☀ TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE ☀

The Nation and One of Its Fragments in *Kanthapura*[1]
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> India then will live in a temple of our making.
> Raja Rao[2]

I. Introduction

By common consent, Raja Rao (1908-2006) is one of 'the founding fathers' of the Indian fiction in English, the other two being Mulk Raj Anand (1905-2004) and R.K. Narayan (1906-2001).[3] Unlike the other two, Rao is famous for his spiritualism and deep-seated respect for caste hierarchy. Although he came in close contact with Western culture, it cannot be said (of him) that he developed a positive attitude to it. He is, in fact, a cultural chauvinist insofar as the construction of Indian cultural/national identity is concerned.[4] For him, the decisive marker of the Indian nation is Hinduism. A robust egalitarianism enables Anand to imagine the community of the nation across caste and class divides; yet he too is hesitant to do the same with regard to the communal and gender divides. Rao is even more parochial than Anand in that his 'imagined community' tends to be a replica of the age-old structure of Indian society.[5] Keeping all the different hierarchies in place, the status quo is zealously maintained in *Kanthapura* (1938) and the handful of novels that Rao wrote after India had achieved political independence in 1947. In what follows, focusing on the treatment of (Indian) Muslims in the novel, I analyse *Kanthapura*, one of the most

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[1] This article is dedicated to the fond memory of my dear father, Md. Mujtaba Hossain, who passed away in July 2011. I would like to thank Rick Hosking and the anonymous reviewers of this essay whose insightful criticisms have gone a long way towards shaping the argument I have sought to construct in it. Slightly altered, the title of this article is from Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993). I have extensively drawn on Chatterjee here.

[2] Raja Rao, *Kanthapura* (1938; New York: New Directions, 1963) 181. Subsequent references are to this edition. Incidentally, E.M. Forster chose to represent Hindu culture/India by the temple and Muslim culture/India by the mosque, that is, by places of worship of the two communities in his 1924 novel *A Passage to India*. In contrast, British culture/India is represented in the novel by the club, a secular place. For all his liberal humanism, Forster tended to see the religious/spiritual India as the Other of the secular West. For a biting critique of Forster and his novel, see Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993) 241-8.

[3] See chapter 3 in William Walsh, *Indian Literature in English* (London and New York: Longman, 1990).

[4] In a sense, Rao is also a cultural syncretist, building bridges between East and West, especially in his second novel *The Serpent and the Rope*. But my point here is that he is ideologically committed to the rich Indian (read Aryan/Hindu) culture of the long past. Like Rao, Anand could never have written, 'Brahmin is he who knows Brahman.' The tall brahminic claim is from *The Serpent and the Rope* (London: John Murray, 1960) 7. Subsequent references are to this edition.

[5] In my view, both Anand and Rao are 'mythmakers' insofar as the construction of the nation is concerned, for both are selective, though not to the same degree. Both are capable of creating the 'myth' of an inclusive Indian nation. The now-famous expression 'imagined community' is from Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London and New York: Verso, 1983).

celebrated Indian English novels dealing with the Indian national movement of the 1930s, to delineate its communal figuration of the nation.[6]

II. Imagining the (Indian) nation

Nations are, as Benedict Anderson has so incisively suggested, 'imagined communities,' that is, 'cultural artefacts.'[7] For Anderson, the discursive reality of the nation precedes its political reality. That is to say, before the nation comes into being politically, it has to be imagined as such. If so, where does this imaginative construction take place? One of the two sites Anderson identifies for such construction to come about is the (realist) novel, the other being the newspaper (both products of what Anderson calls 'print-capitalism'): 'For these forms provided the technical means for "re-presenting" the *kind* [sic] of imagined community that is the nation.'[8]

How far is Anderson pertinent to an anticolonial national formation such as India? Partha Chatterjee, to cite the best known case, has strong reservations about Anderson's claim (as Chatterjee puts it)

> that the historical experience of nationalism in Western Europe, in the Americas, and in Russia had supplied for all subsequent nationalisms a set of modular forms from which nationalist elites in Asia and Africa had chosen the ones they liked.[9]

For Chatterjee:

> The most powerful as well as the most creative results of the nationalist imagination in Asia and Africa are posited not on an identity but rather on a *difference* [sic] with the "modular" forms of the national society propagated by the modern West.[10]

Hence agreeing with Anderson amounts to, according to Chatterjee, 'reducing the experience of anticolonial nationalism to a caricature of itself.'[11] Yet Chatterjee concedes what one may consider one of Anderson's key arguments: 'Anderson is entirely correct in his suggestion that it is "print-capitalism" which provides the new institutional space for the development of the modern "national" language.'[12]

One is, in effect, led back to where one started from, that is, Anderson. However *differently* anticolonial nationalism defines itself, in choosing both to locate and assert its very difference in the domain of culture rather than politics (politics being the domain where difference is to be challenged, to be on a par with the coloniser), as Chatterjee has shown to have been the case in the context of Indian

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[6] The (Hindu) nationalist intelligentsia tended to treat Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism as deviations of Hinduism. That is, these faiths were not as decidedly (construed as) the Others of Hinduism as Islam has always been and perhaps is even today.

[7] Anderson 4.

[8] Anderson 25.

[9] Chatterjee 4-5. Chatterjee is by far the most incisive postcolonial critic of Anderson.

[10] Chatterjee 5.

[11] Chatterjee 5.

[12] Chatterjee 7.

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nationalism, it makes the same use of (print) culture as its adversary, for the use of culture as a means to a political end is itself a bourgeois practice, first seen during the rise of the bourgeoisie in Europe.[13] Insofar as the leadership of Indian nationalism came from the new, English-educated, urban-based Indian bourgeoisie, 'spawned and nurtured by colonialism itself,' as Ranajit Guha puts it, culture *had* to be its site as well as articulation of difference.[14]

If Anderson and Chatterjee engage in a dialogue as to how the nation is imagined across a range of cultural and historical formations, Fredric Jameson and Aijaz Ahmad engage in another, regarding the figuration of the nation in the so-called third-world literature. As is well known, Jameson shook up the placid world of academic criticism by his essay 'Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism.' Jameson postulates:

> Third-world texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic – necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: *the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society* [sic].[15]

Critics have identified numerous shortcomings of this 'sweeping hypothesis,' as Jameson himself characterises it.[16] They are too well known to bear repetition. As with Anderson, I will limit myself to the most publicised critique of Jameson, the one by Ahmad. Of the many examples of 'positivist reductionism' enumerated by Ahmad in his devastating riposte, the one most pertinent to the present discussion has to do with the homogenisation by Jameson of 'nationalism itself' as if it were 'some unitary thing with some predetermined essence and value.'[17] 'There are hundreds of nationalisms in Asia and Africa; some are progressive, others are not,' Ahmad reminds Jameson.[18] What Ahmad says can be developed further: not only are any two (third-world) nationalisms distinct from each other; each is a complex phenomenon on its own right, marked by tensions, contradictions, and ambivalences of its own.

Ironically, by downplaying its complexity, Jameson divests nationalism of its historical character at a time when it is being explored with far greater rigour and vigour than ever before.[19] The tensions informing 'the nation-concept' are precisely what constitute its appeal to contemporary theorists.[20] As Tom Nairn contends, 'it is

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[13] In her study of *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987), Nancy Armstrong has forcefully argued the point in a feminist context.

