

CHANGING PARADIGMS OF LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

Each one came to this planet hardwired to explore, to push out, to grow, to evolve and to discover. The study of literature is like listening to 'strange, melodious sounds' where its universe incorporates a multitude of sounds too faint for human ears and literature provides eyes and ears for such undiscovered territory. Literature at its most basic level is considered to fulfil two aspects- the subject matter and presentation should arouse general human interest. A piece of literature differs from a discourse on astronomy, political economy, philosophy, history, et cetera, as it has, by and large, universal appeal and renders aesthetic pleasure rather than merely imparting knowledge. Why should one care for literature? One should care for literature for its deep and lasting human significance. As the much discussed and oft-quoted definition of Matthew Arnold says, "Literature is the criticism of life", it grows directly out of life and it expands one's life and incites one to forge new ways to conceive and organize life anew. Literature provides a record of what has been seen in life, and the experiences reaped out of it that have immediate or lasting impact or significance in life. All the perceptions of socio-cultural reality and complex ways of dense human lives are expressed through the medium of language organized in various forms of literary art.

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Introduction

In an issue of National Forum, University of California, President David P. Gardner defines Humanities:

- The Humanities are animated by the urge to understand human beings in all their complexity and contradictions. They connect us to our past, linking us to what other human beings have thought and felt and believed and suffered in the process of finding their own humanity. But the Humanities not only connect us to our cultural heritage, they also hold out the potential of connecting everything in our experience. They offer us the experience of wholeness because they touch us at the deepest levels of minds and personality. They are inclusive disciplines, helping us to create larger and more comprehensive meaning out of the fragmentariness of everyday life. In the broadest sense they are devoted to the task of discovering what it means to be human. (Wilson 157)

It can be said that behind the literature of any period lie the combined forces- personal and impersonal. If literature can fulfil imaginative fancies, it is also worldly and political because it prompts one to think about the context- where does a particular piece of literature take one to? What can one do with it? What genre does it belong to? What does it want to seek? In what cultural, social and political context was it produced? What cultural, social and political issues does it encourage to think about? This 'act of questioning' is a further reward of literary study. Literature has evolved with time, coming out of dark and damp monasteries into the light of modern times and new thinking. The knowledge and its interpretation that rested with the clergies have now been discovered in the marginalized spaces. The 'classics' endowed with the credibility of great literature are no longer 'the only' means of wisdom for those who never had access to them. However, the wisdom upon which the classics rested comes from the marginalised spaces. What makes literature boundless is the inclusion of this wisdom and these

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spaces. The strength of literature lies in its ability to incorporate such worlds, also referred to as the 'fourth world', and outgrow its own boundaries. Such inclusion results in the understanding of the shared experiences of the people who once belonged to the mainstream but now being the victims of genocide, on both cultural and physical scales, have now been shifted to minority status. These subjectivities can be best understood in the realm of literature which can connect indigenous cultures. Cultures are dynamic, not static, entities. Today a culture is no longer a given formula or set pattern that an individual has to follow as it is. Instead, it is created every time whenever it is handed over by the older generation and reinterpreted by the present generation. Since the trajectories change through time, whatever an individual learns is not bound to be the same as has been previously internalized. Nevertheless, Earnest Renan rightly puts it:

- One belongs to one's century and race even when one reacts against one's century and race.

Similarly, culture is also an inheritance of its individual member sharing similar attitudes, preferences, and values. Literature expands itself to incorporate the diverse interpretations of each individual and the unifying thread as well. Boundaries have ceased to exist in the study of literature. As the inner psyche of an individual is boundless and constantly evolving, similarly the milieu can never be the same. As culture changes over time, literature has all the more a critical role to play in representing the time periods of the past as they existed. Literature is, in fact, a perturbing force breaking up the romanticized notions of the past and building up new interpretations of the future. Its cognitive dimension helps to incorporate the problems of inclusion of the periphery. It changes the constitution of mainstream both physically and psychologically as more and more identification with multiculturalism occurs. Consequently, one is more comfortable reading something about experiences which are, on the surface, very different from what one inhabits. This expands an individual's boundary and the realm of literature to explore the roots and how such interactions recreate emerging futures, bringing about new mutations. Such mutations ensure the embracing of literatures of those who constitute the periphery.

