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## **Folklore in Literature: The Entwining of Folklore in the Select Narratives of Indra Bahadur Rai and Chetan Raj Shrestha**

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### **Abstract:**

Folklore encapsulates the entirety of human ecology and transmits it from generation to generation. This presents it with paramount importance as also raises the need to preserve it. Orality is its primary medium of transmission and sometimes in the process there are transformations too. These transmissions and transformations also raise the risk of 'loss'.

Given its primordial nature folklore is often the fountain head of creativity. As such literary works source, it and at times folklore gets enmeshed in literary works. Literary works help in transmission as also preservation. Further the employment of folklore like other stylistic strands should and usually have a purpose in the schema of the narrative.

The present paper focuses on the incorporation and purpose of folk elements like folk customs, traditions and folk songs in the works of Indra Bahadur Rai and Chetan Raj Shrestha. It concludes that the elements of folklore are not only documented by the writers but also given interpretive value.

**Keywords:** Folklore, folkmusic, literature, Miteri saino, Jaar pratha.

### **Introduction**

The etymology of the word 'Folk' takes us back among others to its Old English origin 'Folc' meaning 'common people'. The word 'Folklore' came into currency after being coined in 1846 by William J. Thoms to mean 'traditional beliefs and customs of the common people' (Rurangwa 8). We are told that his word revived 'Folk' in a modern sense of the common people whose culture is handed down orally and is supposed to have opened the sluice gates for compound formations like folk-song, folk-hero et al.

Folklore is closely related to culture which is defined by the anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor as “that complex whole which included knowledge, belief, art morals, law, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (Rurangwa 10). On the other hand, MacEdward Leach defines folklore as, ‘the generic term to designate the customs, beliefs, traditions, tales, magical practices, proverbs, songs etc; in short the accumulated knowledge of a homogeneous unsophisticated people’ (Rurangwa 9). Folklore is the oral part of and is set in the culture of the people and reflects it. It follows the common criterion that of oral means of transmission. Thus, Dan Ben Amos in his *The Idea of Folklore: An Essay*, encapsulates it as, “attributes of traditionality, irrationality, and rurality; anonymity, communality and universality; primacy and oral circulation have consolidated in the idea of folklore” (Amos 11). In other words folklore is part of folk culture. However, it was felt that the word ‘Folk- culture’ was not inclusive enough hence a new concept of ‘Folk-life’ was introduced by folklorists like Richard Dorson to define ‘folk culture’ in its entirety (Pasayat 2).

Folklore has been down the ages classified into various categories. It has been divided into oral literature, material culture, social folk custom and the performing folk arts.

Here it begs the question about the role of folklore. Among the functions of folklore William R. Bascom talks about its role in validating culture and maintaining the stability of a culture. Folklore seems to justify rituals and institutions to those who perform and observe them, it teaches the younger generation manners, beliefs, customs and practices. Folklore operates within a given society and thus also ensures conformity to accepted cultural norms and its continuity thus maintaining stability of culture (348). In other terms ‘folk-lore’ has an important role in the creation, revival, maintenance and expression of cultural identity of a people, hence the need to preserve it and ensure its continuity.

The corner stone of folklore is that it is handed down from generation to generation through oral tradition. This aspect of its transmission is also its primary undoing, as folk traditions hazard getting lost in transition in a world reeling under rapid globalization.

### **Literature as repository.**

Folklore’s primordial nature makes it the fountain-head of creativity among other things. Thus, a lot of folk material finds their way into contemporary literature either as principal background, a secondary factor or as an essential motive (Broddy 202). The primary

characteristic of literature is its ability to record and preserve, as also propagate all that was hitherto confined to a people or space. This ability of literature presents it the opportunity to be a hand maiden to folklore by recording and preserving it in print. In doing so it ensures that all that folklore encapsulates gets preserved ensuring the continuance of the folk-life which entails the continuance of a folk and their distinct cultural identity. Folklore is often considered as a platform for holding high moral grounds which would have relevance to modern society too. By ensuring in print the continuance of all these aspects, literature acts as a repository of the treasures of the past, extending yeoman service to human civilization.

Hennig Cohen speaking from the vantage point of American literature says that, “folklore appears in literature in two ways: passively or actively, that is transcriptive or functionally. The passive is elementary and happens when a writer presents folk materials in its original state. It is mere recording or imitation of folklore. This type of folklore becomes lifeless when it is removed from the folk, whose creation it is, and put into print... that writers who are concerned with creating work of art rather than providing transcriptions from life use folklore functionally” (242). He goes on further to say that folklore has been made to advance the plot, to characterize, to provide structure, to explain and to raise questions about the nature of the society (243).

