

The Politics of Language: English as a Postcolonial Medium in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*

Prof. Uday Shankar Ojha*

Dept of English, Jay Prakash University Chapra, Bihar

Corresponding Author: Prof. Uday Shankar Ojha

Dept of English, Jay Prakash University Chapra, Bihar

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Abstract: Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938) stands as a foundational text in Indian English literature not solely because of its narrative concerns—the political awakening of a South Indian village during the Gandhian independence movement—but because of the radical linguistic experiment underlying its composition. This article examines how Rao transforms English, historically the language of colonial administration, into a hybrid medium capable of carrying indigenous oral rhythms, Kannada syntax, and nationalist political consciousness. Reading Rao's celebrated Foreword to the novel alongside postcolonial theories of language, particularly Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin's concepts of abrogation and appropriation and Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity, this article argues that *Kanthapura* enacts a distinct politics of language in which English is deliberately de-Anglicized and Indianized. The essay further situates Rao's linguistic strategy within a broader comparative postcolonial debate on language choice, contrasting his method of appropriation with Chinua Achebe's similar embrace of a modified English and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's eventual rejection of colonial language altogether. Ultimately, the article contends that in *Kanthapura*, language itself becomes a terrain of anti-colonial resistance, and that Rao's Foreword functions as an early manifesto for what would later be recognized as Indian English as a legitimate literary and linguistic variety.

Keywords: Indian English literature, postcolonial theory, linguistic hybridity, language politics, Gandhian nationalism.

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Introduction

The publication of Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* in 1938 confronted a dilemma that would preoccupy generations of postcolonial writers after him: how does a colonized subject narrate an indigenous experience in the language of the colonizer without simply reproducing the colonizer's worldview? Rao's novel, set in a fictional South Indian village drawn into the Gandhian non-cooperation and civil disobedience movements, does not treat this dilemma as a marginal stylistic concern but places it at the very centre of its literary project. The story is narrated by Achakka, an elderly village woman recounting the coming of Gandhian ideas to *Kanthapura* in a voice modelled on oral tale-telling, and it is this narrative voice—colloquial, digressive, incantatory—that carries the novel's most significant political charge (Rao, Foreword). *Kanthapura* is, in this sense, a novel about political awakening that is also, inescapably, a novel about the awakening of a language.

This article argues that *Kanthapura* enacts a deliberate politics of language in which English is de-Anglicized and reshaped to bear the rhythm, syntax, and worldview of Kannada oral culture. Rather than treating English as a neutral vehicle for Indian content, Rao treats the language itself as contested territory, to be occupied and remade rather than simply borrowed. This reading draws on the vocabulary developed by postcolonial

theorists writing decades after Rao—Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin's account of abrogation and appropriation, and Homi Bhabha's theory of cultural hybridity—to make visible a linguistic strategy that Rao himself had already articulated, with striking clarity, in his 1938 Foreword to the novel. Read together, Rao's own theoretical statement and the practice of the novel itself reveal *Kanthapura* as an early and unusually self-conscious instance of what would later be called postcolonial appropriation of the English language.

The argument proceeds in five stages. It begins by examining Rao's Foreword as a literary manifesto for a distinctly Indian English. It then turns to the specific linguistic and narrative techniques through which *Kanthapura* enacts this Indianization, before considering how these techniques function as a form of resistance to colonial linguistic authority. The article then situates Rao's strategy comparatively alongside Chinua Achebe and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's differing responses to the language question in African literature, before concluding with a reflection on how *Kanthapura* anticipates the linguistic hybridity that would become characteristic of later Indian English fiction.

Raja Rao's Foreword as Literary Manifesto

Kanthapura's brief Foreword is one of the most frequently cited documents in the history of Indian English literary criticism,

and for good reason: in barely more than a page, Rao articulates a theory of language that anticipates, by several decades, much of what postcolonial theory would later formalize. Rao begins from a position of linguistic alienation, acknowledging that English does not belong natively to the Indian writer, and yet insisting that the writer has no real choice but to convey through it a sensibility that remains entirely indigenous (Rao, Foreword). This is not presented as a defeat or a compromise; rather, Rao reframes the problem as a creative opportunity. He insists that Indian writers cannot, and should not, attempt to write English exactly as English writers do, arguing instead that “the tempo of Indian life must be infused into our English expression” (Rao, Foreword), a claim that treats rhythm and cadence, rather than vocabulary alone, as the primary site where Indianization must occur.

Crucially, Rao does not propose that Indian writers abandon grammar or standard English out of stylistic rebellion for its own sake; he frames the departure as a structural necessity, arguing that a language is a repository of a people's historical and emotional experience and that English, lacking India's specific inheritance, must be bent to accommodate it. To support this claim, Rao invokes the precedent of Irish and American English, suggesting that just as writers in those traditions had made English carry a distinctly national sensibility, Indian writers might develop an English dialect as regionally and culturally marked as any other variant of the language. This comparison is significant because it reframes Indian English not as a deficient or derivative form of “proper” English, but as one of several legitimate national and cultural variants of a global language—an argument that anticipates Braj Kachru's later scholarly account of Indian English as an autonomous linguistic variety with its own internal norms, rather than a failed approximation of British English (Kachru).

