The Concept of Folklore: An Overview of the Psychoanalytic Reading of Folklores

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Stories have always found a special place in every society and a story teller has had listeners hung on to his or her every word breathlessly for ages. These stories were of myriad quality ranging from comic to heroic, from fables featuring animal as anthropomorphic to fantasy with goblins and fairies. The term folklore or folk tale is used in English to refer to fairy tales in English such as Cinderella or snow White. Folk Tales in the broader sense of the term includes all forms of prose narrative, written or oral which are handed down through generations. The modern story telling differs from the traditional folk tale in one important aspect. The modern storyteller emphasizes on the originality of the material. Whereas the teller of the folk tale prides on the fact that he or she can pass down the folklores almost verbatim. The folk teller can also uses their own embellishment in the tale in order to mesmerize their audience. It is therefore difficult to separate the oral from the written in folk tale because it travels mostly orally and no folk tale can be traced back to any one writer. Which is to say that maybe the oral stories need not have been always oral. But once the story teller or the raconteur recites it in the public, it becomes more of something to tell to the listener and not something to be read. Historically these public spaces where raconteur and poets recited the popular tales, been the major source of entertainment for the general public. Ancient Greek performed popular plays for the public and there was a stress on the oral recitation and the concept of catharsis or the purgation of the feelings of pity and fear. This art of story telling is not bound by any segment of the society or civilization but is ubiquitously present. It is older than history itself and it travels orally through continents and through space and time. It may differ from place to place but it exists to fulfill one social function and an important human need, which is entertainment. There also exist a curiosity about history or the legends. The oral recitation of heroic tales and legends lend an almost pride like quality among the listeners. The legends of the heros are mostly about their tribes or society and they represent the ideals of honour, pride and virtue for the entire tribe. India as a diverse and culturally rich county has written literature going thousands of years back before Homer. Folklore as a new field of learning emerged, relatively new in the nineteenth century when the scholars both in England and Germany began to observe closely at the cultural ways of the lower classes. The Grimm brothers began publishing volumes of oral folk narratives and the interpretation of German mythology. The term initially used for this field was ‘Popular antiquity’, which later proved to be too cumbersome to use and at the suggestion of William John Thomas the term “Folklore” was adopted in 1846. The term folklore in the present time has come to be a whole field of learning, research and subject matter of the field. The field of folklore or folk life studies constitutes firstly and primarily of oral literature also known as verbal art or expressive literature. This stands for those oral literature either spoken or sung or voiced forms of traditional utterances showing a repetitive pattern. The folksongs or folktales circulate by worth of mouth and without any authorship. Unlike the author and their printed works (since the printed literature was born), folktales does not boast of any particular copyright. One of the glaring examples is of the recitation of Ramayana, a mythological folk tale that dominates the cultural as well as the religious sensibilities of the Indian subcontinent. The narration of Ramayana is carried mostly through oral recitations and carries a gamut of proverbs and various aspects of folk and cultural behavior. Now Ramayana also seems to embrace the local and the cultural aspect of the region that it is orally transmitted to. Ravana, the king of Lanka who abducts Sita, wife of the protagonist Ram is celebrated and worshipped in present Sri Lanka and by the Betul tribals in Madhya Pradesh in India. But elsewhere, Ravana is burned in a symbolic gesture of the defeat of evil in the rest of the country. Coming back to the research and scholarship aspect of this field, there are many current theories of folk tale namely Historical-geographic, Ideological, Functional, Psychoanalytical, structural, Cross cultural, Contextual etc. The scholars of folk lore attempts to study the similarity among the folk tales of the world and also to understand the nuances of the oral tradition. To a scholar of folk tale the problems of interpreting and studying Folk tales present its own different challenges. There is problem of understanding the origin of the folk tale
followed by deciphering if the folk tale have any hidden
significance or not. The folklorist also wrestle with the
issue of dissemination and the variations of the folk tales
which are present around the world, they strive to
understand the historical occurrence of this dissemination.

