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Widows and Concubines: Tradition and Deviance in the Women of Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*

By M. E. P. Ranmuthugala¹

Abstract

Raja Rao's 1938 novel *Kanthapura* depicts the impact of Gandhian thought on women and men, and this research focuses on the novel's fashioning of female identities in terms of nationalism as espoused by Mahatma Gandhi. This analytical research paper hypothesises that although women constitute a considerable part of the narrative and have political agency, their identity is moulded by men to serve men's nationalist interests: The paper contends that women must undergo transformation and refashioning of their identities for nationalism. The novel provides a strong argument for Mahatma Gandhi's political ethic of empowering people and engages with diverse issues such as nationalism, religion, caste, sexuality, and feminism. Using close reading, this paper focuses on nationalism through attention to concepts of imagined communities, women's education, and modernism and traditionalism. In addition, the paper draws heavily from gender and feminist theory along with performativity theory especially in relation to the asexuality assigned to women by Mahatma Gandhi. The goal of the paper is to understand if Rao's novel *Kanthapura* is a feminist text that allows agency for women especially within the two discourses of politics and nationalism.

Keywords: Nationalism, Feminism, Sexuality, Gandhi, Political Agency, Identity, Raja Rao, *Kanthapura*

Introduction

Constantly hailed as depicting a microcosm of India, Raja Rao's 1938 novel *Kanthapura* details Mahatma Gandhi's freedom struggle through a fictional village. The novel describes the castes of India and the different ideologies that existed in India in the 1930s, situating these within the larger frame of the nationalist struggle. I base this essay on the impact of Gandhian thought on Indian women and men, with a focus on the fashioning of female identities within the nationalist discourse. I aim to understand if Rao's novel *Kanthapura* is a feminist text that allows agency for women especially within the two discourses of politics and nationalism. In order to provide context of the larger South Asian reality, I will compare the nationalist struggle in India to the nationalist struggle in Sri Lanka. This comparison is due to the similarities in the South Asian fashioning of nationalism through an appropriation of the female body.

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Fanon regards the development of a national consciousness and national culture as inherent aspects of, and necessary steps towards, decolonisation. Given the newly created, contested space of nationalism in South Asia, and the creation of nationalism as being against the colonizer (Radhakrishnan 77-95), I felt that women's bodies were appropriated to serve men's nationalist goals. This is true of the nationalist process in Sri Lanka, where Anagarika Dharmapala (and the father of the Sinhala novel, Piyadasa Sirisena) created nationalism through a demand for a vegetarian, teetotaler nation where women wore saris and the girl children wore lama saris to show decorum (Thilakaratne). Ranga posits the idea that Sirisena considered the "novel as a tool of generating public opinion and stirring passion in order to propagate cultural nationalism", and his "form of nationalism was inspired by religion." However, Sirisena went further: Amarasekara (7) says, "In Piyadasa Sirisena, woman as an instrument of change is a given, he sees woman as the only effective instrument of change; he sees it as a prerequisite of a role to be enacted by woman." The same vision for women can be seen in Rao, who attempts to make women the bearers of the new nation. Thus, I contend in this assessment that women must undergo transformation and refashioning of their identities due to the stance of the author and I analyse nationalism through attention to concepts of imagined communities, women's education, and modernism and traditionalism using a comparison of the village and the city.

The paper addresses the three research questions of "What was the impact of Gandhian thought on women and men?", "How were female identities fashioned in terms of nationalism espoused by Mahatma Gandhi and followers?", and "Is there a refashioning of their own identities by the women?" I hypothesise that although women constitute a considerable part of the story and appear to have agency, their identities were moulded by men to serve their own nationalist interests.