Read in this light, Rao's Foreword functions less as an apology for writing in a borrowed tongue than as an assertion of linguistic ownership. It stakes a claim, on behalf of the Indian writer, to a language that colonial education had positioned as the exclusive property of the colonizer, and it does so nearly a decade before Indian independence. In this sense, the Foreword is itself a political document: an early, explicit statement of the very appropriation strategy that *Kanthapura's* narrative technique goes on to enact.

Linguistic Hybridity and the Kannada Substratum

The Foreword's claims would remain merely programmatic were they not realized in the texture of the novel itself, and it is here that *Kanthapura's* achievement becomes most apparent. Rao constructs Achakka's narration using long, paratactic sentences strung together with “and,” a syntactic choice that mimics the cumulative, unhurried rhythm of oral village speech rather than the periodic, subordinated sentence structures conventional to written English prose. Critics have long noted that this technique draws directly on Kannada oral narrative forms, particularly the *sthalapurana* tradition of legendary place-histories and the *harikatha* mode of religious storytelling, in which a narrator recounts events to an audience through a mixture of narration, song, and digression (Mukherjee). Achakka's voice repeatedly loops back on itself, interrupts its own chronology, and addresses an implied listener directly, reproducing on the page the experience of listening to an oral storyteller rather than reading a conventionally plotted novel.

This hybridity extends beyond syntax to vocabulary and reference. *Kanthapura* is dense with untranslated Kannada terms, local place names, caste designations, songs, and proverbs, embedded within English sentences without extensive glossing. Rather than smoothing these elements into more familiar English equivalents for the convenience of a non-Indian readership, Rao allows them to remain, in effect, linguistic outcrops of Kannada within an English text. Meenakshi Mukherjee, in her influential study of the early Indian English novel, argues that this kind of technique reflects a broader tendency among Indian English novelists of Rao's generation to adapt indigenous narrative and linguistic forms rather than simply importing the conventions of the English novel wholesale (Mukherjee). C. D. Narasimhaiah similarly locates Rao's achievement in his ability to make English answer to an entirely non-English structure of feeling, treating the language as material to be reshaped rather than a fixed mould into which Indian content must be poured (Narasimhaiah).

This linguistic hybridity can be productively understood through Homi Bhabha's account of hybridity as a “third space” of cultural enunciation, a space that is neither simply the colonizer's language nor the colonized culture's mother tongue, but a new formation produced through their encounter (Bhabha). In Bhabha's account, hybridity is not a diluted or impure version of two “pure” cultural forms; it is a genuinely new site of meaning-making that destabilizes the colonizer's claim to linguistic and cultural authority. *Kanthapura's* English—syntactically Kannada in rhythm, lexically mixed, structurally modelled on oral religious storytelling—occupies precisely this kind of third space. It is neither the English of the colonial administrator nor a straightforward transcription of Kannada; it is something genuinely new, produced at the intersection of the two, and it is in this newness that Rao's political and literary achievement resides.

English as a Site of Resistance and Appropriation

If *Kanthapura's* linguistic hybridity can be described theoretically through Bhabha's vocabulary, its political function is perhaps best captured by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin's related concepts of abrogation and appropriation. In *The Empire Writes Back*, the three critics describe abrogation as the postcolonial writer's refusal to accept the colonial language's claim to a single “correct” or “standard” usage, and appropriation as the subsequent process by which that language is reconstituted to bear the weight of a different cultural experience (Ashcroft et al.). *Kanthapura* performs both operations simultaneously. Its abrogation of standard English is evident in its deliberate departure from conventional English sentence structure, its refusal to translate or explain many of its Kannada terms, and its rejection of the linear, plot-driven conventions of the realist English novel in favour of a circular, oral narrative form. Its appropriation is evident in the use to which this reshaped English is then put: the narration of an explicitly anti-colonial, nationalist political awakening.

There is a productive irony at the heart of this appropriation. The very language through which British colonial authority had been administered, codified, and taught becomes, in Rao's hands, the medium through which that authority is narratively dismantled. *Kanthapura's* villagers organize under Gandhian leadership, resist the colonial toddy contractors and the exploitative practices of the Skeffington Coffee Estate, and are ultimately subjected to police violence—and all of this is narrated in an English whose hybrid, Indianized form is itself a quiet act of

resistance to the notion that English belongs, culturally, to its colonial originators. By writing the story of anti-colonial resistance in an English that refuses to behave as “proper” colonial English, Rao extends the novel's political resistance from its plot into its very sentences. Language, in *Kanthapura*, is not simply the medium through which the story of resistance is told; it is itself an active participant in that resistance.

This appropriation also has an important audience-facing dimension. By writing in English rather than Kannada, Rao ensures that *Kanthapura's* account of Gandhian resistance reaches a national and international English-reading public far larger than a Kannada-language text would have reached in 1938. Appropriation, in other words, is not merely a matter of stylistic self-assertion; it is also a strategic choice that uses the colonizer's own linguistic infrastructure—the wide reach of English as an administrative and educational language across India and the British Empire—to carry an anti-colonial message to the very audiences that infrastructure was built to serve.

