

STORYTELLING AND FOLKTALES: THE MIRRORS OF A PEOPLE'S WAY OF LIFE

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Abstract

We are what our stories are. The paper offers a comparative analysis of tales by Vishnusharma and the Brothers Grimm, Richard Burton's translation of the *Arabian Nights* and folklore from Australia. The tales reflect how we think and dream, and how, despite being divided geographically, we are not so different after all.

Folktales, in ancient times, were rooted in the culture they came from and contained the wisdom that governed the way people lived their daily lives. In tribal societies they educated people in tribal customs, beliefs, codes and taboos which encouraged a healthy relation to the natural environment (forests) in which they lived. The source of their philosophy of life could also be traced in their tales. For the people who have not forgotten their roots, this stands true even today.

In the ancient societies, storytellers would carry stories from legend or myth along with stories or news about people, from one group of people to another. That way they would knit communities together, keep its culture and folklore alive, just by communicating it and reminding people about it. Thus in such societies, in the absence of media, storytelling had an important functional value. As Walter Benjamin says, in the essay "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov", the local storyteller would know about the legends of his own region and the traveler would bring in tales from foreign lands. This was, of course, before memory was aided by print or electronic media. Also we are not tightly knit communities anymore, especially those of us who live in cities. Though it may not be true for everybody, but our concerns are more global, and so is our imagination- because of the media that bring us news from all over the planet. Speaking of the functionality of storytelling, Kati Kupatadze, in reference to Mario Vargas Llosa's book *The Storyteller* talks of the storytelling tradition in the Peruvian tribe Machiguenga:

In the Machiguenga society, the storyteller's mission is to tell stories, to entertain... to establish the dialogue with the community of listeners or readers through the fables, tales and stories... The storyteller, somewhat similar to the medieval troubadours, is an anonymous individual who bears the collective memory of the Indian tribes. Being an entertainer, he represents the collective consciousness and oral memory of the people; he goes from one place to another, passing new and old information.

However, though the job of passing information has been taken over by technology, some storytelling traditions (hence storytellers) still exist, like the Irish seanchai from the Celtic era who shared stories with villagers and nobility. As Llosa puts it, a seanchai is:

...someone mysteriously touched by the magic wand of wisdom and the art of reciting, of remembering, of reinventing and enriching tales told and retold down through the centuries; a messenger from the times of myth and magic, older than history, to whom the Irishmen of today listen spellbound for hours on end. (165)

During the Celtic Revival, many of the stories the seanchai told were written down and made available to wider audiences. One wonders if the oral tradition of storytelling diminished because of the coming of print, or it was going to diminish anyway so printing, or writing, ended up preserving the stories that might have disappeared from human memory otherwise.

Ancient folktales, in any society, can be seen as the reservoirs of a cultural group's outlook and understanding of life. Taking Llosa's example of a Machiguengan tale, one comes to know that they believed that once upon a time, the sun used to remain in the sky all the time and the world was warm and bright. But one day it fell from the sky and darkness and evil reigned. So the people decided to walk to help the sun because of which it could rise everyday and defeat the darkness. So the Machiguengas became the people who walk. They were non-violent and each time they were threatened, by other more aggressive tribes or by the white people, they would simply move deeper into the forest. They travelled light, and material possessions were not important to them. They would build new huts, grow cassava and hunt for a living. This was considered living wisely.

For the Australian Aborigines too, storytelling is connected with their spiritual beliefs and their way of life. Although storytelling can be seen as a form of pure entertainment, the stories also reinforce the Aboriginal people's belief in the Dreamtime, i.e. their understanding of the creation of life. Dreamtime refers to the "time before time" when the ancestral Totemic Spirits created the world and gave plants and animals the form they have. The Rainbow Serpent, often associated with water courses, is also considered a Creation Being, the creator of all things and the protector of lands and its people who needs to be respected properly or the world will face its wrath. Following is one version of the Rainbow Serpent story, from "The Dreaming":

...in the Dreaming, the world was flat, bare and cold. The Rainbow Serpent slept under the ground with all the animal tribes in her belly waiting to be born. When it was time, she pushed up, calling to the animals to come from their sleep. She threw the land out, making mountains and hills and spilled water over the land, making rivers and lakes. She made the sun, the fire and all the colours.

Such stories, Mudrooroo says in *Us Mob*, are one of the main components of aboriginal spirituality which is about keeping the earth and the environment healthy, the obligation passed down in dreamtime stories.

The Creation Beings established relationships and groups for everyone. Wherever they halted during their travels, they created rivers, hills etc. when their work was done, they changed into various forms- animals, stars, hills, and that is how they remain even today for they did not leave. The stories associated with dreaming thus showcase the kind of relation the people are to have with their environment and are full of references to animals, lakes, rivers and their general landscape. Apart from being a kind of cultural education, stories also helped the elders pass their knowledge of their landscape to the younger generations so that they learnt to survive in the

harsh conditions they lived in. For example, the stories would give information about where to find the best of food or water resources, how to deal with the weather conditions, what lands to visit and also where not to venture etc. The children would learn about their familial ties and totems, about marriage related customs, about friendship and general morality and also about the acceptable social behaviour and the punishments to be meted out for rule breaking from the stories told by their elders. There are stories ranging from topics like how the sun, the stars or the hills were created, to why the emu cannot fly or how the kangaroo got a tail and the wombat a flat forehead. Repetition ensured that these tales were ingrained in people's memory and their understanding of the tales also deepens with time. The animal fables resemble our own folklore as far as the learning value is concerned; only the animals involved are completely different since they are from the Australian continent.

