

ISSN: 0976-8165

THE CRITERION

An International Journal in English

BI-MONTHLY REFEREED AND INDEXED, OPEN ACCESS E-JOURNAL

The Criterion



October 2014 Vol. 5, Issue-5

5th Year of Open Access



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Irula Folk Tales

Dr. Pauline Das
Associate Professor
Dept. of English
Karunya University
Coimbatore
&
L. Mohan Raj
II M.A English
Karunya University

What is folk tales?

A folktale is a type of traditional story that tries to explain a story element attached to the common folk or which teaches some good to help people behave well in the world. “Such stories usually are fiction - based with magical or supernatural elements, and they often are woven around talking animals, royalty, peasants or mythical creatures. Initially passed down through oral tradition, they were a major means of educating people and were also a means of entertaining people prior to the development of printed materials and modern technologies” (www.wisegees.org, 2014). Folk tales have remained instrumental in preserving the culture in which they had developed.

Main Characteristics

Stories that fall into the category of folk tales generally exhibit some very distinguishable characteristics. They traditionally feature fantastic elements or magic. “They are usually short, often taking just a few minutes to tell or read, and the plots often are melodramatic in nature, featuring a conflict between a hero and villain where everything ends happily, good triumphs and justice properly is served” (www.wisegeek.org, 2014).

Another trait of a folktale is that it survives through multiple generations. Initially, people passed down these stories orally, and this method of sharing the tales often resulted in more than one version of the same story developing. “Even so, the heart of the plots and the reasons for telling them typically remain the same, mirroring the values and culture of the society from which they originated”.

Realism and Purpose

The people, places and events depicted in these stories are largely imaginary. They are connected closely to legends. However, people sometimes tend to believe at least one aspect or character in these tales as real.

Folktales almost always provide some practical or moral lesson. It can explain how something works or came into being. For example, “some of the stories teach the lesson that being willing to work and thinking critically about how to prepare can protect someone against intruders or general danger. The fact that people can derive and apply practical meaning from the characters and plots is part of what makes them so popular and enduring” (www.wisegees.com, 2014)..

Before the internet, newspapers, radio, television and other types of media, people relied on storytellers for both entertainment and education.. Further, people needed ways to preserve their cultures. Folktales met all these needs, providing long-lasting lessons.

Authorship

With oral tradition carrying these folktales from generation to generation and place to place, tracing an original author is difficult. “Most of the time, they are labeled either as "anonymous" or "traditional," but occasionally, specific versions sometimes have attributions that note the person or group of people who wrote down or preserved, which helps keep the different arrangements of the same stories straight” (www.wisegees.org, 2014)

Importance of Folk Tales

A folk tale has an important role in knowledge transfer and personality development. It also has power to influence a person’s perception, attitude, behavior, and many other factors important to human’s life as well as the society.

Folk tales help people to better understand general conditions of human since folk tales are sources of constructed perceptions, beliefs, paradigm, fear, fun, formality, and others. Folk tales are implicitly regarded as a boundary of people in the society to perceive whether things are right or wrong. Even the state’s law could not equally force the minds of human. The reason is that people have been raised with such discipline since their childhood (Prayoon Songsin, 1999, p.6) .

Folk tales enable human to learn local lifestyles by considering that the folklore is a living basis of a particular nation or a group of people. Folk tales are national heritage and culture.

They are stories about human’s ways of lives in each nation or language and have traditionally been followed through generations. Folk tales are both arts and sciences. Being the origin of various sciences has even more widened learning in other fields of study. Folk tales bring people’s pride of their locality so that they would perceive that they have something in common. Such attitudes greatly lead to people’s unity and harmony. Folk tales are sources of entertainment for human (www.thaifolk.com, 2012)

Irula Folktales:

Irula folktales are called as the ‘revival folktales’ because they portray the real life of their forefathers. These folktales talk about adventure and morality. Some of the stories are real stories of the tribe. All the stories are based on Irula religion and power. The stories reveal their culture and beliefs. An outline of some of the Irula folk tales are given below.

