



The English Language as a Site of Postcolonial Struggle in India with special mention of Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates how Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938) serves as a profound example of the English language becoming a site of postcolonial struggle. It argues that Rao's deliberate and innovative manipulation, or "transmutation," of English into an "Indian" idiom function as a powerful act of decolonization. By embedding elements of Kannada oral tradition, narrative structures from Puranic storytelling, and a distinct "Indian English" lexicon and syntax, Rao not only challenges the linguistic hegemony of the colonizer but also reclaims agency for indigenous voices and worldviews. The paper will analyze Rao's authorial intent as articulated in his famous preface, explore his narrative strategies that mimic Indian oral culture, and demonstrate how these linguistic choices contribute to the novel's political resistance against British colonialism and its cultural dominance.

Keywords: India, English, language, postcolonial, linguistic etc.

Introduction:

The introduction and propagation of the English language by the British in India was a strategic and multi-faceted tool of colonial oppression, designed to consolidate power, reshape indigenous society, and foster a sense of cultural inferiority among the colonized. While facilitating administration and education, it also displaced indigenous languages, created a linguistic hierarchy, and served as a means to assimilate Indian elites into a Western worldview. The most seminal moment in the institutionalization of English was Thomas Babington Macaulay's *"Minute on Indian Education"* (1835). Macaulay, an ardent Anglicist, famously dismissed Indian languages and knowledge systems (Sanskrit, Arabic, Persian) as inferior, advocating for English as the sole medium of instruction. His explicit goal was to create "a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect."

The elevation of English as the language of administration, law, higher education, and upward mobility systematically denigrated and marginalized indigenous Indian languages. Vernacular languages, rich in literary and historical traditions, lost their prestige and official importance. Knowledge transmitted through these languages was deemed "primitive" or irrelevant. Access to higher education and coveted government jobs became contingent on proficiency in English, effectively shutting out the majority of Indians and perpetuating illiteracy among the masses. Many educated Indians experienced a sense of cultural alienation, caught between two linguistic and cultural worlds. Their own languages, once vibrant vehicles of thought and identity, were now deemed secondary. English became the primary medium through which colonial narratives were disseminated and reinforced. History, literature, and official documents written in English often presented a biased, Eurocentric view of India, justifying British rule and portraying Indians in stereotypical ways. The English language in colonial India was not a neutral medium. It was a powerful tool that facilitated administrative control, enforced a linguistic hierarchy, contributed to psychological subjugation, and perpetuated a system of cultural oppression, leaving a complex and enduring legacy on post-colonial Indian society and its linguistic landscape.

Raja Rao is recognized as a pioneering voice in Indian English literature, particularly for his novel *Kanthapura*, which is considered a seminal work. Rao's significance lies in his innovative use of language and narrative structure to capture the essence of Indian culture and the complexities of its encounter with modernity. He successfully infused the English language with Indian sensibilities, making it a vehicle for expressing uniquely Indian experiences and perspectives. This paper investigates how Raja Rao's

Kanthapura serves as a profound example of the English language becoming a site of postcolonial struggle. It argues that Rao's deliberate and innovative manipulation, or "transmutation," of English into an "Indian" idiom function as a powerful act of decolonization. The paper will also analyze Rao's authorial intent as articulated in his famous preface, explore his narrative strategies that mimic Indian oral culture, and demonstrate how these linguistic choices contribute to the novel's political resistance against British colonialism and its cultural dominance.

Problem Statement:

This paper argues that Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* exemplifies the English language as a crucial site of postcolonial struggle, where the author deliberately manipulates and "transmutes" English to carry the authentic rhythms, cadences, and philosophical underpinnings of Indian, specifically Kannada, thought and oral narrative traditions. Through this linguistic innovation, Rao not only resists the imposition of a foreign tongue but also reclaims agency for indigenous storytelling, thus performing a significant act of decolonization.

Research questions:

- a) How does Raja Rao's use of "Indianized English" in *Kanthapura* serve as a deliberate act of challenging and subverting the linguistic hegemony imposed by colonial English?
- b) What specific lexical, syntactic, and narrative innovations in *Kanthapura* demonstrably reflect a postcolonial struggle for linguistic self-assertion and cultural authenticity?
- c) In what ways does the English language, as masterfully employed by Rao, become a dynamic tool for expressing distinct Indian identity, cultural nuances, and resistance against colonial power structures?

