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Eternalising Cultural Memory through Cultural Parallels in Literary Narratives

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Abstract:

Cultural memory represents the collective perceptions and creations of the distant past. Such collective memories are best documented and secured in Literature. What matters is not the real facts but rather the consensus of conventions shared by both the cultural history and the literary creator. However, literary narratives do not always give a compilation of such memories under a single wrap. It is on this distinctive point that Jakkana stands out in eternalising cultural memory. Basavaraj Naikar's novella, Jakkanna is the retelling of the life and history of the Amarsilpi Jakkannacharya, the famed architect of the Hoysala dynasty. The plot is replete with events that have been happening from the ancient times. Parallels of such incidents that have endured to the modern times can be drawn from the two great epics and other ancient Indian philosophy and literatures. This article aims at highlighting such aspects of our lives that seems to have been greatly influenced by the past. It also looks at such events that have endured eras.

Keywords: cultural memory, sculpture, soothsayer, architecture.

Introduction

The socio-cultural history of any civilization remains alive essentially through the multiple meanings and interpretations they yield in every new generation. Such meaningful avowals about the cultural history in a given cultural context of the present, is termed as cultural memory. Cultural memory represents the collective perceptions and creations of the distant past. These are maintained by people in a social and historical context and are handed down to their descendants. There is plenty of evidence to prove their existence in society, wherein such 'retrospective memory' reveals itself through rituals and ceremonies at festivals, special occasions, special places and other common platforms. (Assmann, 56–9). Such handed-down memories are of paramount importance in understanding and interpreting events in history. In fact, any particular version of history becomes significant only when it is meaningful to the specific culture it belongs to. This in turn, evokes the collective subjectivities and self-identities of the members of that culture.

This cultural memory does not aim at endorsing past events, or at establishing the factual fibre, nor do they emphasise the need to ensure cultural continuity. Their primary aim is to keep the record of events alive by transmitting this knowledge to succeeding generations.

Community relationship and socialization of the individual members of the society aid in passing down knowledge of cultural history. However, the individuals are free to differ in interpreting them and offer alternate views. Thus interpretations of past events and situations vary in keeping with the times thus warranting continuity in retaining cultural memories. When this memory ceases to be merely an individual experience and integrates with the established notions of a generation, it stakes claim to become part of a collective domain. This explains the significance of cultural memory in both Historiography and Culture Studies. The former looks at the process of establishing this memory while the latter deals with their implications and objects. In short, cultural memory is a concept where the present is shaped by our understanding of the past and therefore the past does wield enormous influence on the present.

Basavaraj Naikar's novella, *Jakkanna* is the recapping of the life and history of the Amarsilpi Jakkannacharya, the renowned architect of the Hoysala dynasty. The plot is replete with events that share commonalities with some of those that have happened and are happening from the ancient times. Parallels of such incidents that have sustained to the modern times can be drawn from the two great epics and other ancient Indian philosophy and literatures.

This article looks at three major turn of events that draws parallels with several events in mythology, history and therefore several ancient literatures of India. The role of birds and the soothsayer in prophesying, Jakkanna deserting his wife and the son recognising and reuniting with his father are some of the oft repeated episodes in several epical and historical contexts.

Brief Synopsis

A brief outline of the story could help to support the claim that the present is shaped by our understanding of the past. The story begins with Jakanacharya's wife being on the verge of delivering his baby. His mother asks him to prepare the horoscope of his about-to-be-born child. On preparing the chart, he realizes that the mother of this baby could be an adulteress. Just then, a soothsayer appears at the doorstep and states that the omen birds have predicted the disappearance of a very intelligent person from this village that very night. She is unable to add more to her story, but seeks alms from Jakkanna. With his distraught mind, he dismisses her. Fuming with anger, he decides to leave his house even without intimating his mother of his decision. Soon after, the mother rushes to inform him of the safe delivery of a baby boy, but he was not to be seen anywhere. She runs out in search of him, but returns in vain. Late in the night, the mother does see him lying on the ground. Overwhelmed at the sight, she calls him home. However, he rejects her invitation and accuses his wife of betraying him. Dejected, the mother returns home. Jakkanna proceeds with his journey choosing the path towards Sanyasa, and begins to meditate on Lord Shiva. Pleased with his devotion and intensity of penance, the Lord appeared before him. Besides indicating to him, his fault of misreading the horoscope, the Lord ordains him with the responsibility to construct temples all over the empire and place his idol in them. Jakkanna is astonished by this. He explains his lack of knowledge of temple architecture, but the Lord convinces him

