
THE “PUZZLE” OF TEXT TRAVELLING AND FOLKLORE

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Story-telling is an art that has stood the test of time and has successfully survived the onslaught of numerous other means of recreation available to human beings like music, dance, indoor gaming or any outdoor sport, or even partying with friends. Story-reading /story-telling remains, by far, the most popular form of amusement. It not only provides pleasure and delight but is also laden with psychological, social, political, and behavioural undertones. It is a cultural universal elementary to all societies and groups. There is no denying that the means of story-telling have, indeed, evolved over the centuries. From the original oral mode, it has come a long way after crossing even the realm of printing mode. Audio-visual equipment, e-books, radio, and TV narrations as well as theatre and cinema are all varied forms of narrating and sharing stories. However, the most startling feature of story narration is that one story has the potential to further inspire a gamut of tales.

The oral tales form a part of our folklore which also encloses legends, music, proverbs, jokes, popular beliefs, fairy tales, and customs pertaining to a social order. On close inspection, it is revealed that the graph of folklore runs both vertically and horizontally. The tales embedded in folklore do not only travel down from one generation to other but they also travel across the spatial and temporal boundaries of the world. A story, more particularly an oral one, will have many appropriations and even counter-narratives. This may be due to its easy adaptability. A handful of basic stories are repeated across time and space with modifications done according to the perspective of the creator. From this store-house of tales, millions of stories are framed and re-framed. Therefore, many new stories resound with suggestions of previously heard tale, belief, or even an anecdote from our folk tradition. Through this paper, I attempt to map out the folkloristic base and ideology of the 2005 release Hindi movie *Paheli*. My paper shall delve into the diverse “sources” evoked by the

movie while focusing on the psychological scope as well as the entertainment value of the narrative. The paper primarily will rest on two theories – Jungian theory of the collective unconscious psychological patterns and Northrop Frye's theory of Archetypes – which will help in delineating the reasons for and consequences of adapting folklore into media.

Paheli is one of the typical examples of text-travelling. The screenplay writer, the story writer, and/ or the director of the movie may disagree with the present finding but it is this very inherent contention present in literature studies that makes it extraordinarily fruitful. A text does not have any single perspective. One text can have multiple interpretations and it may, in turn, explore divergent themes as well. A writer or a director could possibly have been inspired from some pre-existing text he/she came across; at the same time failing to recognize the echoes of millions of other texts within its framework. There can be parallel texts existing on the same plotline or, to put it in other words, the text in question may form a small cog in an unremitting wheel of hypotexts and hypertexts. At this stage, I also disclaim any charges of plagiarism against the team of *Paheli* which this paper may apparently insinuate. In fact, the objective of the paper is, on the contrary, to pronounce the hidden affinity of various texts due to the limited archetypes of emotions and conflicts found in the world.

Paheli is a fantasy film which is directed by Amol Palekar and produced by Juhi Chawla, Aziz Mirza, Sanjiv Chawla, and Shah Rukh Khan, who also plays the male lead. Sunil Shetty, Juhi Chawla, Rajpal Yadav, and Amitabh Bachchan play supporting roles in the film. In a nutshell, it tells the story of a wife, Lachchi (essayed by Rani Mukerji), who is left by her husband, Kishan (played by Shah Rukh Khan), and visited by a ghost, disguised as her husband, who is in love with her, and who eventually takes her husband's place. It is enunciated that the movie is a remake of the 1973 Hindi movie *Duvidha*¹ by Mani Kaul

¹ *Duvidha* is a 1973 Bollywood ghost movie directed by Mani Kaul. The film stars Ravi Menon and Raisa Padamsee in lead roles. It was critically acclaimed, and won the director National Film Award for Excellence in Direction and Critics Award for Best film at the 1974 Filmfare Awards.

