



Research Article

The Real and the Imaginary Narrative: Representation/s of Srirangam in Tamil Writer Sujatha's Short Fiction

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Abstract

Literature represents characters simultaneously as real and imaginary, In the Tamil writer Sujatha's short story collection *Srirangathu Devathaigal* (Angels of Srirangam, Trans R. Balaji), the small South Indian town, Srirangam and its characters drawn from them become 'a site, experience, even mind-set evoked by the past or by another culture or possibly one's own personal heritage, which through study, enactment, yearnings and potential fantasies is transformed into something quite different but appearing just as 'real' as original'. (Ruth Ellen Gruber. "Real Imaginary Spaces and Places: Virtual. Actual and Otherwise."). The above hypothesis is further confirmed in his title 'Angels of Srirangam', because it centres his experience /encounter with unique characters as humans, from his childhood, boyhood to his youth, giving a Bildungsroman effect to his narrative. The word 'devathaigal' or angels enhances the revelation that they are far from real, within the geographic, realistic representation of the town and its life. Unlike R.K.Narayan's *Malgudi Days*, where Malgudi stands for an imaginary town, Sujatha's Srirangam is an actual town, whose memory weaves the stories that are 'real imaginary', meaning characterizing the realistic semblance but with an imaginary overtone. Like James Joyce's *Dubliners*, Sujatha too brings remarkable precision to his description of Srirangam. Hence, Srirangam, like Dublin, becomes a location that comes alive with his personal reading, despite his being far away from the place. Hence, the paper proposes to study the Tamil writer Sujatha's short story collection *Srirangathu Devathaigal*, discussing how he blends the real and the imaginary through his representation of Srirangam linking them to similar enactments of the literary geography and situating the analysis within a comparative framework, referencing James Joyce's *Dubliners* and R.K. Narayan's *Malgudi Days*.

Keywords

Real and Imaginary, Narrative, Literary Geography, Short Fiction, Bildungsroman

1. Introduction

Literature represents characters simultaneously as real and imaginary, as seen in the Tamil writer Rangarajan alias Sujatha's fiction that exhibits his "consummate skill and experience" in his writing (Ashokamitran 4). [1]. His short fiction particularly, represents a literary geography of the South Indian town Srirangam enacted through stories. Srirangam is

the islet town created by the river Kaveri and her first tributary, the river Kollidam. In his Tamil short story collection *Srirangathu Devathaigal* (2011) (Angels of Srirangam, Trans. R. Balaji) [2], the small South Indian town, Srirangam and its characters drawn from the town become a site, an experience, even a mind-set evoked by the past or by another culture or

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possibly one's own personal heritage, which through study, enactment, yearnings and potential fantasies transformed into something quite different but appearing just as 'real' as original'. (borrowed from Ruth Ellen Gruber. "Real Imaginary Spaces and Places: Virtual. Actual and Otherwise.") [3]. The above hypothesis is further confirmed in his title 'Angels of Srirangam', because it centres his experience /encounter with unique characters as humans. The word 'devathaigal' (angels) enhances the revelation that these angels are far from real, within the geographic, realistic representation of the town and its life.

2. Backgrounding Srirangam

The small and beautiful town of Srirangam, near Trichy, known as the islet town created by the river Kaveri and her first tributary river Kollidam, becomes the setting of the 14 short stories created in this collection. To elaborate further, the town derives its name from the Srirangam Temple, which houses Lord Ranganatha (Vishnu) and his consort Ranganayaki (Lakshmi) and is the largest temple complex in the world. Further, the Alvars, poet-saints who wrote over 4000 verses on Lord Vishnu in the various temples they visited, have glorified the temple. These temples, numbering 108, became known as the 108 Divya Desam, and their poetic verses are called *Nalayairathu Divya Prabhandam* (Four Thousand Divine Verses, Trans. R. Balaji) [2].

To describe this town, Sujatha first takes the help of the ancient Tamil poetry above. He begins with a verse of an Alwar, the 9th Century Tamil poet saint of Vaishnava tradition to describe the temple town: "Srirangam, the city where the smoke from the chimneys of the palaces that touch the sky and the smoke from the holy ritual fire of Brahmins is pervasive." (Thirumangai Alwar. *Periyalwar Pasuram*, Trans. R. Balaji, Sujatha's "A Letter to God" p. 1) [2]. The very first image of the town Srirangam as a confluence of the material and the spiritual sets the tone of the opening story, inaugurating the theme of place, space, culture, and religion pervading its environment.

3. Srirangam and its Angels

However, the description of Periyalwar's Srirangam that Sujatha quotes is not the reality reflected in the tales he weaves, gradually beginning from the short story "Aerakkurayya Genius" ("A Genius, Almost", Trans. R. Balaji) [2]. If the temple town for the poet-saint Periyalwar is a merger of the political and the spiritual or the kingly and the saintly, for Sujatha, the town represents the emotion associated with its people, the memory of the individual characters with their idiosyncrasies, witnessed in the narrator's younger days and recalled later as his treasured memories. The above hypothesis is further confirmed in his title 'Srirangathu Devathaigal (angels of Srirangam)', because it centres his experience /encounter with

unique characters as humans. The word 'Devathaigal' (angels) emphasizes that these beings are not real, even though they exist within the town's realistic setting and everyday life. At the same time, they are also not mythical but characters encountered from his formative years to his youth.

