

A MORPHOLOGICAL STUDY OF CHOUBOLI TALE

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Abstract

This paper reflects upon Chouboli tale through Propp's model of Russian folktales. After summarising all the Chouboli tales, it lays down a few observations and culture-specific elements of the tale which come out to be a distinctive morphology of Rajastani folk tales as opposite/similar to Propp's morphology of Russian folk tales.

Keywords: Chouboli (Rajastani folk) tales, Culture-specificity, Propp, Morphology of folk tales.

'Chouboli' is a chain of 8 stories dealing with a ravishing but reticent Princess (Chouboli) whose hand could be won in marriage by making her talk four times. The impossibility of this is shown by over 17 score young men languishing in a dungeon in her palace grinding chickpea, having failed in their attempt to make the princess talk. Finally it is left to a shrewd girl, in an attempt to rescue her own husband who is holed up in the same dungeon, to dress up like a young man and narrate a series of suspense-ridden stories - reminiscent of the famous Betal stories - to make Chouboli speak up. In a clever twist at the end she gets Chouboli married to her husband and all of them go back to their village. Perhaps the most delightful of these stories is the one where the shrewd girl taunts her thakur husband, who had the obnoxious habit of shooting 108 arrows through the nose-ring of his wife every day, to show his bravado by winning the hand of Chouboli and he goes there to land up in the dungeon!

There are eight stories which I have summarised here:

Chouboli

The first tale of the series lays foundation for the others stories to build upon. It is about a Thakur who ruled over a big thikana, he observes a lamentable custom of shooting one hundred and eight arrows through his thakurani's nose ring. Every morning he would make thakurani stand at a fixed place on the terrace and from an already determined distance shoot arrows through her nose ring. But he never missed his mark. Though she constantly pleaded him to give up the peculiar habit, he refused by saying, "If a big man gave up his daily practice at a woman's say, then he wasn't a big man at all". Thakurani's death was a whistle away, what if some day he missed the mark? With all that stress and worry, her body wasted away skinny as a skeleton.

Big words for a small mouth

Once it so happened that the thikana manger's niece came to visit. When she met the thakurani, she couldn't help but ask why she looked so skinny and shrivelled. The first two or three times, the thakurani pretended not to hear but finally told her everything. Seth's niece couldn't contain her rage and shouted, "If my rogue of a husband ever did that to me, I'd feed him roasted chickpea fodder and serve him water that I'd washed my feet in". Thakurani maintains her calm and composure even after listening to these words. Later in the story she tells everything to her husband whatever Seth's niece said. Thakur-sa takes an offence to his manhood from the words of Seth's niece. And he vows to marry her and shoot two hundred arrows through her nose ring every day. With his seven-eight attendants, he marches towards Seth's house. Thakur-sa recounts everything to Seth and tells how such perfidy could be mended. Seth had no choice but marry off his niece to Thakur-sa. Right after marriage ceremony, Thakur-sa drags her to the terrace and orders her to stand at a fixed place, so that he could shoot two hundred arrows through her nose ring. His newest bride burst into gales of laughter and said, "why is your chest all puffed up over such a trifle? You put on a nose ring and stand there so I can shoot a thousand arrows through your nose ring, easy as a flick of my left wrist. No, to do something truly extraordinary, you would have to win the hand of the princess Chouboli....if you can pull off this feat, it would be something truly remarkable-much more impressive than shooting arrows through a nose ring."

Thakur-sa takes up the challenge to bring Chouboli in wedlock home. It is a challenge, since to marry her one has to make her speak four times in a night. Many tried their hands at it, but failed.

Add another to the ranks

Thakur-sa starts off his journey to the kingdom of Chouboli, on the third day he reaches the palace. He is welcomed warmly, and when people heard of his martial skill (shooting one hundred eight arrows through the nose ring without ever missing once) they believed he is the one who would complete the challenge and win Chouboli. At the night, he is taken to the chamber of Chouboli, he was mesmerised by her beauty, and he couldn't utter a word the whole night. He fails and is thrown into dungeon where seventeen young lads were already grinding fodder for the horses. Thus Thakur-sa adds one more to the number. The sad news reached thakurani's ears; she was very much saddened by it. New thakurani takes up on her to get thakur-sa freed from the dungeon. She dresses up as a young man and starts for Chouboli's palace.

