

A Historiographic Metafictional Reading Of Sugandhi Alias Andal Devanayaki By T. D. Ramakrishnan

Anagha P A¹, Dr.Sreena K²

¹Integrated MA English Language and Literature, Dept of English, Amrita School of Arts and Sciences, Amrita Vishwavidyapeetham, Kochi. anaghapashok@gmail.com

²Assistant Professor, Dept of English, Amrita School of Arts and Sciences, Amrita Vishwavidyapeetham, Kochi.sreenak@asas.kh.amrita.edu

ABSTRACT

This research paper is an attempt to read the novel *Sugandhi Alias Andal Devanayaki* in Linda Hutcheon's concept of 'Historiographic metafiction' in this research paper. T D Ramakrishnan's "*Sugandhi Alias Andal Devanayaki*", translated from the original Malayalam work published in 2014 by Priya K Nair has secured several Awards, where the novel with its main plot speaks the story of women who suffers and struggles in the backdrop of LTTE conflict in the history of Sri Lanka meanwhile the subplot speaks of the meta-realistic backdrop of historical Chera-Chola dynasties. The author successfully conveys the political ideas, message against war and discrimination towards women in general through the merging of reality, history, myth, and fiction. Historiographic Metafiction is a technique of postmodernism, which according to Linda Hutcheon - "those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages"(Hutcheon5).

Key words: Historiographic Metafiction, postmodernism, historiography, fiction, fact, myth

INTRODUCTION

T D Ramakrishnan's novel *Sugandhi Alias Andal Devanayaki* (translated by Priya K Nair) is a postmodern novel that can be marked as an engaging piece of work that discusses how violence connects both fascism and revolution. *Sugandhi Enna Andal Devanayaki*, the original work published in 2014 has won the 2016 Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award, 2016 Malayattoor Award, and 2017 Vayalar Award. The novel weaves in and out of the Sri-Lankan history of present and past. Moving through the pages we find the narrator of the novel Peter Jeevanandham, is in search of his long lost love Sugandhi in parallel to his commitment as a scriptwriter of a Hollywood movie team with the project of a movie *The Women Behind the Fall of Tiger* which is co-sponsored by the Sri-Lankan government. We find the irony rising as the movie is about the narrators' past attempt to do a movie on the renowned LTTE Activist Rajini Thiranagama. The novel soon reveals that Peter in the past had come in alliance with the LTTE in the project of the movie for the support and information, meanwhile LTTE had agreed on the helping hands with a hidden plan to use the movie against the Sinhalese and government, but in process, Peter gets too much information about the murder of Rajini Thiranagama which makes him save himself from the hands of Tigers. Readers get to know his long-lost love Sugandhi who was one among the activists of LTTE had helped him escape from the Tigers during the trouble in his first visit to Sri Lanka. The narrator in his search for the protagonist Sugandhi comes across an article published in a web magazine about Devanayaki of Royal Heritage, a powerful divine mythical character in the backdrop of South Asian history. Devanayaki's story brings in the meta-realistic narration in the novel where the character uses her beauty, wit, and intellect to keep her position as queen of Cheras and later Cholas, till the tragedy crosses her life leading her to make up her mind for revenge. In the novel with on and of narration of current and past events author has attempted to merge the past with current bringing in a re-emergence of Devanayaki towards the end of the novel with a surrealist approach, which seems not much conceivable to the readers.

The mythical plot seems to be over-emphasized and concentrated compared to the real plot. The author of the novel T. D. Ramakrishnan has done a good background study of South Asian and Sri-Lankan history to effectively bring in his fictional characters and incidents to open the divergent sides of the Sri-Lankan Civil war and historical incidents where he stays independent without taking

sides or whitewash the sides of anyone. The author portrays how women are suffered, exploited, and abused in the shades of war and battles from a very long time back.

Linda Hutcheon in her work *The Poetics of Postmodernism* while referring to the novels that attempt to present the actual and historical events, also the characters in a fictionalized manner coined the term 'Historiographic Metafiction'. In the work, she labels the postmodern historical novels as "historiographic metafiction" since they bring in the theme with the theory of contemporary historiography and the distinction between history and fiction. She explains her reason for this label as "It (historiographic metafiction) puts into question, at the same time as it exploits, the grounding of historical knowledge in the past real." (Hutcheon92). Historiographic metafiction is related to fiction that combines metafiction with history-based novels and differentiating the facts and events. We find the prominent features of Historiographic metafiction such as intertextuality, parody, paratextuality, time, irony, fragmentation of characters, fragmentation of plot, etc.

