BOOK REVIEW

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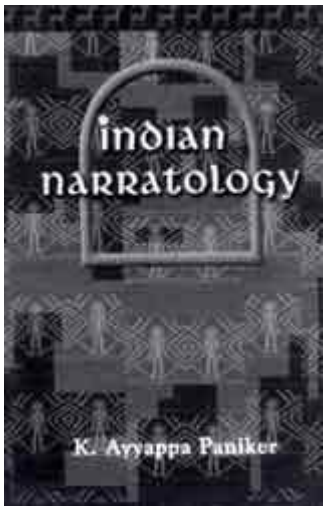
STUDYING THE NARRATIVE LITERATURE OF INDIA



The IGNCA feels happy to introduce a scholarly and fascinating work by Prof. K. Ayyappa Paniker titled ***"Indian Narratology"***. This book is the first attempt of this magnitude to study, the various forms of the art of narration, which emerged in the literary circles of India as well as in the sphere of oral literature. The book makes an interesting reading and highlights the awareness of the Indian story tellers in demarcating the various forms and styles of the art of narration.

India is considered by many as the cradle of the art of narration which developed into an important and independent genre of literature in ancient times. It is a well known fact that the fables of*Panchtantra* which have now become more or less a world heritage, were translated as far back as 5th or 6th century A.D. in Pehlavi language and from that into Syrian, Arabic, Latin, and later in the medieval Europeans languages. They have influenced the culture and moral values of many countries and have enriched their literature. Similarly, some stories from the *Brhatkatha* of Gunaadhya (now unfortunately lost but whose two shorter Sanskrit versions are available) have whose two shorter Sanskrit versions are available) have traveled to such distant countries as Arabia and have found an honourable place among the stories of *"Thousand and One Night"* (Alif Laila). The fascinating account of the travels of Sindbad is a nice example of the westwards migration of these stories and the traveller Sindbad is none else but Sindhupati of our ancient tales.

Taking the narrative literature of India as a whole into consideration and studying their exclusive features vis-a-vis the narratives produced in other cultures, the author comes to the conclusion that the main distinctive features of Indian narratology may be listed under ten heads for which he coins the following technical terms:

1. Interiorization
2. Serialization
3. Fantasization
4. Cyclicalisation
5. Allegorisation
6. Anonymisation
7. Elasticisation of time

8. Spatialisation

9. Stylisation

10. Improvisation

According to the author *Interiorisation* is the process by which a contrast or even a contradiction is effected between the surface features of a text and its internal essence. The deeper intent of an Indian narrative is often not visible to a shallow reader of the text. Only a few take pains to reach the core because the text has often a multiplicity of layer upon layer of signification. The cleverer the narrator, the more complex the inner fabric and the more simple the outer frame. Valmiki's *Ramayana,* if read and interpreted properly, reveals a different story as its core with Rama of the solar dynasty representing the light of Sun and Ravana the night-walker or the *Nisachara* representing the dark forces of night abducting Sita, the daugbhter of Mother Earth who is later rescued by the forces of light having received the help and assistance of semi-human beings who are connected with animal kingdom.

Serialisation implies the structure of the typical Indian narrative which has an apparently never ending series of episodes to a unified, streamlined course of events, centering around a single hero or heroine. For instance, there are hundreds of independent episodes in the *Mahabharata,* which provide a sort of expansiveness to the central story but are not integral to it. This episodic looseness of the Indian narrative allows for variations in tone and style in the middle of the work; even gaps are provided for, as part of the system and a long description of some beautiful object, nature or even a song could be interested to fill the gaps, when it is felt necessary. This feature also makes the Indian narrative highly adaptable. When these old Sanskrit texts were translated, rather reworked into modern Indian languages, a number of events and episodes of local or regional importance were added to them to suit the tastes of the new reading public, making them living entities whereas their literal and strict translations done in the recent past have remained cut off from the common people.

The author further stresses the importance of the element of *fantasy* in the narrative writings of India which has all along its history questioned the nature of reality. Since according tot he Indian view of creation, the universe proceeds from the subtle to the concrete and gets merged into the subtle again, the Indian writers have often found delight in transforming apparent reality into invisible or intangible legend or myth. *Fantasisation* is thus a privileged enterprise in the Indian narrative. The Vedas, the Puranas, the fairy tales and folk tales: all these are primarily perceptions of the imagination and only secondarily those of the rational mind. The highly subjective nature of the human imagination has been recognized fairly early by Indian critics and aestheticians.