Literature Review:

Macaulay's infamous *Minute on Indian Education* (1835) remains a cornerstone of this argument, advocating for the creation of a class of Indians "Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect" (Macaulay, 1835). This perspective, articulated by scholars like Gauri Viswanathan in *Masks of Conquest* (1989), highlights how English literary studies were deployed to civilize and control, shaping Indian thought within a British epistemological framework. *Tharu and Lalita's Women Writing in India* (1991) further illuminate how colonial education, including the imposition of English, marginalized indigenous languages and literary traditions, particularly those of women.

However, the notion of English as solely a language of oppression has been nuanced by subsequent scholarship. While acknowledging its coercive origins, critics like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, in *Decolonising the Mind* (1986), powerfully argue for the abandonment of colonial languages in favor of indigenous ones, viewing continued use as a form of "mental slavery." Yet, other scholars, particularly within the Indian context, have grappled with the inescapable reality of English's deep entrenchment. As Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin argue in *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), postcolonial writers have "appropriated" English, bending it to express local realities and subvert its imperial origins.

This involves linguistic experimentation, the incorporation of indigenous vocabulary and syntax, and the re-writing of colonial narratives from a subaltern perspective. Raja Rao's *Preface to Kanthapura* itself serves as a foundational text in this regard, where he famously declares, "The English language is not an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up" (Rao, 1938). This seemingly contradictory statement encapsulates the complex relationship: acknowledging the foreign origin while asserting a sense of ownership and adaptation. Critics like C.D. Narasimhaiah (1980) have lauded Rao's ability to "make English carry the weight of an Indian sensibility." This linguistic innovation is not merely stylistic; it represents a deliberate act of linguistic decolonization, proving that English can indeed articulate a distinctly Indian experience without losing its authenticity.

The ongoing "language wars" in India, particularly regarding the role of Hindi versus regional languages and English, underscore that the struggle is far from over. However, as *Kanthapura* eloquently demonstrates, the English language in India is no longer solely a symbol of colonial imposition. It has been re-imagined, re-fashioned, and re-claimed by Indian writers and thinkers, becoming a dynamic space where the echoes of colonial history intertwine with the vibrant expressions of postcolonial identity and resistance.

Methodology:

The research is fundamentally qualitative, relying primarily on close textual analysis and the application of established postcolonial literary theories. This research will largely fall under an interpretivist paradigm, focusing on understanding the meaning, context, and implications of the English language's use in a specific postcolonial literary text.

It involves interpreting literary works, theoretical concepts, and historical contexts.

Research Design and Data Collection:

The primary data for this study is Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938), which will undergo intensive textual analysis (close reading). The entire novel will serve as the core analytical subject. Special attention will be paid to Raja Rao's insightful preface, which explicitly outlines his linguistic philosophy and intentions. Secondary data involves various academic journal articles on *Kanthapura* and Indian English literature, books and chapters on postcolonial theory, especially those focusing on language, biographical information or critical essays on Raja Rao's literary philosophy etc.

An overview of *Kanthapura*:

The novel is set in the 1930s, during India's struggle for independence from British rule. It focuses on *Kanthapura*, a traditional Indian village with a rigid caste system and deep-rooted customs. Moorthy, a young man from the village, returns from the city having embraced Gandhi's philosophy of non-violent resistance (Satyagraha). He begins to preach these ideals, challenging existing social hierarchies and advocating for social reform. Moorthy's efforts are met with resistance from the village's elite and the British authorities. However, he gains support from many villagers, particularly the women, who form a volunteer corps under the leadership of Rangamma. The novel illustrates the spread of the independence movement within the village, with protests, boycotts, and acts of civil disobedience. The villagers, inspired by Gandhi, confront the British authorities and fight for their freedom. As the movement gains momentum, the British respond with force, leading to arrests, violence, and ultimately, the destruction of the village. Despite the hardships, the villagers remain steadfast in their commitment to Gandhi's principles. *Kanthapura* is known for its unique narrative style, which is reminiscent of Indian oral storytelling traditions. Achakka's narration, filled with vivid descriptions and local idioms, brings the village and its characters to life.

Thus, the novel explores themes of nationalism, resistance, social reform, the impact of colonialism, and the power of non-violent resistance. It also delves into the complexities of Indian society, including caste discrimination and religious beliefs.

