

Cultural Variation in the Depiction of Plants in Indian Literature

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Abstract

This is a modest attempt to comprehend how culture contributes to the depiction of plants in diverse ways in Indian literature. Such plants bring out the concepts, ideas, thoughts, beliefs and superstitions of society. It is interesting to unravel the threads of good or bad from the varied cultural and behavioural patterns. It also highlights temporal and spatial variation in value attached to a particular plant. A joint venture of a person from literature and plant science thus becomes essential to understand a variety of cultural settings across diverse traditions and customs in India.

Keywords: Diversity, Culture, Indian literature, Plants, Religions and rituals

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Introduction

'Culture' and 'Literature' are closely associated terms as literature is the written portrayal of any culture. In recent times, one of the most important issues in the world in all its diverse forms is the issue of culture. Culture in the traditional sense is considered to be an assemblage of beliefs, practices, traditions, rituals, myths and art of a particular society. Logically, all facets of our life in some or the other way, are confronted with the effects of culture which intern gets manifested in local literature at temporal and spatial scales.

Since ancient times, man has had an intimate contact with various environmental assets in general and plant resources in particular. The mankind depends on plants not only to fulfil their basic needs and necessities but also for the associated cultural values at personal and social level. In rites and rituals, ceremonies and sacrifices observed across all religions and customs, plants have played a significant role in various forms. Globally it has been observed that while accepting variety of transformations, interestingly literary writers have incorporated the changing phases in plant science in their writings and have reinforced the notion that 'culture' is not a static phenomenon. Depiction of plants and plant parts in Indian literature is also found to be obedient in following this rule.

Cultural Variation in the Depiction of Plants in Indian Literature

In the present study, a modest attempt is made to comprehend how culture contributes to the depiction of plants in diverse ways in literature. The manner in which plants are depicted in literature bring out the concepts, ideas, thoughts, beliefs and superstitions of a particular group of society. It is interesting to unravel the threads of good or bad bioclimatic, biogeographic and social conditions as expressed in the respective literature. This study presents examples with reference to plants from literature written in different languages in India, folk literature and also Indian Literature in English and argues that references to the plants is the representation of varied cultural and behavioural patterns with customs and traditions in India.

It also highlights how value attached to a particular plant differs spatially in different traditions of the Indian context as well as the western context.

This exercise concludes that it is advisable and would be an enriching experience if the experts from literature and plant sciences jointly analyse how various properties and features of plants are reflected in literature. This can provide significant insights about plants to a person from literature and make the reading of literature an enriching and rewarding experience for the person having science background under a variety of cultural settings.

There has been a very close relationship between 'man' and 'environment'. The evolution of life on earth in geological ages indicates that man evolved only a million years ago when he lived in dense forests. The ancient and prehistoric man has lived in symbiosis with the environment. In the neolithic age, primitive man lived in dense forests, on trees or in natural caves, and subsided on leaves, fruits and roots of plants. Man seems to have progressed rapidly in historical times, and began to live in organised societies. Human population of this period was very small, and forests were still plentiful. It was during this time when the great epic 'Ramayana' was written and naturally we find references to dense forests like 'Naimsharanya', 'Chitrakut', 'Dandakaranya' and 'Panchavati', which abounded in wild life. But by the time the great epic 'Mahabharata' was completed, onslaughts had been made on forests, and we read of the burning of the 'Khandava Vana'.

Though not scientifically proven, people of the ancient times too were aware of the fact that the air we breathe remains pleasant by surrounding plants. They realised that there is no conduct of life where the plant kingdom does not make its contribution like food, fuel, shelter, fiber, fodder and medicine. Therefore, there are a number of verses in ancient literature depicting the generosity of vegetable kingdom and many plant species have therefore been referred to as 'God' in Indian Literature, and worshipped by the Hindus as a matter of gratitude. Manu believed that trees were conscious like human beings and felt pleasure and pain. This reminds us of one of the shlokas of 'Naradapurna' in which plants have been worshipped as 'deities', and they are being requested to bestow life, success, strength, intelligence, competence and all the attributes of life. It states,

*'Ayurbala yashovarcha, pradnya pashusuneech,
Brahma Pradnyanch medha cha twa no dehi vanaspate'*

India is one of the best examples of a mega diversity, known for its diverse facets in different domains. The diversity in India gets reflected in different languages, religions, dance, music, architecture, food and customs. The Indian culture, often labelled as an amalgamation of several cultures, spans across the Indian subcontinent, and has been influenced by a history that is several millennia old. It can thus be argued that the 'culture' of India refers collectively to the thousands of distinct and unique cultures of all religions and communities present in India.

