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Echoes of the East: British Writers' Retelling of Indian Folk Tales

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ABSTRACT

Due to the richness of culture, religion and language, Indian folk tales have always attracted authors worldwide. Not only do they entertain people across the globe, but they also embody India's ethical values. These narratives are replete with contemporary belief systems, cultural values, moral lessons, and the writers' life experiences. In a very entertaining manner, they provide the knowledge about society, social norms, cultural beliefs and taboos. During the period of British colonial rule, Indian folk tales attracted British writers and influenced their work, leading them to incorporate this storytelling tradition into their writings. This paper examines how British writers incorporated the theme of folk tales in their works and how they adapted and represented Indian folk tales from the late nineteenth century to the post-colonial period. The chapter focuses on the use of Indian folk narratives in the works of Rudyard Kipling, Flora Annie Steel, T.S. Eliot, Mark Tully, Helen Bannerman, Joseph Campbell, Neil Gaiman, Jamila Gavin, Sir Richard Burton, Salman Rushdie and Mary Frere. Though all these writers were influenced by the rich culture of Indian folk tales, they represented it in entirely different ways. Some found it philosophical and self-satisfying; some were curious; some admired it; and some documented and adopted it with the intention of preserving it. Although these writers adopted this folk tradition for different reasons, there is no doubt that they also helped carry it forward.

Keywords: Folk tales, Incorporation, Culture, Colonial, Mythological

Folk tales play a significant role in Indian literature. They emerged from oral cultures and were shaped by religion, rituals, contemporary culture, societal norms and ecological context. These tales include devotional stories, animal fables, moral anecdotes, myths and legends, and were transmitted through public performances and traditions such as storytelling. It remained lucid and popular due to its simple, adaptive nature. Though it took various forms and

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many writers presented it in their own way, it always maintained its core symbolic structure and ethical value. Generally, stories are meant for entertainment, but folk tales serve as sources of knowledge and cultural value as well, all at once.

The incorporation of Indian folk tales into British literature began during British colonial rule. When the British began ruling India, many scholars, administrators, and writers of British origin began studying Indian culture and traditions. During that period, they encountered rich Indian folk literature and found it interesting enough to translate, document, and reinterpret. The use of Indian folk tales in British literature made the British aware of Indian ethics and values. The Western world saw India as ancient, culturally rich, and full of mystery. The stories of ancient India introduced newness in western literary tradition.

The chapter focuses on how various British writers reframed these stories through English literary discourse and thus embedded Indian folk narratives in their literary works. Keeping the metropolitan audiences in mind, Rudyard Kipling used folk tales in his imaginative narratives. Flora Annie Steel presented folk tales in the form of translation. She also preferred to document and preserve it. T.S. Eliot liked to take up the philosophical form of Indian religious literature. Helen Bannerman focused on incorporating Indian folklore into children's literature. She depicted that folk narratives can promote racial stereotypes and cultural distortion. Mark Tully reflected a completely different approach and emphasised the ethical aspect of the Indian folk tales. Joseph Campbell, Neil Gaiman, Jamila Gavin, Sir Richard Burton, Salman Rushdie, and Mary Frere were the other writers who integrated the Indian folk tales into their works.

British writers placed these folk elements between the historical and ideological contexts, blending both cultures.

1] Rudyard Kipling and the Colonial Rewriting of folk forms: Rudyard Kipling is a prominent name in incorporating Indian folk literature into English literature. To effectively represent Indian folk narratives, he utilised his understanding of Indian culture, language, and storytelling, having spent many years of his life in India and felt the true soul of the country. The influence of Indian culture and tradition on him is clearly visible in his works such as 'The Jungle Book' (1894), 'The Second Jungle Book' (1895), and 'Just So Stories' (1902). In all these works, Kipling beautifully used animal fables, oral storytelling techniques and mythical elements. Kipling brought all these elements together in a fascinating way in his works, blending them seamlessly with British imperialism. The animal fable Kipling used was heavily influenced by the Panchatantra and the Jataka Tales. The animals in these tales represent virtues and vices like human beings and convey moral lessons to readers in an interesting and arresting manner. Kipling adopted this concept from Indian folk tradition and presented it in accordance with the expectations of the Western literary world. The jungle, the backdrop of 'The Jungle Book', indirectly depicts British colonial rule, which has its own ideals of law and order. When Mowgli is taught by Baloo and Bagheera about the discipline and rules of the jungle, it feels like British teaching about their laws to Indians under colonial rule.