So literary works are also supposed to create free spaces where folklore is problematized and interrogated. This is also what Alan Dundes meant by the two steps of identification and interpretation as methodology of folkloristic studies (137).

We will now look primarily into Indra Bahadur Rai’s *Jaar : A True Story*( Bipana Katipaya 1970) and Chetan Raj Shrestha’s *An Open and Shut Case* (The Kings Harvest 2013) to see how their works document and incorporate folklore to advance the plot, to characterize, to provide structure, to explain and to raise questions about the nature of the society ( Ihueze 1).

### **Folklore in Literature**

As an introduction to the writers, Indra Bahadur Rai is considered a ‘towering mountain in Indian Nepali literature’. An essayist, critic, short –story writer, academic and a language activist is how one knows him. His works are in Nepali but there have been translated into English and Bengali. Chetan Raj Shrestha on the other hand is a young architect with two books to his credit and writes in English. Both works draw from the

folklore of the Gorkha people. Who are a mixture of the ancient Khas and Kirat tribes and inhabit the region from the north of India to the north-east of India.

Rai's story is about two Gorkha families of Gurungs and Thapas against a rural setting in some distant past and revolves entirely around two folk customs which are intertwined. It is about these two families coming together and getting tragically separated on account of two folk traditions one about kinship and the other about honour its desecration and the punitive action thereof. Both these folk traditions of *Miteri saino* and *Jaar pratha* are integral to the Gorkha folk-culture. We are witness to relationships of blood and marital relationships but there is a third variant in folk-culture that of '*miteri saino*'. In *miteri saino* two unrelated persons or families come together of their own accord and form a sacral pact of a family on account of their closeness. It is an inclusive folk tradition and supposed to last seven generations. This folk custom of *miteri saino* is also taken into the world of nature. The folk very early in the life of a child initiate a *miteri saino* ritual with a *Chilaunay*(Schinaa Wallichia) and *Bhalayo*(Semecarpus Anacardium) species of trees. Human contact with these trees result in irritable itchy rashes, the initiation of the ritual is believed to provide immunity, hence the child can safely wander about in the forest.

The *Jaar pratha* has to do with family honour and its protection, its violation resulting in punitive measures resulting in death of the violator. If a married woman takes another lover, that lover is termed as '*Jaar*'. On the discovery of such a relationship the wronged husband has the right to seek a redress. This can be in the form of an apology in front of the folk whereby the perpetrator accepts his mistake and performs penitence by crawling under the limbs of the husband. In a severe form of redress the wronged husband has the right to cut down the perpetrator. Thus, the folk tradition ensures that sexual promiscuity is kept in check through punitive action.

The first half of the narrative deals with the custom of *Miteri saino*.

...A day came when damai came and blew their shanai. Tapari plates were stitched out of Banyan leaves. Maity and Devi were pronounced mitinis. For them it was as though the dasai festival itself had arrived. Devi presented Maity with a queen Victoria rupee coin...Maity gave as a token to her mitini a Mahendramalli coin and a muga-silk handkerchief. "From this day on the two of you are related as mitinis; do not address each other by name, you are one soul now." Thapa announced to the daughters.

“And we two,” said Ghalay to Thapa, “on account of these girls, have now become one family. There will be no marriages between the two households; that would be incestuous. Any such culprit shall be ostracized. Every bereavement shall be mourned by both families. Our children are henceforth brothers and sisters.”

“I’ll honour our ancestral traditions.” Thapa vowed, head held high before the assembled guests (Rai 49-50).

In a folk twist to the eternal story of love the bystander casualties of the folk custom are Rudraman the eldest son of the Gurung family and Thuli the eldest daughter of the Thapas. Their love that had just started to sprout unknown to their respective families was cut short by Rudraman’s return to his battalion and the *Miteri* custom. The two families having now become avowed kins, Thuli is married off to Harshajit the son of a paternal aunt. After many moons Rudraman returns to claim Thuli, as he believes their relationship predates the *Miteri saino*. Thuli in turn tells him that her marriage was an act of volition and since they were now kin, all matters of heart, were matters past. The folk custom outweighs the pangs of her heart for the moment and she even tries to kill Rudraman seeing him as the desecrator of her marriage. Here they are discovered and the second folk custom of the *Jaar* is brought into play. Thuli was someones else’s wife and Rudraman was now kin to her. Caught and brought before the village elders, Harshajit makes the charge.

“Thuli is a daughter of his sworn family- she is his sworn sister by relation. He has committed incest-he is a sinner! His caste must be taken away first!” (Rai 39).

When moonstruck Rudraman pleads guilty, the village elder disavows him then;

“a Gurung stepped up, snatched and broke the Rupa caste thread with its nine-knots; with his short knife he cut it into many pieces and trampled them into the dirt” (Rai 40).

