

Narrative and Structural Similarities Among Select Haryanvi Folk Tales

Lakhwinder Dhull

NET Scholar, Masters in English Literature
M.N.S College Bhiwani, Chaudhary Bansilal University Bhiwani
lakhwinderdhull@gmail.com

=====

Abstract

The cultural vibe of Haryana is one of the most vibrant in India. Unlike cities like New Delhi, Bangalore and Mumbai that are very metropolitan and modern in the truest sense, Haryana is a state most of whose cities are still rustic and flaunt an authentic taste to its socio-cultural milieu. Through the didactic nature of the folklore, ideas of cultural reawakening and social awareness and upliftment are perceived and acknowledged by the conscious readers. Anthropologists and cultural theorists like Max Muller and Theodore Benfey have contributed considerably towards Indian folklore and have brought it to the mainstream of study. Similarly, Haryanvi folklore, similarly, is a constellation of the regional themes and cultural ideology.

This research paper attempts to draw similarities in the narrative structures and other literal aspects of five select folktales from Haryana namely: 1) *The Farmer's Present*, 2) *A Traveler's Story*, 3) *Bellows for the Bullocks*, 4) *The Silver Well* and 5) *The Hoarder*. Folktales challenge our understanding of morality by developing the audience's perception of right and wrong, sanity and insanity and wisdom and imbecilities. These similarities will be analyzed using the Bulgarian-French historian Tzvetan Todorov's narrative theory model.

Keywords: Folklore, Haryana, Didactic, literature, Indian folklore.

What is Folklore?

William John Thomas, a British antiquarian of the 19th century coined the word "folklore" in 1846 and it meant the "lore" (knowledge) of the "folk" (people). Before the term, materials on folklore were called 'popular literature' or 'popular antiquities' and only later, "W. J. Thomas, under the pseudonym of Ambrose Merton, wrote a letter to a journal titled *The Athenaeum* proposing that the singular word 'folklore' should be used in English to denote the "the manners, customs, observances, superstitions, ballads, proverbs" and other materials "of the olden time" (Dutta, 23).

Folklores are associated with the cultural sentiment of the state they represent and enrich oral and written literature by the way of preserving the cultural artefacts. They were mainly told in loud oral form as a source of entertainment and social gatherings rather than

written. People identify communal pride and glory with their native folklore. In Haryana, rustic and simple peasant societies, people those are close to nature, hard- working farmers, their gullible tendencies, all are the features of the state. Even in the present times, a lot of Haryana associates themselves with these features; folklore hence, “is an echo of the past, but at the same time it is also the vigorous voice of the present”, as the Russian scholar Y. M. Sokolov says (qtd. in Dutta, 23). Sant Gorakhnath, a Hindu yogi from 11th century hails Haryana and the Haryanvis in the following words:

Kantak Des kathor Nar, Bhains Moot Sa Neer
Karma Ka marya Phiray, Bhangar Bech Phakir (“Veerbhoomi Haryana”)

The crudeness and rustic nature of Haryana is articulated in the proverb, where their “nar” (men) are “kathor” meaning arduous and resilient; the “neer” (water) of their land is as blessed as the utility of the urine of a buffalo “bhains moot sa neer”. Sushmita Pathak in her article called “Cow Dung Soap Is Cleaning Up In India” (2018) says that “cow products like dung, milk and urine have healing properties” (Pathak). So, it is a blessing for the people of Haryana that they appreciate the importance of the natural and unfiltered water, that is as salubrious as the urine of a healthy buffalo. The next line forms the foundation of the characters of most of Haryanvi folktales. “Karma ka marya phire” means sabotaged at the cruel hands of destiny. Most stories depict their characters toiling in the fields very hard to serve the society with the fruits of their incessant farming. The characters of our select tales are all farmers; but despite their lives around “bhangar” (buffalos and other animals), they are like “phakir” or fakirs. The lines clinch the idea by equating Haryanvi people with the saint-like attributes. The folktales help the readers develop an understanding of the social milieu of Haryanvi context, says the article:

[...] folksongs not only help in understanding the socio – cultural and religious life of the community but also human psychology and the adjustment of an individual to his/her culturally constituted world. People shape an essential clue to the appraisal of their social, emotional and cultural life and are an index to their ethical and aesthetic norms and sense of values. Variety of folk songs is available in Haryanvi culture like *ragini*, *allap*, *haryanvi filmi songs*. (Social Status)

In the select narratives - *The Farmer’s Present*, *A Traveler’s Story*, *Bellows for the Bullocks*, *The Silver Well* and *The Hoarder*, there is a narrative similarity about the social, caste- based, familial, political and educational arrangement and its analysis helps us to understand the sociology of the society of Haryana using its folklore. The present paper shall analyze this similarity.