Luck and Success favour the Discarded:

This story reveals that polygamy is neither a sin nor a social taboo with the Irulas. Good, generous, hard working and shrewd people are held in high esteem. Ungratefulness and evil plotting are punished.

This is the story of goddess Parvati taking care of an abandoned child. The goddess arranged a small honeycomb with sweet honey dripping into the child’s mouth, and a five-rupee note to appear every day under its cradle. One day the child’s mother came to see her baby and

saw the money, she took the child, bathed it, and brought it home. When the husband saw the money, he agreed that they should keep the child and bring it up, and so they did. A fine boy he became, and the time came for him to be married. They found for him a girl as poor as they were, gave him a horse, and sent the two to work on the barren, dry land that belonged to them.

On their way they meet a cloth merchant. The boy, who had received from his mother some of the five rupee notes found under his cradle, bought a new dress for his wife. Then a comb vendor came, and the girl got a new comb from her husband. Then, as they went on, they met a jeweler. Finally he bought for his wife a sari for one hundred rupees, such a good boy he was!

Near the field where they worked stood a house inhabited by a dancer who made her living by stringing and selling flowers. The boy became friendly with the dancer, learned how to string flowers into various garlands and bouquets, and joined the dancing woman, somewhat neglecting his wife. The princess of that kingdom was so enchanted with the patterns of the flower garlands that she resolved to find out who was the skillful garland maker. So she and her father took a ride. As soon as she saw the garland making boy, she became completely infatuated with him. Secretly she had a shelter made near his field and abandoning her honor and position became his sweet heart.

However there was the wife, abandoned and furious. She decided to kill both the princess and the garland making dancer. She caught hold of the human root, made an effigy from the tuber, endowed it magically with life, and then destroyed it first as a sacrifice to kill the flower girl. And indeed at the moment of the curse, the flower selling girl died. However, all the others, the boy, the princess, and the king got together and decided to destroy the witch. They killed her and thus the princess and the boy survived and lived well together.

This story may sound immoral from our point of view, but not from the tribal standpoint. Polygamy is neither a sin nor a social taboo with the Irulas. The story's message is clear; the boy was good, generous, hard working, and also shrewd. Luck and success are with the offspring who is either unwanted or seemingly unworthy; ungratefulness and evil plotting are punished. (Zvelebil, 1973).

A Widow's Clever Son

A fairy tale more complex but also much more charming is the story of a widow's clever son. A widow worked for daily wages that were the exact equivalent of one measure of millet flour. She made 'dosas' and fed herself and her son. One day, while she went to fetch water, a beggar came to the village and the poor widow's son gave him the two dosas as alms. When the mother returned, there was nothing to eat, but the boy said that since she always taught him that by giving alms one earns merit, he shall go that day itself to see God and ask him for boon.

And he went. On his way, he stretched out under a mango tree that was full of fruits, but they were unripe, and no one, not even a bird or a monkey, could eat them. The boy was hungry. When the boy complained that the tree could not throw even a single fruit to him, the tree answered that its fruits never ripen. The boy told the tree that he was going to see God and ask for boons, and he will ask God what was wrong with the tree. And he went.

On his way he saw a lame horse who begged him to ask the lord why he was lame. The boy promised to ask and went on. On his way he saw people building a bridge over a large river. Although they had tried for fifteen years, the bridge always collapsed and they could not finish it. The boy promised to enquire and find out the reason.

As he went, he saw a cobra that got stuck in an ant hill; it could not get inside, it could not get out. So the boy promised to ask what the matter with the unfortunate reptile was. Then he came across a hermit; he was sitting on one spot, glued to that place, and could not move about. The boy promised to enquire after his fate, too.

Finally, he reached the forest in the town of Dasikotte. The queen of that place, though married, had no child. As it was almost night time, the boy found an empty hut and entered. There was an odd person there, an old hunter or a beggar, and then the boy told him where he was going and why. The old man told him to announce at dawn next day to the people of Dasikotte that at half past seven, the queen will give birth to a child. He also said that the new born baby should be placed in a separate room on the large leave of the gujja-plantain and she should leave to let the child speak.

