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INDIAN FOLKTALES: RAMANUJAN'S INTERPRETATION

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Abstract: As Ramanujan himself opines somewhere, folk stories as idioms and proverbs work with context in society. They are as vivid as our cultures in India. In his essays on folktales Ramanujan gives a psychological and cultural analysis of the stories. His translations are transcreation as he is a very sensitive, conscious cultural translator. His concepts of 'genres are gender', 'counter-system,' categorization of folktales is something new in Indian folkloristics. As he said, past never passes. And the study of folktales will never become outdated. Instead, at every telling they are recreated. Ramanujan made it clear in the Preface to *Folktales From India* that, "Every tale here is only one telling, held down in writing for nonce till you or someone else reads it, brings it to life, and changes it by retelling it. These stories were handed down to me, and in selecting, arranging, and adapting, I've inevitably reworked them somewhat. So, consider me the latest teller and yourself the latest listener, who in turn will retell the tale. Like a proverb, a story gains meaning in context; in the context of this book, the meanings are made between us now."

Keywords: Genres are genders, Counter-system, categorization, retelling. Psychological analysis, cultural context.

Introduction

Ramanujan began to collect Kannada folklore in his twenties, but he had no idea that what he was doing was 'folklore' until he met Professor Edwin Kirkland of the University of Florida when the latter was in India in 1956, presumably working on *A Bibliography of South Asian Folklore*, which was published in 1966. It was no doubt through Kirkland's influence that Raman's first articles in English were submitted to and published in *Southern Folklore Quarterly*, which was then edited and published at the University of Florida. At the time of his service at Belgaum he collected stories from Kittur, Bailhongal and surrounding villages. Ramanujan was one of the first modern scholars of India who looked at folklore as a field of inquiry in its own right, not as derivative or grist for another mill. Most important, he

brought to his analysis an unparalleled combination of precision and personal passion; he was, as he liked to say, both a student and a specimen of Indian folklore. His legacy will be that he demonstrated what others had only been able to state—that the study of South Asia is inseparable from the study of its folklore. In his vision, folklore is one of several systems, several languages or registers that, people use depending on the particulars of context and audience.

These systems—Sanskrit, classical literature, *bhakti*, folklore—comment on each other, and cannot be understood independently of each other. Ramanujan, the student-specimen, also insisted that it was not so much the civilization as the individuals who carry within themselves these overlapping expressive codes. Not folklore as a precious preserve, safe from

pernicious modern influences, not folklore as a culture of the little people, Raman's folklore was a full-fledged collaborator in the production of cultural meaning. Ramanujan in Introduction to his Folktales from India says, 'One way of defining verbal folklore for India is to say it is the literature of the dialects, those mother tongues of village, street, kitchen, tribal hut, and wayside tea shop. This is the wide base of the Indian pyramid on which all other Indian literatures rest.' He was an anthropologist and folklorist. Anthropology is a science of studying man and folklore study of man's mind and heart.

His father as he was a mathematician and astrologer and was interested in magic his room was crammed with books related to those subjects. His mother though housewife read Kannada and Tamil books. This gave him telling metaphor of father tongue and mother tongue. Ramanujan was benefitted with all this store of knowledge which sharpened his sensibilities. Wendy Doniger in an Introduction to *The Collected Essays of A. K. Ramanujan*, said, 'But here in America, he was the consummate participant-observer, translating his Indian insights for us not merely into English but into the thought-systems of Chomsky, de Saussure, Derrida, Stith-Thompson, Freud.' He brought the best of western theorizing to bear on Indian folktales and best of Indian storytelling to the attention of international folklorists.

Objective

My objective here is not to explain his theories but just with little glimpse of his theories and concepts having a look into the few folk stories he has translated and the way he has analyzed them with a psychologists brain; to focus on the relevance of folk tales; to prove the

inevitability and pivotal role of folktales in life with the support of tales in *Folktales from India*.

