

The Folk Art of Storytelling: The Narratives of Tejaji And Galaleng from the Oral Literature of Rajasthan

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ABSTRACT

While the tradition of literature in India is approximately 3500 years old, the history of printed literary texts to circulate among masses, is merely 200 years old. The Shift from the oral-aural era to the era of the printed word was the first technological transition in cultural scenario. Ever since literature has had its mutations. Storytelling has ever been at the core of every human expression. In the present world, storytelling has entered the phase which is marked by artificial intelligence, virtual reality and experiential art. This traversing has been tremendously fast and has given mankind a lot what is worth being called progress but at the same time it has distanced mankind from its roots. Today's literate world treats every story in strikingly different ways from the ways of the world of the folk. This paper aims at illustrating the elemental nature of folk storytelling through the two selected folk narratives from Rajasthan, the ballad of Galaleng and the ballad of Tejaji. These epic-length stories have been composed, transmitted and sung by unknown and almost illiterate authors and artists across generations. These stories have survived to deliver the eternal value systems. It comes in direct contrast with the modern storytelling which is more of a psychological and technological phenomenon, where imagination is given tacitly. In the folk storytelling mental faculties play the larger part whereas in the modern storytelling technology makes the greater imprint. The construction patterns of the folk stories which have no constraints of the idea of unity of time, place and action have also been analysed.

This paper also takes into account the present state of the dying orality with its richness and tries to highlight the need for technological intervention for recording, archiving and preserving these riches of immense value for the posterity.

Keywords

Storytelling, oral narratives, tradition, memory, folklore, technology, Tejaji, Galaleng, antifragility, digital orality.

Introduction

Holocaust Survivor and Noble laureate Elie Wiesel in his novel *The Gates of the Forest* says "God made man because He loves stories" (1995).

Let me tell you a story.

There was a city, very big, rich, prosperous and thriving. This city had its splendid journey of transformation from a hamlet into the present state. Here the people were very intelligent and creative. It had all that a modern city could boast of. This city had neatly developed habitats, planned systems and labyrinthine roads. Every system was made to perfection. People here were very aware of the rights and duties. And society was so much modern that they fully believed in individual dignity of the man. They all were so much aware of their privacy and rights that the slightest of extra movements by anyone into their space caused havoc in their minds. It was a truly cosmopolitan city.

There were a few people who had witnessed its journey from the beginning and that bunch of emotional minds regretted the loss of old times. Its tremendous development and consequent transformation had left certain scars on their memories. In its race and rush to develop and grow with the needs of the changing societal and cultural norms it had mutated itself so much, so many times that the original soul of the core hamlet was totally lost. And it also seemed oblivious of all that was there in that hamlet- the connection between individuals, the eternal message of humanity that the lives of people and the social fabric represented, the empathy, selfless sacrifice, loyalty, fraternity, solidarity and many more value systems that were at a loss. Not that these things were obliterated, but the changed and the incessantly progressive contexts had started redefining the perspectives.

Then as chance would have it, the city had to undergo a series of crises which would put to test the new systems. The city admins and the populace which had traversed fast from the old systems and values were caught off guard in facing the problems. Then it was felt apt to have the original systems in harmony with the newly developed systems. When asked for help the old bunch of emotional minds responded, "we have our own sense of work, ethics and help and with what we can do, the troubles will wash off." The co-existence of the old and the new was the solution. The growth, development and our own existence can become a burden if we are to uproot ourselves and to forget what we intrinsically are.

Friends, this city is Literature after the invention and the intervention of the printed word and the subsequent media and digital and virtual reality experiences and the old hamlet is the primary expression oral storytelling before the advent of the printing press.

1. The Connect between the Folk Stories and Literature

The art of storytelling has treaded the trajectory that began with cave paintings and gradually became a part of the social traditions with the evolution of language. Reinforcing the idea, Hurlburt & Voas (2011) observe that even the depiction of "gazelles and mastodons, represent the essence of the storyteller's art" and later on language made it an "aural activity" (4). They further state,

Significant cultural values were conferred through tribal storytelling. Over the centuries, legends arose that served as moral and ethical pointers for the cultures that spawned them. Stories, often increasingly embellished, were transmitted by word of mouth from

generation to generation, thus preserving the tribe's traditions, superstitions, and ways of life. Early man thus lived in acoustic space. (5)

Literature has ever been the pattern and canvas of individuals as creators. It has undergone mutations as a concept. Gradually with continuous mutations it became necessary to go down the memory lane. In order to connect the present with the roots it became essential to restore the snapped links with the accumulated riches of the centuries. It has expanded its compass to incorporate in its periphery the stories and values, the expressions of the folk and their respective culture. Literature has become more inclusive and it has been at the center of discussions among literati as a medium to explore the hitherto unheeded world of those who are not considered the intelligentsia, the simple and the ordinary, with all their cultural distinctness. This distinctness of the culture of the natives is now included into the mainstream of the literary studies in order to foreground the fundamental value system of the respective culture.

