

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Absent Women, Speaking Silences: Narrative Authority and Gendered Erasure in Raja Rao's Select Novels

Ms. Codagandla Sanjana

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Keshav Memorial Institute of Commerce & Sciences, Narayanaguda, Hyderabad, AP, India;
sanjanaofficialkm@gmail.com

Accepted version published on 5 January 2026



<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18146100>

ABSTRACT

Raja Rao's position within the domain of Indian English literature is pivotal, as a novelist passionately engaged with the metaphysics of spirituality, the nationalist ideologies of Mahatma Gandhi, and the metaphysically grounded culture of Indian tradition. The critical engagement with his narratives has, in general, lauded the novelist's efforts to 'Indianise' the British/English language and to promote a unitary, spiritually conceived notion of the nation. The celebrated discourse, however, remains remarkably silent on issues related to the narrative configuration of gender. Women in Raja Rao's fictional narratives have generally emerged either as personifications of devotion, purity, and cultural traditions or as lacking substantial status as 'narrating' agents. The proposed investigation examines the novels *Kanthapura* and *The Serpent and the Rope* from the above-mentioned perspective. Through the application of a methodology grounded in the theoretical fields of feminist narratology and the critical projects proposed within the realm of 'postcolonial' genders, the proposed investigation proposes to characterize the hovering, silenced, and strategic presences of women's narratives in Raja Rao's nationalist/spiritual project, hence challenging the now celebrated, but differentiable, narratives on the celebrative discourses of his prose.

Keywords: Narrative Authority; Gender and Nationalism; Silence; Feminist Narratology

FULL PAPER

Introduction

Raja Rao is counted among the formative writers of Indo-Anglian fiction. However, his literary contributions, specifically in *Kanthapura* (1938) and *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960), are acclaimed for their philosophical richness, novelistic experimentation, and concern to project an Indian outlook in English itself. Rao's famous perspective on *Kanthapura*, in which he states his resolve to use English to convey the "Indian feeling," is a milestone in the history of Indo-Anglian literature. Rao's literary efforts have almost exclusively been critiqued in the context of his role in the expression of spiritual nationalism, Gandhian idealism, and metaphysical investigations into Advaita Vedanta. These strategies have definitively positioned Raja Rao in the canon but have also led to a restricted approach to reading the author, in which the gender category is often secondary and symbolic. In Raja Rao's works, the female characters are commonly read as winners of tradition, love, and righteousness, having no absolute authority to speak. There has been no substantial work regarding the position of silence and mediated speech in the narrative structure.

This paper seeks to fill this critical void by interrogating how the narrative strategies of a celebrated Indian novelist, Raja Rao, facilitate spiritual nationalism while containing women's narrative discourses. It would contend that the novelist's fiction promotes an ideological vision that includes the regulated presence of women.

Review of Selected Critical Perspectives

Early commentary on Raja Rao focused mainly on his philosophical tilt and linguistic experiment. Critics regularly pointed out his interest in Indian metaphysics and his attempts to incorporate English prose with the rhythms and patterns of Indian thought. *Kanthapura* was interpreted as the Gandhian epic of collective struggle, while *The Serpent and the Rope* was taken up as the intensely personal search in the realms of philosophy. Later critical engagements enriched this perspective by positioning Rao in the discourse of postcolonial studies. His fiction was analysed for how it challenged colonial knowledge formations through indigenous philosophies and narrative forms. However, again, gender was peripheral to these approaches.

Feminist studies of Indian nationalist literature also support the finding that women are both ideologically valorised and deprived of agency. However, it would not be easy to find studies that critically evaluate narrative perspective and the

politics of silence in Raja Rao's fiction. There is a clear need for some focused scholarship in this area with a view to narrative perspective as a primary analytical category.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

This research uses the frameworks of feminist narratology and postcolonial gender critique to explore the intersection of narrative authority and gender in Raja Rao's works. Narrative authority is a set of ideologies associated with the speaker and the interpretation of occurrences in a narrative text. In a nationalist narrative, authority can be associated with ideological unity. The gender nationalist discourse also begins with the attribution of cultural symbols to women, depriving them of subjective agency. Feminist narratology allows one to investigate how and to what extent the female voice is mediated, circumscribed, or displaced through narrative patterns. Silence in this approach is not defined as absence, but rather as narrative-conducive strategies of exclusion from speech and the promotion of other speech patterns. Through an amalgamation of these strategies, this paper also investigates how Raja Rao's text retains ideological coherence by controlling female voice and agency.