To understand the novel's engagement with women, we must first understand Raja Rao's own engagement with the ideologies he discusses in the novel as well as his personal biases and stances. Hailing from a South Indian Brahminic family, Rao spent most of his adult life abroad, studying at the Sorbonne in Paris and teaching at the University of Texas in the United States of America (The Raja Rao Endowment). However, he was in India in the 1930s, where he learned from and followed Mahatma Gandhi, whose insistence on non-violence had a lasting impact on the young author. The events he witnessed as a follower of Mahatma Gandhi are faithfully represented in the novel: The Salt March (Rao 124), non-cooperation (Rao 74-82), and the picketing of the toddy booths (Rao 131) are notable instances where Rao bridges his fictional world with the real India of his time. Similarly, his Brahminic background is reflected in the novel, where the female narrator, who is a Brahmin, is somewhat unaware of the other castes in the village (Rao 5). Also, the narrator talks more knowledgably about the practices, rituals and the actions of the Brahmin quarter, which is not mirrored when she talks about the other castes and quarters. The Brahminic way of life and their codes disallowed them from mingling with those from lower castes. Thus, his understanding of the Brahminic side of the village far exceeds his knowledge of the other quarters, and his narrator repeats this understanding. In this way, Rao allows us an insight into his position as a biased author from the outset.

Rao's fascination with Mahatma Gandhi is reflected in the novel in Moorthy's own idolising of Mahatma Gandhi. Moorthy propagates Gandhian thought in the village much like Rao propagated Gandhian thought through his novels. Both men are the voices and words through which Gandhian thought reached the respective populace. The same phenomenon of a writer promoting a visionary's ideas was repeated in Sri Lanka, where Piyadasa Sirisena propagated Dharmapala's thoughts through his novels (Thilakaratne). Thus, the author takes on the role of

activist and actor, creating a utopia the populace must achieve. It is the author's self-imposed role to faithfully replicate, circulate and make popular the visionary's (Mahatma Gandhi's or Dharmapala's) ideals. Thus, the tropes and themes that the author uses become important as a theme on its own: Rao's stance is the stance of Mahatma Gandhi, and the final product is their view of what India should be. Rao takes India through a transformation with the novel. What he creates then is what Mahatma Gandhi and Rao think is an ideal India. In such a light, the novel must be critically analysed for the agency it allows women because it is through such an analysis that we can understand the agency allowed for women in the new India Mahatma Gandhi proposes.

Analysis

The novel describes in detail the daily lives of an isolated group of villagers, their idiosyncrasies, the community's political structure, and the religious and moral codes that govern the villagers (Rao). The novel positions them at the periphery of the nationalist struggle taking place in India. Their interests are immediate and micro-economic, their lives shaped by historical and religious oral stories. However, Rao ties the nationalist discourse to the village and its villagers through the narrative's central role, Moorthy. This city-educated man from the village brings his ideologies and his complete faith in the Mahatma to the village, and through discussions of impassioned eloquence, he convinces the villagers to join in the nationalist struggle. Thus, we see a shift in the ideologies of the retiring villagers.

The novel is peopled by widows, concubines, men, wives, and children. However, tradition and deviance within the novel is not clear cut when critically reading beyond the surface: The widows do not necessarily shave their heads or refrain from wearing jewellery (Rao 10), and the concubines do not engage in overt and performative sexual deviance that disrupts village life. The widows are vocal and engaged with community activity. They read scripture (Rao 16, 107), take on the nationalist struggle when called on to do so, and Rangamma reads the newspaper to remain abreast of global news (Rao 35-36). The concubines play a secondary role to the widows, but the term concubine is used if a widow is believed to overstep boundaries: Ratna is said to part "her hair to the left like a concubine" (Rao 37). The widows walk a tightrope between respectability and notoriety or ignominy, and they play (or appear to play) both widow and "concubine" based on their actions or the stance they take. Here, as in the novel, I loosely define the word concubine to mean the deviant woman who transgresses accepted norms and behaviour. However, the character of the concubine is held to be equally important, since a concubine is the single remaining person in the village at the end of the novel, which is a scathing commentary on deviance. Given that every villager except the concubine leaves the village, the author argues for the discontinuation of the old system as well as for a removal of deviance. The villagers go to a new village and build their lives there, leaving behind this concubine and her deviance. Thus, the novel aligns itself away from deviance, thus becoming a commentary for traditional womanhood. It is then traditional women who are expected to survive in the new India Mahatma Gandhi and Rao propose. The deviant woman is not acceptable in this new India. In the following sections, I will discuss this idea in detail, connecting it to Mahatma Gandhi's and the author's own opinion of what the Indian woman should be.

