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Reviving the History Through Literature --
Empire - The Story of the Cholas Told Like Never Before

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Abstract

History is the study of past events about a particular country, people, or region. The truthiness in history will not be accurate in all circumstances. The history of a particular period in a country should be analyzed by reading the literature written by native people and also to some extent by the literature of colonizers. Every literary works have traces of history in it, intentionally or unintentionally. History plays a major role in constructing the identity of anything. For instance, the culture of particular people of a particular country is known to others through the history and literature that reproduced them. Literature is a medium through which history is understood with interest and pleasure. Reading history in historical text would be boring and it also does not make the readers remember the events in chronological orders. The study is made to analyse and give brief account on the importance of literature through the novel *Empire* by Devi Yesodharan.

Introduction

Being the daughter of parents working in Middle East, Devi Yesodharan, she grew up in the Middle East and changed schools six times, because of her parents' frequent moves. She tried to build bridges with people by telling stories, always attempting a narrative out of fragmented life. This reflects in her first novel *Empire* where the protagonist Aremis is a migrant. Armeis need to belong to her striving and her homesickness are all very familiar to the experience of the author. The novel explains the history of the Chola Empire in different ways. Rajendra Chola I, the son of Raja Raja Chola I, the great king of South India succeeded his father in 1014 C.E as the Chola Empire. During his reign, he extended the influences of the already vast Chola Empire to the bank of river Ganges in the North and across the ocean. This was shown through the protagonist. Some of the major themes of the novel are identity crisis, history of Chola Empire, exile, love and war. This novel gives a vivid picture of the Chola Empire and the aspects of power, culture and valor of the people in Tamil Nadu. Chitra Divakaruni praises that "Yesodharan does a beautiful job of bringing alive a distant and dramatic past and populating it with heroes and heroines that will intrigue, surprise and delight". The depth of characterization and breadth of historic canvas makes the readers live the period.

The novel demonstrates the cultural values of the people of India especially Tamil Nadu. The description about the formation of soldiers, strategies followed by them in war are clearly described through the novel. The narrative form of the novel brings the history to the present and gives the clear picture of the era. The preface of the novel explains about the history of the world in the 11th century. It explains about the effect of colonization in various parts of the world and solely explains about the Chola Empire. They were considered the most powerful rulers in the region at the time. The army power and the naval power of the empire had been described. The Cholas had thousand ships and they were considered as the dominant naval power in India. It controlled the movement of ships between Asia and the rest of the world. The history of the world had mentioned the naval force of the British because they had dominated every part of the world. But history fails to record the power of colonized people.

The prologue explains about the cultural values of Indians. The Greek troupe was defeated and according to the treaty they were asked to provide sixty soldiers. The Greek Pelias enquires that whether these soldiers should be treated as slaves. For that Anantha replies that "we do not keep slaves, Pelias. We will train your warriors, make them ours and place them in our services depending on their skills" (3). This shows that Indians did not treat others as slaves they make them as their own and treated them as their equals. This shows contradictions to the behavior of British rulers they looted the natural resources as well as the manpower of other countries and treated them as slaves in their plantations. Another important feature is that these soldiers were changed into warriors according to their skills which provides them equal opportunity like the natives and also there is less chance for feeling displaced. The Cholas were famous for creating warriors. An important thing explained in the novel is the bravery of the kingdom.

The cultural setup of the background is explained in the beginning of the novel. Aremis explains about the streets of Nagapattinam market which was crowded and described it as

...rich with the smell of ghee and roasted spices. The sound of men and women disputing prices in hundred stalls...fruits from the hills and tea from Song, iridescent pearls and fresh catch

from the sea, gold and silver from the jewelers of Kodumanal, amphorae from Rome....(13)

The above description about the pace explains two historical contexts to the readers. The description about the food explains about the abundant availability of spices in India. And it also explains about the food culture of India which flourished with spices and ghee. The mention of ghee explains about the cattle farming of India. The mention of spices explains agricultural richness in India. The import and export happened during those days was also explained. The tea was imported from Song and gold and silver were imported from Kodumanal and amphorae were imported from Rome. The fruits were from the hills which also bring out the agricultural richness. The mention of fresh pearls explains the richness of natural resources. Secondly, it describes various occupations of people during the Chola Empire. The major occupations of people were cattle farming, agriculture and pearl harvesting. It explains about the lifestyle of people based on their social status. It also describes that the Chola ports play an important role in controlling the movement of ships between Asia and the rest of the world, enabling the trade of spices, clothes, jewelry, perfumes, weapons and food. Through this the past history of India was revised and given spirit to it.

The history of worshipping god was also analyzed through literature. This is the culture followed by every people in different ways. Cholas planned to take a war against Srivijayans because they misused the power with Song China. Srivijayans did not pay proper tax to Song China by saying that they had allies with Cholas. This results in Cholas to pay tax for Srivijayans also. This made Rajendra Cholan to make a war against Srivijayans. They planned to attack the Palembang port. They started their journey to Palembang by worshipping god. The women tossed the coconuts to the goddess's feet, and it shatters. They poured water on the goddess statue and prayed to get victory in the war. This is the general custom of every king when they go for war. It varies according to the method they use to worship their god. They believe that the ferocious goddess like Kali and Durga will accompany with them and help them to win the war.

Aremis also pray to god according to their culture. She prays to Zeus with the chants which she does not know any meaning. She prays that

Giver of every gift,

The one who makes the uneven even,

And the disorderly world orderly.