[14] Ranajit Guha, *Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1997) 5.

[15] Frederic Jameson, 'Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,' *Social Text* 15 (Fall 1986): 69.

[16] Jameson 69.

[17] Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London and New York: Verso, 1992) 97, 102.

[18] Ahmad 102.

[19] The knowledge that Jameson is a major Marxist cultural theorist gives the irony an extra edge.

[20] I have taken the term from Elleke Boehmer, *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation* (Manchester and New York: Manchester UP, 2005) 4. In her book (*Stories*), Boehmer offers a powerful argument as to why nationalism is still relevant to the postcolonial world. The recent theoretical interest in nationalism derives its impetus from the general distrust of 'grand

an exact (not a rhetorical) statement about nationalism to say that it is by nature ambivalent.'[21]

> If the ambivalent figure of the nation is a problem of its transitional history, its conceptual indeterminacy, its wavering between vocabularies, then what effect does this have on narratives and discourses that signify a sense of 'nationness'?

asks Homi Bhabha.[22] The closest Bhabha comes to answering the question is to suggest that 'the constitutive contradictions of the national text are discontinuous and "interruptive".'[23] To put it plainly, the 'conceptual indeterminacy' of nationalist ideology translates into narrative/discursive ambivalence, which is why narratives/discourses of the nation can never happen to be free from (obvious) contradictions. Of the many contradictions of Indian nationalism informing *Kanthapura*, the one I will be primarily concerned with in this essay is its communal construction of Indian national identity: the conflation of Indianness with Hinduism, 'a nationalist imagination dreaming up the nation-state of the future as a Hindu Samrajya or a Ramrajya.'[24]

III. The historical context of *Kanthapura*

Never before was colonial India so full of political activity as from the time of the introduction of the Ilbert Bill in February 1883.[25] Newer and newer trends emerged, sometimes modifying the older ones, at other times rejecting them altogether. It is both imperative and instructive to read *Kanthapura* in the context of these developments in Indian politics. Only then one is able to understand the exclusionary nature of its conceptualisation of the Indian nation. In what follows, I attempt to provide a broad overview of Indian national politics from the time of the partition of Bengal in 1905 to its culmination in the Quit India movement in 1942. The focus is consistently on the complex and evolving contours of Hindu-Muslim relationship.

Some of the noteworthy developments in the arena of Indian national politics in the first decade of the twentieth century are: first, the partition of Bengal in 1905 and the *Swadeshi* movement (1905-8) it gave birth to (incidentally, *Swadeshi* was the first openly militant anti-British nationalist movement of the twentieth century); secondly, the birth of the All-India Muslim League in 1906; thirdly, the *Swadeshi* riots of 1906-7; fourthly, the split of the Indian National Congress in 1907 into moderates and extremists; and, finally, the Indian Councils Act of 1909, which gave the Muslims of British India a separate electorate. So the overall picture of the period can be summarised as one of conflicts and tensions, of disintegration, of 'things fall[ing] apart.'

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narratives' in the West, manufacturer as well as sufferer of World War I and II, though the trend is fast gaining ground in other parts of the world as well. As such, the approach is rather critical/cynical than sympathetic, with the failures of nationalism given more attention than its achievements.

[21] Tom Nairn, *The Break-up of Britain* (London: Verso, 1981) 348.

[22] Homi K. Bhabha, 'Introduction: Narrating the Nation,' *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London and New York: Routledge, 1990) 2.

[23] Bhabha, 'Introduction' 5.

[24] Guha 62.

[25] The Indian National Congress was formed in 1885.

It can be safely proposed that British-Indian relationship following the Ilbert Bill was in the main one of collision. The steady corrosion of British-Indian relations at the time may lead one to expect to see a greater cohesion among different Indian communities, especially between Hindus and Muslims. Contrary to expectation, however, an unprecedented hostility obtained between the two communities, despite some genuine efforts to bring them closer together. Needless to say, the frequency of communal riots with which the nineteenth century ended is its most eloquent testimony.

To be fair, both sides were to blame, if not to the same degree. Mutual distrust grew because one had begun to pursue a revivalist agenda for some time now, while the other turned more and more towards a separatist politics, both more or less communal in character. In other words, the paths of the two communities had begun to diverge. The action of the one provided an excuse for the (re)action of the other. To borrow from Salman Rushdie, the obnoxious politics of blame had been born.[26] 'It became customary for both Hindu and Muslim newspapers,' writes Abdul Hamid, 'not only to accuse individuals but also to cast aspersions on the other community. The signs of approaching strife were unmistakable.'[27] The enlightened white *sahibs* knew all too well how to exploit these dark situations best.

In India, the last quarter of the nineteenth century saw two distinct tendencies growing up simultaneously: on the one hand, after decades of hostility and indifference towards Western education and culture, Muslims took to reformism in the same spirit as the Hindus had done half a century ago; on the other hand, the Hindus turned away from social reformism to religious revivalism.[28] As the century wore on, Hindu revivalism gathered momentum, engulfing the whole of India. More specifically, Bengal (the power base of the British at the time), Bombay (then the Presidency of Bombay, now the Province of Maharashtra with Mumbai as its capital), and Punjab became major centres of Hindu revivalism.

A whole range of (patriotic) activities were undertaken to highlight the superiority of Indian (read Hindu) civilisation over all the other civilisations of the world – both past and present. The *materialist* West was deliberately contrasted with the *spiritualist* East. To highlight the spiritual heritage of India, the sacred texts of Hinduism such as the Vedas and the *Gita* were elaborately commented upon.[29] In the heat of the argument, some even went on to claim for Hinduism the status of the 'only true and universal faith.'[30] As part of a larger programme to invest Hinduism with

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[26] Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (London: Granta, 1991) 57.

[27] Abdul Hamid, *Muslim Separatism in India: A Brief Survey: 1858-1947* (n.p.: Oxford UP, 1967) 48. Given the Paki(stan) bias of Hamid, one may ask with no use of irony whether he himself has learnt anything from the history of Hindu-Muslim 'strife' he is talking about.

[28] The Muslim apathy to westernisation has come to be questioned. Scholars now hold that Muslim response to Western education was far from homogeneous. Hence to claim that a North Indian Muslim was as averse to the benefits of British culture as a Bengal(i) Muslim is no more than an oversimplification. See Peter Hardy, *The Muslims of British India* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1972).

[29] In one sense, the uses of these texts were also secular for they were to serve the national movement. For a discussion of the nationalist appropriation(s) of Hindu sacred texts (especially the *Gita*), see Josna E. Rege, *Colonial Karma: Self, Action, and Nation in the Indian English Novel* (Hampshire and London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) 1-21.

