

Imparting Wise Conduct of Life through Folktales: A Thematic Study of Hema Pande’s “Vimla and the Seven Thieves” and “The Merchant’s Bride”

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Abstract

Hema Pande is an author based in Gurgaon. She has so far published about ten books of tales collected from different countries of the world and it includes *Folktales from around the World* (2013). Of the fourteen tales in the collection, two stories namely “Vimla and the Seven Thieves” and “The Merchant’s Bride” are selected for a comparative thematic study, for, though the first one is from India (East) and the second one is from Norway (West), they invariably try to convey an instructive message that a woman in any culture must be a protector of her own self personally and her family ultimately. The objective of the study is to show that around the world people try to resolve their everyday problems through creative representations (here it is the folktales). It is also attempted to find the analogy between the archetypes found in these tales.

Keywords

Folktales—West and East—Hema Pande—Archetypes—thematic study—resolving everyday problems with wise conduct of life—women as protectors—acceptance of the evil, the cunning and the wicked

The following Sanskrit saying reveals the relevance of instructive messages about human follies which are to be corrected on a proper explicit moral: “Those who have no education, no penance, no charity, no wisdom, no conduct, no virtue, no religion, are nothing but the burden on earth; they are but animals in form human beings”. And, in every civilization and literature, there found a wise conduct of life through folklore which handed down knowledge and wisdom from generation to generation. According to the New World Encyclopedia, folklore is “the body of expressive culture, including tales, music, dance, legends, oral history,

proverbs, superstitions, and so forth, common to a particular population, that comprise the traditions of that culture, subculture or group". The term "folklore" was coined in 1846 by William Thoms, to refer to what was then called "popular antiquities". Folktales are non-religious tales in every culture and society offering both direct and indirect counsel to humanity.

Hema Pande is an author based in Gurgaon. She has so far published about ten books of tales collected from different countries of the world: *Tales from Japan, The Oni Demons who loved Rice Cake and Other Stories, The Princess of Light and Other Stories, Tales from India: Funny and Wise, The Story of the Moon Glow Pearl, The Yellow Butterfly and the Real Monster, The Snow Maiden and Other Stories, Grandfather Cherry Blossom and Other Stories* and *Asian Splendour*. The one selected for present study is titled *Folktales from around the World* (2013); it contains 5 tales from western countries namely Norway, Russia, Sweden, America and Africa and 9 tales from Eastern countries like India, China, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Indonesia, Burma and Japan. There are certain archetypes and myths found in both the western and the eastern tales but interpreted in different ways, for the social and geographical backgrounds fundamentally differ.

Comparative critic Alridge observes that there are analogies struck among creative works and defines analogy as "resemblances in style, structure, mood or idea between works which have no other connection" (3). In Hema Pande's collection, *Folktales from around the World*, too one finds analogical study possible. The objective of the present study is to show that whether in the west or in the east, around the world people invariably try to resolve their everyday problems through certain eternal features of wisdom that are made available through creative expressions (here it is the folktales of various countries of the world). It is also attempted to find the analogy between the archetypes found in these tales. The very first two stories, "Vimla and the Seven Thieves" and "The Merchant's Bride" are selected for the purpose. Both the stories invariably try to convey an instructive message that a woman in any culture must be a protector of her own self personally and her family ultimately.

Hema Pande's "Vimla and the Seven Thieves" is taken from Indian folktale portraying a typical poor life of a barber's wife Vimla. Her husband is not named; he is presented as a cheerful man with a weakness of gossiping. Here it is tried to impart the value that though it gives momentous pleasure gossiping simply wastes one's working time and ultimately the gossip monger becomes a loser oneself. The husband in the story

represents how the human folly of gossiping ends in loss. He has to beg at the Wazir's court for help and that only on his wife's counsel. Being the wife to such a man she has to accept the status that "they had no money even for food" and at the same time urges him saying, "Go and ask him [the Wazir] for something. You'll never be refused on such an occasion" (9). She is capable of deciding what and when to do. Here, the role of the wife is focused; in fact, she becomes the protagonist of the story by taking predominant position.

According to *Satpatha Brahmana*, wife is the *ardhangini* (half of man): "The wife is verily the half of the husband. Man is only half, not complete until he marries". Manu also declared that mutual fidelity between husband and wife was the highest *dharma*. In *Mahabharatha*, it is made evident that by cherishing the woman one virtually cherishes the Goddess of Prosperity herself. These observations on the role of wife prove to be an eternal value through Vimla and the barber gets help from the Wazir. However, once again because of the timid quality of the barber he is not able to speak out in front of the Wazir and gets only a piece of wasteland near his village. It is again proved that gossip mongers are unable to express themselves in the needed hour and are terrible failures.

Once again Vimla has to come for help and she "was thinking of a clever plan" (11). She advises her husband to imitate her and walks about the field "peering anxiously at the ground and poking it here and there with a stick" (11). As expected this strange behaviour attracts a gang of seven thieves and one of them approaches her for explanation. She tells him that their field has five large pots of gold buried somewhere and they were trying to find the exact spots. The greedy thieves dug the field all night long and being disgusted leave in disgust. However, the field seems to have been ploughed at least seven times. Vimla's plan proves to be successful and she sows rice and after harvest she is able not only to repay her debts but also to buy a bagful of gold coins.

