

Representation of Folktales in World Literature and Its Role in Contemporary Society

Joydev Maity

Research Scholar (Ph.D.)

Department of English
Raiganj University (W.B.)

Abstract

The tradition of telling folktales and stories orally was there from the earliest time of human history. From the beginning of human civilization, story-telling has been often considered as a popular medium of time pass, or sometimes as a medium of imparting some valuable moral lessons. In fact, many of us have grown listening stories about people of various cultures or sometimes of animals from our grandmother or grandfather and all such stories can be included within the terms folklore and folktales. Even now a day, especially in many rural areas, parents create a sense of fear among the children with such ancient stories so that they cannot commit any kind of nuisance. It is really amazing that how we can at once roam in the imaginary land of monsters, ogres, ghosts, fairies or animals with the help of such stories even during this post-modern time, when technology is ruling. Such amazing experience becomes better when we witness numerous different stories from different cultures from all over the world. My writing will explore the folktales from all over the world and their role in this present time.

Keywords: Folktales, World literature, Folk literature, Culture, Myths, Moral teaching.

Before we start analysing folktales worldwide, we must define first folktales in a specific way. To define folklore and folktales specifically, it is said that they originate within a particular culture and community, and passed down orally from one generation to another. Thus, Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary describes folktale in these words: "A traditional story that people of a particular region or group repeat among themselves" (65). However, it is worth noticeable that folklore and folktales suggest not only tales but they also include art, dances, songs, proverbs, myths, legends, fairy tales, fables, superstitions and even jokes. Legend is described in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary as "a story coming down from the past, especially one popularly regarded as historical although not verifiable" (234). To simplify the term, they are the stories of some heroic figures, often interpreted from historical point of view. The existence of such heroic figures and their stories are often believed to be true and they bear utmost cultural importance within their own communities. The stories of King Arthur or Robin Hood are examples of such legendary stories.

Myth on the other hand is approached from the religious point of view and includes gods or demigods. M.H. Abrams and Geoffrey Harpham in their book *A Handbook of Literary Terms* describe myths as, “a system of hereditary stories of ancient origin which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group” (179). Thus, the primary difference between legend and myth is that whereas legend involves human beings as its central characters, myth includes gods or supernatural figures. Fairy tales are mainly written for children and involve supernatural creatures like unicorns, witches or elves. The French novelist Villeneuve’s *Beauty and the Beast* is a prominent example of fairy tale. A Fable is a moral story upon human behaviour, and often includes talking animals, which is termed as beast fable. Aesop’s fables are known to everyone; even in the 20th century, a novel like George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* (1945) is termed as a beast fable.

The prefix ‘folk’ does not limit itself with folktales only, rather it also expands in folksongs and folk drama. Folksongs, like folktales, are transmitted orally within a particular culture and region. J.A. Cuddon in his book *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* describes folksongs as “a communal form of expression and appears to be universal” (323). Ballad, lullaby, hobo songs, work songs, Christmas carols, religious songs, and drinking songs all belong to the category of folk songs. Two special types of folksongs are serenata and aubade. Serenata is sung by a lover when he visits his lover at night, and when similar type of song is sung at dawn, it is termed as aubade. Since the 19th century, folk songs have found itself in written form also. Robert Burns is a prominent figure of Scottish folksongs, and his “A Red Rose” and “Auld Lang Syne” are examples of folksongs. Folk drama, on the other hand, was associated with the fertility rites in ancient times, and many believe that Greek tragedy arose out of such fertility rites. There are two types of folk drama still survive in England: *The Mumming Play* and *The Plough Monday Play*.

The pioneering figure of folktales is undoubtedly the Greek slave Aesop who is popularly known worldwide for his fables. All of his fables, numbering in 725, were originally popular through oral tradition during the 6th century BCE, and they were later collected in written form. The first prominent translation of his fables took place in Latin language, and over the years they were translated in numerous languages throughout the world. In England, William Caxton first published the English version of Aesop’s fables in 1484. However, the most popular version of Aesop’s fables in English being George Fyler Townsend’s collection, titled *Aesop’s Fables*. Many critics argue that using the animal characters in his fables, Aesop actually commented against the authoritative government of the then time indirectly.

The main reasons behind the popularity of his fables are that they not only act as a form of entertainment, but also impart profound moral teaching upon our life. Commenting upon the moral teaching and reality of the fables, Apollonius of Tyana, a 1st century philosopher commented, “...he made use of humble incidents to teach great truths... he by announcing a story which everyone knows not to be true, told the truth by the very fact that he did not claim to be relating real events” (qtd. in Ramanujan 78). Although, his fables are often believed to be written for children, they are equally valuable for mature readers by virtue of their teaching upon our daily life. For example, a story like “The Wolf in Sheep’s Clothing” imparts the moral “Appearances often are deceiving,” “The Hare and the Tortoise” preaches the universal teaching that “Slow and steady wins the race”, “Fox and the Crow” bears the moral that “Never trust a flatterer”, or a story like “Lion and the Mouse”, in which a little

mouse saves the life of a mighty lion, teaches that “Little friends may become great friends.” Thus we find how each story can guide us in our life and help us to take wise decision in various moments of our life.