A field as concerned equally about embracing all the tones of human lives moving beyond the parameters of artistic work is folklore making the experience "a definite realistic, artistic and communicative process" (10), as Ben Amos sees it. Folklore carries social and individual consciousness together. On an individual level, or speaking in terms of identity, each individual is different- they are themselves- thus linked to those with whom they can identify their ideologies. On a social level, or speaking in terms of tradition, folklore carries a shared past into a shared future and together they combine to form connections which are presented through art or artful enactments. There is no individual creator of folklore, yet everybody can identify himself or herself with the oral narrative. This makes one a complete human and folklore a part of the Humanities. This universal duality of personal and social becomes alive in creative arts.

Folklore suffers from ill-formed and preconceived notions depicting folklore as something unsophisticated, raw art from which eventually sophisticated fine arts arose and became a go-to option for themes, motifs and images. This subsumes its humanistic value and diminishes Humanities and Literature from becoming an inclusive field. Both are literature with different modes of transmission, although partially disconnected but overlapping. Sometimes a thought is driven home by face-to-face encounters or effective writing, but both are aimed at the churning out ideas. Both media require different methods of analysis depending on the features they embrace. Analyzing the folklore of a particular folk group is not limited to the study of only that group or the members of that group or the specific culture in question- keeping the context or the background picture in mind- but one understands one's own culture because folklore is the centre of Humanities. This common humanity is the core of *Vasudhaiva kutumbakam*, further promoted by folklore. As William Faulkner in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech stated:

- I believe that man will not merely endure; he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance.

Literature has both written and unwritten traditions. Due to the etymological connection, the written forms are well-known and appreciated, and the verbal forms are far less widely known. The concept of oral literature is less established and therefore the less explored one to the minds who lay stress on literacy and written tradition. Mystery and an aura of crude and undeveloped art have shrouded such forms to fit into familiar categories of literate cultures. Moreover, these are hard to record and present and can be easily overlooked and passed off as a pastime than the corresponding written forms. In fact, neither of these pre-conceived notions is valid. The oral expression can exist, and mainly has

existed, without writing which Walter J. Ong calls the “natural habitat of language” (8). Contrary to the natural order, oral verbalization has the status of a variant of written production; oral forms exist only to be written down and cease to serve any other purpose independently. Hence the impression that oral arts are crude and undeveloped forms. The re-awakening to the orality of arts is highlighted in Saussure’s opinion that “people forget they learn to speak before they learn to write”. Human beings communicate by making use of all their senses- touch, taste, smell, sight and hearing. However, sound plays an integral part in the communication of thought. The importance of oral mode of thought and expression and the differences thereof began to take shape in literary studies with the work of Milman Parry and after that by his disciple Albert Lord who revolutionized Homeric studies. The duo found out in their study of Serbo-Croatian epics, later applied to Homer’s magnum opus, that the pre-literate bards or scribes performed songs based on these epics from memory resulted in a large extent of improvisation each time while maintaining the spirit of the song. This literary discovery was formulated as “Oral Formulaic Theory”- the epics used stock phrases, a repository of clichés and ‘formula’- and expression used under the same metrical parameters to express an essential idea for metrical convenience. The answer to this lies in mnemonic patterns, literally, a system such as a pattern of letters, ideas or associations which assist in remembering something, or simply the methods aiding or designed to aid the memory. For example, mnemonic pattern to remember the names of planets in order, remembering months in order on the back of the palm, names of colours in a rainbow in order. The word ‘mnemonic’ is derived from the Ancient Greek word *mḗmonikos* meaning ‘of memory’ or ‘relating to memory’. In primarily oral cultures, thought exists in balanced rhythmic patterns, uses repetitions, could be formed with alliterations, assonances or any such epithetic setting that enables retention and can be readily recalled.

