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Three-eyed against five-arrowed: Surveying Sanskrit Literary Conventions

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Abstract: Conventions in literature can broadly be recognized to be perpetual opinions descending from the traditional consciousness of the cultured public. Because of their not being mere kaleidoscopic conjectures shaped into the moulds of our figurative thoughts, they become stronger and more firmly established when continuously followed for ages. Examining how Sanskrit literary conventions nourish, maintain and vitalize the literature and vice versa helps us approach more informedly the well-developed literary traditions in India. In this study, a few salient literary conventions are concisely examined in the light of their use in the classical Sanskrit literature by adhering to selected primary literary works plus some secondary and tertiary sources of information where necessary. This study attempts to categorize Sanskrit literary conventions into plausible genres based on their origin, nature, and use; such as conventional characters, phenomena, symbols and objects, concepts, deeds, and numerals. Further, it argues that the fundamental impetuses of the origin and establishment of literary conventions are the very literary theories such as Willing Suspension of Disbelief. How literary conventions are formed and how successful they have been in vivifying and modifying Classical Sanskrit literature are briefly discussed here.

Keywords: Literary conventions, Sanskrit literature, motifs, literary genres, mythical beings, Hindu gods

1. Introduction

The literary conventions in classical Sanskrit literature can primarily be classified into several subcategories depending on their form and application such as conventional figures or characters, conventional symbols and objects, conventional phenomena and deeds, and conventional numerals and concepts.

2. Conventional Figures

The classical Sanskrit literature is enriched with impressive panoply of vividly depicted conventional figures gradually evolving from the time of the Vedas. Some conventional figures are too significant to be ignored for their dominance and prevalence across the literature of multiple genres.

2.1 Kāma: God of Love

Kāma [1], the anthropomorphic form of lust, can be introduced as the most colourfully depicted conventional figure in the Sanskrit literary sources. [2] In the classical mythology of the occidental literature, Eros or cupid occupies the position

maintained by *Kāma* in the oriental tradition. It is evident that this conventional figure in the Sanskrit literature has greatly influenced parallel mythical characters in almost all other literary traditions based on Indo-Aryan languages. Consequently, even in the contemporary Sinhalese literature in Sri Lanka, *Kāma*'s role as a conventional figure is strikingly prominent.

Kāma being a Godhead as Eros in Greek mythology earns more epithets than any other conventional character does. Some of the epithets refer to how he was born while most of the rest describes what he does or bears in his hands. For instance. the epithets manasijanman monojanman [4], manoja or samkalpabhava [5] (lit. mind-born or heart-born) tell us that he was born from the mind. Kāma is presented as the most handsome among the Hindu gods and, therefore, as the epitome of masculine beauty. Why he is called ananga [6], adeha [7] or vitanu [8] (the bodiless or incorporeal) requires some elaboration, which goes as follows.

As in the *purāṇa* literature, once *Kāma* attempted to shoot his arrows at *Śiva* who was in his yogic trance but for that act of insolence was incinerated to death by the beam of fire *Śiva*'s third eye discharged. [9] In memory of the destruction, *Kāma* is still introduced as 'the bodiless' though that defeat was temporary. Being implored by *Rati*, *Kāma*'s consort, and by other gods, *Śiva* recreated the incinerated *Kāma* but without a corporeal shape, making him known as the bodiless.

