Narratives Across Borders

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Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing

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This book first published 2016

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-4438-8811-7
ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-8811-0

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FOREWORD

This study is based on the idea that the aim of literature is to build bridges, to bring people together and to highlight the underlying similarities despite the apparent differences in world literatures. Using Walter Benjamin's metaphor of "a ladder extending downward to the interior of the earth and disappearing into the clouds", it treats story-telling as a collective experience that not only brings together readers scattered in time and space but also connects different cultures and sensibilities. The ancient Indian ideal of *Vasudhaiva Kuttumbakam* or "the world is my home" is invoked, a concept close to the African notion of *Ubuntu* which refers to an open society (as against a small, enclosed one) and relates to the essence of being human, working for the benefit of a larger community.

Beginning with classics like the Indian epics, the *Panchatantra*, the *Kathasaritsagar*, and the *Arabian Nights*, this study cuts across geographical and cultural boundaries, ranging from ancient to contemporary texts, from antiquity to the present age of information technology. Although texts may originate against diverse backdrops, they have a commonality that cannot be denied. Using Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope (time-space metaphor), it focuses on select patterns that recur in literature. Stories may be rooted in a particular time and place but they are a part of a common heritage and comprise what we call world literature. The stories we tell, the tales we love to hear and repeat, all share certain features which reach out across geographical and temporal borders, bridging the gap between people and places. Living as we do in a globalized world today, we need to study literature against such a broad perspective.

The author believes that although narratives have their roots in specificities of time and space, they simultaneously attempt to break new ground; not only do they embody the ideology of the times, they also look back at the past and reach out into the future. The present study, with its varied, broad-based, expansive survey of disparate stories randomly chosen from across the globe, will be of interest to the lay reader passionate about literature. At the same time, it will be useful to the

serious scholar looking for insights into the art of story-telling and the manner in which narratives form a connecting link across cultures.

INTRODUCTION

TELLING THE TALE

> "All classes, all human groups, have their narratives, enjoyment of which is very often shared by men with different even opposing cultural backgrounds. ...narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself!"
> —Roland Barthes

The subject of this study is the literary narrative in its multifarious forms, whether oral or written or even visual. The form it acquires at a given time depends on the age and its level of sophistication. In the days of old, when time was a linear concept measured by the unhurried motions of the heavenly bodies, the sun, the stars and the moon, it was the rambling oral narrative that held sway. Story-telling was a popular pastime of the community when the day's work was done and the inhabitants of a village would gather under a tree. Or when wandering merchants travelled with their wares from one place to another, carrying with them not only merchandise but strange stories from wondrous lands, myths and legends of the vegetation cycle, customs and rituals of the death and resurrection of the various gods that were worshipped. As civilization progressed, the written word took over and narratives came to be stored in books, a process further perfected with the invention of the printing press. Now, in the 21st century, the pace of life has quickened so much that books have been relegated to a secondary place, the primary focus being the cyberspace, the computer and the television. However, one may perhaps agree with a critic like Paul Ricoeur who believes that there is always time for stories: the narrative impulse remains alive even if books have given way to other forms of story-telling. Narratives take on another guise, i.e., visual, and come packaged as soap operas or telefilms, or as popular cinema. Yet all three forms, the oral, the written/printed and the visual, have certain aspects in common which are witness to the fact that no text is independent unto itself, each being a link in a larger chain that we call narrative tradition. More often than not, a new text which is taken as a break from tradition is discovered upon scrutiny to be derivative, a

repetition with a difference, a variation of precursor narratives. This is not surprising for, as the poet says, in our beginning is our end. Or, to put it differently, as T.S. Eliot does, the end of all our exploring is to arrive at the place we start from. Narrative turns a full circle even as it purports to explore uncharted territories.

One needs but to look around to see that narratives are found anywhere and everywhere. The critic, Teresa Lauretis, feels that on no account can narratives be ignored—one has to work either with or against them. Roland Barthes is of the opinion that narratives of the world are numberless; they are present everywhere, at all times, and in different forms. Ursula Le Guin uses the rattle-snake analogy and is convinced that there is no escape from the narrative. Classic narratology believes in a dualistic model for the study of narratives, splitting the work into the *fabula* and the *sujet*, into *histoire* or discourse. However, one may be more inclined to agree with Barbara Smith who questions this methodological doubling, suggesting that instead of illuminating a text it actually misguides and distracts, preventing the reader from fully exploring the connection between the narrative, language and culture. Therefore, it may be advisable not to reduce narratives to a formula. For if a narrative is an attempt at ordering human experience, it may be prudent to remember that human experience is never simplistic; any attempt to reduce it to a defined body of words would not do sufficient justice. A narrative has a beginning and an end (Metz) but life is a living, growing, changing phenomenon which does not have a ready-made structure. If narrative is an attempt to capture some essence of this ceaselessly changing process it, too, must keep evolving, adapting itself to the needs of the times.

Another point of view that needs to be taken seriously is that no narrative is absolutely pure or original. Instead, a narrative is a response to infinite other narratives. Walter Benjamin sees the narrative as the art of repeating stories. Memory plays an important role in story-telling, for every good raconteur must be familiar with stories of old, build upon them, repeat their successes and avoid their failures in order to hold the interest of his listeners. Simultaneously, at work in the narrative process is a subtle power game. The narrative is a temporal sequence but the narrator has the liberty to disturb the time sequence, introducing anachronies, analepsis or prolepsis (i.e., disruption of time sequence, flashbacks and flash forwards) into the narration, thus exerting his authority over the story, over its cast of characters, and also over the recipient or the narrate, whom he/she authoritatively leads from ignorance to knowledge, from darkness to light. There may also be a reversal of the power game with the

narratee calling the shots, reading his/her own interpretation into the story, questioning the standpoint of the author. There may be other power structures, too: what, for instance, does the narrator choose to foreground in the narrative and what is he/she silent about? What is said is important, no doubt, but equally important is what is *not said*. The selection depends on the focalization and is a comment on the underlying ideology. This ideology, when questioned, may lead to a counter-narrative that posits a contrapuntal experience against the narrator's. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr., puts it, people may arrive at an understanding of themselves through narratives, but counter-narratives contest the dominant reality and the assumptions of the narrator, offering instead contrapuntal readings of the text.[1]