The boy, strangely enough, believed everything the old man said. When he woke up, the old hunter - beggar was gone. The boy told the people of the town what would happen, and they were amazed. But at seven o'clock the queen went into labor, and in another half hour a boy was born. The poor widow's son talked to him and asked him for boons. He also enquired about the mango tree. The newborn baby told him that near the roots of that mango tree there is a treasure - seven vessels with gold coins. If the tree gives the money away, it will prosper and its fruits will ripen. He also explained that the horse is lame because no one has ridden it. As soon as someone rides it, it will be whole.

If someone will marry the two daughters of the ruler of that country, the bridge will stand. If not, it will always collapse because of the sin of a non accomplished marriage. The snake has a jewel inside. If it were to spit it out and reveal to anyone his great healing knowledge he will be free, and as for the hermit, if he teaches to someone his doctors wisdom, he will be able to get up.

When the boy went back, the hermit taught to him how to heal people, and the snake spat out the precious stone and gave it to the boy, and the king gave him his two daughters for wives in exchange for the bridge, and the lame horse took people to ride on his back and it was at once whole. Finally, the mango tree agreed that they would dig out a treasure; seven vessels with gold coins. The boy placed them, too, on horse, and they reached home, built a large house and lived with the mother and the two wives in prosperity and happiness. This tale is much wittier and more charming than many fairy tales and masterfully narrated by the Irulas.

The hunter and the elephant:

This animal folk tale might even be present among the non Irulas teaching the moral to be kind to animals and not be greedy and ungrateful.

Emperor goat: Yet another animal tale is the funny 'Emperor Goat'. This tale also reveals however simple might be its theme, tales can become powerful narratives when retold by the Irulas with all gusto and dramatic form and also proclaim the sense of humour among the simple Irula filk.

Realistic Story with a Moral:

One of the most interesting tales, which has the grim fascination of a heroic and bloody ballad, is the Irula version of a well known Tamil folklore motif – the love and marriage between a man and a woman belonging to two entirely different and often antagonistic social groups. The

following dramatic story could probably be classified as a subtype of realistic story with a moral. However, it also has a definite heroic legendary flavor.

A Brahmin youth, Narayana, quarreled with his father and left his paternal home to seek employment at Trichur under a Kerala ruler. He was talented and hard working, and in a few years became quite prosperous. His fame spread. His brothers learned about him, visited him at Trichur, and persuaded him to return home, get married, and settle down. However, on their way back, beyond Mettupalayam, in the Nilgiri forest, they met two Irula girls, and Narayana fell in love with them. He refused to go on a long with his brothers, telling them that he would stay in the forest and marry the two Irula maidens.

The brothers attempted first to talk him out of his decision, then to force him, and finally to kill him, but he escaped. He found the father of the girls who was an Irula chieftain named Kovan and asked him to give him his daughters in marriage. The Irula was hesitant. On the one hand he would love to have his daughters married to a Brahmin youth. On the other hand he was shocked and scared, and he finally tried to dissuade Narayana, but in vain.

He gave his consent only when Narayana promised to observe certain conditions: to renounce the marks of his caste, to tend herds of Badaga cows entrusted to the care of the Irulas, to take part in Irula hunting and killing of animals, and to eat and drink what the Irulas used to eat and drink, i.e., to become a non-vegetarian.

The young Brahmin agreed, married the two daughters of the Irula chief, and when the old man died, Narayana was the elected chief of the Irula tribe. Because he was so highly intelligent and resourceful, the Irula community flourished. However, this provoked the envy and hatred of the old enemies of the Irulas, the Mudugas. They plotted to destroy Narayana. Being accomplished cattle-thieves, one night they drove away the cows entrusted to the Irulas by the Badagas.

A clash between the Irulas and Badagas followed, and Narayana was killed when he tried to stop the fighting. His two wives committed suicide by hurling themselves down the Ulikidangu waterfall. The Irula people erected three memorial stones in the memory of their Brahmin chieftain Narayana and his two Irula wives, Ponni and Velli. The stones are worshipped by the Irulas (Zvelebil, 1973).