ANALYSIS

Sugandhi Alias Andal Devanayaki can be considered as one of the Historiographic metafictional texts with the multidimensional version of recorded incidents from the civil war period and ancient history being discussed in the fictional plot. In the novel, *Sugandhi Alias Andal Devanayaki* T D Ramakrishnan pays tribute to Dr. Rajini Thiraganama by dedicating the novel, who was a Tamil human rights activist and Feminist who was assassinated by Tamil Tigers cadres after she criticized them for their atrocities and publishing the book *The Broken Palmyra*. The novel is set in the backdrop of the Civil War of Sri-Lanka we can see the non-supportive nature of the author towards the two opposition groups; the government and LTTE as brought and discussed in the novel. A clear discussion of struggles for freedom and power along with the sufferings of people focusing mainly on the women who get victimized, marginalized, and suffered amid the wars and battles around the world even from centuries ago is brought to light. We find a thorough background study of Sri-Lankan history on facts, events, politics, culture, economy, trade, myths, etc by the author stays evident throughout the novel.

In the novel we find T D Ramakrishnan playing with the boundaries of fiction and history which seems to move farther from realism that is filled with facts and history. Historiographic metafiction when viewed as a postmodern technique we find Historiographic Metafiction assimilate the three domains literature, history and theory where "its theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs (historiographic metafiction) is made the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past" (Hutcheon5). The term and concept of Historiographic metafiction can be viewed as a combination of two terms, historiography and metafiction. Historiography can be defined as the recording of the change over a period of time which covers different aspects of human society that includes the political, social, cultural, economic, scientific, technological, religious and military developments; which can have the influences of the historians interpretation. At the same time Metafiction can be defined as a fictional writing that draws attention to its fictional nature that makes reader to question the relation between the reality and fiction. Thus idea of historiographic metafiction is a combination or meeting of historical facts and fictional imagination that makes the reader curious to hunt for the study of history surrounding the novel and differentiate the fact with fiction of the text. T D Ramakrishnan with his expert narration and storytelling does the same work forcing the reader to hunt for history.

Straight from the beginning of the novel author makes the reader track down the truth of the detailed information provided; as the novel begins straight with "When I arrive at Divine Pearl, a secret Sri-Lankan military camp that lay ninety-five kilometers from Colombo, it was quite late in the evening." (Ramakrishnan1). The reader at every point gets curious to track the detail to fetch the

truth and details in connection to it. By the end of the first chapter T.D. Ramakrishnan succeeds in bringing the dark shadowed realities regarding the Divine Pearl and the accusations of human rights violation by the Sri Lankan government raised across the world; at the same time narrator introduces the character Sugandhi for whom Peter is in search and at the same time till leads to an all different part of a discussion of a historical as well as the mythic story of magic realism introduced in the third chapter -‘The Story of Devanayaki’ thought to be written by Sugandhi under the pen-name of Meenakshi Rajarathinam, continuing further in chapter twelve as an article relating to a manuscript claimed to be found in Sigiriya ‘Susaana Supina’ that runs till chapter twenty-three. Linda Hutcheon says that “Past events can be altered. History gets rewritten. Well, we’ve just found that this applies to the real world too...Maybe the real history of the world is changing constantly? And why? Because history is a fiction.”(Hutcheon111). T D Ramakrishnan has tried to bring in this aspect of history as fiction that can be rewritten when he deals with the story of Devanayaki where after Raja Chola conquers Kanthalur Salai multiple stories associated with what happened to Devanayaki identified to be different versions of Devanayaki’s life to different geographical territories.

