Registering Resistance: Ambiguity of the Native Narratorial Voice and the Colonial Folklorist in Nineteenth Century India

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ABSTRACT

Folk literature has always remained the veritable connection between the reader and the heritage of the land, orally transmitted from one generation to the other. With the advent of the colonisers from Europe came the colonial trappings of hegemonic, patriarchal structure which aimed at the socio-economic aggrandizement of the colonising countries at the cost of the colonised ones. They disguised their administrative goals in the borrowed garbs of rationality and knowledge. The proposed paper would try to understand the intentions of the colonisers and analyse the resistance exhibited by the colonised narrators in the domain of folk literature in nineteenth century India.

KEYWORDS: Folktales, Colonialism, Narratorial resistance

INTRODUCTION

The mission of Colonialism has always been to alter the status quo of the colonised state to such a degree that the common people's attitude towards their own traditions changed drastically. The hegemonic patriarchy that the colonisers represented tried to subjugate the customs of the colonised and portrayed a better version of their indigenous history by influencing and altering the same. Colonialism affected the outlook of the colonies in nearly every sphere of life, and folk-life was no exception. The subversion of the native vision led to two affects - first was of a rejection of their own way of life and the second was of acceptance and pride in the heritage of the coloniser. The inculcation of the idea of subversion was achieved through the neo-education system put into force by the colonisers in the early nineteenth century, which lead to a hybrid society which contained values from both of the colonizer and the colonized.

Folklore, an integral part of the pre-colonial society, was an inherent part of the theory and praxis of the entire society including the intellectuals and masses. The problem was that the folk-literature was seldom acknowledged as a pure form of literature. It was generally considered as inappropriate to accord a recognition to folk literature within the gamut of mainstream literature, then in vogue. The problem was genuine as folk-texts were oral in nature and hence embodied a sense of independence and fluidity that can be rarely achieved by mainstream literature. The fluidity of folk-literature paved the way of its recognition as a method of resistance against the colonisers. The British understood the immense energy that folk-literature embodied and thus envisaged to get them printed. When a folk-text is printed, its features and language gets bounded within the boundary of hegemonic literary canon, and thereby looses the liveliness of performance, which is a basic feature of folk-lore. The mainstream literature having strict conventions of its own expressed through literary lingua and controlled by the socio-politico-economic concerns of the proto-colonised clearly lacks the voice of spontaneity, vibrancy of the folk-tales. In a way the folk-tales represent the imaginative realism of the common people who existed beyond the realm of Macaulayian India. It is clear that the folk-literature has no distinct time-frame, as they are orally transmitted from a generation to the next and hence the changes in version remains a common feature. Before the advent of print and other media, the human voice was the only communicative technology. In pre-print era, oral transmission was the main feature which separated folk literature from the mainstream literature. Once printed, an oral text was canonized and it lost all the features that proved its vibrancy and evolutionary existence.

Colonial interest in Folktales

The colonial enterprise always endeavoured to use the tradition of the colonised and subvert it for strengthening their cultural domination through the distilled and deviated form of long-existent norms and praxis; with India the status was no different. The British wanted to control the reading practices of the natives by directing what the printed canon in early part of the nineteenth century. In 1818, Mountstuart Elphinstones, who was to later become the Governor of Bombay, submitted a report on the literate practice of the colony:

"...Books are scarce, and the common ones probably ill-chosen; but there exist in the Hindu languages many tales and fables that would be generally read, and that would circulate sound morals. There must be religious books tending more directly to the same end. If many of these are printed and distributed gratuitously, the effect would without doubt, be great and beneficial. It would however be indispensible that they should be purely Hindu. We might silently omit all precepts of questionable morality, but the slightest infusion of religious controversy would secure the failure of the design." (Naregal: 2001:151).

The colonised and the colonisers involved themselves in discourses – each redefining the Other by its own unique experiences. The heterogeneous polyphony within these experiences paved way for the collection, systematic edition through planned exclusion of so called spurious elements and dissemination through the printed form of a sort of filtered folklore in the late nineteenth century India, especially in the emergent native society which had accepted the British notions of "rationality" and "enlightenment". Evidently, both the coloniser and the colonised were subverted by each other - both were deciphered, re-encoded and re-interpreted, while the colonial narratives often attempted (and mostly failed) to suppress these voice(s) of dissent.