The *Panchatantra* or the “Five Treatises” is often considered as the Indian Aesop for its use of animal fables and moral preaching. Although the authorship of the book is controversial, it has been attributed to Vishnu Sharma. The book was originally written in prose and verse in Sanskrit language between 100 BC and AD 500. The book was first translated in the Persian language by Burzoe, and over the time, it has been translated in more than fifty languages all over the world. For example, in Arabic language the book was translated as *Kalilah wa Dimnah* by Ibn al-Muqaffa. In Greek, it has been translated as *Stephanites Kai Ichneutes*, whereas in Turkish as *Humayun-namah*; another famous Indian version of the book is *Hitopadesha* or “Good Advice” was composed by Narayana in the 12th century. Written in a frame narrative, the book is divided in five books, and all of them include several fables. As mentioned earlier, like Aesop’s fables, the fables of this book too moralize on various issue of our day to day life like the importance of friendship in our life, the importance of moral deeds in our life. The other earliest folktales in India are the Pali Jatakas, concerning the previous life of Buddha. The stories, in which Buddha appears both in human and animal form, are largely concerned with his efforts to understand the enlightenment.

The essence of Indian folktales and animal fables are perceptible in the folktales of various countries worldwide, the first being the Chinese folktales. For example, the famous Chinese character, The Monkey King from *Journey to the West* has been modelled upon the Indian Hanuman from the Hindu epic the *Ramayana*. Chinese folktales, like the folktales of any other country, have its own unique characters and themes, and more often than not impart some ethics. The Chinese beliefs of Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism amalgam in these stories and they emphasize on various issues like the need to respect the creation of nature, role of wisdom in our daily life, hubris as the destructive force etc. Some important collections of Chinese folktales are *The Chinese Fairy Book* by R. Wilhelm, *A Chinese Wonder Book* by Norman Hinsdale and *Chinese Folk-Lore Tales*, edited by Andrew Lang.

African folktales are one of the earliest in the world. In fact, many believe that folktales were there from the earliest times when the existence of the human beings was discovered first in this continent. Like the folktales of any other countries, these tales not only act as a preserver of their cultures or as a medium of entertainment, but also as a mode of imparting valuable life lesson. It is noticeable that African folktales include proverbs, riddles and the stories of the tricksters, and more often than not, they become a part of the syllabus in school level education. So even we analyse the novels of a major African novelist Chinua Achebe, we will notice that they are full of African proverbs, especially in his 1958 novel *Things Fall Apart*. Thus, in the novel he wrote, “Among the Igbo, the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten” (56). Many of the African folktales are concerned with the supposition of why and how like how some animals behave in particular way as perceptible from the titles of such stories like “Why Turtles Live in Water”, “Why the Cheetah’s Cheeks Are Stained” or “Why the Warthog Goes About on His Knees”. Some prominent authors of African folktales are James Honey, Elphinstone Dayrell, and Owen Vaughan.

Out of this African folktales born the African American folktales which were very much popular from 1700 to 1900. These were the folktales of the African slaves who were brought to America. They often had to toil hard in this new land, had to tolerate the rigorous tortures of their owners, and moreover, they were not allowed to speak in their native languages. Far from the rich cultural heritage of their own nation, these slaves used to preserve their native cultures through their folktales. Often these folktales were performed in a ceremonial form at night with dance and music being the famous attraction. Thus, they also became a form of light entertainment for them after the day's hard toil. But for children, these performances often acted as an occasion for some valuable teaching of life, especially, via such stories which include the animal characters. Generally such folktales are divided into seven categories; the prominent among them are the tales of origin, tales of trickery and trouble, tales of ghosts and spirits, and the tales of the slaves. These stories often function at the symbolic level also for the slaves. For example, in trickery stories often a smaller creature like the Brer Rabbit outsmarts powerful, witty characters like Brer Fox or Brer Bear, which symbolizes the slaves' hidden desire of defeating their powerful owners. The most popular book of African American folktales is Joel Chandler Harris's *Uncle Remus, His Songs and His Sayings: The Folk-lore of Old Plantation* (1880).

While discussing about the African influence in the American folklores, we should keep in mind that the Americans have had their own unique folktales too. Many of the American folktales focus on the creation and origin myths such as the formation of earth, origin of the human beings or sometimes try to explain the various phenomenon of weather. Apart from the origin stories, there are also the heroic stories and the stories concerning tricksters, which involve the various forms of trickery and deceptions. Other peculiar stories of such folktales are the stories of the tall tale, which focuses upon the exaggerated stories of an individual or exaggeration upon some famous events. American folklores have found a distinguished place in the native literature too. The popular figure of Santa Claus is often said to have originated from the poem "A Visit from St. Nicholas", written by Clement Clarke Moore. The poem describes in detail about the peculiar appearance of Santa Claus and also his habit of giving toys to children. Washington Irving's famous short story "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" narrates the story of one of the most popular folklore characters The Headless Horseman. Some of the major folktales collections of America are *Myths and Legends of Our Own Land* by Charles Skinner and *Rootabaga Stories* by Carl Sandburg.

