

Wilderness as Refuge: A Study of A K Ramanujan's Folktales of India

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Abstract: Folklore is also termed as Folk literature, which consists of varieties of other forms like, folktales, folk plays, folksongs etc. The term 'Folklore' split into 'Folk' and 'lore' clearly describes its meaning as beliefs in the form of myth, legend or stories passed on from one generation to the other. Where 'Folk' stands for people and 'lore' indicates the traditions passed on from one person to other. These folklores exist from time immemorial and follow oral tradition. Folktales are the popular stories that have eternally flowed from the ancestors to the new generation. Thus they encompass the culture, value system, tradition and beliefs of older human societies. Re-reading of folktales will lead to better understanding of Indian ideology towards many entities including representation of wilderness/forest.

In order to understand the representation of wilderness/forest in Indian folktales I have chosen A.K. Ramanujan's *Folktales from India* consisting of more than hundred Indian folktales from different parts of India and translated from twenty two different languages. This collection includes the tales which teach moral skills required to lead a happy and truthful life along with establishing a clear imagery of ancient India and its tradition. The paper will attempt an in depth reading of the selected folktales to understand ancient India's perspective about wilderness.

Keywords/Phrases: Indian Folklore, Folktales, Folktales from India, Representation of Wilderness

Folktales: An Important Cultural Carrier

Folktales are one of the most important categories of art forms listed under the broad umbrella term 'Folklore' also known as 'Folk Literature'. Folktales uphold the oral tradition of India with no written language, yet have existed since time immemorial. It becomes humanly impossible to trace the authors of these folktales because they are passed on from one generation to the other through word of mouth. One of the unique features of folktales is its fluid orality making it unlike written literature which is rigid, once written it becomes a document that is not modified on a day to day basis and folktales rejuvenate spontaneously on a regular basis, while getting passed on from older generation to the new. Though literature of any form takes its birth from real life, oral literature comes closer and interwoven with real life in comparison to written literature. The culture, tradition, attitudes, habits, way of life and rituals of any given place and time is reflected crystal clear in the oral tales belonging to the period. Most of the folktales are didactic in nature and their prime focus is to convey the art of leading an ethical, moral, truthful and conscious life. These folktales play an important role in constructing cultural values of specific ethnic groups, as these stories are embedded with high cultural quotient and narrated by people representing the ethnic group that they belong to, it shapes the understanding of the entire community which believes in the given set of values propagated through folktales.

Thus, study of folktales has gained much importance as it deals with understanding the ethnic groups and their ideologies. Written literature serves to be highly useful in this regard, as it accumulates the oral tales and preserves it through inscribing it and thus making it available for critical study. It is also a means of preserving oral tradition of the past. Indian folklore is a repository of innumerable myths and legends encompassing moral values of the ancient India and at the same time creating the traditional values of the present day.

Forests in Indian writing in English and Indian Folktales:

Forests have always been one of the important sources of energy in all Indian folktales, myths and legends. Ancient India has been a witness for the power of wilderness and Indian concept of wilderness is different from that of colonizers concept of wilderness. Indian writing in English includes nature writings from Jim Corbett and Kenneth Anderson, which undoubtedly portray wilderness in the lines of John Muir, Henry David Thoreau and Wordsworth as it does not have its own tradition of nature writing. They aped the idea of nature as sublime from their English counterparts and pictured wilderness in its sublime state as shadowy, dark, trembling and dreaded. Sublime arouse a feeling of astonishment and horror though is admired for its vastness and power. It is here we can note the difference between sublime and beautiful. The idea behind beautiful was only limited to arouse pleasure unlike sublime. Feminist critics show us how sublime is attributed to masculine and beautiful to feminine. This provided one of the reasons for excluding women from wild encounters. Though the terminologies like wilderness, sublime and beautiful are gendered, the experiences of sublime are not gendered.

The sublime wilderness found its literary base especially in romantic poetry. The most famous nature imagery of Scottish Highlands, Lake District and English mountains are derived from ancient European sublime archetypes. Sublime resorts to a large degree of terror to induce spiritual bewilderment and at the same time is vulnerable to cultural and technological changes and advancement. For example, once the sublime European mountains are now taken over by roads, trains and ski-lifts rendering sublime as tamable.

The new writers deny wilderness to be a place of sublime or recreation. They bring to forefront the risk of commodification of wilderness as 'wild and free'; for example the advertisement of a car showing grasslands devoid of human existence. The main reason for the same is the very construct of nature and culture, wilderness and civilization in opposition to each other. The new writers bring in the idea of bringing nature close to home, to avoid the much hyped inclination of urban mass towards wilderness leading to its ultimate destroy or ecological problems. Thus, the new canon of wilderness considers humans as part of nature and not separate from it.

On the other hand, Indian folktales do not portray nature or wilderness as the other or a separate entity. Instead folktales exhibit a grand show of the harmonious relationship between human beings and nature and the base ideas of many modern-day scientific innovations are drawn from the images presented in ancient Indian folktales. Forests are often seen as a place of refuge in the Indian folktales, myths and legends. One of the best examples can be Ramayana, which takes place in various jungles of India. Both Rama and Sita being safe in the lap of jungle, it is the forest that consoles Sita when she is rendered alone after her abduction by Ravana, it is the forest that provides the much-needed support to Rama to win over Ravana and it is the forest again that becomes an important image throughout Ramayana. Similarly, the usage of forest and wilderness imagery can be seen in Mahabharata as well. The image of wilderness as a place of refuge is not limited to the epics Ramayana and Mahabharata but is very much an essential aspect of many ancient Indian folktales. A close reading of A.K. Ramanujan's *Folktales from India* will help us understand the representation of wilderness in the folktales of India.