Although Kipling frequently used folk motifs, native language, and conversational rhythm to present Indian culture authentically, he moulded all Indian literary elements to fit the British literary perspective. He domesticated Indian folk tales so that Western society could easily connect with his works.

In 'Just So Stories' too, Rudyard Kipling has made extensive use of Indian folk tales. His stories, 'The Elephant's Child' and 'The Cat that walked by Himself', draw on enough Indian folklore to reflect India's rich culture and traditions. 'The Elephant's Child' is heavily influenced by Panchatantra and Jataka Tales.

"In the high and Far-Off Times the Elephant had no trunk." (The Elephant's Child, p.1)

'The Rakatakamin' also tells about clever animals and draws inspiration from Indian folk tales:

"Once upon a time, in a wonderful country where all manner of beasts lived together..." (The Rakatakamin, p.65)

Kipling portrayed his characters in a playful way. While writing his narratives, he exoticised the Indian settings. At many points, he seemed to imitate the oral storytelling techniques. Kipling's deep familiarity with Indian culture is evident in his works. He captured the true flavour of Indian storytelling traditions and paid careful attention to the minute details, including linguistic texture and sensory description.

Kipling's literary works can be better understood in the light of Edward Said's concept of Orientalism. According to Edward Said, colonial literature presents Asian literature as timeless and playful and seeks to interpret it in Western countries. Kipling presented Indian folk tales as a thing of wonder, which was

entertaining rather than rational. In Indian folk literature, animals in fables are portrayed as wise. They personify virtues and vices and present moral values, and their dialogues are full of wisdom, but Kipling's portrayal of the animal characters differs. He presented animal characters as instinctual rather than intellectual. Kipling embedded Indian folk motifs into the Western literary tradition, making it more suitable and readable for Western readers. He wrote his works with children and other Western people in mind. For that, he simplified the cultural complexity, reduced narrative ambiguity and explained the moral lessons presented in the Indian folk tales. This attempt made his works more accessible and understandable to Western readers, but also resulted in distortion. Folk tales that traditionally functioned as collective cultural expressions are transformed into individualised authorial creations. By using Indian folk motifs, Kipling found his own unique space in Western English literature and, by incorporating these elements, popularised this kind of literature on a global scale. He made the generations aware of Indian culture, traditions, beliefs, and disbeliefs, among other things about India. Though his stories remained controversial due to their colonial stereotypes, they present a fine example of adaptation and reinterpretation in English literature.

2] Flora Annie Steel and the Ethnographic Mode: Flora Annie Steel's approach towards Indian folk literature was completely different from that of other writers. Most other writers who incorporated or worked with Indian folk tales focused mainly on adaptation or reinterpretation, but Steel engaged with Indian folk motifs in a distinct way. She approached Indian folk tales through collection, documentation and translation. Steel's understanding of Indian culture is based on her own experiences. She spent over two decades in India and worked with local communities. Her experiences and understanding of Indian people, culture and languages motivated her to preserve and record Indian folk stories for future generations. Her most famous work is 'Tales of the Punjab' (1894), in which she has captured the flavour of Punjabi culture and generously used the regional folk narratives.

"The ugly hen painted. By jealousy tainted, The pretty hen dyed. Lamenting his bride, The cock, bald and bare, Sobs loud in despair;" (The Hen and The Hawk, p.63)

In 'The Faithful Prince', Steel highlights Indian moral values by presenting the theme of loyalty and devotion:

"The Prince, hearing this, was filled with wonder and admiration..." (The Faithful Prince, p.18)

Like many common Indian folktales, 'The Rat's Wedding' showcases India's cultural practices and customs. The story presents the theme of Indian wedding traditions and conveys moral lessons through animals:

"The Rat's wedding feast was spread, and all the guests were bidden..." (The Rat's Wedding, p.6)

Raja Rasalu, who is considered a hero in Punjabi folk tales, also finds a place in her story, 'The Adventures of Raja Rasalu':

"In the days of old, when Raja Rasalu was a boy..." (The Adventures of Raja Rasalu, p.1)