Discussion:

Preface as decolonial statement:

Raja Rao's short but highly significant preface to his novel *Kanthapura* functions as a powerful decolonial statement, laying bare the linguistic and cultural complexities inherent in an Indian writer attempting to express an authentic Indian experience in the English language. It's not merely an introduction; it's a manifesto for linguistic self-assertion and cultural reclamation. "The telling has not been easy. One has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own." This opening sentence is a direct acknowledgment of the colonial imposition of English. He doesn't shy away from admitting that English is "not one's own," implicitly recognizing its foreign origin and the historical violence associated with its dominance over indigenous languages. This honest recognition is the first step in decolonization – naming the problem.

Rao's central ambition, articulated in the preface, is to "convey... the spirit that is one's own" in English. He explicitly states his desire to make English "carry the perfume of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata," and to sound "as if it were translated from the Kannada." This is not about passive acceptance or mere translation; it's about active transmutation. He seeks to stretch, bend, and reshape English to embody the rhythms, cadences, thought-patterns, and philosophical depths of Indian languages and culture. This act of forcing the colonial language to serve indigenous epistemologies is a direct challenge to its hegemonic purity and supposed universality. Rao justifies his linguistic project by drawing a parallel to Sanskrit: "Our method of story-telling is not the same as that of the European. The tempo of Indian life must be infused into our English expression." He then adds, "We, in India, think in Sanskrit, and write in English. But our English must not be the English of the market place, but the English of the spirit." By invoking Sanskrit, a classical Indian language with immense spiritual and literary authority, he legitimizes his linguistic experimentation within an ancient Indian tradition of adapting and spiritualizing language. He roots his experimental English not in a desire to emulate the colonizer, but in a desire to align with India's own profound literary heritage, particularly its oral, fluid, and philosophical storytelling forms (like the Puranas).

Ultimately, Rao's preface is a declaration of cultural sovereignty. It asserts that Indian experience, thought, and spirituality are profound and unique, and that if English is to serve as their vehicle, it must fundamentally change to accommodate them. It's an act of linguistic appropriation that aims for cultural liberation, demonstrating that even within the imposed language, a truly authentic and resistive voice can emerge.

In essence, Raja Rao's preface is a foundational text in postcolonial literary theory. It articulates the linguistic dilemma faced by many colonized writers and boldly proposes a solution: to decolonize the English language itself by imbuing it with the spirit, sounds, and structures of the land and people it once sought to suppress. It's a statement that sets the stage for the novel's profound engagement with the struggle for freedom, not just politically but culturally and linguistically.

Rao's mimicry of oral narrative and folk tradition:

A key aspect of Rao's artistry, and a powerful decolonial act, is his deliberate mimicry of oral narrative and folk tradition. He masterfully transforms the written English novel into a vehicle for a storytelling mode deeply rooted in the Indian cultural ethos. Rao chooses an old Brahmin woman, Achakka, as the narrator. This choice is crucial. In traditional Indian society, elderly women are often the custodians of local history, folklore, and spiritual narratives, passing them down through generations. Her voice is not merely individual but represents the collective memory and wisdom of the community. Achakka frequently uses the first-person plural "we" ("We in Kanthapura," "our village," "we said").

This "we" encompasses the entire village, emphasizing the communal rather than individual experience, a hallmark of oral traditions where stories belong to everyone. The narrative flows as a continuous, unbroken stream, much like an oral performance. Achakka's voice is often described as "garrulous" or "breathless," characterized by long sentences linked by conjunctions ("and," "so," "then"). This mimics the meandering, conversational style of a storyteller who is not bound by strict literary conventions or chapter breaks. Unlike typical Western novels that often follow a linear, cause-and-effect plot, *Kanthapura* frequently deviates into digressions, anecdotes, and tangential observations. This episodic and discursive nature directly mirrors the structure of Indian Puranas (ancient Hindu religious texts and folk tales).

Puranas are characterized by a "story within a story" format, where the main narrative is often interrupted by myths, legends, or moral tales, providing context and deeper meaning. The story of the freedom struggle in Kanthapura is interwoven with local myths, legends, and the worship of the village goddess, Kenchamma. Moorthy, the Gandhian leader, is often portrayed in mythical, almost avatar-like terms, elevating his earthly struggle to a cosmic battle between good and evil. This blending of the mundane with the sacred, and history with myth, is characteristic of Indian folk narratives, where the spiritual and the everyday are not separate. Repetition of phrases, descriptions, and ideas is a common feature in oral narratives, serving to emphasize points, create rhythm, and aid memory. Rao employs this technique effectively, giving the prose a chant-like or rhythmic quality.