Finally, the village elder declares the punishment-

“You have one night to think it through. Crawl under his legs to whom you have done trespass. If you say that is unacceptable to you, then it will be here, tomorrow, at this very time. You have aggrieved his honour- you will be given a lead of ten paces to run. Harshajit will run you down and cut you down. If you run and earn your escape to another land-that is your good fortune. As the offender you may not strike him back. You must outrun death to live” (Rai 41-42).

Now to Chetan Raj Shrestha's *An Open and Shut case*. The narrative of the novella is about a not so open and shut case about police brutality, murder, forced incest and suicide. The major characters are an East European tourist Straun, and the local folk, Puran constable and Dechen OC set against the perfect natural setting of Sikkim. All of them and the myriad plots are strung together like beads on a folk-song *Resham Firiri resham firiri*. Since a folk-song or folk music is a part of folk-lore and folk-life, it carries all its attributes and hence the importance in the cultural identity of a people and society. It is defined by Maud Karpeles as the, "product of a musical tradition that has been evolved through the process of oral transmission... with continuity which links the present with the past...has originated with an individual composer and has subsequently been absorbed into the unwritten living tradition of a community...it is the re-fashioning and re-creation of the music by the community that gives it its folk character" (Gelbart 2). A folk song is pure and honest, relates to everyone, is written about specific events or emotions in simple stanzas with the refrain repeating sometimes to the point of madness for the listener and yes, orally transmitted.

Ramanujan opines that, "folklore items, like many other sorts of items in cultural exchange, are autotelic, that is, they travel by themselves without any actual movement of populations. A proverb, a riddle, a joke, a story, a remedy, or a recipe travels every time it is told. It crosses linguistic boundaries any time it is told. Neighbouring languages and regions have, therefore, a large stock of shared folk materials" (97). In the narrative, Straun the East European tourist is holidaying in this part of the world. He had been forced to buy the CD of the folk-song and then had begun the 'adoration of *Resham Firiri*' across his trans-Himalayan odyssey.

Resham Firiri. Resham Firiri.

Oorera jauki , danra ma bhanjyang, Resham Firiri

(Silk fluttering in the wind, wish I could fly over hills and valleys).

The verse changes with different rhymes but remains connected by the thread of a love theme. The attempts at translation are by the author of the article.

Ek nale bandook, dui nale bandook, mirga lai take ko

Mirga lai maile take ko hoina mayalai take ko

(Single barrelled-double barrelled gun aiming at the deer

Not the deer but my dear is in its sight)

Sano ma sano gaai ko bacho, bheeraima Ram Ram

Chodera jana sakina mailay, baru maya sangai jau.

(small calf on the precipice O lord

Can't leave my here, best go with my love)

Himalchuli pallo patti dumsi lukne doolo

Suna chaandi bhannu matra maya raicha thulo

(A porcupines den beyond the peaks

Gold and silver are namesake, love is greater).

Resham Firiri. Resham Firiri

Oorera jauki , danra ma bhanjyang, Resham Firiri (Shrestha 8).

The refrain and the theme remain intact else the folksong is given to sheer musicality through bewildering and disparate sets of rhyming lines.

The second verse of the folksong employs a proverb, *Bhir ma jaanay goru lai Raam Ram bhanna sakincha kadh ma halna sakinna* (one can pray for a cow that goes to a cliff but can't shoulder it) meaning one can but, only pray for a desperado. This only complicates matter further.

He played it out at all spaces, restaurants, taxis hotels the works. His desire to hear it in its founding environment as its creators carried on their daily toil was overwhelming.

“Straun was mystified by his infatuation with the song. He prided himself on his reason acquired so diligently from sombre bearded professors in his east European university. He dissected his symptoms. His obsession, which was like a calm fever, had nothing to do with the songs lyrical content for its meaning would always elude him. The instruments too were common; he knew their Western variations and had no great attachment to any of them. The only cause of the malady then could be the tune, which haunted him. It brimmed with longing. It spoke of the mountains to him. It was sad and sweet and mysterious” (Shrestha 5).

One can almost recall Wordsworth's *Solitary Reaper* here for the girl too was singing a folk-song. Which was to the lyric speaker incomprehensible yet hauntingly beautiful and beyond the realm of comparison.

In the shared taxi to Gangtok he asks for the song to be played and immediately there is a sense of bonhomie as every co-traveller recalls their association with the song and their childhood. He asks for a translation, but it only compounds his problems, first by the process of transliteration. A young co-traveller tried to help with a transliteration "tickle the chicken and give the cat chicken shit. Your love and my love came up in mid-way", another passenger volunteered the meaning of the final verse, "on the mountain, opposite side porcupine hiding in a hole. But love is greater than gold or silver" (Shrestha 8). Secondly, the protean character of the folk song is further fortified by the employment of images, lines and words, more for rhythm and rhyme and seemed disconnected from the central theme defying a meaningful translation.

