

HISTORY, IDEOLOGY AND CRITICAL HISTORICAL LITERACY: READING S. L. BHYRAPPA'S AAVARANA AS A PEDAGOGICAL TEXT

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ABSTRACT

Historical fiction occupies a complex position between literary imagination, cultural memory and historical knowledge. S. L. Bhyrappa's Aavarana (The Veil) provides a particularly significant case for examining this relationship because the novel explicitly stages conflicts concerning historical evidence, ideological interpretation, artistic freedom and the pedagogical transmission of the past. Through its central protagonist, Laxmi, the novel constructs a movement from inherited ideological assumptions towards archival research, source consultation and critical interrogation of received historical narratives. At the same time, Aavarana is itself an ideologically situated literary text and has generated sharply divergent critical responses concerning its representation of medieval Indian history, religion and communal relations. This paper therefore does not attempt to establish the historical validity of the novel's competing claims. Instead, it examines how the novel represents the production, circulation and contestation of historical knowledge and considers what this representation can contribute to educational discussions of critical literacy and the teaching of contested histories.

Employing a qualitative literary methodology combining close textual reading, narratological analysis, discourse analysis and contextual engagement with scholarship on historiography and historical thinking, the study identifies four interconnected pedagogical concerns in Aavarana: the distinction between evidence and interpretation; the ideological mediation of historical narratives; the relationship between literary representation and historical knowledge; and the necessity of cultivating students' capacity to compare sources rather than passively inherit authoritative narratives. Particular attention is given to the novel's embedded structure, in which Laxmi's research, the historical novella she subsequently writes, and the controversies surrounding its publication become successive stages in an inquiry into how knowledge of the past is produced. The paper argues that Aavarana can be productively employed not as a transparent account of Indian history but as a pedagogical object through which students can examine historiography, narrative authority, source criticism, cultural memory and the politics of representation. The educational value of such a text lies precisely in its contentiousness: it creates an opportunity to teach students how to distinguish historical evidence from literary construction, interpretation from fact, and critical inquiry from ideological certainty.

KEYWORDS: S. L. Bhyrappa; Aavarana; historical fiction; historiography; critical literacy; historical thinking; literary education; cultural memory; contested histories

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between literature and historical knowledge has long presented a productive difficulty for literary and educational scholarship. Literary texts frequently represent historical events, communities, political conflicts and cultural transformations, yet literary representation cannot be treated as equivalent to historical documentation. Historical fiction occupies precisely this unstable territory: it draws upon historical records while reorganising them through narrative selection, characterisation, imagination and aesthetic form. The educational significance of such texts consequently extends beyond literary interpretation. Historical fiction can become a site where students encounter competing constructions of the past and learn to examine how evidence, memory, ideology and narrative interact in the production of knowledge.

S. L. Bhyrappa's Aavarana provides a particularly complex example. Originally published in Kannada in 2007 and subsequently translated into English as Aavarana: The Veil by Sandeep Balakrishna, the novel places the contemporary experiences of Laxmi within a larger inquiry into medieval Indian history, religious identity and historical representation. The English edition was published by Rupa Publications in 2014. The novel has attracted substantial public and scholarly controversy precisely because it presents itself as an intervention into established understandings of Indian history. One recent academic study describes the novel as a work of "historical rewriting" concerned with the claim to historical truth, while also criticising its emotionally charged and ideologically situated treatment of the past.

This ambivalence is pedagogically important. A text that generates controversy should not automatically be excluded from the classroom; equally, it should not be presented to students as an uncontested repository of historical truth. Its educational value may instead lie in enabling students to investigate the mechanisms through which historical narratives acquire authority. Aavarana is particularly suitable for such an approach because its own narrative repeatedly foregrounds questions concerning archives, documents, field research, historical interpretation, artistic freedom, censorship, ideological commitment and the responsibilities of writers.