This paper aims to retell the until now less heeded stories of the two heroes who lived their breaths to be sung by the posterity and at the same time tries to differentiate the art of folk storytelling from the modern storytelling in terms of authorial and performative aspects, medium and functionality of components and narrative structures. This also aims to underline the need for preserving the oral storytelling traditions, that are endangered.

While perusing the literary historiography of the medium of storytelling Professor G.N. Devy (2011) observes, "While the literary tradition in India is about 3500 years old, the practice of putting the literary texts in the medium of print is barely 200 years old...The principal mode of literary transmission prior to the nineteenth century was oral (75).

2. Two Narratives in Context

Rajasthan has been known for its bhakti and shakti, with every inch of land, stories of bravery, sacrifice, chivalry, dignity and devotion are abounding. The land here has been wet more by blood than by water. I stand here to briefly narrate and analyse two narratives from the oral tradition of Rajasthan.

The first narrative is from the southern Rajasthan from the area known as Wagad. This land of aboriginals amid Aravali range with a populace of around 3.5 million people speaks Wagadi.

The ballad of Galaleng or Gulal Sing is the representative verse composition, that is very prominent Veer Rasa narrative in the oral tradition of Wagad region. History doesn't seem to have done justice to many of the monumental figures, yet the folk has kept them alive till date. They rule the minds and hearts of the folk defying death and forgetfulness. Galaleng is one of those legendary figures. This is a 1600 lines lyrical work. The narrative tells us of the kingly manners and attitudes, arrogance and royalty and of loyalty and sacrifice. It has the vision of social welfare. Gulal the hero visits the royalty of Mewar, claims an estate there and constructs a dam for his subjects. Later he is expelled from Mewar on some charges. He goes to Dungarpur and is received warmly there. His adventures across the region are detailed and his marriage that he is ready to postpone due to a call of duty for war is sung. The story has cruel scenes of violence and also the softness of love. It expresses the innate desire to love and to be loved in the brave heart and at the same time the desire to sacrifice the same desire for the patriotic feels. The song narrative depicts the Rajput culture and the brave Rajput feminine mindset that is ready to willingly and happily let their husbands go to war. In the song there are bravely fought battles, mesmerizing tales of attraction and of the will to submission, and there is also the dignity of the warrior who sheds the blood of his enemies and does not spare those who oppose his will and finally is sung as the hero in this folk oral tradition.

Another narrative that has been incorporated, plunges into the Bhakti. This is the ballad of the Jat hero Tejaji who was deified as the protector against snake bites. Tejaji ballad is an integral part of the rich folk oral tradition in Rajasthan. Tejaji is considered one of the eleven incarnations of Lord Shiva and worshipped as a deity. This ballad is sung particularly in western Rajasthan and in south eastern Rajasthan. This is also popular in Gujarat and Malwa region of Madhya Pradesh. Tejaji was wounded badly fighting with Minas who had stolen the cows of Jats and later he sacrificed his life by allowing a serpent to bite him on his tongue, as this was the only unwounded part on his body. This he did to keep his word given earlier to the serpent while he was on his way to bring his wife home. Tejaji's noble, self-sacrificial death raises him above the others because he did it for others' cause. This ballad has the elements of dignity of the self, public welfare, bravery, belief in human values, valor, attraction and repulsion of injustice. Herein one finds the social norms of castes, traditions and values. This ballad is also a fable that tells us of the sacrifice done to preserve the ideals. Here a tree, a snake and a mare speak in human language and at the Centre stage Tejaji functions as the epitome of human values. The depth of human values and philosophy is evident when all a tree (vegetation), a mare and a snake (Animals), and man all communicate to prove that all life forms are interrelated and interdependent and ultimately the different parts of the ultimate one single over soul. This is the message of all ancient Hindu scriptures.

