

Spatio-Temporal Transition: Reading Navya Aesthetics in S. Mañjunāth's "Śāle"

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Abstract

The present article explores S. Mañjunāth's poem "Śāle", focusing on the tension between the nostalgic past and the fragmented present with shards of memory that serve as a conduit to the narrator's self. The poem represents a relative reality of the modern educational landscape, where the once-harmonious triad of school, teacher and parent had drifted towards disintegration. Through potent metaphors – the "sculpted idol" of the teacher, the maternal warmth of the 'umbilical' connection, and the "stumped tree" of the institution – Mañjunāth portrays the school as a site of profound emotional and intellectual formation. The study highlights how the poet uses the "past– present– future" continuum to critique the temporality and loss of communal values (*Saha-jīvi*), teacher-pupil bond and connection of

self with space in the modern education system, while also celebrating the indestructible nature of memory and mentorship.

Keywords: School, Nostalgia, Memory, Teacher, Motherhood, Modernity.

The research article offers a critical examination of S. Mañjunāth's seminal poem, "Śāle" (School), exploring the temporality of space and the transience of time and vividly evoking the student-speaker's relationship. Mañjunāth is a pivotal figure in the Navya (Modernist) tradition of Kannada literature; his works are characterised by an intense preoccupation with the "eternal present" and the metaphysical continuity of life. This study situates the poem within the broader landscape of contemporary literary and philosophical outlooks, including social fragmentation, cultural alienation and the eroding foundations of the traditional educational ideals. By weaving together the poet's personal history and his literary philosophy, the text explores the school not merely as a physical structure, but as a living embodiment and enduring entity.

S. Mañjunāth emerged as one of the preeminent senior poets during the twilight of the 'Navya' Modernist movement in contemporary Kannada literature. His poetic oeuvre encompasses significant collections such as *Hakki Palṭi*, *Summaniruva Summāna* (translation), *Bāhubali*, *Nandabaṭṭalu*, *Maunadda Maṇi*, *Kalla Pārivalāgalā Bēṭa*, *Magaḷu Srjīsida Samudra* and *Jivayāna*. His definitive corpus is archived in the volume *Nelada Bēru Nabhada Biḷalu*. The present composition "Śāle" (School) is excerpted from the anthology *Magaḷu Srjīsida Samudra*. Mañjunāth existed in a state of perpetual poetic contemplation, inhabiting his poetic master craft so entirely that his transition from life appeared as a sudden, poignant revelation of verse – an untimely departure that occurred far too soon. As a poet preoccupied with the web of the eternal present and the continuity of existence, his poem "Śāle" serves as a perspicacious testament to the intensity of his experiential writing.

In the contemporary vacuum of the “present”, characterised by emotional, aesthetic, intellectual, and physical fragmentation and distortion, this poem articulates the internal relative reality of schools – institutions that once sculpted, and ought to continue sculpting, the trajectory of future lives. It reflects a growing dissonance in which the school, the pedagogue and the progenitor can no longer maintain a synchronised pace within society; a sense prevails that the lines of demarcation between these three pillars are becoming increasingly pronounced.

Why has this occurred? While education and its auxiliary spheres aimed to manifest as a burgeoning tree offering the shade of wisdom and a firm foundation for life, the modern psyche, in its quest for contemporaneity, has faltered. Universalist sentiments such as ‘I’, ‘Mine’, ‘Ours’, ‘Universal Well-being’, and ‘Social Equality’ find themselves increasingly restrained within the current epistemic and scholastic sphere. The current text seems to be born out of this very contemporary struggle. The poet’s consciousness weaves the links of the past and future into the present, carving new vistas of modern life. Originating in the schoolyard, the poem delves into the nostalgic recollections, diffusing them like moonlight over the large canvas of human existence:

Śāleyaṅgaḷavanne diṭṭisuta nintiddāga

kāṇisikoṇḍavaru namma ṭīcaru

kettida vighraha avaru

[As I stood gazing at the schoolyard,

The ones who appeared was our Teacher;

A sculpted idol she was]