The central figure through whom these questions are dramatised is Laxmi, a filmmaker and creative writer who is asked by her husband Amir to write historical plays about Akbar and Tipu Sultan. Her refusal to produce predetermined heroic representations initiates a broader intellectual journey. She consults her deceased father's research, reads historical works, examines documentary material and eventually transforms her research into a historical novella. The novel subsequently places this novella within the larger novel, creating a layered narrative in which contemporary debates

about history are refracted through fictional representations of the medieval past.

The present study approaches this structure primarily as an educational problem. Rather than asking whether Laxmi's interpretation of medieval Indian history is historically correct, the paper asks a different question: What does Aavarana teach readers about the process through which historical knowledge is selected, interpreted, contested and transmitted? This question permits a distinction between the historical claims made by characters and the pedagogical possibilities generated by the novel's representation of those claims.

The paper argues that Aavarana can be read as a literary laboratory for developing critical historical literacy. By critical historical literacy, this study refers to the capacity to interrogate sources, distinguish evidence from interpretation, recognise ideological framing, compare competing accounts, identify omissions, examine the relationship between narrative and evidence, and understand that historical knowledge is produced through methodological practices rather than received passively from authoritative institutions.

Historical Fiction And The Construction Of The Past

Historical fiction occupies an intermediate position between factual historiography and imaginative narrative. Unlike conventional historical scholarship, it is not required to reproduce the past through the evidentiary conventions of professional historiography. Yet unlike purely fantastical fiction, it derives much of its meaning from an identifiable relationship with historical time, persons, institutions and events. This creates an epistemological tension: historical fiction can stimulate historical consciousness while simultaneously transforming historical material through artistic imagination.

Aavarana intensifies this tension by repeatedly drawing attention to its own research apparatus. The novel does not simply place fictional characters against a historical background; it makes research itself part of the narrative. Books, archival records, inscriptions, physical sites, scholarly notes and bibliographic references become elements of the fictional structure. The result is a self-reflexive narrative in which the production of historical knowledge becomes part of the story being told.

The novel's extensive use of historical material has consequently generated contrasting scholarly interpretations. A recent study approaches the novel as a form of postcolonial historical revisionism and focuses on its representation of cultural memory, identity and contested historical narratives.

Historical Thinking And Critical Literacy

Historical thinking involves more than remembering dates, personalities and events. It requires students to evaluate sources, understand historical context, distinguish primary from secondary evidence, identify perspective, recognise causation and contingency, and understand that historical interpretations may differ because historians make different selections and arguments from available evidence.

This approach has important implications for literary education. When literature represents contested historical events, students can be encouraged to ask not merely "What happened?" but also:

- What does the text claim happened?
- What evidence does the text invoke?
- Who is authorised to speak?
- Which voices are absent?
- How are historical actors characterised?
- What assumptions govern the interpretation?
- What distinction is made between evidence and inference?
- How does the genre of fiction affect the presentation of historical knowledge?
- How might another historian interpret the same evidence differently?

These questions move students from consuming historical narratives to analysing their construction.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

The pedagogical problem addressed by this study arises from the increasing circulation of contested historical narratives across literature, popular culture, political discourse and digital media. Students encounter representations of the past through textbooks, films, novels, social media, documentaries and public debates. These sources frequently present competing interpretations while claiming different forms of authority.

Literary education can contribute to students' ability to navigate this environment because literary interpretation already requires attention to perspective, narrative structure, language, omission, ambiguity and ideological framing. However, historical fiction also creates a danger: students may confuse a compelling narrative with documentary truth.

Aavarana makes this tension unusually visible. The novel repeatedly opposes "truth" and "ideology," but the novel itself is also a constructed ideological discourse. Its characters articulate competing positions, yet the narrative gives greater argumentative authority to some positions than to others. Consequently, the most productive educational approach is neither to accept nor to dismiss the novel's historical claims. It is to teach students to examine how the novel constructs its claim to truth.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative literary research methodology. Since the research examines a literary text rather than collecting empirical data from participants, the study does not employ quantitative measurement, questionnaires or

experimental intervention. Its primary method is interpretive textual analysis.