Humorous Tales:

Of an entirely different tone, full of wit and surprising situations, is the entertaining Irula narrative of Ayyakappa, which is also known among the Tamils of Satyamangalam.

The king and his minister used to go round the country to see how their subjects lived. Once they came -incognito- into the Irula village of Surundi, went to the first hut (which belonged to an Irula lad called Ayyakppa), and said that they were tired travelers, on their way from the Raja of Kerala to the Sultan of Mysore. They wanted to rest in his house. Ayyakappa asked his mother to prepare a good Irula dinner, he was lucky in that respect because he had caught in his snare a large monitor lizard that day.

The king and his minister relished their dinner, and after the food, the king said that they enjoyed his food and company and said that if he has any wish he can say it. Ayyakappa replied that he wanted to become for one single day the king of his country. The king promised to fulfill his wish.

Then the minister took out some betel and areca nut from his box - the Irulas are very fond of betel leaf. Ayyakappa fell unconscious because the leaves were drugged.

In the night the minister secretly took the Irula lad to the palace and put him in the king's bed, dressed like the king. No one saw them.

In the morning, when Ayyakappa found himself in the royal chamber and faced the first minister, he first thought that he was dreaming and tired to sleep again. But the first minister kept on waking him, and so the Irula youth decided to get up, sat on the throne, heard the people's wishes, passed on orders- in short, ruled. The real king watched while hidden in secrecy and had great fun.

Suddenly, Ayyakappa remembered his mother in the Irula village and some of his enemies who had once cheated him. He issued two orders: to take ten thousand gold coins to his mother and to bring his two enemies, shave their heads, and ride them on a donkey through the city.

The day was then spent in the pleasures of the palace, in entertainments with the girls of the harem, and in plays and games. Finally a grand dinner was served, after which Ayyakappa was again given drugged betel, which made him swoon.

The next morning he found himself in his tribal hut. He called his ministers, but of course, it was his mother who came running and asked him why he was shouting and where he went the previous day. Ayyakappa denied his mother and insisted that he was the king.

The mother thought this was all nonsense and warned him that only yesterday the king had punished Koppa and Muttan, his old enemies, and so he ought to be careful. She added that the king is also very kind because yesterday he had sent them ten thousand gold pieces and so they are now rich. "It was me, it was me!" roared Ayyakappa. "I am the king! How can you be my mother?" And he jumped up, took a cane, and began beating her. She screamed and the neighbors came, overpowered him, and took him down to the town's prison.

In the prison he was flogged every day and given hardly any food. His mother visited him daily, and finally, Ayyakappa came to his senses and said that he was not the king. The happy woman got him released and took him home.

A few days later the king and his minister, both in disguise, came again to the village of Surundi. When Ayyakappa saw them approaching he hid behind a tree. But the king saw him. The king asked him for food. Ayyakappa didn't want to have anything to do with him. The king frowned, and the scared Irula lad could do nothing but take the king and his minister to the hut and have dinner prepared. While they were eating, he narrated everything that had happened to him, showing the bruises on his back. The king expressed his regrets and handed to Ayyakappa a beautiful flower. As soon as the young Irula smelled it, he fell unconscious and was taken to the royal palace.

In the morning when he found himself in the king's bed and the minister came to wake him up. Ayyakappa shouted, "I am not the king. I am a poor miserable Irula from the forest". The real king, who was watching all this from behind a screen, could hardly control himself. He came out and said, "Well, how are you this morning?" Ayyakappa finally understood, fell prostrate at the ruler's feet, and said, "I am well." The king introduced him to the queen and told him to come visit whenever he would wish to do so.

Ayyakappa used to come there from time to time, and he fell in love with a palace maid. The queen and king agreed to give him the maid in marriage. Ayyakappa built a grand house for himself and lived comfortably with his wife and mother. But soon they spent all of their wealth on themselves and other Irulas. Ayyakappa decided to get some money from the king by a trick. He asked his wife to spread her hair, put on a white sari, go to the queen, and ask her for money

to perform funeral rites for her husband, who has died. The queen felt awfully sorry and gave her one thousand gold pieces.

