



Grandmother as a Narrator in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* – A Critique

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Abstract

For any literary work, the narrative technique constitutes one of the essential requisites. How the art of narration is chiseled in a literary work is what lends it artistic and emotional credibility. In *Kanthapura*, Raja Rao experiments with the narrative technique. The novel is presented from the viewpoint of an old grandmother who relates the tale of the brave resistance of the people of Kanthapura to expel the British from India. The ancient Indian Puranic method has been preferred to the western narrative technique, which according to Raja Rao, suits the Indian credo and climate. In *Kanthapura*, Raja Rao sought to defamiliarize the English language by bringing to the standard English form Indian thought and feeling, Indian culture, and Indian ideology. The present paper essays to investigate how Raja Rao used different elements and structures in narrating *Kanthapura* as experimenting tools to lend the novel a lasting artistic quality that served the purpose he had in mind. The reliability of the narrator in her description and narration of incidents and characters will be under scrutiny.

Keywords: Narrator, Defamiliarization, Reliability, Authenticity, Patriarchy, Kanthapura.

Narrator and its Importance

One of the integral and indispensable components of any narrative is its narrator. The reader experiences the narrative world through the perspective of the narrator. In simple terms, the narrator communicates the narrative to the narratee. According to M.H. Abrams (1962), the narrator is the one “by means of which the reader is presented with the characters, dialogue, actions, setting and events which constitute the narrative in a work of fiction”. (231) The narrator does, in fact, color and influence the way things are presented and discerned. Different writers have used various methods in their choice of narrators to tell a story, and even a single work displays a diversity of techniques. However, the widely recognized modes are first-person and

third-person narration, with further subdivisions of the third-person narrative into omniscient and limited point-of-view techniques.

While the narrator in the third-person narrative is “someone outside the story” (omniscient), the narrator in the first-person narrative speaks “as I and is to a greater or lesser degree a participant in the story” (Abrams, 231). However, Gerard Genette (1980) maintains that there are only two modes of narration. They are “telling” or “narrating” a fiction and “showing” or “perceiving” it. While “telling” is performed by the narrating self in which the narrator supplies information about the “fictional world,” “showing” is accomplished by the “experiencing self,” wherein the narrator “minimizes his/her presence in the text and allows the reader to experience fiction on his own without comments” (164).

Regardless of the technique, the narrator's ideological position eventually comes through in the narrative. The meaning of a text, however, is not determined by the text alone; instead, it is the result of the interaction between the author, the text, and the reader. As such, it is the reader's responsibility to carefully address and consider the narrator's function in a narrative, the level of engagement in the event, the degree of visibility in the text, the amount of knowledge he or she possesses, and most importantly, his or her trustworthiness as a storyteller. As Roland Barthes put it in his 1967 essay, “The Death of the Author,”

“A text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author. The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination.” (148)

Reliability of Narrator

The next conundrum beyond the role of narrators is how authentic and reliable a narrator's viewpoint is in fiction. Since the middle of the 20th century, there has been a lot of debate about the reliability and unreliability of narrative in literary studies. The study of how a narrator becomes unreliable has, however, drawn far more attention than the study of how and why a narrator can be seen to be dependable. However, the objective of the current research is not to take sides in that argument or attempt to settle it. The present paper will nonetheless attempt to formulate a secure definition of narrative reliability to look at the text under consideration. A reliable narrator is defined as one who is honest in his/her ideas and opinions and can be relied upon to account for significant occurrences. In other words, a reliable narrator is someone a

reader can trust to tell the tale exactly as it happened, or at least how he or she experienced it. A reliable narrator "sounds authoritative and displays a thorough knowledge of the characters and events that the story unveils. He or she offers an unbiased, or at least equally weighted, description of characters and events" (Houston, 2011).