Steel's approach reflects the ethnographic impulse that characterised much colonial-era scholarship. In her works, she treated Indian folk motifs as valuable cultural artefacts that need to be preserved so that they can provide current and future readers with insight into moral values, beliefs, and disbeliefs prevalent in Indian society, as well as the social structures of colonised societies. She accumulated knowledge about Indian culture and folk-tale traditions and translated them for British understanding. Instead of distorting or manipulating the folk text, she acknowledged the Indian storytellers and their works, presenting them with the utmost loyalty. However, the ethnographic mode itself is not free from ideological implications. Steel tried her best to preserve folk tradition, but transcription inevitably altered the narratives. The effectiveness of oral folk tales depends on the performance of the characters, the audience, interactions, and repetition. When it is converted into written forms, it loses some of its aroma. While translating these texts, Steel gave priority to clarity and moral coherence, and infused those qualities into her works in ways that could be accepted and valued within the English literary tradition. As a result, the fluid and situational nature of folk storytelling is replaced by fixed textual versions that imply authority and finality.

3] T. S. Eliot and the Indian Philosophy: T. S. Eliot also couldn't remain untouched by the beauty of Indian philosophy and folk tradition. He also embedded Indian folk tales in his most famous work, 'The Waste Land'. He incorporated the knowledge and philosophy of Indian religious scriptures such as the Bhagavad Gita and the Upanishads into this masterpiece. In 'The Waste Land', Eliot writes:

"These fragments I shored against my ruins. Why should I orchestrate my pieces?

The three thawed thunder, and the rain song Santhih santih shantih" (The Waste Land, V. What the Thunder Said, lines 430-433)

The word 'Santih', which means peace, is directly taken from the Hindu Upanishad. By drawing on Indian philosophy and mythology, Eliot added depth to his works. Eliot has also given the reference to Kaliyuga as depicted in Hindu scriptures. In his poem 'The Dry Salvages', he writes:

"And the way up is the way down, and the way forward is the way back.

You are not thinking of the future or the past,

Only the present moment, the moment of vision, the moment of choice, the moment of decision.
(Kali Yuga, the darkness of the present)" (The Dry Salvages, (II) pp. 18-19, in Four Quartets, 1943 edition)

4] Helen Bannerman's portrayal of Indian Folk Tales: Helen Bannerman's works also highlight the influence of Indian folk tales on Western literature. In her children's book 'The Story of Little Black Sambo' (1899), she has retold an Indian folk tale. The story is set in India and explores Indian culture and folklore.

"Once upon a time, there was a little black boy, and his name was Sambo. He had a nice new pair of red trousers, and a beautiful blue jacket, and a lovely green umbrella." (The Story of Little Black Sambo, p.1)

Bannerman presented her stories in an uncomplicated and traditional manner without curdling the flavour of Indian folk tradition:

"He met a Tiger, and the Tiger said, 'Little Black Sambo, what are you going to do when I eat you?'"
(The Story of Little Black Sambo, p.10)

"And the Tiger was very angry, and he began to chase Sambo round and round the tree." (The Story of Little Black Sambo, p.16)

Bannerman's other works, like 'The Story of Little Black Mumbo-Jambo' and 'The Story of Little Black Quasha', are also infused with Indian folk-tale culture, and she presented her stories in a simple, engaging manner, keeping the Indian folk tradition alive.

5] Mark Tully's incorporation of Indian folk tales: Mark Tully's own understanding of the complexities of Indian society and the folk culture of India inspired him to incorporate Indian folk tales and cultural references in his works. Tully explores various aspects of Indian society, including folk tales and myths. Throughout his work 'No Full Stops in India', he provides several references to Indian culture. In 'Rewriting of the Ramayan', he describes how the Ramayan epic has been interpreted over time.

"Each person who wrote the Ramayan had his social exigencies to cope with" (No Full Stops in India, p.407)

"Sita not only notices that Ram can't take any decision, and so she asks him what is wrong...she replies, "That's the men's way of doing things. We have ways of making people feel ashamed..."
(No Full Stops in India", p.1)

In 'The Kumbh Mela', he describes the Kumbh Mela, highlighting its importance in Indian society and culture. 'The Deorala Sati' also depicts the story of Roop Kanwar and examines the practice of Sati Pratha in Indian society and culture.

6] Joseph Campbell's Indian Odyssey: Joseph Campbell's works are heavily influenced by Indian folk tales and mythology. His knowledge of Indian mythology is clearly reflected in his works, and he revived the stories of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata through his pen. 'The Hero with a Thousand Faces' presents the references to Ramayana and Mahabharata extensively. Campbell presents the hero's journey like Rama's journey in the Ramayana. He compares the hero's life with Rama's life when he writes:

"The hero is the one who has given his life to something bigger than himself" (The Hero with a Thousand Faces, p.123)

In these lines, Campbell highlighted that his hero's character is similar to Rama's because, as in the Ramayana, Rama prioritises his duties over personal desires; his hero also embodies selflessness and works for a higher purpose.