Who is most marvellous?

Disguised thakurani presents himself at the court, and requests for the permission to take up the challenge. At night, he is pushed in Chouboli's chamber; he was blinded by her beauty. To make Chouboli speak, he plans to narrate stories. But to tell a story, he demands hunkaras and since princess doesn't speak, her bed agrees to give hunkaras. The story goes like this: Four marvellous, super-humanly talented men land up at raja Parichat's court. The raja immediately hires them. On a certain occasion, royal astrologer tells the raja that a special occasion is to arrive for the wedding of prince, and it would last for one and half an hour. If during prince rode on a certain saddle during his wedding procession then he would become the supreme king of the world within twenty-one days. But the saddle is in kuchbhuj, which was seven hundred kos from the city. The raja seeks help of his four marvellous men. And they promised to get the saddle on time. These four men are endowed with unbelievable powers; one can run swifter than a deer, one can see upto the distance of thousand kos, one can blow away mountains and trees away, and one is a great archer who can shoot at the right mark even from the distance of thousand kos. Using their respective skills, they got the saddle on time. The one with gift of sight located the

saddle and informed the runner; ‘blower’ blew away all the hurdles from runner’s path, and when, on return journey, runner stopped to take some rest and quickly dozed off to sleep a serpent with insidious intent approached him, the great archer killed the serpent. Thus, the saddle reached the prince right on the auspicious moment.

After relating the story, he (disguised thakurani) puts a question to the bed, hunkara-giver, who is the most marvellous of the four? To which bed answers, ‘the one who blew away the hurdles is the most marvellous, for if he wouldn’t have cleared the path, runner wouldn’t have reached on time.’

Storyteller holds the runner as the most marvellous, they start arguing and then suddenly the princess bursts out, “you worthless bed, how could you spew such nonsense right before me! Keep up your bickering and I’ll have you throw into garbage. Of the four, the sharpshooter was the most marvellous. If he hadn’t hit his mark, the rest of the marvels had to sit in defeat”.

Drums are beaten for Chouboli spoke. Same construction follows in next three stories.

Who is most true?

Without hunkaras, stories cannot be told. So, the disguised Thakurani looks for a hunkara-giver, this time Chouboli’s necklace volunteers. Immediately Chouboli takes it off her neck and throws it to him. Story begins: on the night of wedding a seth abandons his wife as he had to go on an important assignment; his wife (sethani) falls in love with Thakur who lives in front of her badi (house). Both were melting in the fire of love, one day Thakur asks her to come to his place, but owing to the fear of the society and for the sake of her honour, she refused. Thakur devises a scheme to meet her and avoid eyes of the people: he gets a tunnel dug from his house to her. But a neighbourhood thief gets to know about it, he also starts digging a tunnel from his place to cross-section thakur’s tunnel. His plan was to steal sethani’s jewellery; he thought, she would be so worried about what people would think that she won’t say a word about the theft. And his crime will go unpunished.

So it happened, when the tunnel was complete, sethani ornamented in sixteen *singars* trod the tunnel. When she entered thakur’s rang mahal, a maid servant was massaging his feet. He had drifted to sleep. When the maid servant saw a woman as beautiful as Gangaur standing in the doorway, she smiled. Then she quietly left. The sethani came and sat down at the foot of the bed. She didn’t want to wake him, so she began pressing her lover’s leg herself. All of a sudden Thakur-sa woke up, he didn’t bother to open his eyes and just said, “that’s enough my daughter. Time for you to sleep.” And as it was the wish of the Lord, who were they to interfere? Respecting his words, Thakur-sa adopts sethani as his daughter and gives her a necklace. Sethani too respecting his words considers him as her father. Thakur-sa asks her to leave, on her way back she meets the thief waiting for her. When she relates what transpired, he lets her go.

