Folklore and Children’s Literature

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Putting together this issue on Folklore and Children’s Literature has been tough because a symbiotic relationship between the two genres is taken for granted, whereas it is actually yoking together of two very distinct genres. The other problem is that there is really no consensus on how to define literature for children. C S Lewis wrote years ago that literature for adults that has stood the test of time is what is ultimately considered suitable for children. As a definition, this seems a plausible rule of thumb. Then there is an increasing difficulty of defining “child.” Without knowing who a child is, how can one talk about children’s literature? Publishers slot books according to age groups of 3 or 4 years, but because one cannot fix the stages of childhood, I find it more useful to categorise books aimed at readers between 2 and 20 years as children’s and young adult literature, without breaking these into smaller categories. Children’s literature today is experimental, abundant, and various. Fantasy, reality fiction, biographies, nature and animals, historical fiction, science fiction, detective stories, romance, chic lit, poetry, folktales, mythology, graphic novels and comics crowd bookshop shelves.

Folktales have always been made available with different interpretations and packaging in India, but recently there has been marked growth of folktale publications, a lot of it for children. There are folklore anthologies in the market for every age group, from picture and colouring books for pre-schoolers to more sophisticated collections for 12-year olds and above. This could indicate a demand for such books and a healthier publishing industry for children. Or it could be that while negotiating existence in a global village, nations/cultures/communities are trying to find common ground within their region and not necessarily with the rest of the world. Folklore is an excellent place to begin as it documents society and is hence an excellent repository of information. Since these are oral tales that are being written down, every collection, interpretation is unique as what elements of the “original” tale are retained depends upon the teller. So, in a sense, commodification of folktales as children’s literature fulfils the need to connect the present to the past, but also creates a sense of a common identity within a community.

The fact that folktales have had to be rewritten for children suggests that folk and children’s stories are not synonymous, yet there must be a hidden relationship between them which is exploited when folk tales have to be converted into children’s literature. Collecting, collating and canonizing folklore is a relatively recent phenomenon, but converting it into something “suitable” for children begins around the latter part of the nineteenth century. The Brothers Grimm had not been shy to include unpleasant truths—e.g., parents who exchange an unborn child for salad leaves, as in “Rapunzel”—in their stories, but in the sanitised versions re-written for children, Rapunzel is kidnapped by a wicked witch, while the culpability of Rapunzel’s parents is resolved by throwing them out of the story altogether.

In fact, folklore has been like the cultural bedrock that people turn to, especially in times when there seems to be an attempt or a movement to define “national literature”. Folktales are inevitably produced, recorded and regurgitated for public consumption as they are considered to be the repositories of indigenous knowledge and culture. This need to define a national literature, especially for a new nation state, was what spurred the Germans and the British in the nineteenth century into documenting their folklore, and then there was the Irish National Movement of Literature with Lady Gregory, Synge, Yeats and Douglas Hyde at the forefront which led to the establishment of the Irish Folklore Commission in 1935. In India, there were some publications like Flora Annie Steele and R. C. Temple’s Tales of the Punjab told by the People or R. E. Enthoven’s Folklore Notes. After 1947, the anthropologist Verrier Elwin and poet and critic A.K. Ramanujan attempted to collect folktales from the North East Frontier Province and Southern India respectively. These are considered seminal collections.

Children’s literature has always relied a great deal on folklore for material and form. Folktales usually have a simple narrative, repetitive elements that are reminiscent of its oral past, anthropomorphic characters as in the Jataka and Panchatantra tales, and they are usually stories about ordinary people and incidents but may also include tales about creation and the supernatural. They can be political, allegorical, with religious and pagan or tribal elements, and moral and psychological dimensions. Sometimes there is an elision between folklore and religious mythology. Stories of one region are often very similar to those in another region and or country since it is known that tales travel and are adapted by the teller and to local flavours. Malory’s Mortle d’Arthur is a classic example of this. It is about the quests of the Cornish King Arthur’s Knights of the Round Table, but is actually a pot pourri of Cornish, French and Scottish stories that travelled with the fifteenth century tin traders between France, Glastonbury and Cornwall.
The articles in this issue focus on the use of folklore in children's literature. Their basic premise is that folktales are the cultural bedrock of a nation, but they consider questions like what were the origins of the tales? What were the elements from the original tale or versions thereof that were removed to make it presentable for children? Which of the tales continue to be popular through the ages; which were political in nature, originally, but were subsequently tempered down or simply lost their relevance as political parables, but survived since they were good stories? Does converting a story from an oral tradition to the written word change the fabric of the story? Does it make it more rigid, less flexible and hence impervious to any further adaptations as before? Are all folktales necessarily to be remodelled to make them suitable for children? We hope that debate on the yoking of folklore and children's literature will continue.

Collecting Children - The Schools' Manuscripts Collections

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There is a scene in the well-known Disney film Chitty-Chitty-Bang-Bang where the “Child-catcher” trundles into town to gather up any stray children who might be wandering the streets. He is, in effect, collecting children. In this instance, however, I am using the term “collecting children” to refer to children as collectors of folklore. In Ireland in 1937 a scheme was devised by the newly formed Folklore Commission to recruit the help of schoolchildren and their teachers in the task of collecting folklore. The Department of Education was brought on board and a circular was drafted entitled Circular to Managers and Teachers of National Schools: Scheme for the Collection and Preservation of Folklore and Oral Traditions. This outlined the working of the scheme and reads as follows:

Material collected by the pupils may be entered in their school jotters and the compositions written in their copybooks from that material. These compositions, or as much of them as is not unduly repeated, together with stories, songs, proverbs and other material collected, should be transcribed by selected pupils into the official Manuscript Books which were issued to all National Schools..... All Manuscript Books officially supplied... should be forwarded to this office at the end of the current school year – June 1938 – for immediate transmission to the Folklore commission. The composition copybooks, or a selected number of them, should also be forwarded to this Office.

And so, from this emerged what is now known as The Schools’ Manuscripts Collections. It consists of 1,128 bound and paginated volumes, in addition to an estimated 40,000 unbound original copybooks. The collecting scheme was carried out by children. 11-14 years of age, under the direction of their teachers, who followed specially prepared guidelines. Some 50,000 children took part and the scheme resulted in large amounts of folklore material being recorded, much of it from parts of the country not served by full-time or other collectors.

The aforementioned guidelines were drafted by the Folklore Commission’s archivist, Seán Ó Súilleabháin, who had extensive experience of field-collecting, archiving and indexing procedures. In the guidelines, which appeared in booklet form entitled Irish Folklore and Tradition, Ó Súilleabháin lists fifty-five separate topics as “Subjects for Compositions”, and outlined the questions the children might ask of their parents and neighbours about these local traditions. For instance, under the topic of “Old Story” the following suggestions were made:

Write down an old story as told by the elderly people while sitting round the fire on winter nights. It may be about a king or a queen or their children, or perhaps a widow’s son or a poor boy that set out from home to seek his fortune. It may be about a cruel stepmother who was very strict with her stepson or stepdaughter. It may be about Gobán Saor or the Bārrsclovog or Conall Gulban or Céatach or some such person about whom tales are told beside the fire. It may deal with magical helpers (The Man with His Ear to the Ground; The Man with His Leg tied under His Belt etc.) or with helpful horses or cats or with boats that go over land and sea. Or with soldiers killed in battle each day and were alive again next morning. If you know (or hear locally) a story that you know or are told has been “in print already” do not be deterred by this, but write it down, giving storyteller’s