Drawing on the hero's journey pattern in Indian epics, Campbell portrays it as a universal motif that appears in myths and stories across cultures.

In 'The Refusal of the Call', Campbell showcases Arjuna's hesitation in the war of Kurukshetra. Campbell also shows his interest in Indian mythology by citing Krishna's mentorship of Arjuna in the Bhagwat Gita in 'The Meeting with the Mentor'.

Campbell has also drawn on the Buddhist text 'The Jataka Tales'. In 'The Hero with a Thousand Faces', he writes:

“The universal hero’s journey is seen in the story of Prince Five Weapons, who overcomes his enemies with the help of his five weapons (representing the five senses), illustrating the Indian concept of overcoming the ego.” (The Hero with a Thousand Faces, p. 115-116)
Depicting the story of Prince Siddhartha, he writes:

“The call to adventure is the opening of the eye to the mystery of life” (The Hero with a Thousand Faces, p.51)

Campbell refers to the moment when Siddhartha encounters the sufferings of life, when the truth reveals itself, and he is pushed towards the spiritual quest by the circumstances.

He shows his love for mythology in ‘The Power of Myth’ by saying:

“Mythology is the song of the universe, the music of the spheres- music we dance to even when we don’t know the tune.” (The Power of Myth, p.31)

7] Neil Gaiman’s Indian Mythos: For creating something new and fresh, Neil Gaiman created his masterpiece, ‘American Gods’. Gaiman combined various mythologies in his works, including Indian folk tales. In this work, Gaiman portrayed a world that is full of darkness and chaos. It resembles the concept of Kali Yuga in Indian mythology.

“The world was going to end in a ball of fire and ash and madness, and it was going to be called the Kali Yuga.” (American Gods, Chapter 11, p.195)

He also incorporated the magical creatures of Hindu mythology, like the rakshasa. The character of Mr. Nancy is portrayed as a trickster god who reflects the persona of Lord Ganesha of Hindu mythology. Nancy’s character is sharp, insightful, and full of wisdom, and just like Ganesha, he is a remover of obstacles, too.

“Shadow remembers something and asks Mr. Nancy if he knows an elephant – headed god. Mr. Nancy thinks of Ganesh, a Hindu God” (American Gods, Chapter 14, pp. 261-262)

8] Jamila Gavin’s retelling of Indian Myths: Jamila Gavin, a British writer of Indian origin, also reflects her interest in Indian heritage, myths, folk tales and mythology through her work “Tales from India”. With this work, she sought to bridge the cultural gap between India and Britain and to bring Indian stories to a broader audience. ‘Tales from India’ is a marvellous collection of six short stories that highlight India’s affluent storytelling tradition. ‘The Story of Durga and the Mahishasura’, which is part of this book, depicts the rich Bengali tradition.

In her work, ‘The Magic Orange Tree and Other Stories’, she has woven Indian folk motifs into engaging narratives. The story’s use of a magical orange tree taps into Indian cultural symbolism, where trees often represent sacred spaces or wish-fulfilment. In Indian folktales, trees like the pipal and banyan are considered holy and worshipped for their spiritual significance. Kalpavriksha is also depicted as a wish-fulfilling tree in Indian scriptures. Gavin incorporated the same myth in this work. She presented the magic orange tree as a wish-fulfilling tree.

“The orange tree was said to have magic powers, and whoever sat under its branches would be granted a wish.” (The Magic Orange Tree and Other Stories, p.1)

Gods, goddesses and their magic always remained the foundation of Indian folklore. Gavin adopted the popular oral storytelling culture of India and incorporated that in her works. She writes:

“The villagers would gather under the tree’s shade, sharing stories of gods and goddesses, of magic and mystery.” (The Magic Orange Tree and Other Stories, p.5)

The setting under the tree also emphasizes cultural heritage and community bonding, which are deeply rooted in the Indian folktale tradition.

Gavin’s aim was to introduce the rich Indian folk tales to the children, so she presented them with the utmost sincerity. ‘The Elephant and the Tailor’ is also a very popular and humorous tale of northern India. She also presented ‘Three Indian Goddesses: The Stories of Kali, Sita/Lakshmi and Durga’, which is replete with the aroma of rich Indian mythological tradition.