Another important feature worth mentioning here is the question of improvisation. This can occur in the technique of delivery either by variations in the existing corpus or by introducing totally new forms in words, structure and content. The “verbal variability” (Finnegan 10) allows the artist to choose his vocabulary in such a manner that can impart repetition to the identical themes again and again, thus ensuring the existence of oral literature.

Context-sensitivity is another feature that ensures the permanence of traditions in oral societies which face acculturation at different points in time. Narratives and sentiments might get lost or forgotten due to induced or natural amnesia due to cultural changes. Nevertheless, people remember the experience over the years. Hence, preserving those elements or memories which still have relevance in the present imparts longevity to their newly-fashioned narratives. Now, since the orality has no dictionary as literacy is endowed with, each oral creation should have “direct semantic ratification”, that is, using real-life situations to relate with age-old traditions justifying the inherent wisdom.

It appears that the features of orality and the differences with the written counterparts are determined by the degree as to how much the two interact: living in a world which is dominated by the written word, it can be said that writing can co-exist with the due emphasis on oral elements as well. Even Aristotle has reasoned that when performed with visual effects, tragedy can be superior to the epic. Written words were, and still are, read aloud which shows that the oral aspect is not entirely lost:

- The real message of the sermon can only be spoken; the eloquence of the oration does not exist on the printed page; the drama is speech; and the melody of poetry is called into being only by the living voice...highest literature always implies vocal expression. (Ong 557)

Both of them draw on the materials of each other and both adopt and adapt to each other. So the oral and written arts are not “wholly distinct” as imagined. In fact, oral literary forms fall within the category of definitions of what literature is. As understood, Literature is expressive, an aesthetic art that performs cathartic function rather than practical purposes. This is equally applicable to oral literature. It is the unfamiliarity with the existence of such cultures and their social contexts that their oral literary forms are considered insignificant to analyze. The written literature enjoys the privilege because it is easily accessible. One needs to remember that oral art forms are also a part of the corpus of literature with certain definitive features that are sometimes visible in the content and sometimes the researcher has to locate them in the social context.

In India, classical scriptures form the largest repository of oral arts. As the writing is thought to be fixed and oral is constantly changing, the classical texts are also thought of as fixed entities and the oral or folk texts are filled with variations. However, there can be no watertight compartmentalization in a country culturally rich as India where the oral and written, fluid and fixed forms continuously cross their boundaries of the medium. For example, *Vedas* are fixed but transmitted orally until today despite being

transmuted into written forms, although after many years of oral composition. On the other hand, *Ramayana*, the epic with a written origin, has many variations and versions in as well as outside India. Ramanujan explains the discourse on verbal and written arts in Indian terminology. He says, *akshara* is imperishable but the one who has all the knowledge of texts by heart is *kanthastha* and the ignorant one is *niraksharkukshi*.

Thiong'o calls the oral tradition being colonised by the literate tradition as "aesthetic feudalism" (63), "Great tradition" and "Little tradition" in the Indian context. Ramanujan moves beyond this dichotomy of colonised and coloniser, hierarchies and divisions and admits:

- Oral traditions of every kind produce texts. 'Cultural performances' whether they are written or oral acts of composition, plays or weddings, rituals or games, contain texts. Every cultural performance not only creates and carries text, it is a text. (5)

The so-called "Great tradition" and "Little tradition" interact with each other and instead of victimizing the orality as a relegated medium and sympathizing with it, it needs to be studied in order to be appreciated and gain an equally dominant status. As culture is not an overnight phenomenon but a constantly evolving entity, similarly, orality has been here since time immemorial. It is the unfamiliarity which gives the oral medium a colonized status, not the medium itself. The present study aims to address this unfamiliarity by bringing forth the connectivity it has with every aspect of human life just like any other creative act or literary piece. Orality and literacy are not binary opposites but allies connected to each other by the means of a word; the only difference lies in the representation of the word but mistakenly associated with who possesses more knowledge or wisdom. There can be no such notion here that only one can survive and the other has to stop existing or that they cannot co-exist. Hence, Zirimu rejects the idea that orality is linked to illiteracy because illiteracy indicates the binary opposition between those who can read/ write vs. those who cannot. This establishes literacy as a norm and orality as a departure from the norm.

