

The Narrative Tradition of Ancient India

Abstract

Though the novel as a literary phenomenon is new to India, the tradition of narration can be traced back to the earliest times when story-telling took the form of fables and folk tales. It was an oral tradition and served as a medium of both instruction and entertainment. No distinction was made between prose and verse and the nature was essentially religious and didactic. The written tradition of modern India is a continuation of the oral and many novelists derive their structure and technique from the ancient modes of story-telling. The surging popularity of modern Indian novelists makes it essential to have an understanding of the ancient Indian tradition of narration.

Keywords: Narrative, Novel, Folklore, Fables.

Introduction

The word "narrative" is very wide in scope and context. As defined by the French writer, Michel Butor, "Narrative is a phenomenon which extends considerably beyond the scope of literature: it is one of the essential constituents of our understanding of reality. From the time we begin to understand language until our death, we are perpetually surrounded by narratives, first of all in our family, then at school, then through our encounters with people and reading."¹

In India, the tradition of narration can be traced back to ancient times when story-telling took the form of fables and tales. The tradition was oral rather than written and was a medium of both instruction and entertainment. The written tradition of modern India is but a continuation of the oral and many novelists derive their technique from the ancient modes of story-telling. As pointed out by Sudhakar Marathe and Meenakshi Mukherjee:

"In India... the printed word has never been a vehicle of culture as it has been in the post Renaissance West. Many pre-printing forms – myths, folk tale, the puranas, the epics, bardic recitals, heroic songs, and narrative carved in stone, painted in scrolls or woven in fabric, harikatha, harakatha, kirtana and other forms of oral narrative recitals continue to instruct and please people in all parts on India. Some of these forms have been incorporated and imitated in newer forms."²

The earliest forms of story-telling were the fables and folk tales. The most famous fables of the world are to be found in the Panchatantra and can be divided into two categories – the beast fables and the popular tale. Both have certain characteristics that are similar:

"The narrative structure is often circular, i.e., either there is a larger story which contains a smaller one which in turn contains another and so on, or a number of shorter tales are strung together in the larger thread of the central narrative."³

Thus, the tales and beast fables have a frame-story into which other stories are fitted. This technique of inserting emboxed stories into the main theme or frame-story is a feature that is peculiar to Indian literature. These emboxed stories may sometimes distract the reader, yet they are essential to the whole structure of the tale as they expand upon the themes and essential points of the frame story. They are complete stories in themselves and even though they are emboxed, can be analysed independently of the main story.

The language of these tales is elegant and sublime. They are written in both prose and verse as no clear-cut demarcation between the two existed in ancient India. The nature of fables was essentially religious and didactic and aimed to inculcate worldly wisdom among the people. The Panchatantra specially appears to have been constructed for the purpose of instructing young princes is statecraft and practical morality. Its last version, Hitopadesh is devoted to the knowledge of statecraft. Franklin Edgerton says:



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"...it (Panchatantra) is designed especially to advise rules in the arts of government. It is, then, a "Mirror for Magistrates, or Furstenspiegel. The so-called 'morals' of the stories have no bearing on morality, they are unmoral, and often immoral. They glorify shrewdness, practical wisdom, in the affairs of life, and especially of politics, of government."⁴

Though not directly opposed to the dharma-shastras, the fables teach shrewdness and cleverness rather than morality or ethical behavior and are more close to the niti-shastras and artha-shastras rather than the dharma-shastras.

Besides these fables and tales, there are two great epics of India, the Ramayana and Mahabharata as well as the Puranas which are philosophical by nature. These retain the story within the story framework of the earlier tales and fables.

There are various levels of time and space in the traditional Indian narrative. The first level is that of the contemporary speaker and listener. The second is that of the original setting and the third, fourth and subsequent levels are those of the stories occurring within stories. This chain is sometimes small and sometimes very big. In Tulsidasa's Ramcharitmanas, there are four sets of narrators and listeners – (a) Tulsidasa and his audience, (2) Yajnavalkya and Bhardwaj, (3) Kakabhushundi and Garuda and (4) Shiva and Parvati.

