

No Text Is an Island: Tracing Postmodern Echoes from *Kathasaritsagara* to *Cupid's Bow*

A Study of the Translated Telugu Short Story *Manasijavillu* and Its Mythic Intertexts

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Abstract

This paper explores how the contemporary Telugu short story *Manasijavillu* (Cupid's Bow in English translation) participates in a long and dynamic lineage of mythic reimaginings that stretch from the *Kathasaritsagara* to modernist and postmodern retellings such as Thomas Mann's *The Transposed Heads* and Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana*. By situating *Manasijavillu* within this continuum, the study examines how classical Indian myths are not merely retold but refracted through postmodern techniques of intertextuality, irony, metafiction, and narrative self-awareness. Drawing on the theoretical insights of Julia Kristeva, Roland Barthes, Linda Hutcheon, Fredric Jameson, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Lawrence Venuti, the paper argues that *Manasijavillu* embodies a distinctly postmodern narrative consciousness while asserting a regional literary agency through translation. The English translation *Cupid's Bow* itself becomes a creative act of rewriting that transforms cultural specificity into global literary discourse. Ultimately, the paper demonstrates that myths, stories, and translations alike are part of an interconnected web of meaning—affirming that “no text is an island.”

Introduction

The phrase “no text is an island” aptly captures the postmodern belief that no literary creation exists in isolation. Every text arises within a network of echoes, borrowings, and transformations. Postmodern literary theory destabilizes the notions of originality and singular

meaning, proposing instead that storytelling is a continuous cultural conversation. Within this dialogic frame, myths and classical stories do not remain fixed monuments of the past but become templates that are constantly reinvented for new epochs and audiences.

This study traces one such continuum—from the ancient Sanskrit narrative compendium *Kathasaritsagara* to Thomas Mann’s *The Transposed Heads* (1940), Girish Karnad’s *Hayavadana* (1972), and the Telugu short story *Manasijavillu*, translated into English as *Cupid’s Bow*. Each work adapts a mythic motif of transposed identities, reconfiguring its meaning according to the aesthetic and philosophical sensibilities of its era. By examining this lineage, the paper reveals how Indian mythic imagination sustains itself through reinvention, and how postmodern narrative practice—especially in regional literatures—keeps myth alive by re-contextualizing it within modern anxieties of selfhood, gender, and authorship.

The Story in Context: *Manasijavillu* (*Cupid’s Bow*)

Pingali Chaitanya’s *Manasijavillu* (2018), first published in the Telugu weekly *Andhra Jyothi*, unfolds as a psychologically charged and symbolically rich narrative steeped in both tradition and introspection. At its core lies a poignant psychological conflict—one that unsettles the reader and invites reflection across the boundaries of era and genre, drawing from ancient, modern, and postmodern sensibilities. What begins as an emotional unease develops into a metaphysical crisis that propels the protagonist into a surreal quest for meaning.

The story begins in domestic tranquility but quickly descends into disquiet. The protagonist—a young, newly married woman—begins to feel an uncanny dissonance within her seemingly blissful domestic life. Though her husband stands before her, familiar in face and form, something within her recoils: she no longer recognizes his body as his own. His limbs, once intimate, now seem alien. Troubled by this surreal yet deeply emotional experience, she embarks on a fantastical journey—into the heart of the forest—to confront none other than the

mythical duo, Betaal and King Vikramarka, the very storytellers whose tales have long shaped Indian folklore.

She reminds Betaal of his sixth tale—the story of *Hayavadana*, where a washerman, his wife, and his friend undergo a body-head transposition due to a divine boon. When the wife accidentally switches their heads, the dilemma arises: whom should she consider her true husband—the one with her husband's head or the one with his body? Vikramarka's answer—that the head defines the person—satisfies Betaal, ending the tale.

But not for her.

The protagonist confronts Betaal with a striking protest: she is not content with the conclusion that placated both narrator and king. Her suffering continues, because for her, it is not the mind or face, but the physical presence—the body of her beloved—that defines intimacy, identity, and love. She claims her right to reject that imposed ending and instead choose her own truth.

What follows is a meta-fictional twist. Betaal confesses he cannot resolve her anguish—for he and Vikramarka are but characters in another storyteller's world, lacking agency. Yet she refuses to accept this powerlessness. With defiant resolve, she chooses to script her own ending, choosing the man with her husband's body as her true partner.

