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Research article

Literary representation of Jewish departure in “The Saga of Muziris” by Sethu

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Literature and history are fields of knowledge that cannot have an independent existence. This article aims to analyze the interface of literature and history with reference to the novel “The Saga of Muziris” by Sethu. It mainly focuses on the levels which historical events impact the society and the resulting changes in sociocultural realms. An important event in the history of Kerala is considered here – the Jewish departure. Authors have identified literature as history concentrating on significant historical events: for example, K.N. Panikkar in his essay “Novel as Colonial Narrative” analyzes colonisation as individual experience. The article analyzes how social constructions were altered during and after these events. The eventual conclusion is that these events contributed to the restructuring of society largely resulting in triumph of community and hence the novel can be considered as a narrative of history as a social experience.

Keywords: Sethu, The Saga of Muziris, literature as history, multiple narratives, Jewish departure, othering, triumph of community, tragedy of individual

Introduction

Can literature be considered as history? K.N. Panikkar says: “Literature does not ‘happen’ outside history, but within it” [1. P. 3]. Literature of each age has reverberations of its history: history has always been the inspiration for literature. While “A Tale of Two Cities” drew before us the intricacies of French Revolution, “Train to Pakistan” brought to us the horrifying realities of the partition of India. History and literature has this undeniable symbiosis that before the advent of colonial archiving it was literature that acted as archive of history; the famous Vadakkanpattu of northern Kerala is a perfect example of how cultural history of North Malabar was preserved in the form of ballads [2. P. 303]. As Panikkar rightly observes, history meets literature not only when historical events are fictionalized but in every work of literature [1. P. 4]. Literature develops a world of relationships and social structure from various social events and provides details to the emotional realm of people who were involved in the events. “The writer’s imagination, needless to say, is the key agent here for it transmogrifies human conditions into

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meaningful human experiences for the delectation of both historians and belletrist. It rectifies and amends textual and historical incongruities without cancelling the foundation of truth in human experiences. The creative writer is both the recorder and an inventor of history” [3. P. 196]. In other words, it could be said that literature presents us history as experienced by people. Every event prompts multiple perspectives to look at it. If we look at the Holocaust, Jews who had first-hand experience of it have a narrative of their sufferings and survival to share, people who saved themselves from the brutality have their narrative of escaping the scene, people who are not Jews but did not support the persecution law have their own narrative of political turmoil, and people who supported the law have their narrative of purification of Germany. People who experience a particular event happening in a society do not experience it in a homogeneous way; social experience differs with the identity of the one who is experiencing it. Therefore when social experiences vary, there arises the possibility of multiple narratives of the event. In other words, each person or group of people involved in a historical event have their own version of history. In this paper I am attempting to trace how an important event in the history of Kerala and its impact on the social and personal realms of people who lived through it is represented in “The Saga of Muziris” by Sethu thereby analyzing whether the novel could be treated as a narrative of history as a social experience. The paper analyses how departure of Jews altered the social experience of the natives and how the Jewish community experienced the same event.

Discussion

“The Saga of Muziris” is a phenomenal piece of literature by A Sethumadhavan, a renowned Malayalam novelist, known under the pseudonym Sethu. The novel was originally written as “Marupiravi” in Malayalam and was later translated to English by Prema Jayakumar. Aravindan, the protagonist of the novel, returns to his homeland Chendamangalam with his historian friend Perumal after an excavation of the ancient port of Muziris or Muchiripattanam. This journey to his homeland turns out to be Aravindan’s journey to himself and his roots. As he learns more about Muziris, which laid unseen to him all those past years, he explores a part of him that appears to be a writer; duly prompted by his friend. Aravindan discovers the 2000 year old glorious history of Muziris which had been the oasis of traders from Greece, Rome, and Arabia who scooped away our black gold (pepper) for exorbitant prices and changed the lives of the people on the shore forever. Sethu builds up a world that seems to be so exotic with lifelike characters that embodies the soul of Muziris through Aravindan’s writings; novel within a novel. He also explores the more recent social and political milestones in the history of Kerala, which he experienced as a young boy, like the departure of Jews.