Ramanujan's Theory of Folktales

In theorizing, classifying and analyzing no one can be compared with A. K. Ramanujan. He was aware of his dual responsibility. He was an anthropologist as well as a folklorist. He had studied linguistics, psychology and so many subjects that his knowledge influenced his study of folktales. His study is nothing but a cultural study of India. He wrote, "I would like to suggest the obvious: that cultural traditions in India are indissolubly plural and often conflicting but are organized through at least two principles, (a) context-sensitivity and (b) reflexivity of various sorts, both of which constantly generate new forms out of the old ones. What we call Brahmanism, *bhakti* traditions, Buddhism, Jainism, *tantra*, tribal traditions and folklore, and lastly, modernity itself, are the most prominent of these systems.

They are responses to previous and surrounding traditions; they invert, subvert, and convert their neighbours. Furthermore, each of these terms, like what we call India itself, is 'a verbal tent with three-ring circuses' going on inside them. Further dialogic divisions are continuously in progress. They look like single entities, like neat little tents, only from a distance. Reflexivity takes many forms: awareness of self and other, mirroring, distorted mirroring, parody, family resemblances and rebels, dialectic, antistructure, utopias and dystopias, the many ironies connected with these responses, and so on. In this paper on Indian literary texts and their relations to each other ('intertextuality', if you will concentrate on three related kinds of

reflexivity. I shall call them (1) *responsive*, where text A responds to text B in ways that define both A and B; (2) *reflexive*, where text A reflects on text B in ways that define both A and B, relates itself to it directly or inversely; (3) *self-reflexive*, where a text reflects on itself or its kind. The parts or texts in relation 1 may be called co-texts, in 2, countertexts, and in 3, metatexts.

We could also speak of pretexts, intertexts, subtexts, and so on. The vast variety of Indian literature, oral and written, over the centuries, in hundreds of languages and dialects, offers an intricate but open network of such relations, producing families of texts as well as texts that are utterly individual in their effect, detail, and temporal/regional niches. But these relations are perceived by native commentators and by readers. To them, texts do not come in historical stages but form ‘a simultaneous order’, where every new text within a series confirms yet alters the whole order ever so slightly, and not always so slightly. T. S. Eliot spoke of a simultaneous order for European literature, but the phrase applies even more strongly to Indian literary traditions, especially until the nineteenth century. Modernity disrupted the whole tradition of reflexivity with new notions of originality and the autonomy of single works.

Among other things, the printing press radically altered the relations of audience to author to work, and it bifurcated the present and the past so that the pastness of the past is more keenly felt than the presence of the past. Reflexive elements may occur in various sizes: one part of the text may reflect on another part; one text may reflect on another. Where cultures (like the ‘Indian’) are stratified yet interconnected, where the different communities communicate but do not commune, the texts of one stratum tend to

reflect on those of another: encompassment, mimicry, criticism and conflict, and other power relations are expressed by such reflectivities. Self-conscious contrasts and

Reversals also mark off and individuate the groups –speciously if they are closely related, like twins.

His concepts of counter-system and ‘genres are genders’

His scientific perspective towards folktales made it possible that Ramanujan used the term Counter-system to the non-classic literature. And he also says that without it the study of Indian literature becomes incomplete. Like *bhakti*, folktales present a counter-system, in which classical theories such as *karma* have limited currency and in which the chaste women of epic and classical drama play more complex and active roles. ‘genres are genders’, he said, and the women-centered tales about which he wrote represent a major focus in the later years of his life. Women’s tales were themselves context-sensitive, told from a woman’s perspective, commenting on a woman’s place in Hindu India. Here Ramanujan again stepped across boundaries, those that separate the world of men and women, and spoke in a mother tongue. But even counter-systems are not autonomous, not entirely independent of the other systems to which they respond, and so folklore overlaps, perhaps at the deepest levels, with other expressive systems in India. Ramanujan thus found continuities, as well as alternatives, between folklore and classical traditions. Folk genres, he suggested, divide into the ‘domestic’ (*akam*) and the ‘public’ (*puram*), just like classical Tamil (*carṇkam*) poetry. Riddles are domestic, proverbs are public, and household tales evolve into publicly

performed epics, settings where their anonymous characters receive names and histories. Raman made another long-lasting contribution to re-establishing Indian folktales in international scholarship. As a folklorist, he knew that the alternatives and continuities that he explored in Indian folklore might apply as well between tales told in India and those told around the world.

