



NEW HISTORICIST READING OF IDRIS: KEEPER OF THE LIGHT

SUSHITHA ANOOP

Research Scholar
Sree Sankara University,
Ernakulam District, Kalady,
Kerala. 683574. **INDIA**

ABSTRACT

A historical novel contains truth and imagination. On examining the relation between art and history, one can understand that history requires truth to the events of the past, but art requires imagination and concentration on needs of art. The writer of a historical novel must use the facts of history according to the needs of her novel. She maintains truth to history. At the same time, she deviates from the facts of history in order to introduce new characters for making literary effectiveness. In Idris, Anita Nair takes the opportunity to select past events of seventeenth century and combine them with the plot of the novel through her powerful imagination. She does not hesitate to reveal her novel as a historical narrative. In New Historicist reading of Idris, it is clear that Anita Nair is influenced by her own social sphere and surroundings. She is inspired by eastern culture, Nair Tharavad, Malabar and women's position in the society. Her main character Idris belongs to multicultural setting.

Key words: caste system, trade relations, multiculturalism, existentialist dilemma

INTRODUCTION

Anita Nair is one of the most important writers of the present times. Her sixth novel *Idris: Keeper of the Light* (2014) is a historical and geographical novel about a Somalian trader who visited Malabar in 1659 AD to attend the Zamorin's Mamangam festivities. Surprisingly, he meets his own son Kandavar on that occasion. In order to dissuade Kandavar to become a Chaver, Idris takes him on a voyage along the coast from Malabar to the Dutch trading settlement of Galle, Ceylon, Thoothukudi and on to the diamond mines of Golconda. .

On examining the novel *Idris*, one can understand that history is a source and a motivation for Anita Nair to write the novel. History forms the background of the novel.

Anita Nair brings about valuable information of Kerala history in her novel. She wrote literary work based on historical context. Here text and context are given equal importance.

SUSHITHA ANOOP

1P a g e



Parallel reading is possible here. She depicts the spirit of Indian society by showing Indian culture. She also tries to portray seventeenth century Indian society. Veneration of past or tradition is seen here. Author focuses her attention on the past lives. She also tries to disclose problems of people of seventeenth century. All situations, dialogue and characters in the novel except some well-known and historical figures, are the products of the author's imagination. In the Prologue, author narrates the origin and growth of Idris, son of Sumataar Guleed. A writer needs some facts and imaginative power to convince the reader. It is clear that the author has done indepth research on the history of the period between 1625-60 in South India. Thus she can easily talk about trade-relations, governance etc. of the seventeenth century.

In *Idris*, Anita Nair refers to several historical facts which lend realism to the whole novel. The characters portrayed in the novel seem to be real humans of flesh and blood. She has given a graphic description of one jewel-eyed man Idris. The topographical details add to the element of realism in the novel. The novelist has taken great pains to make them live in reader's imagination. One cannot brush them off lightly when they are real spots.

New Historicism is a simultaneous reading of literary and non-literary texts. It demonstrates how a work of art may be read and interpreted in terms of its context of other texts, such as those from economics, legal tracts and medical records. It takes the historical context as co-text. All texts are simply texts; there is no privileged work of art. In New Historicism, historical documents are read differently in a deconstructive way.

Through this novel, Anita Nair explores the history. The famous Mamangam festival was conducted at Tirunavaya, on the banks of Bharatapuzha to select the new king. It was also an enormous trade fair in which traders from various places came. During the reign of Chera kings, the Perumal used to preside over the Chieftains and naduvazhis, assembled for Mamangam, to decide on the administrative and political policies for the coming twelve years. Two of the earlier kings known to have abdicated their thrones following this route were Kulasekara Alwar and Cheraman Perumal (8th century).