There is still more power-politics at work. If the narrator is a puppeteer of sorts, deftly manipulating the events of his story, his characters, even his readers or listeners, the whole process is analogous to sexual activity. There is an erotic pleasure in the discursive process. Freud's views on creativity and sexuality are well-known and one may like to mention Robert Scholes who believes that the archetype of all fiction is the sexual act, in the way it gradually progresses, builds to a crescendo, only to be followed by an anti-climax or denouement. Roland Barthes, in *The Pleasure of the Text* celebrates the physicality of language, the jouissance, and its orgasmic pleasures. In more or less the same vein, Laura Mulvey compares the narrator with a sadist—in the sense that through the narrative, teasingly, tantalizingly, he/she keeps the listener or reader hanging on, waiting for what happens next, for the next bend in the story, the next episode, always holding back, cheating on the end, delaying it as far as possible. Theresa Lauretis sees the act of reading, like writing, as "a function of desire" with the book's ending corresponding to the pursuit of the unattainable love object, narrative closure impeded by ecriture, the dispersal of meaning. "More simply put... the archetype of this fiction is the male sexual act." (Lauretis 71)

Take the legendary Scheherazade, for instance, who although for different reasons, postpones the conclusion of her stories, keeping Prince Sharyar forever in suspense, thus prolonging her life, story by story, one day at a time. She, too, is exerting the power of the word over her listener although temporal power lies with her husband at whose behest she may be beheaded at the break of day. The sexual politics interwoven into the

[1] Henry Louis Gates Jr. "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man," *The New Yorker* (23 Oct 1995), p. 57.

fabric of the narrative cannot be ignored. There is also some measure of narcissism in much metafiction, in the self-reflexive novel, for instance (which loops back on itself and becomes a comment on the act of writing), or even in metatheatre, where we have a play within a play, like *Hamlet's* "mousetrap" or like "Pyramus and Thisbe" in *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* or even the performance sequence in *Waiting for Godot*. A point to emphasize is that "narrative" does not mean fiction alone: drama and poetry are narrative forms, too, and so are non-literary works (which, however, are not in the purview of the present study). What has been said so far would be equally applicable to texts across the genres, across man-made borderlines of nation, class or culture, reaching out to the high and the low through elite and popular forms.

This brings us to the formal aspects of a narrative. The beginning and the end have already been mentioned, but what about the mode of narration? If we look back at the *Panchtantra* or the *Kathasaritsagar* or the *Arabian Nights*, it is easy to see a similarity in their structural framework. Each comprises a framed narrative with many stories held together by the overarching grand or master narrative. Like Chinese boxes or Russian dolls that fit one inside the other, these stories are held together by the framing narrative. One may also cite at random a twentieth-century text translated from the Malayalam—O.V. Vijayan's *The Legends of Khasak*—where the framing story is that of a newcomer into a sleepy village, his effort to find a place in the community, and ultimately his departure from the village. Within this frame numerous other stories are told—each character of the village has his own history which is narrated along with the superstitions and beliefs prevalent in that region. Together these stories, real and mythological, link up to form the substance of Vijayan's text. Thus, the framing device is very much in use even today. Take, for instance, the works of Mario Vargas Llosa or Shashi Tharoor or Italo Calvino.

The metafictional technique, or the framed narrative, is thought to be an eastern concept. Framed texts that appear outside the Indian subcontinent (the *Arabian Nights*, *Decameron*, *Canterbury Tales*, for instance) are said to have their origins in the *Kathasaritsagar*. A.B. Keith believes that the frame narrative was a Middle-Eastern concept; he is of the opinion that the animal tales of the *Panchatantra* travelled to Persia and Arabia where they were framed in stories along with the local tales, and then travelled back to India. This is how the stories as well as the technique spread across the world and were adopted by the novel in the

form of rambling narrative patterns with several story-threads, the kind that are found in India and also elsewhere.

How, one may ask, does this technique figure in poetry? Take a look at the best-known poetical work of the twentieth century—T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. What is it if not a sequence of scenes and sketches from modern life, held together by a commentary, a statement of the theme that runs through the five movements of the poem? What Tiresias sees, in fact, is the substance of the poem, Eliot tells us, and the substance that he sees comprises the many grim and sordid situations of a world which is a meaningless, barren, waste land. The horror of this landscape informs the various sections of *The Waste Land.*

In drama, the story-within-a-story, or rather play-within-a-play has various purposes but most of all it presents the world as a stage with us poor players, playing our parts. The outermost frame is occupied by the writer who pens the story, but on the stage it is the Chorus which holds the scenes together. Closer to home, it is the *sutradhar* who performs a binding role. In the plays of Girish Karnad, for instance, the *sutradhar* connects the many levels at which the action takes place. Similarly, in Vijay Tendulkar's *Ghasiram Kotwal* the human wall which sings and dances in between scenes performs the same role as the chorus of traditional plays. The framed sequence may also be found in popular forms of mass entertainment. Take, for instance, the film *Titanic* and its salvage sequences, the backward and forward movement of time, the simultaneous narration of two different stories—one of the shipwreck and the other of the discovery of the wreck. This dual narration is what Tzetvan Todorov sees in the unfolding of a story, a technique found in popular as well as canonical texts, in a cult film like *Titanic* and also in an established work—like *Oedipus Rex*, for instance, where the crime has been committed before the commencement of action, *ante rem,* and must now be revealed step by step.

There is, thus, in narratives, a repetition of narrative tools, of stories and underlying ideologies and mythologies. Archetypes, if you will, which keep recurring from time to time and have their origins in the primal instincts of man. These, when identified, enhance the pleasure of the text. Narratives and counter-narratives, visions and re-visions, each narrative challenges our complacencies and compels us to look at the world afresh.