9] Sir Richard Burton’s adaptation: Sir Richard Burton showed his fascination with Indian folk tales by translating and adapting the Indian folk tales. He blended fantasy, adventure, and moral lessons in his works, focusing on themes of love, morality, and power. His popular work ‘Vikram and the Vampire’ is a translation and adaptation of the Sanskrit story ‘Vetala Panchavimsati’. It truly captures the flavour of Indian folktales:

“The king, being a wise man, determined to capture the Vetala...” (Vikram and the Vampire, p.20)

“And the Vetala said, ‘Hear, O King, a tale of love and wreak...” (Vikram and Vampire, p.45)

Through this work, Burton showcased his deep interest in Indian folk tales and helped bridge the cultural divide by introducing Indian stories to a Western audience.

10] Salman Rushdie's magical realism: Indian born British novelist Salman Rushdie, who is well known for his magical realism, blended Indian oral traditions and postmodern narrative techniques in his works. In his 'Midnight Children', he wove his story with the threads of Indian folk tales and mythology. He presented various cultural references in his narrative. The theme of the novel 'Midnight Children' is influenced by the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. The Protagonist, Saleem Sinai's journey, echoes Rama's exile and return. Rushdie integrated the popular theme of duty and identity (dharma) from Indian folk literature into this novel. Saleem's search for self is tied to his sense of duty (dharma), echoing the epics. He reflects his sense of duty by saying:

"I have been given a task, a purpose... I must be true to my fate." (Midnight Children, p. 383)

As Rama adhered to dharma in the Ramayana, Saleem also keeps his sense of duty in the first place. The concept of magical birth stories always remained very popular in Indian folk tales. The same thing is embedded in 'Midnight Children':

"I was born with the gift of a voice..." (Midnight Children, p.3)

The concept of avatars in Hinduism is also incorporated:

"Saleem Sinai, the stinker, the miracle worker, the god squaddist". (Midnight Children, p.127)

India's ancient gurukul tradition also finds a place in the novel:

"In the old days, the children of the city would be sent to the forest to learn..." (Midnight Children, p.213)

The impression of Sufi and Indian mystical traditions on Rushdie's mind is clearly visible when he writes these lines:

"...my grandfather Adam Aziz, hovering, like a hawk, between earth and sky." (Midnight Children, p.11)

Rushdie's 'Midnight Children' is replete with Indian folk-tale references and provides a solid foundation for his masterpiece.

11] Mary Frere's storytelling: Mary Frere spent her days in India during the 19th century. She preserved Indian oral traditions by introducing British readers to Indian folk tales. Her works are known for documenting folk tales from the Deccan region.

In various stories from her work 'Old Deccan Days', she presented themes of ambition, brotherhood, loyalty, jealousy, and cleverness, upholding the Indian folk-tale tradition.

Exploring the themes of jealousy, competition and astuteness, she wove the story of 'The Brinjaalee Bird' which revolves around a king and his seven queens:

"The youngest queen had a little son, whom she loved very much..." (The Brinjaalee Bird, p.48)

The Brinjaalee bird is depicted as a magical bird whose song is therapeutic and helps people to forget their troubles:

"The Banjaalee bird sang sweetly, and all who heard it forgot their troubles..." (The Banjaalee Bird, p.52)

'The Snake and the Ichneumon' highlights moral lessons. It explores the themes of friendship and betrayal and teaches the need for trust:

"The snake, being very grateful, promised to do anything the ichneumon wished..." (The Snake and the Ichneumon, p. 136)

"But when the snake was asleep, the ichneumon killed it, and then repented of its action..." (The Snake and the Ichneumon, p. 139)

'The Fisherman and his Wife' presents the classic example of Indian folk tales. It deals with the themes of greed and ambition, and their consequences.

"A fisherman caught a wonderful fish, which begged to be let back into the sea..." (The Fisherman and His Wife, p. 76)

"The fisherman's wife wanted more and more, till she lost everything..." (The Fisherman and His Wife, p. 80)

Mary Frere contributed not only to preserving Indian folklore but also to promote cross- cultural understanding.

CONCLUSION

These British writers blended Indian folk traditions with colonial traditions. They simplified, romanticised, distorted and found solace in it too. Ultimately, the study explores the importance and engagement with Indian folk tales in British literature and enhances understanding of their journey across language, culture, and other aspects.

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