Having known Vimla's earning the thieves threaten her to give their share but Vimla being a wise bold woman challenges, "You rascals won't get a single gold coin" (12). She also notices that the thieves keep watching them and hence talks to her husband in loud voice that she has hung all the gold in a bundle from the branch of the neem tree outside. The thieves attempt to steal the same during the night. Mistaking the hornets' nest as the bundle of gold they one by one climb the tree and get stunk by the hornets. Finally the branch gets broken and they fall down too. For a while Vimla and her husband are relieved from the threat of theft.

Later, thieves come during a hot summer night and carry Vimla away in the cot when she is sleeping outside home. This time also Vimla acts cunningly and swings herself onto a low branch of a pomegranate tree. She is presented not only as a mentally wise personality but also a physically strong woman. Covering her face with the white sari she scares them under the guise of a ghost. She returns home safe while the thieves run non-stop and “never came back to trouble Vimla and her husband again” (16). She thus lives to be a better half of her husband complementing by all ways. None other than the gossip monger barber is saved from the downfall, for he is blessed with such a wise wife.

Hema Pande has picked the next tale from Norway; it is also about a poor wise girl Ingrid who evades her marriage with a very old merchant neighbour Squire Jensen by her sheer cleverness and it is aptly titled “The Merchant’s Bride”. She openly and courageously denies saying, “Do not be foolish. You are much old for me” (17). Being disappointed the merchant goes to her father Patterson to enter into a deal; he exploits Patterson’s poor economic condition and reminds him of his borrowing of three hundred Kroner and two cows: “If you can persuade your daughter to marry me, I will pay for the wedding and forget the debt. If not, I will take away your farm from you” (18). The merchant also wants to marry, for he feels bored of being alone for a longer life.

It is to be quoted here that no religion has dissuaded marriage: “Then the Lord God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him’ ” (Genesis 2:18). In the history of Norway too, it is believed that marrying for economic, social or political reasons would seem improper to most people: “Marriages are supposed to be romantic love matches between two individuals with similar values and perspectives” (everyculture.com). King Herald also wished to marry a commoner rather than seek a bride among the royal families of Europe. It is no wonder that the old merchant wants to get married and also the young Ingrid refuses to get married for economic reasons to unsuitable groom.

However, Patterson cannot help yielding to the mighty authority of Jensen. It is to be remembered that in every civilization acceptance of the evil, the cunning and the wicked is one of the many ways of managing the evil for a peaceful life. He insists his daughter to accept Jensen’s proposal. On the other hand, Ingrid very decisively replies, “I will never be his bride” (18). As a helpless father he becomes a victim to the situation. He manages to pull on by not allowing Jensen to meet Ingrid. He wants him to keep the wedding dress and the

crown at Jensen's place and send for his daughter. Jensen also arranges everything for the marriage and sends one of the farm boys to meet Patterson. Patterson never wants to break his promise and tells him that she is in the hayfield. The boy finds Ingrid and says, "I have come for what the squire and your father talked about" (19). It is evident that the boy does not know the bride and the clever Ingrid decides to play a joke on the squire. She says, "I hate to give her up, but if the squire wants my mare, then I will give her to him" (19). The mare is taken to the backdoor of the squire's mansion.

When the boy goes inside to announce the arrival of the mare the squire is in a hurry and simply asks, "Is she here?" and without allowing the boy time to talk about the mare asks him to "take her up the back stairs to the bedroom" (19). Einstein said, "Blind belief in authority is the greatest enemy of truth" and being blinded by authority Jensen strongly believes that his subordinators would have done everything properly and delivers command after command instructing, "Call my maids to help her dress. Ask no questions and tell the maids to be quick about it" (21). He does not even verify whether it is Ingrid who is really brought there. And when the horse is ready dressed up in bridal costume, again Jensen proudly says, "Bring her down, ask the musicians to play the wedding march and call the priest. Let the wedding begin" (21). This is how all proud authority will become sightless on their own and Old squire Jensen becomes "the laughing stock of the entire valley, and never again did he ask a young girl to be his bride" (21). While Jensen's pride and authority meet with terrible end Ingrid's cleverness gains victory. The learning aimed at through these characters is that one should not be a wanton malignancy (like Jensen) and at the same time one should act bold and wise (like Ingrid) not be timid and imprudently foolish (like Patterson) when there is an untoward menace. As a protector and preserver of family, Ingrid is most appreciated and to be emulated.

In both the folktales, there is portrayal of two women, one western and the eastern, who try to solve their problems through wisdom and the resultant earned strength. It is amazing to see how irrespective of the ethnic differences women are invariably endowed with instinctual astuteness and smartness. The *raison d'être* for such analogies has already been done by S.S. Prawar; his views on the three factors responsible for analogies between literary texts may be quoted:

Social (two societies may have reached a similar stage of development or find themselves faced with similar problems); Literary (at certain stages of their development a given genre may develop a dynamic

of its own and lead to similar development which then may, or may not, have been strengthened by direct contact with foreign models; and Psychological (the human mind has common ways of responding to common experiences; two authors may have a similar cast of mind). (56)

For the present study done the third factor is understood as the best way of reasoning out the analogy between moral and life values portrayed in folktales collected from different parts of the world.

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