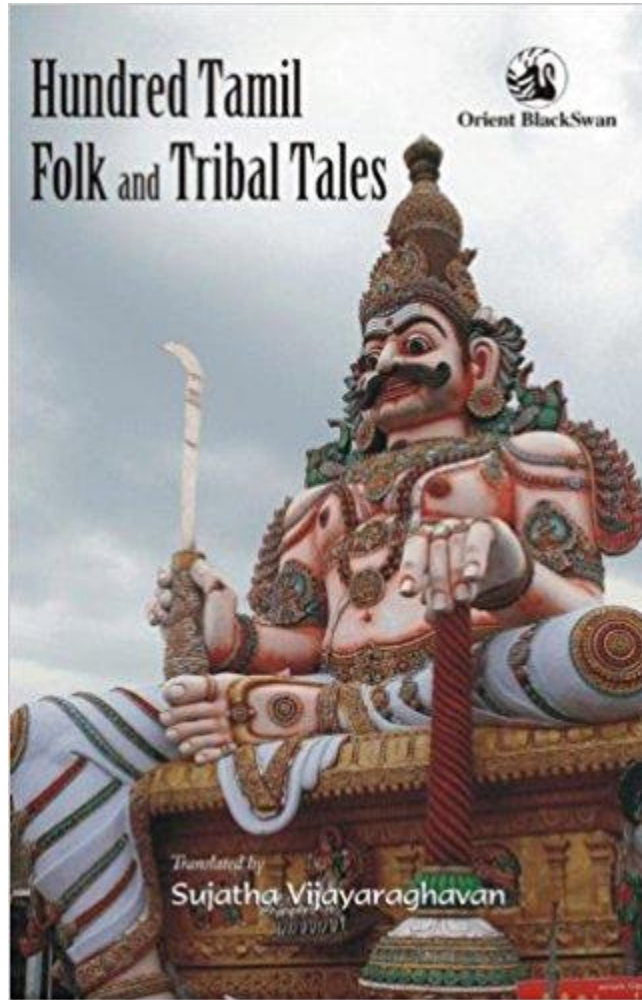

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**The Lost Cultural and Traditional Identity of Indian Lore in Third World & Subaltern Literature:
A Study of Sujatha Vijayaraghavan's *Hundred Tamil Folk and Tribal Tales***

Raghavi Priya. J. and Dr. Laxmi Dhar Dwivedi



Abstract

There is a recurrent theoretical question asked by many theorists, critics, “Is folklore and tribal-lore beyond preservation for future generations?” Using references from post-colonial theory and colonial gender discourse, the researcher shows how colonialism has eroded the cultural, traditional sheen of Indian lore in the so-called context of the third world nation; how

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literature is sidelined in terms of third world & Subaltern literature; It also gives an insight into the rich, cultural, traditional system of India as showcased by folk and tribal-lore and how a section of the society scrutinizes this recognition by sidelining the “Other” literature; the subalterns cashing on the postcolonial hangover by silencing it, a literary infatuation that separates our literature from the literature of the west.

Keywords: Sujatha Vijayaraghavan, *Hundred Tamil Folk and Tribal Tales*, *Third World Literature*, *Subaltern*, *Colonialism*, *Oral Literature*, *Folklore*, *Tribal-Lore*

Introduction

There are various types of cultural and traditional practices in India and other places which are interwoven into our society and religion. If we take India alone, it is in a humongous level; and thus, hard to keep a written record of each and every cultural and traditional practice because most of them are found only in oral format. The only way through which our heritage; along with its culture and traditions could be carried forth to the generations to come, was through ‘Folk Tales’ or ‘Folklore’ also known as folk literature, oral tradition, or the lore, and through ‘Tribal Tales’ which were the best way of spreading knowledge to the illiterate and tribal clans, from then to now. It is transmitted by [word of mouth](#) and consists of narrations in [prose](#) as well as verse; it also has poems, songs, myths, dramas, rituals, proverbs, riddles, and the sort.