One can examine the above statement by relating it to the characters and setting of the tales that portray a variety of characters and situations, including a neighbour who lacks genius in his entrepreneurial ventures. Further, each story brings out a different flavour, colour, and tempo of the temple town, infusing humour, nostalgia, melancholy, fine tenderness, a sense of belonging, and importantly, a deep impression on the narrator's life.

If one engages in a debate of whether the above narrations are real or imaginary, then one should keep in mind the following facts: However realistic the setting and the characters (mostly Tamil Vaishnava Brahmins, Tamil Iyengars, speaking in the dialect spoken in the 1950s) seem to be, they are experiences shared after 30 years. Second, analysing the narrator-persona of these tales, we can understand that these stories bring out the narratives of a young boy and later young adult and his encounters with characters in a small town that he left for his higher studies and jobs. His brief returns give him the opportunity to have only a glimpse of their destiny. Third, when we view these stories from the writer Sujatha's point of view, then one concludes along with the writer that it is impossible to write totally imaginative stories; that except for a telephone directory and railway time table, truth is impossible to create; that in trying to arrive at the truth, sometimes there are many readers waiting to get angry for reasons other than literary; and also, even if there is realism, some amount of fiction / imagination goes into them. This is what Sujatha jokingly answers to the question whether his characters are real-life ones. (Sujatha, Foreword) [7].

4. Real or Imaginary

4.1. Location

This brings us to whether his location is real or imaginary, location here is not merely geographical, historical or cultural, as suggested by his "Devadhaigal" or 'Angels.' Location to borrow from Orsini and Zecchini is "...a standpoint, a position, an orientation, a necessarily partial and particular perspective, however complex, ample and multiversal it may be, from which a writer represents and imagines his or her worlds." ("Locations of World Literature: Perspectives from Africa and South Asia", (2) [6]. Srirangam acts as a prism, allowing exploration of the kaleidoscopic world the characters inhabit and experience, focusing on the temple, chariot rituals, 'thermutti' (the street corner where the temple car is parked, Trans R. Balaji) [2], 'Kollidam' (bridge across the Kollidam tributary of Kaveri, Trans R. Balaji) [2], etc. Therefore, Srirangam turns into a "real imaginary space /place." [3]. For example, the Aghraharam (the Brahmin neighbourhood, Trans mine), the

Ranganatha Swamy Temple, the temple town and its narrow streets, childhood conflicts, boyhood world, friendships, family rituals, neighbouring relationships and unforgettable adolescent experiences that had a[delete] woven an everlasting memory of the lively world of the temple town in the narrator's young adult days—all these become the recalled real world of a young narrator engaged in a recalling of this magical world. The paper would not have been possible but for the excellent but unpublished translation done by R. Balaji, which gave the motivation for this study on Sujatha. His translation attempts remind one of the following facts about translation: "The Translator must know both the background knowledge of the subject matter and the linguistic aspects, because Linguistics and Translation are interrelated." (Mahmoodha & Gnanamuttu 68). [5].

4.2. Characters

If the narration, setting, and location are elusive terms of definition of their real / imaginary content, then are his characters real or imaginary? One could definitely say that Sujatha's characters are real and imaginary simultaneously. Srirangam and its characters drawn from them is 'a site, experience, even mind-set evoked by the past or by another culture or possibly one's own personal heritage, which through study, enactment, yearnings and potential fantasies transforms into something that is quite different but appearing just as 'real' as original. (Borrowing the above words from Ruth Ellen Gruber. "Real Imaginary Spaces and Places: Virtual. Actual, and Otherwise." (299) [3]. Hence, when Sujatha goes back and forth from recalling those characters, he found frightening or timid in his responses to them as a boy turn to his later description of the ones, he no longer fears or have gone lower in status in comparison. Hence the narrator centres his experience / encounter with unique characters as humans, from his childhood, boyhood to his youth, giving a Bildungsroman effect to his narrative. For instance, I quote the narrator's assessment of a friend, Krishnamurthy, whom he feared earlier and whom he meets much later in Srirangam:

And life itself seems to be a fantastic comedy. There seem no hard and fast rules to it. How life has elevated the standards of a coward like me and made me sit comfortably! But Krishnamurthy...?

Today he is waiting at the entrance with a recommendation letter. He needs a job. Should I give him a job or not? Kindly advise. (Sujatha's "Krishna Leela" Trans R. Balaji p. 6) [2]. [Please indent this quotation]

Hence most of the characters he meets in Srirangam and his interactions with them express also the narrator's coming of age amidst them. Even his youth experience of spending the salary money his servant maid had accidentally kept in his book and his denial of it and his late confession to his grandmother who is in deathbed, once again reveals "The Denial" to be a Bildungsroman tale or his coming-of-age story.