The Select Folktales

The Farmer's Present

We begin with the folktale *The Farmer's Present*. In a small village in Haryana, there lived a hardworking farmer who had a watermelon garden. In his garden, once grew a gigantic watermelon that made him feel proud of his farming. He decided not to sell it in the market and rather put it up for an exhibition. He decided to take it to the king, who had a habit of treading through his kingdom at night to keep a track of his subjects and their well-being. Disguised as a simple villager that night and while walking past the houses, he comes across this magnificent watermelon and stops by the farmer's house. He knocks at his door and asks about the watermelon, saying that he is hungry and would like to eat some of it; on which the farmer replies, "No! I'll take it to the king who will surely give me a good price for it". "What if the king refuses to buy it?" asked the visitor, "then he may go to the devil," said the farmer. The next day when the farmer took his prized possession to the king and flaunted his humble gift, the king smiled and asked him "what if I refuse your gift?", to which the witty farmer replied, "then you know my answer, dear king!". The king rewarded him well both for his magnificent gift and his unparalleled wit.

The Silver Well

The Silver Well revolves around a cunning cheat who would live by the rule "why should I work when I can easily con the simpletons?". In his pursuit of a new victim, he goes to an over-trusting farmer and tempts him into buying his property which the conman says he can't take care of anymore. "But I'd like to see your property first", said the farmer, to which the thug took him into a huge field which led to a little hut and a well by the end of the field. "This field, the hut and the well are for sale, but the well is the most expensive for it has silver at its bed. It is called the silver well", said the thug. He demonstrates it for the farmer by pulling out water from the well, the bucket of which was already laid with silver coins beforehand. The poor farmer was naturally thrilled beyond words. "How much will it cost", asks the farmer; "100 gold coins, but I can give it to you for just 75 for you are a good man", replied to the thug. The farmer went home excitedly and shared the news with his wife, who suggested him to once consult a wise man before spending all their life's savings. The wise man gives the farmer a way to gauge the truth. He says "ask in writing that the well belongs to him and he is selling it for 75 gold coins. Tell him that you shall pay only 10 gold coins for the silver well if he doesn't want to give in writing about his ownership of the well. If he agrees to the latter offer, he is conning you!" The thug, obviously, accepts the 10-gold coin proposal, feeling happy that he would at least get something. This incident is reported to the village sarpanch, and the conman gets a sound thrashing.

The Hoarder

Similarly, *The Hoarder* is a story of another farmer who owned a magnificent pot of gold but was imprudent enough to keep it hidden under ground of his farm to make sure it is untouched by others and kept safe. He would check his gold every day by re-digging the place where his pot lay buried; oblivious of the fact that his daily trips to the farm were being

observed by a thug who knew about this pot of gold. Once the thief had made sure of the exact spot where the farmer had hidden the pot, he dug it out and ran away with it. The next day, the farmer completed his daily activities and came checking on the gold just like every day. To his devastation, this time the pot was nowhere to be found. Hearing his scream, a passerby stooped to inquire about the incident and asked why he kept such a valuable material in a hole? The farmer replied, “I had never really needed the gold; I could not spend it on anything, so I saved it instead”. The passerby took to surprise and found out a way to pacify him by using his wisdom and wit. He brought a large stone and put it in the hole where the gold existed and covered it up, like the farmer would do with his pot of gold; saying to the farmer, “imagine this stone to be the hoarded gold. Imagine it is still there inside the pit and its value as much as you never used or had”. The farmer realized that he was responsible for his own problems and that mere possession has no worth unless it comes of any use to the owner.

Bellows for the Bullocks

Bellows for the Bullocks is a folktale on a similar narrative pattern. It has attained a lot of fame and is also included in the graduation syllabus of many universities like Gurugram University and Maharshi Dayanand University etc.

It is a story of a poor peasant struggling to buy a buffalo and the original title of the tale was “*Dhaandhaa Dhaae Kaa*” (ढांढाढाईका) which is also used as an idiom to mean, ‘back to the same situation’ (MDU). The peasant saved up fifty rupees with a desire to buy a pair of oxen that will help him in farming. He waits for the annual fair where he might get a good deal for his money. On his way back from the fair with an old but strong and healthy bullock, he is stopped by a seemingly rich farmer who in actuality is a master-thug. He had four stout sons who were one treacherous than the other and the simpleton farmer fell well for their guise. The sons praised his bullock and offered to buy it. The farmer felt tempted and thought it would be a good idea to sell it for a little higher rate and make some money out of the trade. He offered to sell it for one hundred and twenty-five rupees, the offer that seemed too much for the thugs.