An unreliable narrator, on the other hand, has his/her credibility compromised. An unreliable narrator "undermines the discourse." (Chatman, 1990, 233). He or she does not relate "a story in an objective way, is inaccurate or, in some cases, intentionally misleading" (Prather, 2014, p. 4) However, for many critics, the reader's perception of the text is more significant when determining whether or not the narrator can be trusted. Quoting Asgar Nunning, Hansen (2007) states that a narrator's reliability or unreliability is not a question of inconsistencies or deviations inherent to the narrative structure but rather depends on the reader's choices. The reader will trust the narrator more if they share the same worldview, moral standards, values, and beliefs. Otherwise, they won't be trustworthy (227).

Narrator in *Kanthapura*- Purpose, and Reliability

Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, published in 1938, marked a change and a shift in the direction of Indian English literature. It represented a substantial shift in terms of what it stated and how it expressed it. In the novel, a narration of local history, Raja Rao created a form of modernism by using "ironic, skeptical, and inventive techniques like Puranic texture and often appearing Hindu tales and stories with distinctly Indian content." (Singh, 2015). Although the novel is a story of rural life, set in a village in the valleys of Himavathy, deep inside the city of Mysore in south India, it represents a microcosm of the whole of India. The novel, in which religion is blended with social realism to describe the impact of the Gandhian movement on a south Indian village, is told from an old grandmother's first-person point of view. She is an observer-narrator or witness narrator since she not only describes her adventures but also details events involving significant others. Her consciousness is exploited to create an alternate world and rewrite and reshape the official war narratives.

However, it is generally argued that all first-person narrators are unreliable because they filter everything through their own experiences and beliefs. In this case, Vogrin Valerie (2003) states that "In a sense, all first-person narrators are somewhat unreliable. Even the most scrupulous characters may, unconsciously perhaps, shade the truth or emphasize one fact over another to make themselves look ever-so-slightly better" (84). Valerie explains that the first-person narrator

chooses and rejects events based on personal discretion. In this sense, the narrative will be heavily influenced by the narrator's current situation as well as his or her memories of the past. As a consequence, the narration will not be able to provide a comprehensive description of the events. There is a possibility that he/she may have overlooked, forgotten, or mistook some events, statements, or intentions. Moreover, for William Riggan (1981), even a witness narrator “can only report to the best of his/her ability and recollect the overt words and actions of his protagonist’s life and draw from these his inferences and interpretations concerning the inner nature of that protagonist. He/she is incapable of penetrating directly into the psyche of the protagonist or any other character within the chronicle” (22).

On the other hand, reliable narrators are more prevalent in omniscient narratives. This is because they have no investment in the plot and are, therefore, less likely to fabricate information to further their own agendas. Nevertheless, determining whether a narrator is reliable or not is always a challenging task. In other words, since there is not a single, constant, knowable reality, there cannot be a trustworthy first-person narrator either. (Vogrin, p. 84) In response to this challenge, the paper attempts to identify both consistency and inconsistency in the narration of the novel *Kanthapura*.

In the novel *Kanthapura*, Achakka is the first-person narrator who recounts her previous experiences. She recalls events from the past that took place a long time ago. Choosing an old, mature grandmother as the narrator of the novel who recalls incidents from her rich repository, conforms to the demands of the novel. However, she is not simply narrating the incidents but has herself participated in the Gandhian Satyagraha movement and thus lends true credibility and authenticity to her narration. She mingles the past and the present, the men and the gods in her narrative to provide mythological or spiritual significance to physical phenomena. The endowment of spiritual implications to a contemporary struggle for Swaraj makes it a sacred and pious epic struggle. The witness narrator not only describes individuals' lives and happenings but also occasionally reflects on the general human condition while balancing it with specific circumstances in the narrative. In Vogrin's (2003) words, she offers the reader an “experience of the world through her eyes and ears and nose and skin” (80). An example from the beginning of the novel illustrates this point,