She returns her badi, and soon after Seth also arrives. She didn’t want to hide anything from her husband, and gives a true account of the events. Seth grants her forgiveness.

Our storyteller gain puts a question to the hunkara-giver, the necklace, “who is most true?” The necklace answers, “both the Thakur and the husband were the most true”, the storyteller counters, “the thief was the most true. For he was a thief both by birth and by nature, and still he ventured to do good”

They, storyteller and hunkara-giver, again started arguing. Chouboli, notwithstanding such ruckus, silences them by saying, “the sethani was the most true. She could have deceived her lord had she wanted. You often won’t find such honest words coming from a wife’s mouth.” Drums are beaten to a glorious beat.

Whose bride is she?

After the bed, necklace, veil of the princess comes forth to give hunkaras, as story couldn't be told without hunkaras. And the storyteller again begins a new tale: once upon a time there were five friends: carpenter, tailor, goldsmith, lac-maker, and Brahmin. Each of the friends possessed a talent unsurpassed and incomparable. There were no artists their equal in the whole world. The Brahmin even possessed the knowledge of making things come to life. So once it happened, when they were travelling they found a log of sandalwood. Night was growing dark, they decided to keep an eye on the log else somebody would steal it. They took turns to sleep and keep vigil. When it was carpenter's turn, he chiselled out a fine woman from the log of wood. When it came to tailor, he stitched clothes for her, and covered her with them. And so on, goldsmith crafted jewellery for her, lac-maker made *charau* for her. When it came to the brahmin's turn to keep watch, he breathed life into the statue. She came to life. All four woke up on listening a woman's voice. They started quarrelling among themselves to marry the woman. Here, storyteller asks the veil, "whose bride is she?" The veil answers, "...the bride belongs to the carpenter. If he hadn't fashioned her likeness out of the clump of sandalwood, no one would have had a chance to do anything".

The storyteller disagrees; according to him she belongs to the Brahmin, for it was he who made her alive. The two starts bickering, and Chouboli, couldn't bear it, yells, "The lac-maker was the one who put the churau on the bride. Don't you even have the sense to know that only the one who gives the girl churau to wear is the groom she has wed?"

Who is the lord?

"A bird without feathers, a vine without flowers, and a mouth without teeth, all seem as empty as a story without hunkara". And thus, hunkaras are required to tell a story. The storyteller searches for a hunkara-giver. The lamp comes forth to give hunkaras, and the story begins:

Once it so happened, there lived a Rajput and a Jat, both were very good friends. When the Rajput went with the jat for his mukhlava to retrieve his bride from her parents' house, his in-law treated him better than their own son-in-law. The Rajput wished that the jat should get same hospitality from his in-laws on his mukhalva. The day of the rajput's mukhalva arrived; he took his best friend, the jat, with him. On their way fell a shiv-mandir, both visited the mandir. The Rajput prayed to lord Shiva that his in-laws treat his friend better than what he expects. And takes an oath if it didn't happen, then he will cut off his head in the same temple. As Lord Shiva was high on bhang at that time, he didn't pay heed to the rajput's wish.

The Rajput's in-laws didn't consider the jat as their guest, instead treated him as a servant. The Rajput couldn't contain his rage, but what could he do there? On the next day, they both leave along with the rajput's bride. On the way back the Rajput stopped in front of the same temple, and took leave from his friend and bride. He went inside the temple and with a stroke of his sword cut off his head. When the jat saw stream of blood flowing down the temple stairs, he rushed to the temple. And after seeing that horrible scene, with a stroke of his sword cuts off his head.

The bride, after waiting for a great deal of time, entered the temple. What follows, was wailing and crying. When she was about to take her life Ma Parvati appears and asks for forgiveness for her husband's guilelessness. Ma Parvati asks her to put the heads back on their trunks, so she can restore them to life. But in haste, the bride put the rajput's head on the jat's body and vice-versa. Both came alive.