*He was furious at the Nepalis for inventing such a melody only to subvert it with bad poetry and worse logic (Shrestha 8).*

To make matters worse a young co passenger opines that the song was incomplete

*There is more? Straun asked*

*Yes, anybody could add anything (Shrestha 9).*

Along the way a policeman *Puran constable* hitches a ride and as he gets down at his destination, he whistles the same tune. It was New Years Eve and also the night *Puran constable* was brutally murdered by his wife. This was a fatal culmination to years of physical abuse peppered with extra-marital affairs. Next morning the mother and daughter surrender at the police station and the little daughter Maya has to give the gory details of the night. Among other things she recalls her father teaching her a new song for the New Year- *Resham Firiri* before the daily fight between the parents took a tragic turn. The in-charge of the police station was *Dechen OC* who had been a co-traveller with Straun the previous day and had been 'ambushed by the song'. Today she was 'assaulted' for the second time again,

"...the song infested the roots of her life. She remembered her father singing it to the strumming of a guitar. She had then known it as a lullaby; her mother had sung it for Jayanti.

It must have been after their second father had left, for she remembered her younger sister singing it back” (Shreshta 26).

But the song seems to cling along later it is also played at a game of housie where both Straun and Dechen OC are present. The officer orders the song to be changed and another pop song comes on

*Baby girl Everytime I see you cry,*

... ..

*Babygirl farkera timi aai deu*

Straun was outraged...what kind of people would turn their backs on a rich musical inheritance and adopt such crassness?” (Shrestha 32).

In both cases we have seen how the writers have adopted folk culture into their works; the folk customs of *miteri saino* and *jaar pratha* in the first work by Rai and the folk-song *Resham Firiri* in the second work by Shrestha. This dovetailing of folk culture into the narrative has a twin effect; the elements of folk give character to the narrative, and the narrative in turn records and preserves the folk lore. Since literature is a contested space, by providing a space to folk-lore it is also brought under the ambit of interrogations and negotiations. Where in *Jaar*, the two folk-customs are not only preserved but also questioned. They can be questioned on the grounds of gender equality, from Thuli’s point of view. She is the silent voice, though she acts honourably, the custom allows no space to hear her part of the story. She becomes a contested space too where two men fight for possession relegating her to a commodity. Thuli’s response though is worth retelling. When Rudraman comes to reclaim her, “the miteri kinship came later; my relationship is older than...either you come with me or I will kill than man” (Rai 52), Thuli agrees to meet him covertly. But unawares she comes with a different intent, she strikes at him twice with a ‘khukuri’ screaming, “how dare you do this to me!” (Rai 57). It is a patriarchal system where only the male honour is taken into account but Thuli asserts her rights to honour and self respect.

The *miteri saino* custom can be questioned on its ability to foster a feeling of community or otherwise. However, the good the intention it is also foisted on the innocent girls who are unawares about the ramifications of the custom.

In the case of Shrestha's narrative, the folk song is not only preserved and transmitted but its attributes are also called into question. The narrative defines it, shows how it is embedded in a given culture, recalls and recreates memories and suggests its importance covertly. The use of the folksong to string the lives of the various characters creates a 'web of significance'. Further the shape-shifting folk song irritates the patronizing Westerner Straun, hurts his pride in a Western upbringing a Western liberal education, a university degree, "absurdity was supplanting mystique and this appalled him" (Shrestha 8), just as it has the same effect on the police officer and wants the song changed. The folksong seems to encroach upon the authoritative space of both characters and subvert it. According to Kirin Narayan this is possible due to folklore's latent potential to critique and contest central order (189).

### **Conclusion.**

The folk traditions that are characterised by their oral transmission would surely have been lost had they not been recorded in literature. Literature also ensured that the same folk traditions are propagated and transmitted over a large space and people providing for entertainment as well as continuity to cultural identity. And by raising a plethora of questions about the folk customs and songs, a new life is blown into them providing them dynamism. Juwen Zhang writes that, "in the midst of confrontations between traditional values and modern concepts ...(people) begin to question who they are and how their culture has shaped their identity in the global context. They need to seek an identity that is uniquely theirs. They find it only in their traditions, but they also find so many unsatisfactory elements associated with these traditions. They then find the ...(literary) expression to challenge, to explore, to release, and to satisfy and amuse themselves" (274).

Thus, literature unwittingly becomes a repository of folklore and ensures its preservation. Along with its maintenance and transmission a space for interrogations is also provide for ensuring that future generations inherit this cultural heirloom as part of their living, thriving culture.

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