Due to the prevailing environmental conditions, several local pockets have been created in India, which is reflected in different languages, religions and customs. Of all the species on the earth, the urge to communicate is probably utmost among human beings. Man is able to express his feelings both through verbal and non-verbal means, but verbal, i.e 'linguistic' communication is potentially much more powerful than the non-verbal means. For human beings, one of the most effective and powerful ways to convey one's ideas and feelings is 'language'. Literature is 'language in operation', and language operates as a medium for a literary writer to showcase his views and opinions and express his sentiments in an effective manner. Unlike other forms of communication, literature is not restricted to the 'addresser' and 'addressee', but it has got a wider domain and circulation. Every reader enjoys the 'licence' to read and interpret the text in his own manner, analyse vagueness, obscurity and strangeness in his own way, and thus 'indeterminacy' operates as a virtue in literature. Along with many other references, the inclusion of plants in Literature, leaves it open to multiple interpretations and herein lies the beauty of literature. For example, Rabindranath Tagore's poem 'Krishnakali' opens with the following lines,

*'In the village they call her the dark girl,
but to me she is the flower Krishnakali'*

In these lines, reference to the flower 'krishnakali' leaves the poem open for multiplicity of interpretations and unlike any 'science' which claims a measure of objectivity, in literature there is a lot of room for subjective interpretation. It is felt that if students of literature understand the properties of trees with the help of Botanists, literature students can certainly derive additional connotations and thereby derive pleasure in the process of interpreting literature.

'Plants' have occupied one of the central positions in literature. In western literature, poets like Robert Frost, William Wordsworth and W.B. Yeats have made a lot of references to plants in their texts. There are several texts in Literature that take a holistic view of Plants and motivate the readers to change their attitude towards plants so that this beautiful green planet will continue to be inhabitable for our future generations. In Indian Literature as well, writers like Rabindranath Tagore, Sarojini Naidu, Toru Dutt, Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy, Borkar and Indira Sant have made references to plants. The belief that flowers gladden the mind and confer prosperity is aptly brought out in the following lines in (Mahabharata, Book 13, Anusasana Parva, Chapter 101),

*Manohladayate yasmac chriyam capi dadhati ha
tasmat sumanasah prokta naraih sukrtakarmabhih
devatabhyah sumanaso yo dadati narah sucih
tasmat sumanasah prokta yasmat tusyanti devatah.*

It argues that the man who is in a state of purity offers flowers to the deities, finds that the deities become gratified with him, and as the consequence of such gratification, bestow prosperity upon him.

Just as it is not possible to divorce 'Language' from 'Literature', it is not possible to divorce 'Literature' from 'Culture'. 'Literature' and 'Culture' are closely associated terms as literature is the written portrayal of any culture. In recent times, one of the most important issues in the world in all its diverse forms is the issue of 'culture'. 'Culture' in the traditional sense is considered to be an assemblage of beliefs, practices, traditions, rituals,

myths and arts of a particular society. Logically all facets of our life in some or the other way, are confronted with the effects of culture which intern gets manifested into a local culture at temporal and spatial scale.

As said earlier, since ancient times, man has had an intimate contact with various environmental assets in general and plant resources in particular. The mankind depends on plants not only to fulfill their basic needs and necessities, but also for the associated cultural values at personal and social levels. In rites and rituals, ceremonies and sacrifices observed across all religions and customs, plants have played a significant role in various forms, and this is depicted in literature too. In the present study a modest attempt is made to comprehend how culture contributes to the depiction of plants in diverse ways in literature. The manner in which plants are depicted in literature bring out the concepts, ideas, thoughts, beliefs and superstitions of a particular group of society. References to plants in literature is the representation of varied cultural and behavioural patterns with customs and traditions in India. Living in harmony with nature has been an integral aspect of Indian culture, and this has been abundantly reflected in a variety of traditional practices, religious beliefs, rituals, folklore, arts and crafts, and in the daily lives of the Indian people from time immemorial. The present study also brings out how value attached to a particular plant differs spatially in different traditions of the Indian context.