The analysis combines four approaches: close reading, narratological analysis, discourse analysis and pedagogical interpretation.

First, close reading is employed to examine significant dialogues, narrative episodes, embedded historical narratives and metatextual interventions within Aavarana. Particular attention is given to scenes in which characters explicitly debate historical evidence, artistic freedom, religious identity and the purpose of history.

Second, narratological analysis is used to examine the novel's layered structure. The contemporary narrative concerning Laxmi and Amir contains Laxmi's historical novella, which itself reconstructs medieval events. This "story within a story" structure is significant because it makes the transformation of historical material into fictional narrative visible to the reader.

Third, discourse analysis is used to examine how competing vocabularies—such as "truth," "progress," "communal harmony," "artistic freedom," "research," and "ideology"—are mobilised by different characters. Rather than determining which character possesses the final truth, the analysis investigates how the language of truth itself becomes a site of contestation.

Finally, pedagogical interpretation considers how these textual structures can be translated into educational practices concerned with critical reading and historical literacy.

The study therefore makes an important distinction between historical verification and literary analysis. Claims concerning Tipu Sultan, Aurangzeb, Vijayanagara, temple destruction or medieval religious policy are treated primarily as claims represented within the novel. Where the paper discusses the novel's historical argument, it does not assume that the narrative's evidentiary claims are independently established merely because the novel presents them as researched. This distinction is essential because Aavarana itself has been the subject of sharply contrasting scholarly interpretations.

Laxmi and the Transformation from Belief to Inquiry

The intellectual trajectory of Laxmi constitutes the central epistemological movement of Aavarana. At the beginning of the narrative, she is asked to participate in the production of historical drama according to a predetermined interpretive framework. Amir asks her to write plays about Akbar and Tipu Sultan and specifies their heroic framing through titles such as Akbar the Great and Tipu Sultan: The National Hero.

The significance of this episode extends beyond the particular historical figures involved. The scene establishes a distinction between research and representation. Laxmi is not initially being asked to investigate a historical question. She is being asked to produce a narrative whose conclusion has already been determined.

The distinction becomes particularly important educationally. Research begins with an inquiry whose answer is not already fixed. Ideological narration, by contrast, may begin with a desired conclusion and subsequently select material that supports it. Aavarana dramatises this difference through Laxmi's resistance to writing a predetermined historical narrative.

Her subsequent turn towards her father's research transforms her from a producer of historical representation into an investigator of historical claims. The novel therefore constructs research as an epistemic discipline: sources must be located, examined, compared and interpreted before conclusions are reached.

This movement can be pedagogically translated into an important principle:

Students should be taught to investigate claims before reproducing them.

In literature classrooms, this principle is particularly useful because students frequently encounter historical assumptions embedded within literary works. A text may describe a historical event with great narrative confidence, but confidence of narration does not itself constitute historical evidence.

"History Is a Quest for Truth": The Epistemological Claim

One of the central propositions encountered by Laxmi in her father's notes is that history constitutes a search for truth. The novel associates this search with primary sources, documentary records, classification, comparison and evidence.

At one level, this formulation establishes the philosophical centre of the novel. History is presented not as an instrument for confirming political ideology but as a disciplined attempt to reconstruct the past from available evidence.

At another level, however, the proposition requires qualification when considered pedagogically. Historical scholarship cannot simply recover the past without interpretation. Historians necessarily select sources, establish significance, construct causal relationships and work within conceptual frameworks. Consequently, the educational objective should not be to replace one supposedly pure "truth" with another supposedly pure "truth." It should be to teach students how claims about the past are warranted.

This distinction is crucial to reading Aavarana. The novel's insistence upon truth is itself part of its rhetorical strategy. The educational reader must therefore ask: What constitutes evidence? How is evidence interpreted? Which sources are privileged? Which sources are excluded? How does the narrator establish credibility? What assumptions govern the interpretation?

Such questions transform the novel from a text that merely tells students what to believe into a text that can teach them how to examine claims about belief.