In this paper we are going to delve deeper and probe the
psychoanalytic theory of folklore. It has been considered
as the most speculative of all the theories mentioned and
was not seen very kindly by the orthodox or traditionalist
Folklorist. The nineteenth century reading of Folk tales
resulted in glorifying the history for the sake of national
glory / greatness or glorifying the deeds of national
heroes. In its budding form it was a new field of
imaginative research and a form of national pride. But
soon it took on a extreme form dovetailing with
aggressive nationalism and virulent political ideology as
seen in Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia in the 20th
century.

The Psychoanalytic theory replaced the symbols of
divinity and heavenly phenomenon with sexual
symbolism. The Psychoanalytic theory had been proposed
by Dr Sigmund Freud at the turn of the 20th century.
From Totem to Taboo (1913-14) to Future of an Illusions
(1927) and Civilizations and its Discontents (1930) Freud
sought to trace the complex and contradictory relationship
that an individual has with the social forces and how
those forces shape his/ her desire and psyche. Sigmund
Freud depended heavily on myths, taboos, fairytales to
support his theory and his research into the subconscious
mind. In the “Interpretation of Dreams”(1900) he
presented his thesis that dreams of an individual represent
or express the latent repressed wishes and fears of
infantile sexuality in symbolic gestures. Then the dreams
were equated with myths and other kinds of folklore and
were subjected to similar interpretation. If the dreams
represented the repressed infantile desire of an individuals
then myths holistically represented the repressed psyche of
the childhood of the race. In the 19th century the myths
and folk tale exhibited the heavenly battle between the sun
and night, light and darkness, thunderstorm and morning
light. With the advent of the Psychoanalytical theory, the
myths were now a striving between the male and the
female. The hero –Achilles , Perseus , Theseus-
represented the phallus and the enveloping light stood for
the womb. Thus in the Freudian terms the male genital
was symbolized by sticks, tress, umbrellas, pencils, hammers , umbrellas etc. The female genital is
represented in the same manner by caves, bottles , boxes,
doors, gardens, flowers etc. The dreams or fairytales
about dancing, riding, climbing, flying signified sexual
 Gratification. Interestingly hairfalling off symbolized
castration.

In the myth of Oedipus, Freud illustrated his
psychoanalytical theory. The myth according to Freud
exposes the dark repressed desire of incest and dreams of
slaying his father. Oedipus is a Greek tragic hero and the
legend of Oedipus is a tragic one, where he slays ,
unknowingly his own father and marries his birth mother.
On being aware of the truth he blinds himself our of sheer
shock and grief. To quote Richard M.Dorson “ in
the myth of Oedipus, Freud found a superlative illustration of
mythical narrative that exposes the dark suppressed
desires and drives of the children grown to adults. The
boy-child loves his mother incestuously and dreams of
slaying his father, in Oedipus Rex, his dreams are
grievously fulfilled.”

After Freud, many of his followers continued the process
of enriching communication or relation between folklore
and psycho-analysis. Ernest jones (1879-1959) wrote an
extensive treatise on folk beliefs. “On The Nightmare”(1959), which dealt with the figures of
medieval demon, vampires, werewolves, incubus etc. In
this terrain of monster which are the stuff of nightmare,
jones perceived a direct relationship between the infantile
fantasies and folk lore. The figure of witch according to
jones is an exteriozation of a woman about herself and her
mother and a witches’ sexual relation with the Devil was
supposedly about a women’s incestuous fantasy . in the
similar vein the trope of vampire and its blood sucking
activities point to a repressed oral sadism . “ The devil ,
whose phallic symbolism is evident in his frequent
identification with a snake , is a father figure incarnating
two repressed wishes , the desiers of the son to both
imitate and defy his father.” aCCORDING TO jones
repressed incestuous emotions were tied up with these
belief and were a result of the Oedipus complex . The
strict patriarchal and ascetic influence of the Church
helped to foster there repressed emotions associated with
these folk lore.