“They say the Mahatma will go to the Redman’s country, and he will get us swaraj.... And we shall be happy. And Rama will come back from exile, and Sita will be with him, for Ravana will be slain, and Sita freed, and he will come back with Sita on his right in a

chariot of the air, and brother Bharata will go to meet them with the worshiped sandals of the Master on his head. And as they enter Ayodhya, there will be a rain of flowers.”
(*Kanthapura*, 257)

All characters in the novel are described in a way that makes us feel like we are living, experiencing, thinking, and feeling like them. She narrates every incident and character in every detail with intelligence and shrewdness, giving her narration a more realistic feel. As a witness narrator, Achakka’s penchant for seemingly unnecessary digressions, frequent repetitions, and detailed descriptions generate a poetic effect in her otherwise prose narration. By describing and evaluating characters and incidents in detail, the narrator appears more dramatic and gives the reader a better understanding. Commenting on the mode of narration that Achakka has adopted in *Kanthapura*, Srinivas Iyengar (1984) writes that it is “Characteristically Indian, feminine with a spontaneity that is coupled with swiftness, raciness suffused with native vigor, and exciting with a rich sense of drama shot through and through with humor and lyricism.”(306).

One story follows another in a garrulous manner reminiscent of the age-old Indian storytelling tradition. Due to the narrator’s involvement in the story, she fills in the knowledge gap and shortens the reader’s distance from the described events. The narrator presents the various events and incidents that culminated in violence and conflict but does it in reference to the lives of the common residents of the street. She blends domestic and political life to demonstrate how people’s lives were developing under the shade of dread, terror, and the ensuing collapse of their sense of security. According to Meenakshi Mukherji (1971),

“The choice of such a narrator serves several useful purposes. Making this old woman the narrator enables Raja Rao to mingle fact and myth in an effective manner. For the old woman, Jawaharlal is a Bharata to the Mahatma- the Mahatma who, she believes, will slay Ravana so that Sita may be freed. For her, Gandhi has attained the status of God, and Moorthy is regarded as his avatar in *Kanthapura*.... To her, the satyagraha becomes a religious ceremony to which she devotes her sacred ardor.” (39)

Moreover, the use of irony and humor, tone and tenor as per different situations, and literal translation of Indian phrases and idioms enriches and beautifies her narration and adds sublimity and Indian flavor to her language. Thus, by using the experienced grandma as the narrator, the author allows the reader to get to know every individual by providing all pertinent details and understanding them better.

Indian Flavour in English Language, Theme and Narration

In the early stages of their literary careers, most postcolonial writers were unsure whether they should write in their native language or in English. Many of them perceived writing in English as oppressive since it was the colonizers' language or the language of overlords. They believed that writing in English would discourage the use of native languages. As a result, several post-colonial writers defended a total return to the usage of local languages while rejecting the colonists' language.

On the other hand, many writers chose English as their medium of expression. Choosing English as a medium of expression made them view it as an act of resistance. They utilized it to challenge their colonial masters' generated pool of hegemony and discourse against the Orient as well as to deconstruct the English. However, they didn't use the English form used by the British as such but replaced it "with a local variant that doesn't have the perceived stain of being somehow sub-standard, but rather reflects a distinct cultural outlook through local usage." (Margulis and Nawakoski, 1996) These writers used English to represent their native culture, sensibilities, and spirit. New English was created as a therapeutic act of resistance by the champions of this stark thought. In this connection, Salman Rushdie, in *Imaginary Homelands* (1991), maintains that,

One of the changes has to do with attitudes towards the use of English. Many have referred to the argument about the appropriateness of this language to Indian themes. And I hope all of us share the opinion that we cannot simply use the language the way the British did; that it needs remaking for our own purposes.(17)

In this context, Raja Rao's novel *Kanthapura* occupies a unique position in the field of Indian English fiction. Its goal of highlighting Indian thought and feelings, Indian heritage and culture, and the veritable Indian, is greatly acknowledged and admired by readers. Its short, enduring, classic Foreword is, "in effect, the manifesto of all Indian literature in English" (Trivedi, 9). This was so because Raja Rao not only had to construct meaning into an "alien" language but also had to present the Indian sentiments and spirit in a foreign language. Raja Rao writes that, "One has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own" (*Kanthapura*, 1).