The Archive as a Literary Device

The father's library performs an important structural function. Books, notes, documentary material and research records

become narrative objects through which Laxmi reconstructs a historical past.

The archive is therefore not merely a source of information; it becomes a literary device.

Laxmi's discovery of her father's notes produces a movement from memory to documentation. Her intellectual transformation is represented through the physical encounter with books and records. This has considerable pedagogical significance because it materialises a process that is often abstract in classrooms.

Students are frequently told to "consult sources," but literary texts rarely represent what source consultation actually entails. Aavarana turns this process into narrative action. Reading, comparison, annotation, field research and documentary interpretation become components of the protagonist's development.

The educational implications are therefore substantial. A literature classroom using Aavarana can ask students to construct an evidence map for a historical claim made by the novel. Students can distinguish:

- 1.the claim made by the character;
- 2.the source invoked by the character;
- 3.the interpretation derived from that source;
- 4.alternative interpretations;
- 5.the distinction between historical evidence and fictional reconstruction.

This approach converts literary reading into research training without reducing literature to historical documentation.

Artistic Freedom and Historical Responsibility

The conflict between Laxmi and Amir provides one of the novel's most important debates about artistic freedom. Amir argues that historical drama remains an artistic creation and therefore falls within the artist's freedom. Laxmi responds that artistic freedom cannot automatically justify ideological distortion.

Her position is encapsulated in the statement:

"I think truth is greater than art, and an artist's creation must be an expression of truth" (Bhyrappa, Aavarana, p. 83).

The statement creates an apparent opposition between artistic freedom and historical responsibility. From a literary-theoretical perspective, however, the issue is more complex. Fiction does not have the same epistemological obligations as historiography. A novelist may invent dialogue, compress chronology, create composite characters and imagine interior states. The question is therefore not whether historical fiction must reproduce the past literally, but how it signals its relationship to historical evidence.

For educational purposes, this distinction is extremely valuable. Students can be encouraged to differentiate among:

historical fact → historical interpretation → fictional reconstruction → ideological appropriation.

These categories should not be treated as mutually exclusive. A historical novel may contain factual information, interpretation and imaginative invention simultaneously.

Thus, Aavarana can support a pedagogical examination of the ethics of historical fiction without requiring students to accept Laxmi's formulation that truth must always supersede art. Instead, students can debate the more precise question: What responsibilities does a writer assume when fiction represents historically vulnerable or contested communities?

Professor Sastri and the Ideology of "Progress"

Professor Sastri represents another epistemological position. His discourse repeatedly invokes "Progressiveness" and communal harmony as purposes of historical writing. The novel constructs a conflict between this approach and Laxmi's insistence that historical evidence should not be suppressed for the sake of social harmony.

The issue becomes particularly significant in the educational context because it raises a difficult question: Should historical education prioritise social cohesion or historical accuracy?

A simplistic answer would be inadequate. Education necessarily has ethical and civic purposes, and the presentation of history can influence social relations. At the same time, suppressing uncomfortable historical evidence does not necessarily produce critical citizenship. Students who later encounter contradictory evidence outside the classroom may lose confidence in educational institutions if they discover that significant historical controversies were omitted.

The pedagogically stronger position is therefore not that every historical claim must be presented without context, but that students should learn how to encounter difficult evidence responsibly.

The controversy represented through Sastri and Laxmi can consequently become an exercise in epistemic ethics. Students can examine whether social harmony is strengthened by omission, contextualisation, acknowledgement, comparison or open debate.

The "Story Within the Story" and Historical Mediation

One of the most significant formal features of Aavarana is its embedded narrative. Laxmi eventually writes a historical novella based upon her research, and this novella becomes part of Bhyrappa's larger novel.

The resulting structure can be represented as:

Bhyrappa → Laxmi → historical research → historical novella → reader

This layered structure complicates the question of authorship and authority. The reader does not receive medieval history directly. Instead, the reader encounters a fictional character who researches history and then transforms that research into fiction within another fictional text.

