

## THE 'WISE OLD MAN' OF *KANTHAPURA*: GANDHI AS AN ARCHETYPE

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### ABSTRACT

In the annals of social science scholarship, there is a common tendency to perceive fiction as something belonging to a surreal world, something that has nothing to do with man's more mundane, prosaic efforts of making ends meet and surviving in everyday life. As a counterpoise to such a perception, the primary thrust of this paper will be that as a product of our intellectual and imaginative engagement, fiction tries to encapsulate the anxieties and aspirations at the core of a community's existence. It serves as an inventive terrain on which the apprehensions of an emergent nation could be voiced and contested. Identifying the interface of literature, psychology and politics, this paper explores the archetypal projection of M. K. Gandhi as the 'wise old man' in Raja Rao's maiden novel, 'Kanthapura' (1938). This archetype of the 'wise old man' will be identified within the framework of Analytical Psychology as expounded by Carl Jung. The assertion here is that fictional narrative, read through the glasses of analytical psychology, can help us to discover how fiction writers conveyed their message to a society undergoing transformation - in our case an India grappling with contesting political occurrences.

**KEYWORDS :** Archetypes, Fiction, Narrative, Gandhi.

### INTRODUCTION

The foundation of this paper rests on the premise that literary texts encode certain 'archetypes' - in words and in images - reflecting the tensions, conflicts, contradictions at the heart of a nation's existence. Such texts can be deemed as sites of a priori forms of intuition - designed not just to mirror reality but also to rescript and recast it. This function makes literature a significant "contact zone" (Pratt, 1991, p.34). This means that it invokes the space and time where citizens who are separated by geography can co-exist and communicate, a sphere in which their respective trajectories can intersect. In fact, the very act of writing implies a social engagement - one is writing about someone, for someone. It is in itself a vehicle of self-realization, shaping one's attitude to life and its daily struggles. Literary texts therefore operate inventively upon people as individuals. They often give us astute insights into the psyche of an era than all the historical and political documents treating the same moments in a society's evolution (Ngugi, 1981, p.72).

The central argument of this paper rests on the belief that fiction is an outcome of our psyche, an exceptional by-product of the human psychological make-up. It personifies the psychological assumptions of its creators, and it is actualized through the psychological assumptions of its readers. What the writer expresses as perhaps his own personal world view becomes a mirror of a network of signs reflecting the age he lives in and its various problems. A nation's literature is thus not only a mechanistic reflection of those people's collective encounters, but it is also a representation of how that community, class, race or group has defined itself historically and how it interprets the world in relation to itself. It is the collective inheritance of a society's culture, politics and economy.

Seen in this light, fiction - being conditioned by historical and social occurrences - cannot afford to exist above or to transcend the burning issues of the day. In fact, through the articulation of their creative efforts, the writers may not simply reflect dominant ideologies, but also militate against them, providing to the masses a more approachable outlet for identifying prevalent issues. And therefore the output of writer's pen not only reflects reality but also attempts to convince us to take a certain position on that reality. A writer may or may not be aware of it, but his innovative labour brings out on the stage one or more facets of the acute economic, political, cultural and ideological struggles in a society. As Kenyan writer Ngugi we Thiong'o succinctly puts it, "Every writer is a writer in politics. The only question is what and whose politics?" (Ngugi, 1981, p.iv).

In the decades around India's Independence, one can locate certain fissures marking moments of political rupture in the nationalist project, where creative writing emerged as an important means of appropriating, inverting and challenging the prevailing cultural, social and political structures (Loomba, 2005, p.63). These spaces or fissures were indelibly created not only by the partition of India, but also by the transfer of power between two very different governing systems. The primary intention of this paper is to establish the novel as a genre that facilitated people from various parts of the country to subscribe to a common frame of reference, which in turn provided them with the much needed certitude in turbulent times. Borrowed from analytical psychology, the concept of 'archetypes' advanced by Carl Jung will be employed to discover the motifs through which the varied experiences of a nation slide into fiction. The idea is to trace a dialogic relationship between Raja Rao's novel *Kanthapura* (1938) and his contextual political occurrences, which inspired him to communicate to his readers, the anxieties of a colonised and thereafter, a newly-independent nation.

#### **THE 'WISE OLD MAN' ARCHETYPE : A RENDITION FROM ANALYTICAL PSYCHOLOGY**

One of the central assertions of this paper is that certain recurrent manifestations in Indian literary history during the mid-twentieth century played a very significant role in providing people with optimism in turbulent times. Such manifestations take the form of 'archetypes', whose mediational property serves to affect reassurance during turbulent times. One such archetype is that of the 'wise old man', as exemplified by the figure of Gandhi in Raja Rao's '*Kanthapura*'. This section entails an investigation of this particular archetype and its place in our larger project.