Progress as Folklorist

Ramanujan gave us concepts, as counter-system. His idea of stories as context-sensitive, pluralistic and reflective gave new insight into the study of folktales in India. There is a marked contrast between Raman's first reportings of folktales and his later, subtle, and brilliant analyses of them in the 1970s and 1980s. In his initial account of 'Hanchi' in 1956, he was concerned to fit his Indian data into Aarane-Thompson tale-type categories, that is, to find appropriate tale-type or motif numbers for his Kannada text. His 1982 essay on the same tale, however, is informed by his knowledge of Proppian folktale morphology and modern psychology, both Freudian and Jungian. Here his emphasis is not whether an Indian tale fits into European categories, but whether certain distinctive oicotypical features of the Kannada tale bring into prominence specific characteristics of Indian (e.g., Kannada) culture. This shift in perspective is an important feature of Ramanujan's contribution to international folkloristics.

Retelling of Folktales

There are of course several distinguished folklorists in India. Vijay Dan Detha is a well-known example. But Raman brought a new focus to his data. Oral tales are narrated on different occasions in different contexts, but the context that had been totally ignored even by Indian scholars until then was the

kitchen. It is in the kitchen, while feeding the children in the evening, that stories are often narrated. Thus although the story is aimed at feeding, some sleepy or obstreperous child, there is an audience of female members listening to the telling. Inevitably, the tale becomes a network of messages between those present. More significantly, the tale resonates within a world of women, barred to men, which thus reflects the values, sufferings, aspirations and fantasies of women.

Women-centred tales mainly fall into two categories, depending on at what stage in the tale the girl gets married. There are tales where marriage occurs halfway through the tale, and in such narratives, the protagonist has to suffer incestuous attention from the father or the brother before her marriage and from members of the husband's family after. Then there are tales which start with the girl's marriage. She then loses her husband (either to misfortune, to a courtesan, or to the machinations of in-laws). All over the world we find tales in which right at the start of the tale, the female protagonist meets her love and then loses him. One famous example is of course Cinderella. Cinderella is originally Suvarndevata in Indian folktale and Hanchi in Kannada.

But the distinguishing feature of all these oral tales is that in them it is the women who have the energy, wisdom, foresight and cunning to save their men. The men are 'wimps', only too susceptible to control by other women, usually mothers, courtesans or in-laws. Ultimately, it is the woman's enterprise that saves the marriage. It is a world where women are firmly in charge.

In the classical tale, Sita, Savitri and Draupadi are chaste, devoted to their husbands. In oral tales, women cheat, take on lovers. Adulteresses triumph.

We have saying that, knowledge shared grows, hidden is forgotten'. Raman translated a story where the illiterate women narrator surprises us with a complex aesthetics used in informing them and a consistent philosophical attitude to the craft of telling tales. A housewife knew a story. She also knew a song. But she kept them to herself, never told anyone the story or sung the song. Imprisoned within her, the story and the song were feeling choked. They wanted release, wanted to run away. One day, when she was sleeping with her mouth open, the story escaped, fell out of her, took the shape of a pair of shoes and sat outside the house. The song also escaped, took the shape of something like a man's coat, and hung on a peg. The woman's husband came home, looked at the coat and the shoes, and asked her, 'Who is visiting?'

'No one,' she said.

'But whose coat and shoes are those?'

'I don't know,' she replied.

He wasn't satisfied with her answer. [So they had a fight.] The husband flew into a rage, picked up his blanket and went to the Monkey God's temple to sleep.....

All the lamp flames of the town, once they were put out, used to come to the Monkey God's temple and spend the night there, gossiping. On this night, all the lamps of all the houses were represented there---except one, which came late.

The others asked the latecomer, 'Why are you so late tonight?'

'At our house, the couple quarreled late into the night,' said the flame.

'Why did they quarrel?'

'When the husband wasn't home, a pair of shoes came onto the verandah, and a man's coat somehow got on to a peg. The husband asked her whose they were. The wife said she didn't know. So they quarreled.'

'Where did the coat and shoes come from?'

'The lady of our house knows a story and a song. She never tells the story, and has never sung the song to anyone. The story and the song got suffocated inside; so they got out and have turned into a coat and a pair of shoes. They took revenge. The woman doesn't even know.'

The husband, lying under the blanket in the temple, heard the lamp's explanation. His suspicions were cleared. When he went home, it was dawn. He asked his wife about her story and her song. But she had forgotten both of them. 'What story, what song?' she said.