Helen McKay, author and storyteller enumerates the following elements that can be found in Australian Aboriginal stories: the spiritual belief system, customs, animal behaviour, psychology, land maps of various regions, hunting/ gathering skills, cultural norms, morality, survival skills, and food resources. Though there are multiple tribes and languages amongst the Australian Aborigines hence a great variety of stories, Helen McKay gives an insightful generic classification of their tales: stories for children and for adults; women's stories and men's stories (both public and secret); love, comedy, tragedy, horror stories; parables, sacred stories (both public and secret); mystical stories etc. She calls these stories "the oral textbooks of their (the Aborigine's) accumulated knowledge, spirituality and wisdom from when time began". A story can be told in dances or plays or even visual forms. A storyteller is like a performer, using gestures, facial expression and voice modulation to make the telling lively and entertaining. Though the Aborigines didn't develop a written language to write the stories down, they did use paintings and carvings to record information.

It is evident that many people are actively involved in not only preserving the aboriginal heritage but also contributing to its richness at their own level. The storytelling tradition is still alive and new Dreaming stories are being told even today. Helen McKay who has collected many aboriginal stories in the book *Gadi Mirrabooka* (which means 'below the southern cross') explains that new experiences like the terrifying appearance of the fighter planes in the Australian skies during the second world war, nuclear tests in Maralinga in South Australia in the 1950s, even the plight of the stolen children have found their way into some "screamtime" stories.

Coming to our own cultural heritage, some of our people had started penning down stories gathered from the oral tradition a long time ago. It is important to say some of our people because we, the people of India, come from different cultural backgrounds and one cannot hope to include all our folktales in an analysis. So I have taken the easiest route and chosen the tales that I got acquainted with, thanks to my grandfather who was great at telling stories (which came from his excellent memory). I came across some of them when I decide to read the *Panchtantra* (written by Vishnusharma, but derived from an older oral tradition). The tales from *Panchtantra* provide an insight into our ideas of wisdom and righteousness and also portray our culture and lifestyle. It is interesting to contrast them with *Arabian Nights*. In *Panchtantra* material wealth is secondary and excessive greed can land you into trouble like Chakradhar (from the fifth part of the book). His story is narrated by the Brahmini from the tale titled "The Brahmani and The Mongoose." He and his three friends go in pursuit of wealth and find great reservoirs of copper, silver and gold respectively. Chakradhar's friend asks him to take as much gold as he wants from the inexhaustible store he discovered but Chakradhar hopes to find greater wealth and refuses.

He ends up being cursed. On the other hand, Sindbad the sailor from *The Arabian Nights* risks his neck seven times in pursuit of riches, even kills a few people so that he may take their store of food to survive while he is trapped, like them in an underground mass grave, but he succeeds every time. He returns home with a store of diamonds, gems and such valuables though his companions get eaten by monsters or drown after shipwreck. Though Sindbad's tale is more about the spirit of adventure (and being exceptionally lucky) than about good conduct, Sindbad also believes in giving alms to the poor. So riches make you respectable, but also bring the responsibility of helping the less fortunate. His adventures are recorded in stories titled "The First Voyage of Sindbad the Seaman", "The Second Voyage of Sindbad the Seaman" and so on. There are seven such voyages. In "Aladdin; or, The Wonderful Lamp" (*The Arabian Nights*) the hero sends his king a number of slaves carrying gold and precious gems and the king gets ready to marry his daughter off to him without inquiring about the source of his wealth. Similarly Ali Baba's prime virtue is that he has discovered a hoard of stolen wealth to alleviate his poverty. He is lucky in having Morgiana as a slave girl, who saves his life several times by confounding and killing the thieves from whose store of stolen wealth Ali Baba had been stealing. He features in the story titled "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves" in *The Arabian Nights*. In *Panchtantra*, on the other hand wisdom and good conduct make you worthy and not you wealth. If you are stealing stolen things, it would probably bring you bad luck.