Representation of wilderness in A.K. Ramanujan's *Folktales from India*:

A.K. Ramanujan born in Mysore, India in the year 1929 is an eminent Indian poet, folklorist and a translator whose contribution is immense in the field of cultural studies. A close reading of the selected tales from his collection *Folktales from India* helps one to locate the position of nature in ancient Indian folktales. This collection consists of hundred and eleven tales that speak about seven basic categories like man, woman, family, super natural, humour, metafiction and animal tales. Irrespective of the category we pick to study, one can clearly view a specific representation of wilderness. The four selected tales include *A Flowering Tree*, *Acacia Trees*, *The Pomegranate Queen* and *The Princess of Seven Jasmine* to analyze the representation of nature or wilderness as a place of refuge.

To begin with the first tale *A Flowering Tree* we get to see a girl who transforms herself into a flowering tree in order to help her mother who toils all day long to make the ends meet. We see that the younger sister transforms into a flowering tree temporarily and the elder sister plucks the fragrant flowers, which they sell and earn secretly to surprise their mother. This boon of temporarily transforming into a flowering tree gains the attention of the prince and the younger sister is married to the prince. Though she faces difficulties at palace by her sister-in-law due to the same boon of being able to transform into a fragrant flowering tree, it is the same ability that provides her the strength to survive and reunite with the lost prince. Thus, tree here acts as a symbol of mother nature, which provides shelter to the girl and protects her from the misfortune. Thus, forest can be understood not just as a place of magic or supernatural powers, instead as a place of refuge. At the same time the tale brings out the relationship between a woman and nature, where both suffer in the hands of male chauvinistic anthropocentrism. Throughout the tale the girl makes it a point to request the people around her to handle the

flowering tree gently while plucking the flowers, else it would harm her when she transforms back as a real woman. This indicates that the nature is entitled to receive tender care from human beings who reap its benefits. At the same time nature provides shelter and care for the helpless woman in the tale.

In the story, *Acacia Trees* we get to see the only daughter of the gowda (landlord) being fancied by her brother and he seeks to marry her. The family heeding to the fancy of the son arrange the marriage between the sister and brother knowing its incestuous implications. Throughout the preparations of the marriage, the girl is cautiously kept unaware of her wedding with her brother. But, she learns about the fact that, she was about to get married to her brother from neighbor Obamma. Immediately we see the girl taking rescue or refuge in the acaia tree grown in her front yard in order to escape from the plight of marrying her brother. The girl is not successful in fleeing from the marriage and thus both the girl and her brother die due to drowning in the well. Yet, we see that the girl returns in the form of bullock's fruit from the tree that grew over her mound and the cruel brother turns out to be a thorn bush. Nature becomes a safe resort for the girl who wanted to move away from the incestuous relationship that was forced upon her by her own family members. Though her parents did not come for the support of the righteous girl, nature stands as a strong support to the girl, symbolizing nature as refuge again.

The Pomegranate Queen serves as another wonderful example to show wilderness as a force that protects woman in need. Here the father kills his daughter who was unyielding towards alliances brought forward by the father. As a result, she is killed, cut into pieces and buried in the backyard. Father is successful in convincing his wife that their daughter died due to a contagious disease, thus had to be buried immediately and her body couldn't be preserved till the mother came back from the neighboring village. Though the daughter is brutally killed by her father, she finds refuge in the lap of mother nature. Daughter is reborn in the pomegranate tree that grows above her place of burial. She becomes the queen of that pomegranate tree whose beauty is unmatched even with the angels of the heaven and is found playing veena (musical instrument) during night in the pomegranate flower. She comes to the sight of Indra's son (lord of heaven) who eventually marries her. We see that the girl happily marries the man of her choice in the refuge of wilderness which is unlike her brutal father. This symbolizes nature as providing justice to those in need of it.

Finally, in the tale *The Princess of Seven Jasmines* the troubled prince sets out to free his kingdom infested with snakes. He is not only successful in bringing back the lost peace of his kingdom but also wins over the most beautiful princess who weighed not more than seven jasmines. Forest becomes the centre of this tale as the prince meets the seven hooded snake king who gives the task of bringing jasmine flower that would fall from the mouth of the princess when she laughed. In order to complete the task and make his kingdom devoid of snakes that threatened his subjects, the prince takes up an adventurous journey in the forest where he saves ants and a demon who eventually help him to win over the princess of seven jasmines. Forest symbolizes itself as a place of heterogeneity and a place of refuge for the prince who set out to find solution to the problem that was troubling his kingdom.

Conclusion:

Wilderness in ancient Indian folktales is not a sublime entity or a place of horror. Instead it is inclusive of everyday aspects of nature ranging from a plant, tree, flower to the forest untouched by civilization. Wilderness acts as one of the important symbols in folktales across India, as ancient India was a pagan society, its roots show an inseparable relation between humans and nature. Thus, through the analysis of Indian folktales one can easily spot the difference between western idea of wilderness and ancient Indian idea of wilderness. The selected few from A.K. Ramanujan's *Folktales from India* depict wilderness as a refuge as folklore is all about the life of agrarian settlements. Study of folktales will lead to better understanding of culture and tradition of ancient India which was primarily close to nature and wilderness unlike today's affiliation towards western scientific terms. Hence the re-reading of these folktales with a new lens to understand the context serves in understanding our culture and tradition holistically.

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