



## Kanthapura and Malgudi as Fictional Backgrounds : A Comparative Study

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*The novels 'Kanthapura' and 'The Guide' are written by the Indian English writers namely Raja Rao and R. K. Narayan respectively. Kanthapura is totally a rural village of Pre-Independence India, as against Malgudi, a semi-urban town of Post-Independence India. Rao's intention through the novel is to reveal the woes and sufferings, social evils and idiosyncrasies, oddities and weaknesses of human character. The most striking point is that in spite of its setting, Raja Rao has tried to show how the freedom movement had reached the rural folk through Moorthy, the hero of the novel. They called this movement Gandhian movement. As Kanthapura is a typical Indian village, it has a wholly religious folk and it is through religion that the freedom struggle takes shape in Kanthapura. Gandhi is a legendary figure for the villagers and is the subject of bhajans and harikathas. Slowly and steadily religion awakens in them the need for freedom, the walls of orthodoxy are suddenly breached and the villagers start a mass movement for the freedom of India.*

*Malgudi in the novel 'The Guide' symbolizes a mini-India, an imaginary town developing from a rural looking conservative town into a Post-Independent modern town beset with complex realities. The male protagonist of the novel is a typical Indian character; scenes and symbols, and traits and manners are typically Indian. Kanthapura's form and narrative technique belong to a living Indian tradition. It focuses on the presentation and Raja Rao's intimate knowledge of the Indian village. The sanitized, untouched quality of Malgudi is shattered with the arrival of railways, new people, and new ideas within it. In fact, the novel transforms modes of living and social patterns of behaviours. Malgudi is a mini-India, it represents the pulse and motion of the country, which includes the coming in of the railways, snake charmers, dance shows, etc. Malgudi imbibes in itself the whole of India with its people, culture, superstition, beliefs and natural landscapes like caves, temples, trees etc. The adulterous relationship between Raju and Rosie is the fall out of modernity. Raju, the fraud, becomes the martyr of Mangala village, and it is the result of the need felt by the villagers for spiritual mooring.*

**Key words:** *Fictional background, gandhian movement, spiritual mooring.*

**Introduction :** Kanthapura and Malgudi are fictional backgrounds created by the famous Indian novelists Raja Rao and R. K. Narayan respectively. A fictional background is a background that does not exist anywhere in reality but springs out of the mind of the novelist himself. Through these small, insignificant places, the writers have tried to show the impact of Indian Independence movement and the changes that follow.

The main concern in handling this Research Project was:

To capture the change that an Indian village and a semi agricultural town undergo at the time of Independence movement and the changes that follow.

- (i) To examine how far the fictitious places Kanthapura and Malgudi are recognizable as realistic settings.
- (ii) To focus on Kanthapura and Malgudi as fictional backgrounds depicting the way of life of the people whose psychology and background present India in general, and to see how far can we go from the specific to the generic.

- (iii) To make a comparison between Kanthapura and Malgudi.

#### **Kanthapura:**

Kanthapura is an imaginary place portrayed by Raja Rao.

C. D. Narasimbahiah remarks, ***“No other book of this scope and size on this theme pictures so vividly, truthfully and touchingly the story of the resurgence of India under Gandhi’s leadership, its religious character, its economic and social concern, its political ideal precisely in the way Gandhi tried to spiritualize politics.”***

Kanthapura is typically Indian not only in its location but also in the portrayal of its villagers. The villagers, though simple and ignorant, are capable of exhibiting great potential as evident in their participation in the freedom struggle. Besides, they are truly Indian in their use of the literal translations in their day-to-day conversation such as, ***“He is my wife’s elder brother’s wife’s brother-in-law.”*** (Rao 1971, 44)

#### **Location:**

The novel opens with the contours of the village on the banks of the Himavathy. The village is situated in Mysore, in the province of Kara:

***“...High on the Ghats is it, high up the steep mountains that face the cool Arabian seas, up the Malabar Coast is it, up Mangalore and Puttur and many a centre of cardamom and coffee, rice and sugarcane. Roads, narrow, dusty, rut-covered roads, wind through the forests of teak and of jack, of sandal and of sal, and hanging over the bellowing gorges and leaping over elephant-haunted valleys, they turn now to the left and now to the right and bring you through the Alambe and Champa and Mena and Kola passes into the great granaries of trade.”*** (Rao 1971,7).