The genre of folklore has been copiously treated with different perspectives- Indo- centric and Euro-centric- both of which have been referred to in this study. The cultural differences of the areas require separate treatment of the subject along with the boatload of definitions provided by writers around the world to get to the minutiae of "folk". But in order to identify the core of "folk" one needs to understand the prefix "folk" attached with the lore and tale. In India, the concept has been prevalent since the Vedic times, while in the European context, the popularization took place in the nineteenth century. To begin with, hiving off the "folk" from the *Vedas* only precludes it from total comprehensiveness. The counterpart *loka* has been defined in a broad spectrum, that is, the world, the earth, fourteen *lokas*, life, people, population, group etc. On the other hand, the word "folk" does not offer a wide variety of meanings as does the word *loka* partly due to the later awakening of the Western world in realising the prevalence and depth of it. The term folklore had its genesis in the works of nineteenth century English antiquarian William John Thoms. Thoms proposed the term in a letter to Charles Wentworth Dilke, the editor of *Athenaeum*, "good Saxon compound, folklore- the lore of the people" instead of "popular literature" and "popular antiquities" prevalent at his time. Prior to the term folklore, the Germans preferred *Volksunde*, the French *traditions populaires*, the Irish *Bealoideas*. The western world sources offer a uniform stand etymologically. It is derived from the Old English *folc*, meaning common people, laity, men, people, tribe, nation, multitude, troop or army. Even the recognized dictionaries talk singularly:

Merriam-Webster Dictionary define folk as

- People in general,
- Archaic, a group of kindred tribes forming a nation

The great proportion of the members of a group that determines its character and that tends to preserve its characteristic form of civilization and its customs, arts and crafts, legends, traditions and superstitions from generation to generation.

Oxford Dictionary portrays the term similarly

- Relating to the traditional art or culture of a community or nation,
- Relating to or originating from the beliefs and opinions of ordinary people.

The perceptions of folk have improved or evolved from time to time. It would be futile to connect these terms with antiquity; they are not just relics of human development but a very lively and very much organic phenomenon of humanity. The pejorative association of folk with quaint/ old-fashioned terms creates complexity. it follows that folklore involves (a) those ingredients of the unwritten tradition of the

folk which are visible in omnipresent tales and stories, rituals and faith, practices- magic and superstitions; (b) a science that studies such ingredients. Hence the scope of folklore is extensive. Folklore exists in mental space originally. These ideas are reflected in the form of genres and once it is put to analysis it crosses the boundaries of discipline becoming scientific in nature. Today the scope of literature also has extended from songs and sonnets to a song sung by an old lady belonging to a folk group. In such a detailed transformation of literature are included all the significant expressions that are written or oral. Hence such expressions:

Have the contents of primitive psyche:

- Could have been acquired by a traditionally verbal course whose authorship cannot be claimed by anyone and which is immersed in folk psyche;
- Even if authored, contents should have the elements of folk psyche so that it represents the particular folk group, not any individual personality.

Folk literature is also crucial to the knowledge of human experience because it provides an inside-out view of civilization. It lays bare what people think and in their own words, especially that which they might not be able to say in everyday conversation – “one finds people’s own unselfconscious picture of themselves” (Dundes 1). It is so much ingrained in human behaviour that it can never be relegated to the past and can never be limited to primitive people. In fact, it is always created anew and thus becomes a part of the modern technological world where both co-exist. Due to this emergent nature of folk literature, a culture gets to know itself internally and externally.

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