This structure can be understood as a form of metahistorical narration. The novel does not simply narrate the past; it narrates the process through which a contemporary subject attempts to narrate the past.

This distinction has major implications for literary education. Students can be asked to compare three levels:

1. the historical event as a scholarly reconstruction;
2. Laxmi's representation of that event within the novel;
3. Bhyrappa's representation of Laxmi representing that event.

Such an exercise makes mediation visible. Students learn that historical knowledge does not move directly from "the past" into the classroom. It passes through archives, historians, institutions, textbooks, authors, translators, teachers and readers.

Khwaja Jahan and the Problem of Perspective

The embedded historical narrative centred on Khwaja Jahan further complicates the relationship between history and identity. The character is represented as a former Rajput prince who undergoes defeat, forced conversion, castration and enslavement before becoming attached to the Mughal court.

Regardless of the historical status of each detail presented by the narrative, the character performs an important literary function: he experiences history as embodied transformation.

Historical events are therefore not represented merely as dates or political transitions. They become experiences of displacement, loss, religious transformation, gendered violence and altered identity.

This provides another pedagogical possibility. Historical literacy should not be restricted to institutional events. Students can examine how historical processes are experienced by individuals whose identities are transformed by political power. At the same time, this technique requires careful classroom handling. The emotional force of historical fiction can produce identification, anger or sympathy. Students therefore need to learn to distinguish affective response from evidentiary judgment.

The question should not be whether students are emotionally moved by Khwaja Jahan's experience. They may be. The pedagogical question is whether they can subsequently ask what kind of historical evidence would be necessary to substantiate, contextualise or challenge the narrative.

Khwaja Jahan and the Sadhu: Dialogue as a Model of Intellectual Encounter

The conversation between Khwaja Jahan and the Hindu sadhu is especially important for the novel's treatment of religious philosophy. Khwaja Jahan initially interprets military success as evidence of religious superiority. The sadhu challenges this logic by distinguishing military victory from spiritual truth.

The conversation is structurally significant because it introduces dialogue as an alternative to coercive certainty.

The sadhu does not merely deliver a monologue. Khwaja Jahan asks questions, receives responses and modifies his understanding. The scene therefore resembles a pedagogical dialogue. Knowledge emerges through questioning rather than through the unilateral imposition of doctrine.

This dimension of Aavarana can be connected to dialogic approaches to education. A classroom dealing with religiously and historically contested material should not require students to arrive at a predetermined ideological conclusion. Instead, it should create conditions in which students can formulate questions, examine assumptions and encounter competing conceptual frameworks.

The important pedagogical distinction is between dialogue as a method and consensus as an outcome. Students do not necessarily need to reach agreement. They need to learn how to disagree intellectually without abandoning evidence or reducing the other participant to an identity category.

The Novel's Representation of Religious Pluralism

The conversation between Khwaja Jahan and the sadhu also articulates the novel's representation of Hindu philosophical pluralism. The sadhu describes different traditions as employing different terminology while potentially pursuing comparable ethical and spiritual ends.

Within the novel, this becomes a contrast between multiplicity and exclusivity. Yet an educational reading should resist transforming this contrast into a universal claim about entire religious traditions. Religions are internally diverse, historically changing and interpreted differently across communities and periods.

The pedagogical value of the scene therefore lies less in accepting its binary classification and more in examining how literature constructs religious categories.

Students can ask:

- How does the novel define Hinduism?
 - How does it define Islam?
 - Are these definitions internally consistent?
 - Whose voices represent each tradition?
 - What historical variations disappear when a tradition is represented as a single system?
 - What happens when a literary narrative turns theological differences into civilisational oppositions?
- These questions introduce students to the difference between analysing a representation and endorsing it.

Aavarana and Critical Historical Literacy

The most significant educational contribution of Aavarana lies in its potential to model critical historical literacy. The novel repeatedly demonstrates that historical knowledge is mediated by institutions, scholars, artists, political interests

and cultural memory.