The storyteller asks the hunkara-giver, "Which one is the bride's true lord?" Hunkara-giver replies, "the trunk is twenty-times bigger than the head. Which is why the one with the rajput's body is her true lord."

Hearing this, flames rose to the crown of Chouboli's head. She leapt and said, "Men recognise one another by their faces. The face and the head are the most important parts of a person. The one with the face and the head of the Rajput is her true lord" Drums are beaten for the fourth time, and the storyteller completes the challenge. Chouboli belongs to whom?

Chouboli is married to the disguised thakurani, while taking seven rounds around the holy fire the storyteller was all the time carrying the thakur's sword. On the nuptial bed, the storyteller tells her everything, he reveals his true identity to her. Chouboli questions her to whom does she belong to, to the storyteller or to the Thakur? Then on not getting an answer, she gives the answer to the riddle herself: "tradition lets Rajputs marry a man's sword in his absence to a woman". Since storyteller was a woman, and woman couldn't be married to a woman, in that case Chouboli was married to the thakur's sword aka him. The storyteller demands the might Thakur in his dowry, and three of them leave for the thikana. On their way back, the storyteller comes out of the disguise. The Thakur was bewildered and equally happy to see her and more happy to know that Chouboli belongs to him. Towards the end the Seth's niece, the storyteller completes her vow by making Thakur-sa drink water in which she washed her feet and eat chickpea fodder.

These eight stories, though form a sequence, but even can be analysed separately. Most of the folktales begin with an invocation to Lord Ram like Chouboli tale/s. Invocation serves a purpose; it is declaration of a break from the mundane affairs and invites people to embrace an imaginary world of Kings and queens, of magic and fantasy.

Invocation (A)

As we read at the beginning of the Chouboli tale: "May Lord Ram bless us that this tale of Choubolibe reborn again and fine new readers and new listeners age after age." Chouboli is a folktale of Rajasthan; there are many versions of the story in circulation. Vijaydan Detha collected several narratives of the tale and then on the commonality penned it down. Here invocation other than its usual function, serves another function that is of summing up the idea of folklore, and thus it even leaves space for other versions to pitch in. some tells even have invocation, in which narrator asks for blessing to the listeners of the tale. The story telling and listening, both are a sacred act.

Hunkaras(grunts or hmms) (B)

Hunkaras means grunts or hmmmms, they are even known as *Hangure*. In old days, these stories were meant to be narrated in *chopals*, or they were bedtime stories. Hunkara is both a device in orality and textuality. Christi Merrill writes, "I began to realise that Detha' written versions of the Choghrou repeat the formulations that demand its audience to give the necessary hunkara, the grunts and hmms of approval that turn a telling into a two-way communication, a community event". Hunkaras are strung to the stories; one cannot function without the other. They both are clubbed together. If a storyteller sees that the listeners are losing interest, not giving hunkaras, he cleverly flips to another story.

These stories overlap, and exist in chunks. When a child would stop giving hunkaras, granny would stop the story and next night would pick up the tale where she stopped last night. No hunkaras are a sigh of disinterest or the listener has dozed off to sleep.

In Chouboli story, hunkaras serve one more purpose; the hunkara-giver is asked a riddle or a mod-boggling question. It leads to conflict and Chouboli had to interfere to resolve the conflict.

Hunkaras are essential to further the plot. In praise of hunkaras and stories a psalm is sung at the beginning of the Vijaydan Detha's Chouboli and other stories
“Hunkaras are what make storytelling fun
And the telling brings luck to everyone
So long live storytelling!
And long live hunkaras!”

These stories do show some fragments as discussed by Propp in his essay: The functions of Dramatis personae. But they do not follow the same chronology. The story begins with an invocation and hunkaras are clubbed with it, it is to maintain the sense of orality.

Interdiction (I) is often a challenge. Each of the Chouboli stories contains an interdiction, except the first one. In “Big word for a small mouth”, it comes in a form of a dare which Thakur-sa takes up to prove his manhood. Interdiction is to make Chouboli, the reticent princess, speak four times in a night. It is a form of inverted-interdiction, somewhat like “Bring the breakfast out into the garden”.