3. Origin and Composition of Folk Narratives

These folk narratives have survived for centuries without ever having been transcribed into written form. Galaleng died somewhere between 1703 and 1730 and Tejaji's died somewhere around the end of thirteenth century. But they both have been living through all the time ever since in the minds of those who have founded their faith in them. The folk sings of them. Folk ballads are meant for the fulfillment of the religious, social, cultural and psychological needs of the folk. Folk stories take shape and manifests itself in different forms in different geography and times. Keeping the core elements of worship and miracle, folklore keeps on changing its expressionistic forms. This happens in accordance with local beliefs, events, validations and its soul is the flexibility. Across the journey the folk has woven its own sentiment at different places to suit to its demands. As to the narratives concerning the evolutions of folk deities and their life acts, folklorist Bhanawat (2004) observes,

We are unable to put the ends together when we try to think, in details, about the origin of form and beliefs related to the deities. But one thing is certain that folk might have generated some belief in order to see the completion of some work or fulfillment of some desire and with the passage of time got precipitated as deity". (n.d.)

This emphasizes the question of authorship of the folk stories, particularly of those which take the form of a tradition. These are composed by almost illiterate minds and this also becomes a tradition for centuries. Authors and singers for generations contribute to these song narratives and keep on adding the contemporary. What becomes irrelevant gets deleted. Elaborating upon the composition of the oral traditions of stories Devy (2011) observes, "The stories themselves are never without a motif of a long journey; they are stories that have travelled and gathered more stories around them on the way" (77). The singing of these narratives is also peculiarly memory based. Without having read any of the content, like the chants of Vedas these epic length sagas are sung mostly by illiterate artists. Both these aspects authorial and performative put folk narratives in sharp contrast with modern storytelling wherein authorship is scholarly, mostly individually fixed and elaborately psychological. The old traditions of the storytelling were made to impact masses over larger geography and greater time spans. They delivered universal, timeless values. It was primarily a community experience whereas the new stories are more inclined towards individualistic epiphanies and their diction has become more elaborate. These have grown time specific. There is a striking difference between the content and themes represented by characters. In traditional stories the characters were extraordinary gods/kings/heroes while in the new story the common man and his predicaments have got voice. These are more centered on the story instead of the inherent powers or capabilities of the character.

Then there is the difference in the medium and the impact. Modern stories increasingly have grown visual, digital and their telling is bolstered by technology. Stories told orally or read, require readers' imagination, whereas stories watched fill imagination. Gottschall (2012) opines, "The writer lays down the words, but they are inert. They need a catalyst to come to life. The catalyst is readers' imagination" (VI).

This story watching has presented a threat to the oral storytelling. Storytelling has ever been the centre stage of every human expression but the traversing in the past 200 years, especially in past 75 years has been so tremendous and so varied that now "the page has simply been supplanted by the screen" (VI).

The structural perspective in the folk narratives is strikingly different from the modern narratives. Their peculiar feature of construction of space and images gives the impression of hallucinations. In the composition and performance of any verbal matter of a narrative the artists use a very flexible framing. They may begin from an everyday trivial event and "even in the narrative itself ...there is no attempt made to follow a sequence. The episodes retold and the images recreated take on the apparently chaotic shapes of dreams. In the Adivasi Ramayana, one can find a sudden and surprising appearance of an episode from Mahabharata... Yet one would be wrong in assuming that Adivasi art do not employ any ordering principals. On the contrary there are very strict ordering principals. The most important among these is 'tradition'. Though a casual spectator does not notice it, every Adivasi performance and creation has, as a pre-text another such performance or creation belonging to a previous occasion. The creativity of the Adivasi artists lies in adhering to the past and at the same time slightly but definitely subverting it. The subversions are more playful than ironic. Playfulness, indeed is the soul of the Adivasi art" (Devy, 71). There we find there different versions of the ballads of Galaleng and Tejaji and in every performance of the story the narrator contributes something of his own and of the age he belongs to.