The ‘schoolyard’ in the poet’s mind remains an uncorrupted space across the triad of time. The living presence etched in his memory breathes here, transmuting the image of the teacher into a ‘sculpted idol’. The poem “Śāle” can be discerningly compared with the Neo-

classical English poet Oliver Goldsmith's masterpiece, *The Village Schoolmaster* from the collection, *The Deserted Village* (1970). Where in the poet, as S. Mañjunāth's "Śāle", feels nostalgic about an idyllic rural life, where the school is situated in a vibrant space and the village schoolmaster is the custodian of moral and intellectual strength of the community, steering it towards a positive direction;

"Beside yon straggling fence that skirts the way

With blossom's furze unprofitably gay,

There, in his noisy mansion, skill'd to rule,

The village master taught his little school; ..." ("The Village Schoolmaster" 289)

It's quite interesting to see that both poets begin their poems with nostalgic notes. Oliver Goldsmith employs the metaphor 'noisy mansion' for the village school he depicted. In contrast, S Mañjunāth in his poem "Śāle" portrays the schoolyard as an eternal memory etched in his heart and mind, evoking overpowering emotions. Both the poets are overwhelmed by their rootedness in the school, childhood, past and its memory. Since the poets have such an affinity for their respective schools, there is no surprise that they have employed two magical metaphors: 'sculpted idol' for the teacher and 'noisy mansion', for the school.

The subsequent verses of S. Mañjunāth's "Śāle" intensify the reader's aesthetic sensibility further by penetrating the heart through the medium of that very idol:

Hokkaḷa keḷage sīreyuḍuttiddaru

Heḍmāṣṭarindomme peṭṭu tinda nannannu

kōḷimariyante bāci hoṭṭegavaccikoṇḍiddaru

[She wore her saree below the navel,

Once, when I was thrashed by the Headmaster,

She gathered me up like a chick

And tucked me against her belly]

Recalling the innocence of childhood, the poet captures the essence of his mentor (Guru) with poetic precision. The description of her attire serves as a prelude to a deeper symbolism; the ‘hokkaḷu’ (umbilical cord) is the quintessential signifier of maternity and motherhood. Thus, when the Headmaster’s strict demeanour and discipline struck terror into the child, the teacher’s act of gathering him ‘like a chick’ manifests maternal care and instincts. This evokes a lingering ache, a sigh transformed into a melodic lament.

The poetic intuition, while dwelling upon the tangible facets of existence, abruptly ascends to a transcendental mastery over the boundless, celestial and timeless continuum of the past and future. By oscillating between the surreal and the actual, it seems to mediate in the succeeding verses on how the infinitesimal, dew-like fragility of life’s reflection, distilled from both venom and mist, dissolves into nothingness.

Yāvudū arthavāguvudilla,

Jīvada tereteregaḷebbisuva bāṇa

nāṭuvudu, arthakāgi alla

[Nothing is understood;

The arrow that stirs the layers of life

Pierces, not for meaning]

The poet posits that one must discover meaning within life rather than expecting life itself to be inherently ‘meaningful’. The phenomena that stir the soul are experimental processes ending in pure sensation. In the poet’s emotional forge, reality is tempered and reshaped – shifting from the present to the ancestral past and stands beyond fixed definitions to strike the observer as a visceral, visual emotion.

Talabageyutta nintavanannu ṭīcaru

Kaihididoydaru, alli

gaddakke kaikottu mlānārāgi namma

Heḍmāṣṭaru!

[While I stood searching the depths, Teacher

Took my hand and led me; there,

With chin resting on his hand, silent,

Was our Headmaster!]

Stumbling and faltering while deeply immersed in the quest for the meaning of existence, the disciple returned to reality. In that moment, the master, seemingly fraught with inner turmoil and oblivious to the external world, had surrendered entirely to silence. Overwhelmed by a surge of astonishment, the disciple wondered, was this not the very same master who once resonated so vehemently?

Huḍuganige hoḍedadakke innū bēsaravē

gūḍugaḷalli cilipiliyalla Śālege rajavē

mattēke ibbarē

bharadalli śālenadesuvante iddāre?

[Is he still sad for hitting the boy?

There is no chirping in the nests; is the school on holiday?

Then why are they both here,

As if running the school in full swing?]

The child's innocent consciousness wonders if the Headmaster's silence is a lingering regret. The school, once a nest of 'chirping' children with a vibrant aura, is now enveloped in a frozen, fragrant silence that suggests a perpetual 'holiday'. Yet, these two timeless archetypes continued with undiminished zeal, as if the pulse of the institution depended solely on their enduring presence.