Though both Ramayana and Mahabharata are considered to be epics, they were not thought to be so in the Indian tradition. As Irawati Karve points out "a clear distinction was made in Sanskrit between these works, the first being Kavya and the second Itihasa. Sanskrit poetics does not consider Itihasa to be history, but a genre of composition like Kavya or Natya."⁵

Two other types of narration to be found in ancient India are Akhyayika and the Katha. The former revolves round real people and incidents while the latter is pure imagination and invention. According to some scholars, an Akhyayika is that in which the story is narrated by the protagonist whereas in a Katha, it is narrated by the protagonist as well as other characters. However, Dandin in his Kavyadarsha holds that no clear distinction or demarcation can be made between the two.

There are also historical romances and semi-historical romances like Bana Bhatta's Harchacharita and Merutunga's Prabandha Chintamani respectively. The former deals with the story of Harshavardhana, the king of Kannauj, but does not claim to be a historical work. It gives a detailed description of the life and people of those times, especially the nature of the army and its life during an expedition. The narration is straightforward and is a narration of the author and not of the characters. There are allusions to different lore like epics, religion, philosophy and sciences.

In Bana's Kadambani, the old device of emboxing stories is found and this produces an artistic complexity and variations in the narration. When a long description is introduced, there is a

complete arrest of the narration of the story. The description is a single sentence extending to a few pages with only one predicate at the end, the description being effected by introducing a large number of epithets in syntactical relation with the main subject-matter of description, with similar and other figures of speech and with the presentations of the various parts of the object of description. There is a profusion of hyperbole and there are many allusions to mythology, nature, religion, philosophy, sciences and the customs, manner and practices of the people are introduced.

All Indian collection of tales are of unknown authorship. Their essential and integral feature is the literary form in which they are written. They are usually written in prose mingled with sententious stanzas, gnomic verses, maxims and aphorisms which are not really essential but embellish the story, thereby enchanting the reader as well as precisely conveying the gist of the moral of the tale in as few words as possible. Each of the Katha works usually contains different sententious stanzas and even various versions of the same Katha work often contain different sententious stanzas. The inclusion or omission of different gnomic verses characterizes different versions of the same Katha tale.

Aim of the study

The aims of this paper is to study the narrative tradition of ancient India as it in essential for a proper analysis of modern Indian writers in English literature.

Conclusion

Thus, it can be seen that India has a rich heritage of narrative tradition and its techniques have tended to influence the Indian novelists, including those writing in English. They have tried to retain their Indianness through their themes, patterns of myth and reality, technique, perceptual models, ethical preoccupations especially through language. They have unhesitatingly incorporated Indian idioms and words in their works and experimented with language in order to maintain an illusion of reality and authenticity. They have also tried to present Indian values and ethos through their works.

As pointed out by K.R.Srinivas Iyengar:

"It stands to reason that what makes Indo-Anglican Literature an Indian literature and not just a ramshackle outhouse of English literature, is the quality of its Indianness – in the choice of subject, in the texture of thought and play of sentiment, in the organization of material and in the creative use of language."⁷

It cannot be denied that in order to understand and correctly analyse the works of Indian novelists it is imperative that the various modes of narration in Indian tradition should also be studied.

End Notes

1. <http://www.goodreads.com>
2. Sudhakar Marthe & Meenakshi Mukherjee, *Narrative: Forms and Transformations*, Chanakya Publications, Delhi, 1986, pp 3-4

3. K.Satchidanandan, *Indian Literature: Position and Proportions*, Delhi Pencraft International, Delhi 1999, p. 195
4. Meenakshi Mukherjee, *Realism and Reality: The Novel and Society in India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi 1985, p.4
5. Franklin Edgerton, *The Panchatantra* (translated from Sanskrit), George Allen and Unwin Limited, London 1965, pp 10-11
6. Irawati Karwe, "The Origin of Genres" in *New Literary History*, VII (1976), p. 163
7. K.R.Srinivasa Iyengar, *Indian Writing in English*, Sterling Publishers Printer Limited, New Delhi, 1962, rpt. 1987, p. 122