

A Travel through the Indian Folk tales: A Comparative Reading of *Arabian Nights* and *Panchatantra*

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Abstract: The folk tales of India have a long tradition tracing back to the ancient times ranging from the astounding *Panchatantra* to *Hitopadesha*, from *Jataka* to *Akbar-Birbal* stories. These didactic tales which have been passed through generations is the greatest source of our Indian culture. *Aesop Fables*, *Arabian Nights*, *Sindbad* and a large number of western ballads and nursery rhymes owe their origin to the folklore tradition in India. This paper is an attempt to look into the influence of *Arabian Nights* in Indian story tradition. *Thousand and One Nights* in its truest sense, is a potpourri of myths folklores, morals and literature. Rich in frame stories with poems and riddles, this amazing treasure is a medley of suspenseful humour and gothic narratives. A comparative study of these texts from different cultures will culminate in a newer understanding of the social, political, economic and mythical attitude of human nature.

Key words: myths, legends, society, culture, folk tales.

The term folklore was first coined by William John Thoms, the founder of the Folklore Journal 'Notes and Queries' in 1846 to refer to the traditional songs, legends, tales, and proverbs and believes of people. Folklore is an umbrella term which encompasses folk tales, folk music, legends, myths etc. Any traditional story orally told is a folk tale. All over the world, there are folk tales of different types-animal tales, magical tales, tales of adventure etc.

When it comes to India, the amazing land of diversities, folk tales has a long tradition tracing back to the ancient times ranging from the astounding *Panchatantra* to *Hitopadesha*, from *Jataka* to *Akbar-Birbal* stories. These didactic tales which have been passed through generations is the greatest source of our Indian culture. *Aesop fables*, *Arabian Nights*, *Sindbad* and a large number of western ballads and nursery rhymes have their origin in the Indian folk tales. This paper is an attempt to travel through the Indian folk tales, especially *Panchatantra* tales to dig out the influence of it in the later folk tales like *Arabian Nights*. It attempts to study the thematically the structural and philosophical similarities in both the texts.

Panchatantra, the text of five tantras or principles (which includes estrangement of friends, Of Crows and Owls, Loss of Gain and Rash Deeds.) is a medley of tales, believed to be recited by the sage Vishnu Sharma to the three Indian princes in the ancient period with 72 short stories compiled in 5 chapters beginning with each frame story. The stories of animal fables written in the form of dialogues "glorify the shrewdness and practical wisdom in the affairs of life and especially about politics and government." Since these stories are "unmoral and immoral" in nature, Franklin Edgerton, a Yale Professor calls *Panchatantra* as 'Machiavellian' in nature. But some scholars differ from this opinion affirming the didactic quality of the work.

Compiled in Arabic and written during the Islamic Golden Age, known in English as the *Arabian Nights*, *Thousand and One Nights* is a potpourri of myths, folklores, morals and literature. A strong influence of *Panchatantra* can be seen in this collection of frame stories ensuing with the story told by Sheherazade to her husband and the powerful monarch Shaharyar. As retribution against the infidelity of the women, he decides to execute the virgins he marries on the very next day and this continues till the Vizier offers his own daughter as the next bride. To save herself from the impending danger and to pontificate the king, she begins to recite tales for thousand and one nights. The king who was eager to hear the conclusion kept on postponing the execution. Sheherazade's tales renders a multi-layered description about love, tragedy, history, jinn, ghouls, magic carpets, sorcery, legendary places etc. and also mirrors the decline of the Sassanid Empire.

It is mainly through the animal stories that we see the impact of Indian tales in *Arabian Nights*. The Tale of the Bull and the Ass, and the Tale of the Merchant and His Wife are such examples. *Jataka* tales, a similar collection of Buddhist tales from India, which features animal characters, has also influenced *Arabian Nights*. Similarly, Indian folklore tradition houses another collection of animal fables written in 11 or 12 th century AD by the Sanskrit scholar Narayana Bhattu, *Hitopadesha* which is compartmentalized into 4 sections such as gaining of Friends, Causing dissension between friends, separation and union.

