

Thematic Concerns And Narrative Technique In Fables From *Jataka Tales*

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Abstract

The Folklores form an integral part of the cultural history of any country .M.H Abrams defines folklore as, “the collective name applied to sayings, verbal compositions and social rituals that have been handed down solely, or at least primarily by word of mouth and example rather than in written form” (Abrams ,100). Folktales form an integral part of folklore and involve orally transferred tales and literature. Indian folklores date back to centuries and involve oral fables in Sanskrit, Pali and other classical languages. The influence of Indian folklore can be found in many folktales of Eurasian region. Irrespective of the region or culture, all folklores embody certain common characteristics like a simple plot line, one dimensional characters, the personification of animals, presence of supernatural and occult. Folklores hold a mirror to the society of the time and often showcase the grim realities of social life like the caste system, poverty, prejudices, subjugation of women etc . Most of them are didactic in nature and present a moral lesson .Poetic justice is served at the end and usually there is a happy ending .The term folklore of India encompasses several folk stories ,fable and parables with their origins in the Indian sub-continent .Considering the ethnic and cultural diversity of India , it is difficult to trace the origins of many of the folktales as many of them are regional variations of each other and some folk stories are drawn from epics like *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. The *Panchatantra* and *Jatakas* form an integral part of folk literature of India. While *Panchatantra* is largely considered a part of Hindu canon of texts, the *Jatakas* are an important part of Buddhist art and literature. This paper aims to study the thematic concerns and narrative techniques employed in selected fables from the *Jataka tales*.

Keywords: Folklore, Folktale, Pali, Cultural history,Narrative techniques, Thematic concerns, *Jatakas*

The *Panchatantra* is written in Sanskrit and is collection of animal fables. While *Panchatantras* are animal fables, the *Jatakas* describe the previous existences or births of the Buddha when he appeared as Bodhisattvas (beings who are yet to attain enlightenment or *moksha*), in both human and non-human forms. Therefore it can be stated that *Jatakas* has a greater religious influence on them more than the *Panchatantras*. The *Jatakas* are in Pali and primarily deal with the themes of rebirth, virtue ,sacrifice and peace. The plot revolves around the Bodhisattva who is depicted as the embodiment of righteousness and wisdom. The *Jataka* contain more than 500 tales .Some *Jataka Tales* are excerpts from *Cariya Pitaka*,

the *Buddhavamsa*, and other parts of the Pali canon. Even though *Jatakas* embody ideas peculiar to Buddhism, the influence of Hindu religious ideas can also be seen in *Jatakas*. *Jatakas* are said to be the inspiration behind many other folk literature around the world like *Arabian Nights*, *Aesop's Fables* and *Adventures of Sindbad*. Even though *Jatakas* are primarily religious texts, their simple narrative style, symbolism and imagery make them endearing to one and all. Today *Jataka Tales* are especially popular as Children's Literature. Most of the stories are didactic in nature and can be used to teach moral values to children. The use of fantasy elements like talking animals, magic etc. also plays a role in making the *Jataka Tales*, an all-time favourite of children. In Pali, *Jatakas* mean "Birth story" or related to Birth. *Jatakas* have been a major influence on Buddhist art, culture and architecture. Many scenes from the *Jatakas* can be seen depicted on major Buddhist monuments like Bharhut and Sanchi. *Jatakas* are closely related to another form of Buddhist narratives called *avadāna*. *Avadāna's* are thematically similar to *Jatakas*. *Avadāna's* centres around Buddha's explanations on the nature of Karma. "The tradition avers that these stories were narrated by Buddha himself during the course of his sermons to drive home the message that by constant practice of virtuous deeds or *Paramita* (the highest virtue) one reaches the status of "Enlightened One" (Joshi and Banerjee)

The Bodhisattva is an incarnation of Buddha. In Buddhism, Bodhisattva is a being about to attain enlightenment. In the *Jatakas*, the Bodhisattva may or may not be the protagonist in the story. But Bodhisattva plays a pivotal role as through the Bodhisattva the moral of the story is delivered. It is not necessary that the Bodhisattva is human being, he may also appear in the form of an animal. The Bodhisattva wins over the evil forces around him through his virtue and selflessness. It can be noted that the Bodhisattva is always showcased as being in a powerful position or belonging to a group which holds power. For instance in the fable *King Great Virtue*, he appears as the King of Benares. In *Prince Wicked*, he is a hermit and the master of his monastery. In the stories *The Prince's Revenge* and *The King's Remorse* too he is the wise master of the monastery. In animal fables like *The Hawk's Friends* and *The Earthquake*, he appears as a noble Lion. The Bodhisattva being a person having authority uses the power he wields in order to act as a role model and leader to people around him and protect them from evil. The antagonist represents various kinds of vices and is shown as negatively affecting the lives of people around him. Just as the Bodhisattva represents virtue and truth, the antagonist may represent *mūlakleśa* and *upakleśa*. *Mūlakleśa* and *Upakleśa* are unwholesome mental factors that dissuade a being from attaining enlightenment or Nirvana. Both the protagonist and antagonist are shown as being one dimensional characters.