So thus the revenge is taken. The story inspires a person to tell stories which they have heard.

It also clearly states certain beliefs in our folk culture. Firstly, the flames don't get extinguished at night; when they are put out, they simply move from home to temple, and return to the wicks when the

lamps are lit again next evening. Nothing in nature is ever totally extinguished. Secondly, the story makes certain statements about stories. For instance, where does a story live? A Western child may believe that a story lives in a book, ideally beautifully illustrated by someone like Arthur Rackham. In Indian folklore, a story lives inside the teller, literally, physically inside. And it is his or her duty to pass it on. If the teller fails to pass on this story to some listener, the story will take its revenge and she (it is almost certainly likely to be a woman) will suffer punishment. There are some things you cannot keep to yourself. Food, daughter and story. You must circulate them. A story is not merely for entertainment; it has an important social function. If you don't circulate it you are not doing your social duty.

Already we are dealing with an aesthetics which is different from the Western. According to Aristotle, catharsis is an experience which the audience undergoes. The purgation of emotions liberates the listener. According to the aesthetics of the Indian oral tale, as A.K. Ramanujan points out in this and many other examples, it is the narrator, the artist whose well-being is at stake. He must tell the tale for his own sake.

The stories *Tell it to the Walls* and *A Story and a Song* give a picture of inevitability of stories in life and their healing, consoling power. In the first story wall is a metaphor. An old woman when her sons, daughters-in-law, grandsons have no time to her she becomes very fat filled with woes and other words. Having

nobody to share her words she goes away from the house and in a remote area in a broken house she tells all the pent up feelings about first son in front of one wall. The wall collapses and she becomes lighter. tells about second son in front of another wall and at the collapsing it she becomes still more light. Thus, gradually all four walls collapse and she becomes slim and lighter. She returns home happily.

In the first story also shoes and coat are metaphors. When wife never tells a story and a song which she knows to anybody, to take a revenge story becomes shoe and sits outside the house. The song becomes coat and hung on the peg. The husband doubts and enquires his wife but she doesn't know anything of the coat and shoe. Quarrel develops. Husband sleeps under a tree in front of temple. There by the conversation of lamps of all the houses in the meeting he understands the problem. But by the next day husband asks her to tell him the story and song she had forgotten the story and song completely. The lamp here is also a metaphor.

Knowledge shared grows, hidden is lost. Folktales are told not only to make children eat more or put them to sleep. They are often told to keep adults awake: when farmers gather to watch crops all night or graze cows or sheep all day. Even story listening is also bless. The listener no longer bears to be a bystander but feels compelled to enter the world of the story. The wall between fiction and reality collapses. Thus, the stories are metaphors in search of a context, waiting to be told and given new relevance (xxii Folktales). The illiterate litterateurs' use of metaphors works very uniquely. In the essay *Towards a Counter-system: Women's Tales* Ramanujan narrating a story write: The story of the Lampstand Woman is told in the Kannada, Tamil, and Telugu areas. I have an example each from Tamil and

Telugu and six variants from several Kannada districts. Of the several points that can be made about it, the relevant one here is the mainspring of the action. What happens to the heroine has nothing to do with her character. It is made clear she is blameless. There is no villainy, no fault. Mother Fate seems a bit jealous of the woman's good fortune. her speech in the girl's dream makes that clear: 'You've all this wealth. No one has as much. But who's going to eat the three great measures of bran and husk?' A psychologically oriented interpreter might see in the dream an expression of the heroine's guilt over the property, a need to earn it by suffering and hardship. That is plausible, but the storytellers tell me it's all because of 'what's written on the forehead,' or the will of Mother Fate (*Vidhiyammā*). Character is not destiny here. Nor does the character have to 'learn through suffering' as in Western (Greek or Shakespearean) drama.

Vidhi, or Fate, is usually imagined as a woman, *vidhiyammā* in South Kannada; *Śeṭṭvi tāyi* in North Kannada and Marathi (Karve 1950). She writes on a newborn child's forehead all that is going to happen to him or her. Sometimes the *vidhi* function is performed by *Brahmā*. Several expressions refer to this writing on the forehead: *talaividi* (head-fare), *talaiyeḷuttu* ('head-writing) in Tamil; *haṇeli barediddu* ('what's written on the forehead'), *haṇebaraha* ('the writing on the forehead') in Kannada.