This study begins with the generally accepted premise that the impulse to tell a story is as old as life itself, that there can be no rigidly defined rules governing the composition and structure of narratives, and that the more we try to impose a pattern on the fluid nature of the narrative process, the more will it elude us. Further, it develops the idea that to the mimetic and diegetic task of the writer a third element may be added, i.e., the impulse to break new ground and to experiment. What goes into the literary text, thus, is in part "constant" and in part "variable", combining as it does tradition with innovation, the old with the new. As the narrative progresses through the polytropic principle towards its closure, it contains within itself traditions of the past even as it forges ahead into new territories. So, how radical are today's story-tellers? How original is their craft? These are some of the questions that need to be answered.

At a deeper level, the attempt is to draw attention to three different yet related concepts in narratology—philosophy, ideology and the story—beginning with certain basic assumptions: the philosophy of a text is taken as that which includes the ideology, the meaning and the thoughts transmitted from one party (whether individual or collective) to another. For an understanding of ideology, one may go back to the word created by Destutt de Tracy in his *Elemens d'Ideologie* to define the science that aims at understanding the representation, nature and characteristics of ideas.[2] After de Tracy, ideology has been used differently by different philosophers, but in the present context it may be worthwhile to take ideology in a simple, uncomplicated form as that which embodies ideas. Philosophy and ideology in a narrative are embodied in the story that is told. The act of story-telling itself is a mode whereby knowledge is passed on from the teller to the recipient, possibly designed for the entertainment of the latter, and often involving the indoctrination of the other. As Jean-Francois Lyotard says, narratives are the communal method by which knowledge is stored and exchanged, therefore, they "define what has the

[2] Tracy coined the term "ideology" shortly after his appointment to the Institute National in 1796 to refer to his "science of ideas" which attempted to create a secure foundation for all the moral and political sciences by closely examining the sensations and the ideas about those sensations which arose in human beings as they interacted with their physical environment. For Napoleon, "ideology" was a term of abuse which he directed against his liberal opponents in the Institut National and it was this negative sense of the term which Marx had in mind in his writings on Ideology (he called Tracy a "*fischblütige Bourgeoisdoktrinär*"—a fish-blooded bourgeois doctrinaire). http://oll.libertyfund.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=41&Itemid=259 Accessed on 25.6.2015

right to be said and done in the culture in question, and since they are part of that culture." (Lyotard 23)

It is also worth keeping in mind that the transferred knowledge is to a large extent shaped by the ideology of the narrator and this ideology gives the text its underlying philosophy. We may here recall the etymology of "philosophy": philosophy is derived from the Ancient Greek word meaning "love of wisdom" and it is wisdom of one kind or another that is communicated through the innumerable stories that we narrate, the stories we are told and the tales we are familiar with. A teller of tales has some ideas to communicate to the listeners, a philosophy to propound, an ideology to promote, and a culture to preserve through the stories which are narrated.

The stories of the *Panchatantra*, for instance, are a means of passing on ideas, for communicating wisdom, and for spreading knowledge, a pattern discernible in all literary texts. The figure in the carpet may be hidden but it exists; it is like the guilty person whom Oedipus seeks (not knowing he himself is the one)—"seek and ye shall find him, unsought he goes undetected." There is a definite ideology underlying the various points of view encountered in story-telling, undercurrents unseen yet present.

Whose ideology? Whose philosophy? one may ask. The author's? But, as Roland Barthes told us in 1967, the author is dead.[3] Whose, then, if not the author's? The reader's perhaps, if we go by post-structuralist principles, for the death of the author—so we are told—means the birth of the reader. It is the reader's responsibility to deconstruct the text and then reconstruct the underlying philosophy. The target is never a single reader, so the literary text becomes an object like Wallace Stevens' blackbird, looked at from thirteen or more different ways, each reader reading his / her own meaning into the text. The meaning—rather, the meanings—are thus context-specific and change with the reader's positioning, milieu, location in time and space—the standpoint epistemology as it is called.

[3] "Thus is revealed the total existence of writing: a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author. The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination." (Barthes 148)

The "chronotopes" or the spatio-temporal specificities of a text, as Bakhtin puts it, determine the meaning. The philosophy a text contains would relate to the context, the age, the time, and the milieu; interpretation is oriented toward what Bakhtin calls the "conceptual horizon" of the recipient.[4] The text remains what it is but the message it conveys is subject to changes as it travels down the ages; it acquires new meaning—not because something is added to the ur-text but because some of the voices which were earlier silent or unheard, are now loud enough to be taken cognizance of, a fact which takes us to the Bakhtinian concepts of dialogism and heteroglossia. The voices we hear affect our reading of a text. They may rise and fall, depending on personal and social factors; at times some may almost disappear while others may become "dominant" in the sense Jakobson uses the term.[5] The dominant keeps shifting, depending on the philosophy discernible to the reader at a given time and place, the voices that the reader can hear.

The present study focuses on how stories travel through time and through space. Doing so, they undergo changes with every age and every narrator. Sometimes the changes are drastic and the original tale is lost. The lessons conveyed by the stories also undergo variations with the passage of time and also with the teller. Moreover, in story-telling, the role of the narratee is as important as the narrator's, for every story needs a recipient. The meaning of the narrative (or its many meanings), thus, depend on several factors which will be studied in the chapters that follow vis-a-vis texts drawn from diverse geographical and cultural backgrounds.

[4] "Therefore, [the speaker's] orientation toward the listener is an orientation toward a specific conceptual horizon, toward the specific world of the listener…." (Bakhtin 282)

[5] The concept of the dominant, which Jakobson defined as "the focusing component of a work of art" that "rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components."

"…in the evolution of poetic form it is not so much a question of the disappearance of certain elements and the emergence of others, as it is the question of shifts in the mutual relationships among the diverse components of the system… the shifting dominant within a given complex of poetic norms…."