Concerning Kāma's role, his most significant characteristic that has also been a time-honoured convention in classical Sanskrit literature is nothing else but the act of shooting the adolescent with flower-arrows. Being injured by Kāma's arrows, the victim's mind is supposed to become bursting with love. By shooting with flowerarrows, Kāma churns the hearts of to-be-lovers, earning him the epithet manmatha [10] or the churner of hearts. Smara [11] (remembrance) and madana [12] (passion) are another two epithets referring to his deeds. The convention goes that the god Kāma is typically a bowman or an archer whose bow is made of a sugarcane and who has five flower-arrows with which he shoots the hearts of the youth. [13] He is denoted by a good numer epithets that include *puspacāpa* kusumāyudha or kusumadhanu [15] (one who has a flower-shooting bow), and pañcasāyaka, pañcabāna [16], and pañcamārgana [17] (one who has five arrows). Of his bow of sugarcane, the string is a line of black bees [18] (alikula) whose buzzing is the twang [19] of the bow. Similarly, flower-arrows five aravinda (Nelumbium speciosum), aśoka (Saraca indica), cūta or honey-mango sprout (Mangifera indica), navamālavikā or jasmine (Jasminum sambac) and nīlotpala or blue water-lily (Nymphaea stellata) are supposed to kindle five distinctive psychoexcitements in lovers' mind, i.e., unmādana (fanatical or demented about love), tāpana (regret), śosana (dry up), stambhana (freeze), sammohana (infatuated) respectively. As Ingalls [20] explicates, these arrows may be considered the sidelong glances of damsels shot from their arched eyebrows, which are also often compared to beautiful bows.

Even though Kāma lost his carnal beauty during the transfiguration he encountered, the poets who established it as a convention determine his physical figure. He holds a banner emblazoned with the illustration of a crocodile or a fish, which led to designate him as makaraketana [21], makaradhvaja (crocodile-bannered) or mīnadhvaja [22] (fish-bannered). Indian damsels described as those having rotund hips and curvaceous bodies are known to paint the outlines of a crocodile in musk or turmeric on their breasts as if they want to mark the precise location where Kāma should shoot. Kāma's bigamous character is because *Rati* (passion) revealed (pleasure) are his consorts [23] accompanying him in love combats. As regards his company, spring season [24] and the moon are his bosom friends while he sends another companion, the south wind [25], as his messenger towards lovers. The act of shooting flower-arrows and other distinctive features of Kāma's character are enchantingly depicted in the Sanskrit literature by various poets of different periods, which were welcomed as conventions by their successors.

2.2 Śiva

Another conventional figure of importance throughout the literary history of India is Śiva, the very destructor of *Kāma*. In the Sanskrit panegyric literature, Śiva is vividly eulogized illustrating his vogic prowess, the awe-inspiring cosmic dance of creation and destruction, dexterous deeds, and benevolence. As the literary conventions disclose, Śiva has three eyes (trinayana) [26] of which the one in the forehead flashes forth a beam of fire to consume whoever enrages him. Blue-throated (*nīlakantha*) [27] Śiva bears a skull {*kapālī* [28], kapālika [29]} for he roams as a mendicant and holds a bow or a trident {triśūlāyudha [30], śūlapāṇi [31]} as weapons. In the Sanskrit literary tradition, he remains the enemy of love {manasijadveṣī [32], smarāri [33]}, rather the love deified because he destructed Kāma. Being an ascetic, Śiva spends his time in meditation, clad with a loincloth made of a tiger hide and snakes as his ornaments. In his destructive aspect, Siva is bhairava or the terrible (bhīma)[34] but in his benevolent aspect, he is called Siva or the propitious {śankara [35] or śambhu [36]}. Sanskrit poets describe the Ganges as the river flowing from the crest of Siva (gangādhara) [37] whose headdress consists of a high conical mass of thick matted locks {uttungamaulī [38], jaṭāsaṃhati [39]}. The heavenly Ganges flows in vast cascades through these locks as Siva performs his dance. Associated with Siva are his consort, *Pārvatī* [40] or Gaurī, the daughter of Himālaya, his son, Guha [41] or Skandha and the bull Nandī [42] who serves as the great lord's mount and high chamberlain. The destructive *tāṇḍava* dance [43] which Siva performs at twilight at the necropolis may be one of the most well-known rooted conventions in the Sanskrit literature. Sanskrit poets often describe in detail the intensity of his dance regarded as the cosmic symbolism of the world's end. The Saivite literature copious in epithets to Siva has endowed loads of stereotypical images of him to secular literature too.