Buddhism originated and flourished in North India. Several Buddhist pilgrimage sites and centres of learning were located in Varanasi, Bihar, Odisha and the surrounding areas. Therefore it is no wonder that, most of the *Jatakas* are set in the northern part of India. Many of the fables like *King Great Virtue*, *Prince Wicked*, *The Prince's Revenge* and *The King's Remorse* are set in the kingdoms of Benares and Kosala (area extending from present day Uttar Pradesh to Western Odisha). The setting of the tales is clearly stated in the *Jatakas*. In many of the stories the members of the royal families of Benares and Kosala surface as important characters.

The *Jatakas* have a simple plot with one dimensional character. Supernatural elements such as spirits, demons and ghosts are often used in the story. The supernatural beings may be

presented in a positive or negative light in different tales. For instance in the fable *King Great Virtue*, the demons are shown as taking advice from the King of Benares and helping him in return for his valuable guidance. While in some other tales like *Demons in Desert* and *Monkey Chief and the Demon*, the demon is shown as being deceitful and cruel.

Another narrative technique that is used is personification of animals. In animal fables, the Bodhisattva is always the chieftain amongst the group of animals. Most of the animal fables are set in the forest. One common theme in animal fables is the dangers posed by human beings to the animals. In the animal fables the Bodhisattva can be seen protecting his herd or other animals in the forest from dangerous human beings. In some of the animal fables, the protagonist is the wise animal leader imparting wisdom and providing guidance to the group. For instance, in the story, *Earthquake*, the Bodhisattva appears as a wise and imparting wisdom to the animals in the forest and diffusing their ignorance.

The plot of the *Jatakas* have a simple story line. The whole story revolves around the idea of good v/s evil. *Jatakas* are rooted in Buddhist ideologies and present the philosophical constraints of Buddhism in a very subtle manner. The *Jataka Tales* are stories of the previous births of Buddha. Each story comes with a teaching. These stories revolve around the ideas of *Karma*, *Samsara* and *Dharma*. According to Buddhism, all living beings are trapped in the cycle of *Samsara* or rebirth. In order to achieve freedom from *Samsara*, one needs to engage in Karma following the Eightfold path. The Eightfold Path consists of eight practices: “right view, right resolve, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right samadhi (‘meditative absorption or union’)” (“What are the six perfections to become a Bodhisattva?”). The Bodhisattva or enlightened being is shown as being free from worldly desires and following the Eightfold Path to Nirvana. The antagonist of the *Jataka* can either be an individual or a general ideology that dissuades the enlightened Bodhisattva from the Eightfold Path or tries to cause harm to the people under the Bodhisattva. In Buddhism, the unwholesome mental states that lead individuals into wrong thoughts and actions are known as *Kleshas*. *Kleshas* serve as obstacles to knowledge and wisdom. Primarily there are six *Kleshas* that is Moha (delusion), Pramāda (heedlessness, carelessness), Kauśīdyā (laziness, slothfulness), *Āsraddhya* (lack of faith, lack of trust), *Styāna* (lethargy, gloominess) and *Auddhatya* (excitement, ebullience). The other negative emotions are considered to be caused by the six main *Kleshas*. In the *Jataka* tales, the conflict in the story is caused as a result of one of the six *Kleshas*. The *Klesha* may be showcased as affecting an individual or society as a whole. The *Bodhisattva* resolves the conflict caused by the *Klesha* and imparts wisdom. The individual or animal, overwhelmed by a *Klesha* is often the antagonist of the tale. The Bodhisattva in the story imparts a lesson on how *Kleshas* can be overcome on the path to *Nirvana*.

Jatakas can also be seen as a reflection of the society of the times, references to social evils like caste system can be seen in many *Jataka* tales. The *Jatakas* are dated between 300 BC and 400 AD, a time when caste based discrimination was rampant in Hinduism. Even *Jatakas* were Buddhist texts, the society of the time was predominantly Hindu and social practices in the society can be seen in the *Jatakas*. For instance, *The Prince’s Revenge* is the story of the prince of Kosala’s thirst for revenge. The role of women characters is very limited in the *Jatakas*, this may also reflect the societal norms of the time. Women are shown as being extremely submissive and do not have an opinion or voice in many of the stories.

Folklores such as *Jataka Tales* and *Panchatantra* are an integral part of the priceless literary heritage of ancient India. Both these texts are timeless in nature and stand as monuments of undying past. The *Jatakas* should not be just viewed as religious texts or moral stories. The texts are a reflection of the times in which they were written and should be seen as documents of history capturing the cultural ethos of a society in the process of change. It is sad to see classics like *Jatakas* and *Panchatantra*, reduced to the status of just moral stories for children, which is evident through the fact that *Jataka Tales* are found in the Children Literature section of most libraries. It is ironic that even though *Jatakas* are world renowned and many scholars around the world have tirelessly worked to translate the original texts that were in classical languages like Pali and Sanskrit making them widely available, limited research has been done in this field. One reason for the lack of research is the lack of awareness about the quality and value of the texts. Therefore, it is important to study and produce in depth analysis of folktales like *Jatakas* which form an important part of Indian cultural legacy and stand as testimonies of the rich cultural history of India.

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