

**Memory and Mnemonics: A Study of *The Ballad Of The Warrior Girl Kuyili* by Vanavil.K.Ravi**

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**Abstract**

This paper examines Vanavil.K.Ravi's *The Ballad of the Warrior Girl Kuyili* through the lens of memory theory to understand the nature and the role of memory in the narrative by attempting a close reading of the textual structures. The narrative serves as a cultural recall connecting generations where the present readers can relate to the traumatic experiences of the past. Vanavil.K.Ravi employs mnemonic devices such as metaphors, imagery, realism, intertextuality as narrative strategies and fills the voids of the memory process and uncertainty about the experiences of the past. It plays a significant role in refreshing our reservoir of memories of the valiant women, a beautiful warrior-girl Kuyili by uniquely blending historicity, authenticity, imagination and contemporary relevance. This ballad when examined through Marianne Hirsch's Postmemory truly serves to create a cross-generational reconstructive memory where the readers are not passive to the experiences of the past but indirectly are influenced which leads them to actively engage in the preservation of their past identity and culture by acknowledging the bravery of women and their role in shaping the history of India. *The Ballad of the Warrior Girl Kuyili* by Vanavil.K.Raja seen through the lens of Memory as a theoretical approach vividly takes us down memory lane and makes the readers relive their past history and restore the untold stories of their culture which have been blurred by the passage of time.

**Keywords:** Memory, Mnemonics, Ballad, Postmemory, Reconstructive memory

Memory studies is an emerging trend in the field of academic research that employs 'memory' as a device in literature for recollection of the past. The aspects of memory are used by writers as their principal narrative structure in their works. The various theories of memory are having a significant impact on literary studies and it is termed as a 'memory boom' by scholars and researchers as memory has become a focus of substantial concentration and has significantly developed a surge of interest in the theoretical frameworks in creating a platform for multi-disciplinary research specially in humanities and social sciences research. Memory studies is helpful in traversing and understanding the relationship between the individual and collective, historical and cultural, social and political dimensions of memory in relation to time, place and space.

Memory studies seeks to examine the social, cultural, cognitive and political shifts affecting individual and society as a group on what, how and why they remember the past and its significant role in the present by building a reservoir of memories for creating identities. Literature plays an important role as it deals with predominant ideas of memory and its

representations aesthetically through narrative and literary techniques. The characters in literary texts are seen as representatives of a particular culture or society and the narrative bears witness to the events of the past. On a textual and structural level, the reader becomes clear of the fact that how memory is formed between generations and all the facts in history are merged with fiction. The literary texts effectively brings out this transformation of adopting a highly self-reflexivity of narration that encompasses the recollection of the past, exhibits the emotional chaos of the narrator and recounts the experiences of the past.

This paper examines the text of Vanavil.K.Ravi's *The Ballad of the Warrior Girl Kuyili* through the lens of memory theory to understand the nature and the role of memory in the narrative by attempting a close reading of the textual structures. Michael Rothberg's Multidirectional theory and Marianne Hirsch's Postmemory are two the most influential works that contributed to the literary and culture studies that helps researchers to examine the narrative tools like metaphors, symbols and imagery offering multiple perspectives within the liminal space of memory. These theories enable us to see how memory works in literature as a vehicle for transfer of transgenerational memory. In other words, we can see the evidence of the writer's individual memory is directly influenced by the socially shaped collected memory of the past, a kind of memory he retains of the past in his narrative which shapes the knowledge and content of a larger social group living in the present thereby mimetically transferring the memory to them through adopting a rhetoric of cultural memory.

Michael Rothberg's Multidirectional memory (2009) has impacted our understanding of the concept of memory. His study clearly states that our present is characterized by a wide variety of past narratives and places the author as performing subject whose knowledge stems from the multidirectional memory shaped by parallel reading of texts and intertexts which in the modern post-structuralist concept is termed as intertextuality. The author's multidirectional remembrance or his individual memory is part of a collective culture of memory. Marianne Hirsch's Postmemory serves as a cross-generational reconstructive memory which requires not a passive reception of the experience of the past but instigates the readers to actively pursue in the preservation of their past identity and culture. The narrative serves as a cultural recall connecting generations where the present readers can relate to the traumatic experiences of the past. Postmemory sustains the connection, remembrance and experience as requires in fictional narratives which recreates the mimesis of remembering and understanding of the mnemonic structures to comprehend a narrative plot. Vanavil.K.Ravi employs mnemonic devices such as metaphors, imagery, realism, intertextuality as narrative strategies and fills the voids of the memory process and uncertainty about the experiences of the past.