Women as Mediated Voices in *Kanthapura*

Kanthapura by Raja Rao is commonly hailed as progressive for its female narrator and its portrayal of life in a South Indian village during the Gandhian freedom movement. Prima facie, the novel is progressive in its treatment of women. Closer scrutiny reveals that the treatment of the female gender as narrators is circumscribed within strictly delineated ideological domains. Women speak, but their utterances are channelled and disciplined within a male-centric ideology of nationalism and spirituality.

Achakka as Narrator: Authority

Achakka, the old Brahmin widow who whispers the tale of *Kanthapura*, is a contradictory figure. She seems to have the power of narration because she is the main storyteller, but she derives that power entirely from elsewhere, not from herself as an autonomous being. Achakka never claims to be the author of the events she describes. She positioned herself as a carrier of the communal memory of the events she is describing. Male ideological leaders mediate Achakka's interpretation of the political world. Moorthy and, by extension, Mahatma Gandhi, are the actual leaders who provide ideological formulation and direction. Achakka idolizes Moorthy, the religious leader, who often casts a judgmental glance at her actions and interpretations. Her narrative supports the Gandhian model of non-violence,

selflessness, and ideological purification without presenting counterviews. In other words, Achakka's narrative serves as a confirmation of the ideological constructs of nationalism.

The narrative structure reinforces Achakka's limited agency. First, the fact that Achakka often wanders off on tangents, repeats herself, or appeals to the will of the gods suggests that the world is one in which suffering and loss have deep spiritual significance but are not necessarily politically contestable. Second, the text's structure suggests that the culture expects women like Achakka to uphold tradition and its values, not disrupt intellectual constructs.

"Collective Female Presence and Individual Erasure

However, in Achakka, women are depicted not just as a mass but also individually. They are seen as ardent supporters of the nationalist movement because they participate in rallies, withstand police repression, and remain loyal to their community. However, their behaviour is expressed in terms of sacrifice and dedication.

The female characters, for example, Rangamma and Ratna, demonstrate leadership strengths, but the broader narrative limits their agency. Rangamma's political understanding is shaped by religious discourse; her leadership qualities are validated only by virtue of being an older woman. Ratna can be said to be represented in relation to men in positions of authority as well as in relation to the ideal of nationalism.

The lack of interior psychological complexity also underscores this effacement of individuality. The minds, doubts, and inner struggles of women are hardly ever excavated. Instead, women are reproduced as personifications of collective morality, resilience, and piety. Suffering, whether it is imprisonment, societal exclusion, or physical torture, is told as a sacrifice to the patriotic cause. Politics then becomes an act of worship rather than a manifestation of autonomous politics.

Devotion as a Mode of Containment

The blurring of lines between political activism and religious dedication in *Kanthapura* is an important aspect, as it tries to regulate the space of women's agency. The cause of the nationalist movement is constantly articulated as mythological and religious, by comparing it to religious epics and obligations. The role of women in the freedom movement is expressed through bhajans, prayers, and rituals. The manner of this engagement is such that there is greater stress on

emotional and moral commitment, and less stress on rational engagement and ideological clarity. Consequently, the voices of women find expression in the emotional construction of the narrative, but without any intervention in its ideological positioning. By employing such narration techniques, *Kanthapura* establishes a gendered model of participation, in which women are fundamental to the moral and emotional sustenance of the nationalist movement, whereas men dominate ideological roles and interpretations. The women are integral to the story, yet the parameters of spiritual nationalism strictly control their roles.

Symbolic Femininity and Spiritual Idealisation

Raja Rao's fiction portrays femininity as a constant exemplar of symbolic and spiritual significance. Women are depicted as denotations of virtue and spiritual tenacity. Although this elevation assumes a touch of reverence and admiration, it simultaneously renders women impalpable within the realm of pragmatism and tangible human experience. This symbolic representation of femininity, therefore, functions as an ideological mechanism that maintains consistency and stifles women's ability to become agents of autonomy.

Women of *Kanthapura* are often associated with Mother symbolism and devotional roles. Women are conceptualized as guardians of tradition, sustainers of sorrow, and moral pillars of society. This symbolic exaltation positions women on a pedestal, yet it also positions them outside the political domain. Admiration supplants recognition, and the religious valuation of life substitutes the material life.