History tells us that Mamangam competition between Vellatiri and Zamorin had existed for a long period. Being a part of Kooriyalthara Festival, Kandavar Menavan and team had participated in a Mamangam and they were killed in that Mamangam. In Grandavari, one can see *Mamagam* only and not Mamangam. One has no information about the year of the First Mamangam. But one gets information that Zamorins and Vellatiri fought in AD1101. Thaipooyyam and Mamangam were nightmares to Zamorins. They were not happy about these festivals. But attackers thought that it is a golden chance. Zamorins had his own soldiers. No one could touch him. People prayed to Thirumanthamkunnu Bhagawati to save them from Vellatiri. Bhagawati had suggested them to fight against Zamorins and to achieve redemption. Thus the people became Chaver. This is the story of origin of Chaver. In this



novel, Chandu Nair, Kandavar's uncle says the Chaver has to be decided by the Thirumanthamkundu Bhagawati. The Goddess decides who will be a Chaver.

Anita Nair describes seventeenth century houses. The padipura was only a gate house. Beyond the wooden gates was a short corridor flanked by ledges on either side. At the end of corridor were two rooms to the left and right. One room had a wooden staircase which led to another one above. There was two storeys high and had a thatched roof. Zamorin's palace and the temples had tiled roofs. All houses had to have a thatched roof.

In *Idris*, narrator presents the story of a revolutionary character Deva Gurukkal. when Idris and Kandavar visit the head of a Kalari (martial arts school), the Muslim Baapa Gurukkal tells the story of how Deva Gurukkal, Baapa Gurukkal's grandfather is excommunicated by learning new techniques of fighting from an untouchable and converts to Islam.

In *Idris*, magic realism plays an important role. Magical realism integrates a realist mode of writing with fantastical or marvelous events treated as perfectly ordinary occurrences. Wherever Idris goes; his jeweled eye evokes a sense of wonder and incredulity. As a result of secret alliance between Kuttimalu, a Nair woman and Idris, a Somali trader, Kuttimalu gives birth to a boy Kandavar Menavan. When Kuttimalu discovered she is pregnant, she had thought of killing herself. The child would betray her, she thought. And if discovered the caste laws would demand that she would be sold into slavery or her family would murder her to avoid the dishonor and scandal. But she could not do it. After her delivery, an old woman camouflages the truth. So Kuttimalu keeps the secret as secret. Old woman proclaimed that he was the image of her grandfather. By a strange twist of fate, Idris meets his nine-year-old son, Kandavar in this very land. Then, surprisingly he joins the Nair household headed by Kandavar's uncle.

The joint property of the whole Tharavad is kept under the control and management of the Karanavar who is legally responsible for its safe-keeping as well as for the education of its junior members and for all the necessities arising from its social status. The law by which succession is regulated in these Tharavads is called the Marumakkathayam law (succession by nephews). Marumakkathayam/ Matrilineal system has been prevalent mainly among communities like the Nairs and Kshatriyas. In this novel, Chandu Nair rules Kuttimalu's house. He is Kuttimalu's brother and Karanavar of the family. He has the right to advise his sister Kuttimalu and her son Kandavar. Karkitaka Chikilsa is mentioned in this novel. Chandu Nair inculcates the importance of the health regime everyone underwent in the wet month of Karkitakam. Medicated oil massages, herbal concoctions and a controlled diet to cleanse the system of the residual evil of a year's excesses.

Description of an ordeal is seen in this novel. Neelakandan, Kuttimalu's present husband officiate an ordeal. A barber is accused of stealing a gold chain. For the past fifteen years, he

has been barber of the family. The barber is brought to the kottil in chains. Fire ordeal is taking place. Here Anita Nair mentions about ritual cleansing. The trial ground is swept clean of leaves and twigs. A woman sprinkles a mixture of war and cow dung on the ground. The barber is taken to the bathing pond near the temple and asked to cleanse himself. A guard held the barber by the arm as another takes a palm leaf with the accusation written on it and wraps it around the waist of the accused. The Brahmin washes an iron ring in water and casts it in to the oil. Barber is ordered to retrieve the ring from fire. The barber hollers in pain. A white cloth is brought and the hand is wrapped in it quickly. Idris came before the barber as a savior. He smeared papaya's paste over the burned hand. On the third day people reached the ordeal ground where the court of enquiry takes place. They cannot prove barber is the real culprit because his burned hand is cured with the help of Idris.