The recurrent theoretical question asked by many theorists and critics is, “Is folklore and tribal lore beyond preservation for future generations?” as many youths of our modern generation are unaware of the traditional value of ‘Folklore’, because they are not accustomed to it, due to globalisation and as they are living in a fast-paced world based on e-commerce and e-technology. Oral literature and Oral form of telling tales is a tradition which is dimming in the 22nd Century.

These issues can be seen using the post-colonial theory, Subaltern studies and colonial gender discourse found in it for a better understanding of this issue. To embark on this exploratory sojourn, we draw on a piece of medieval Tamil Literature called “Ramayanam”. This epic has a lot of sub-plots based on the folklore of that century. It shows how rich our political and social system was then. It also has lore’s like how the squirrel got its three stripes, the test of fire which gives way to the latter tradition of Sati which prevailed in India, Why one should not cage a parrot and so on. But there is not just one form of telling “Ramayanam” but there are many. It started from the rich tradition of “Oral Tales” even before it was written by Kambar. It had many different narrations of the same story. As each place has added its own traditional and local culture and flavour to the original story, we have as many as “1000 Ramayana's”.

Can the Subaltern Speak?

Gayathri Spivak in her work has asked a very in-depth question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

Although Spivak acknowledges the "epistemic violence" done upon Indian subalterns, she suggests that any attempt from the outside to ameliorate their condition by granting them collective speech invariably will encounter the following

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problems: 1) a logocentric assumption of cultural solidarity among a heterogeneous people, and 2) a dependence upon western intellectuals to "speak for" the subaltern condition rather than allowing them to speak for themselves. As Spivak argues, by speaking out and reclaiming a collective cultural identity, subalterns will in fact re-inscribe their subordinate position in society. The academic assumption of a subaltern collectivity becomes akin to an ethnocentric extension of Western logos--a totalizing, essentialist "mythology" as Derrida might describe it--that doesn't account for the heterogeneity of the colonized body politic.(Graves)

What is Folklore in the modern-day world?

Folklore is the body of expressive [culture](#), including tales, [music](#), dance, legends, oral history, proverbs, jokes, [popular beliefs](#), customs, and so forth within a particular population comprising the traditions (including [oral traditions](#)) of that culture, subculture, or group. Traditional customs, beliefs, stories, and sayings: ideas or stories that are not true but that many people have heard or read (Merriam)

Sujatha Vijayaraghavan

Sujatha Vijayaraghavan is a professor of English in Pondicherry University and has written several Tamil novels and poetry as well as translated many into English. *Hundred Tamil Folk and Tribal Tales* (HTT) is one of her translation works. In HTT we see a beaming cause to save folklore and tribal tales for the future generations.

Sujatha Vijayaraghavan is the translator of HTT which is a translation of "Naatupura Kathai Kalanjyam" compiled and edited by Aaru Ramanathan. It is a collection of popular folk and tribal tales from all over Tamil Nadu. Vijayaraghavan has separated the tales according to the the districts they were gathered from and the region of their origin. The tales revolve around themes like "Tribal lore- independent literature", "The carnivalesque", "ancient cities and tales," and "folk dances."

The Lost Cultural and Traditional Identity of Indian Lore

The Folklores and Tribal tales have been an integral part of our culture and heritage. When it comes to Indian folk tales, it is found intertwined in this land filled with diverse religions, languages, cultures, castes and creeds. India is a land where tales and short stories are found in an everlasting range. Indian folklore and tribal tales have a wide range of stories filled with mythological legends, which surfaces from all walks of life. The interesting stories range from from 'Panchatantra', 'Hitopadesha', 'Vikram and Vethal' to, 'Jataka' and 'Akbar and Birbal'. It does not stop at this; it even follows the great Indian epics like 'Ramayana' and 'Mahabharata', Religious scripts like 'Bhagavad Gita', 'Vedas' and 'Upanishads', which are full of didactic stories inspired from the lives of great men and saints, filled with moral values. Indian folklore has perfect moral stories for children, who have to be implanted with right values. All these ancient stories have been passed from generation to generation, from the old to the young through oral form, creating bonds of traditional values with their present-day generation.