The ideals propounded by the Folklore Society (established in London in 1878) were of enlightened parochialism. Its journal *Folklore* voiced the late nineteenth century ideals of disciplining the ill-taught, under-developed and irrational oriental colonised through Enlightenment of rational occidental knowledge. Edward W. Brabooke's article in *Folklore* XII (1901) and Charlotte Burne's *The Handbook of Folklore* (1914) reaffirmed the "empire theory" of folklore, voiced by E. S. Hartland in his Presidential Address in 1900. Hartland emphasised the "practical advantages for the governors, district officers and judges of an enlightened mother-country in learning through folklore about the cultures of the native people under their dominions"(Jobson:1999: p. 332). Temple does not delude himself about the reason for amassing his collection. For him, this "will enhance our influence over the natives and render our intercourse with them more easy and interesting." (Morrison: 1984: p.150). He was the distinguished Victorian who would subsequently give lectures on Anthropology in Cambridge in 1904. Temple surely affirmed to his "White Man's Burden" and when premier educationists of post-renaissance Bengal like Rev. Lal Behari Day collected Bangla folktales as a response to Temple's request, he acknowledged the colonial paradigmatic discourse of control, but not unilateral subjugation.

Credit for the first few collections of Bengali folk literature goes to these people. Sir George issued folktale collections Grierson in 1873 and Reverend Lal Behari Day in 1883. The advent of the twentieth century saw the establishment of folklore societies in various parts of the world and the publication of a number of journals devoted to folklore studies. This created a viable organizational structure for research and lent new impetus to the collection of folk literature. In Bengal, interestingly enough, this effort was led mainly by the English-educated citizenry of Calcutta, whom the British had intended to make their own image in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect.

Folklore as a device of colonisation

The British regime in India aimed at the exploration of the cultural heritage of the land in order to collect, translate, understand, formulate and categorise the nation and its ethos for better administrative control. This sense of categorisation had its roots in the eighteenth century rise of rationality and scientific temper throughout Europe. The economic needs that followed the trade war within nations of Europe was furthered by the industrial revolution. This sudden change in socio-economic status -quo in the west prompted the intense furthering of the colonial enterprise to maintain the growth pattern back home. The difference between the oriental life and belief with the occidental was used to fuel the colonial hearth of superiority and the agendum of 'noble' appropriation of the so-called irrational masses into the 'modern' world of rationality and science. Thus, the whole affair needed the deciphering of the minute details of life in the Indian subcontinent and for that they made the language policy and education policy, through which they envisaged to shape and fit different Indian languages into a single framework, in a way to streamline the varied and vast culture of India. British colonial officials started to collect Indian Folklore texts, mainly folktales from local story tellers from the middle of the nineteenth century. It is interesting to note that it happened exactly at the same time when similar projects had taken place in Western countries.

The fact that India was a colony and the British were here on a colonial enterprise thus affected the Indian folklore study and the colonial collectors' perspective. The British administrative personnel and Christian missionaries acted as links between Western civilization and the elite of the Indian sub-continent.. The spirit of nationalism and independence in India inspired some of the Indian elites to search for their heritage and cultural roots in order to create new avenues of cultural revival, one manifestation of which was the re-emergence of folk literature in the domain of the neo-educated masses. The colonisers used folklore to approach their subjects; while nationalists used it to revive the long-lost national identity to fight colonial power. Thus, there was a difference between the nature and tone of the collections by colonial and Indian collectors. According to Naithani, the images of India were "usually unromantic" in the colonial collections (Naithani: 2006: 54), while the motivated Indian collector and narrator's rendition was "not a vague and romantic loss of tradition but the historical and cultural transition within a colonized society" (Naithani: 2006: 48).

Seminal Works of the coloniser folklorists

Richard Carnac Temple (1850-1931) was one of the distinguished "administrator-scholar[s]" of colonial India

and was the premier folklorist of his generation. He was born in India, and was the son of a civil servant. He graduated in Anthropology from Cambridge, and returned to India in 1871 as a soldier. After his feats of valour in the Afghan wars of 1878-79, he was appointed as the Cantonment Magistrate of Ambala in Punjab. He started the periodical *Punjab Notes and Queries* - a "miscellany" in 1883 which represented his scholarly interests. He was busy collecting ballads, stories, and folk-legends for his book on the legends of Punjab, the first volume of which would be published in the very next year as *Legends of the Panjab*. Vol. 1 (1884) which was followed by two more volumes in 1885 and 1900 respectively. He also co-edited with Flora Anne Steel, the wife of a British civil servant, the tales of Punjab and Kashmir in *Wide Awake Stories(1884)*. He was also the co-editor of *Indian Antiquary* from 1884.