Complexities of Indian Womanhood and the Role of Women in *Kanthapura*

Women have historically been placed in the inner domain. Radhakrishnan (84), talking about the inner/outer distinction, says nationalist rhetoric makes “woman” the pure and ahistorical signifier of “interiority” and that in fighting the outside, something within gets even more repressed and “woman” becomes the mute but necessary allegorical ground for the transactions of nationalist history.” Women occupied a limited space in Indian politics pre-1930 (Chatterjee). Their role was consistently seen as being within the private space of the house, where traditional domesticity was praised and deviance was rejected. Women were meant by society to tend to the needs of the men and the household. Men did not believe that women had political opinions of their own. This is replicated in the novel where the widows are constantly seen cooking, cleaning and washing, taking care of their men by placing the men’s needs ahead of their own (Rao).

Women were subjugated through both folklore and written history. Bhudep Mukhopadhyay’s 1882 tract “Paribarik Prabandha” says, “Women cultivate and cherish... godlike qualities far more than men” (Chatterjee 125). Thus, Hindu women were given such role models as would ensure chastity and virtue (i.e. Sita), which would keep them tied to their homes. They were called goddess, not partner; they were never the equal of their husbands; and women were not allowed to be single or flawed (Chatterjee). The role of the mother as the goddess ultimately triumphed in the thoughts of Indian society at large.

In *Kanthapura*, we see both the traditional woman who is not allowed to forget her duty to her man irrespective of her role in the Sevika Sangha (Rao 110) and the new woman who fights bravely against attackers and traditionalism. They fight, march, barricade toddy shops, and read scripture (Rao 107), but there are instances where the modernity they exhibit is flouted by the traditionalism they bow to: They do not forge separate identities but incorporate Gandhian/nationalist thought into their existing identity of caretaker/mother. In *Kanthapura* too, most women are given the tag ‘Amma,’ which emphasises the maternal, feminine, even Goddess-like aspect of women. Indians have perennially dichotomised between the Goddess and the whore (Chatterjee 125): women are taught to emulate goddesses in daily life leading to a dehumanising of women and effectively restricting expression of emotion and sexuality. Even cinematic productions such as *Mother India* (Khan) pandered to this idea. Thus, women became asexual, in contrast to men who, according to Mondal had to “rise above” their sexuality (Mondal 927). Chatterjee says the image of woman as goddess or mother served to erase her sexuality in the world outside home (Chatterjee 131). Mahatma Gandhi himself always felt women were asexual. In a faithful representation of the existing dichotomy, in *Kanthapura*, Venkamma chastises Rangamma when she goes to the lawyer’s house in the city for a few days: her widow status is converted to that of a whore or a deviant woman. Venkamma says “oh! This widow has now begun to live openly with her men” (Rao 101). This incident highlights how thin the thread is by which a woman is moored to society.

In such a pervasively discriminatory era, Rao writes about widows (a perennially disadvantaged and repressed group) and other women appropriating or filling the role of the freedom fighter. He bestows on them agency as well as might. He creates an equally benevolent and vengeful female deity (Kenamma) to guard their village, which must be contrasted to the non-violent male political leadership of Moorthy and Mahatma Gandhi. This deity and the women of the Sthala Puranas provide the widows and other women strong female role models to emulate, especially much later when they engage in their own battle for India. The women read the Sthala Puranas (localised historic tales) (Rao) and the scriptures (first with a scholar and then by themselves) (Rao 107). These stories, which link to the larger Mahabaratha and Ramayana, allow

them to identify with the few strong women of popular myths and history, but also caution them that power lies with the men. These tales lead them to depend on others for salvation. However, once the women begin to read the scriptures for themselves, a change can be observed in that the women become stronger and more politically conscious (Rao 107-108). The narrative changes to include some autonomy for the women of *Kanthapura*, where they choose to engage in the nationalist struggle through a rational, thought-out process.