The myths and legends are also typically Indian. The central myth in the novel is that of Ram-Sita-Ravana. Under the influence of Mahatma Gandhi and his follower, Moorthy and the innocent villagers suddenly revolt against the foreign rule. Their strong will is evident in their march on to the Skeffington Estate. They fight together in one spirit and represent the

indigenous spirit of fighting that picked up its seeds from the freedom struggle in India.

A noteworthy point regarding the position of women is that, though majority of women in Kanthapura remain confined to their household works, seeds of empowerment had already been sown. The individual contribution of women has been highlighted.

Rao created a character Rangamma, who is the counterpart of Moorthy, and he gives the important role of a narrator to another woman, Achakka. In this way, he brings women at par with men. Also the four-fold division of caste in Kanthapura is typically Indian which at once brings into one’s mind the rigid caste division in Indian villages. Religion is also an important factor that characterizes Kanthapura as Indian. The villagers swing into action by way of religion. They identify their idols with the freedom fighters. Hence, taken as a whole, Kanthapura truly depicts the Indian sensibility.

#### **Malgudi:**

Malgudi is a fictional background created by R. K. Narayan, regarding the origin of which, he says: ***“I remember waking up with the name Malgudi on Vijayadasmi, the day on which the initiation of leaving is celebrated. The goddess of learning gave me the name. Malgudi was an earth-shaking discovery for me, because I had no mind for facts and things like that which would be necessary in writing about Lalgudi or any real place. I first pictured not my town but just the railway station, which was a small platform with a banyan tree, a station master and two trains a day, one coming and one going.”*** (Khatri 2006,134)

Narayan’s Malgudi is a Post-Independence, modern Indian town. As represented in ‘The Guide’, it stands for Modern India. The novel was written in 1958, a time when India was still basking in the optimistic Nehruvian dream of a secular, socialist, progressive, yet spiritually upright nation. All these traits are found in Malgudi.

At the time of Independence, many changes took place in India owing to the East-West amalgamation. This was evident in the industrial development along with the coming up of the railways. All these together soon made Malgudi, an emerging tourist centre. It led to

the transformation of Malgudi from a semi-agricultural town to a modern Indian town. The community life also coloured itself with urbanization, huts changed into bungalows. Malgudi is certainly a mini-India on the basis of its social, physical and cultural features.

Its inhabitants are typical Indian men and women representing Indian ideologies and behaviours. They have a pre-defined attitude towards man-woman relationship, still possessing some orthodoxy in their mind. They share unique culture and cherish their tradition that identifies India in all its richness. It is also a microcosm of India in the way it has developed in the Post-Independence era. It brought a shift in the mentality of people. For instance, Rosie marries Marco because **“He had a big house, a motor car, he was a man of high social standing...no family at all.”** (Narayan 1958, 85)

Also, Raju's mother appreciates Rosie's higher education and Rosie takes up dancing as a profession. All these portray India in its earlier phase of development.

However, the negative aspects of the Modern Malgudi are also unavoidable. A close study of the money-mindedness of the people of Malgudi and their adulterous relationship bring forth the modern India, which has lost its old serenity under the influence of Western culture. Iyengar rightly remarks: **“The nuances of humanity are lost in the rattle of civilization, the imperative of tradition are exceeded by the impact of change, and stability and certainty are no more... the comparative calm of the thirties is gone, or is going: we are heading towards the war and the post war years of hectic striving, chronic uncertainty, expense of spirit and lust in action. Narayan sees the new Malgudi as a field of unpredictable and uncontrollable forces, a theatre where forces and tragic-comedies are played without end.”** (Iyengar 1962, 373)

This modern Malgudi is New India; on comparing it with Kanthapura, the Old India, one can draw some of the important points of comparison between the two:

#### Comparative study:

##### Pre-Independence and Post-Independence:

Kanthapura, with its unique picturesqueness, echoes how the Independence movement became a

tangible reality in a small village; while Malgudi, a semi-agricultural town in the Post-Independence era springs out of the struggle towards modernity. It is further exemplified by the replacement of traditional conveyance by modern machine; and of huts by bungalows.