which is further based on a short story written by Vijayadan Detha². It is noteworthy that Detha based his story on a popular folktale from Rajasthan which has no written account. When Kaul translated it into the film medium, he remained loyal to its context and shot the movie in a village in Jodhpur district of Rajasthan. He also engaged folk musicians of Rajasthan namely Ramzan Hammu, Latif, and Saki Khan for better effect. Although the movie won critical acclaim but it failed to stir the box office, most probably because of the star cast. On the other hand, *Paheli* was savaged by film critics in India but it opened to big numbers abroad especially in the US. Moreover, it went on to become India's entry for the Oscars in 2006 after superseding other nominations like *Black*, *Iqbal*, *Swades*, *Parineeta*, *Hazaaron Khwaishein Aise*, and some regional movies. Needless to say, the fact that Shah Rukh Khan is the lead of the movie is a major factor behind the success of *Paheli* in contrast to *Duvidha*. Some people also claim that Ravi K. Chandran's³ breathtaking cinematography is a probable reason for the Shah Rukh Khan starrer getting the allegedly prestigious nomination. Nevertheless, these considerations are outside the premise of my paper and will not be discussed beyond this point.

Apart from the pronounced adaptations, *Paheli* has several echoes of other texts, both in the Eastern as well as the Western traditions. In India, the oldest known folktales are collected in *Panchatantra* compiled by Vishnu Sharma in the second century BC. The assorted tales in this anthology are based on oral traditions, including animal fables, each with a palpable moral lesson. One of the stories from the album of *Panchatantra*, "The Girl Who Married a Snake," is also based on the similar plot structure as *Paheli*. A Brahmin couple is blessed with a child that came to be a snake. The snake is reared and loved like a son of the family and when it grows, the mother resolves to get a wife for her 'son'. Her husband is sent in search of a bride for the snake. He meets a long-lost friend who magnanimously offers the hand of his

² Vijaydan Detha (1926-2013), also known as Bijji, was a noted writer from Rajasthan and a recipient of the Padma Shri award along with several other awards such as the Sahitya Akademi Award. With more than 800 short stories to his credit, which are translated into English and other languages, he was co-founder of 'Rupayan Sansthan' with late Komal Kothari, an institute that documents Rajasthani folk-lore, arts, and music. His literary works include *Bataan ri Phulwari* (garden of tales), a fourteen volume collection of stories that draws on folk-lore and spoken dialects of Rajasthan. His stories and novels have been adapted for many plays and movies including Habib Tanvir's *Charandas Chor*, Prakash Jha's *Parinati*, Amol Palekar's *Paheli*, and *Duvidha* by Mani Kaul.

³ Ravi K. Chandran is a young and budding Indian cinematographer. He has frequently collaborated with leading Indian filmmakers like Priyadarshan, Shaji Kailas, Mani Ratnam, Rajiv Menon, and Sanjay Leela Bhansali. During his career till date, Ravi has won two Filmfare Awards and one Southern Filmfare Award.

daughter in matrimony without meeting the 'son' of the Brahmin. On reaching the village, the girl is warned by the neighbours against marrying a snake. Undauntedly, she marries the snake because she wants to keep her father's word. One night she sees a young man in her room who turns out to be her husband. He proves it by entering into the slough and then coming out of it once again. From that night onwards, every night the young man would temporarily discard the snake skin. He would stay with his wife till daybreak and then would slip back into the snake's skin. After a few days, the Brahmin hears noises from his daughter-in-law's room during night. He keeps a watch and sees the snake turning into a young man. He rushes into the room and throws the snake skin into the fire. The curse is lifted and they lived happily ever after.

Now, the puzzle is resolved in *Paheli* in almost the same magical way. When Kishan (the husband of Lachchi) returns after four years to the village to find out the truth behind the rumours of his wife's pregnancy, the family is perplexed as to who is the "real" Kishan. They decide to visit the king so that he can arbitrate. On the way to the king they meet an old shepherd (impersonated by Amitabh Bachchan) who helps them out. He asks the real son of Bhanwarlal to pick up hot coals, asks the real husband to gather the sheep, and asks Lachchi's real paramour to enter a water-bottle, which is conceded by the ghost. The shepherd cleverly traps the ghost inside the bottle. The real Kishan is found out and everyone returns home. Lachchi is devastated over the loss of the ghost. Shortly afterwards, she gives birth to a daughter, Looni Ma, by whose identification the ghost exposes his identity to Lachchi. It is revealed that the ghost escaped the bottle and took control of Kishan's body to live with her.

