

Demystifying the Meaning of Folktales: A Study of A.K Ramanujan's Select Essays

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Abstract

The study of the forms that today are called "folklore" of which folktale is only one segment, began in Germany in the eighteenth century. Indian folktales were first published in the journal of *Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal*, established in 1774. Very few researchers showed interest in the studies of folktales during those periods. |In 1886, when Indian Antiquary was established, the interest of the scholars remarkably increased to the studies of folktales. Folktales has great significance in the present situation of swift social changes while the society facing a massive problem of enriching the poor masses and educating the thousands of non-literate people. Folktale plays an important role to generate the sprite of brotherhood and communal respect. Folktales may help to build morality in an amusing way. Many Indian social reformers paid great attention to the folktales as one of the most effective tools of social reforming. The objective of this present study, is to explore the socio-cultural scenario of India and to understand the interconnection of human, nature and folktale that is presented in the select essays and collected folktales of Ramanujan that have been explained differently to show the unique features of Indian culture.

Keywords

Folklore, Folktale, Culture, Brotherhood

Introduction

India has the world's richest sources of folktales. Everyone studying the culture of India needs to study not only its written classics but its oral traditions, and folktale is an important part of it. The folktales have been an eternal part of every culture since the ages. It is orally passed on by the word of mouth from the ancestors to descendants and consists of both prose and verse narrative. It is a natural expression of the innermost feelings which come out from the unconscious mind of the community. It is rooted in tradition and is preserved in memory. Every branch of literature, oral or written, comes from life, but oral literature is a better reflection of the innermost recesses of the social

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and cultural life of a society, its traditions, customs, habits, behavior and rites. Folktale is found everywhere, though the emphasis differs from place to place. Lullabies, riddle poems, proverbs, folk songs are different forms of folktale.

The most evident and distinct characteristics of folktale is its orality. Usually, folktale flourishes on the base of the collective memory of the community people. Written literature exists in manuscripts and book and maybe remained the same as the author left the written work. But in the case of folktale, it is not possible. The oral tales connected only with listening, speaking and singing, depending upon a living culture to carry on a tradition. Therefore, if any item of folk literature cannot be recalled in the human mind or retold by a story teller it will lose completely.

In this age of science and technology the oral tradition of folktale is disappearing, hence it's become necessary to record them in the form of writing. A.K. Ramanujan, one of the most prominent poets, essayists, folklorists and scholars of Indian literature has done a commendable work to preserve the tradition of folktale. Though he is widely known for his contributions to the Indian poetry in English, he shows his proficiency in the field of essay writing on folktales. He has collected folktales from different parts of India which are in different languages and translate them into English. Ramanujan's essays present folktales in the perspective of Indian culture and life. Folktales and myths create a model for human behavior and offer guidance for crucial elements in human existence- war and peace, life and death, truth and falsehood, good and evil. Through an unprecedented analysis, I propose to demystify folktales of Ramanujan's essays to find out the aspect of Indian culture.

Folktale mirrors the customs and cultural characteristics of the society from which it has originated. As they are transmitted verbally from one generation to another, each storyteller modifies or adds something new to the existing stories to contextualize the present culture in a very interesting and fascinating way. Fables are another form of folktale, where animals or inanimate objects communicate in a manner of man and woman and teach a moral lesson. In the same way, every culture has a set of wise sayings also known as Proverbs offer some guidelines to live life properly. On the other hand, a riddle is a type of poetry that describes something without actually naming what it is, leaving the reader to guess. Folktales are not just mere stories; they represent the principles of the good and wrong of society. They compile the shared views of the moral points of the community.

Today's children are the citizens of tomorrow. It is essential for children to learn about their own cultural heritage and the cultures of others. The minds of young children are blank pages. Childhood experiences and knowledge make a ceaseless consciousness on their tender minds. Folktales and fairy tales are very helpful to mould their gentle feelings with social, cultural and moral values in the form of interesting stories. Stories are very popular to the children for their imaginative characters, supernatural elements and simple actions leading to a triumph of justice. In this regard, folklores or oral stories are accepted as one of the major sources of learning for children. The stories, by narrating and role-playing make the unconscious minds of the children desirable to choose the right way in due courses and to be honest and good in their later life. In his article "*Folktales, Reality, and Childhood in Ethiopia: How Children Construct Social Values through Performance of Folktale*", Tadesse JaletaJirata argues that folkloric performance is not only a play practice of the children but it is such an art form in the

course of which they achieve survival skills and grow with the values of the society. Through storytelling, they established a relationship between imagined affairs and the world of reality.