CHAPTER I

IMMORTAL CLASSICS

The *Panchatantra*: Stories with a Lesson

> "The *Panchatantra* is like the evergreen banyan tree, spreading its branches and roots. Wherever an aerial root touches the earth it becomes a tree and starts giving joy to everyone by providing shelter, shade and fruits. Though the *Panchatantra* has travelled far and wide, its mother trunk is rooted in the soil of India and delights all those who read it."
> —Manorama Jafa

The present study begins with a focus on popular folk tales from India which have shaped the lives and minds of many generations. As a starting point, it uses a familiar story:

Once upon a time, perhaps it was around 200 B.C., in a goodly kingdom by the sea, lived a noble king who was greatly loved by his people for he was a just ruler and those were days of plenty. This king, whose name was Amarsakthi, ruled over the kingdom of Mahilaropya in southern India. The country prospered and the king's fame spread far and wide. Truly, it seemed to be a golden age. But his glory notwithstanding, the king was very sad for he had three foolish, good-for-nothing sons, called Bahushakti, Ugrashakti and Anantshakti, who were averse to all learning. Their state of ignorance gave the king sleepless nights and he wondered what could possibly be done to awaken their intelligence. Was there a teacher who could impart knowledge to them? The king's advisers and counsellors came up with various suggestions. One of them offered to take them under his tutelage for twelve years in the course of which he would teach them grammar, religion, diplomacy and the essentials of practical day-to-day living. However, the young princes being what they were, would not have the patience to complete such a lengthy educational training, so the offer was rejected. Next, someone suggested the name of Vishnu Sharma, a much-respected learned Brahmin who would be able to educate the princes in a shorter span of time. Pandit Vishnu Sharma was called in and offered substantial material gains if he agreed to take on the

onerous task of educating the princes. The Pandit politely declined the offer with the famous words: "*Nahan vidya vikrayan karoni*" (I will not sell knowledge) but agreed to take on the responsibility of initiating the royal young men into a state of knowledge.

So it was that Vishnu Sharma, the learned Brahman, was appointed the teacher of the errant princes. He took them under his tutelage and began to instruct them through fables, each fable carrying a moral lesson. When wisdom was presented to the young princes disguised in the form of stories, they were receptive and in six months' time they actually possessed unsurpassed knowledge of all branches of practical wisdom. Vishnu Sharma's collection of tales, the *Panchatantra* had stories in prose and morals in verse taken from the Vedas. The teacher's modus operandi was simple but effective. Instead of administering homilies or sermons, he narrated stories to the young men. Each story carried a moral lesson which would be driven home effectively and painlessly. About two centuries after these stories were narrated by Vishnu Sharma, they were collected as the *Panchatantra*. *Pancha* or five—the collection has five *tantras* or divisions: *Mitra Bheda*, *Mitra Samprapti*, *Kakolukiyam*, *Labhdaprasam*, and *Aparik Itakaraka* which roughly translates as *The Separation of Friends, the Winning of Friends, War and Peace, The Loss of Gain*, and *Hasty Action*. A discussion on narratives and how they travel across time and space should rightly begin with this seminal text.

The stories that reformed the princes are collected in the *Panchatantra* which dates back to a period before 570 AD. Divided into five chapters or *tantras*, they relate to the art of living wisely and well and form a *nitishastra*. This anthology of popular tales is a familiar one across the Indian subcontinent; we have heard the stories often in our growing years and as adults we have repeated them to younger generations. In particular, it is essential to keep in mind that the tales of the *Panchatantra* relate to the practical aspects of day-to-day living, pointing to a just and upright path that human beings should aspire towards. They impart moral instructions administered in small doses and the lessons they convey are connected with the culture in which the text is located. The *Panchatantra* comprises units that are linked together to form a whole, moving towards a telos, a conclusion; it follows the oral tradition, comprising talk-stories, tales from folk lore, myths and legends that travel down the generations by word of mouth, adapting themselves to the environment and situation, inevitably changing with every narrator and with every narration.

Travellers from the east to Persia carried these fabulous tales back home from India. King Khosraw I ordered his ministers to translate the fables into their literary language, Pahlavi. Then, as time went by, the Persian version was in turn translated into Arabic. By the 11th century, the tales of the *Panchatantra* were read and enjoyed in many different languages in Europe. In recent decades, these stories have become popular through comic books such as the Amar Chitra Katha series (a comic imprint with hundreds of titles easily available online). The comic book series is written by the leading Indian fantasy and comic book writer, Samit Basu, and illustrated by Ashish Padlekar. In India, the importance of the *Panchatantra* tales may be assessed by the fact that the Government of India issued a set of four postage stamps in 2001 which depict four stories from the *Panchatantra*. These stories are "The Lion and the Rabbit", "The Tortoise and the Geese", "The Crows and the Snake" and "The Monkey and the Crocodile". The denomination of these stamps is Rs. 4/- each. The *Panchatantra* stories became part of the national postage not only in India, but in Lebanon too where two postal stamps were issued, based on the stories of the *Panchatantra.* [1]

The *Panchatantra* tales are sculpted on the temple walls; the Mukteswara temple, for instance, offers a pride of place to tales from the *Panchatantra*.[2] This 10th century temple has some of the most ornate carvings and renditions of the *Panchatantra* tales. Sculptures can be found of elephants, monkeys, lions, and other animals. Around the windows of the Jagmohana are monkeys engaged in a variety of humorous and lively scenes depicting popular stories from *Panchatantra*.[3] The sculptural decoration of the Mukteswara is exquisitely done; the *Panchatantra* stories, etched on the walls with great skill and precision, are of interest not only to the art critic but also to the lay man.

The moral or didactic purpose of the *Panchatantra* cannot be doubted. The stories were told with the specific purpose of imparting instruction to the doltish princes. The maxims relate to morality, religion and

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[1] For this section on the *Panchatantra*, I am indebted to my doctoral student, Dr Harpreet Dhiman, who made a critical study of the text in her Ph.D. thesis on popular folk tales.