A pedagogical framework derived from the novel can be organised around five competencies.

i. Source Awareness

Students should identify what kind of source is being used: archival document, inscription, court chronicle, archaeological evidence, scholarly monograph, memoir, oral account or fictional representation.

ii. Source Evaluation

Students should ask who produced the source, when, for what purpose and under what conditions. A source does not become reliable merely because it is old, official or frequently cited.

iii. Comparative Interpretation

Students should compare competing historical accounts rather than treating one narrative as self-evidently authoritative.

iv. Narrative Awareness

Students should identify how narrative choices shape interpretation. Characterisation, focalisation, omission, emotional intensity and sequencing all influence how readers understand historical events.

v. Reflexive Reading

Students should examine their own assumptions. Historical reading is not simply about identifying the bias of others. Readers themselves bring cultural memories, political assumptions and inherited narratives to the classroom.

IMPLICATIONS FOR LITERATURE EDUCATION

The educational significance of Aavarana extends beyond the teaching of Indian history. It demonstrates how literature classrooms can become spaces for interdisciplinary inquiry.

A literature student reading the novel must simultaneously encounter narrative theory, historiography, cultural studies, religious studies, political discourse and archival methodology. This interdisciplinary quality is especially valuable in contemporary humanities education, where students increasingly need to interpret information across different media and knowledge systems.

The novel can therefore be used to develop an evidence-based literary pedagogy.

Instead of asking students only:

“What is Bhyrappa saying about Indian history?”

the teacher can ask:

“How does Bhyrappa construct authority for what he says about Indian history?”

The second question is pedagogically more productive because it transforms students from recipients of interpretation into investigators of interpretation.

Similarly, instead of asking:

“Is Laxmi right?”

students can be asked:

“What evidence does Laxmi invoke, how does she interpret it, and what assumptions structure her interpretation?”

This difference is fundamental. The former asks students to choose a side; the latter asks them to practise scholarship.

CONCLUSION

S. L. Bhyrappa's Aavarana is particularly valuable for educational research because it makes the production of historical knowledge part of its narrative structure. Through Laxmi's intellectual transformation, the novel represents research as a movement away from inherited assumptions and towards source examination, archival investigation and critical questioning. Through Amir and Professor Sastri, it stages competing positions concerning artistic freedom, ideological responsibility, historical representation and social harmony. Through the embedded historical novella, it foregrounds the complex relationship between historical evidence and literary imagination.

The novel should not, however, be approached pedagogically as an uncomplicated historical authority. Its representations of medieval India, religious traditions and historiographical debates are themselves situated within a particular ideological and cultural framework, and scholarly responses to the work have identified precisely this ideological dimension.

Its strongest educational potential consequently lies elsewhere. Aavarana can function as a meta-historical literary text through which students learn to ask how historical narratives acquire authority, how sources are selected, how omissions shape interpretation, how literature transforms historical material, and how contemporary ideological commitments influence readings of the past.

The movement from Laxmi's initial assumptions to her archival investigations provides a useful metaphor for critical historical literacy. Yet the final pedagogical step must go beyond Laxmi. Students should apply the same scepticism that the novel directs towards ideological historiography to the novel's own claims. They must learn not merely to replace one authoritative narrative with another but to develop the intellectual habits necessary to investigate competing claims.

For literary education, this is particularly significant. Literature can teach students to inhabit perspectives, recognise narrative construction, interrogate language and perceive the emotional dimensions of historical memory. Historical

research can teach them to evaluate evidence, establish provenance and distinguish interpretation from documentation. When these practices are brought together, literature becomes more than an illustration of history and history becomes more than a collection of facts. Their intersection can produce a form of critical historical literacy in which students learn to read both texts and historical narratives as constructed, situated and contestable forms of knowledge.

In this sense, the most productive way to teach Aavarana is neither as a definitive account of India's past nor simply as an ideological novel. It is to teach it as a contested knowledge-text—a literary work that makes visible the struggle over who has the authority to narrate the past and, more importantly for education, equips students to examine the evidentiary, narrative and ideological processes through which that authority is produced.

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