Mary Frere, the daughter of Sir Bartle Edward Frere - the Governor of Bombay published the *Old Deccan Days, or Hindoo Fairy Legends Current in Southern India* in 1868. The narrative source of Mary Frere's folktales was Anna Liberata de Souza, a Catholic convert from a Lingayat family of Deccan. Mary would take notes as Anna sat cross-legged, a typical Indian custom of centuries, followed by generations of folk performers, and narrated her tales. These would eventually be edited, expunged in accordance to the taste of the domineering patriarchal and hegemonic occidental rationalistic gaze and published as the first colonial compilation of "Indian" folktales. G. H. Damant serialised his *Bengali Folktales from Dinajpur* in the *Indian Antiquary* from 1872. *Indian Fairy Tales was published in 1879 by* Malve S. H. Stokes, the daughter of the Celtic scholar Whitley Stokes. The narrative source of her folktale collection were native ayahs in Calcutta and Simla, from a manservant. Thomas William Rhys-David's translated Jataka tales and in 1880 published *Buddhist Birth Stories*. Rev. Charles Swynnerton published *The Adventures of the Panjab Hero Raja Rasalu and Other Folk Tales of the Panjab* in 1884 ; Rev. J. Hinton Knowles' *A Dictionary of Kashmiri Proverbs and Sayings* and Sir George Grierson's *A Bihar Peasant Life* were published in 1885. In 1886 were published Temple's *A Dictionary of Hindustani Proverbs* and Knowles' *Folktales of Kashmir*. Mrs. Georgiana Kingscote, along with the help of Natesa Shastri published *Tales of the Sun or Folklore of Southern India* in 1890. Campbell published the *Santal Folk Tales* in 1891 while Swynnerton's Indian *Night Entertainments* (1892) was next in print. William Crooke collaborated with Pandit Ram Gharib Chaube and published *An Introduction to the Popular Religion and Folklore of India in 1894.* Crooke was a prolific writer and editor, noteworthy among his written, edited and prefaced works are *The Talking Thrush, and Other Tales from India* (1899), *Folktales from the Indus Valley* (1902), *Things Indian* (1906), *Hatim Tales (1928)* and *Kashmiri Stories and Songs* (prefaced by Crooke: 'On the Antiquities in the Stories').

Dilemma of the colonial folklorists: resistance of the 'native' narratorial voice
The folklorists of colonial administrative set-up or European origin supporting the colonising campaign was at an unease while dealing with the collection, narration, and eventual translation followed by printing of the orally transmitted folktales of the Indian sub-continent. Their work was complex as they were administrators on the one-hand and folklorists on the other. They did not have the freedom of

Orientalists and Indologists working from the comfort of their known home-space like Max Müller who was able to support his vocation in France: studying Sanskrit from Eugène Burnouf and studying texts from the East India Company's collection in London or Monier Williams pursuing his philosophical quest at Haileybury and Oxford. The colonial folklorists like Damant, Crooke and Temple were "busy Indian official[s]" (as Temple described himself) pursuing the 'native' narrators - unknown troubadours and rural bards in a foreign land to collect their stories in order to re-design them for the furtherance of the colonial enterprise in India.

These narrators were of a rural background with little knowledge of the canonical literature and the official language status. They were the followers of a living tradition of folklore which was literature and performance at the same point of time. They were the carriers of a proto-history that had travelled for centuries in the Indian heritage and remained an alternative to the royal and mainstream Indian literature. The administrator-scholars had a certain degree of repugnance and disgust for these narrators as Temple goes on to elaborate in the Preface to his *Legends*, "[M]any as the vices and faults of these people are . . . [t]he bhât, the mârâsî, the bharâîn, the jogî, the faqîr and all of that ilk are in truth but a sorry set of drunkards as a rule – tobacco, opium and a little food sufficing for their daily wants, and I have found out that a small payment, say one or two rupees for each separate song, and their keep in food and an abundance of their favourite drugs while employed, has amply satisfied them, and in some cases have been inducement sufficient to send other of their brethren to me" (*Legends of the Panjab*. Vol. 1, page x). Temple's efforts in extracting stories from these bards was the furtherance of the colonial game - a discourse of extraction and control. Temple often uses imagery and metaphor that betrays his vocation as a scholar and enforces his administrative nature and prowess. His "catching of bards" was equivalent to the Foucauldian idea of disciplining through Knowledge. He was the lord of the land, the judge of the land and its people who decided whether any rural bard was "a most disreputable rascal". (*Legends of the Panjab*. Vol. 1, page viii)or "very ignorant and often stupid to boot" (*Legends of the Panjab*. Vol. 1, page xi). He failed to be a proper collector of folklores and became a prejudiced commentator, at times:"If you know how to recognize them when you see them, and catch them when you have lighted on them, you will find bards still wandering over the countryside by the score, so the harvest to be gathered is a very large one." (*Legends of the Panjab*. Vol. 1, page vii)