[2] See http://www.culturalindia.com/Temples/Mukteshwara.htm In India, the *Panchatantra* stories have become part of temple architecture along with *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* stories

[3] Channabasappa S. Patil, 1995. *Panchatantra in Karnataka Sculptures*. Karnataka State Directorate of Archaeology and Museums, Mysore.

philosophy. Their primary focus is practical day-to-day living and governance: How should one conduct oneself in routine matters? What makes a just and noble ruler? How should a king rule best and what should be his policy towards his people? In this respect it is possible to see a connection between the *Panchatantra* and Machiavelli's *The Prince*, for instance. Or even Kautilya's *Arthashastra*. The three texts overlap on various issues but there are striking differences, too. *The Prince* treats the state and the ruler as supreme, advocating the maxim that the end justifies the means, thus coining the term "machiavellian".

Scholars have also traced the influence of *Arthashastra* on the *Panchatantra*. A.B. Keith believes that "the *Panchatantra* appears to allude to Chanakya and follows Kautilya's *Arthashastra*. It is suggested by Hertel that it was originally conceived as a work for teaching political wisdom but it must be admitted that its character as a political textbook is never glaring. It is essentially a story book in which the story teller and the political teacher are unified in one personality." (Keith 112-113) *Arthashastra* deals with good administration, finance and statehood but does not compromise on ethics. Nor does it veil its teachings on governance behind fables or folk tales. The *Panchatantra* differs from *The Prince* and *Arthashastra* in that it remains a moral treatise; it deals with ethics and polity but nowhere does it advocate the use of foul means to reach a desired goal. It is dissimilar in another respect: its teachings are sugar-coated, couched in popular tales and thus easily understood even by those who are not gifted with mental alacrity.

C. Rajan is of the opinion that the *Panchatantra* "might have been originally designed for the use of monarchs as a mirror for princes, a pattern for a just ruler in the art of government and in the conduct of his private life and relationships. Because the private and the public areas of living are both parts of a whole, the two cannot be separated and compartmentalized. *Niti* applies at all levels. Further, this work goes beyond the education of princes. It is meant for all men and women. Many of the tales are about ordinary people going about the normal business of living rightly or wrongly." (Rajan xxviii)

The *Panchatantra* shares several stories with Aesop's *Fables*, thus giving rise to speculations whether the Indians were inspired by the Greeks or vice versa. Perhaps it would be safe to say that the two collections of stories are derived from similar sources. Lin Yutang is of the opinion that it was the Eastern tales that influenced the Greeks (in *Wisdom of India*). The influence of the *Panchatantra* has also been traced in the

works of Boccaccio, La Fontaine, John Gower, and the Grimm Brothers. These tales have travelled far, indeed, and have been translated into as many as two hundred languages in different countries, in the Eastern corners of the world as well as the west.

Looking at the structure of the *Panchatantra*, it may be noted that it comprises a collection of stories that are independent yet linked. They are like beads in a rosary, or like many compartments in a larger structure. The framing device is obvious as is the multiple level of story-telling. The tales are interwoven with maxims and moral lessons. The outer frame, the Preamble as we know it, comprises the story of the ruler of Mahilaropya, King Amarshakti, his sons and the pandit appointed to educate the princes. Further, within each chapter or *tantra*, there are inlaid stories. Thus, the metafictional technique is very much in evidence. These embedded stories are peopled by their own characters, some of whom become story-tellers. Thus, there are multiple levels of story-telling, different narratorial voices that emerge for a while, are heard, and then disappear only to make way for other voices.

Each *tantra* is a duplication of the overall structure of the collection. So it is like many mirrors reflecting each other, giving different perspectives on various issues, yet similar in their goal. The original narrator is Pandit Vishnu Sharma himself. After he begins narrating stories, the characters created by him take on the role of narrators. With each subsequent narration of the *Panchatantra* tales, other narrators step into the limelight, either as editors, compilers or translators. Ibn-al-Muqaffa, who translated the *Panchatantra* into Arabic, added another section to the book, thus including himself in the line of narrators. But, if there are several narrators, multiple diegetic levels, and multiple frames, there are also many narratees. Beginning with the three princes as the first narratees of the tutor, Vishnu Sharma, the various levels of the *Panchatantra* give us an array of listeners and at the end of the list comes today's listener, the recipient of our times, or the contemporary reader. The collection of fables is thus a thickly textured and multi-layered text. It has a moral purpose but does not end on a dogmatic note. The conclusion is open-ended and the reader / listener is left to ponder upon possible meanings and arrive at his own conclusions. Evidently, Vishnu Sharma was not only a good teacher but also a psychologist who realized that human beings did not like to be shown a mirror to their unsavoury behaviour. Hence he disguised all moral lessons in clever stories peopled by animals and birds, species decidedly inferior to human beings. The

characters in the *Panchatantra* represent human vices and virtues, good as well as bad qualities. They are "types" we can recognize.

Vladimir Propp, in all the tales he has analyzed, identifies eight broad categories of characters. If we try and locate these characters in the *Panchatantra*, we find the following broad divisions: royalty, courtiers, mystical characters, commoners and women. The five divisions of the *Panchatantra* together comprise stories which may vary from one collection to another. Each story stands independently but concludes by pointing a cue to the story that will follow, thus giving an impression of linked unity and continuity. Arthur A. MacDonell, in his *A History of Sanskrit Literature*[4] has compared the narrative technique to a set of Chinese boxes. Each part contains "at least one story, and usually more, which are 'emboxed' in the main story called the 'frame-story'. Sometimes there is a double emboxment: another story is inserted in an 'emboxed' story." (See Edgerton, 1924)

Vishnu Sharma has been criticized for his portrayal of women. The beginning of the *Panchatantra*, for instance, smacks of misogyny. Although he was a learned man, he apparently was patriarchal in his outlook, had an aversion for women, and considered them inferior and unclean—an attitude that is a reflection of the traditional male-dominated society of the times. Some of the stories present infidel women, others insatiable, cruel or dominating. The good woman is cast in the traditional role of wife, sister or mother, the socially unacceptable woman is the whore. This is a pattern we find in other classics, too, e.g., in the *Arabian Nights.* In his defence, however, one may say that no doubt he is harsh, but at the same time he is aware of the importance of woman's position in society.