[30] Dayananda Saraswati cited in Crispin Bates, *Subalterns and Raj: South Asia since 1600* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007) 96. Dayananda founded the Arya Samaj in 1875.

historicity, a number of biographies of Sri Krishna appeared in Indian languages, implanting him as the 'ideal hero' in Indian (Hindu) consciousness.[31] The Aryan ancestry of the Hindus was emphasised in order to infuse them with a sense of racial pride. As if to consolidate it further, heroes from the historical past, especially those who had successfully resisted the waves of Muslim invasion, were reinstated in public memory, with the (sometimes oblique, sometimes obvious) message to re-enact those heroic deeds of the past to rid India of her present-day subjugation. Bengalis revived the memories of Pratapaditya and Sitaram; Maharashtrians, of Shivaji; and Punjabis, of Ranjit Singh.[32] In each of these centres of Hindu revivalism, in short, there flourished a number of pro-Hindu organisations (whose pseudo-religious activities often led to communal riots), an array of Hindu *utsavas* (festivals) and *melas* (fairs), a spate of new journals, and a body of literary works based on history, whose revivalist gospel charged Hindu India with new life but threatened Muslim India with doom.[33] The revivalist clamour of the day was loud enough to drown the old voices of harmony, moderation and reformism for a while.

How did the Muslims react to the revivalist craze of the day? The story of the Muslims of British India begins with the Great Rebellion of 1857. Rightly or wrongly, it was the Muslims who were held responsible for what the British tend(ed) to call the Mutiny. 'In the British view,' writes Thomas Metcalf, 'it was Muslim intrigue and Muslim leadership that converted a sepoy mutiny into a political conspiracy, aimed at the extinction of the British Raj.'[34] For most of the third quarter of the nineteenth century, therefore, the Muslim community was in murky waters, held in contempt and distrust by the colonial masters. On the other hand, the Muslim perception was one of disillusionment. Consequently, the most vital task before the leaders of the Muslim community after 1857 was to repair Anglo-Muslim relations, to bring about, in the words of Peter Hardy, 'rapprochement between Islam and the nineteenth-century Western-dominated world.'[35] They decided on a two-part programme: to establish in the eyes of the white rulers of India that they were allies not enemies of white rule and, for the first part of the programme to bear fruit, to reconcile themselves and the community they represented to Western education and culture, which in turn entailed dispelling the strong anti-British sentiments of the community. After the memories of 1857 had grown a little paler, the British policy was also geared to promoting the new secular ambitions of the Muslims. At the turn of the century, the British were so openly committed to safeguarding Muslim rights and interests as to invite charges of partiality from the Hindus.

So Hindus and Muslims were not the only actors on the Indian political scene at the time under discussion here. Right at the centre were the British, desperately looking for a new ally to meet the extremist challenge of the *Swadeshi* years.[36] Soon

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[31] See Amales Tripathi, *The Extremist Challenge: India between 1890 and 1910* (Bombay: Orient Longmans, 1967) 1-2.

[32] Tripathi 73-74.

[33] The Muslim intelligentsia invariably saw Hindu revivalism as a threat to the existence of Muslim community in India.

[34] Thomas R. Metcalf, *The Aftermath of Revolt: India, 1857-1870* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1964) 298.

[35] Hardy 104.

[36] When the Congress split in 1907, the *Swadeshi* movement had already moved into its extremist phase and was to enter the terrorist phase soon.

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an opportunity offered itself. Towards the end of 1906, when (Hindu) India was still simmering with resentment over the partition of Bengal, Lord Minto, the first twentieth-century liberal Viceroy of India, received a thirty-five-member Muslim delegation. In his reply to the address presented by the delegation, Minto submitted that he was as 'firmly convinced' as they 'that any electoral representation in India would be doomed to mischievous failure which aimed at granting a personal enfranchisement regardless of the beliefs and traditions of the communities composing the population of this continent.'[37] The 'political rights and interests of [the Muslims] as a community will be safeguarded,' he assured them, 'by any administrative re-organization with which I am concerned.'[38] Not surprisingly, in the space of barely a quarter of a year, the All-India Muslim League was founded.

The next decade – that is, the 1910s – was a quieter one, insofar as nationalist agitation in India is concerned. The main reason was the First World War. With the advent of the War, the political climate in India began to cool down, with the political parties competing with one another to put on show how loyal they were to the British Raj. By contrast, nationalist activities geared up abroad, especially in North America where through the weekly paper *The Ghadar* 'the entire nationalist critique of colonialism ... was carried, in a powerful and simple form, to the mass of Indian immigrants.'[39] At home, Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Annie Besant started the Home Rule movement based in Bombay and Madras respectively. As the name of the movement suggests, the demand was self-government for India on the lines of the white colonies after the War was over. The two most remarkable events of the decade were the appearance of Gandhi in 1915 on the Indian political scene and the Lucknow Pact of 1916. The former would have a long-term impact on national politics in general and Hindu-Muslim relationship in particular: Gandhi would relentlessly work for Hindu-Muslim amity till the very end of his life, consistently earning undue criticism from almost all vested quarters in the process. The latter – the pact between the Congress and the League – would reconcile the interests of the two communities for a while but would soon fall apart. The issue of separate electorate would again prove a bone of contention.

For the national leadership in India, the second decade of the twentieth century was one of steady disillusionment. The 'great expectations' that they had entertained during the War did not materialise when it was over. They had expected that Britain would grant India self-rule in return of her huge contribution to the overall War effort. But the leaders of both Hindu and Muslim communities were soon to be disillusioned. If the Government of India Act of 1919 disappointed them all, the British attitude to Turkey angered the Indian Muslims in particular. It was clear from the Treaty of Sevres signed in May 1920 that the Ottoman Empire was already a thing of the past. The anger led to the resurgence of what has come to be known as the Khilafat movement. Although the movement concerned the Muslims of India who looked upon the Caliph of Turkey as the spiritual head of Muslims all over the world, Gandhi chose not only to align himself with it but also to become, along with the two Ali

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[37] Lord Minto quoted in Hardy 155.

[38] Minto cited in Tripathi 163. The Muslims of British India were finally awarded separate electorate by the Indian Councils Act of 1909.

[39] Bipan Chandra, Mridula Mukherjee, Aditya Mukherjee, Sucheta Mahajan and K. N. Pannikar, *India's Struggle for Independence: 1857-1947* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1988) 155.

brothers, its moral and political anchor. By getting himself involved in the Khilafat movement, Gandhi was able to turn it into, in the words of B.R. Nanda, 'a rallying cry for Hindu-Muslim unity.'[40]

If such developments as the Rowlatt Bills, the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, the Khilafat and Non-cooperation movement brought the Hindus and Indian Muslims together for a while, other developments in the late 1920s worked to pull them apart, creating in the process a chasm that would continue to widen and would eventually pave the way for the decisive entry, spread and consolidation of communalism in Indian national politics, culminating in the partition of India. Chief among them was the appointment of the all-White Simon Commission, so called after the name of its chairman. The primary task of the Commission was to decide 'whether India was ready for further constitutional progress and on which lines.'[41] The formation of the Commission without a single Indian member on it was enough to provoke opposition from the various nationalist fronts operating at that time. The consequence was either total boycott of the Commission by most of them or cold indifference to it by the rest. Ironically, the boycott did not result in a positive outcome. That is to say, it failed to generate a greater understanding between the different political parties claiming to represent the different communities of India. Instead, each decided to pursue its own parochial interests, in the process divesting the Congress of the legitimacy of its claim to represent all Indians. From now onward, two distinct but inter-related tendencies would run parallel in Indian national politics: one would emphasise the fight against the colonial rule; the other, the conflict of interests of the different communities of India.