Namaskariside

ellarū kaikōṭṭubiṭṭiri enuvantha

nōṭa esedaru

hakkigaḷella hāridarū mara uḷiyalēbēkalla

hāge nānobba enadru

matte ṭīcaru?

‘averelli, saṇṇadondu kārāṇakke hōgibiṭṭaḷu

nimagellā suddi muṭṭalillave?’

[I bowed.

He threw a look that seemed to say,

“All of you have abandoned me.”

“Even when all the birds fly away, the tree must remain;

And so, I am here,” he said.

And Teacher?

“Where is she? She left for a small reason.

Did the news not reach you all?”]

The poet’s internal salutation is directed toward a static image of a yearning mentor who feels forsaken. The “Śāle” (School) has witnessed generations of teachers and pupils; it remains like a ‘stumped tree’ after the birds have taken flight. Yet, it is not extinct; it flows like an eternal spring within the poet’s heart. When the poet inquires after the lady teacher, the revelation of her departure is dismissed as a ‘trivial reason’ – a profound commentary on the fleeting, incidental nature of existence.

Haudalla, karagibiṭṭittu kappu vighraha

Śāleyiddalli īga janānivāsa

namma taragatigalalli enthado caṭuvaṭike

matteli heḍ māṣṭaru? Magalantha ṭīcarē

illada mēle avarelli? horabidde nānu

[True, the black idol had melted away.

Where the school stood, there is now a settlement;

Some strange activity goes on in our classroom.

Where is the Headmaster now? When even the teacher,

Who was like a daughter to him, is gone –where would he be?

I stepped out –]

As the veil of ‘unreality’ dissolves, the poet returns to a stark actuality: the sacred space of the classroom, the god-like mentor, and the home-like school have vanished, replaced by a secular residential colony. This evokes the imagery of P.T. Narasiṃhācār’s poem, ‘*Mōṭu marada mēlondu mudi gīḷi*’, which flows like a subterranean river beneath Mañjunāth’s verses. The school is the ‘stumpy tree’, and the poet is the ‘old parrot’ mourning its vanished glory.

Oliver Goldsmith, too, in his “The Village Schoolmaster”, provides a pen portrait of spatio-temporal transition that subtly takes place by reflecting the modern undercurrents which overshadow the narrator’s school memory;

“But the past is all his fame. The very spot

Where many a time he triumph’d is forgot.” (“The Village Schoolmaster” pp. 293-4)

Both the poem brings forth a gentle irony with a sardonic tone at the end, which otherwise reflects the bygone glory of the school and its pristine environs where once the teacher acted as a centripetal force binding students, community and environment into a syncretic culture. The concluding lines of “Śāle” also echo with “The Village Schoolmaster”;

Namma śaleyadāriaṣṭu dūravidvodu

iṣṭē kiridembuḍu īga arivāyitu

[The path to our school, which once seemed so long,
I realised only now, was actually so narrow.]

The poem succeeds in articulating the physical and psychological distance of memory while underscoring the narrowing passage of time and its inevitable nature. The concluding couplet of the poem echoes the speaker's lamentation and brooding thoughts as they come to terms with the reality of life in a state of infinite transition. This invokes the limitations of human existence and our inability to control natural phenomena.

S. Mañjunāth's "Śāle" stands as a testament to the resilience of memory and the ontological endurance of institutions. Through the central metaphor of the 'stumped tree' (motumara), the poet argues that while the 'birds' – representing the ephemeral presence of students and individual teachers – have to take flight inevitably, the school remains an anchored, existential reality within the speaker's psyche.

The poem gracefully traverses the terrain between the clinical 'present' and the venerated 'past', advocating that education is not just a transmission of knowledge but an embrace of maternal, harmonious and infinite evolution that shapes one's self and soul. Mañjunāth's use of the metaphor of the 'sculpted idol' (*vigraha*) for the teacher elevates the act of pedagogy to a divine level, thereby establishing an everlasting bond between the teacher and pupil which goes beyond time and space, yet he grounds this in a stark contrast, critiquing the contemporary societal fragmentation with its superficiality and hazy relationship. Ultimately, the closing epiphany regarding the shortened 'path to school' is a profound realisation of the confluence of time; as the physical distance diminishes, the psychological immensity of the school's influence only grows. Thus, the poem concludes not as a lament for what is lost, but as an attestation to the indestructible foundations of the human spirit.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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