Historiographic Metafiction is a technique of postmodernism, which according to Linda Hutcheon is “those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages”(Hutcheon5). The novel Sugandhi Alias Andal Devanayaki could be called a novel dealing with the production of a movie about an unfinished movie and the experience of scriptwriter Peter during the attempt as said “It is a movie about a movie that was not made”(Ramakrishnan50). We see that the story plot gets far stretched when the Tamil- Sinhalese strife between government and LTTE unfolds its historical dimensions with the factual and the mythical framework of the story enter to one plot reveal the continuity of all histories when fictional Sugandhi blasts the CHOGM being a parallel to mythical Devanayaki burning Sinhasailam where the identities become hard to understand with two far dimensions getting combined at the end of the novel where Peter during his escape from Sri Lanka sees- “When the aircraft took off, I saw Devanayaki. From burning Lanka, she was coming to Kanthalur with me. She had placed a foot on Sigiriya and the other on Sripada.” (Ramakrishnan 242) which draws parallels to the chapter twenty-two where on Rajendra Cholas inquiry to Mahinda about his Akka, Devanayaki he gets the reply from his spies as “Devanayaki had grown as tall as the sky. She had walked away, with one foot on Sigiriya and the next on Sripada.”(Ramakrishnan169).

Throughout the novel, a disorganization of the fragmented plot is seen with a lack of linear time frame where the plot goes forward and flashbacks without ease that creates a credibility issue on the narrator. Starting from the present forward narration of the Peters Hollywood movie that is sponsored by the Sri Lankan government on Rajani Thiranagama the irony arises, that moves to the fable of Devanayaki that projects the feminist ideas with links of factual histories of Chera, Chola, Pandya, and Sinhalese putting light to the long run violence against women with repressive power, rapes in shades of war, sufferings in a patriarchal society, and objectification of the female body. The story of Devanayaki covers Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Ceylon, and also Cambodia and Indonesia with long extended imagination from historical facts of the Sangam era.

Historiographic metafiction often points out the usage of inter-textual and para-textual conventions being part of the postmodern technique. T D Ramakrishnan has done a great set of background studies that gets evident in the novel while bringing in references to the facts and literature in connection with the subjects brought down for discussion. By bringing references to the movies “The Road from Elephant Pass”, “The Battle of Algiers”, “Kannathil Muthamittal”, “No more Tears Sister” author has done smart work to explain the type of movie Peter is planning in his dream project on Rajini Thiranagama. For the narrator, the online magazine “Karupu” becomes a key to his search and realizations, where the articles “Notes on the Life of a Female Soldier” and “The Story of Devanayaki”(part-1) were found that makes the way for his further search for

Sugandhi his lover leading to get the second part of “The Story of Devanayaki” revealing to be a story from Sree Vallabha Buddhans “Susaana Supina” an old palm-leaf manuscript unearthed from Sigiriya. While narrating the mythical story “The Story of Devanayaki” the references of “Arthashastra” by Chanakya, “Thirupavai” and “Nachiyaar Thirumozhi” of Andal, “Soundarya Lahari” of Shankaracharya a clear vision of Devanayaki's spirit and intellect to sustain in her thoughts to do her wishes is explained, she goes to all extend using her body, intellect, love and soul to win her battle for freedom and revenge.

T D Ramakrishnan has done excellent work by efficiently bringing in the fictional characters along with real historical figures and succeed in creating a close relationship with readers. The fictional characters introduced in the novel at both fictional and mythical parts are creating a resonance to readers creating no tension in acceptability as the information and details of character image as attire, language, setting, culture, etc can be seen true to the periods to which the narratives are taking place. Thus rewriting the historical events and the past questions the stability of the meaning with possibilities of historical recordings which are controlled and influenced by those in power and elite in the society. The author herewith his efforts incorporating the known historical events and personages within the texts manages to question the known historical knowledge and bring in an illusion of possible facts and myth.

CONCLUSION

“Sugandhi Alias Andal Devanayaki” can be marked as a Historiographic Metafiction that portrays an alternative historical rewriting that blurs the borderline of fact and fiction making reader think of a new history and myth or another side of history and myth; at the same time making readers question the objectiveness and truthfulness of history. T D Ramakrishnan has made the novel a real art piece contrary to the usual historic novels in Malayalam literature and Priya K Nair has done an excellent work translating the novel to English effectively to be established among the wide range of readers around the world. “Sugandhi Alias Andal Devanayaki” becomes something beyond the mere historic, feminist or fascist novel rather than a potential novel with multiple forms and topics combined.

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