> You are our only nectar; you
> O woman, are our poison, too.
> For union with you is the breath
> Of life; and absence from you, death. (396)

The binaries in respect to women seem present the way they existed in those times. This flaw notwithstanding, the *Panchatantra*, remains a useful text, enabling us to grasp the need for a practical approach to living and helping us understand the cultural context of the age in which the

[4] Arthur Macdonell: //www.gutenberg.org/files/41563/41563-h/41563-h.htm Accessed on 25.06.2015.

stories originated. It remains a "treatise on the art of living wisely and well…" comprising "stories linked by wise and good sayings of a good and true poet … of service to others here in this world, [leading] the way to the World of Eternal Light…." (Rajan 435)

Stories such as these, linked with popular myth emerging from the common imagination of the people, have the authority of history that is shaped by the oral tradition. Such stories retain their hold on the human imagination because of their subject matter, dealing as they do with human affairs and destiny, with the daily routine of everyday living and with issues that mankind has to grapple with. In his essay, "Myth, Fiction and Displacement," Northrop Frye tells us that old folk tales, myths and legends give us uncomplicated, easy-to-remember story patterns. These are "no more hampered by barriers of language and culture than migratory birds are by customs officers, and made up interchangeable motifs that can be counted and indexed." (Frye) The greatest of writers take an interest in folktales and it is here that landmarks of literature originate. Writers like Shakespeare make use of them because they "illustrate the essential principles of story-telling." We find the same principle at work elsewhere, too. A later part of this chapter will take, for example, Thomas Mann's short story, "The Transposed Heads" which makes use of a folk tale from India and modifies it in such a manner that it continues its journey into times to come.

> A myth that survives over a long period takes on different shapes when handled by individuals of different generations. (Gay Clifford 5-8).

The greatest of literary texts seem to have a sanction in the past: a writer is best understood when he makes use of familiar devices, or when he works against a backdrop of accepted and traditional ideas (an idea supported by many literary theorists, including T. S. Eliot). Ancient myths and legends, when revived by later generations of writers, become means by which parallels may be drawn between contemporaneity and antiquity. An old story may, thus, be told over and over. But when it is retold it does not stick out like an obsolete signpost; instead, it is reworked and acquires new dimensions, becoming relevant to the times.

With their roots in the collective imagination of a community, folk tales often provide the structural frame-work for stories, a frame-work that is essential if a story is to be placed in a tradition. In this context, one may cite T.S. Eliot's essay on William Blake where he laments that missing in the work of the gifted poet (Blake) is the necessary backdrop against

which great poetry should be written: "What [Blake's] genius required, and what it sadly lacked, was a framework of accepted and traditional ideas which would have prevented him from indulging in a philosophy of his own." Such a necessary framework may be constructed from familiar folklore, ancient legends and myths which come down to us from a hoary past but retain their appeal and vitality; myths which may be interpreted either simplistically as entertaining stories, or intellectually as "a revelation of that vanished mind of which our mind is a continuum." Eliot advocated the use of myth "as a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history." This mythical method is what he appreciated in the works of James Joyce who, using the Homeric myth in *Ulysses*, succeeds in "manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity."[5]

Eliot believed in the timelessness of certain recurrent images and themes in art. Northrop Frye calls them "archetypes of the unconscious," originating in what has been called our "collective unconscious": archetypes which are repeated time and again in some form or the other, familiar stories that we are willing to hear narrated again and yet again. Literary history reveals that much enduring literature is informed by pre-literary categories, for example, ritual, myth and folk tale, and the search for archetypes is like literary anthropology (Frye 12). In popular folklore, a motif that holds eternal fascination is that of transformation or metamorphosis, whether it is found in the *Bible*, in a children's story, or in a canonical text. Lot's wife turns into a pillar of salt when she takes a backward look, Philomel turns into a nightingale when pursued, a young princess turns into a golden statue at the Midas touch, the coach turns into a pumpkin at the stroke of midnight, the frog into a prince when the curse is lifted: these are stories that we are familiar with, stories that have survived the passage of time. They continue to live on because of the permanent human element in them: they deal with love and death, joy and sorrow, pain, anguish, and other forms of experience peculiar to our mortal world. Our attention is riveted to the nightingale, for instance, because the bird was once, and still is a girl: a girl seduced and later mutilated. The outer form has changed but the pain lives on and it is a human pain that we identify with and respond to. When the frog enters the princess's chamber, we know that there is a human story behind it, an unfortunate prince

[5] T.S. Eliot on the mythical method in his essay "Ulysses, Order and Myth," 1923.

trapped in the frog's slimy body, so we wait with baited breath for the inevitable transformation to take place.

When transformations take place in fairy tales, there is generally an element of poetic justice in the grand finale. Cinderella's story is another version of "virtue rewarded" when Prince Charming finally locates her and when the cruel stepsisters are punished. Rumpelstiltskin, the wicked goblin, is swallowed up by the earth when he stamps his foot too hard in rage. No attempt is made to explain or rationalize these events and none is expected in fairy tales, but the moral of the story is driven home all the same: the good will be rewarded, the wicked must suffer.

In the ancient mythologies of India, as in the Graeco-Roman mythological system, in the stories of Gods, Goddesses, and demons, transformation of evil characters taking on an attractive form to entice the unsuspecting, Gods taking on a mortal appearance to interact with human beings, animals turning into men and vice versa, are not uncommon incidents. They are as familiar as the story of Tiresias turning into a woman and then returning to a male form in the Greek legend. Sometimes the transformation is not complete and what we are left with is a creature that is half-man and half-animal, part human and part bestial. Ganesh, for instance, who has the head of an elephant and the body of a man, is not an isolated figure in world mythologies. He reminds us of other legendary figures, part animal and human. The Narsingh, for instance, is half-lion and half-man, symbolizing the intelligence of a man and the strength of a lion. The Egyptian Sphinx is partly human and partly animal. The Centaur or the Satyr of Graeco-Roman mythology is half-human and half-equine, the Minotaur half man and half bull. The idea underlying these myths is that the human and the animal attributes co-exist, generally in a balanced, harmonious form. However, human beings—because they are human—hanker after a state of perfection that remains elusive.