Now about the characterization, in the *Panchatantra*, the two main characters begin a conversation about a certain event and some principles of practical wisdom. Other characters are curious to listen to those principles. Every story carries a moral for the reader. Just like in *Arabian Nights*, the end of the first story would be the beginning of the second story and the readers are the quiet listeners in both the narratives. The first story in *Panchatantra* features a lion and a bull who are separated by a jackal. Ministers or Viziers have played an important role in both texts since they decide the good for the king at some crucial points. *Arabian Nights* also begins the frame story series with an animal story titled 'The Tale of a Bull and the Ass', as told by a Vizier. It is interesting to note that even the flora and fauna speak and converse with human beings in both the texts. A pretty number of animal characters are given human attributes in the former text such as the bird with two heads, blue jackal, the girl who married a snake, gold giving serpent, musical donkey etc.

A similar kind of characterization can be witnessed in *Arabian Nights* as well. The characters are introduced here to moralize Shaharyar. The work brings the character of Haroun Al -Rashid, based on the historical ideal ruler who roamed around the city at night to see the predicament of his people. Readers could witness a gradual transformation of the mood in these tales - from darker brutal stories to the brighter ones conveying social values and adventures. The philosophical interrogations made by Sheherazade are deeply rooted and thought provoking. Other than that, the theme of the oppressed and the oppressor is explicit in Nights-we see in many stories, the powerful jinns are locked in bottles, viziers sacrificing their daughters for the king's pleasure, a diligent cobbler flees the city in fear of his nagging spouse. Some of the dominant characters go through the reversal of fortune and fortune hunting in these tales- for instance, Aladdin, a poor man who uses a genie of the lamp to win the heart of the only daughter of a Chinese emperor, Ali Baba, a wood cutter who becomes

immensely wealthy after discovering a vast chest of treasure hidden by evil bandits, Ali shar who inherits a large fortune on his father's death loses everything by spending lavishly etc.

Raymond Williams in his 'Culture and Society' opines that culture consists of the 'objects' of a society, whereas society consists of the people who share a common culture. The societal system described in *Panchatantra* offers a parallel to the urban society depicted in the *Arabian Nights*. This heterogeneous social ladder is headed by the Abbasid Caliph, the highest leader cum ruler of the Islamic world. Next below him is the position of the professionals exhibiting various skills such as doctors, teachers, merchants, etc. Dhimmis are the non – Muslims who pay taxes regularly for being safeguarded by the authority. The slaves and women are placed at the lowest. The plight of slaves is much better than that of the women. No racial discrimination or physical torture existed. Women, on the other hand, are treated almost like slaves. Seeing as commodities, their rallying cry for economic, political and social freedom is unheard. It is significant to note that *Arabian Nights* also supports women who outwit men for their survival. The characters of Morgiana, the clever girl who kills the leader of forty thieves and saves Ali Baba's life and Zummurrud, the slave girl who outwits the captivator by disguising as man are the fine examples of such women. Similarly, India's caste system is very much explicit in *Panchatantra*. Brahmins at the top, followed by warring kshatriyas and trading vayshyas. Shudras are similar to slaves who did all the filthy tasks for the above three classes.

Indian Myths and legends also play a serious influence on the *Arabian Nights*. Freud related Psychoanalytic theory to mythology and wrote in 1908 that "it is extremely probable that myths, for instance, are distorted vestiges of the wishful fantasies of the whole nation, the secular dreams of youthful humanity." In 1909, Karl Abraham proved that since myths are the realization of desires, they are quite similar to dreams. In Indian story tradition, the genie is replaced by goddess, myriads, ghosts and gandharvas. Yakshi is a myth from Kerala who is said to lure lonely and lost travelers at night by assuming the form of a beautiful woman and ask for a little 'lime' that is used along with betel leaves for chewing. Similarly, Ghauls in the Arabic folklore is said to dwell in cemeteries and uninhabited places. Vetala Tales is a similar compendium of frame stories. Vetala is a predatory undead spirit who recites tales to the monarch Vikramaditya to pass the time and also assists him in thwarting the shrewd plans of Yogis.

Folklore, also known as Folk literature or oral tradition is the lore of cultures transmitted by word of mouth and is later put into words. Irrespective of the cultural, social, geographical differences, the societies all over the world shares a common tradition. They all share almost the same ancestry or common ancestry.

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