The novel explicitly features Harikatha performances (traditional storytelling involving music, discourse, and drama) and bhajans (devotional songs) as central to the villagers' understanding and mobilization for the Gandhian movement. Jayaramachar, the Harikatha man, explicitly links Gandhi's struggle to ancient myths, making the political accessible and relatable through a familiar cultural form. This shows how traditional oral forms were used to disseminate nationalist ideas.

Through these techniques, Raja Rao achieves several critical goals. He demonstrates that English, the language of the colonizer, can be reshaped and imbued with an authentically Indian voice and sensibility, challenging its colonial purity. He validates and celebrates Indian modes of storytelling, knowledge transmission, and cultural expression, asserting their richness against the colonial devaluation. He presents an "Indian" truth that resonates with the cultural and spiritual realities of the people, rather than forcing their experiences into a pre-existing Western literary mold. In essence, *Kanthapura* is not just a story about India; it's a story told like an Indian story, even in English, making it a profound act of cultural and linguistic decolonization.

Linguistic nativization and 'Indianized English':

Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* is a landmark in Indian English literature for its deliberate "linguistic nativization," or the process of adapting English to better reflect Indian culture and language. Rao's approach involved not just translating Indian concepts but also embedding Indian syntax, rhythms, and vocabulary into the English language itself, creating a unique hybrid form. Rao aimed to capture the essence of Indian oral storytelling traditions, particularly the Puranic style, which he believed was more authentic to the Indian experience than Western narrative structures. He employed a narrator, Achakka, who adopts the persona of an old woman telling stories, creating a conversational and intimate tone.

This oral style, with its lack of strict punctuation and continuous flow, reflects the rhythm of Indian life and speech patterns. Rao strategically uses English words and phrases that carry specific cultural connotations, enriching the text with local flavor. He introduces untranslated words from Indian languages (Sanskrit, Kannada, etc.), giving the reader a sense of the linguistic landscape of India. Rao also adapts English grammar and syntax to mirror Indian sentence structures, further blurring the lines between the two

languages. Rao's approach is not simply about mimicking Indian languages in English; rather, it's about creating a new, hybrid language that is both English and Indian. He consciously rejects the idea of simply translating Indian concepts and stories into English, instead striving to create a language that embodies the spirit of India. While rooted in Indian storytelling traditions, Rao's work also draws inspiration from European literary modernism, particularly the works of writers like Virginia Woolf and T.S. Eliot. This influence is evident in his experimental use of language, stream-of-consciousness narration, and exploration of psychological interiority.

In other words, *Kanthapura* is considered a seminal work in Indian English literature, paving the way for other writers to explore the possibilities of linguistic nativization. Rao's work highlighted the potential for Indian writers to create a distinct literary voice by engaging with the English language in innovative ways. The novel is notable for its innovative use of 'Indianized English' where Rao consciously crafted a style that blends the rhythms and syntax of Indian languages, particularly Kannada and Sanskrit, with the English language, aiming to authentically capture the Indian experience and challenge colonial linguistic norms. This approach, characterized by the incorporation of local idioms, expressions, and storytelling techniques, has been hailed as a significant contribution to the development of an Indian English dialect. In essence, Raja Rao's linguistic nativization in *Kanthapura* demonstrates a conscious effort to forge an "Indian English" that is both a product of and a response to the colonial encounter, aiming to capture the unique cultural and linguistic landscape of India within the English language.

Conclusion:

Kanthapura offers a powerful and poignant portrayal of the Indian independence movement at the grassroots level. By focusing on a small, ordinary village in South India, Rao brilliantly captures the impact of Gandhian ideals—Satyagraha, non-violence, Swadeshi, and civil disobedience—on the lives of common people. The villagers' transformation from passive subjects to active participants in the anti-colonial struggle provides a microcosm of the larger national awakening.

The novel holds a unique and enduring position in the landscape of Indian English literature. Its significance as both a literary and linguistic landmark stems from its groundbreaking approach to storytelling, its engagement with pivotal historical events, and its innovative manipulation of the English language to serve an indigenous sensibility. *Kanthapura* proved that Indian English could be a powerful, expressive, and authentic medium for conveying complex Indian realities. It inspired and influenced many subsequent Indian English writers to explore similar linguistic innovations, contributing significantly to the emergence of a distinct and vibrant Indian English literary tradition.

In sum, *Kanthapura*'s enduring relevance lies in its dual achievement: as a deeply insightful literary work that captures the spirit of a nation in transition, and as a pioneering linguistic text that boldly reshaped the English language to reflect an authentic Indian voice. It remains a cornerstone of Indian English literature, studied and celebrated for its artistic vision and its profound cultural significance.

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