2.3 Vișnu

As the divinity who receives the highest honour, admiration, and love of the Hindus in the Vaishnava tradition and is worshipped as a child, a youth and a lover alike, the god Viṣṇu has been the source of many literary conventions. A great number of epithets ascribed to Vișnu such as Murāri [44], murajit [45], muraripu [46] (the enemy or the conqueror of Mura), madhusūdana (destroyer of *Madhu*). keśava [47] padmanābha [49] (having a lotus sprung from the navel), garuḍadhvaja, kṛṣṇa [50], mādhava [51] (the spring), devakīnandana, hari, nārāyaṇa illustrate his being venerated in different aspects. Visnu is believed to have ten avatāras (descents or incarnations), namely, the fish (matsya)[52], the tortoise (kūrma)[53], the boar (varāha)[54], the man-lion (narasimha)[55],the dwarf (vāmana)[56], axe-wielding human (paraśurāma), ideal person {Rāma [57] of the Rāmāyaṇa}, allperfect person (Krsna)[58], attractive enlightened (Buddha) and a future incarnation (Kalkī). As regards his physical figure, Viṣṇu's complexion resembles the colour of water-lilies or a fresh rain cloud (navajaladharaśyāma)[59], a classical euphemistic convention in replacing the colour black. In most of the panegyric hymns to Visnu, he is depicted to be reclining upon his serpent couch amidst the milky sea, where the serpent known as Sesa and the king of all nagas holds his cobra hoods like multiple parasols over the head of Visnu. Nearby stands his mount, the giant Garuda bird [60] while Visnu's beloved partner is Laksmī [61] who is believed to bring prosperity to her admirers. As the Krsna incarnation, Visnu is described as a dancing shepherd (Gopa)[62] with Gopīs or amorous shepherd girls. Sanskrit poets such as Jayadeva, author of the Gitagovinda, epitomized this rich convention to illustrate the divine love between Kṛṣṇa and $R\bar{a}dh\bar{a}$ [63] and refer to it as the quintessence of adolescent love wherever they find it appropriate.

2.4 Kuvera and Śakra

With less embellishment and devotion are Śakra, and illustrated Kuvera [64] two conventional figures in the literature written in Sanskrit, who play notable roles and contribute much to the vivification of Indian literary traditions. The former, chief of the Yaksas or devils, thrives at his abode, *Ālakamandā*, known to be the utmost cloud-cuckoo land. Accordingly, Kuvera remains the perfect example for the extremely rich and is represented as a demon having three legs and only eight teeth, resulting in a repulsive figure. The latter has evolved from his ancient form known as Indra who has his roots in the Rgveda as well. Śakra is believed to be the chief of all gods in the Hindu pantheon. Indra encountered a change in his name as Śakra, which is often used especially in the Buddhist literature. Further, the conventional figure Indra or Śakra deserves many epithets such as purandhara, sahasrākṣi [65], pūrbhid [66] and so on whose roots are primarily in the Rgveda.

2.5 Epitomic Characters

The Sanskrit literary conventions encompass some literary characters as the epitomes of certain human traits. Therefore, the convention persuades us to accept the hermit girl, *Śakuntalā* [67], as the quintessence of everlasting innocence and serene

beauty. Similarly, *Indumatī* in the *Raghuvaṃśa* of *Kālidāsa*, *Damayanti* in the *Naiṣadhacarita* of *Harṣa* or in the Nalopākyāna of the *Mahābhārata*, *Sāvitri* in the *Sāvitryupākhyāna* as well as *Sītā* in the *Rāmāyaṇa* are depicted as the hallmarks of virtuosity, chastity and honesty. Further, *Rāvaṇa* is the worst or the villain as Sanskrit poets consider while *Durvāsas* is the most irascible sage cursing with whomsoever he is displeased.