The story concludes—or rather, transcends closure—on a liberating note. As she walks away, leaving Betaal and Vikramarka behind at the cusp of yet another tale, she laughs. They cannot catch up with her, for she has stepped out of their story and into her own—a narrative she now claims as the author of her own destiny—a liberating, metafictional gesture—symbolizing her emancipation from both mythic determinism and narrative authority.

This moment of self-authorship transforms *Manasijavillu* from mythic retelling into postmodern rebellion. The narrative's play with layers of storytelling—folk tale, myth, dream, and translation—creates a recursive textual world where creation and interpretation blur.

Theoretical Framework

The postmodern dimensions of *Manasijavillu* can be illuminated through key theoretical concepts:

Intertextuality. Julia Kristeva (1980) defines intertextuality as “the absorption and transformation of another text” (Kristeva 36). *Manasijavillu* exemplifies this by refracting the *Kathasaritsagara*’s transposed-head motif through contemporary narrative and feminist sensibilities. The text becomes a site where myth, modern psychology, and literary critique converge.

Metafiction and Self-Reflexivity. Patricia Waugh (1984) describes metafiction as fiction self-consciously aware of its construction. *Manasijavillu* demonstrates this through its layered narrative: the protagonist’s dialogue with Betaal exposes the artificiality of the storyteller’s authority, turning the act of reading into an encounter with narrative consciousness itself.

Postmodern Pastiche. Fredric Jameson (1991) describes postmodernism as a culture of pastiche, recycling historical forms without subordination to narrative hierarchies. Chaitanya’s story embodies this through playful recombination of myth, modern sensibility, and feminist critique, destabilizing traditional hierarchies of head versus body, author versus character, and myth versus modernity.

Historiographic Metafiction. Linda Hutcheon (1988) theorizes postmodern texts that rewrite historical or mythic material while simultaneously acknowledging their constructedness. *Manasijavillu* rewrites classical Indian myths in a contemporary idiom, questioning both patriarchal authority and the inevitability of canonical resolutions.

Death of the Author. Roland Barthes (1977) posits that the meaning of a text resides not in the author's intent but in the reader's interpretation. When the protagonist steps out of Betaal's tale, she enacts Barthes's principle, asserting interpretive and narrative sovereignty.

Translation as Postmodern Act. Gayatri Spivak (1993) and Lawrence Venuti (1995) argue that translation is a creative, political act. The English translation, *Cupid's Bow*, retains Telugu idioms and narrative cadence, enacting Venuti's "foreignization" strategy and extending the story's postmodern agency to a global audience.

Collectively, these frameworks demonstrate that *Manasijavillu* is not merely a regional retelling but a conscious engagement with postmodern literary strategies, intertwining intertextuality, metafiction, and translation into a cohesive aesthetic.

Regional Literatures, Myth, and Translation

While Indian postmodern criticism often privileges English-language texts, regional literatures like Telugu demonstrate inherent postmodern tendencies. Critics such as Meenakshi Mukherjee (1985) and G. N. Devy (1992) have highlighted the dialogic nature of regional narratives, emphasizing their interplay of tradition and innovation. Telugu fiction of the late twentieth century—exemplified by Volga, Abburi Chayadevi, and Rachakonda Viswanatha Sastry—employs fragmentation, metafictional devices, and narrative ambiguity to explore gender, identity, and social critique.

Within this context, *Manasijavillu* re-engages classical myth while subverting its authoritative closure. The protagonist's challenge to Betaal and Vikramarka destabilizes traditional hierarchies, foregrounding experiential truth over canonical judgment. The story exemplifies what Devy calls the "re-Indigenization of modernity," where indigenous narrative techniques interact with contemporary concerns, producing literature that is simultaneously rooted and innovative.

Translation further amplifies this effect. The English version, *Cupid's Bow*, preserves the semantic and stylistic complexity of the original, resisting homogenization. By retaining Telugu cultural nuances, the translation enacts what Bhabha (1994) describes as “cultural hybridity,” creating a liminal space where regional narrative sensibilities engage with global readerships. Translation here is not mere transmission but a creative act that mirrors the story’s postmodern strategies, emphasizing multiplicity, difference, and dialogue.

