrying away dust that had been touched by his feet” (246).

Gandhi’s aura worked wonders among the masses, and it is this aura that permeates the whole atmosphere of *Kanthapura*. This novel, first published in 1938, presents the arrival of Gandhism into a small, remote village. The village, which had a stratified social structure with regard to caste and class, awakened to Gandhian principles and values, through the intervention of an urbanized villager and Gandhian, Moorthy. He was a representative of the nationalist students who went back to their native villages in the 1920s and 1930s and strove to reform the social life of the villages and build miniature nationalist groups to resist the alien government. Gandhi became a beacon of hope for Indian peasants with his call for social reforms and self-sufficiency and there were rumours endowing Gandhi with miraculous powers. Claude Markovits observes that many expected Gandhi to establish kingdom of justice, his Ramraj. Markovits confirms:

Such hopes expressed themselves fully during non-cooperation, and, even after its abandonment, they remained linked in the minds of many to the person of Gandhi. They continued to burst forth sporadically during the 1920s, taking the form of localized agitations led by charismatic leaders who were seen as little Gandhis. (142)

Moorthy was such a 'little Gandhi' who, inspired by Gandhian programme, was able to transform the mindset of a whole village. The monikers Big Mountain and Small Mountain for Gandhi and Moorthy, given by the villagers, are suggestive of the link between them.

Gandhi's mobilizations during the Civil Disobedience and Non-cooperation campaigns had convinced such young people like Moorthy that religion and tradition held no barrier to political and nationalist movements; in fact, traditions and rituals could be invoked to mobilize the peasants and to facilitate social reform. In the novel religion served as a link between urban nationalism and the life and thoughts of the peasants. Gandhi was introduced to the villagers through the artistic tradition of *Harikatha*, which usually narrated the stories of gods and goddesses. It was only appropriate that Gandhi was introduced in such a manner considering his status and influence and the role he played in incorporating the peasants into the nationalist movement and in transforming the village life. And *Harikatha*, rendered by Jayaramachar was in the form of the story of Bharatha, the beloved daughter of Brahma, who was saved from bondage by an incarnation of Shiva, the Mahatma, "a wise man and a soft man, and a saint" (14).

In the foreword to the novel Raja Rao indicates that the Mahatma had become a part of the 'sthala-purana' of the village, just like Rama or Sita had been incorporated into the legendary histories of similar villages, only because they had passed by these villages. The fact that the Mahatma, even without his physical presence in the village, had become such a mythical figure, given a status similar to that of gods and goddesses,

establishes his aura. When the carts brought goods to the Kanthapura fair the pictures of the Mahatma mingled with that of Rama, Krishna and Sankara, once again proving the divine status given to Gandhi in these villages. In fact the novel exemplifies the method of nationalist movement to use traditional patterns of religious belief to serve nationalist interests.

When Moorthy was very young he had a vision of Hari and that holy vision was merged into the one he had of Gandhi. It was a magical and reconstructing experience for him:

...and the Mahatma patted him on the back, and through that touch was revealed to him as the day is revealed to the night the sheathless being of his soul; and Moorthy drew away, and as it were with shut eyes groped his way through the crowd to the bank of the river. And he wandered about the fields and the lanes and the canals and when he came back to the College that evening, he threw his foreign clothes and his foreign books into the bonfire, and walked out, a Gandhi's man. (39)

Here the emphasis is on the effect of Mahatma's words and gesture, his very presence, on the viewer and listener, that is, Moorthy; or in other words the concern here is the Mahatma's aura. It was his aura that transformed Moorthy, and later reconstructed the village life. The inevitable change that the village underwent is mirrored in the narrator, Achakka, who transformed herself from an orthodox, naive Brahmin grandmother to a secular and open-minded narrator who was able to connect easily with her readers, even when her belief in Kenchamma remained unwavering. The religious landscape is appropriate, holding in view Gandhi's commitment to religious reforms, leading to a link between religion and progressive mobilization and peasant participation. The peasant women, irrespective of their class and caste, were now inspired by the Mahatma's political call, venturing into hitherto un-travelled areas of political and social struggles, trying to rewrite their own

destinies, all the while allowing themselves to be constrained by their religious beliefs.

The novel's narrative is paralleled by several historical incidents and movements, almost all of them inspired by Gandhi and nationalist movement. Gandhi's concept of *Sarvodaya* finds its repercussions in the attempts to the inclusion of pariah community, introduction of spinning wheel and the rejection of foreign clothes. Gandhi's much acclaimed Dandi March against the new salt law and the consequential Civil Disobedience movement, are the main historical circumstances which parallel the many occurrences in the novel. The women in the novel, including Rangamma and Ratna, represent the newly awakened Indian rural women, inspired by nationalist fervour collecting under Gandhian banners. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, one of the leaders of Gandhi's Salt Satyagraha, insists in her work *Inner Recesses, Outer Spaces* (1986) that it was Gandhi who was responsible in awakening the women in Uttar Kanara to political consciousness. Kamaladevi confirms:

Since Gandhiji's call reached them, they had become aware of their own inadequacies, that they did not live as humans, in dignity, in self-respect... They wanted freedom, not only for them, but all who were today in bondage like themselves. As the great leader had called upon every one of them to get free they must refuse to be in bondage. Now they were free for did they not prefer going to jail rather than be content to be slaves?...The Mahatma has made us free so we are not afraid. His care for us gives us respect. We are asked to serve, not slave. (175)

Even though they had never met Gandhi, a similar awakening transformed the women of Kanthapura too, and it was definitely Gandhi's own charisma working through Moorthy. When Rangamma talked to the women about becoming volunteers and fighting for the Mahatma, their initial response was that they were not men and hence not expected to fight. These same women were the first to follow Moorthy when 'Don't—touch—the Government' campaign began. Together they

left the village to picket Boranna's toddy grove, men, women and children, Brahmins and pariahs, marching shoulder to shoulder and rushing to the toddy grove to the cries of '*Mahatma Gandhi ki Jai*' ignoring the threats of the police. The women were conscious of a sudden energy and exhilaration coursing through their veins:

And Rangamma cries out, 'Now, sisters, forward!' and we all cry out, '*Mahatma Gandhi ki jai! Mahatma Gan hi ki jai!* And we deafen ourselves before the onslaught, and we rush and we crawl, and swaying and bending and crouching and rising, we move on and on, and the lathis rain on us... we feel a new force in us and we say we shall enter the toddy grove and tear out at least a toddy branch and break at least a toddy-pot. And there are shrieks and shouts and cries and sobs, and the more we are beaten, the more we get used to it and we say, 'After all it is not bad-after all it is not so bad,' and our bangles break and our saris tear and yet we huddle and move on...And when the calm had flowed back to our hearts, we touched our bones and our knuckles and our joints, feeling the wounds fresh as burns, and when we saw all the people gathered to see us, there was something in us that said, 'You've done something big,' and we felt as though we had walked the holy fire at the Harvest Festival. (149-150)

Gandhi gave the women in Kanthapura, and many other similar villages courage to break free from the bondage of age old orthodoxy and superstitions, and transform themselves into "something that the urban intellectual can easily understand and empathize with" (Shingavi, 95).

The women risked their own and even their children's lives in answer to the call of Gandhi. With the awakening of the nationalist spirit women grew in confidence and courage and began to actively participate in religious education too, heralding handful of changes in the religious scene too. With the social life of the village undergoing transformation the untouchables were being integrated into its political life with the pariahs getting actively involved in the nationalist movement. In fact Gandhi's mass appeal, his aura, was responsible for bringing

together people from different sections of the society to act under the nationalist banner. Only Gandhi could perform such a miracle, as he is “the idealized personification” of millions of ordinary people, especially peasants, as Nehru would comment (266). Gandhi’s magnetic influence over the peasants would force Nehru to compare him with great ascetics, endowing him with a mythical aura (267). As Nehru avers in his autobiography: “He was obviously not of the world’s ordinary coinage; he was minted of a different and rare variety, and often the unknown stared at us through his eyes” (267).

Similar to what happens in the national scenario, in the novel too the Mahatma becomes the dominant discourse and all else become subverted to it. This undermining of all other issues, like the exploitation of the lower caste community by the upper caste community represented by Bhatta and the sufferings of the coolies in Skeffington Coffee estate, is necessary on the face the larger issue, which is the awakening of nationalist consciousness. Deliberate creation of a sense of unity is vital in the negotiation with the British, and the novel reflects what happens in the national arena with the intervention of the Mahatma. As Partha Chatterjee argues in *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*, Gandhian intervention was imperative in the mobilization of the peasantry and nationalist movement had foreseen this:

To control and direct the peasantry within an organized nation-wide movement, it was of course necessary to constantly keep in the foreground of one’s rational political understanding the importance of agrarian issues for a comprehensive programme of mobilization. But this mobilization could never be achieved by a rational programme alone. It required the intervention of a political genius: it required the ‘spellbinding’ of a Gandhi. (150)

Gandhi’s influence over the different sections of the society grew through his ‘open conversation’ with the nation, through his own journals and the efficient and effective Congress informational channels. As the image of the Mahatma grew in significance, the concepts related to him and the association

allied with him too grew in relevance. Even the ideological opposition within the nationalist movement worked in relation with him as the Mahatma was the only platform from which their activities and strictures could be launched.