3. Conventional Symbols and Objects

3.1 Amṛta and Halāhala

Among the conventional symbols used in the Sanskrit literature amrta or the nectar seems to be the most prominent and well known. The mythologies regarding its acquisition, power and the like have formed very famous literary conventions and the connoisseurs of Sanskrit literature are very well acquainted with the nature of amrta (even if they have never tasted it!). When referring to a food or a beverage extremely and unexplainably delicious, Sanskrit poets tend to compare it with amrta, the divine drink. It is described that by means of drinking amrta, Sura-s or gods became immortal whereas asuras or the opponents of gods had no chance to taste it. Halāhala, the extremely lethal poison emerged from the milky ocean at the same time the nectar did. Thus, poets take into account that the most poisonous substance ever existed in the world is nothing but halāhala.

3.2 Conventional Objects

As conventional objects *cintāmaṇi* or the jewel of wishes and *pārijāta* or the tree of wishes are of much importance in the Sanskrit literary tradition. It is mentioned, according to the prevailed convention, that whatever we wish can be obtained from the jewel of wishes and the tree of wishes. Similarly, the Ganges is introduced as *tripathagā* or the river, which has threefold ways of flowing. Further, the weapons godheads hold in their hands have conventional value. The *vajra* of *Indra* and the *pāśa* or the fetters of *Varuṇa* are examples.

4. Conventional Phenomena and Practices

In the Sanskrit literature, some actions are deemed conventional as they have become axioms and been accepted as the possible phenomena by connoisseurs without further questioning. For instance, appearing and disappearing of literary figures are very common incidents to Sanskrit readers. It is noteworthy that sages, gods and such celestial beings that are conventionally believed to have superhuman powers such as clairvoyance and clairaudience deserve this skill and poets describe beautifully how they appear to and disappear from mortal humans' eyesight. Transfiguration, cursing and its unavoidable aftermaths, traversing oceans and the sky without using any machine and the many superhuman capabilities of that ilk that are often found in Sanskrit romantic fictions such as Daśakumāra carita of Dandin can be cited as some conventional deeds well used in the literature. Furthermore, it is surprising that after a virgin gently kicks or gives a douche of ale to a barren aśoka tree it yields blossoms. This is termed as aśokadohada (lit. the longing of Aśoka tree) in Sanskrit. [68]

The great epics in Sanskrit, namely *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa* and most of the literary works in Sanskrit are extremely rich with such conventional practices. Just to cite an example, one arrow shot at enemy becomes many arrows and the virtuous in the battlefield get help from gods. Similarly, it is often found sky-talks or *ākāśabhāṣita*s in most of the Sanskrit dramas where actors hear divine voices from the firmament.

One of the most striking literary conventions is the churning of milky-ocean [69] (kṣīrasāgara, ksīradhi) which involves a nice conglomeration of conventional phenomena, objects, symbols and concepts. If briefly narrated the story goes as follows. As cited above, the gods and demons desired to obtain the drink of immortality, amrta were advised to churn it from the milky ocean. They used Mount Mandara for churning rod and Vāsukī or Śeṣa [70], the world-snake, as twirling string. [71] The gods took the tail while the demons had to take the head of Vāsukī wrapped around the churning rod. When they churned the milky ocean, Vāsukī spewed forth the kālakūta poison [72] and consequently, the demons that were holding the head of the snake were

embarrassed and defeated, even if, eventually, the great lord Śiva swallowed the poison and saved all. The churn was successful as various precious objects and treasures emerged from the deep including the long-sought-after beverage of immortality, amṛta, at last. Sanskrit poets describe this incident in detail and use it as a convention. For instance, an extremely arduous task of which the result is enjoyable and pleasant is often tallied with the task of churning the milky ocean.

In addition to these conventional phenomena, a large number of incidents that were well used by poets as literary conventions are to be found in the purānic literature and other literary sources. For example, the sage Agastya [73] took all the water in the ocean by his folded hands and saw the precious stones at the bottom of the sea. [74] According to another conventional phenomenon, Śakra who was cursed by the sage Gautama had thousand vaginal symbols all over his body as a reminder of his sexual misconduct, but then by imploring the angered sage he could get the punishment assuaged and those symbols converted into eyes. [75] This is how Śakra acquired the epithet, Sahasrāksī. Further, Sanskrit literary tradition believes that the flowers called kaumudī bloom in moonlit nights and peacocks are enraptured by hearing thunders. The Cātaka bird (Cucculus melanoleucus) consoles his thirst with raindrops [76] as it could not drink water in a natural way. Such mythopoetical imaginations have shaped literary conventions so that poets could handle them in keeping with their needs.