Surely no other discipline is more concerned with linking us to the cultural heritage from the past than is folklore; no other discipline is more concerned with revealing

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the interrelationships of different cultural expressions than is folklore; and no other discipline is so concerned ...with discovering what it is to be human. It is this attempt to discover the basis of our common humanity, the imperatives of our human existence that puts folklore study at the very center of humanistic study. (Wilson 101)

Folklore

Folklore is an unrecorded, unofficial, tradition of oral communication by word of mouth from one person to another. It gives importance to both the form and content of our traditions. It embraces all knowledge, moral and ethical values, attitudes, assumptions, feelings, and beliefs transmitted by examples of either real or imaginary stories or a mix of both telling the stories of human and animals. But this richness is lacking in our present-day world as the future generations are fixated upon social media such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Viber, hike and so on; which in reality are not social in context. The physical connection and contact are lost between a child and a mother, a grandmother and a grandchild; as gone are the days of 'Nila Sooru'¹, when the mother used to feed the child showing the moon and telling stories about Gods, Goddesses, poochaandis², etc. Now-a-days grandchildren don't go to their grandma to hear stories of mythical characters or 'Thalattu song'³. Many times, our rich literary culture is lost in transition because of our failure to retain such knowledge. But due to some pioneer Indian Folklorists in contemporary India like A. K. Ramanujan, and other Indian folklorists like Jawaharlal Handoo, Sadhana Naithani, Anjali Padhi, Nandini Sahu, Mariamma Chedathy,

¹ The food fed to the child under the full moon or just under the night sky, while telling various folk or tribal tales, to amuse the child.

²Poochaandi is the Tamil version of Bogymen. In Tamil Nadu, poochaandi is a word that is typically used to scare children, to make sure they sleep early, or to get them to eat properly. You will often hear mothers saying – "Poochaandi varan. He will take you away." He is given descriptions of someone looking ferocious and scary and who will come and take away misbehaving children.

³It means lullaby sung to a baby.

Gambhari Devi, Verrier Elwin, Komal Kothari, K. K. N. Kurup, P.R.Thippeswamy, , Ki. Rajanarayanan, Dinesh Chandra Sinha, Komal Swaminathan and others; and editors like Aaru Ramanathan, Dr G. Stephen, T. Nadarajan and others and translators like A. K. Ramanujan and Sujatha Vijayaraghavan, we have got back a part of our lost vibrant folklore and tribal tales.

Tales Included in HTT

In HTT we can see the first set of tales from the regions around Cuddalore and the theme is “Gender and divinity.” It includes the popular “Anandayi” tales; the translator points out how Anandayi is worshipped only by women and is a woman turned in to the goddess by the local. In “The Foolish King” we see an Irulatchi becoming a queen and how human beings had direct contact with Gods and Goddesses. In stories like “Who can be Trusted”, “The Creator’s Knot” we see the tradition of village elders being the justice provider to the victims, Just like our Panchayat system.

The story “Speak After You Look Before and Behind You” is a perfect example of how bribery can change even the Gods, It is a story about how lord pillayar sides the monkey which had shattered a sparrows nest because the sparrow told the monkey that it was suffering in the rain due to its laziness. Pillayarm supports the monkey because he of his bribe of one ripe jackfruit “Well! Money reaches even the Netherworlds, if need be” (HTT 23). It is a moral folktale. There are tales that deal specifically with Tamil beliefs and literature. The “Kuttiandavar” tale gives details of the glorious port city of Caveripoopatinam, it also shows the origin of the word city and urban people, as in those days it seems that the name “pattinam” or city only referred to Caveripoopatinam and the people was referred to as “pattanathar”. Vijayaraghavan draws our attention to the fact of “the little canon shaping the big” and explaining how scholars hold the view that the literary classic, ‘Silappadikaran’ “grew from folklore”. In this story, she shows how the cast chettiyar came about and how some rivers and ponds in Poompuhar could cure an illness like leprosy, tuberculosis and one such pond called Agni Kundam at Osarappar temple is capable of curing any level of poison if you just take a dip in it. Till today no one has died of poison or snake bite in Poompuhar. Thus, it proves that there is some kind of truth in folktales and the entire lot of them are not false. It also gives us a rich description of our sea ports and trade.