In Chouboli story/ies, ‘hero’ starts his journey to fulfil the inverted interdiction. To complete the challenge he journeys to the other kingdom. Interdiction may also be the princess who doesn’t speak, and it is the desire to possess this princess, or in word of Propp the lack of ‘her’ that starts off the story. Though, it is not strictly the lack or desire, and if it is, then it is a desire for Thakur-sa to prove his manhood.

Thakur-sa absents himself and doesn’t return with the princess, it can be set equivalent to what Propp terms as Absentation. Whole Thikana was worried over the absence of the Thakur, and New Thakurani starts for Chouboli’s place to rescue the Thakur. Here it will be worthy to notice the element of FAKE HERO. In Russian folklore, Propp examines that a fake hero usurps the power of the hero with an intention to harm him, and the fake hero is most often a member of the family who knows all the secrets. In chouboli tale, however, this is slightly altered. Here fake hero comes into the play before the real hero. For real hero it is the rescue mission, and not the desire to possess the object of the challenge.

In Propp’s model disguise is employed by the Villain to cheat the hero, but in Chouboli tale, the hero disguises to rescue the Thakur.

The disguised thakurani tells stories to Chouboli in order to make her speak. In Russian folklores, the hero has to defeat the villain or take over him in a game of cards. Game of cards is a test of one’s intelligence; the storyteller narrates the stories which agitate the princess to speak up. The magical element that helps the hero to defeat the villain, in chouboli stories is the hunkara-giver. A folklorist once said that, “lion is not a lion in folktales”. Even a hunkara-giver is no ordinary hunkara-giver, it is an element which would supposedly give wrong answers and argue with the storyteller. All this bickering would provoke the princess to speak. The magical element or the hunkara-giver helps the hero to defeat the villain. In chouboli story, villain is itself the object of lack or desire, and doesn’t fit in the Propp’s dramatis persona.

The questions that are asked by the storyteller, by nature, do not have a correct answer. All options can be correct, provided one argues one’s case well. It heightens the conflict between the storyteller and the hunkara-giver. The princess answers are not correct, they are culture specific, but to extract correct answers is not the motive, challenge is to make her speak. Both female and male narratives are given due importance, it is in the fashion of *puppet-narration*.

The story ends on reconciliation between all the parties, Thakur-sa gives up his obnoxious habit, he engrosses himself in other worldly duties. Seth's niece completes her pledge, Chouboli gets married to which her parents are happy and she is happy too.

Cultural nuances and some other observations

In our Rajasthani folktales, it is difficult to determine the gender of the narrator. The Story gives equal importance to both the voices, it is reminiscent of *puppet-narration*, in puppet shows usually two puppets: a male and a female, act as narrators. Sometimes story inclines towards male narration, and sometimes it is in a vehement female voice. In the opening story of the series, thakurani-sa taunts Thakur-sa in these words, "As far as I am concerned, you miss you mark every day". It tells a lot more about Thakur-sa and his eccentricity, Freud would have read Thakur-sa's act of shooting arrows through his wife's nose ring as a recompense for bad performance in bed. Narrator, at times show sympathy to Thakur-sa, and at times takes side of female personae. Narrative vacillates between male and female voice. Cross-dressing further complicates for the reader to determine the narrative.

Chouboli is often talked about in a manner, which makes her seem as an object which shall be possessed. Though at end we see how a woman through her intellect overpowers Thakur-sa, teaches him a lesson. In Seth's niece Chouboli had found a true mate, she spends a great deal of time with Seth's niece. Our folktales even make ample mention of homoeroticism and same-sex marriage. (Duahari Zindagi)

Some of the answers of Chouboli are culture-specific; the one who gives a woman Charau armlets to wears actually weds her. And even the solution to the riddle: to whom Chouboli belongs, is also culture-specific. It can be argued that the one who gave life to her shall be her lord. Narrator doesn't say that she gave the right answer, but it stops then and there. And drums are beaten.

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