Analysis: Postmodern Mythic Rewriting

Manasijavillu exemplifies postmodern mythic rewriting through its layered narrative, recursive storytelling, and ironic displacement of authority. The transposed-head motif, originating in *Kathasaritsagara*, is reimagined through Mann’s modernist lens and Karnad’s existentialist reinterpretation, and finally transformed into a feminist, postmodern critique in Chaitanya’s story.

The protagonist’s engagement with myth reflects postmodern textuality: stories exist not as fixed monuments but as sites for negotiation and reinterpretation. The laughter that concludes the story signals narrative liberation and underscores the story’s metafictional awareness. Through this act, the protagonist enacts Barthes’s *Death of the Author*, claiming interpretive authority and exemplifying the postmodern valorization of multiplicity and contingency.

Intertextual resonance is evident at multiple levels: mythic motifs, philosophical dilemmas, and linguistic registers intersect to create a narrative that is at once local and global, traditional and innovative. Translation intensifies these intersections, positioning *Cupid's Bow* as a bridge between Telugu literary culture and the wider postmodern literary world. The story exemplifies Hutcheon’s historiographic metafiction, Jameson’s pastiche, and Spivak’s translation politics, demonstrating how regional mythic narratives participate in global literary dialogues.

Ultimately, the story transforms the classical question “Who is the true husband?” into the postmodern question: “Who has the right to tell the story?” The answer is revolutionary: the heroine herself. By asserting narrative agency, she subverts patriarchal and authorial authority, reclaiming both the myth and its meaning. Her laughter at the end signals not only personal liberation but also the openness of storytelling itself—highlighting that myth, narrative, and translation are living, dynamic processes rather than fixed scripts.

Manasijavillu also demonstrates the postmodern strategy of temporal and spatial disruption. The protagonist moves across the domestic sphere, the forest of imagination, and mythic time, creating a narrative topology where linear progression is secondary to thematic resonance. The interplay between past, present, and imagined worlds allows the text to interrogate the boundaries of identity, desire, and narrative authority. This multiplicity reflects McHale’s (1987) assertion that postmodern fiction is ontologically self-conscious, foregrounding the relationship between reality and representation.

Moreover, the story’s treatment of bodily presence versus intellectual or spiritual identity engages contemporary feminist discourse. By emphasizing the corporeal as central to relational and self-identity, Chaitanya challenges traditional metaphysical hierarchies, producing a narrative that is at once culturally specific and philosophically resonant. The translation *Cupid’s Bow* preserves these subtleties, demonstrating how regional literature, when carefully translated, can participate in global debates about gender, identity, and textuality.

The story’s engagement with myth, translation, and postmodern theory illustrates a broader literary phenomenon: the capacity of regional Indian literature to contribute to global literary dialogues. While Anglophone postmodern Indian literature often garners the most critical attention, stories like *Manasijavillu* demonstrate that regional narratives, when translated,

retain both aesthetic and cultural integrity while participating in wider discourses on storytelling, identity, and authorship.

Conclusion

Manasijavillu affirms the postmodern proposition that “no text is an island.” Situated within a continuum from the *kathasaritsagara* to Mann and Karnad, it exemplifies how myths survive through transformation and reinterpretation. By foregrounding the protagonist’s agency, Chaitanya’s story contests patriarchal and narrative authority, demonstrating that the meaning of myth resides not in tradition but in lived experience and creative engagement.

The English translation *Cupid’s Bow* extends this agency across cultural and linguistic borders, performing the act of translation as a postmodern creative intervention. By preserving Telugu idioms, tonalities, and mythic resonance, the translation embodies what Venuti calls “foreignization,” allowing regional specificity to engage a global audience without subsuming it under dominant literary norms.

Through its intertextuality, metafictional play, and engagement with feminist and postmodern theory, *Manasijavillu* exemplifies the productive interplay between myth, literature, and translation. It demonstrates that regional narratives, far from being isolated, are integral to the global circulation of ideas and imaginative strategies. By stepping outside the confines of canonical myth, the protagonist models the very agency and critical engagement that the story embodies, leaving readers with a compelling affirmation of storytelling as an ongoing dialogue rather than a closed system.

In tracing postmodern echoes from the *Kathasaritsagara* to *Cupid’s Bow*, this study underscores the enduring vitality of myth, the creative potential of translation, and the transformative possibilities of narrative agency. Stories, like human consciousness, thrive in interconnection, dialogue, and reinterpretation. In this light, Chaitanya’s work is both a

continuation of ancient storytelling traditions and a bold assertion of contemporary literary selfhood.

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