This is the appeal of folklore. It is loaded with magic and fantasy, which while transporting the reader/viewer into a fictitious world teaches hard-core real-life lessons. Living with a ghost or a snake is unconceivable but the latent implications of such tales may unravel the deeper mysteries of life. Behaviour, social obligations, relationships, duty, and moral principles are imparted through such narratives. The girl in *Panchatantra*, through her sense of duty and devotion, was able to transform even a "snake" into a young man, and Lachchi, because of her love, could change the good ghost into Kishan or vice-versa. To elucidate

further, in the story of *Panchatantra*, the snake is used only as a symbol of sexuality, suppressed desires, or vice. Brahmin's son may not be a real snake but he might bear the character of a snake and, in the end, his heart and character are amended because of his dutiful wife. On the other hand, there is no ghost in *Paheli*. The ghost is just the external manifestation of Lachchi's fantasies or can also be a reduplicative hallucination of Kishan's own schizophrenic self. In this manner, the folklore amuses and instructs with the help of strange occurrences.

As mentioned, all stories are visited and re-visited over and over again resulting in ever-new narratives. Folklore is no exception. It has ignited the ingenuity and creative faculties of writers for centuries and has very cleverly albeit smoothly made its position in media of all variety ranging from broadcast, print to digital. Contemporary writers like Girish Karnad have been immensely inspired by folk tales and many of his plays have their origin in folklore. His play *Naga-mandala* is the story of Rani who is newly married to Appanna. Appanna comes home only in the day, asks for food, stays for some time and then goes away to be with his concubine. He treats Rani with contempt, aggression, and mistrust. He locks her in the room, and scolds the old lady Kurudava and her son Kappanna when they attempt to become friendly with Rani. Kurudava gives a potion to Rani which, she claims, will cause Appanna to fall in love with Rani. Rani, disheartened, pours the potion on the ant-hill which happens to be the dwelling-place of a King Cobra. The Cobra starts visiting Rani every night in the guise of Appanna. This "new" Appanna is the man of Rani's dream and after some time it is learnt that Rani is pregnant. The husband accuses Rani of adultery and she is forced to undertake the snake ordeal. Rani holds the snake in her hand and the snake "slides up her shoulder and spreads its hood like an umbrella over her head" (Karnad 292). The onlookers consider Rani a goddess and Appanna also seeks her forgiveness for his sins. Karnad's play is a study in love, marriage, position of man and woman, marital politics, mythical structure but the substitution or replacement of the husband by a non-human links it to all the afore-discussed stories. So much so, even the ambiguity of its conclusion matches those of other narratives. Karnad has offered multiple conclusions to the Rani story of his play. One conclusion is from Rani's perspective, one from her husband's and the third includes the perception of Naga.

There is an abundance of such tales woven around humans and animals or ghosts, witches, and demons in the folk tradition. Karnad himself acknowledges in "Appendix 1" of his *Collected Plays Volume One* that the source of *Naga-Mandala* comes from a folk-tale he had heard from A.K. Ramanujan, a poet and academic. Interestingly, Ramanujan is known for his collection of folk-tales and their variants as were found in different parts of India⁴.

Karnad's play became an inspiration for a 1997 Kannada movie directed by T.S. Nagabharana. Though the story was written by Girish Karnad, the conclusion was twisted to match the expectations of cinema-goers. A stylized fight between the husband and the Naga decides the fate of the three characters. Some critics believe that *Paheli* has resemblances to the screenplay of the Kannada film *Nagamandala*. *Paheli*'s director, Amol Palekar, was even accused of plagiarising the screenplay and storyline from *Nagamandala*, the film. However, Palekar dismissed the accusation saying that *Paheli* was adapted from a short story written by Vijayadan Detha.