Jewish departure for Aravindan was a journey from ‘own’ to ‘other’. Sethu, in one of his interviews about the making of the book, says that his home town Chendamangalam, and adjacent areas like Paravoor, Mala, etc. were among the places of early Jewish settlements [4]. There was no concrete evidence as to when they arrived here though, it could be 2000 or 1500 years ago. “According to tradition, by the time when St. Thomas, the Apostle, came to Kerala there were Jewish colonies in Palayur, Pulloot, Madai and Maliankara which are places in and around

Muziris. They were so numerous that they seem to have had eighteen synagogues and houses of studies” [5. P. 277]. The merchant community of Jews settled down on the areas easily accessible from Muziris and the tolerant society of Kerala welcomed them with rewards. Joseph Rabban, the leader of Anchuvanam group of merchants was bestowed with royal powers by Bhaskara Ravivarma Perumal, the then ruler of the kingdom (5. P. 278). This land treated them as their own showing no discrimination. Aravindan being a member of the same society shares this sense of inclusion. This social inclusion is reflected in Aravindan’s experience as a young boy. When people of lower caste were prohibited to walk through the Paliyam Sanketham (a cluster of royal administrative houses and their temple), Jews were not discriminated. Though this biased social inclusion poses a question mark on the equality of the place, it is evident that Jews were considered as a part of the society. It is also seen in the efforts to promote their language in government schools of the area: “The Cochin, now Kochi, government had decreed that if there were at least eight Jews in school there has to be a part-time teacher to teach them Hebrew during the noon intervals” [6. P. 276]. Being in a society with people from diverse religion who practiced different customs Aravindan considered the Jewish community as his own or rather he believed they considered him as their own; as ‘us’. Otherness dawned on Aravindan when his Jewish classmate Seemon proudly showed him what he called “our flag” [6. P. 270], the Israeli flag. The flag serves here as a tool for othering; us separated into ‘we’ and ‘them’. It was at that point Aravindan learned that the people he thought as their own kind were actually immigrants who are destined to leave for a distant country taking shape called Israel. Othering occurs when a particular group defines itself using another group/person as different from them. “No subject will readily volunteer to become the object, the inessential; it is not the Other who, in defining himself as the Other, establishes the One. The Other is posed as such by the One in defining himself as the One” [7. P. 26]. Though mainly used as a postcolonial concept where the occident produces an uncivilized orient other, otherness in the words of Simone de Beauvoir “is a fundamental category of human thought” [7. P. 26]. Now, to define oneself as ‘the One’ there need to be inevitable components of superiority. Therefore when an individual or group of people is exposed to a seemingly different and superior culture, he experiences a sense of not belonging to that particular culture and thereby as the ‘other’. For Aravindan as a boy, Israel, from the description of his friends and other Jews of the community, appeared as superior space with a flag made of white silk and polished coins. It was intensified by the holiness of the land: “There were separate heavens for people from Chendamangalam in Israel. If Seemon died in Israel, Seemon would go to that heaven. And that would be much higher than the paradise of people from here” [6. P. 276]. Seemon or Aron though doesn’t intentionally play a superior inferior game that would make Aravindan feel like the other, their fevered religious adherence and resulting glorification of their culture as not only different but better eventually leads to othering. Now, othering here is a two way process; while Aravindan feels himself as the other in the presence of the Jewish identity, he also feels the Jewish community is the other in his society.

Jewish departure for the Jews was a journey from the ‘other’ to ‘own’. Jews fleeing from religious persecution opted to settle down in the port city of Muziris.