England has been the birthplace of many legendary folktales heroes and perhaps the most active country at present as far as sustaining the storytelling tradition is concerned. From the earliest times, England has been the favourite hunting ground for the Celts, the Anglo-Saxons, the Vikings, and the Normans and they had enriched the land with their rich culture and tradition. As a result, we notice the English folktales are full of such figures like ogres, devils, demons, wizards, elves and giants. The British people are so much obsessed with the storytelling tradition that there are few storytelling festivals like The Lakeland Storytelling Festival in the Lake District and the West Country Storytelling Festival in Devon. Even there is also a Society for Storytelling (SfS) and Mythstories, a museum, to promote this tradition. Some of the popular British folktales collections are *English Fairy Tales* and *More English Fairy Tales* by Joseph Jacobs, and *English Fairy Tales* by Flora Annie Steel.

While discussing about the English folklores, we must discuss about some major folk characters like Robin Hood, Tom Thumb or King Arthur. The character of Robin Hood in literature was first depicted by William Langland in his poem *The Vision of Piers Plowman* in the 14th century. On the other hand, in ballad he made his first appearance in the 15th century ballad "Robin Hood and the Monk". The character of Robin Hood is perhaps the most widely known folk character worldwide, thanks to various movie adaptations. Although in different versions, his appearance has been depicted differently, but one thing is common in all is his generous nature of robbing the rich and helping the poor. In the 19th century, Sir Walter Scott's novel *Ivanhoe* did much to popularize this legendary figure. King Arthur is another popular folk hero who, it is believed, fought against the Saxons while defending Britain. One of the most notable historical accounts of Arthur's story can be found in *Annales Cambridge, the Historia Brittonum*. The figures of Tom Thumb and The Ravens of the Tower are also equally well known in the British folklore tradition.

The world of the Japanese folktales is dominated by dragon kings, goblins, animal spirits, ogres etc. This is largely to do with the influence such tales took from other countries like India, China or America. However, in this context we should not forget that numerous Japanese folktales are influenced by the country's two major religions, Shintoism and Buddhism. At present, the Japanese folktales are so much popular that they have inspired many literary compositions, including graphic novels, magna or even some films. Among numerous Japanese folktales, the story of the Momotaro is most popular. It is the story of Momotaro, a boy born from a peach, and was raised by an elderly couple. Later, he courageously fought against demons with the aid of his talking dog and a monkey. Yuki-Onna is the story of a snowwoman, who freezes people with her breath. Kintaro, on the other hand, is the story of a giant boy who has the ability to communicate with animals. Two popular folktales collection of Japan are *Green Willow and Other Japanese Fairy Tales* by Grace James and *Child-Life in Japan* by Matilda Chaplin Ayrton.

Now the question may arise about the relevancy of folktales and folk literature in contemporary times, when technology is taking a giant leap. The fact that the importance of folktales is not time bound; it is universal. Folktales always act as a preserver of culture of any particular community; there are many cultures which have lost their essence but their oral tales are still present within us. From time immemorial, such tales have not only entertained us but also have always guided us in our life with their moral preaching. The characters in folktales often find themselves in tangled situations but also find a way to get out of such situations. Thus, they help us to take wise decisions when we face difficulty in our life. It is noticeable that every folktale employs the device of poetic justice by which the vices are punished and virtues are rewarded. So, such tales at once inspire us to adopt the virtuous paths in our life and encourage us to lead a moral life. So it is pretty much clear the importance such folktales hold even in our contemporary times, not only for children but for people of every age.

So the importance of folktales in our society cannot be denied and we must take some necessary steps to keep the tradition of folktales going, especially, in contemporary time when technology is becoming a threat to such ancient tradition. One of the best ways to preserve such cultures is to present them in written form, and in this regard literature has been playing a crucial role worldwide. For example, many major postcolonial writers from Africa (including Chinua Achebe) and Caribbean have extensively used the folktales or native

cultural elements in their writings, hence, assisting in preserving their culture. Indian literature in English or in any other languages is also playing an important role in this aspect. The philosophy of Vedas or the preaching of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* still haunt the mind of the people of every age. Even some particular type of Bengali folklores like 'Kirtan' (enchanted devotional songs) or 'Baul' (regional song along with dance) songs are also enjoyed by every community of people. To give the folk literature more sparks, there are also academic studies on such field, not to mention of various research works on such literature in India. Even a prominent academy like the Sahitya Akademi is constantly encouraging and promoting such literature of every language in India.

Works Cited

Abrams, M.H., and Geoffrey Galt Harpham. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Cengage Learning India Limited (11th edition), 2015.

Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. Penguin (1st edition), 2013.

Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 4th edition. Cambridge University Press, 2014.

Cuddon, J.A. *Dictionary of Literary Terms and & Literary Theory*. Penguin Books (5th edition), 2015.

Ramanujan, A.K. *Folktales from India*. Penguin India, 2009.

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary, New edition. Turtleback Books, 2011.