Another important element of Indian narrative is *Cyclicalisation,* the Buddhist *Jataka* stories are, perhaps the best examples of this phenomenon. Belief in rebirth and also the notion that every event may repeat itself some time in future gives the Indian narrator a handy device for stringing together any number of tales in a particular narrative formula. The placement of a single story in a chain of stories is a very natural form of narrative art in India. To delineate human nature, its weaknesses, aspiration and intrigues through representatives of such types in animal world is a device which is so old in India that it can justly be surmised as the origin of such genre of tales all over the world. This is a device with which the author speaks in allegories and transposes human characteristics on animals' thought to be possessing similar traits of nature. However it is difficult to agree with the supposition of the author that this device owes its origin to the animistic or atavistic beliefs of early times and I would rather think that it is perhaps a beautiful and clever way of exposing the weaknesses of certain types of human beings without naming them. The height of such an *Allegorisation* is found in the text of *Panchtantra,* a piece of world literature now, due to its translation into all civilized languages, in which the lion, the jackal, the crow, the crab, the monkey, the hare etc. all represent a particular type of human beings. We do not perceive these animals as animals but, as soon as the imagination penetrates through the thin veil of allegorisation, we start perceiving them as human beings around us and discern them as characters with whom we come into

contact daily in our lives.

A strong characteristic of Indian narratives is the *anonymity* of its narrator. The author of many narrative work prefers to remain anonymous and witches in some mythical figure or semi-historical personality as the original narrator or the inventor of that particular legend or tale. The vast literature of Puranas with all its disharmony and variedness of content, is ascribed to one single author named, Vyasa the expander. Gunadhya, the famous author of now lost *Brhatkatha* ascribes the original authorship of his work to Lord Siva, who narrated the stories first to his wife overheard by one of his *Ganas,* who narrated it further.

There is perhaps considerable justification for such a selfless and self-efficating attitude because the origin of a tale is often shrouded in mystery and cannot be historically determined.

This is perhaps also one of the reasons why the Indian narratives are placed in the *fluidity of time* and not in any given moment of history. The narrative time in Indian texts, according to the author, is more psychological in character than logical. The happenings relate to an undefined area of time whereby the emphasis from a definite dateline is shifted to an indefinite infinity opening the possibility of such an happening any time and any-where in the world. However, the authors of Indian narratives are a little more specific about the placement of their stories within certain framework of *space* which is obvious by the fact that the author mentions the region where certain happenings took place. K. Ayyappa Paniker points to the fact that the *Jatakas* usually start with the mention of Varanasi in Kashi region or the fables of*Panchtantra* with a mention of the city of Mahilaropya in the southern region of India. He, therefore, expresses the opinion that the Indian narrative "can be said to be a spatial one and this makes for a more free handling of the time factor". The temporal dimension, according to him, is often underplayed while the space factor gets added importance. However, this is not very convincing and I would think that in an Indian narrative the space is an unimportant as the time and the specific mention of a particular place is in no way significant to the basic intent of the story. That what happens in a fable of *Panchtantra* in Mahilaropya could happen in the same way and in the same manner anywhere else in the world.

Lastly, the Indian narrative shows a wonderful balance between *stylization* and *improvisation.* The narrator follows certain pre-established codes in the overall structure of his literary production yet he also puts a stamp of his personality by improvising substantially in the motives and the contents of the story. The basic frame-work and the structure is adhered to, still a lot of margin is there for personal freedom with regard to the content and individually invented style. This phenomenon is very similar to the *Raga* system of Indian music where the basic structure is fixed and given but still a lot of scope is where for improvised variations based on the training and the talent of the musician.