It is certainly the case that there are striking parallels between imagination (fantasy) and memory. They both represent absent objects with images. For both the image is ambiguous, both true and false to give two instances (representing different tradition of ideas). In his essay *Pleasures of Imagination* (1712), the English Empirist Joseph Addison defines primary pleasures as derived from sight, which he calls 'the most perfect and most delightful of all our senses and secondary pleasures of imagination, 'which flow from the ideas of visible objects, when the objects are not actually before the eye, but are called up into our memories, formed into agreeable visions of things that are either absent or fictitious'. (Lachmann 303-304)

The word 'mnemonic' is named after 'Mnemosyne', the goddess of memory in Greek mythology. In Latin mnemonics is called *memoria technica* (memory technique) that helps in

aiding memory. In literary texts, mnemonics are literary devices that the narrator employs to make the readers remember or recall something. When literature is interpreted in the light of memory, it is said to be a mnemonic art. Literature can be considered as a culture's memory as all texts are products of culture and the process of writing is both an act of memory and communication where every new idea or text is etched into a memory space. Intertextuality exemplifies clearly that every concrete text sketched out from the individual memory of the narrator, connotes the macrospace of collective memory that represents a culture.

Memory Poetry is characterised by a pronounced heteroreferentiality and thus spurs a fictitious collective audience to recall fateful events of the shared past. Due to the specific metrics and rhymes, poems are particularly apt to affect and shape cultural memory. (Neumann 340-341)

Oral literature is transmitted through the spoken medium that relies mainly on memory and recalling of stories, folktales, legends, myths, ballads, poems, songs and other forms of expression passed down verbally from generation to generation. Oral literature forms the very basis of storytelling that is real or imaginary, structured in dialogue, monologue or paragraph. The narrator tells the facts as if he has lived them as a character, addresses himself in the form of becoming both narrator and character and finally takes on the role of a third person by staying out of all events and detaching himself. The ballad encapsulates tales and poems that are transmitted from one generation to other as verbal entities with a distinctive verbal content creating its own identity that encompasses all the traditional knowledge, beliefs and values about the environment and the nature of society as a whole.

*The Ballad of the Warrior Girl Kuyili* dates back to 1780 to 1790 CE in history about the ruling Queen of Sivaganga Velu Nachiyar. She is hailed as the first Indian woman freedom fighter against the British rule. Sivaganga is a town and the headquarters of the Sivagangai district in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu. The town is located at a distance of 48 km from Madurai and 449km from the state capital of Chennai. During the period portrayed in the ballad, it is a small, independent, princely state ruled by Monarch or Cheiftans. Velu Nachiyar at the age of sixteen has been married to the king of Sivaganga Muthu Vaduganatha Thevar, who gets treacherously killed in Kalayar Koil Temple by The British Company in alliance with The Arcot Nawab Muhammed Ali when the king does not yield to the demand of tax to be paid to Nawab Ali.

Velu Nachiyar escapes with her daughter on the advice of the Marudu Brothers but vows to return later after gathering an army to avenge the murder of the king. In the course of eight years, the Queen Velu Nachiyar gathers a secret army consisting of all women warriors and names her regiment after a cowherd woman Udayal. Udayal is a cowherd in the nearby village who helps the Queen to escape the British soldiers. When the soldiers demand the whereabouts of the Queen, Udayal refuses and keeps her lips sealed. The angry soldiers unleash extreme brutality by beheading her. On hearing that Udayal has been slain, Velu Nachiyar dedicates a temple as a mark of reverence and pays obeisance and names her army of women 'Udayal Regiment'.

They beheaded her at last  
Chivalry would thus become  
A thing of the past.  
The trees around lamented and  
Shed their leaves in respect.

The sky was dark, a single star  
 Like a little insect  
 Peeped out from above  
 To have a look at that  
 Ghastly scene, a blot on earth.

(Canto 4:40-41, pg 36-37)

The use of imagery as a mnemonic device in the above lines such as trees shedding their leaves in respect and a star peeping out like a little insect and the use of pathetic fallacy to attribute human emotions to inanimate objects of nature evokes the pathos and magnificence of the sacrifice of Udayal.