5. Conventional Concepts

5.1 Similes and Metaphors

Sanskrit similes and metaphors recurrently used in the literature have also changed as literary conventions slowly but firmly since the time of the Vedas. For instance, when describing a young damsel it is very common to hear that her every physical feature is coloured with carefully selected conventional similes, metaphors and concepts. Thus, the rotund hip is compared to a cartwheel and the thighs are as tapering off and smooth as plantain-stems. [77] The round and fully-grown breasts resemble golden jars. Their long eyes are akin to those of a female deer or to the petals of a water lily or fish. The fingers are not different from budding sprouts, while the lips and the teeth are like the wedges of *Bimba* fruit (*Cephalandra indica*) and glaring pearls respectively. [78] The breasts of a ravishing girl are so perfectly buxom that not a lotus fibre could divide the two. [79] Her gait is believed to resemble, or if further described, surpass that of an elephant or a swan. Sanskrit poets were used to describing girls using *nakhaśikhāntavarṇanā* or the descriptions starting from toenails and ending up with the braids of hair, as well as adhering to the hackneyed similes because those had become conventions that were lavishly optimized in the literature. [80]

5.2 Hyperbole

Poetic hyperboles also play the role of literary conventions as similes and metaphors do in the Sanskrit literature. The ineffability trait of a person, such as love, virtuosity or generosity, or that of the beauty of the nature is introduced using a poetic hyperbole, which has been repeated over several centuries. In Vāsavadatta, the great prose poem of Subandhu, the ineffable pain of a lovestricken heart is described as "one that can hardly be written or told in many thousands of aeons, even if the sky becomes the leaf, the ocean the inkbottle, the writer a Brahma or the teller a king of serpents..." [81] (Even here, the Brahma and the King of serpents themselves appear conventional figures for the former is reckoned not to be tired and the latter is believed to have a thousand mouths).

5.3 Stereotype Characteristics

Concerning beast characters in the literature, stereotyped traits of humans have been applied to beasts as well so that they could again be used to illustrate the characteristics of human beings. According to that practice, the peacock was believed to be arrogant while the lion is the proudest. Jackal was considered the wittiest or cunning but ass was a sheer example for foolishness and lethargy. In the *Pañcatantra* of *Viṣṇuśarman*, a world-famous anthology of beast fables in Sanskrit, commendable application of human traits to beasts can be seen. Further, beasts

speaking human languages are commonly found in such stories.

6. Conventional Numerals

Certain Numerals can be introduced as another branch of conventions in the Sanskrit literature. There, number three (tri- in Sanskrit), five (pañcain Sanskrit) and seven (sapta- in Sanskrit) seem to be the most frequently used conventional numerals to denote the number of certain objects of importance. Therefore, we find a vast number of things, which appear as triples for which trikadruka [82], triguņa [83], tridhātu [84], trinetra [85], tripura [86], triloka [87] are just a few examples. Similarly, there are objects that consist of five components and subsequently whose names are preceded by the prefix pañca-. Some Examples are pañcamahākalpa [88], pañcacaksu [89], pañca pūlī [90], pañcāgni [91], and examples for those consisting of seven components whose names are preceded by the prefix sapta- can be cited as follows; saptagrdhra [92], saptaratna, saptaloka, saptārņava. Caturand nava-, which are known in English as fourfold and nine-fold respectively, are also frequently used conventional numerals. Caturanga caturveda, caturyuga [95], caturbhuja [94], caturvarna [96], and navagraha, navaratna, navāmśa are instances.