In Kannada folk-Ramayana, we see transformation of the Oedipus pattern: Ravana brings his barren wife a magic mango, a boon from Siva. On his way back, he is hungry and so eats the fruit and becomes pregnant himself. His nine days are equal to nine months and he sneezes nine times, and a daughter is born. He casts the child as inauspicious in the Ganges. Later he is infatuated with her, tries to marry her, and fails in the marriage-test. Rama wins and marries her. Later Ravana abducts her. Rama kills him with the help of Ravana's wife, and rescues Sita.

The interesting features of this pregnant-father motif are: (a) the envy of female fertility/potency, or womb-envy; (b) the way the father bypasses a mother to beget a daughter so that there is no father/mother/daughter triangle; and (c) the way he tries to marry his daughter, thereby trying to be his own son-in-law. Examples of this sort in Indian folktales are universal and relevant.

In women's tales most of the time woman is so powerful-may be inspiring, cunning, villainous- that story runs by those characters.

Relevance of Folktales

In a technologically advanced, sophisticated, fast life we don't know our neighbors. Due to loneliness we don't have

anybody to share our emotions, woes or happiness with. The result is blood pressure, diabetes mellitus and hyper acidity. Our children's education is bereft of moral education through folktales. In such condition introduction of our Indian folktales into present education system will help them grow with sense of nativity. But story telling needs a special skill, which can be acquired not just by training but with love to give some time to kids. Instead of looking like pale preaching they introduce a world of dream, magic and lessons implied. We need not say 'rain rain

go away' in a land like ours. We are rain lovers. Stories like The Flowering Tree carry concern for nature and women suffering as a tree as well. From the examples of stories given in the paper the need of folk stories is clear. They console us. They cure us. They guide us regardless of our age and sharpen the imagination and sensibility.

Stories like The Serpent Lover (Naagamandala) and The Flowering Tree (Cheluvu) are sources to many modern works, television and movie adaptation.

One more important thing which we must never forget is a child in every man never dies. We the disturbed elders are in more need of stories.

The study of folk culture and oral tradition may contribute to our understanding of culture and its functioning in human societies. It may be of some help in understanding human psychology and the adjustment of the individual to his culturally constituted world. Folklore provides proofs to historiographers. The exciting thing about folk life is precisely this, that it covers everything. Every phase of life in traditional or folk society can be studied with the interrelationship and functions of part to whole. Not only does the researches

study the verbal arts of folk song, folk tale, riddle etc. which the Folklorist has long ago made his province but also agriculture and agrarian history settlement patterns, dialectology or folk speech, the folk architecture, folk cookery, folk costume, the folk year, folk religion, folk medicine, folk recreation, folk literature, folk arts and crafts. It is this exciting totality of the verbal, spiritual and material aspects of culture that we mean by the term Folklore.

This clarification about the scope of Folklore also indirectly serves as a clarification about the close relationship between Anthropology and Folklore: If Anthropology is a science of man, Folklore is the study of Man's mind and heart (10 Why Folklore). If Ramanujan is anthropologist and folk story translator into English, his study and discourse includes all that is mentioned in the above lines. Storytelling has cathartic effect on both story teller as well as listener.

Conclusion

With the examples of the stories it is proved that the stories have therapeutic effect. They are relevant as life goes on with them. The concepts he used to analyze folktales made him a unique and great folklorist. His translation is transcreation. His contribution to the world folkloristics and Indian Cultural studies is remarkable. Here in this small paper it is not possible to analyze all stories in Ramanujan's collection, or deal with complete analysis of tales by Ramanujan. It is just an attempt to peep into and have a look of them. As Blackburn and Dundes wrote in Introduction to the collection of Ramanujan's Essays, he taught us to let oral stories speak for themselves; they have their own tales to tell, as he put it. His intelligence lit up the tales he told, like a lamp moving across a dark space, illuminating this corner, pointing to that detail, a contrast with a Sanskrit story or a

parallel with Shakespeare, but never reducing the whole to a grand premise or single conclusion, always giving back complexity, deferring to the voice of the tale, and letting us listen.

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