Shahid Amin analyses the myths and stories surrounding the figure of the Mahatma among the peasants in the northern villages, in his work "Gandhi as Mahatma: Gorakhpur District, Eastern UP, 1921-22." In the particular context of Gorakhpur Amin says: "...a series of 'extraordinary occurrences' in the villages of Gorakhpur were being read in a familiar way, that is according to the conventions of reading the episodes in a sacred text but with their religiosity over determined by an incipient political consciousness" (317). Thus Gandhi's aura and his inexplicable sway over the whole sections of the nation, fashioned him into a polysemic text, generating different and independent interpretations, especially among the marginalized sections. As Amin says, "... the Mahatma's image takes form within pre-existing patterns of popular belief and ritual action corresponding to these" (331). Sometimes Gandhian directions were invoked and misinterpreted to justify subversive programmes not necessarily approved by him, "such as... demands for the abolition of zamindari, reduction of rents or enforcement of just price at the bazaars..." (337). What happened in Chauri Chaura in 1922 was something similar. The accused were frequently referring to Gandhi and Swaraj. As Shahid Amin quotes the judges of the High Court in *Event, Metaphor, Memory*:

'...how this name of "Swaraj" was linked, in the minds of the peasantry of Gorakhpur, with the name of Mr. Gandhi. Everywhere in the evidence and in the statements made...by various accused persons,' they found that 'it was "Gandhiji's Swaraj," or the "Mahatmaji's Swaraj" for which they (i.e. the peasants) were looking. (195)

According to an eye witness of the riot the demonstrators were shouting that "until the thana has been burnt and the

police have been killed, there will not be Gandhiji's swaraj" (196). Shahid Amin interprets the Chauri Chaura incident:

First, several analyses of contemporary voluntary activity in other parts of north India suggest that peasant nationalists were invoking the Mahatma to rough up opponents, punish waverers, and attack bazaars and police stations. Second... the issue of violence apart, the Mahatma of the peasants was not as he really was but as they had thought him up. (197)

Amin suggests that the Mahatma was not an isolated phenomenon, but a construct, a reflection of the collective desires of the masses. Their urge for freedom and social reform was transferred to the image of the Mahatma and gave him a mythical persona.

In *Kanthapura* similar interpretations are visible especially among the Brahminic sections. As Rengamma hoped while waiting for action and listening to the news about Salt Satyagraha. "Oh no, the Mahatma need not go as far as the sea. Like Harischandra before he finished his vow, the gods will come down and dissolve his vow, and the Britishers will leave India, and we shall be free, and we shall pay less taxes, and there will be no policemen" (139). Thus the construction and the interpretation of the Mahatma varied according to circumstances and social class.

While the discourse of the Mahatma dominates the text from the beginning itself, a subtle change is perceptible towards the end when Moorthy, the self-acclaimed Gandhian and responsible for the Gandhian transformation of *Kanthapura*, shows an inclination towards Nehruvian socialism. As Moorthy writes in his letter to Ratna:

...the Mahatma is a noble person, a saint, but the English will know how to cheat him and he will let himself be cheated. Have faith in your enemy, he says, have faith in him and convert him. But the world of men is hard to move, and once in motion it is wrong to stop till the goal is reached. And yet, what is the goal? Independence? Swaraj? Is

there not Swaraj in our States, and is there not misery and corruption and cruelty there?... as long as there will be iron gates and barbed wires around the Skeffington Coffee Estate, and city cars that can roll up the Bebbur mound, and gas lights and coolie cars, there will always be Pariahs and poverty. Ratna, things must change. Jawaharlal will change it. (211)

Priorities change for Moorthy. The concept of an independent nation-state gets subordinated to the issue of stratifications and margins within the nation which leads to poverty and oppression. A free nation does not guarantee the freedom for all the people. He does not reject Gandhi, but he has more faith in Nehru. "You know Jawaharlal is like a Bharatha to the Mahatma, and he, too, is for non-violence and he, too, is a Satyagrahi, but he says in Swaraj there shall be neither the rich nor the poor. And he calls himself an 'equal distributionist,' and I am with him and his men" (211). As long as nationalist consciousness was uppermost in Moorthy's mind he considered himself as Gandhi's man, but an augmented social consciousness compelled him to change his perspective. But this change from Gandhism to Socialism is not the final attitude of the novel. Still loving Moorthy, the women participants of the nationalist movement, including the narrator Achakka, Rangamma and even the Pariah women, profess their unwavering faith in the Mahatma. As the narrator confirms:

They say Rangamma is all for the Mahatma. We are all for the Mahatma. Pariah Rachanna's wife, and Seethamma and Timmamma are all for the Mahatma. They say there are men in Bombay and men in Punjab, and men and women in Bombay and Bengal and Punjab, who are all for the Mahatma. They say the Mahatma will go to the Red-man's country and he will get us Swaraj. He will bring us Swaraj, the Mahatma. (211)

The novel's dominant Gandhian position is reasserted despite suggesting the possibility of an alternative programme. The nation could never be de-aligned from the Mahatma as long as the foregrounding of the idea of a unified nation was the

urgency of the hour. Thus the subversive insight generated by the text in the form of socialism which has the potential to realize the ideal of an egalitarian society, is contained in the text itself, with Gandhism regaining its hegemony. The unique situation of anti-colonial struggle combined with people's desire for social change led to the construction and perceptibility of the Mahatma's aura, the aforesaid construction made possible due to the rare sympathy and knack for communication which the Mahatma evinced. The novel, foregrounding Gandhian discourse, reflects the existing power relations, which has led to the construction of the Mahatma. Thus Gandhi, while fashioning historical events, becomes a product of the existing historical circumstances too.

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