Narrative Devices in the Buddhist Canonical
Avadanas and Jatakas

(Abstract)

The Buddhist literature is considered to be the treasure house of narrative techniques. It had got great prominence in all over the world because of its religious flavour. Buddhists had adopted various kinds of stories as a medium of propagation of religious ideals. The remarkable fact is that these tales gave life and vigour to their religion. The oral transmission of the tales was take place by the activities of Bhāṇakas. They helped to widen the range of Buddhist narratives. There are a number of commentaries and reinterpretations on these tales throughout various countries. Buddhist literature employs the techniques of almost all the ancient Indian literary genres.

India is considered to be the birth place of Buddhist ideals. Due to the varied and multiple socio-religious activities of India, Buddhist monks had migrated to various places. Thus the literary treasures of Buddhism also migrated. There are a number of studies in the realm of Buddhist narrative literature. Most of the studies are from the countries like China, Tibet, Sri Lanka, Japan and so on. In these countries Buddhism is still the living tradition. But in present India it is of less prominence compared to other countries. The modern studies on Buddhist literature in the light of western ideologies are remarkable. Most of the original texts are not available in their original form, but their fragments can be traced in the form of commentaries in various languages. From the beginning of Christian era Indian scholarly world were aware of Buddhist narratives. Jātaka
tales had got wide spread acceptance among common people because of its simple and oral transmission. A number of literary works were formed on the basis of these tales. Thus a study on the narrative devices applied in the tales is relevant.

The Jātaka tales and Avadāna tales are the important Buddhist narratives which utilized ancient Indian literary styles to provide a strong base to their religious and literary activities. Jātakas are considered to be the previous birth stories of Buddha while Avadānas are the heroic deeds of Buddhist disciples. Both literary genres are directly or indirectly related together with their structure and plot.

The present study ‘Narrative Devices in the Buddhist Canonical Avadanas and Jatakas’ is focused on the major Buddhist narratives like Avadāna and Jātaka tales with recent concern of storytelling in the light of narratology. In this thesis an attempt is made to identify the structural elements and gradual changes occur in the collection and mode of presentation of Avadānas and Jātaka tales. This literary venture employs various methods of narration and their application in Avadānas and Jātaka tales, prominent narrative devices, their possibilities and also its different manifestations. Using these ideas of narrations, an attempt is made to analyze prominent Buddhist canonical narratives like Avadānas and Jātakas.

The study of narrative devices in Buddhist canonical Avadānas and Jātakas is also fruitful in understanding the narrative methods prevalent in ancient Indian literature along with contemporary narrative experiences. Buddhist scholars utilized all possibilities of
narration to create a strong foundation for their ideas through literature. Narrative devices applied in Jātakas and Avadānas can be classified into external and internal narrative devices. External narrative devices can be traced out from the outer frame of the tale. It is mainly consisted of structure of the tale, title, variant literary forms, mythological elements and the like. Internal narrative devices, on the other hand, are mainly consisted of the time and space of narration, quotations, linguistic peculiarities, variant narrators, flash back episodes, side story and also enigmatic method of narrations. Buddhist narratives are the treasure house of religious and philosophical ideas illustrated by Buddha and his disciples. These elements are enigmatically narrated in both Jātaka and Avadāna tales. It includes the narration of Buddhist perfections, four noble truths, eight paths and universal aspects of Buddhism. External narrative devices enclose the ancient Indian mythological elements. Buddha utilized the possibility of retelling mythical elements with variant tone and tenor. A number of mythical characters and incidents were intermingled with Jātakas and Avadānas. These narrative types are powerful to capture the minds of the audience. The interpretation of life experiences of Buddha and Buddhist disciples with elegant narrative devices makes the text more popular all over the world. For the sake of an attentive reader the Avadānas and Jātakas reveal a vast treasure of narrative devices.