Wielder of the thunderbolt,

Lift me from darkness. (258)

Aremis prays to Zeus in order to get victory for Cholas where she does not belong to and she was also going to fight for someone else's victory. This is also an important aspect in history. After colonization most of the people joined the army but they were not fighting for their country and also they were not fighting against their enemies. In some cases, people were forced to join the army and worked for the colonizers army. Aremis faces the same situation. She does not belong to India, but she is working for the welfare of India and praying in order to get victory in that.

The idea of uniform and harmonious culture is a myth imposed on history and propagated by the ruling classes in their own interests. This novel is written in a way it is narrated by a person who does not belong to the place and she is not high in the society. The history of Cholas was explained in so many literary texts from Sangam literature to the present contemporary writings. But every literature shows different happenings and different incidents in the same period of time. The novel *Ponniyin Selvan* by Kalki traces the history of Cholas, but it does not mention about the women vassals in the army. And it was narrated by the person who belongs to Cholas itself so there will be some prejudices in explaining the history. In this novel *Empire*, the author provides new information to the Chola dynasty which can be added to the history. The time period of the novel was not particularly mentioned. The novel also depicts the negatives of Cholas where *Aremis* was not treated equally in the society. Interest in the social system which is nothing other than a system of human relations governed by law, creates the possibility of conceiving the kind of tensions, conflicts, struggles, and their various kinds of resolutions that are represented as a reality in history.

The history of every country was changed by the dominating power especially after colonization. Literature is considered to be the replica of history. Historians can no longer claim that their study of the past is detached and objective. The historical situation cannot be transcended. The past is not something which confronts as if it was a physical object, but is something one cannot construe in line without particular historical concerns. The relations between literature and history must be rethought. There is no stable and fixed history which can be treated as the background against which literature can be foregrounded. All history is foregrounded. History is always a matter of telling a story about the past, using other texts as inter-texts.

The history of every country has lessons to teach for the future generation. This was examined in new historicism. The novel explains about the history of Cholas in a way better than other writers. The novel explains various aspects like the geographical location of the background. Through literary works the geography of the place was also can be revised. While *Anantha* returning after the war, he describes the place as

The forest is something the Cholas continuously battle, hacking at its encroaching edges again and again so that it does not overwhelm the city. The long-clawed bears in this jungle are big enough to knock a man down with a nudge and break his back with a dance on his chest. Every once in a while, a soldier turns up dead, mauled by a tiger while on guard, not quick enough with his spear. (6)

Through this description the harshness of the land was explained. The Cholas were great warriors but they were killed by the tigers and bears. The forest was also considered as the natural barrier which protects them from the enemies. The author had explained it as a battle because nature is more powerful than human beings. The new historicism also depicts the cultural materialism of the text. Through this novel one is able to understand that people are generous towards animals also which makes them not to hurt them even if it is dangerous. The cultural value of the people varies according to their knowledge and also depends upon their love towards nature.

The history of Chola empire is that *Rajaraja Chola* took the title of *Mummudi Cholan*—the Chola king who ruled the Cholas, Pandyas and Cheras during 985-1014 CE. *Rajendra*

Chola, son of RajarajaChola begins assisting in military campaigns from 1002 CE. In 1014 CE Rajendra Chola was ascended to the throne. In 1017 he invaded Lanka, the Sinhala king's crown was carried back by the Chola army, and the king, Mahinda V, was brought back as a prisoner. In 1025 CE Rajendra leads forces and invades Srivijaya, sacking Palmbang, Kandaram and Malaiyar, Ligor, Kedah and Tumasik. In 1044 Rajendra Chola died. He is succeeded to the throne by his son Rajadhiraja Chola, who had accompanied his father in his military campaigns. Rebellions against Chola rule rose during his reign in the Lanka and Chalukya regions, and the Cholas had to wage costly battles to quell the resistance. In this novel the only one incident of history was taken as the plot and described with imagination.

The history of Indian literature was portrayed differently by various historians. Colonizers depict Indians as barbarians, and they destroy the history of the past. Most of the western philosophy had its base in Indian philosophy. Before foreign invasions people led a different life. The culture, economic, social and historical context of the countries was changed. Historians started analyzing the truth and depicted it in their literary and non-literary texts. Yesodharan had recreated the history which is very difficult because most of the historical contexts were destroyed by the colonizers. Only a few Sangam literatures were obtained and through that people got to know about the history of Chola Empire. Most of the history was carved in the stones of the temple and transmitted orally. These are the major sources Yesodharan gathered in order to write this historical novel.

Most of the histories about Chola Empire talks about Rajaraja Chola in detail and only about his deeds. For example, *Ponniyin Selvan* by Kalki explains about Rajaraja Cholan. The readers know about the complete history of Raja Raja Cholan but they did not know about the history of Rajendra Cholan. The author tries to appreciate the deeds of Rajendra Cholan through this novel. It also explains about the trade done during his period. The major influential reason for the writer to write about Rajendra Cholan is that he had struggled hard in order to place his name in history. He may be mentioned in the history as the son of Rajaraja Cholan but he considered that it was not the way to be seated in history. This made him different from many warriors and it made him expand his territory and army power.

The study explains that the history about certain things can be analyzed only through literature. Literature plays a major role in framing the history of people and country. Historians wrote only about the powerful kings and their victories. The history of the past was dominated by the writers because they wrote in favor of the famous and powerful kings. The other warriors are not explained elaborately because it depends on the instinct of the writers. This novel is unique compared to other historical novels because the author brings out the truths which are hidden in the history. Throughout history the foreigners who worked in India as soldiers were never mentioned. The history explains about the trade and naval powers of people, it also explains about foreign traders in India, but it does not explain about the foreign warriors who fought for India. It is injustice because history should inform about the people who strived hard to form and expand a kingdom.

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