that he would be ably supported for this, if he takes up the initiative. He also directs him towards the place of his previous birth from where he could help his kith retrieve a treasure of gold coin, a part of which, he could use for his work. Consequently, several temples were built and they brought him enormous fame. In the meantime his son Dankanacharya grows up evincing a keen interest in sculpture and architecture. He then sets out in search of his father with the skeletal details of his appearance given by his grandmother. He reaches Belur where he takes up a job as a sculptor. During the consecration of the idol of Lord Narayana, in a temple, he identifies a flaw in a figure sculpted by the great Jakanacharya himself. Dankanacharya contends that the carving stone has a toad living inside and that there is water inside the stone. This, he claims, renders the piece defective. Jakanacharya, challenged for the first time, vows to cut off his right hand if the young sculptor proves his allegations. The King, who had earlier requested Jakkana to construct the temple for Lord Narayana, asks the young sculptor to prove his point. Dankanna suggests that sandal paste be applied all over the statue. The paste would remain wet if there is a hole inside, else it would dry, he proclaims. On hearing this, the King orders his men to carry out the procedure. The paste remains wet around the navel region while the other parts quickly dry. When the spot is chiselled a toad jumps out with a little water flowing out, thus certifying the claims of the young boy. Upholding his vow, Jakanacharya cuts off his right hand. Eventually, the two sculptors realize their relationship as father and son after which the family reunites.

Birds as foretellers

It has been a common feature in Indian tradition to communicate human thoughts, ideas and even aspirations through birds and animals. In fact every Hindu deity is accompanied by a bird, Garuda with Narayana, the crow with Saneeshwara, Peacock with Muruga, Swan with Saraswathi, Owl with Lakshmi, Parrot with Meenakshi and so on. These apart, Indian Literatures abound with omens, dreams and soothsayer's words to foretell the future. Sita insists joining her Husband's journey to the forest in Ayodhya Kanda citing the words of a soothsayer in Ramayana. Sisupala was a deformed baby. A soothsayer predicts that the curer of his deformity would also be his slayer, who happens to be Krishna. Sisupala is killed by Krishna in the Mahabharata. King Vikramaditya is warned by a soothsayer that he will lose his kingdom if he marries a certain girl. Fearing this, he gets her married to his Prime minister. There have been several other instances of the soothsayer's words being followed rigorously in Indian mythology.

The tradition remains intact, in *Jakkana*, where the plot begins with a koravanji, bringing up the prophecy of the two omen birds. "Tomorrow a great scholar of this Kridapura will be a victim of his own scholarship" (Naikar, 4) the female bird tells the male, according to the soothsayer. This is true, as later when Lord Shiva, pleased with his penance appears in front of him and intimates him of his faulty reading of the horoscope (Naikar, 17). Consequent to this reading, Jakkana walks out of his house and family.

Both the *koravanji* and the *Halakki* birds appear again later in the novella to prophesise about the reunion of the father and the son. "The omen birds said that the stone dislodged

from the platform would be refitted into it; that the son would outshine the father".(Naikar,39)

The other aspect of soothsayer's words is that they would be in the form of a riddle. The male bird after conveying this begins to whisper which is barely audible to the soothsayer. Hence who that scholar was, where and when this would happen etc. were never clearly known.

Abandoning the family

The second parallel that can be drawn with the culturally rich texts is the abandoning of wife and child(ren) by the protagonist. Right from Rama's abandoning a pregnant Sita (Ramayana), Dushyanta's complete loss of memory about Sakuntala (Mahabharata), Nala's deserting his wife Damayanti in the forest (Mahabharata), Haris-chandra selling his wife to pay dakshina to Sage Viswamithra, (Markandeya Purana) etc, it is possible to see a whole plethora of literatures where abandoning the family has been rampant for varied reasons.

Jakkana too deserts his wife in labour along with his mother. The turn of events is both sudden and dramatic. "Down with my adulterous wife and her adulterine baby!"(Naikar, 5) So saying he struts out of his house. Quite like Rama, who repents his action and pines for his beloved, Jakkana too regrets his impulsive action on that fateful day. He offers to apologise to his mother and wife when Lord Shiva informs him of his error of judgment in reading the horoscope. The Lord however reassures him then. His regret reappears when Emperor Vishnuvardhana mentions H.H.Ramanujacharya's reference to his son with a possibility of establishing a blood relationship with him.