Trees are sacred in India, and often associated with a God or Goddess. Some scholars believe that it is the tree that was worshipped first, maybe for its medicinal or symbolic purpose, and that the gods and goddesses came later. Lot of plants have achieved religious sanctity. It is interesting to note that Gods and Goddesses in Hindu culture have correlation with plant and animal species. No Hindu worship is complete without offering flowers to the deities. Also, different deities have different favourites and their propitiation is incomplete without offering them their desired flowers. Particular flower and plant is linked to a particular deity where the colour of the flower also plays an important role. Bel, Rudrasksha (seeds of *Elaeocarpus*) and ber (*Zizyphus Jujaba*) are considered dear to Lord Shiva, Mango (*Mangifera Indica*) to Lord Hanuman and pipal to Lord Vishnu and blades of Dhruva grass are offered to Ganesha. For example, Lord Shiva is offered white

flowers, whereas Lord Ganesh is believed to adore red flowers. Interestingly, there seems to be a correlation between different festivals and colours of these flowers too. The day, time, month or occasion of worship of sacred trees has a mythical, astrological or utilitarian basis. Amala and Pipal are worshipped especially in the month of Kartika (October-November), Bel in shravana (July-August) and sami in ashvina (September-October). When the festival named 'Shivaratri' is celebrated, in order to worship Lord Shiva, plenty of white flowers are available. When 'Durga Puja' is celebrated in Bengal, a lot of 'Shivaliphul', i.e 'Parijat' are available. For Lord Shiva, the offering of China Rose is also generally made. Literature in India is replete with names of various flowers. The beautiful delightfully scented cream-yellow flower is often used in the Indian context to worship Lord Krishna. Rabindranath Tagore has immortalised this flower in one of his poems. The 'Lotus' has pride of place in Indian literature. A famous couplet ascribed to Kalidasa, a renowned dramatist in Sanskrit literature describes a woman's face as a miracle of flower blooming within a flower, her beautiful eyes are like dark blue lotuses blooming in the pink lotus of her face. In 'Bhagvatgita' too we find a lot of references to the lotus flower. In Bengali culture in India, Red Hibiscus, goes with Kali Devi and so in Bengali literature we find reference to this flower. For example,

*Jabakusum shankasham,
Kashyapaye mahadhuti
dhantari sarva papagajam
pranay tasmeen divakaram*

Due to the ecological value and efficacious properties, trees continue to be used in the religious and social ceremonies of the Hindus. The trunk of banana is used to erect welcoming gates and its leaves to make the ceremonial pavilion. The sacred leaves of peepal and mango are ubiquitously employed in making prayers and offerings. We find the depiction of this in Jai Nimkar's novel 'Come Rain' and Anita Desai's 'In Custody'.

There are certain beliefs associated with different plants in India. Many plants from historical times have been considered sacred in India by various communities. The most outstanding examples are the Peepal tree (*Ficus religiosa*), the Banyan tree (*Ficus Benghalensis*) and Khejdi tree (*Prosopis cineraria*), and these have been traditionally revered and therefore never cut. There are a number of other trees and plants considered to be sacred and grown in temple premises and protected in other localities. It must be remembered that such traditional cultural attitudes, though based on religious faith, have made significant contribution in the protection and propagation of various species of trees and plants in India. For example, people never cut the tree of '*Ficus religiosa*' (Umber), as there is a strong belief that if this tree is cut, something evil will happen. *Ficus* species are key stone species, they are water indicators and there is a hidden agenda of plant conservation in various Indian cultures. The wood of sacred trees like Bel and Pipal is never used as fuel as there is a belief that this invites the wrath of Gods. Sacred trees are invoked on special days for long life, for the expiation of sins, for averting mishaps or for the fulfillment of a particular wish. Young girls are symbolically wedded to the Pipal tree to avoid future widowhood. Mahabharata tells the story of a woman called Savitri who lost her husband one year after her marriage near a Banyan tree. She followed Yama (the God of death) to the land of the dead and through determination and intelligence managed to secure back her husband's life. In the memory of that event, Hindu women go around the Banyan tree tying seven strings around it. This is imitative magic, by symbolically going around the immortal tree, the women are binding immortality into their married life.

The traditions associated with plants are also reflected in literature. Every family in Hindu culture is associated with one holy plant, usually a local species, and is thus labelled as '*Devak*'. Folk Literature and Indian literature makes references to the '*Devak*'.