The use of extended sentences without punctuation, the repeated phrases and sentences frequently to create a rhythmic, lyrical effect, the seemingly pointless digressions in the story, and the literal translation of Indian terms and phrases into English, all contribute to *Kanthapura*'s Indianness. A textual example is used to illustrate the Indian credo.

Then there were the Kannayya House people, who had a high veranda, and though the house was I know not how many generations old, it was still as fresh and new as though it had been built only yesterday. No wonder that waterfall Venkamma roared day and night against Rangamma. (*Kanthapura*, 11)

Use of the *Puranic* Method

The ancient Indian Puranic method has been preferred to the western narrative technique, which according to Raja Rao, suits the Indian credo and climate. The novel is presented from the viewpoint of an old grandmother, Achakka. The tempo of her garrulous talking holds up to the principles of the ancient Indian oral tradition of grandmother-led stories. It accounts for the length of the most famous Hindu epics like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, which have been rendered in numerous verses. In this sense, Raja Rao remarks, "Episode follows episode, and when our thoughts stop, our breath stops, and we move on to another thought" (*Kanthapura*, 1). The western technique of Chapterization is not used in the novel. Instead, the story is one long continuous tale. In one of his interviews (1988) with Arthur Pais and Radhika Radhakrishnan, Raja Rao declared that "the Indian novel can only be in the epic form and metaphysical in nature . . . Every country has its own form, and I believe that the *Purana* form is Indian" (134).

Inconsistencies/hidden agendas in Grandmother's narration

Raja Rao's choice of an older woman as the narrator in *Kanthapura* raises some fundamental questions in the mind of the reader. Is Raja Rao emphasizing and championing the responsibilities and duties of women in a male-dominated society through a female narrator? Or is he really in favor of women's liberation from patriarchal clutches? What is the veracity of the narrator's description and narration of incidents and characters? Although the novel's primary focus is on the freedom struggle of Indians against British colonialism and not on women or their families, their perspectives have been skillfully incorporated into the narrative. Like men, women like Rangamma played an integral role in organizing the other women of Kanthapura and forming the Sevika Sangh. They participated in the freedom struggle, took on jobs readily reserved for men and worked shoulder to shoulder with men.

Nevertheless, being on the cusp of transformation due to education and revolutionary fervor, the women in *Kanthapura* still advocated and preached the folds of domesticity. When Rangamma finds out about some husbands complaining of not receiving proper attention at home because their wives are away participating in the drill, she immediately takes appropriate measures. She

explains to the women folk that they should pay attention to their household duties. Similarly, Moorthy's call for women to spin yarn daily as a means of civil disobedience against British rule is not received cordially. The answer that they will spin only if their husbands permit them to do so vindicates the belief that household chores constituted the primary duty of women. Although the women are trying to break the shackles of domesticity in every possible way by enthusiastically participating in the Indian freedom struggle, they still are portrayed as being "...shy, retiring, unwilling to show her face before strangers, and always responsive to her husband's bidding" (Gemmill, 1982, 7).

The narration of Achakka would make the reader question not only her logic and sensibility regarding her tone and manner of retelling such significant episodes from Indian history but also her fairness in handling these events. As readers, we depend on the narrator's vocabulary and intellect because we cannot step outside the character's perspective to get a more comprehensive picture of the tale. Being a woman, how far has she maintained distance in her comments and detailed descriptions from all sorts of prejudices and biases? While Raja Rao beautifully places the narration in an older woman's hands, it is not free from queries in the rational world of men. Possibly due to her age, the narrator's tendency to exaggerate things - like Moll Flanders in Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722) - allows the reader to overlook possible embellishments.

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