Unlike Dushyanta, who forgets about Shakuntala, albeit a curse by sage Durvasa, Jakkana repeatedly expresses his regret on the miscalculation and unnecessary suspicion his wife's chastity, thus becoming a victim of his own scholarship as predicted by the omen birds.

While Jakkana shows no semblance to Haris-chandra's act wherein the latter not only sold away his wife, but was willing to sell her mangalsutra as well when needed. Jakkana is perhaps akin to Nala who yearned to be united with his wife Damayanti. However, there is more to Jakkana's deserting his wife than that which meets the eye

It may be pertinent to recall some of the others who have abandoned marital life in their quest for spirituality. Two of the greatest names that one can think of are Gautama Buddha and Vardhamana Mahavira. Both left their families behind in search of the ultimate Truth. They chose to follow the path of sanyasa to attain their goal. Even after accomplishing their goal, they continued to remain away from family, proceeded to establish highly solemn schools of thought and philosophy, viz, Buddhism and Jainism respectively, that spread all over the world.

Excepting the fact that Jakkana was reunited with this family, he can be included in this Hall of Fame. He walked out of his house and family, though with a sense of self-effacing yet

misplaced dejection, he was never tempted to return even after his mother's loving persuasion. He was determined to take up sanyasa and followed the spiritual path of yoga and meditation. He does show semblance of the two great ancient Indian Philosophers on these terms. However, Lord Shiva who appeared before him, pleased with his penance advised him against returning to his family, although he wished to as soon as he realized his miscalculation and the heinous accusation he charged his wife with. He was overcome by a deep sense of remorse and was therefore keen to apologise for his error. The Lord dispensed with the idea and assigned him a more rigorous task which prevented him from taking up sanyasa much against his wishes. His return to worldly life after completing the assigned task, though through Devine intervention and dispensation, depicts him dissimilar to the two giant saint – philosophers.

Reunion of the son and the father

The third parallel is about the son and the father's reunion whereby Jakkana eventually reunites with his family. This is chiefly due to the efforts of his son Dankanacharya and not either his or his wife, Lakshmi's efforts. In that sense the sequence overlaps with Lava and Kusa in Ramayana who get united with their father, Rama.; while Shakuntala goes to Hastinapura in search of her beloved and Harichandra's wife meets her husband accidentally when she comes to cremate her son.

Jakkana's son shows determination to seek his father, sets out of the house in search of him. After spending several months, wandering to several places, making enquiries about his father, he lands in Belur, where a sequence of events including challenging his own father, he succeeds in his efforts of both seeking his father and fixing the flaw in the sculpture. The father recognises the son. Unlike Rama and Sita who do not reunite, Jakkana is united with his family

Apart from these quite obvious parallels, there are a few minor equivalences too. The mother son relationship does remind us of several instances such as Kowsalya - Rama, Sumitra – Lakshmana, Kaikeyi – Bharatha. Gandhari –Duryodana. In all these situations as in the current study, the mother outpours immense affection for the son emanating a positive relationship. However, it is interesting to note that the mother- son relationship projects a completely different dimension in Western Literature. Antigone- Oedipus, Gertrude – Hamlet are just a few examples.

Another parallel is the advice sought and followed religiously from the Gurus. Sage Viswamithra, Guru Kripacharya are wise sages guiding the Royal families in the two great epics. So did Dasaratha seek from Sage Viswamithra. In the novella too Emperor Vishnuvardhana, as per Sri Ramanujacharya's suggestion , invites Jakkana to construct a temple for Lord Narayana and what follows as they say, is history.

Summation

Cultural memory uniquely facilitates the collective perceptions and creations, as presented in literary narratives as a living testimony to the happenings of a distant past. Literary narratives, for their part, merge fact and fiction seamlessly thus blurring their borders. This 'retrospective memory' (Assmann, 56–9) lives through social contexts constantly reminding us of their antique origins. This cannot be better expressed than in the words of John Elsner (226): "What matters ... is not that (a particular account of the past) be correct by our standards or anyone else's, but that it be convincing to the particular group of individuals ... for whom it serves as an explanation of the world they inhabit.

Therefore, it may not be an exaggeration to conclude that Jakkana, serves well to be the torchbearer, eternalising cultural memories through cultural parallels in literary narratives.

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