German born author and lecturer Erich Fomm adds his
own dimension to the traditional oedipus complex as
illustrated by Freud. In his primer published in 1934
called the “ The forgotten language”, he points out at the
universal symbolism in the mythical relations and the
figures of folklore. He brings the Oedipus complex to a
full circle by suggesting that the myth dramas are actually
a struggle between the patriarchal domination of the
Creon (Ruler of Thebes in the legend of Oedipus) and the
Matriarchal order represented by Antigone ( daughter of
Oedipus and his mother Jocasta) and supported by
Oedipus , who consumed by grief and subsequently dies
in the grove dedicated to Goddess Furies. Applying his
reading to the fable of Red Riding hood, where the
Freudian reading was of a maiden straying from the path
of virtue and being seduced by the wolf symbolizing the
man as the red cap is the menstrual symbol. Fromm reads
the story different, where the wolf displays a pregnancy
envy when he fills his stomach or womb with the girl and
the grandmother and is punished when the Red riding
Hood stows stones which is a symbol of sterility in his
insides. The tale is presented as a tussle between a man
and a woman who hates men and also abhors sex.
C.S Jung, after severing his professional relationship
with Freud established his own school of analytical psychology
in Switzerland. He and his followers rejected the name
and the sexual symbolism of the psychoanalysis. But from
the view of the folklore both have a lot in common.
Firstly folklore forms an important part of their discipline.
Secondly both interpret folklore and fairy tales with the
help of symbolism. If Freud pairs the opposite like male-
female, phallus-vagina, in clear sexual terms Jungs uses
the terms consciousness-unconsciousness. Life-Death,
God-Satan. What is common between them is the use of
consciousness, which is the key concept in their
interpretation. Jung uses the term collective consciousness
as opposed to the personal consciousness used by Freud.
And by this term he had something deeper in mind.
According to Jung all men shared in the collective
consciousness whose content he termed as archetypes.
These archetypal dreams emerged from the central or
master mold of the collective unconsciousness and
sometimes becomes a part of the personal
unconsciousness. These archetype represented a form
rather than content.

One sees this relationship in the dual nature of the
mythological figure like the Greek Gods who were both
helpful and spiteful at the same time. Jung frequently
employed folklore in his writings. In one of his last work
he wrote on a modern phenomenon which has folkloric
implications, Unidentified Flying Objects. He explained
these sightings through the deep seated anxieties of the
people of the earth who want to transcend their earthly
boundaries or rather escape from it. One of the other
important essays Jung had written is on the figure of the
trickster in the essay “The trickster, a Study in the
American Indian Mythology” (1956). According to Jung a
trickster is a a God, animal and man at the same time,
nested with superhuman powers and is simultaneously
divine, bestial and superhuman.

Psychoanalytic analysis involves the interpretation of the
symbols in the tales to reflect the collective consciousness
of the people. This interpretation studies a cultural folk
tale to interpret the psyche of its people. Psychoanalysis
offers deeper insight into the cultural and psychological
aspect of the folklowl as it attempts to decipher the
symbolic meaning inherent in the folk tales. This
approach not only helps to understand the tales but also
the people by applying the concept of sexuality, power
and gender relations. The knowledge and learning of
people can be deciphered through the process of
psychoanalysis where one can understand the hopes,
aspiration and the psychological makeup of the people.
Folk tales are the products of the human imagination
, creativity and also reflects the unconscious needs of the
society. Primarily among them is the wish fulfillment and
the folk tales reflects this unconscious need. Folk tales
such as Cinderella or Hansel and Gretel demonstrates the
overcoming of goodness over persistent wickedness. In
India the panchtantra tales or the Jakarta tales are avidly
read and recited by all sections of the society. These
Panchtantra tales has the animal as the lead characters and
the tales always has a moral lesson at the heart of the it.
The legend about Panchtantra dates back to Ancient India
where a King appointed a teacher Vishnu Sharma to
educate his indifferent and lazy sons. In order to pique
their interest in learning, he crafted these tales with a
strong moral lesson at the end of each tale. The Monkey
and the Crocodile tale could glean several lessons from
the stories such choosing one’s companion carefully as
demonstrated. Each tale has a lesson that builds up a
strong individual, which in turns contributes to the
building up of the community. The psychoanalytic
reading of the folk tale helps to understand the collective
consciousness of the society and ultimately helps in the
understanding of the human problems and builds a better
social understanding.

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