In 1928, the political parties of India jointly issued what has come to be known as the Nehru Report, after the name of Motilal Nehru (father of Jawaharlal Nehru). The Report was an answer to the British 'challenge' that the Indians were incapable of devising 'a concrete scheme of constitutional reforms which [would have] the support of wide sections of Indian political opinion.'[42] Since it was an outcome of joint efforts, the Report 'rejected the principle of separate communal electorates on which previous constitutional reforms had been based.'[43] Both sections of the Muslim League – the one that had refused to have anything to do with the Congress and the other led by Mohammad Ali Jinnah that had agreed to cooperate with the Congress – saw in the rejection of 'the principle of separate communal electorates' a threat to Muslim interests. To protect Muslim interests, Jinnah came up with his famous 'Fourteen Points' which the Congress could not accept because accepting them would mean, the Congress leadership thought, weakening the spirit of nationalism on the one hand and strengthening that of communalism on the other. There was another side to the issue too. Hindu communalism had also become a force too strong not to be taken cognizance of. Hindu communal parties such as the Hindu Mahasabha and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) were out now to safeguard Hindu interests. The Communal Award of 1932 was thus an inverse recognition of Indian nationalism having become communal in character, for even the Congress did

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[40] B. R. Nanda, *Gandhi: Pan-Islamism, Imperialism and Nationalism in India* (Bombay: Oxford UP, 1989) 102.
[41] Chandra et al. 260.
[42] Chandra et al. 263.
[43] Chandra et al. 263.

not raise any protest against it. Just as the colonial government could no longer deny the force of Indian nationalism of the day, Indian nationalism could no more hide its communal character.

Within the Congress, the leadership passed from Gandhi to Nehru and his ilk who embraced a Marxist-socialist politics, rejecting the kind of politics that Gandhi stood for. The socialist focus of the new Congress leadership meant that from now on (the causes of) class conflicts would receive far greater importance than (those of) the communal ones. Of all the national agendas, the problems of peasants and workers became the number one agenda for the Congress. The question of Hindu-Muslim unity was no longer *the* central issue. Under the Government of India Act of 1935, the Congress went into provincial elections in 1937, won a majority in most of the provinces and formed government in them. Interestingly, during its twenty-eight-month-long rule, the Congress did little to improve Hindu-Muslim relations but everything to redress the plight of the working classes. The Congress provincial governments resigned in October 1939, and in the din and bustle of the Second World War that had started in September 1939, the Hindu-Muslim issue was almost forgotten.

So during the decades between the 1900s and the 1930s, Indian politics had become a site of conflictive interests and Indian nationalism a constellation of parochial nationalisms. In the hullabaloo of Hindu revivalism and Muslim separatism, Indian nationalism could no longer remain Indian nationalism, pure and simple. With the two main communities looking askance at each other, it could only be either Hindu or Muslim nationalism, one informed by revivalist and the other by separatist ideology. Yet here and there a lone voice, albeit subdued, could be heard, urging moderation, sanity, and tolerance; projecting an Indian identity free from considerations of caste, class, or creed; and thus inviting fellow Indians to accept the cultural plurality that is India. If Rabindranath Tagore is one such voice, Gandhi is no doubt another. But the Rao of *Kanthapura* is certainly *not* such a voice.

IV. The nation and its fragments in *Kanthapura*

In erasing the Hindu-Muslim question from its construction of the nation, *Kanthapura* participates in parochial nationalism, a type of nationalism that takes care of the interests of one particular community (the Hindus) and ignores those of the Others. The nationalist imagination that goes into the making of the novel is all the more dangerous in that it chooses to pit itself against one of the Indian minorities (that is, the Indian Muslims) and cast them as the Other of the nation, instead of confronting the real Other (British rule) face to face. In line with mainstream nationalist discourse, *Kanthapura* forms national identity on the basis of Hinduism. In this formulation, to be an Indian is to be, first of all, a Hindu. Exclusion on the basis of community/religion is, however, not the only exclusion. There are some others along lines of gender, class, caste and age. These multiple exclusions from the figuration of the national subject have been, and continue to be, vigorously contested not only in the (historical) fiction but also in other literary genres of the post-independence period. Scholarly discourses too have questioned what Josna Rege phrases as 'the success of the nationalist synthesis.'[44]

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[44] Rege 81.

In her provocative study, *Myths of the Nation: National Identity and Literary Representation*, Rumina Sethi reads *Kanthapura*, one of the classic texts of the Indian national movement, in terms of its selective (because of class and gender biases) figuration of Indian national identity. According to Sethi, Rao is 'ahistorical' (and the charge is a serious one) in his 'representation of the contemporary politics of the 1930s.'[45] Sethi substantiates her case by way of showing how Rao uses Gandhian ideology in his novel: now upholding, now downplaying, that is, using it to serve his own ideological purpose (ideology appropriating ideology). Conceding that Gandhian philosophy is full of 'contradictions,' caught as it is between 'fixity and resistance,' Sethi argues that *Kanthapura* derives its tensions not so much from these Gandhian contradictions as 'from the way in which they have been written into the novel.'[46] In other words, Rao appropriates Gandhian thought so as to cover up his 'implicit bias towards brahminism which can be seen as a feature of chauvinist Hinduism employed by revivalist nationalists.'[47] Through a detailed analysis of the treatment of the two 'fragments' of the nation – peasants and women – Sethi is able to demonstrate the exclusionary character of the nation Rao constructs in his novel.[48] Deploying a new critical idiom that came into prominence in the wake of (postcolonial) cultural studies in the late 1980s, *Myths of the Nation* is one of those rare works on Indian English fiction that have persistently stressed, contrary to the dominant critical trend of the time, the need 'to pose a series of interruptions in one's conceptualization of a homogeneous cultural identity.'[49]

My approach to *Kanthapura* is both a continuation and an expansion of what Sethi has done in her outstanding work. Although Sethi is aware of the exclusion of minorities (especially Indian Muslims) from the projected nation of *Kanthapura*, she does not pay (in fact, does not choose to pay) these 'fragments' of the nation the amount of attention they really deserve. In my opinion, the question of exclusion/inclusion of the (Indian) Muslims in the novel is as important as the other two exclusions. For Rao would not have been able to write *Kanthapura* at all, or at least not the way in which he did, if he had not chosen to treat the (Indian) Muslims the way in which he has treated them in it.

Kanthapura is set in the (early) 1930s, incontrovertibly one of the most challenging decades in the history of Indian nationalism, marked by the increasing impact of the Gandhian programme of civil disobedience. Responding to the call of M.K. Gandhi to join the programme, a small community living in the village of Kanthapura – which is, according to C.D. Narasimhaiah, '[a]n unmistakable South Indian village' – gets involved in the national struggle for independence under the leadership of Moorthy, the Gandhi of Kanthapura.[50] In the process, the villagers lose everything (they had). Still they remain hopeful that today or tomorrow 'he will bring us Swaraj, the Mahatma. And we shall all be happy.'[51] In ending on an unmistakable

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[45] Rumina Sethi, *Myths of the Nation: National Identity and Literary Representation* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1999) 72.

[46] Sethi 72. The phrase 'fixity and resistance' is the title of the final chapter in Sethi.

[47] Sethi 72.

[48] Sethi is using the term 'fragments' in the sense Chatterjee has used it in his brilliant study of the exclusionary politics of Indian nationalism, *Nation*. I use it in the same sense here.

[49] Sethi 110.