This engagement with women is fascinating because it shows the complexities of creating a space for women in the nationalist struggle that does not negatively affect the traditional roles the women were given. The women are important in the struggle because they bring in reinforcements, they are committed, and without them the struggle is not complete. However, the emphasis is always made that the men set the agenda (Moorthy convinces the women to join the struggle and Mahatma Gandhi propagated nonviolence), and that they hold the power. The stories from their myths talk about strong men and passive women with a few exceptions. The women are given possible role models but they are disproportionate. The larger number come from devout, devoted women. However, the tone changes with the introduction of Kenchamma, who is both fair and vengeful, and is also strong and powerful. The village women can aspire to be like her, and therein lies the complexity of the engagement. The author provides both arguments. However, at the end, he subverts this two-sided argument by removing everyone from the village except the deviant concubine, who has the powerful Goddess for company. All other women return to traditional settings in the new village, which in this situation is the mirror image of the new India that Mahatma Gandhi helped birth. That creation of a new India through a male is also a subversion of female roles as the woman's role as mother of creation is stripped.

Thus, I question the women's engagement with nationalism, their agency, and the representation of women in the text irrespective of the change seen in the imagined communities (Anderson) the women create with the mythical women. Once the women are engaged, they create these imagined communities with Kamala Devi, Sarojini Naidu, Annie Besant and their Russian counterparts (Rao 109) rather than with the pious and husband-worshipping Sita, thus forging their own identity as freedom fighters. In addition, they identify with the "Rajput women (who) fought with their husbands, and if their husbands were defeated ... they prepared the pyre ... and finally jumped into the flames" (Rao 109). These Rajput women can be problematic because they jump into the husband's pyre, but the women identify with the power the Rajput women have, their fights alongside their husbands, and also the choice they make to jump into the pyre rather than face defeat. Choice in itself is an argument for agency. The women choose their own ending, which is a powerful stance to take. Additionally, the identification with these women such as the Rajput women and Sarojini Naidu is not merely in terms of the national interest. They identify with women who actively work for their nations, including the Russian women.

However, I argue that this engagement in itself is not organic because it is foisted on them. They were made aware of the nationalist struggle and convinced of the need to join it by Moorthy. Moorthy is the force behind whom these women rally. It is his understanding of the Mahatma, his vision for the village, and his ideas that push these women to activism. Ultimately, they participate in the struggle because of Moorthy. In that engagement, I see a lack of agency for the women, which is in contrast to their identification with the Rajput women, who had agency and made their own choices. However, the argument about agency is complex and needs to be addressed in depth separately. In this lack of agency, they become the pawns of the nationalist struggle where they are refashioned to fit the need of the male leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi.

Mahatma Gandhi's Women

The two statements “Gandhi’s political ethic is to empower the people in a way that will enable them to lead themselves” and, “Gandhi’s model of independent India makes the people the teachers...” (Radhakrishnan, 1992, 89) are important in understanding Mahatma Gandhi’s politics and Mahatma Gandhi as a political actor. The novel *Kanthapura* is a strong argument for Mahatma Gandhi’s political ethic of empowering people, for it argues that the villagers are capable of managing their village and of concerted political action. Moreover, the villagers appear to show agency by acting of their own free will to further the nationalist struggle. In his bid to create nationalism, Mahatma Gandhi brought together all communities, and in doing so, he made women asexual and created a new persona for women. Calling for men, women, and untouchables to all be part of the struggle, Mahatma Gandhi called untouchables Hari jan, or children of the god Hari fighting the same battle as the Brahmins and the other castes, and he saw women as renunciators. Widows in this text are the epitome of the asexual, because their creed does not allow them to be sexually active once widowed, and they are renunciators because they renounce worldly pleasures when they are widowed. Rao, as a supporter of Mahatma Gandhi, incorporates many of Mahatma Gandhi’s ideas into the novel such as his ideas about women and their position in society, their education, the need for *Swaraj* or home-rule, use of fasting as a political action, and the use of non-violent non-cooperation to achieve goals. Rao chooses a village that is much removed from central politics to bring home the ideologies of nationalism and Gandhian thought. He uses the village elders to inculcate values in the younger generation, and uses Harikatha (Rao 14) to teach religion and history, so that the villagers are reminded of their capabilities as Indians. He uses his text to propel people to action. In doing so, he makes the women the focus of the novel.