The present study is concerned with this idea of linking the past with the present through literature and in the present section the focus is on how certain motifs have been manipulated in texts across time and space. Take, for instance, stories related to change or metamorphosis which continue to fascinate readers. In the popular fairy tales of Hans Christian Anderson or the Brothers Grimm when we read of characters changing entities it grabs our attention immediately. Or when we take the works of Ovid or Kafka, who speak of transformations of different kinds, what remains with us is the eerie transformation of one form of existence into another. With its immense popular appeal, this is a recurrent motif in literature. It may be

interesting to see how an author would handle this subject in the present age of science and computers, in which atheism, scepticism and cynicism are all-pervasive. It would also be of interest to study the kind of transformations that occur in Indian folk tales and in their western counterparts. This section focuses on one particular folk tale from the *Vetalapanchavimshati* in the *Kathasaritasagar* which has been used by two different authors, Thomas Mann and Girish Karnad, writers distanced from each other in time and space but drawn to the same motif. How do they handle a familiar theme? What are the traditional and innovative devices used in each case so that the ancient legend is not only made relevant to the twentieth century but may be understood regardless of all chronotopic barriers? These are interesting issues which would throw a light on what goes into the making of world literature.

The *Kathasaritsagar*

The *Kathasaritsagar* is an ancient Indian classic; its structural aspects bear affinity to the *Panchatantra* in the metafictional mode, the multiple narrators, and the framing devices used. The outer frame is the story of Shiva and Parvati. Shiva narrates the adventures of the seven Vidyadhara princes to Parvati, but is overheard by Pushpadanta who narrates it to his wife. Parvati is incensed and wants to punish him but the 'gana' Malyavan intercedes on his behalf. Further enraged, Parvati turns on Malyavan and curses him to be reborn on earth as Gunadhya. In his reincarnated form he has to spread far and wide the tales that Shiva had narrated to her. One of the books written by him falls into the hands of the Vidyadhara prince, Naravahandatta, who adds the *Kathapitha*, a preamble to it. Together, the *Kathapitha* and Gunadhya's stories (about the adventures of Naravahandatta) form the eighteen books of the *Kathasaritsagar*, comprising numerous stories that flow like rivers and streams, big and small, giving the anthology its name—the Ocean of the Sea of Stories. One of these cycles of stories is the *Vetalapanchavimshati or* The *Vetala Pachisi,* twenty-five tales told by the Vetala to King Vikramaditya. There are multiple diegetic levels, stories within stories, held in outer and inner frames, all of them compiled by Somadeva, the Kashmiri Shaivite Brahman, who, in the year 1070 AD, added some Kashmiri tales to the collection, thus giving the *Kathasaritsagar* its outermost frame. Since then, the *Kathasaritsagar* has been translated, edited and annotated any number of times. With each edition a new narrator is added to the list, which means yet another outer frame to the collection.

The entire *Kathasaritsagar*, which gathers together an assorted variety of folk tales, is made up of 22,000 slokas which makes it twice as long as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* put together. It comprises stories that are complex and fall under various categories: history, myth, animal tales, tales from the *Ramayana*, folk tales, riddles, tales of magic and the supernatural, and stories related to everyday living. It is an amoral collection as well as a-religious. The concerns are purely worldly; of the four Hindu *purusharthas, dharma*, *artha*, *kama* and *moksha*, the collection of tales is animated by *artha* and it is regarded as a celebration of life in its myriad forms.

Pointing to the different levels of narration, a critic says of the *Kathasaritsagar* that the main narrative is "lost in a maze of stories that are added to it. At the slightest provocation, a speaker recalls a tale in which a speaker recalls another tale; and the banquet consists of nothing but hors d'oeuvres" (Somadeva xxx). It is like peeling off layer after layer of an onion only to find that the essence lies in the layers themselves.

When we look at it closely, we note the wide range of stories and their varied characteristics, tone, and language. Often this gives the impression that these tales are narrated by multiple authors, the product of many minds at work. Like many other ancient classics, it is likely that they have come down from the oral tradition and were compiled at a much later date by Somadeva—who did not author the tales but simply compiled them. Beginning with the outer frame of the stories, we have deities as the main characters: Lord Shiva and his consort, the Goddess Parvati atop their divine abode, the Mount Kailash. Parvati is bored and asks her spouse to entertain her with stories never told before. Lord Shiva happily obliges and tells her several connected stories about kings and queens, ghosts, witches and demons against a backdrop that shifts from the ethereal to the earthly and to the underworld. His efforts are not in vain for the goddess is pleased. Unknown to them, however, their trusted guard, on duty outside their chamber, has overheard the stories. Seeing how they induced in Parvati an amorous state conducive to intimacy, he decides to use them for his own purpose. He narrates the stories to his wife who happens to be Parvati's maid. Unknowingly, she repeats the tales to her mistress, following which the guard's crime is discovered and he is punished.

The *Brihatkatha* (the "Great Story") was purportedly written by Malyavan in his earthly existence as Gunadhya. It comprises the seven tales Shiva narrated to Parvati. As the story goes, Gunadhya wrote them and presented the manuscript to the Satvahana King who rejected it

because of its crude appearance: it was written in Paisaci language on the bark of a tree and in Gunadhya's blood. Dejected, Gunadhya began destroying the seven books, one at a time. He burned six of them but before he could destroy the seventh manuscript, the seventh Vidyadhara prince, Naravahandatta, salvaged what was left of it and added his own preface to it.