[50] C.D. Narasimhaiah, *Raja Rao* (New Delhi and London: Arnold-Heinemann, 1973) 39.

[51] Rao, *Kanthapura* 181.

note of triumphant optimism, *Kanthapura* is typical of nationalist (historical) fiction. This optimism is indicative of the approach of nationalist historical fiction to the past it deals with: it is neither nostalgic nor critical as revivalist historical fiction tends to be. It is resolutely focused on the future. Elleke Boehmer has drawn attention to the contrastive moods of 'idealistic hope of renewal' and of 'pessimism of late imperial culture' characterising the literatures of the period when *Kanthapura* was published (that is, early twentieth century): the former marking the literatures of peripheral colonies, while the latter, those of the colonial centres.[52]

Both M.K. Naik and Narasimhaiah commend *Kanthapura* for its 'authentic' portrayal of life in rural India.[53] If one accepts rural India as Hindu India, there will be nothing to take issue with. If otherwise, there will possibly be no end of reservations. Even though Narasimhaiah seems more perceptive than Naik in noticing 'socio-economic divisions' in Kanthapura (the village, and, significantly, not in *Kanthapura*, the text), he does not pause to tease out the implications of these divisions in terms of caste/class hierarchy and the power relations they assume.[54] Kanthapura has 'a complex structure' because 'it is there in the village, has always been there, in this land of villages.'[55] By refusing to question socio-economic reality and its reverberations in the daily life of the people concerned, Narasimhaiah accepts no discrepancy between reality/history and its discursive/novelistic representation. In simple terms, Narasimhaiah does not read culture/literature in terms of the ideology it is embedded in or seeks to project. Yet he is not totally unaware that all art is selective. Explaining why Rao does not 'individualize' non-brahmin characters, Narasimhaiah argues 'it is obviously because he doesn't like to crowd his canvas.'[56] As if to apologise for Rao, he adds: 'But even then he would not dismiss [them] without a thought for he has felt for them in their wretchedness.'[57] Not surprisingly, it does not strike Narasimhaiah that the national 'canvas' of *Kanthapura* is absolutely free of Muslim presence.[58] Nor is there representation of any other community in it. The national 'canvas' of *Kanthapura* is crowded only with Hindus, just as the village of the title is an exclusively Hindu village. The only Muslim character in the novel is the policeman Badè Khan, the (surrogate?) villain, who comes from outside. He is *not* a Kanthapurian and is thus *disqualified* to be an Indian. For, on an allegorical plane, Kanthapura is India or, as one critic puts it, 'pre-independence India in miniature.'[59]

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[52] Elleke Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005) 97.

[53] See chapters (respectively 4 and 2) on *Kanthapura* in M.K. Naik, *Raja Rao* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1972) and Narasimhaiah.

[54] Narasimhaiah 39.

[55] Narasimhaiah 39.

[56] Narasimhaiah 40.

[57] Narasimhaiah 40.

[58] Here is John B. Alphonso Karkala, 'Myth, Matrix and Meaning in Literature and in Raja Rao's Novel, *Kanthapura*,' *Perspectives on Raja Rao*, ed. K.K. Sharma (Ghaziabad: Vimal Prakashan, 1980) 76: 'Raja Rao does not use th[e] Judaeo-Christian-Islamic myth of the unknown and unknowable. Instead, to make his tale of modern India more meaningful, he goes deep down into the roots of continuing Indian cultural tradition, and draws out from the most ancient of mythic conceptions.' Like Naik and Narasimhaiah, Karkala also fails to see through the politics of representation (in his case it is the Indian/Hindu myths deployed by Rao) in *Kanthapura*.

[59] Suresh Nath, 'Gandhi and Raja Rao' in Sharma 58.

One is able to form, I contend, a fairly accurate idea of the nation Rao intends to construct in *Kanthapura* from a consideration of the way in which the very first chapter of the novel is structured. In fact, it is possible to read it as the ideological blueprint of the entire novel as far as imagining the (Indian) nation is concerned. The chapter is composed of five small units of unequal length: three basically descriptive units followed by two mainly narrative ones. The first one introduces Kanthapura, the village of the title and also the scene of narrative action; gives its precise geographical location; and ends with an invocation to Kenchamma, the local goddess.[60] The ritual of beginning an (individual/collective) activity by invoking gods/goddesses is a standard Hindu practice (the equivalent Islamic/Muslim practice is to recite a certain verse from the *Qur'an*). Readers are thus positioned as to what to expect in what follows. They are about to enter a Hindu world which is strategically given the name of 'Bharatha' in the final unit in which 'Gandhiji' appears.[61] Brahmins enjoy the topmost position in the Hindu social order. Accordingly, some of the prominent brahmin men and women of Kanthapura are introduced in the second unit, technically the first unit describing the population of the village. It is not without significance that the smallest unit is the third one which deals with the non-brahmin population of the village: pariahs, potters, *sudra*s, weavers, and so on. This confinement of non-brahmin Hindus to a comparatively narrower narrative space is in my view emblematic of the marginal position they actually occupy in a society dominated by the brahmins. With the third unit, the description of Kanthapura and its (Hindu) population ends. One is thus left in no doubt that in Kanthapura there is not a single man or woman belonging to a faith other than Hinduism. In short, Kanthapura is a Hindu village.

The story begins to unfold in the fourth unit which is technically the first narrative unit. Three years back from the time of actual narration, the protagonist of the novel, Moorthy, discovers 'a half-sunk linga,' which is then housed in a temple hastily built for that purpose, triggering off a series of Hindu festivities culminating in *Harikathas*.[62] It is through one of these *Harikathas* (which forms the second half of the fifth unit) that Gandhi enters the small and as yet unpoliticised psyche/world of (Hindu) Kanthapura. The chapter/unit ends with the last-moment entry of the policeman Badè Khan, who is sent by the colonial government to live in Kanthapura so that he can closely monitor the impact of Gandhian politics on the Kanthapurians.

Now, if Kanthapura is India and all its inhabitants are Hindus, the message is clear: the Indian nation-in-the-making is a nation of Hindus, with brahmins and non-brahmins joyfully (though not equally) appropriating 'the nation-space' between themselves.[63] Despite being the last of all the characters to enter Kanthapura, Badè Khan and, by extension, the community he belongs to might have become at least one of the many 'fragments' of the nation, if Rao had willed so, one must add. In choosing

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[60] As a postcolonial concern, geography/space is no less crucial than history/time. As Said has argued: 'The main battle in imperialism is over land, of course.' *Culture* xiii.

[61] Rao, *Kanthapura* 10. The name of Bharatha links India to its Aryan/Hindu past, Bharatha being the name of Lord Rama's younger brother in the epic *Ramayana*. Incidentally, it is also the official Sanskrit name of India.

[62] Rao, *Kanthapura* 7. As Rao himself explains the term in the Notes appended to the American edition of the novel (which I am using here), *Harikatha* means '[l]iterally, story of God.' 189.

[63] The term is from Homi K. Bhabha, 'DissemiNation: time, narrative, and the margins of the modern nation' in Bhabha 294.