In this form of representation, the similarity with the nationalist discourse of this time reflects the feminization of the nation itself in terms of a holy mother goddess. In this case, the required attitude was reverence and sacrifice rather than input. On this basis, women are appreciated for their role in upholding moral integrity and emotional oneness rather than questioning and reconstructing ideology. Spiritual idealization in this case becomes a form of control, ensuring that women are at the centre of the narrative's moral reconstruction rather than at the centre of intellectual and political action.

The Silences of Gender in *The Serpent and the Rope*

The Serpent and the Rope offers a vastly different setting for telling a story from *Kanthapura*, one that moves from a communal world to a deeply individualistic philosophical quest. However, one aspect of the gender dynamics at play in the narrative does remain the same. *The Serpent and the Rope* is another novel in which a man embarks on a journey to unlock metaphysical secrets, in which women appear simply as prompts in a man's quest for knowledge. The female characters of the

novel are depicted mostly as intellectual partners or symbols of cultural differences. Their existence is to help the protagonist develop philosophical ideas of identity and belonging, but their inner worlds remain unexplored to the same extent as the males. Their utterances are channelled through the male consciousness that dominates the novel's discourse.

This replicates a type of intellectual marginalization. While female figures are important to the protagonist's development, they don't affect the metaphysical conclusions to be drawn. Silence is maintained not by absence but by narrative containment. The female figures are allowed to speak, but their speech does not impact the course that the quest will take. Throughout their existence, it is confirmed that there is a priority given to gendered metaphysical questions.

Silence as Ideological and Narrative Technology

The silences in Raja Rao's fiction are neither accidental nor passive omissions but rather deliberate narrative and ideological technologies. By controlling which voices can speak with authority and which must remain mediated, the narrative ensures the continuity of spiritual unity and philosophical coherence. Silence ensures that ideological contradictions are absorbed rather than articulated.

Within both *Kanthapura* and *The Serpent and the Rope*, women's silences preserve metaphysical harmony. Dissent, ambiguity, or alternative interpretation are subsumed beneath devotional acceptance and symbolic reverence. This strategy enables Rao to construct a cohesive spiritual vision while avoiding challenges to its founding assumptions. In other words, this unity comes at the cost of repressing female subjectivity. The control over narration, therefore, becomes ideological control, setting the course not only over what can be said but even what can be imagined within the fictional world. As a result, silence serves as a structural principle that reinforces gendered hierarchies in the guise of spiritual universality.

Rereading Raja Rao: Difficulty and Ambivalence

A critical rereading of Raja Rao involves a shift away from unqualified veneration towards a more qualified engagement with his thought structure. His fiction does enact a monumental spiritual aspiration and a substantial investment in cultural resurgence. Nevertheless, these achievements also coexist with narrative structures that privilege male authority and marginalize female agency.

To recognize this as contradictory is not to diminish Rao's literary importance, but to locate him within the complex historical and ideological moments of nationalist letters. Indeed, his fictions importantly register the resistance to colonial

epistemologies and adherence to patriarchal norms. In contrast to reverence, contemporary criticism acknowledges the transformative power of his fiction, with attention to its silences and exclusions.

Conclusion

This research illustrates that the construction of Raja Rao's nationalist-spiritual vision is intricately intertwined with gendered narrative imaginings that are often invested in symbolic expressions of femininity, to the extent of overshadowing the independent agency of female characters in the narrative. Rao's narrative, though firmly grounded in spiritual and nationalist ideology, tends to situate the feminine protagonists as secondary actors within the larger framework of actions and events and instead regards them as mediums of cultural and/or philosophical significance. This paper argues that the significance of silence, both literal and figurative, is a crucial aspect of the interpretation of Rao's literary texts because the intervention of silences and silenced voices can be a hallmark of the subtle dialogue between narrative authority and gender, and what is unsaid is often as significant as what is being said.

Works Referenced

- Chatterjee, P. (1993). *The nation and its fragments: Colonial and postcolonial histories*. Princeton University Press.
- Gilbert, S. M., & Gubar, S. (1979). *The madwoman in the attic: The woman writer and the nineteenth-century literary imagination*. Yale University Press.
- Mukherjee, M. (2000). *The perishable empire: Essays on Indian writing in English*. Oxford University Press.
- Rao, R. (1938). *Kanthapura*. Oxford University Press.
- Rao, R. (1960). *The serpent and the rope*. John Murray.
- Nayar, P. K. (2008). *Postcolonial literature: An introduction*. Pearson Longman.