Kuyili, a young and pretty girl in her teens comes across a group of soldiers all clad in men's attire. The little girl gets perplexed at the rifle-shot and faints out of fear. When she regains her consciousness she beholds the face of the Queen Velu Nachiyar, sees the fire of truth in her eyes and takes the pledge to join the army and vows to bring the queen back to the throne. On the tenth day of Navarathiri, Kuyili enters the British warehouse and pours oil hurriedly on her saree and starts to run like a fireball. The guards were shocked and motionless at the sudden attack while the Udayal army gunned down the guards. The fire envelops the warehouse and it crumbles down like a pack of cards. By the act of sacrifice, Kuyili destroys the arsenal and Queen beheads Major Bonjour. The British flag is pulled down from the mast and the Hanuman flag was flying high. As the flames arose high in the air, the figure of Kuyili ascended to the heavenly aboard. Kuyili stands as an epitome of supreme sacrifice and gave her life for the sacred cause. Kuyili's story is etched in gold in the annals of history in the line of Joan of Arc and Abbakka.

The Ballad of the Warrior Girl Kuyili is an immensely moving portrayal of her metamorphosis from an innocent village girl to a martyr who stands as a symbol of bravery and glory of womanhood. This ballad written by Vanavil. K. Ravi effectively informs the readers of the untold stories of our own culture, society, and history which has been blurred with the passage of time. The existing lacuna in Indian History has been filled with true events and imagination of the narrator. This story has been passed on for many generations which speak volumes of her courage, valour, and faith. Vanavil .K. Ravi's Ballad of Kuyili plays a significant role in refreshing our reservoir of memories of the valiant women, a beautiful warrior-girl Kuyili by uniquely blending historicity, authenticity, imagination and contemporary relevance.

Seventeen hundred and eighty!  
 The month? I am not sure  
 Before the festival, Navarathiri,  
 Maybe some weeks before!  
 The events of this ballad  
 Not chronicled precisely-let's  
 Travel back in time to see  
 The warrior-girl Kuyili

(Prologue 5, pg. 20)

The narrative takes us back in time with characters who are representatives of Tamil culture and society and bears witness to the events occurred in the past. On a textual and structural level the narrator merges history with fiction and weaves the narrative through the thread of memory by recounting the experiences of the past. The narrative tools like metaphors,

symbols and imagery helps in mimetically transferring the memory of the past history as the writer adopts a rhetoric of cultural memory as seen in the following lines,

Down the memory lane,  
She saw her past again  
As a kid of eight or nine,  
Inside the palace walls,  
She roamed about like a deer,  
Learnt the martial arts  
Mastered several languages,  
French, English, Urdu too  
Rode a horse and as an archer  
'Focus', her virtue

(Canto 3:24, pg. 30)

The writer adopts a unique Tamil literary form for his ballad named 'Sindhu'- into English and narrates as if he were an eye witness to the historic events concerning the life of Velu Nachiyar.

The Queen narrated to Kuyili  
All the events of her life,  
As a kid, as a princess,  
Then the King's wife.  
She told her something more that was  
More a private thought!  
Kuyili was convinced.

(Canto 6:61, pg. 45)

According to Michael Rothberg's Multidirectional Theory of Memory Studies, the writer with his individual memory uses his ballad as a vehicle for transfer of transgenerational memory to the readers of the present generation. The writer acts as a performing subject whose knowledge is shaped by his parallel reading of various texts where his individual memory stems from the collective culture of memory. The narrative serves as cultural recall and informs the readers of the present generation of their past identity and their culture. The writer's narrative clearly indicates the influence of other texts as he acknowledges that he has derived his inspiration from the revolutionary Tamil poet Subramaniya Bharati and includes references about Abu'l Hassan Yaminud-Din Khusrau, Indo-Persian Sufi singer, musician and poet and Mirza Ghalib, an Indian poet who wrote both in Urdu and Persian. So the concept of Intertextuality is embedded in his narrative when he refers to Joan of Arc, Abbakka Chowta, Lakshmibai, the Rani of Jhansi, who are women martyrs of the past which further reveals his reading of parallel texts across the world.

Among all the stories told  
In the books of History,  
One would remain etched in gold  
The story of Kuyili.  
Joan of Arc and Abbakka  
Were her forerunners.  
Lakshmibhai too Lakshmi Seghal  
Several after her.

(Epilogue 135, pg. 80)

The reading of the ballad, according to Marianne Hirsch's Postmemory truly serves to create a cross-generational reconstructive memory where the readers are not passive to the experiences of the past but indirectly are influenced which leads them to actively engage in the preservation of their past identity and culture by acknowledging the bravery of women and their role in shaping the history of India. The Ballad of the Warrior Girl Kuyili by Vanavil.K.Raja seen through the lens of Memory as a theoretical approach vividly takes us down memory lane and makes the readers relive their past history and restore the untold stories of their culture which have been blurred by the passage of time.

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