Comparative Postcolonial Perspectives: Rao, Achebe, and Ngũgĩ

Rao's strategy of appropriation gains further clarity when placed alongside comparable debates in African postcolonial literature, where the question of whether to write in the colonizer's language at all became a matter of sustained and sometimes acrimonious dispute. Chinua Achebe, writing roughly two decades after Rao, arrived at a broadly similar position. In his essay “The African Writer and the English Language,” Achebe argues that the African writer should aim to produce an English that remains recognizably English while being “altered to suit new African surroundings” (Achebe), expressing confidence that the language would prove capable of carrying the full weight of African experience. Like Rao, Achebe treats English not as an alien imposition to be endured but as a linguistic resource to be actively reshaped—a position that aligns closely with Rao's own insistence that English must be made to carry the tempo of a specifically Indian life.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o represents the opposing pole of this debate. In *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngũgĩ argues that continued reliance on English and other colonial languages by African writers constitutes an ongoing form of cultural subordination, likening the imposition of a colonial language on a colonized people to a “cultural bomb” that destroys their confidence in their own languages, histories, and heritage (Ngũgĩ). For Ngũgĩ, appropriation of the sort practised by Rao and Achebe does not go far enough, because it leaves the fundamental linguistic hierarchy—in which English remains the language of literary prestige and colonial vernaculars remain marginalized—intact. His own subsequent decision to write fiction in Gikuyu represents a rejection of appropriation in favour of what he considered a more thoroughgoing linguistic decolonization.

Positioned against this spectrum, Rao's *Kanthapura* sits closer to Achebe's model of appropriation than to Ngũgĩ's model of rejection, but it arguably goes further than Achebe in the sheer structural extent of its linguistic Indianization. Where Achebe's English remains recognizably grammatical by conventional standards even as its idiom and reference are Africanized, Rao's prose reorganizes English syntax itself around Kannada oral rhythms, producing a more thoroughgoing formal transformation.

This comparison suggests that appropriation is not a single, uniform response to colonial language politics but a spectrum of possible interventions, ranging from lexical and idiomatic adaptation to the kind of deep syntactic and structural transformation that *Kanthapura* undertakes.

Language, Nation, and Gandhian Politics in *Kanthapura*

The politics of language in *Kanthapura* cannot finally be separated from the politics of the Gandhian movement the novel depicts. Achakka's oral storytelling mode positions her as a transmitter of collective memory across generations, recounting *Kanthapura's* transformation to an implicit audience of listeners who will carry the story—and its political lessons—forward. This narrative structure mirrors the way Gandhian ideas are shown spreading through the village: not through official decree or printed pamphlet alone, but through spoken word, song, and communal gathering, the same oral channels through which Achakka's own tale is transmitted. The novel further fuses this political narrative with local religious tradition, associating the village goddess Kenchamma and figures such as Moorthy, the young Gandhian organizer, within a single continuous framework of devotion and duty, so that nationalist politics is absorbed into, rather than opposed to, existing village cosmology.

In this context, Rao's hybridized English becomes the necessary linguistic counterpart to a story about the fusion of the modern nationalist movement with indigenous village life. A standard, unmodified English—colonially “correct” and syntactically alien to the rhythms of oral Kannada storytelling—would have been formally at odds with a narrative whose entire political argument is that Gandhian nationalism belongs organically to village India rather than being an external imposition. By making the language itself perform this fusion, Rao ensures that *Kanthapura's* form and content reinforce one another: a novel arguing for the indigenous ownership of a nationalist movement is narrated in a language that has itself been indigenized.

Conclusion

Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* demonstrates that the politics of language in postcolonial literature is rarely a matter of neutral stylistic choice. Read alongside Rao's own Foreword and against the theoretical vocabulary later developed by Bhabha, Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, the novel emerges as a sustained act of linguistic appropriation, in which English is abrogated of its claim to a single correct form and reconstituted to bear the syntax, rhythm, and oral storytelling conventions of Kannada village culture. This transformation is not incidental to the novel's nationalist politics but central to it: the very language of colonial administration is remade into a vehicle for anti-colonial narrative, and the novel's formal hybridity becomes an extension of its thematic argument that the Gandhian movement belongs organically to Indian village life.

Positioned comparatively alongside Achebe's confident reshaping of English and Ngũgĩ's eventual rejection of colonial language altogether, Rao's strategy appears as an early and unusually thoroughgoing instance of postcolonial linguistic appropriation, one that anticipates by decades the theoretical vocabulary later developed to describe it. In this respect, *Kanthapura's* significance extends well beyond its immediate

historical moment: it establishes a template for the hybridized, Indianized English that would go on to characterize much of the Indian English fiction that followed, from the mid-century novels of Mulk Raj Anand and Bhabani Bhattacharya to the more overtly experimental hybridity of later writers such as Salman Rushdie. *Kanthapura* remains, in this sense, not only a novel about the birth of a political movement but a foundational text in the ongoing negotiation of what it means to write India in English.

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