The series, “The Female Goddess: Consent and Dissent Narratives” shows how women were too chaste as the character Duruvathayi seen in “The God who Tested His Wife”, who lives with her husband who is a chauvinist God in disguise of a man with leprosy as he wants to test his wife of her chasteness. The story “When are you Going to Die”, shows a witty mother in law who wins over her daughter in law without fighting with her. The story “Serving Food in a Clay Bowl” shows how one day we are going to get old and what we sowed will be returned to us by the future generation. “His mother became an old woman in due course of time. The boy who was now married man called his wife and instructed to bring the clay bowl from the banana patch and serve the old woman food in it. The wife did as she was told.” (HTT 54)

“The Smart One”, “The Pleasure with Madhavi” shows the tradition of riddling and placing bets to check who the intelligent one is. “Footprints” and “Beating with the Broom”

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shows how wrong decision skills can lead one into troubled waters. “About Giving Alms” shows us the tradition of giving alms to the Brahmins, which is sometimes misused by that clan. It also shows how one must be generous only to the needy and poor. “A knock with the Pestle” also deals with a similar issue but it is a story which talks about the traditional value of giving food to the poor as according to lore it may even save us our life and secure a place for us in heaven.

The Tamil specifics are also brought in with reference to folk deities such as Ayyanar and Jakkamma, sports such as Jallikattu, and dances such as Kummi. It has 100 tales which deal with Mythology, Moral values, Wit, parables, Religions, Customs, beliefs, knowledge, riddles and songs with values. It shows both the bright and gloomy sides of our tradition and customs. It shows how both men and women can be selfish and cruel, as well as loving, caring and helpful.

Conclusion

There is a distinct identity of our traditions and cultures as well as universality about folk tales. The folktale “The Foolish King” is about a sister who saves her brothers and this tale has striking similarities to that of Hans Christian Andersen’s fairytale, “The Wild Swans” where the girl silently makes shirts for her brothers who have been turned into birds by their wicked stepmother. The story of the jealous neighbour who tries to imitate the journey to the forest and gets thrashed by bandits is another that has universal tones. In “The Tale of Tales,” there is even a reference to “Chakespiyar” (Shakespeare). The chants and songs have been translated retaining the local flavour. Any attempt to document the richness of indigenous culture is appreciable in a globalised world, which is felt to be losing many of its distinct ethnic and cultural forms, languages, and performing styles. Sujatha Vijayaraghavan has spread this book to a wider audience through her translation.

If we ask ourselves the recurrent question asked by many, “Is folklore and tribal lore beyond preservation for future generations?”, our answers would be a big “NO”, because our folklore history is filled with world-renowned tales compilation like The Hitopadesha Composed by Narayana Pandit around a thousand years ago, The Jataka Tales originally written in Pali language by Buddhist monks in 300 B.C, The Panchatantra a legendary collection of short stories from India originally composed in the 2nd century B.C by Vishnu Sharma along with many other scholars. After all these centuries still, they are looked upon as something valuable and resourceful by some of the readers and even writers like A. K. Ramanujan, Sujatha Vijayaraghavan, Komal Swaminathan and others. They are the “Treasurers” of our “Culture, Traditions and Heritage” of our nation. They should be preserved and protected and not discarded as simple third world and subaltern writing. The folklore and tribal tales have universal concepts which are useful to all. It is a known fact that the people of the so-called Third World share a common historical back-ground- colonialism and this subaltern experience makes the themes that the folktale address very convincing and identical.

The translator in her preface, points out how ‘Eurocentric’ emphasis’s is on the text of the other or the third world nations, especially their disregard to folktales as a cheap inferior thing and how “Contemporary folklore studies questions this attitude not only pointing to the

colonial/imperial impact upon research but also upon us, the country, at large where the same attitude kept and keeps the divide alive” (HTT xxiii).

I like to conclude that The Lost Cultural and Traditional Identity of Indian Lore as seen in Third World Literature are reviving slowly but steadily. We must be ready to shed our “cannibalism” and get in touch with our roots, our traditions. We must take extreme pride in showcasing our folklore and tribal tales like the rest of the third world nations. Folktales are the only means through which society and social contact can be formed and through which the subaltern speak.

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