Indubitably, women had a prominent role in Mahatma Gandhi’s campaigns. He was constantly surrounded by women, both as followers and as care givers. Rao mirrored this in Rangamma, Ratna, Narsamma, and a host of other women who follow Moorthy but who also tend to Moorthy’s material needs by providing him food and shelter. The use of a female narrator is equally thought provoking, given the common practice of using a male narrator and the idea that nationalism is a man’s area of expertise while the private domain is the woman’s space. “An ideology of separate spaces for men and women” has always held sway in literature and everyday lives (Morgan 203). Hence, women’s political activity has been given little prominence but in *Kanthapura*, women show political interest, and in the last 30 pages of the book, political acumen and agency. They come into their own once all the men have been incarcerated. They find some agency because of the lack of men to take action. It is with the men’s incarceration that the women start to think about political action and engage in active politics (Rao 155-185).

Even though a female deity protects them, and a female leads their charge (both Ratna and Rangamma play large roles), the women are seen on many occasions “wringing their hands” wondering what they should do next because they have no understanding of the required action, and they feel they cannot make a decision without their men to guide them. In fact, I feel that they know only their household duties: they cook, clean, and look after their families, living and dying for them: Narsamma dies because of Moorthy’s excommunication since she could not define herself as anything but a Brahmin mother (Rao 49). They may be involved in a national struggle, yet they can only sleep peacefully if the “men were not far and their eyelids did not shut” (Rao 156), and the women continue to do their duty to their families in addition to their own nationalist struggle. They believe that “it is no use belonging to the Gandhi group” otherwise (Rao 110). They blindly incorporate Gandhian/nationalist thought into their existing identities without refashioning an identity. In fact, this is an argument against Rao’s depiction of women: He is contrasting these

village women to the modern women of the cities who, according to Chatterjee (124), did not even make the beds. These modern city women did not do what traditional women did: They were worldly and they were not concerned with household chores. Conversely, the traditional women, were focused on the house and the family. Rao depicts the traditional woman as better, but with some political activity. Thus, he is contributing to the creation of a new ideal woman, by saying that these village women (who are engaged in the nationalist struggle but have not forgotten their traditional duties) are the women to emulate.

To show the superiority of Indian culture contrasted to the western, Indian nationalists created the idea of a pure, moral, virtuous woman, which effectively curtailed the women's freedom and sexuality. This is a fashioning of female identities by men to suit their needs. Given Rao's ideas of women are conditioned by Mahatma Gandhi's, in this text, the widows play the role of the Indian woman who lacks the freedom to enjoy her sexuality but must take up arms to fight in the nationalist struggle. They must prove their virtue and live within the boundaries of the new ideals that Mahatma Gandhi (and Rao) proposed.

Extending the argument about the widows, it is interesting that Rao uses widows as his main characters, knowing that they are usually shunned from society, which leads to the question of why he would use them knowing their social position within the traditional Indian society he writes about. One possible reason is that Mahatma Gandhi decreed equality for all: Men, women and untouchables alike. However, I feel that the overriding reason is that Rao does so because of Mahatma Gandhi's idealisation of 'woman as renunciator' which was the final phase of his discourse on women and which was prominent in the 1930s. Brahmin widows led an enforced celibate life and would have been perfect candidates for Mahatma Gandhi's campaign. They are the embodiment of Mahatma Gandhi's idea of women, which was, quite clearly, conditioned by existing discourses on women and their conduct. Thus, I feel that Mahatma Gandhi did little to change conditions for women ultimately, although I believe he furthered their cause more than any other in recent history.