Trying to settle the negotiation, the farmer and the thugs agreed to consult a ‘wise’ old man and that his say shall be the word. In guise of an old man, the father sat afar this scene and waited patiently for their plan to succeed and for them to approach him. To seem genuine and fair, he pretended disinterest to be the arbitrator and gave in reluctantly, only after seeking a promise that both the parties would obey to his quote, and it shall be final. The poor farmer was incorrigibly trapped. After feigning an examination, the thug father declared his *dhandaa* to be unworthy and of mere two and a half rupee! It was too late for the farmer to realize this subterfuge by the group of thugs.

Dejected, he left for his home and shared the incident to his wife. Unable to sleep at night, he came up with a plan to make even with the thugs. Next morning, he packs a dress of

his wife and some jewelry and leaves for the thugs' house. Enroute, he finds a place to change into a beautiful woman so well that anyone could mistake him to be a gorgeous woman tempting enough for the thug sons to be enticed. He cooks up a story that 'she' has been turned down by her husband and now has no place to live.

The eldest of the sons proposed to marry her but the other brothers objected, showing their equal interest. The witty farmer proposed a solution that the one who is the first to bring a Saharanpuri mangoes, Banarasi saree and sweets from the city would be her husband. All the four brothers ran to the market, leaving behind their old father.

Seeing them go far away, the farmer got into his own dress and thrashed the old man black and blue saying, "*Bol buddhe mera dhaandhaa dhaae kaa*" (Now say that my bullock is worth only two and a half rupees). The old thug offered him five hundred rupees and begged for mercy and forgiveness. The farmer took the money and disappeared.

When he came back to his house, he realised that the thugs would deceive the innocent villagers and so he decided to punish them more. The next day, he dressed up as a *hakeem* (local doctor); knowing well that the thugs needed medicine for the beating the old man got. Seeing the *hakeem* coming, the sons requested him to help his old father. He directed them to get the required medicines from the neighbouring places and sent all the four sons in different directions to fetch them. The moment they were gone, the old thug got another round of thrashing from him, and the farmer shouted again "*Bol buddhe mera dhaandhaa dhaae kaa*" (Now say that my bullock is worth only two and a half rupees). This time, the old thug offered two hundred rupees that he had hidden for emergency. The thug family was revenged again in defeat and anger.

The farmer's vengeance was still not quenched, and he decided to punish them again. This time he bribes a young boy and asks him to shout "*Bol buddhe mera dhaandhaa dhaae kaa*"; hearing that, the thug sons came out running after him, leaving the old man alone again. The old thug saw the farmer coming again just like a god of death, but he got a different punishment this time. The farmer asked him to kneel down and draw a line from his nose promising that they would dare not to cheat anyone ever again. The villagers lived fearlessly ever after.

A Traveler's Story

A Traveler's Story surpasses all the above ones in wit and wisdom. It is a story of four friends who were socially unproductive and who spent their time conning the gullible. One day, a traveler came to the place where they gathered every day to kill time. He was wearing a gold chain, was dressed up in an affluent attire and flaunted his costly and pompously flamboyant belongings. The four friends quickly developed amicable relations with him and they schemed to deprive him of all his affluence by playing a game. The game is:

“Each of the four friends and the traveler
Will tell a story. The one who tells the most
Unbelievable story shall win. Other four
Shall have to obey what the winner says.” (Kutty)

They begin one by one with one more than the other incredible stories. The first friend’s story involves his mother, who, soon after his birth, craved for plums. His father said that the tree is very tall, and it is impossible for him to pluck them. His brothers also tried to climb the tree unsuccessfully. But he got up from his cot and briskly climbed the tree and plucked a lot of plums, much to his mother’s satiety.

The second friend began with his story – a fortnight after his birth, he chased a rabbit into the woods. The rabbit suddenly transfigured into a tiger who marched towards him to attack but he bravely told the tiger that he was only chasing a rabbit and not a tiger. The tiger paid no heed to his warning and attacked him only to be caught by the jaws and be ripped apart.

The third friend narrated a more unbelievable story. When he was three months old, he went fishing with some friends. Unable to catch any fish, he dived onto the river- bed where he saw a whale eating small fishes. He killed the whale with his fist, cooked and ate it all by himself.

Not lesser than his friend, the fourth friend came out with an equally unbelievable story. He was nine months old when he went to the forest and climbed a tamarind tree wanting to savor some tamarinds. He climbed a long and flowery tamarind tree but did not know how to get down. So, he went to a nearby house and used their ladder; placed it against the tree and got down.

