

The Idea of *Folk* in Folk-Literary Studies: A Brief-Critique

Generally speaking, folk literature is an umbrella expression that includes all kinds of Myths, legends, epics, fables and folk-tales passed down from generation to generation. As such, these stories have endured across time because they have had both an *entertaining* and *cultural* value. These orally transmitted stories also embody a belief system that contains fundamental human truths which have been the bedrock for human survival and existence over the centuries. **Quintessentially, folk-literature addresses the questions related to human existence, human morality, human fears & dreams vis-a-vis the natural world.** However, it would be interesting to examine the idea of *Folk* as it emanates in Indian & Western cultural traditions keeping contemporary literary criticism in mind.

According to the Cambridge English Dictionary the word *folk* refers to **people** of a particular type. Moving from popular beliefs and customs of ancient Greek and Roman, to the lively descriptions of traditional ceremonies in sixteenth and seventeenth century England, a mention should invariably be made about the works of Robert Burton, H. Hission, Henry Bourve John Brand, Von Herder, Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm who did pioneering work in the field of folklore studies. As a result of their efforts scholars began to take interest and soon it became an independent branch of knowledge. Mac. Edward Leech sees *folklore*¹ as:

*The accumulated knowledge of homogeneous, unsophisticated people.*²

Some critics like Edward Martland see it as a branch of anthropology dealing with the *psychological phenomenon of the uncivilized* while G.W. Boswel defines folklore as:

*The unwritten history of ancient societies preserved in the minds of the people and handed down through ages by the medium of language or practice.*³

Despite disagreement, the term could refer to a *body of materials, a cultural process and a methodology* applied to orally transmitted literature. So the questions that arise are: (i) Should *folk-literature* be studied keeping its immediate social context in mind and (ii) Are there parallels that can be drawn between the ancient, medieval and modern societies that have preserved the oral tradition. To the first, the response, quite obviously would be **Yes** as the *milieu* of the folktale provides a complete understanding of a folk-tale. It is the context that adds variety and difference to the tale from a comparative point of view. And the second addresses the notion of value across disciplines like folk-literature and anthropology. And this is a testimony to the power of the folk-tale across culture groups. However, one cannot confine the value and impact of folk-lore or folk-literature to just two traditional dimensions, as a student of literature could use its subject-matter across political boundaries. For example

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Dante, Shakespeare, Rabelais, Cervantes, Goethe, James Joyce and many others utilized folk speech and dialects in their dramatic plots. In fact, there are parallel collections for every race, nationality and cultural groups. And therefore research in folklore is usually placed under four headings: collection, classification, history and reconstructive techniques and literary criticism.

In contemporary times the expression *folklore*¹ has acquired literary currency and includes among others manners, customs, observances, superstitions, ballads, proverbs and so on of the olden times. Quintessentially, folklore could be considered as a creation of civilization, of a group of people circumscribed to a defined geographical territory whose way of life and traditional heritage are bound by a common identity. As a type of self-expression, *folklore* has two broad categories – Prose & Poetry. Prose literature would primarily incorporate among others folktales, myths, legends, fairy tales, fables, ghost stories and folk dramas while Poetry would include the ballad, songs, lullabies, rhymes, folk metaphors, parody and poetic sayings. In the Indian context, the *Panchatantra* and the *Brihat Katha* have been the source of many folktales. In fact, they form the earliest part of literature. *Atharveda* is also a collection of superstitions, folk beliefs and rituals. Similarly, the *Jataka tales* bring forth the ideas of Lord Buddha. As such, the term *Folklore* was first introduced by **William Thomas** in 1846 and was used to refer to any group of people who shared a common factor of language, occupation, belief or religion. Generally speaking, folktales were produced by peoples and transmitted from individual to individuals. And these tales were markedly different from *vedic* rituals and myths, although Ananda K. Kumaraswamy says that the *content of folklore is metaphysical*. (<https://www.ukessays.com/essays/english-literature/the-science-of-folklore-english-literature-essay.php/09.04.2019>) Nevertheless folk deals with human problems while myth deals with supernatural problems.

Conceptually speaking, folk tales can be located in space but not in time. For example, in the story titled as *Vermilion and Marriage*, there are four friends of a tribe belonging to four different vocations – One is a Vermilion hawker, one a Weaver, third a Carpenter and fourth a goldsmith. Once, when they decided to spend a night in a mango orchard, three of them went to sleep, while the fourth – the Carpenter was awake. As he was sleepless, he chiselled a log into a beautiful female figure. When the goldsmith saw the figure, he made a gold chain, a pair of earrings and bangles for her. The Weaver wove a Sari while the Vermilion hawker anointed her head with Vermilion. At day break, all four of them started quarrelling as to who should marry the girl. A holy man heard their voices and said,

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he who made her is the father, he who clothed her is her elder brother, he who gave garments is her uncle, and he who brought her to life and put Vermilion on her forehead is her husband. And thus the girl became the wife of the Vermilion hawker. Such customs/traditions are still prevalent in the society. Applying Vermilion on the forehead of the girl means that she is married to the boy who does this act. This is how the story tries to preserve the tradition and define the sanctity of marriage. Thus one could say that *verbal art* is the boundary of folklore, which includes myth, folktales, legends, ballads etc. (Bascom). However, folktales are *dynamic* in nature and they change with Society. All forms of societies have had their folklore which have survived from the earlier stages of civilization as the *shadowy remnants of ancient religious rites still incorporated in the lives of illiterates and rustics*

(https://www.jstor.org/stable/3814683?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents/10/04/2019)

Quintessentially, the core message surrounding folktales reverberate around the themes of

1. Triumph of Good over Evil
2. Truth always comes to Light
3. Might is Right, and
4. A Friend in Need is a Friend indeed.

References:

1. The term 'folklore' coined by Willium Thomas in 1846 received wide recognition and entire popular literature, observances, practices, customs, rituals and superstitions of humans are grouped under the wide category of folklore now. See for details Archer Tailor's Folklore and the Student of Literature, Vol.II, pp.216-221.
2. Leach, Maria. Funk and Wagnal's Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend, Vol.1, p.66.
3. Quoted by Ben-Amos, in his article "Towards a definition of Folklore", published in Journal of American Folklore (JAV) Vol.66, p.283.