There is a quite distinction between the folktales and myths, though both of them have become a part of alluring storytelling that attracts and frightens the young and the old. The word “myth” has been derived from the Greek term “mythos”, which means is “story”. Myths focus on how individuals should treat one another and have an inseparable relationship to the religious tradition and rituals as compared to the folk tales. Usually, myths are related to the execution of the world such as how the earth is formed, why these things are happening, and of any natural events. Myths deals with the origin and life of gods, goddesses, demons and any other supernatural beings whereas the folk tales are being created by the folk or villagers deals with the lives of the folk and simple human beings.

Being an inseparable part of folklore, folktale is complementary to anthropology that helps to examine mankind and their culture. Anthropology studies man’s present as also past, and also his sub-human and pre-human origins; it examines the objects of nature like stone, wood, bone, ivory, animal horn and so on, and tries to reconstruct the economic, social, ritual and aesthetic activities that might have been characteristics of the pre-historic human societies. Cultural anthropology, one of the four branches of anthropology, is most closely allied with folklore which is concerned with the study of the customs, traditions, and institution of living people. Without having a direct relation to folklore, other branches of anthropology may occasionally provide valuable information regarding past developments and population movement which is useful to the folklorist. Therefore, folktales are one of the important parts that help the anthropologists to build up the cultural practices of any group of people. Folktale to the anthropologists is a part of a culture, so it is obvious that any ethnographic study which does not consider folktale cannot be a complete description of the culture.

A collection of oral tales from twenty-two languages of India, “*Folktales from India*” selected and edited by A.K Ramanujan, and “*The Collected Essays of A.K Ramanujan*” edited by Vinay Dharwadker, published after Ramanujan’s death is consist of hundreds of folktales translated into English from different languages. These stories carry moral lessons for teaching the skill of life and representing ethical values along with enjoyment which one can derive from the tales reading that are full of wit and wisdom.

In this present study, I have discussed two folktales on which A.K Ramanujan pen down his remarkable comments and views in the form of essay. The folk tales includes *The Clay Mother-in-law*, and *A Flowering Tree*. These folktales mirror the Indian tradition and culture in its various forms; from the family structure to the formation of society. They also narrate the reasons of developing some kind of omnipresent conflict in relation between the family members in Indian context in general and South India in particular. These tales demystify the various subjects of life and customs which are untold or could not be told directly in the society. For example, the idea of Oedipus complex, the menstruation cycle, its necessity and precautions, the place and condition of woman in the society and the mystery of confliction between Mother in-law and Daughter-in-law and many more. This research only highlights the issues of Indian culture that is presented in the above mentioned two Folk Tales those Ramanujan includes to her Essays on Folktales.

The Clay Mother in-law is a South Indian folktale that is circulated in oral form from one generation to another. The tale is about a poor family of three members- the mother in-law, the son and the daughter in-law. The mother in-law is an authoritative figure and her daughter in-law has to follow her every whim. On the other hand, the daughter in-law is very docile, she does not do anything without her mother in-law's consent. Every day when she cooks rice she asks her mother in-law how many measure (*sheer*) rice has to put. Once the mother in-law died, she wept for long days and began to ask her husband about the measure of rice. After few days her husband being irritated bring, a doll made of clay as her wife's mother in-law that has one hand pointing two fingers means to two glass and another hand pointing three fingers means to three glasses of rice.

In the essay "The Clay Mother-in-law: A South Indian Folktale", Ramanujan provides his views and explain the folktale *The Clay Mother-in-law*. He found that like many other tales, in this folktale too mother-in-law has got a prominent place. It describes the relationship between son's wife and his mother. As we know that Indian family system is basically joint family though its gradually transforming to nuclear family. In a joint family structure daughter- in-laws have to live with her husband's family. And their a rivalry arises between the two-woman figure in the family for a place in the man's heart. Since, they compete for the same thing, cruelty, jealousy and tyranny from the mother side showed first and whenever the turns for the daughter-in-law comes, she does not spare her older woman. Through this essay Ramanujan, also points out the woman's dependency on male, as ancient Sanskrit text says- a woman depends on her father when she is in teen age, on her husband when she is in youth, and on her son when she is old or become widowed. Thus, in every folktale we find the custom and culture of our ancestors that follows from one generation to another in the form of tales.