It is inarguable that Rao's ideas of women were conditioned by Mahatma Gandhi's. Nowhere is this more prominent than in the ending: The novel ends with a single "concubine" surviving in the village, which all the widows and other villagers have left (Rao 185). I feel that this offers many readings. On one hand, only a sexually deviant woman could survive alone: all others must, at the end of the nationalist struggle, return to domesticity however emancipated they might have been through Mahatma Gandhi's ideology. Following their service to their country, the women must return to their traditional roles and their place within the household as they could only enter politics and the public sphere to serve the national cause. Their public role is limited to serving a larger national goal. They are not expected to continue in their public roles or to engage in politics once the freedom struggle concludes. Conversely, it is possible that what Rao argues is that that what is detrimental (to society) must die, for the good of the independence to flourish. The bad elements of the village are purged through the struggles and the villagers leave (Rao 183-185), symbolising their renunciation of evil/tradition, etc., and their new lives elsewhere denote new beginnings.

Conversely, it is also possible to argue that a transgressing concubine, who has no education, cannot move forward in the new India that Mahatma Gandhi envisioned. It is only the New Woman of the twentieth century who can successfully make the transition. If this is so, women's education and her new duties as envisioned by Mahatma Gandhi are important matters to address. The following section focuses on this new woman, her education and her sexuality.

The New Woman

The woman that Rao and Mahatma Gandhi envisioned was the new woman of India, who differentiated herself from the common woman in terms of her sexuality, virtue, and dedication to the house. She was also learned, thus combining the modern with her traditional upbringing.

Mahatma Gandhi made adequate use of the concept of the asexual, goddess-like woman, the mother of the new India. In his belief that women were asexual, he created this concept of women as the pure and immaculate bearers of the new nation. The new woman differentiated herself from the “common” woman in terms of her sexuality, her virtue and her dedication to the house. This carries connotations of the Victorian woman, which possibly influenced the ideology behind the New Woman of India that appeared in the early 20th century. This concept of the new woman derives from the chastity of Venkamma but without her coarseness and temper. The new woman was to be gentle-spoken, educated, and chaste.

In terms of sexuality, the image of woman as goddess or mother served to erase her sexuality in the world outside the home (Chatterjee 131). This is one reason why Mahatma Gandhi himself always felt women were asexual and that only men had to overcome their sexuality (Mondal 927). However, in *Kanthapura*, Venkamma chastises Rangamma when she goes to live with the lawyer: since she is neither mother nor married woman, it is easier to think she can be a whore. Venkamma articulates this when she chastises Rangamma for “living openly with her men” (Rao 101). Any deviance on the part of the woman will effectively remove her from society or place her reputation at risk.

It is interesting to note that “formal education became not only acceptable but, in fact, a requirement for the new badramahila” who was the representation of this new-found nationalism (Chatterjee 128). It was (considered) possible for a woman to acquire the cultural refinements afforded by modern education without jeopardising her place at home (Chatterjee 128). This may have been one reason that Ratna, representing the generations to come, is given an education by the author. The novel’s women do not fall victim to the practice of sealing off education to women. They are somewhat emancipated and are able to form some ideas for themselves.

Ratna as a character is important for two reasons, she embodies the new woman who is educated and modern, but is contrasted to the ideology preferred by contemporary Indians in that she is deviant in behaviour and character. Against tradition, she has been given access to education, but her mother laments it later when Ratna talks back to her elders, questioning traditional widowhood (Rao 37). Ratna does not retain her traditional customs, preferring to wear her hair on the left and to run like a boy (Rao 121). Thus, she fails both as a traditional widow and as the new woman. However, being involved in the nationalist struggle agrees with her and she becomes more deferential and the widows too accept her. Achchakka, the narrator, quotes an instance: “The other day, when Ratna was here, we asked, ‘When is Moorthy to be released?’ And she says, Why, aunt,’ - and how deferential Ratna has become! - ‘he’s already freed’” (Rao 182). Her education also helps her become scripture-reader to the widows even though in their own words, there “never was a girl born in *Kanthapura* that had less interest in philosophy than Ratna” (Rao 107). The reader may wonder if women’s education is criticised since the only woman to attend school is criticised. However, I feel that the author uses this episode so that the concept of the new woman, who is learned and traditional, can be introduced.

Men and Women: Wherein Lies the Power?