7. Formation of Literary Conventions

Discussing as to how literary conventions are formed, several steps of formation can be distinguished in the light of their application. The origin of the methodology used to form conventional characters such as gods, if an example is considered, dates back to the pre-Vedic period. It is clear when studying the Rgveda and the Avesta, the sacred literary source of the Hindus **Iranians** that of the respectively, and anthropomorphism, idolatry and personification of natural phenomena primarily gave shapes to the abstract ideas Vedic people had regarding divinity. That was how mythologies formed and Indian poets' recurrent application of such mythologies became axiomatic conventions, which beautified the Sanskrit literature. In the case of the conventional deeds, symbols, phenomena,

concepts and numerals, recurrence of them caused them to become conventions. The more frequent the conventions were used the more strong axioms they became. Admittedly, as identified earlier, mythology plays a great role in forming conventions in the literature. Especially the Purānic literature, a treasury of mythology, has been the primary resource for Sanskrit poets to choose vivid symbols, phenomena, concepts, similes, metaphors and other modifiers of the literature of that ilk in order to ameliorate their presentation of poetic thoughts. Poets' ingenuity was evaluated on how skillfully they had used the existing literary conventions in the Sanskrit literary tradition in unprecedented novel ways. Thus, the beauty of a new poetic work did not rely much upon into what extent it consisted utmost novel ways of presentation but upon how much the poet adhered to the axiomatic literary conventions without transgressing long descending regulations of the Sanskrit literature.

8. Conclusion

Given the above-cited discussion, it is evident that 'willing suspension of disbelief' [97] (icchānuga aviśvāsa vilambana) is the compulsory prerequisite for enjoying the literature beyond naturalism and materialism as we tend to purposively and temporally forget the impossibility of mythopoetic thoughts in order to enjoy them. Further, literary conventions are deemed modifiers and promoters literature which by poets get their mythopoetized thoughts much more reinforced. The more familiar literary conventions become to the connoisseurs of certain literature the better they can enjoy that literature. It is thus attested that keeping to literary conventions greatly benefits poets and connoisseurs alike.

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- 7. Ibid. 14.9
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- 9. Kumārasambhava (kum.) 3.71,72;

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synonyms referring to the "world snake" while Monier Williams cites that there are three chief

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- 79. Ibid. 1.40
- 80. Krishnamoorthy 1994: 48
- 81. "tvatkṛte yānayā vedanānubhūtā, sā yadi nabhah patrāyate, sāgaro melānandāyate brahmāyate lipikaro bhujagarājāyate kathakaḥ kadā kimapi kathamapi anekayugasahasrair abhilikhyate kathyate vā..." Hall, Fitz Edward (ed.). (1859). The Vásavadattá: a romance.
- Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press. p. 238.
- Cf. For the very hyperbole reiterated; see:

Mahendra's commentary on *Hemacandra*'s *Anekārthasamghraha* 2.495

- 82. ŖV. 1.8.10; ŚBr. 13.5; Tāṇḍya Brāhmaṇa (TāBr.) 16.3
- 83. Ragh. 2.25; Pāṇinī (Pā.) 6.3.115; Manusmṛti (Manu.) 1.15
- 84. ŚBr. 5.5.5.6; *Taittirīya Saṃhitā* (*TS.*) 2.3.6.1; *TāBr*. 13.3.12; RV. 5.43.13.
- 85. Bhāvaprakāśa (Bhpr.) 7.8.157; Map. 270.27
- 86. ŚBr. 6.3.3.25; Aitareya Brāhmaṇa (AiBr.) 2.11
- 87. HariV. 11303
- 88. MBh. 12.338
- 89. Dharmasamgraha (Ds.) 66
- 90. Pā. 2.1.51
- 91. Kathopanişad (Katha.) 1.3.12.
- 92. AV. 8.9.18
- 93. RV. 10.92.11; MBh. 3.790; HariV. 1697
- 94. MBh. 3.16424; HariV. 12934
- 95. Manu. 1.71; MBh. 12.11227; Ragh. 10.23
- 96. Ragh. 10.23
- 97. This term was originally introduced in the preface of the revised version of the *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) by Wordsworth and Coleridge.