The author of this work classfies the ancient narrative literature into ten models and deals with them in one chapter each, bringing to light their salient features on the basis of the most characteristic literary representative of that model. These models are :

1 The *Vedic* model

2. The *Purana* model

3. The *Itihasa* model

4. The *Srnkhala* model

5. The *Anyapadesa* model

6. The *Mahakavya* model

7. The *Buddhist* model

8. The *Dravidian* model

9. Multiple model (The Folk/Tribal Narrative)

10. The *mixed* (miscellaneous) narrative model

The Vedic model is best represented by the oldest of the *Samhitas,* namely *Rgveda.* The author describes this model as *'Encrypted Narrative',* where the narrative leaves much to be imagined and interpreted by the listener to the even because the whole narrative is not only symbolical but yields multiple meanings interpreted at different plains. For *Purana* model he takes up *Srimadbhagavata* as a representative text.

This model is termed as *'Saga Narrative'.* These are the tales and stories regarding Gods who are divine beings no doubt, but behave often as elevated human beings. The *Itihasa* model, represented by *Mahabharata* belongs to the category of the 'Epic Narrative' which deals with the stories of ancient heroes, the glorified human beings who are sometimes the earthly incarnations of various Gods. These heroes, though endowed with divine prowess and valour, are basically human beings with a number of human weaknesses. The *Srnkhala* model deals with such texts as the *Kathasaritsagar,* which have an unending chain of stories. One character of the story narrating another story and a character in that story narrating one more stories encapsuled in it. Unless you listen to the last story attentively, you would not comprehend the significance of the previous stories and have to work your way up from the bottom to the top, till you finally understand the content and the intent of the first story. The *Anyapadesa* model is the commonly known fables of *Panchtantra* and *Hitopadesa* etc. where animals represent certain kinds and types of human beings whom we see all around in every society. The sixth or the *Mahakavya* model is best represented by the *Raghuvamsa* of Kalidasa which deals with almost all aspects and situations of human life and its unending vicissitudes centering round the personality of some grand and noble historical or divine figure. At the same time, it is not oblivious to the beauties of nature and tries to rope in nature to express or strengthen the emotions and internal mental set-up of the character, in question.

The Buddhist and the Jain narratives represented by *Jatakas* and also tales in *Maharashtri Prakrta* have an ultimate goal or propagating the religious ideals although the stuff of the tales has usually been drawn from the folk tales transmitted orally from pre-historic times. The author then devotes a separate chapter on the nature of 'Dravidian Narrative' and takes *Cilappatikaram* as well as *Manimekalei* (both in Tamizh) as models. These the Dravidian narratives have significantly different nature than those of Sanskrit *Mahakavyas* in as much as they are much more lyrical in character and have great exuberance of highly passionate and emotional feelings. They are full of songs and dances all through the text and have mostly a female character as their central figure. the multiple or the *'Tribal model'* can have very 'non-classical' and even 'non-literary' nature but has a pristine beauty and is perhaps the richest and still untapped resource of the Indian narrative imagination. It is basically oral in composition as well as communication.

It is creation of a community and as such highlights its collective consciousness with its special individuality. It is not institutionalized and has a free style with enormous scope for improvisation.

The last or the mixed (*misra*) model comprises a number of miscellaneous types and varieties of narrative like e.g. the well known Sanskrit prose work *Kadambari* which contains elements of chain narration, cyclicalistion, elasticisation of time and space and much more, making it the most suspense-packed and interesting novel of Sanskrit; the *Campus* with their vigorous and terse prose interspersed with beautiful verses, the *Dutakavyas* the emphasis is shifted from the story to the description of nature and inner feelings of the human beings and further to the innumerable form of oral narratives with a strong regional

character and their well-known improvisations.

It is basically these oral narratives which form the bedrock of regional theatre developing sometimes into such classical forms of dance drama as *Koodiattam* in Kerala. Oral narratives also form the basis of such literary genres as *Mangalakavyas* in Bengali, the *Lilacharitas* in Marathi, the *Quissas* of Punjabi and Sindhi and the *Viragathakavyas* of Hindi.

"Indian Narratology" by K. Ayyappa Paniker is the first commendable attempt by a versatile scholar to categorize the various forms of the rich Indian narrative literature and to analyse its content and nature. The book makes fascinating reading and the interest of the reader is always kept up by the captivating subject matter presented in a very simple and readable language and in a simple and direct style. It is an indispensable book for the scholars working on any aspect of Indian narrative literature, and also for a common reader who wants to educate himself on the subject.

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