In *Idris*, Anita Nair provides the historical information about the traveller Ibn Batutah through Idris' thoughts. Ibn Batutah, the Moor travelled everywhere with an entourage of wives, concubines, and almost a caravan of baggage. Idris has heard that Ibn Batutah had written mostly about courts, princes and less about common people. Idris feels that he is also turning into a scaled down version of Ibn Batutah himself.

Narrator describes fate of a young girl Margarida. She was the daughter of an Armenian Muslim woman who had converted to Christianity. If her mother hadn't chosen to convert, she may have been a Muslim merchant's favorite third wife. But her mother died and the father was stabled to death. Margarida, about seven years old girl was left alone. Her Tamil nanny looked after her. She eyed Margarida as if she were a fowl. Goncalo, broker waited till she turned into a woman. He paid the old woman some money as an advance. In her thirteen years, Goncalo taught her how to respond against people when they come to rape her. She wept the first few times, and then she understood how to behave.

Anita Nair tries to constitute recorded historical events in her story. It proves that this novel is the mirror of the multifaceted conditions prevailing in the Indian society. The fabric of the novel has interwoven threads of caste system, the traditional concepts of joint family and the most sensitive issue of man-woman relationship, especially in extra-marital ones. The author highlights the condition of women in traditional society and their recent awakening in the wake of feminist movements- assertion of their identity and awareness of their rights, the clash between two cultures, disillusionment and dilemma of the modern human in this world and her resultant alienation.

CONCLUSION

On examining Anita Nair's *Idris* from a New Historical perspective, it is clear that author brings factual and fictional elements together. One can consider this literary text as cultural artifact. Text and context create each other. New Historicists use the past to read the present.

SUSHITHA ANOOP

4P age

They acknowledge that historical reality is created through interpretations of historical texts. In order to convince the reader that Anita Nair is telling the story of India, Anita Nair introduces so many references to Indian myths, history and characters in her novel. She makes use of Indian images, symbols, similes and metaphors. One can find out dialogues from the vernacular speech and reflection of the social, political, religious, moral and cultural aspects of Indian life in her novels. The language, theme, characterization, narration and the story reveal Anita Nair to be an exceptional novelist.

Anita Nair has a fine knack of turning the historical events into this novel. She also gives a new dimension to the novel relating with history. The past is narrated as a background for the development of the hero's personality in a novel. Anita Nair presents artistic reality. One can observe fidelity in the transcription of life as it is. She is an artist who loves art for the sake of art. Yet she does not ignore life. The presence of the past in the novel cannot be overlooked. Conflicts and frustrations in the mind of characters are related to the medieval Indian social environment. It is true that India has a rich treasure of mythological stories, legends and history. The novelist has used Indian history to present existential dilemma of modern human and modern life.

New Historicism uses the past to "read" the present and thus throws light on the politics of our own society. Anita Nair reconstructs the history of seventeenth century Kerala. Extensive use of historical data will help one to get a sense of the social and political atmosphere of the medieval Kerala. Anita Nair familiarizes medieval South Indian history through her narration of an unfamiliar story of Idris' travel. *Idris: Keeper of the Light* is a historical novel but is framed with a fair bit of poetic fantasy. Anita Nair provides historical information about Malabar and trade relations during colonial period. Hence it is clear that this novel is highly informative to present generation.

WORKS CITED

- Agarwal, B. R., and M. P. Sinha. *Major trends in the Post-Independence Indian English Fiction*. New Delhi: Atlantic, 2011. Print.
- Balan C. *Reflections on Malabar: Society, Institution and Culture*. Kanhangad: Dept. of History, 2000. Print.
- Nair, Anita. *Idris: The Keeper of the Light*. New Delhi: Fourth Estate, 2014. Print.
- Nair, K Madhavan. *Nayar Pazhama*. Trichur: Kairali, 2011. Print.