Archetypes, according to Jung, are primeval forms or motifs which have evolved through the centuries and now reside in man's unconscious. The manifestation of archetypes occurs in instances of myth, ritual, folklore and religious experience (Jung, 1981, p.43). Theoretically, there are innumerable archetypes in the reserve of the unconscious. Jung explicitly states that archetypal motifs are not determined by direct interaction between the mind and the external world. Instead the archetypes which we see today, have their origin in our evolution i.e. our environment has left its mark in patterns of recurring images and themes. Some of the archetypal figures described by Jung are - self, the shadow, the wise old man, the anima, the animus, the mother, the persona etc.

Significantly, Jung insists that archetypes are not ideas themselves, but are structures which empower the potentiality of ideas. It is the inherent symbolism of the image that they represent, which marks their impact. Archetypal images impart intelligibility to the text and at the same time, capture the desires and anxieties of humankind. In a sense, they mediate between the unconscious and consciousness. Jung leaves no stone unturned in privileging the imaginative capacity of human beings. Moreover, Jung believed that archetypes are triggered especially in situations wherein a certain limitation of the conscious sphere calls for a compensatory function on the part of the unconscious.

This becomes all the more relevant in moments of adversity, conflict and trauma - "The changes that may befall a man are not infinitely variable; they are variations of certain typical occurrences which are limited in number. When therefore a distressing situation arises, the corresponding archetype will be constellated in the unconscious" (Jung, 1977, p. 294). Archetypes, then, mirror the psyche's attempts to conquer obstacles, explore meaning, and provide potential choices for the future. And it is at this juncture, that the thread of Analytical Psychology can be coherently weaved with the idea of studying a period of Indian history that was fraught with contentious impulses - and how subscribing to a primordial image (that of Gandhi, in this case) helped people to address those impulses, in the terrain of both fiction and reality.

For Jung, the archetype of the 'wise old man' is an incarnation of 'spirit', especially spirit that represents knowledge. Though in certain ways this archetype might come across as fatherly and heroic, but it also possesses certain qualities unrelated to father or hero - a hermit-like serenity, embodying the strength that galvanizes one against inner struggles. He represents wisdom, contemplation, intuition and erudition on the one hand, and on the other, ethical qualities such as benevolence and eagerness to help. In imaginative works - both cinematic and novelistic - this kind of character is usually portrayed by an affectionate and learned elderly figure who uses his knowledge to enlighten his audience about who they are and who they have the potential to become. The ideal moment for the old man to materialize is when the hero is in a wretched and desperate situation from which only profound spiritual intervention of some kind can rescue him. The old man delivers the hero with the prudence needed overcome his problems. Further, by asking questions of the hero, the old man stimulates his moral faculties. This is evidenced in some examples of the Wise Old Man archetype in literature and film, such as Merlin in the *The Legends of King Arthur*, Gandalf in *The Lord of the Rings*, Albus Dumbledore in *Harry Potter*, Yoda in *Star Wars*, Morpheus in *The Matrix*, Rafiki in *The Lion King* and so on.

#### **GANDHI IN *KANTHAPURA* : A LIVING LEGEND**

In this section, it will be demonstrated how Jung's archetype of the 'wise old man' finds resonance in the portrayal of Gandhi by Raja Rao. Gandhi as the 'wise old man' was a shared literary, philosophical, and cultural influence for most writers of the freedom struggle era, though their treatment of this archetype differed radically. The people of India for the first time under Gandhi's leadership started thinking in terms of India as one nation. They rose above their regional loyalties and felt spiritually allied. This was a revolutionary emotional experience. It provided a powerful stimulus to the literary trend which was already transforming from romanticism to realism, from the highbrow and artificial literary style to the vigour of the spoken idiom. Gandhian ideals touched a sensitive chord of the idealism inherent in Indian thought. All this served as an indirect inspiration and stimulus for creative literature.

Gandhi's own prolific prose output combined with his capacity to bring together diverse communities under the rubric of the 'India' made him an extremely compelling figure for both folklore and writers. He became the subject of oral and written literature in a very short span of time. Gandhi was not a creative writer himself but was a great creative thinker. He ignited intellectual and moral passions and introduced new techniques of thought and behaviour that had a profound impact on young writers all over India. Moreover, Gandhi's spinning-wheel, his long march to make salt on the beach at Dandi, the fasts he undertook for self-purification and atonement, the sometimes even his simplicity - all made for very powerful iconography. The reverence that his image evoked not only touched the ordinary people, but also influenced those whose work was essentially imaginative i.e. fiction writers (Gopal, 2009, p.45). He enlarged their ability to sympathise and added new dimensions to their creative endeavours, inspiring them to write novels with greater seriousness and purpose.