Rituals also have a connection to plants. For example, black sesame seeds are used in Hindu culture. They are put on the dead body and the motive is to release its connection with the physical world at the death ceremony. In Western Himalayan Kumaon Hills, people hold the tree 'sacred' and offer

iron pieces as their offering to Gods dwelling in the trees. The people residing in this area believe that the iron wards off the evil and the reflection of this is found in folk literature of the north of India. Even as 'sacrifice' certain plants are offered to God instead of animals. 'Coconut' also known as the 'head fruit', has the shape of a human head with three eyes and offered to God.

The same plant is looked upon with a different perspective in two different cultures. For example, if we consider the plant named 'Alstonia scholaris', we find that the frames of the slates are made with its wood, and so it has relation with the word 'scholar'. Even the convocation certificate given to the students at Shantiniketan has a small artistry made with its wood as it is considered to be 'auspicious'. However, the tree which is perceived in one pocket of the country as 'Scholaris', in the other pocket of the country i.e 'Maharashtra', is looked upon as a 'witch' (Saitan). In Maharashtra, there is a belief that if someone goes under this tree, he is haunted by a witch and therefore suffers from fever. So, in Bengali literature, especially in Tagore's writings, we find positive attributes of this tree, but in Marathi literature, it is usually projected with negative connotations. In Buddhist literature, in contrast to Jains, plants are regarded as 'insentient beings', not participating in the process of reiterated individual rebirth. Thus, different cultures carry a baggage of varied perspectives towards plants.

Interestingly, men and women have at times carried a different perspective to look at the same plant. It is felt that interpretation of plants on the basis of gender could be one of the fertile areas of research. For example, the famous marathi poetess Indira Sant adores the 'Babhul' plant, as she sees a lot of feminine attributes in that plant. She perceives the flowers of this plant as 'earrings'. She states,

*'lavlav hiravi gara palavi katyachi var mohak jali,
ghamgham karati lolak piwale phandi tar kalokhi kali'*

The famous marathi poet Vasant Bapat as a 'man' approaches the same flower with a totally different lens. He associates manly attributes like 'boldness', 'activeness', and 'strength' to this plant. He states,

*'Assal lakud, bhakam gaath,
Tathar Kana tanak path,
Vara khat gara khat,
Babhul zaad ubhech ahe'.*

Just as there are gender differences in the way plants are perceived, we find different interpretations of the same flower in different religions. In Hindu literature, 'Krishnakamal' known as 'Passiflora', is associated to Lord Krishna, Kauravas and Pandavas from Mahabharata. The five stamens are related to 'Pandavas' in Mahabharata, the purple-coloured crown refers to Kauravas and the ovary stands for 'Lord Krishna'. However, in christianity the five stamens have a reference to injuries of Christ and the three stigmas refer to the three nails on which Christ was hanged.

It has been noticed that the value attached to a particular plant differs spatially in different traditions of the Indian context as well as the western context. For example, in the western world, people are aware of the medicinal value of the 'Basil' plant, but in the Indian context, it has been assigned a lot of value. For example, in the novel 'That Long Silence' by Shashi Deshpande, Jaya is the central protagonist and we find her aunt Vanita worshipping the Basil plant for her husband's long life. In Raja Rao's famous novel 'Kanthapura', the character states, 'the leaf is laid', and this signifies that the food is served on the leaf and one must eat it. This reminds us of the culture of south India where food is served on banana leaf as this has a scientific basis. Unlike Indian Literature, in western literature it seems that the trees did not always bring out the 'delightful escape', but rather it has portrayed more of 'fear' and 'emptiness'.

Several references are made to plants in songs in India. For example, there is a marathi song. '*Angani pariyaat phulala*', where '*Pariyat*' (*Nyctanthus arbor-tristis*) becomes the symbol of happiness. Saint Dnyaneshwar asserts that trees are our relatives when he says '*Vrisksha Valhi amha soyare vanachare*'.

Conclusion

The above discussion explicitly reveals that there is a very close relationship between plants and literature. Indian Literature effectively mirrors its deep and sympathetic understanding of plants through all the three major genres of literature namely, poetry, drama and fiction. It is felt that it would be an enriching experience if the experts from literature and plant sciences jointly analyze how various properties and features of plants are reflected in literature. This can provide significant insights about plants to a person from literature and make the reading of literature an enriching and rewarding experience for the person having science background.

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