The actual process employed by Temple for collection of folk literature proved his ambivalent situation: the songs and tales were collected from the rural folk artists or bards by Temple's munshi Chaina Mal in Punjabi which were translated by the munshi in Persian. Temple would later transliterate the Persian translation of the native tales in the Roman script and then translate them into English. This system thus marginalised the originality of the bard and his or her explanations were overlooked giving ways to a distilled version of the ballads or the tales The native bards had rudimentary knowledge of Persian –the language of Mughal court elites while both Chaina Mal's and Temple's proficiency in native Punjabi seems to be a questionable matter. This intricate linguistic exchange was hence

pervaded by a sense of miscomprehension and doubt, an incessant latent fear of slippage and chaos. This in many ways reflects the pervasive ambivalence in anthropological narratives born out of colonial encounters (Talak Asad 1973). The story-tellers or narrators and the colonised middle-men like Chaina Mal blind acceptance of the superiority of the coloniser folklorists who were also hugely empowered colonial administrators was often questionable. This fact was often left unrecognised by the folklorists themselves who self-consciously, or unknowingly, affirmed their gaze to be omniscient. In 'Colonial Histories and Native Informants', Nicholas B. Dirks depicts the insularity of people towards Colin Mackenzie and his assistants who were on a mission to collect data in various parts of South India in 1820-1821:"Knowledge was never imparted without suspicion and the direct invocation of some British authority. When British authority was not absolute . . . there were frequent difficulties "(p. 297)

There was mutual mistrust which led to a complex colonial game-play of power and resistance amply explained by David Kopf in his *Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance: The Dynamics of Indian Modernization 1773- 1835:* "To appreciate fully the phenomenal Orientalist rediscovery of the Hindu classical age, it is necessary to isolate those components of the European Enlightenment that predisposed the Company servants in that direction. The intellectual elite that clustered about Hastings after 1770 was classicist rather than 'progressive' in their historical outlook, cosmopolitan rather than nationalist in their view of other cultures, and rationalist rather than romantic in their quest for those 'constant and universal principles' that express the unity of human nature. " (p. 22)

Ashis Nandy's analysis of the psychological paradigms involved in the rise of the Nationalist discourse and the rise of resistance in the rural areas as well as the urban and educated intellectuals and artists is evident in '*The Psychology of Colonialism: Sex, Age and Ideology in 'British India'*, (pp.1-63). Nandy relates the insularity of the narrator and the ambivalence of relation between the coloniser folklorist and narrator as the "new definition of masculinity and normality". He associates the acute opposition between the two important elements of folk-literature: the source and the collector and interpreter as an acute disjunction of 'the necessarily androgynous cultural archetypes of South Asia and the gendered identities of the Victorian Imperial discourse'. This led to the perception of the natives as roguish, flippant, feminine, childlike, irrational – who needed rational tuning and education to achieve the status of being culturally tamed through the Western, modern and/ or Christian hermeneutical devices in order to mature into adulthood. Thus arose the necessity to the repress the "unwilling to learn, ungrateful, sinful, savage, unpredictably violent, disloyal" traits in the native psyche. Nandy posits: "The colonial ideology handled the problem in two mutually inconsistent ways. Firstly, it postulated a clear disjunction between India's past and its present. The civilized India was the bygone past; it was dead and 'museumized'. The present India, the argument went, was only nominally related to its history... Secondly and paradoxically, the colonial culture postulated that India's later degradation was not due to colonial rule - which, if anything, had improved Indian culture by fighting against its irrational, oppressive, retrogressive elements - but due to aspects of the traditional

Indian culture which in spite of some good points carried the seeds of India's later cultural downfall. "(pp: 17-18)

Sadhana Naithani, in her seminal work *The Colonizer Folklorist* exposes this inherent ambiguity, this essentially mutual re-framing, in her study of Temple:"What was the response of the folktale narrators to Temple's invitations/ commands? Was it the collector's choice that only stories of saints and mythical heroes were recorded, or is there a possibility of a judicious narration on the part of the narrator and of silent censorship on the part of the munshis?"(pp. 1-14)

Conclusion
The resistance of the native narrator towards the colonial enterprise of the British folklorists was probably the first example of popular resistance in the rural heartland of Indian sub-continent in the literary domain. The relatively ill-educated common folk of the rural Indian world-order, even though dependent upon the colonial administrative order for their meagre living, had registered their protest against the hegemony of the colonisers even when the educated class of the urban areas remained insular to anti-colonial efforts.

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