We are here and the discourse is the future of storytelling. In every area of human activity, whatever endeavor is made with the objective of progression or heading towards the future, future becomes the enemy of the past. History is replete with this. Cave paintings became obsolete with the advent of languages. Orality of 5000 years suffered when printed word was invented. Print industry declined with the advent of visual impact in motion pictures and when digital technology arrived on the scene all other scenes seemed a distant history. Even the digital world is creating new technologies and methods at a great pace. The technological intervention and societal changes and other forces of modernization are rapidly wiping out the oral tradition and culture. Famous English literary critic T.S. Eliot posits, "Though the English tradition generally upholds the belief that art progresses through change – a separation from tradition, literary advancements are instead recognized only when they conform to the tradition" (Eliot, 1920). For Eliot, the term "tradition" means a special and complex character and "It represents a "simultaneous order," by which Eliot means a historical timelessness – a fusion of past and present – and, at the same time, a sense of present temporality. The introduction of a new work alters the cohesion of this existing order, and causes a readjustment of the old to accommodate the new. The inclusion of the new work alters the way in which the past is seen; elements of the past that are noted and realized. In Eliot's own words, "What happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art that preceded it" (Eliot, 1920). These two narratives and many such others follow the theory of the historical present and the also the thought of the timeless and the temporal together wherein we find that they survive with sheer vitality and thrive in the new contexts. This is the inherent characteristic of the traditional narratives to give the masses their message anew in every generation, while keeping the core spirits intact.

Nassim Nicholas Taleb, a Lebanese-American, focuses on problems of randomness, probability, and uncertainty. In his book *Antifragile*, Taleb posits 'Antifragility' as a property of systems that increase in capability, resilience, or robustness as a result of stressors, shocks, volatility. In the introduction to this book he says, "Some things benefit from shocks; they thrive and grow when exposed to volatility, randomness and disorder... Yet, in spite of the ubiquity of the phenomenon, there is no word for the exact opposite of fragile. Let us call it anti-fragile." "Antifragility is beyond resilience or robustness. The resilient resists shocks and stays the same; the anti-fragile gets better. This property is behind everything that has changed with time: evolution, culture, ideas, revolutions, political systems, technological innovation, culture and economic success...even our own existence as a species on this planet" (Taleb, Prologue). As Taleb explains in his book, antifragility is elementally different from the concepts of resilience that stands for the ability to recover from failure; and robustness that as a characteristic, stands for the ability to resist failure. As we can see the incessant flow of the oral tradition across centuries and their ever renewable faculties they have the faculty of robustness and resilience. That it can resist any adversity and sustain. It maintains its original spirit and makes its journey effectual. The last of all, the quality of antifragility that it can actually benefit from the adverse impact of technological storm of modern entertainment is to be pondered upon. These oral narratives have survived but at the same time have suffered a lot at the hands of visual and digital technologies. The artists and performers have become so few that these narratives are dying. The conditions of survival for the artists have forced them to other occupations and this has obstructed the flow of the narratives as traditions.

The Greek philosophical treatise of “Panta Rhei” meaning “Life is a Flux” by Heraclitus states that change is the only constant in human existence. That things are the ‘same’ in that they are all subject to change. Transition has been recognized as the ultimate condition of human existence. Despite that human mind desperately tries to create the notions of the changeless and oscillates between the theories of kshara and akshara. God or divinity stands for freedom from the laws of transition. All this philosophical discourse has the notion of flowing time at its backdrop. Every culture, every philosophy has had a rich discourse on this school of thought of the imperishable and the perishable. Underlining the relevance of the folklore and its elements that represent the archetypal creations and universality of the same, of the eternal message of the mortality and morality that subsists in these narratives Devy expounds “The prerogative to conceptualize eternal Time is not the philosopher’s alone. Ordinary people throughout human history, have agitated against the transience of body and matter by actively generating folklore related to immortality and eternity. In this universal space of folklore reside all our ghosts, genii, snakes that live for centuries, nymphs, gnomes, rakshasas, gandharvas and all para-psychic beings that defy the laws of death” (152). This is the responsibility of the present literati to endeavor to make the perishing stories prolong their lives. Undoubtedly things change and come to an end, yet what has presented a threat to its life may prolong its life. Shelly in his poem prays the West Wind as “Destroyer and Preserver” to save the potential of life in the things that it destroys, the same is the case where the technologically innovative methods and mediums of modern storytelling that take the and extend the minds to new horizons, can prolong the life of oral narratives by conserving them in digital form. The need of the hour is to help sustain these dying narratives and by recording, archiving in digital formats and by making them available for times to come to the posterity. May be that there would be times when digital world would have human sensations and robots and computers would have feelings, until then the digital people must strive to digitize human experiences. If technology supports human life’s basic systems, it proves itself. Digital orality is the new format that awaits the attention of the literati. I want to end my statement here with a note to value tradition in its true spirit and keeping it alive to provide a background to the future. We never reach anywhere without keeping in mind where from we started and how we reached there. We have to value the riches of centuries in order to create worth for upcoming centuries.

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