Even though they were welcomed with rewards (as mentioned earlier), they never adopted the ways of this land. Sethu remembers that the Jews had their own culture, rituals customs and dress. While Christians and Muslims approved inter caste marriages, they always preserved their identity [4]. Jews of Chendamangalam while preserving their distinct religious and cultural identity managed to stay as different; there had always been ‘us’ and ‘them’. Othering, as said earlier, involves a group defining itself as ‘the One’, and here Jews while defining themselves as ‘the One’ managed to stay as ‘the other’ in the society of Chendamangalam. How do they maintain that position? Their otherness? Their otherness sprang from the belief that one day they will leave for the country promised to them and thus they are religiously superior to the rest of the society. Seemon and Aron were the first ones to expose this otherness to Aravindan and other students of their class via the flag and colourful information about Israel. They embody the unfailing spirit of a community who rigorously tried to preserve their faith and purity even while being a part of a totally different society. This otherness is even more visibly reflected when they proudly held the Israeli flag in their procession the day it was raised in Israel: “All the Jews in Chendamangalam and Parur had worn their traditional dress that evening and paraded through the main streets carrying the Israeli flag. The other people of the place had watched curiously, as their neighbours paraded with the flag of another nation. A lot of them did not know whose flag it was. But they could recognize the excitement and jubilation of those who held it aloft” [6. P. 297] and in their disappointment when they could not hear their Prime Minister’s declaration of independence through radio “what kind of land was this in which one could not hear Kol Israel?” [6. P. 275]. Jews of Chendamangalam though grateful for the tolerance and harmony shown by the people of Chendamangalam, which is evident in Moses masters speech [6. P. 282], longed to go to a place they could call their own. They lived here, but did not belong here. While the otherness that resulted from preserving their identity was rather a subtle one, the caste division among the Jews was an intentional power play to keep the black Jews in the margin. This is very much evident in the words of Solomon when he doubts white Jews were picked for the departure first: “we are always the ones who don’t have anything. At any feast, the leaf is laid for the white skinned first. If there is anything left over, the dark ones get something” [6. P. 280]. When the Jews were settling down in Chendamangalam and adjacent areas, they built synagogues. The one built in 1568 was by a group of Jews from Spain. This congregation consisted of chosen members of pure lineage among which majority were whites and therefore called as White Jews. The natives or Malabarees called them Paradesis and thus came in the division of white and black Jews [8. P 758]. The fact that caste existed among Jews was a revelation to the people of Chendamangalam. Here the black and white binary manifests othering with all its discriminative components. Otherness here “is a result of discursive process by which a dominant in-group (“Us” the Self) constructs one or many dominated out-groups (“Them” the Other) by stigmatizing a difference-real or imagined-presented as a negation of identity and thus a motive for potential discrimination” [9. P. 44]; the difference being caste. The formation of Israel and news of Jews settled in various parts of the world migrating to Israel gave the Jews of Chendamangalam pos-

sibility of a journey to a place to call their own. People dreamed of better jobs and protection from the government, after all it was their own government: “Vava would not have to drag his corn infested foot from house to house to sell eggs. The government would set up a shop for him, give him a home to stay in and money to start a new egg business” [6. P. 272]. Moses master appears here as a priest like figure, a leader, who safeguards the spirits of his people while the migration procedures were progressing. He, while asking his people to be thankful for this land, also constantly reminds that their journey to their land is above all emotional and social ties to this land [6. Pp. 282–283]. In other words, their own land filled with their own people is where they belong.

Conclusion

“The Saga of Muziris” is largely an autobiographical novel that chronicles the social and political history of Kerala. Sethu remembers that the curiosity for building the saga of Chendamangalam was ignited by the departure of Jews to Israel [4]. The Jewish departure to Israel was a cultural and political phenomenon that opened new perspectives of life to the people of Chendamangalam. For Aravindan it was a realization of the segregation of people into us and them or us and the others. Whereas for the Jews it was the joy of truly belonging to a nation of their own. The birth of a new nation, which is a political phenomenon, resulted in the triumph of a community. It was at the same time rather a tragedy for Aravindan as an individual.

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Научная статья

Литературная репрезентация отъезда евреев в «Саге о Музирисе» Сетху

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Литература и история – это области знания, которые не могут существовать независимо друг от друга. Цель статьи проанализировать взаимодействие литературы и истории со ссылкой на роман Сетху «Сага о Музирисе». Основное внимание уделяется тем уровням, на которых исторические события влияют на общество, и вытекающим из этого изменениям в социокультурных сферах. Рассматривается важное событие в истории Кералы: отъезд евреев. Многие авторы определяли литературу как историю, концентрирующуюся на значимых исторических событиях: например, К.Н. Паниккар в своем эссе «Роман как колониальный нарратив» пишет о колонизации как об индивидуальном опыте. В статье изучается изменение социальных конструкций во время и после этих событий. Заключительный вывод состоит в том, что данные события способствовали перестройке общества, в значительной степени приведшей к триумфу сообщества, поэтому роман можно считать повествованием об истории как социальном опыте.

Ключевые слова: Сетху, Сага о Музирисе, литература как история, множественные нарративы, уход евреев, отречение, триумф общины, трагедия личности

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