4.3. Setting

Sujatha's work *Srirangathu Devathaigal* here becomes the site of a literary geography enacted through vivid narratives that represent the lived-in world of the Srirangam temple town, rather than reducing the town to a background setting. For example, Rangu's shop, which recurs in most stories, or Gundu Ramani as a character deserving mention in more than one story are haunts revisited, revealing their deep impression in the narrator's life. The temple town itself becomes a symbol or an icon that shapes everything from the narrator's bond with his grandmother, his sister, his friends and neighbours, the streets, its daily routine, social bondings, and interesting and quizzical observations of friends and neighbours which provide a rich tapestry of memory and nostalgia.

5. Joyce, Narayan and Sujatha

Although mapping Sujatha's place in the world fiction is beyond the scope of this paper, it feels incomplete without a discussion of Sujatha's weaving of the real and the imaginary in relation to the world-famous fiction writers like Joyce and Narayan. Like James Joyce's *Dubliners* (1914), Sujatha too brings into his short stories a remarkable precision of description of Srirangam. Their "strong focus on science and psychology" (Thilagavathi 203) [9] is echoed in his narratives on the varied characters in his fiction in general. Sujatha's Srirangam, like Joyce's Dublin, becomes the locale that comes alive with his personal reading, despite his being far removed from the place that represents a literary geography enacted through stories. While James Joyce took pride in his precision in depicting Dublin and Ireland, his characters, spun out from the real-life middle-class residents of Dublin, were real and archetypal. His characters, whether in the short story "The Sisters" or "An Encounter" from *Dubliners* expose the stasis, both religious and psychological, experienced in Dublin. Irrespective of the centripetal and centrifugal attraction experienced by Dubliners towards the city, Joyce's Dublin grows alive and real, similar to Sujatha's Srirangam.

Unlike R.K. Narayan's *Malgudi Days* (1943), where Malgudi stands for an imaginary town, Sujatha's Srirangam is an actual town, whose memory weaves the stories that are 'real imaginary', meaning, characterizing a realistic semblance but with an imaginary overtone. Similarly, R.K. Narayan's *Malgudi Days* represents a gallery of real-life characters in a brilliantly conceived imaginary town, Malgudi, coining its name through prefixing and suffixing the two famous locales of Bangalore, Malleswaram and Basavanagudi. Narayan's successful recreation of the imaginary town with an authentic core of real-life characters in fact handled the imaginary town being turned into a museum piece. In contrast to Narayan's imaginary town being museumized as the real, Sujatha's real town gets museumized in its quizzical play of the real and the imaginary, exemplifying the playful aesthetic energy of the writer. Here, a word about Sujatha's prose style, which has

been studied in detail by Vallikannan & S. Thillainayagam. [10]. In the final story about a retired Maths teacher, V.G.R who chose to die in Srirangam, Sujatha's prose style brings out his irony of descriptions through juxtaposition of contrasting images. His prose narrative goes thus:

Once my grandmother made some *bolis* and I took it to V.G.R in a tiffin box. I had to shout next to his ear. He took one whole minute to turn towards me. I told him in a loud voice "Its *boli*. Paati has sent it since you like it". The next moment tears flooded his eyes, overflowed and disappeared into his thorny beard. He spoke with the tears and I couldn't make out a single word. I looked around and was startled. His dhoti had slipped from his waist and he looked like a weary, fatigued lion. Lines of dried urine stains were visible all over the *thinnai*. Nearby there were some grubby vessels and a closed bucket. A little away from him was a slate, Loney's trigonometry book and then a volume of Naalayira Divya Prabandham ("V.G.R." 4) [2].

Hence, other than his "racy style and unconventional techniques" (Bharathi 5) [8], Sujatha can also contribute to a poignantly thoughtful narrative style.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, Sujatha attempts a memorable and nuanced reading of the locale, its cultures, its geographies, and the people connected with them, providing the experience of cultural immersion. I agree with Nagarathinam Krishna's opinion that Sujatha's writings reveal a multi-faceted manifestations [4]; for, his short fiction is an expression of one such aesthetic facet only. He blends the real and the imaginary in his short stories that reflect childhood memory, where his authentic observations reflect the real, and his child's perspective and memory of events and people surrounding those events reveal the imaginary. Here, the fusion of the real and the imaginary is significant, since it does not create 'devathaigal' or angels as supernatural beings but flesh and blood beings remembered with affection, resulting in not the recording of the past but in recreating how the past felt, about how a friend, a neighbour, a relative, a servant, a street event or a victory program could be realistic and seem magical or imaginary seen from a child's sense of wonder, exaggeration or ignorance. Hence, Sujatha's tales stand for both the real and the imaginary.

Author Contributions

Mala Renganathan: Conceptualization, Formal Analysis, Methodology, Writing – original draft

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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