

Folktales Published as Children's Literature: An Exploratory Study

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INTRODUCTION

Stories are an important part of every one's life. Most people have grown up listening to stories during their childhood and as they grow up. In societies such as ours, stories have typically formed part of growing up in communities with oral traditions. Stories reflect hopes, dreams, expectations and histories of societies. Stories and poems have also always formed an important part of literature for children.

India has a rich source of oral traditions. An integral part of the Indian society, oral tales have been typically used to convey moral norms, customs and traditions from one generation to another. They were often narrated during mealtime or bedtime. While several such traditions are still prevalent, the past few decades have seen radical changes in the structures of a family due to which communities rarely remain the hub of story-telling. With a greater presence of nuclear families, the culture of story narration is also being slowly eroded. Children often need to rely on written forms of folk literature to get acquainted with traditional stories. Printed children's literature is hence a relatively new concept in Indian society.

What is children's literature?

Encyclopaedia Britannica (1963, Vol 5,) defines children's literature as that which "include all books written especially for children, other text-books, and also the many books written for adults which have been widely read by children" (p. 520). Here only books have been considered as a part of children's literature. *The International Encyclopaedia of Education* (1994) defines children's literature as "Children's literature includes the genre of realistic fiction, fantasy, poetry, biography, historical fiction, non-fiction, as well as the picture book" (p. 733). Children's literature is defined in terms of genres that can fall in this category. Gradually with time, the field of children's literature has opened up to include more sources apart from books and other written materials. *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online* (2014) defines children's literature as:

Children's literature, the body of written works and accompanying illustrations produced in order to entertain or instruct young people. The genre encompasses a wide range of works, including acknowledged classics of world literature, picture books and easy-to-read stories written exclusively for children, and fairy tales, lullabies, fables, folk songs, and other primarily orally transmitted materials.

Temple, Martinez, Yokota, and Naylor (2014) claim that, Children's literature is the collection of books that are read to and by children . . . Children's literature spans the range from alphabet books and nursery rhyme collections for the very young through novels and informational books for adolescents (or young adults, as they are called in the book trade)—in other words, from birth to about age fifteen. (p. 7).

Thus, there appears to be an ambiguity in the way in which children's literature is defined. This would be especially so if we were to understand how different cultures view what the 'modern' world defines as children's literature.

Children's literature in India

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Many south Indian stories were mealtime rather than bedtime stories. They were associated with relaxed, loving figures, with sleep and food. The tales were formative influences and hypnotic. We were trying hard to keep our eyes open by the time we came to the end of the story and the meal, which were aimed to coincide (Ramanujan, n.d., cited in Menon, 2000).

According to Ramanujan (1991/2009) folktales were told to adults as well. He mentions, "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 or when workers slice areca nuts (which have to be processed within a short time after they have harvested) or roll *bidis* (cheap local cigarettes) in a factory" (p. xxiii).

While several such traditions are still prevalent, the past few decades have seen radical changes in the structures of a family due to which communities rarely remain the hub of story-telling. With a greater presence of nuclear families, the culture of story narration is also being slowly eroded. Children often need to rely on written forms of folk literature to get acquainted with traditional stories. As argued by Rose (2011), printed children's literature is hence a relatively new concept in Indian society.

What are folktales?

The word folk means 'people' and tale means 'stories'. Hence folktales are stories of the people which are passed down from one generation to another. Thompson (1951, cited in Huck and Young, 1961) defined folk tales as "...all forms of narrative, written or oral, which have come to be handed down through years. In this usage the important fact is the traditional nature of the material." (p. 273). Folktales often travel from one place to another. As a result of travelling and retelling, a tale may have many versions. According to Ramanujan (1991/2009), "A folktale is a poetic text that carries some of its cultural contexts within it; it is also a travelling metaphor that finds a new meaning with each new telling." (p. x)

Statement of the problem

To study select folktales in Indian children's literature in terms of their content and messages.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this study, the researcher analysed folktales published as children's literature for their content and analysis. The theoretical perspective underlying this study is an 'interpretive' approach, where the essence of the research lies in 'understanding' the processes involved in the phenomenon to be studied. It believes that humans are shaped by their environment and their subjective perception of their environment (i.e. their realities). This research falls in the domain of qualitative research as the researcher is analysing folktales which are published as children literature for their contents and messages. The tool used for this analysis is content analysis.