Like Morgiana, there are a number of strong female characters in the *Arabian Nights*, for example, the eldest lady in the tale of the 'Three Ladies of Baghdad', who is a shrewd businesswoman and lives richly thanks to the adventurous business trips she has undertaken. But if the woman is somebody's wife then she would be more trouble than she's worth both in *Panchtantra* and in the *Arabian Nights* (note that Morgiana is a slave and 'the eldest lady' is unmarried). Both the collections warn men against taking advice from their wives. In *Panchtantra*, in "The Story of the Weaver" from the fifth book, a man on the suggestion of his spouse, despite being warned by his friend, ends up asking a yaksha for two extra heads and two extra pair of arms so that he could get more work done. Because of his unusual appearance, people take him for a demon and kill him. In "The Man and His Wife" from *Arabian Nights* too the husband perishes because his wife wants to make love to him in a garden and they are mistaken for adulterers. A female expressing desire is seen as a sinner and root of all evil. Wives are to be beaten up and kept under control as exemplified in the Wazir's tale of the merchant and his wife. Here the theme of unfaithful wives is repeated in several tales, given that the tale of Shahryar that frames all the other tales is also about his being betrayed by his wife who prefers a black slave to him. There is even a verse dedicated to women:

Rely not on women,
Trust not to their hearts,
Whose joys and whose sorrows
Are hung to their parts!
Lying love they will swear thee
Whence guile ne'er departs....
Iblis ousted Adam
(See ye not?) thro' their arts.
(*Arabian Nights* 14)

It seems that the tales are meant primarily for a male audience and the secondary status of women is universally acknowledged.

The tales also shed light on the social structure of the societies they come from. In *Panchtantra* one would find kings, merchants, farmers, brahmins, shudras, thugs, fishermen and woodcutters. In the world of *Arabian Nights*, Harun Al-Rashid happens to be the ruler of Baghdad while places like India (or Hind) China and Africa are also mentioned. In fact, Sindbad happens to meet a king who has people from Hind as guests who call themselves Kshatriyas and Brahmins. This along with the mention of voyages by sea points out that there exists a better connectivity with foreign lands in *Arabian Nights* as opposed to *Panchtantra* which portrays a primarily Hindu setting. The world of Arabian Nights mentions four kinds of people: Muslims (belonging to the true faith), Christians (Nazarene), Jews and Magians (fire worshippers) (from the Tale of the Ensojelled Prince). The name of Allah is important and in “The Eldest Lady’s Tale” a town is put under a curse by an angry god for following the wrong faith, except a prince who was acquainted with the Quran. Apart from Caliphs, Emirs and Wazirs there are rich merchants, poor porters and beggars, god-men (Kalandars), slave girls and men (blackamoor). There are white slaves too called Mamelukes, which again points out contact (or conflict) with the “white” race.

In the tales collected by the German cultural researchers Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm (the Brothers Grimm), god is not important and the stories stand alone instead of being a part of a framing story like in *Panchtantra* and *Arabian Nights*. Here too one would find fairies, dwarves, giants and witches. As fantastical as they are, they too reflect something from the society they come from. For example, the existence of extremely barbaric punishments (and they didn’t think of themselves as Barbarians) in western societies may be hinted at in the Grimm brother’s “Little Snow-White” (*Fairy tales*) where the evil queen is made to wear red hot iron slippers and dance until she drops. Another example is Charles Perrault’s version of Bluebeard’s tale - this is actually about a serial-killer who lives in a castle. There is one room in it where his newlywed wife is not allowed to enter. One day he goes out and his wife, overcome by curiosity, goes to see what’s in the room only to find his murdered ex-wives. They had been murdered for disobeying him and entering the room. Bluebeard is believed to be modeled after Gilles de Rais, a 15th century Aristocrat who was believed to be a serial killer of children. Grimm’s Cinderella (*Fairy tales*), would not have been able to do much, despite all her beauty and charm, if it had not been for her fairy godmother. This is indicative of a society in which social connections are important, and where orphaned children may not be looked after properly by their relatives.

It is remarkable how these tales spread over the word and attain a universal appeal. One can draw parallels between *Panchtantra* and Aesop’s fables. The story of Cinderella becomes the story of Chūjō-hime in Japan. “Little Red-Cap” (Grimm) better known as “Little Red Riding Hood” exists in many versions all over Asia and Europe. It is difficult to determine whether these tales are similar because they spread from the same source or because people everywhere have similar imaginations.

Different people expect different things from these tales. For Tolkien, the appeal of fairy stories lies in the idea of “eucatastrophe” or “happy endings” that gives some sort of emotional consolation. G.K. Chesterton, in his book *All Things Considered*, observes that they impart moral and ethical sense as all happy endings hang on some condition:

Cinderella may have a dress woven on supernatural looms and blazing with unearthly brilliance; but she must be back when the clock strikes twelve. The king may invite fairies to the christening, but he must invite

all the fairies or frightful results will follow. Bluebeard's wife may open all doors but one... A man and woman are put in a garden on condition that they do not eat one fruit: they eat it, and lose their joy in all the fruits of the earth ...

It is surely obvious that all ethics ought to be taught to this fairy-tale tune; that, if one does the thing forbidden, one imperils all the things provided. ("Fairy Tales")

So it can be said that these tales warn us against false or foolhardy conduct and serve to make us wiser or rather programme us into becoming beings that our cultures considers proper. The stories we've heard with interest become a part of us and we can tell them again in newer forms and versions. Though initially being the part of the oral tradition, these stories have managed to travel across time because of the people who recognized their value and bothered not only to remember them but also to pass them on. One can feel a spiritual connection with the countless people who carried these tales in their memories, as the knowledge of these timeless tales gives us a share in that great collective memory of human experience.

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