Another essay of Ramanujan on folktale is "A Flowering Tree: A Woman's Tale" which is based on a story named *A Flowering Tree* told by women in the Kannada-speaking regions of South India. In the story, a girl reaches adolescence and finds a magical skill that allows her to transform into a tree. She and her older sister utilise this skill to assist their struggling mother, who toils hard as a maid at the king's residence. After taking a bath, the younger sister asked her older sibling to fetch two pitches of water. She also advised the older sibling not to touch the pitches with her fingernails and warned the older sibling not to damage the branch or shred the leaf of the flower tree when she grew into a bloom. She instructed her sister to carefully pick as many flowers as she wishes. She must then apply another pitch's water on the tree in order to change back into a girl. The elder sister pours the water over her body, as she said, thoroughly, once she did so the younger sister become a tree full of flower. She plucks a bucket-full flower very carefully without harming the branch or leaves and then pour water of another pitch over the tree and her sister become human being again. Now, they sell the flower to the market to help her mother monetarily. Once, they are passing by the king's house and the princes saw them with the flowers which are totally different from the earthly flower in smell and beauty. The queen calls them in the house and bought all the flowers from the sisters.

When the prince first saw the sisters holding those odd-smelling flowers, he inquired about the flowers' enigmatic origins and the tree they grew on. He sneakily pursues the two sisters and learns how they magically transform into a lovely flower

tree of heavenly beauty and fragrance. He requested the blossoming girl from the king and queen after telling them the tale. The blossoming girl eventually married the prince. The prince asked her to turn into a flower tree on the first night, and despite her objections, she did so. This continued on for the following nights, until the prince's sister learned that her daughter-in-law could turn into a flower tree. One day on her sister's in-law's insistence, she goes to a jungle where she met with her sister in-law's friends who were informed about her art of becoming flower tree. They forced her to turn in to the tree and once she did so they pluck the flowers without taking any care to the branch and leaves. They even, did not pour the water over her thoroughly. As a result, when she become a girl again, she doesn't have proper shape of human being. She only got back her face and handless. On the other side the prince had turned into ascetic in the search of his wife. He arrived at the home of his older sister, who welcomed him with open arms and made an effort to reintroduce him to life. In order to calm him down after failing in all of her attempts to get him to talk, she sends the most stunning seven maids to his bedroom. But no woman was able to make him want to speak or act in any way. But when the flowering girl, his half-human wife, attempted to caress him while she was at his room and the prince responded immediately, they were able to recognize one another and exchange the details of their respective backstories.

Ramanujan attempted to establish the position of girls who are in puberty and the early stages of menstruation in Indian culture through the essay "A Flowering Tree: A Woman's Tale." He draws attention to the way they are treated like *Pushpabati*, a blossoming tree. He demonstrates how a woman's safe haven in India after becoming *Pushpabati* is her husband's home, where she can express her creativity and bear children. The story also emphasizes how much stronger Indian society is than Western societies in terms of husband-and-wife loyalty. The loyal love a responsible husband has for his wife. It further claims that following puberty, a lady can only feel secure in her husband's arms and that a man finds all of his happiness in the arms of his wife.

The other aspect of this essay is the traditional ecological idea in our culture. In several regions of India, trees are worshipped as deities. Through this folktale, children are taught not to destroy plants that are currently merely twigs because, when they grow up, they will become flowering trees like the girl. Therefore, it can be said that the concepts of a greener world and environmental protection that modern environmentalists and academics care about exist in Indian culture in the form of folktales and are passed down orally from one generation to the next.

Conclusion

Folktale is a link between literate and non-literate society. They are old but are yet told and retold. As Ramanujan said that a folktale is a poetic text that carries some of its cultural contexts within it; it is also a traveling metaphor that finds a new meaning with each new telling. Folktale and myth have become a powerful instrument of preservation both history and culture with a great potential to merge with contemporary reality. Folktales impart a culture's moral principles, traditions, and rituals. They are put to use now in a variety of ways depending on the circumstances and circumstances of the moment. In this present I have tried to justify the all-possible aspects of folktale through the analysis of the select essays of A.K. Ramanujan. The study comes to the conclusion that the study's chosen folktales significantly reflect Indian family structure, the man-woman relationship, and the ecological notion.

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