##### Characters:

The people of Kanthapura are innocent and generous; though less educated, they still uphold their ethical values. On the stark end, the Malgudians, though modernized in every way, represent a shift towards the replacement of spiritual peace by emotional disturbances. Also, the Kanthapurians share a strong bonding of relationships in contrast to the adulterous, weak relationship of the Malgudians.

##### Class Division Vs. Class Dilution:

Kanthapura has a very strict caste hierarchy. Any kind of intermingling is strictly prohibited. They blindly follow their caste rituals, while Malgudi dilutes all the class distinction when it comes to personal or professional opportunities. For instance, Rosie, a devadasi girl, finds a respectable vocation as a dancer. It reflects the Western influence where everyone has his/her own identity irrespective of any differences in the society.

##### Position of Women:

In Kanthapura, majority of women remain confined to their household, while in Malgudi women strive for their progress. However both Kanthapura and Malgudi represent the empowerment of women being assigned with important roles. Rangamma, Achakka, Ratna are the leading courageous women of Kanthapura. Ratna encourages a timid woman by saying, **“Be strong, sister, when your husband beats you, you do not hit back, do you? You only grumble and weep. The policeman's beatings are the like.”** (Rao 1971, 176)

Similarly, a woman of Malgudi takes up an M. A. degree and pursues dancing as her profession, representing the New Woman of the New India.

##### Under Postcolonial Scanner:

Post-colonialism is a specifically post-modern intellectual discourse that consists of reaction to, and analysis of, the cultural legacy of colonialism. Its

ultimate goal is combating the residual effects of colonialism on cultures.

Post-colonial literature focuses on the effect of racism and usually indicts white and/or colonial societies.

While Raja Rao has pictured Pre-Independence India, R. K. Narayan has portrayed India after Independence. Rao's 'Kanthapura' is a fine specimen of the growing patriotism among the Indians at the time of Independence. The novel portrays the united resistance of the villagers and their effort to withstand their exploitation at the hands of the whites residing at the Skeffington Estate. Narayan, in his novels, deals with the British presence mainly by its avoidance, as in the first scenes of 'Swami and Friends' or in 'The Bachelor of Arts'. Even the systematized study of English has been marginalized by Narayan. Elleke Boehmer remarks: **"The English teacher of the novel with the same title (The English Teacher, 1945) leaves his soul-destroying profession of 'mugging up' Milton, Carlyle, and Shakespeare to begin a life of retreat and meditation."** (Boehmer 1995, 176)

In Kanthapura, the Indian cultural heritage is deeply grounded in its myths and legends, and various rituals. While in Malgudi of 'The Guide', the simultaneous co-existence of colonial and traditional presence is inescapable. The statue of *Sir Frederick Lawley*, the **"good man"** who built tanks and dams, holds the same appreciation as the Ishwara temple which has **"the entire epic Ramayana carved along the wall..."** (Narayan 1958, 137)

Economically, 'Kanthapura' presents a purely agrarian village with abundant resources of land and farm, while Malgudi is an emerging tourist centre, having bungalows, taxis, railways- yet another aspect of the post-colonial India.

The use of language, although English, is not the King's English. It's the language coloured with the Indian context. While Rao uses Indian speech-rhythm, and mythic allusions, Narayan uses English language, filled with the vocabulary from the native language, to demarcate a very non-English cultural space, defined by its own beliefs and practices.

Iyengar remarks that Narayan **"uses the English language just as we used to wear dhoties**

**manufactured in Lancashire- but the thoughts and feelings, the stirrings of the soul, the wayward movement of the consciousness, are all of the soil of India."** (Iyengar ed. 1985, 359)

#### Conclusion:

After studying all the above aspects of Kanthapura and Malgudi, it can be rightly said that the two fictitious places are in close proximity with the real India and Indian sensibility. Quoting Thomas Hardy, **"It is better for a writer to know a little bit of the world remarkably well than to know a great part of the world remarkably little."**

Be it well or little, both the writers Raja Rao and R. K. Narayan are authentically Indian in the selection of theme, portrayal of characters and above all, creation of a background that creates an inquisitive tendency in the minds of the readers to locate it in the world of human beings.

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