Raja Rao's first novel 'Kanthapura' depicts the arrival of freedom struggle to a small South Indian village, covering the volatile period of Indian history between Gandhi's Dandi March in 1930 and Gandhi-Irwin Pact in 1931. It records the devastation of the village brought about by the encounter between the foreign rulers and the freedom fighters. The configuration of this novel corresponds with the actualisation of the early enthusiastic episode of the Gandhian movement, "before disenchantment with the Gandhian ideals set in" (Naik, 1985, p.62). Therefore, the men and women in Kanthapura are portrayed as being overwhelmingly stirred by Gandhi's call for freedom and the confidence that the Britishers should be resisted with non-violent means, civil disobedience and mass movements. In Kanthapura, Gandhi has more of an invisible presence rather than an actual appearance and his ideas and principles are personified through the character and personality of the protagonist Moorthy, who is at the centre of the novel's social and political milieu.

The novel is shaped as a grandmother's tale which enfolds within itself other stories and their narrators. This spacious structure also includes a 'harikatha' or a 'story of Vishnu' in which Gandhi has been accorded the mythological status of an avatar of the deity himself.

So how does Rao's rendering of Gandhi in Kanthapura align with what Carl Jung's interpretation of the 'wise old man'? Although his primary focus was psychological, specifically dreams - Jung - at various points in his career, expressed an interest in manifestations of the archetype in myth and fairy tale, believing that "myths are first and foremost psychic phenomena that reveal the nature of the soul" (Jung, 1981, p.6). He argued that there are certain contradictions in life that are irreconcilable and humans are therefore pushed to resolve those contradictions through their symbolic processing in myths and fables. Perhaps this logic accounts for the existence of Gandhi in tumultuous political climate of the 1930's in Kanthapura. Gandhi serves to fashion a nationalistic discourse and also as a God-like mythical figure existing since time immemorial in one form or other in the people's consciousness. True to the traits of the archetypal 'wise old man', he leads the people of Kanthapura to higher levels of awareness, and initiates them into a quest for truth.

Moorthy's encounter with the Mahatma gave him lessons of Gandhian political ideology as well as spiritual revelations. He came to understand that a certain kind of self-restraint is integral to the practise of non-violence. In fact, it wasn't enough to simply not commit violence; it was equally important to not nurture the feeling of antagonism towards others. Moreover, Gandhi's words, constantly echoed by Moorthy affected the villagers with a force of a divine decree. Gandhi's socio-political ideology was made accessible through a simple set of commandments, "spin and practice ahimsa and speak the truth" (Rao, 2004, p.76). When Moorthy asked people to weave khadi, the logic of economic pragmatism is metamorphosed into religious sanction - "To wear cloth spun and woven with your own hand is sacred, says the Mahatma" (p.17) and "spinning is as purifying as praying" (p.19). In this way, the actual historical objectives of financial self-sustenance and generating employment are veiled by Rao under the mystical halo surrounding a legendary incarnation - that of the Mahatma.

Gandhi's quality of tolerance, coupled with truth, non-violence forgiveness, persistence and above all - faith - readily qualify him to the status of Jung's archetypal 'wise old man', whose appearance brings us face to face with our negative traits and connects us to a higher entity. The task of immortalizing him in fiction has been achieved by Rao effortlessly and with flamboyance. The inscription from the Gita on the inner title page of Kanthapura - "Wherever there is misery and ignorance, I come" - echoes Raja Rao's sentiments about Gandhi. Gandhi is the living image that sustains his novel. And therefore a call for freedom from such a legendary and revered figure came to be appreciated as a call from God into pilgrimage.

Kanthapura is a personification of Gandhism as renaissance, penetrating the hitherto neglected segments of society, in a quest for knowledge. The novel exudes an aura of optimism, faith and dedication to the national cause in a vivid, authentic and spontaneous manner, with Gandhi as the pervasive spirit.

## CONCLUSIONS

Having analysed Rao's appropriation of the Gandhian image in *Kanthapura*, we can confidently assert two things. The first is that in an atmosphere where everything was in flux, where every dimension of knowledge was being questioned, where conflicting paradigms were being debated upon, Rao provided a simple access point to basic Gandhian principles, without being didactic. He had the liberty to choose an archetype and set Gandhi's image within it, around a reference point that people could easily relate to. This archetype not only provided insight about the contemporary moment but also reflected upon upcoming possibilities. In one sweeping gesture, Rao could grasp the present and apprehend the future, without being encumbered by certainty. And this is how the domain of the novelist's world is different from that of the social scientist.

The second assertion is that because of the inherent liberty of the fictive exercise, Rao had the upper hand in translating Gandhi's message into a medium which became accessible to a large number of people. He successfully captured Gandhian percepts into a story of a small, almost anonymous South Indian village, through an experiment in language which was as near to our native sound and speech structures as English could ever be (Sethi, 1999). Thus, such a novel of social portraiture like *Kanthapura* became a creative space for Raja Rao - reflecting and possibly rectifying the chaos that he encountered in his immediate socio-political context.

And this contention surmises the key insistence of this paper - a literary text dramatises and exposes the psychological processes involved in the mundane activities of everyday human life. It should therefore be treated as a sort of experiment with different characters. It can be perceived as data that represents cogent descriptions of human action in varied social contexts. Fiction can thus sway the thoughts and actions of its readers, just as psychological knowledge can impact the contents of fiction.

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