Badè Khan to embody the evil – the narrator describes it as 'the serpent of the foreign rule' – against which Gandhi has been expressly sent by Brahma, 'God of Gods,' to wage war, Rao recoils from allowing him/them even that minority status.[64] Although inspired by the kind of politics Gandhi stood for, in its execution *Kanthapura* is both an unhealthy appropriation and an unpleasant distortion of history in that whereas Gandhi had relentlessly worked for Hindu-Muslim harmony to the very end of his life, the author of *Kanthapura* seems to work for a completely opposite outcome.[65] Why else should he have chosen a Muslim character to play the villain in a work whose primary concern is to imagine the Indian nation? With the Congress already in power in 1937, could it be that in 1938, the year of publication of *Kanthapura*, the question of Hindu-Muslim unity was no longer so crucial a vector in the calculus of anticolonial national struggle as it had been even a decade earlier?[66]

At least three very powerful objections can be raised against what I have so far said about Rao and his novel. First, it can be argued that Badè Khan is not the only villain in *Kanthapura*. There are other (Hindu) characters as well in the novel who are depicted in as negative a light as Badè Khan. That is to say, to choose to single out the villainy of Badè Khan is a distortion in itself. Secondly, it is possible to argue that Badè Khan is not meant to represent the Muslim community of India. To take him as such – that is, as a representative Muslim character – is to misinterpret authorial intent. As a member of the colonial police force, he is rather part of the colonial government against which the villagers of Kanthapura inspired by Gandhi and his followers are struggling. If anything, then, Badè Khan should be seen as standing for one of the repressive apparatuses of the colonial state. And finally, the treatment of Badè Khan at the hands of the villagers, it can be further argued, has nothing communal in it. Even if he had been a Hindu, there would have been no difference. In those heady days of anticolonial national struggle, whosoever had acted on behalf of the British would have been treated likewise by the Indians. In other words, the villagers of Kanthapura treat Badè Khan as a villain not because he is a Muslim but because he is a collaborator who works for the perpetuation of colonial hegemony rather than its end. For to serve the 'small alien minority' of white sahibs in any capacity (and Badè Khan is no less than a policeman) is to betray the vast majority of Indians.[67]

Although powerful, these objections are not hard to refute. In what follows, I attempt to construct a counter-argument, mainly focusing on the portrayal of the villainous characters in the novel. As to the first and third objections, it is true that

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[64] Rao, *Kanthapura* 12, 11.

[65] In his English weekly *Young India* of 29 May 1924: 182, for example, Gandhi had written: 'For me the only question for solution before the country is the Hindu-Muslim question ... I see no way of achieving anything in this afflicted country without a lasting heart-unity between the Hindus and the Mussalmans.' For a clear exposition of how Gandhi came to regard Hindu-Muslim unity as 'the greatest question' in the context of Indian national movement, see Judith Brown, *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope* (Delhi: Oxford UP, 1990) 140-44 and 185-89. See also S. Abid Husain, *Gandhiji and Communal Unity* (New Delhi: Orient Longmans, 1969).

[66] See Judith Brown, *Modern India. The Origins of an Asian Democracy*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994) 293-316. For the new leadership who took charge of the national movement after Gandhi, the question of Hindu-Muslim unity did not seem to carry as much weight as it had for Gandhi.

[67] William Dalrymple, *White Mughals: Love and Betrayal in Eighteenth-Century India* (London: Flamingo, 2003) xlvi.

Kanthapura does have villains other than Badè Khan, but it is also true that they are treated *differentially*. The two characters who have no truck with what they call 'Gandhi business' and are bold enough to say so are the priest-turned-moneylender-cum-landowner Bhatta and the Swami, a rather shadowy figure.[68] Both work together (in the name of religion) to foil the success of 'Gandhi business' by all means. Bhatta plays an underhand role in the arrest of Moorthy, while it is the Swami who is to blame for the death of his mother. Yet neither Bhatta nor the Swami appears to be as despicable to the villagers of Kanthapura as Badè Khan who is after all *on duty* there. Bhatta is more fortunate than the Swami in that he is never supposed to have anything to do with the white masters. When the pariah women set his house on fire, it is not because he is finally identified with what Badè Khan has come to represent (that is, the repression of the colonial state) but because his high interest rate has ruined most of them. The narrator explains:

> Well done, well done; it is not for nothing Bhatta lent us money at 18 per cent and 20 per cent interest, and made us bleed … he has starved our stomachs and killed our children … Well done, well done.[69]

In addition, there is a clear tendency both in the author and the narrator to play down the wickedness of both. The narrator is explicit about why Bhatta has become what he is now. In his case, the two sources of corruption are his frequent visits to the city and love of money. Previously, the reader is informed, 'Bhatta was a fine fellow for all that. With his smiles and his holy ashes, we said he would one day own the whole village.'[70] So Bhatta is not a born criminal. Since his aberration is temporary, there is every possibility of his coming back to the path of virtue. The possibility is translated into reality when Rao sends (a supposedly repentant) Bhatta on a pilgrimage to Kashi immediately after the arrest of Moorthy, though the narrator remains a little sceptical about its final outcome.

A slightly different strategy is employed to make light of the foul play of the Swami. Although it is no secret that 'the Swami is a Government man,' the (open) secret is in circulation only in the city.[71] Thus the authority of the Swami as the spiritual leader of his community, though challenged in the city, remains secure in the orbit of Kanthapura. Rangamma, who is 'no village kid,' is chosen 'the third member' of 'the Congress panchayat committee of Kanthapura,' and herself organises a *Sevika Sangha* – that is, an association of female volunteers – has real difficulty to come to terms with the idea that Gandhi wants caste-system to go.[72] She cannot accept that Gandhi has approved of 'all this pollution' resulting from 'the confusion of castes.'[73]

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[68] Rao, *Kanthapura* 26.

[69] Rao, *Kanthapura* 153. The extract shows the extent to which Gandhian ideology has been able to penetrate the psyche of the Kanthapurians. There can be no doubt that the narrator savours the burning of the house with obvious relish, revealing in the process an attitude which can by no means be called Gandhian. Gandhi wanted his followers to extend love in exchange of hatred, an ideal encapsulated in his notion of *ahimsa* (non-violence). In the Gandhian scheme of things, *ahimsa* occupies as important a place as *satyagraha*.

[70] Rao, *Kanthapura* 20.

[71] Rao, *Kanthapura* 89.

[72] Rao, *Kanthapura* 28, 75, 76, 105.

[73] Rao, *Kanthapura* 27.

By doubting the Gandhian stand on the caste question, Rangamma is in effect endorsing, though not as forcefully as Bhatta, the authority of the Swami in such matters. Even Moorthy who suffers considerably as a consequence of his excommunication by the Swami does not characterise him as a villain. In comparison, Badè Khan is not so fortunate. He remains a villain from the moment of his entry into *Kanthapura*/Kanthapura to the very end. Except for one indeterminate moment when he comes to join the *bhajan* that Moorthy asks Rangamma to organise after his fast, Badè Khan is never allowed to betray a single redeeming feature. The recurrent use of animal imagery in the characterisation of Badè Khan is in effect a refusal to grant him humanity.[74] He 'growl[s],' 'prowl[s],' is a 'bearded monkey,' a 'bearded goat,' a 'dog,' and so on.[75] Badè Khan is further divested of humanity by way of metonyms/synecdoches: often he is no more than 'a beard, a lathi, and a row of metal buttons.'[76]

The second objection that there is nothing communal in the characterisation of Badè Khan is also easily refuted. In his depiction of Badè Khan, Rao *is* prejudicial, subscribing to the stereotypes of the (Indian) Muslims generated by colonial discourse, a tendency from which his portrayal of Hindu characters is remarkably free.[77] Moorthy, for example, is a man of action.[78] Instead of being resigned to fate, he takes responsibility for what he himself does as well as what others do under his leadership. His decision to 'fast for three days' after the disastrous outcome of the first skirmish is a result of his realisation that 'much violence ha[s] been done because of him.'[79] This image of a responsible Indian/Hindu is the obverse of what one comes across in colonial discourse (for example, in the short stories of Rudyard Kipling). In contrast, true to the colonial image of Indian Muslims, Badè Khan is given both to sensuality and violence.[80] As if to emphasise how strong these (Muslim) proclivities

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[74] Other characters are also compared to animals. But the comparison works to stress some positive aspect of the character concerned. For example, Moorthy is compared with 'a noble cow.' Rao, *Kanthapura* 5.