As mentioned above, Moorthy (and, by extension, Mahatma Gandhi) is the social reformer. He is the central character around whom all these women are placed. His vision is what motivates them to join the nationalist struggle. Mahatma Gandhi is the leader for India, while Moorthy is the leader for *Kanthapura*. Thus, the male still holds the power. If that is so, what role does the woman have? I previously questioned whether she has agency. In addition, it is equally important to answer whether she has equal power. I believe that the women in *Kanthapura* do not have equal power. When Rangamma is chosen to the committee, she is chosen because she is a woman for the female representation. She is the third person to be selected (Rao 81). She comes a distant second to Moorthy in the daily planning. It is only in the absence of Moorthy that we see Rangamma and Ratna becoming strong characters able to lead the women. They receive leadership roles with the women when Rangamma creates the Sevika Sangha, but leadership positions where they are to lead the men are not easily bestowed on the women. It is only in access to news from the centre that we see some parity. Rangamma has access to the latest news because she subscribes to newspapers. However, generally, the women do not receive news from the centre if not for Moorthy or another male.

Thus, one must question if men must be absent for women to obtain power. This question is doubly important in the South Asian context because of the tradition of women entering politics in the wake of dead male relatives as has happened in India, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan. However, the question must also be related to the refashioning of women's identities: Does a political role entail a refashioning of identity for the women? The answer to both appears to be in the affirmative in the text. The women are able to take a decision about action only once the men are incarcerated, and entering politics (or in the text, engaging in political activity) requires them to move beyond the traditional roles they maintained to becoming the new woman that Mahatma Gandhi envisioned. This new identity needs significant refashioning of the women since the identity demands education coupled with tradition, and chasteness coupled with familial duty. Such dichotomies lead to a question of whether it is possible for women to carve positions in politics, for which the answer appears negative.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to question Raja Rao's 1938 novel *Kanthapura*, which situated an isolated microcosmic village within the larger nationalist struggle, through a close reading of the text using a feminist lens. I questioned whether the novel appropriated female bodies for the men's nationalist needs, and I argue that it did because the women in the novel were conferred agency by Moorthy who wished to be engaged in the struggle. The women rarely grasped that agency as truly theirs until the men were in prison and they needed to rely on their own judgment, and the women reverted to their original roles of homemaker once the struggle ended. Thus, agency seems to accompany women within the public sphere (only) when they engage in a battle that men have hoisted on them, and not in the personal sphere as homemakers. Their needs are secondary to that of men and their political views are shaped and created by men within the larger discourse as the men have envisioned it. The women are visible but not heard in this struggle. They become the tools of men (either of Mahatma Gandhi or Moorthy) rather than equal counterparts with a political voice. They are not the social reformers but are the pawns of the real social reformers: Mahatma Gandhi and Moorthy.

Since the women returned to the status quo, the question of whether the status quo favoured women's possession of power becomes important. The novel's women are seen tending to their men, cooking and cleaning for them. They are not portrayed as equals to men. The concept of the modern woman too situates the woman within the home, allowing them education but not a political voice. They are used in the nationalist struggle where they fight oppression by the white colonizer, but they do not attempt to overthrow the injustices of the local political and social systems that relegate them to domesticity. Their possession of power is only within male-sanctioned situations and spheres, and not within the homes. The women are provided roles to play whether within the house or in the struggle, but they do not craft their own roles.

Finally, I argue that they did not change the status quo. The women did not change society or themselves. They return to their traditional roles, albeit with education, where they resume cooking and cleaning for their men. Thus, I believe that the novel is problematic and cannot be considered a feminist novel. In addition, the novel promotes a vision of women as both modern and traditional where they are tools for men and nationalism. This is the flawed understanding of Mahatma Gandhi and Rao, who do not understand the lived experiences of women and cannot envision the contributions the women can make to the political landscape. The author faithfully recreates Mahatma Gandhi's vision of women as renunciator and asexual being, who thus has no desires or needs beyond what the nation and its men allow her. The male author's and male visionary leader's flawed understanding of women creates a problematic novel that fails in the questions I posed. Thus, while the novel is microcosmic and faithful to historic situations, it is not a tract for women to follow if they desire organic political agency.

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