Another movie, *Videsh* a.k.a *Heaven on Earth*, written and directed by Deepa Mehta also uses the snake ordeal to merge the line between reality and fantasy. It is the story of Chand who gets married into an Indo-Canadian family and inherits their constant struggle to keep themselves above water. Frequently beaten by her frustrated and bullying husband, Chand is helped by a Jamaican woman named Rosa who gives her a magical root. Chand's attempt with the magical root leads to a series of surreal episodes involving a snake. However, the inclusion of the snake folklore appears unconvincing and out-of-context in the present case. The movie was a feeble attempt to bring in a dash of Indian exotica while dealing with graver issues of immigration and bride-harassment.

Furthermore, we can relate these stories rooted in Eastern folklore with the fairy tales of Western convention. Such tales of metamorphosis are found in abundance in the works of Grimm Brothers, for instance "The Frog-King", "Cinderella" and "Snow White and Rose Red". All these stories end "happily" with the girl getting her fantasy man as husband who

⁴ In his work in folklore studies, Ramanujan highlights the intertextuality of the Indian oral and written literary tradition. His essay "Where Mirrors Are Windows: Toward an Anthology of Reflections" (1989), and his commentaries in *The Interior Landscape: Love Poems from a Classical Tamil Anthology* (1967) and *Folktales from India, Oral Tales from Twenty Indian Languages* (1991) are examples of his work in Indian folklore studies.

loves her and respects her needs. Be it the ghost, the frog, or the snake, all is, in due course, transfigured into young, handsome, and loving men. Fulfilment of desires is, however, not the only motif in these stories. Another motif is the reaction of the protagonist. When the reaction is amended, when it is tinged with humility, sympathy, and fellow feeling, only then the makeover takes place. Therefore, it may be deduced that folktales have a similar base in all cultures, and such a comparative study of their themes and structures confirms their inherent intertextuality. In 1928, Vladimir Propp's book entitled *Morphology of the Folktale* became the basis of research into the structure of folklore texts in which he discovered a uniform structure in Russian fairy tales. Even ancient Greek and Roman literatures contain rich troves of folklore and popular beliefs, many of which have counterparts in modern contemporary legends.

It is noteworthy that folklore is ordinarily free from any sacred or religious content. The presence of gods and goddesses cannot be denied in some of them but the presentation of divinity is either humorous or subversive in nature. Nonetheless, folktales address other deep psychological issues which can be explained in terms of Northrop Frye's theory of Archetypes. The term archetype denotes a recurring pattern of experience easily identifiable in literature and human sciences. They can be actions, characters, images, metaphors et cetera. The archetypes are basically primordial images which reside in our psyche and seek an outlet in works of art. So, literature enacts the recurrent rhythms of the natural cycle ranging from birth, death, to seasons, and rhythms of emotions and conflicts. Once they are allotted a form and shape in literature, they awaken in us a profound feeling of social sharing.

Carl Jung also used the term archetype to refer to the experiences of our ancestors which get lodged in "collective unconscious" of the whole race. These unconscious psychological patterns, instincts, or archetypes may or may not have components of the fantastic (such as magic, ethereal beings, or the personification of inanimate objects), but their existence is unquestionable. This may, to some extent, explain the repetition of themes, characters, and situations in the folklore all over the world.

Another text that resounds with the theme of relationship between humans and animals is S.T. Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." The ancient mariner kills an albatross and a curse descends upon him. It is only when he looks at the water snakes and starts admiring their beauty as creatures of God that the curse is lifted. So, another keynote present in the folk-tales centring on transformations and impersonations is respect and love for all God's creations, irrespective of shape or colour. If it is done, then all the wishes are automatically granted.

From the given textual examples, not only the aspect of recurrence is highlighted but their intertextuality also comes to the surface. One text may be consciously and overtly inspired by only one source-work but it may unwittingly draw parallels with numerous other texts. At the same time, the same text may go on to generate ideas for succeeding works of art. Gerard Genette gives two new terms: "Any text is a *hypertext*, grafting itself onto a *hypotext*, an earlier text that it imitates or transforms" (qtd. in Sanders 12; emphasis added). It implies that every text is a hypertext as well as a hypotext, that is, it is an "off-spring" of a previous text and, in turn, is also a literary antecedent that inspires other texts. Thus, adaptation is a continuous and an on-going process.

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