[75] Rao, *Kanthapura* 13, 19, 59, 60, 69.

[76] Rao, *Kanthapura* 31. In 'An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*,' Chinua Achebe detects Joseph Conrad deploying the same strategy to dehumanise the Africans in his novella *Heart of Darkness* (1902). It is 'rare' to find in the book, according to Achebe, 'an African who is not just limbs or rolling eyes.' *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch (New York and London: WW Norton, 2001) 1786.

[77] Both images are to be found in *A Passage to India*, the classic Anglo-Indian text. Dr Aziz and Dr Panna Lal are both stereotypes. One is an image of Islamic/Muslim militancy and sensuality, while the other is one of Indian/Hindu clumsiness and irresponsibility. For a perceptive discussion of Muslim stereotypes in Anglo-Indian fiction, see Benazir Durdana, *Muslim India in Anglo-Indian Fiction* (Dhaka: writers.ink, 2008), particularly Chapter 4: 'Dehumanization of Muslim Characters.' According to Durdana, Anglo-Indian fiction is full of 'stereotypes of the amoral, libidinous and violent Muslim.' 11. Of the three characteristics of amorality, lust and aggression, Badè Khan is deficit in none, though the last two are perhaps more pronounced in his character(isation) than the first. See also Mushirul Hasan, *Legacy of a Divided Nation: India's Muslims since Independence* (London: Hurst & Company, 1997) 25-36 and Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978).

[78] In his vision of the Mahatma, Moorthy is repeatedly exhorted to act: to seek truth, to forgo foreign cloth and university (that is, English education), and to work for 'the dumb millions of the villages.' Rao, *Kanthapura* 34.

[79] Rao, *Kanthapura* 61.

[80] See note 77 above.

are, they are made to come to the fore on the very day of Khan's arrival in Kanthapura. The narrator reports:

> At the temple square he [Badè Khan] gave such a reeling kick to the one-eared cur that it went groaning through the Potters' street, groaning and barking through the Potters' street and the Pariah street, till all the dogs began to bark, and all the cocks began to crow, and a donkey somewhere raised a fine welcoming bray.[81]

There is certainly a touch of humour in the effect of the kick on the other animals. However, contrary to what humour frequently does, here it does not work to lessen the culpability of the agent of violence, for it is an act of heedless violence: together the scene (a place of Hindu worship) and the victim (a mute animal and 'one-eared' at that) of violence deprive the humour of its intended effect. In fact, it is held back at the precise moment from what it might have achieved in terms of comic relief, and then turned on its head instead. In the process, humour becomes black humour. After all, who would welcome an animal, if not its own species? It is not for nothing that there is such a preponderance of animal imagery in the portrayal of Badè Khan. If it were humour pure and simple, Rao would not allow his narrator to talk about the lechery of Badè Khan immediately after she has so artfully captured his propensity for violence.

With nowhere to live in Kanthapura, Badè Khan goes 'straight' to the nearby Skeffington Coffee Estate where the owner of the Estate (a European) gives him a hut to live in.[82] No sooner has the problem of accommodation been fixed, Khan goes out and procures 'a Pariah woman among the lonely ones.'[83] The woman '[brings] along her clay pots and her mats and her brooms,' and makes the best use of each of these items: in addition to doing cleaning and cooking for Khan, she gives him 'a very warmful [sic] bed' as well.[84] One may still remain doubtful if Rao is really working with the colonial stereotypes of Indian Muslims, for to generalise from a single example is always suspect. But doubt gives place to conviction when 'a young Badè Khan' comes to join 'the bearded one.'[85] Khan the junior repeats what Khan the senior has done previously: 'he too [takes] a hut and a woman and settle[s] down in the Skeffington Coffee Estate.'[86] Lechery is a Muslim monopoly in *Kanthapura*!

The communal element in the portrayal of Badè Khan is too marked to be missed. Of all his physical features, none is as frequently singled out as his beard. The recurrence of the feature is so obtrusive that one must pause to think out its possible significance. One must pause to ask, 'What is extraordinary about the beard of Badè Khan, an ordinary policeman?' It is extraordinary only in the sense that it is one of the most visible markers of a (pious) Muslim in the Indian subcontinent. Symbolically, the beard of a Muslim is taken to be as sacred as the holy thread of a (brahmin) Hindu. To jeer at a Muslim's beard would generate as great an outrage as to laugh at a

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[81] Rao, *Kanthapura* 15.
[82] Rao, *Kanthapura* 15.
[83] Rao, *Kanthapura* 15.
[84] Rao, *Kanthapura* 15.
[85] Rao, *Kanthapura* 117.
[86] Rao, *Kanthapura* 117.

(brahmin) Hindu's sacred thread.[87] In both cases, the insult is likely to be judged on a communal rather than personal level. On most occasions in *Kanthapura*, Badè Khan is insulted with specific reference to his beard. In due course, the tendency degenerates into a crude equation: to defy Badè Khan is to pick at his beard. In the very first scuffle between the Gandhians (the nationalist force headed by Moorthy) and the non-Gandhians (the anti-nationalist colonial force led by Badè Khan), both parties engage in 'a battle of oaths,' hurling obscenities at each other, whose targets remain unspecified.[88] The only exception is Badè Khan who is identified by no other means but by his beard: 'Oh, you bearded monkey.'[89] Eventually the parties come to blows:

> Badè Khan swings round and–bang!–his lathi has hit Moorthy and his hands are on Moorthy's tuft, and Rachanna and Madanna cry out, 'At him!' and they all fall on Badè Khan and tearing away the lathi, bang it on his head. And the maistri comes to pull them off and whips them, and the women fall on the maistri and tear his hair, while Moorthy cries out, 'No beatings, sisters. No beatings, in the name of the Mahatma.' But the women are fierce and they will tear *the beard* from Badè Khan's face.[90]

How may one explain why the women choose to tear the maistri's *hair* but Badè Khan's *beard*? Is there really nothing communal in it? In attracting the violence of the non-violent Gandhians, the beard of Badè Khan becomes a site more of communal violence than of anticolonial national struggle. The sub-text of communal prejudice gets exposed here.