In 2009, Children's Book Trust (CBT), New Delhi published folktales of different states of India as a part of their *Golden Set series*. In this study, the researcher has analysed folktales of Orissa and Andhra Pradesh published in English by CBT. Each of these compilations has 16 stories. Hence, a total of 32 folktales were analysed, comprising of 16 tales each from the state of Orissa and Andhra Pradesh. The researcher studied the text meticulously, using the analysis to give the patterns of content focus and messages conveyed.

The selection has been made considering the fact that both the states have geographical and cultural proximities. Hence, selecting these states as the sample allows the researcher to analyse contents of these folktales and at the same time compare them. Also, these books are recently published and available in the market for young readers. The researcher chose to analyse these compilations as they were available under one book cover and were thought to have a rational basis for putting these together in a single volume.

Findings and Analysis

The researcher has analysed them on the basis of the major themes that emerged from the stories: morals, gender representation, portrayal of adults and children, and role of destiny, human effort and religion.

Morals in the stories

Morals can be described as specific values that appear to be the major messages being conveyed through children's stories. For tracking patterns of these values or morals, themes of each of the stories selected have been analysed. It can be inferred that the maximum morals conveyed through the folktales of both the states are from the use of the binary of good versus bad behaviour, followed by the use of wit or wisdom or some other kind of human effort. This implies that in both the states a moral message is conveyed by rewarding good behaviour and punishing and transforming bad behaviours. Certain differences in how the morals are conveyed through the folktales of the two states are also observed. For instance, while the folktales of Andhra Pradesh use supernatural powers, and use animal stories, Orissa folktales use stories around friendship and keeping promises. However, for both states, folktales must have clear moral messaging.

Gender Representation

Folktales of both the regions have high male representation, much more than females.

The common roles associated with men in both the states are either of kings or princes (i.e. royalty), farming, business, advisers and Brahmins. All these fit into the stereotypical male roles prevalent in society. None of the roles assigned to males however, are related to domestic household work in both the states

It can be argued that such stories socialise children into accepting gender stereotypical roles as a norm. While Andhra Pradesh folktales portray women only in domestic roles, folktales of Orissa seem to miss out even on talking about women as protagonists in traditional stories!

Thus, folktales of both the states have male dominance and depict gender stereotypical roles. Such stories are used as tools to socialise children what they should do and what they shouldn't do on the basis of their gender.

Portrayal of adults and children

In folktales of both the states, it is the male adult who dominates as the protagonist. It can be argued that such stories don't even have children to identify with. In stories of both the states, childhood has not been portrayed at all. In fact, it has been skipped. The protagonists reach adulthood in a short span of time. This also reflects that in Indian context there is a tendency to disregard the importance of childhood. As these stories are didactic in nature and have adults as the main protagonists, it can be said that through these stories the image of 'an ideal man' is being projected. The message being conveyed to the young reader is that the child has to become like the characters projected in the stories, 'an ideal person' who follows societal norms. It is also evident that while the folktales seek to project role models for young boys, they do continue to project women as domesticated passive role models.

Presence of destiny, religion and human effort

In both the states, icons of gods come from traditions of Hinduism. No other religion has any presence in these tales. Thus in both the folktales of both the states, gods of traditional Hinduism dominate the gods of other states. It must also be noted that while the introduction to the folktales of Orissa mentions that tribal culture and modernity have been juxtaposed in the tales, there is not even a single story about the tribals, their traditions, culture and ways of living. Folktales of both the states give greater importance to human effort than destiny in achieving desired goals in life.

CONCLUSION

Folktales of both the states have many similarities on each aspect taken for analysis. Both have didactic stories, project gender stereotypical roles, indicate a low female representation as compared to males and the dominance of male adults. Stories of both the states lay significance on human effort. However, at the same time, the presence of a ritualised homogenous god is critical. The similarities in the stories could be attributed to the close physical proximity of both the states. However, it is surprising that the 'culture' of both states is depicted as more or less similar. Analysis clearly reveals that even the heterogeneity within a state does not find space in this volume of folktales. For instance, it is well known fact that Orissa has a large population belonging to a diverse tribal tradition. This can be said of Andhra Pradesh as well. It is indeed surprising and a matter of grave concern that young children and educators are being 'socialised' into believing that folk traditions emanate from the Hindu culture, completely dismissive of the tribal culture and traditions that have dominated these geographical regions of a plurally rich Indian society.

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