According to some critics, Gunadhya's contribution to the tradition of Indian literature may be rated as high as that of Rishi Vyas or Valmiki. In world literature the *Kathasaritsagar* holds a unique place along with other texts like the *Panchatantra* or epics like the *Mahabharata* or the *Ramayana*. Gunadhya's text is dated roughly between 495 and 490 BC, corresponding with the dates of the Satvahana ruler of Andhra Pradesh. Later, several translated versions were made available in Sanskrit and Prakrit. Among the versions that have survived are those compiled in Buddhaswami's *Brihatkatha Shloka Sangraha*, Kshamendra's *Brihatkatha Manjari*, and Somadeva's *Kathasaritsagar*. The *Kathasaritsagar* of Somadeva is larger than the other two versions. It is believed that Somadeva compiled the tales of Gunadhya for the Queen Suryamati, the wife of King Anant and gave it an appropriate title that loosely meant "Ocean of Stories". Although the title evokes the image of a boundless ocean into which flow all the rivers of stories, the *Kathasaritsagar* may actually be regarded as an ur-text from which originate the various traditions of Indian fiction. It weaves into its structure diverse elements of myth and history, imagination and reality, illusion and truth. Its tales are peopled by flesh and blood characters who are true to life and who are depicted in situations that are plausible. At the same time, there is the *deus ex machina* the supernatural machinery that interferes with human existence and causes complications from time to time. Or else it enters the story world at a point when human endeavor is powerless to grapple with a given situation. Divine help then comes to the rescue in such cases.

Simultaneously, even as the *Kathasaritsagar* gives us glimpses of diverging worlds, it presents certain non-debatable psychological truths about human nature through stories that depict an array of human beings of all types. Human character is laid bare in all its complexities. In all its various shades and hues, it records the social structure then prevalent in India, traditions and customs which held sway right up to the time of the medieval ages, human aspirations in conflict with divine intervention, or with social propriety, all of which are mirrored here faithfully. The warp and woof of these stories is taken from a broad expanse across the Indian subcontinent, from far-flung places, the north, south, east and west. If we

have tales from Kashmir, we also have some from the Deccan, from the present Sri Lanka, the Maldives and the Nicobar Islands. Within its broad framework the *Kathasaritsagar* contains several cycles of stories, like the Vetal stories, the Tota-mynah stories and the Singhasan Batisi. One cannot be sure whether these cycles were part of the original composition of Gunadhya or whether they were added later on. The age of the Satvahanas was that of the wandering merchant who would go trading from place to place, taking not only his ships or caravans to distant places but also carrying with him stories from one locale to another. The stories of Gunadhya were thus added to, modified, adapted to the local sensibility, and multiplied in manifold forms as they spread in all directions.

The fables of Aesop, the stories of Alif-Laila, *1001 Arabian Nights*, may all be convincingly traced back to the *Kathasaritsagar*. The text is unique in that it is simultaneously simple and childlike as well as complex. The simplicity is based on the "story" content of the tales: taken from everyday life, related to recognizable human situations and conflicts, the tales of the *Kathasaritsagar* are easily comprehended by the young and old alike. However, underlying the apparent simplicity is a deeper current comprising the moral and ethical content on the one hand and the narrative framework on the other. Both these aspects provide fodder for the intellect and present a different face of the text to the scholar seeking intellectual inroads into world literature. They cover a sprawling canvas and it is easy to lose sight of the main story but the frames are well-contained, one inside the other; the stories are inter-linked and the narrators flow from one tale to the next, keeping the entire structure in place. The linked narratives do not fall apart.

First compiled in 1070 A.D., Somadeva's *Kathasaritsagar* has a number of stories that involve transformations from one state of being to another. As in the fairy tales and allegories of the western and the eastern world, there often seems to be a moral lesson being driven home. The tale of the heads that get switched, from the *Vetalapanchavimshati*, for instance, debates a very valid question: what is it that makes a man? Is it his physical attributes, his emotions, or his intellect? The story underscores the idea that the head is the most important, it is the *utamanga* that identifies the body and rules the other organs. The Sanskrit tale, narrated by the *Vetala* to an adventurous king is just one of the twenty-five stories framed by the outer narrative of King Vikrama who makes endless trips to and from the cremation grounds to carry a corpse at the behest of a scheming mendicant. This framing device used in the *Kathasaritsagar* is said to be a source of inspiration for other similar "framed" serial stories

of the western world: the *Decameron*, for instance, or *1001 Arabian Nights*, or even *The Canterbury Tales*. The structure is similar: one central speaker who controls the show and ushers in all the stories, many characters from diverse backgrounds, a number of unrelated stories that are ultimately loosely linked together to form a whole. The situations described are usually unexceptional: men and women caught in different circumstances, their interaction, their choices, and the consequences of their choices.

The stories of the *Kathasaritsagar* have found an international audience as writers the world over recognize in them timeless motifs and rework them in diverse ways. A writer who has retold the transposed-heads story of the Vetala is Thomas Mann who came to Sanskrit literature through his study of the works of Schopenhaeur. Before discussing Mann's version of the story, however, a word about the original is necessary.

The original story of the transposed heads from the *Vetalapanchavimshati* speaks of a newly-wed woman, Madanasundari, whose husband, on a sudden impulse cuts off his head as a sacrifice to the Goddess Parvati. Following his example, Madanasundari's brother does the same. The young bride is woebegone and tries to take her own life, but the Goddess speaks up, prevents her from doing so, tells her to place the heads on the bodies and they will come to life again. The instructions are followed, but in her confusion, Madanasundari mixes up the heads, so that when the bodies come alive again, the husband's body has the brother's head while the brother's torso has the husband's head. Which of the two, then, is her husband? To whom does she "belong"? This is the Vetala's question, the answer to which is supplied by King Vikramaditya: "The one with the husband's head; for the head ranks supreme among the members, just as woman among life's delights" (Zimmer 248).[6] This is the original story. As it moves through time it acquires different dimensions.

In Thomas Mann's "The Transposed Heads" (1940) the story of the transposed heads is given a mock-heroic treatment. The main characters are Sita, her intellectually-trained husband, Shridaman, and his friend, the robust and handsome Nanda. The two men, in love with the same woman, sacrifice their lives at the temple of Kali. Sita, on the advice of the Goddess, places the heads back on the body again, but confuses them (deliberately, perhaps, because the Goddess had warned her against this

[6] The sexist overtones of the answer may be noted.