It is important to note that *Kanthapura*, though written between 1929 and 1933, was actually published in 1938. As can be seen from the discussion of the historical context of the novel above, by then the political situation in India had greatly changed. Of the new developments, the most remarkable one was the rapidly shifting positions of rulers and ruled in terms of political power, a phenomenon more true of the Congress than of any other political party of the time. By virtue of being already in power in the majority of provinces of British India (seven out of eleven) in 1937, the Congress could legitimately claim itself to be the voice of all India.[91] It was thus in a position to define, if not dictate, the terms of negotiation with its colonial counterpart. At a time when Indian nationalism was clearly the more legitimate political force than its imperial opponent, what need could there possibly be for Rao to choose a dark-skinned Muslim instead of a fair-skinned sahib as the villain of *Kanthapura*, a novel much celebrated for its depiction of anticolonial national

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[87] It is true that Hindu ascetics and gurus also keep a (long) beard. But they do so in order to create a halo of otherworldliness about themselves. For a Hindu, to keep a beard is *not* a religious obligation. By contrast, a Muslim grows a beard as part of his commitment to the *sunnah*. Put simply, the Arabic term *sunnah* means what the Prophet of Islam said and did. In Islam, following *sunnah* is no less important than following the *Qur'an*. In terms of religious significance, a Muslim's beard is possibly comparable to the Five Ks of the Sikhs: *kēs* (uncut hair), *kangha* (small comb), *karā* (circular iron bracelet), *kirpān* (dagger), *kacchā* (special undergarment).

[88] Rao, *Kanthapura* 59.

[89] Rao, *Kanthapura* 59.

[90] Rao, *Kanthapura* 59. Emphasis added.

[91] See note 66 above.

struggle in the Indian context? At the turn of the nineteenth century when Indian nationalism was just beginning to make itself felt at an all-India level for the first time in the history of India, it was apt that its exponents judiciously avoided direct confrontation with the most formidable imperial power in modern history. For several decades after its birth in 1885, for example, the Congress practiced what historians have sardonically called the politics of petitions and prayers, that is, a moderate form of negotiation. In the arena of culture, the articulations of nationalism were as muted. In order to articulate its call for national regeneration, revivalist historical fiction (mostly written at the turn of the nineteenth century) had to combine allegory with romance, apparently undermining historicity only to bring about (for the nation) the moment of its entry into history. (That moment arrives in nationalist historical fiction.) Evidently the times of *Kanthapura* were very different from those of revivalist historical fiction in both Britain and India. Even though the Second World War, which would ultimately cause the dissolution of the European empires, was just looming on the horizon, Britain, shattered by the trauma of the First World War and shaken by the economic depression of the 1930s, was more or less in a subdued mood both at home and in her colonies where the tendency to resort to repression could still be seen every now and then. The Government of India Act of 1935 is an eloquent testimony to the fact that Britain was indeed in a mood of conciliation in India.

Yet the author of *Kanthapura* is hesitant to call a spade a spade when there is apparently no need for it! If it did not arise from an overt need for narrative improvisation, one cannot but ask, then what else could possibly have led Rao to deflect white villainy onto brown skin in *Kanthapura*? Why does the novel have a Muslim villain at all? Badè Khan is, in the final analysis, an inverse projection of what R.K. Ramaswamy, the narrator-protagonist in *The Serpent and the Rope*, terms 'Brahminic autocracy.'[92] In simple terms, 'Brahminic autocracy' is what Sethi has called 'chauvinist Hinduism,' coupled with upper-caste male/patriarchal prejudices. It has four basic components. First, Hinduism is far superior to any other religion of the world, including even those born of Hinduism itself (e.g. Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism). While the other religions (especially the monotheistic ones such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) seek God, Hinduism alone seeks Truth. Secondly, Truth is *not* readily available to all Hindus. Only the brahmins have a privileged access to it. Thirdly, Truth has a masculine face. And finally, Hindus are the only legitimate inhabitants of India. Rao is proud of his Aryan ancestors but seems oblivious of the fact that the Aryans themselves were outsiders. For Rao the arrival of the Aryans in India is not a source of irritation, while it *is* in the case of Others, especially the Muslims.

One may argue that the Rao of *Kanthapura* is not the Rao of *The Serpent and the Rope*, if only because the two novels are separated by a period of more than two decades.[93] True, but it is equally true that the Rao of the first novel is also the Rao of the second in embryo.[94] If *The Serpent and the Rope* is a full-blown illustration of

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[92] Rao, *The Serpent* 148.

[93] *The Serpent and the Rope* came out in 1960 and won the Shahitya Akademi Award of the year.

[94] Rao offers an interesting contrast to Rabindranath Tagore. Unlike Tagore, who moved from the lyricism of earlier years to the prose of later years, from the ivory tower of art to the sordid reality of life, from individual longing to collective belonging, from escape to engagement, Rao moves the other way round, from politics to metaphysics, from a half-hearted dalliance with Marxism to a full-fledged

'Brahminic autocracy,' its intimations are unmistakable in *Kanthapura*, especially in its conceptualisation of the Indian nation.[95] It is perfectly in tune with the later development of Rao that the nation in *Kanthapura* is selective in terms of caste/class, community, and gender. While the 'fragments' of the nation Sethi deals with – peasants and women – have at least been recognised as 'fragments,' the community of Indian Muslims is not (deemed authentic enough to be) even a 'fragment' of the nation Rao envisions in his novel. If the absence of Muslim men and women in the village of Kanthapura is one proof of the exclusionary logic informing the imagining of the nation in *Kanthapura*, the vilification of Badè Khan, the only Muslim character of any consequence in the novel, is another.

IV. Conclusion

In *Inventing India: A History of India in English-Language Fiction*, Ralph Crane discusses Rao's *Kanthapura* along with E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* and Ruth Prawer Jhabvala's *Heat and Dust* in a chapter significantly titled 'Bridges.'[96] The grouping is premised on two assumptions. First, the historical period of all the three novels is more or less the same. Secondly, together they offer a comprehensive view of the then India. If Forster's India is predominantly British, Rao's is primarily 'Indian,' while Jhabvala's is perhaps both. As Crane reads them, all the three novels are concerned with building bridges (hence the title of the chapter): *A Passage to India* and *Heat and Dust* between East and West, while *Kanthapura* between 'the various Indian communities.'[97] Given the communal configuration of the Indian nation-in-the-making in *Kanthapura*, it is difficult to accept the conclusion Crane draws about the novel. To be true to the spirit of the work in question, one has to admit that the India in *Kanthapura* is *not* 'Indian India' but *Hindu* India and that it builds bridges *not* between 'the various Indian communities' but between the various Hindu castes. The nation in *Kanthapura* is a nation of Hindus, not of Indians.

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dedication to Vedanta, from a brief affection for Gandhian ideology to a lasting attachment to whatever Gandhi opposed in Hinduism such as 'Brahminic autocracy.' In short, while Tagore grows in humanism and liberalism, Rao in chauvinism and parochialism.

[95] K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar gets it right when he argues that '*Kanthapura*, *The Serpent and the Rope*, and *The Cat and Shakespeare* make a trilogy, and present a steady progression in Raja Rao's own *sādhanā*.' 'Literature as *Sadhana*: A Note on Raja Rao's *The Cat and Shakespeare*,' in Sharma 108.

[96] See chapter 4: 'Bridges' in Ralph J. Crane, *Inventing India: A History of India in English-Language Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1992) 75-99.

[97] Crane 99.