The wife went home and gave the money to Ayyakappa, who then put on a dirty cloth, spread his hair widely, and ran to the king and told him that his wife died suddenly after a long illness and that all the money the king gave him was spent on her medicines and so he doesn't have money to perform rites. The king felt sorry and gave him one thousand gold pieces. He then went to inform the queen of the sad event.

After they talked to each other, the king sent a man to Ayyakappa's village Surundi to find out the truth. As soon as Ayyakappa saw the man, he made his wife lie down on her mat, and he began to weep. The man saw him, returned to the palace, and reported to the king that Ayyakappa was dead. The queen was stunned; she sent one of her maids to find out truth. As soon as Ayyakappa saw the maid, he lay down on the mat, and his wife started lamenting over his body. The maid reported to the queen that indeed Ayyakappa was dead.

The king, on horseback, and the queen in her palanquin went, then, in person to the Irula village to find out the truth. As soon as Ayyakappa saw them, both he and his wife laid down on their mats, pretending to be dead. When the king and queen approached the two 'bodies', the king shouted that he would give a whole village down under the hills to anyone who will tell him the truth. Hearing these words, Ayyakappa jumped up shouted, "Majesty! I died first!" At the same moment, the maid fell at the queen's feet said, "My lady, I died first."

The king and the queen laughed so much that they almost burst. Ayyakappa and his wife indeed received a whole village down under the hills, in Tengumarahada, and it was theirs and of their Irula progeny till the Badagas came and took it away from them (Zvelebil, 1973).

Conclusion:

Folklore travels across language boundaries but it always represents the cultural background of the particular community. The Irulas have a stock of folktales which reflect the tribe's socio-religious and family life. Some of these tales show the tensions of love and hate on the domestic front.

The Irulas believe that supernatural powers dominate their earthly life. Their faith in witchcraft, ghosts, sorcery and black magic expresses their fear and superstition. Ghost stories abound in their folklore. There are many funny stories, too, in the form of dialogues of animals and birds like the one between a crab and an owl.

A third category of tales centres round imitative and imaginative aspects of their life. As in any society, the Irulas have stories about the adventures of kings, queens, princes and their retinue. There are also plenty of stories of snakes and serpents.

If there is one condition that must be fulfilled while listening to an Irula story teller, it is this: one must say '/u:/ and /a:/ repeatedly, otherwise the narrator starts fidgeting, becomes impatient and finally stops talking. When one begins to tell a story he may even ask directly, "/a: u: ndu solriya?" (Will you listen and 'be with me'?, then I shall tell). (Zvelebil, 1973).

The following are the main genres of Irula folk tales:

Myths and legends form the core of Irula folk tales. They are often very complex and relatively stable. Although none of them escaped Hinduization, certainly most contain ancient tribal material. There are certainly many motifs in them borrowed from the non-tribes. But they are nevertheless charming and are an enrichment of the fairy tale world. Some of the folk tales are realistic narrative of customs. For example, accounts of honey gathering, hunting, and tuber searching, and of the myths that accompany them. These are undoubtedly genuine local lore.

Some of the folk tales are realistic with a moral. Examples are folk tales that illustrate filial love, brotherly affection or on themes such as ‘which house is better: the paternal home or the house of the husband? Anecdotal stories that contain messages, which are numerous and usually brief and are genuinely Irula stories well known throughout the tribe. The Irulas are very fond of animal fables. They usually revolve around two very basic, very important character traits: shrewdness and self respect. Animal fables, riddles and ad hoc oratory are also numerous among the Irulas.

The Irulas are a carefree people who seem to have little anxiety for tomorrow, or regrets over the yesterdays. They have faith in God, fear of the supernatural and harbor their own superstitious ideas. They believe in sorcery, witchcraft and black magic. In addition to the fear of the supernatural spirits, they fear Kurumbas, members of a fellow tribe. Their folklore discloses its own code of morality and sex (Perialwar, 2013)

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