It was now the traveler’s turn to narrate a story. His story went something like this – he had a farm where four men toiled all day long. They were lazy and thus, were frequently castigated by the traveler. One day when the traveler went on a pilgrimage, the four workers ran away to freedom and the traveler has been searching for them since that day. He said that the four friends were the same workers and that he was ecstatic that he could find them. The contest ended and the friends were in a dilemma because their plan of looting the traveler misfired. The four thug friends suffered a witty blow. The traveler walked off with all their fine belongings, teaching them a fine lesson.

Focus on the Narrative Structure

As folktales cannot be ascribed to a single author or era, their authorial analysis and similarities cannot be brought out on the basis of authors or age. Therefore, their study has to be focused on the narrative structure, social context, characterization and sartorial choices. These tales, along with many others, have a simple structure and a singular story. They avoid

mingling multiple plots thereby focusing on the defined protagonist and his worldly concerns. The characters are generally poor but sagacious, honest, and hard-working; have single-dimensional, consistent behaviors and represent a definite human attribute – simplicity, wile, wisdom, or deception. It can be said that:

The character of the protagonist is drawn in broad strokes; his present fate is dealt with summarily; the problem that furthers the action of the story is brought in quickly and the adversaries are introduced as socially/ morally/ narratively ‘given’. The theme of the tale is simple. All the characters are predictable and behave according to the essential traits of their personality. Peasants are simple and hardworking a lot. But that does not necessarily mean that they are fools; neither would they accept man-made disasters lying down. They would react and react in a fitting manner. (MDU)

The stories encapsulate similar natural and rustic setting that emanates aesthetic beauty, cultural conscience, and simple social values. They stand united in serving the readers with the knowledge of Haryanvi art form, customs, and material cultural resources. They theorize the patterns of Haryanvi behavior, norms, and values by reconstructing collective human activities. Ranging from a poor farmer, fashionable traveler to a cunning thug, these stories have explained the similarities between extremely different demeanors and backgrounds yet having similar rudimentary tendencies. Even the language is very simple, so much so that certain words like *dhandaa* and *dhaani* in *Bellows for the Bullocks* do not have exact translations.

The article called “Social Status of a Haryanvi Rural Woman: A Reflective Study through Folk Songs” explains this fact”:

Haryanvi is a dialect which is really difficult to do exact translation in English but Hindi speaking people can understand it easily. However present article would try to display gist of the folk songs but may deviate from exact meaning. (Social Status)

Understanding of Morality

Folktales challenge our understanding of morality by developing the audience’s perception of right and wrong. Their actions are contemplated, and nemesis follows soon:

In fact, a large number of folk tales have tricksters as their protagonists. But these tricksters with their practical and doubtful morality are treated like heroes because they are able to throw a successful challenge to and hoodwink the formal wider cultural practices which are perceived to be oppressive by the folk. (MDU)

These tales promote thoughtfulness, resourcefulness, presence of mind and mental acuity. The way the wise man solves the mystery of *The Silver Well*, or the apt way the

farmer punishes the old thug in *Bellows for the Bullocks*, the passerby of the story *The Hoarder*, all of the characters nurture the social values of insightfulness.

There is an absence of women as heroines. In the select Haryanvi folklore, women objectification, patriarchal suffocation, and the point of view of the discourse along with gender conditioning is all reflected specially in *Bellows for the Bullocks* where the four sons feel so desperate to marry the woman (the guised farmer) that they would make all ends meet just to be with her. But in all the other tales, women are missing even as passive characters. Therefore, by shifting the focus from narrative aesthetics to women subordination in these tales, a male dominated Haryana is seen. This is a grave area for a separate study.

The endings of all the stories are positive, optimistic and informative. Apart from being didactic, they also provide a smile on audience's face because of their soft length, easy language, and happy ending.

The Narrative Structure Theory

The Narrative structure theory by Tzvetan Todorov (1960) elucidates about how the narration in a story is created. Tzvetan Todorov is a Bulgarian-French historian, sociologist, philosopher, structuralist literary critic and essayist. Todorov suggested 5 stages that a character will undergo, namely, are Equilibrium, Disruption, Recognition of the loss, Resolution and Equilibrium Again. In all the five select tales, we see a similar structure. The characters are living a stable, peaceful and a predictable life; they are in their narrative 'equilibrium'. The thugs in *A Traveler's Story*, *Bellows for the Bullocks*, *The Silver Well* and the theft in *The Hoarder* are the 'Disruptions' in their lives. These tragedies happen due to their own follies as in *The Hoarder*; bad-luck, over-confidence as in *A Traveler's Story*; or lack of judgement as in *Bellows for the Bullocks*. In *The Farmer's Present* the disruption would be his encounter with the king's question that what if he refuses the gift of the gigantic watermelon. The 'Recognition' takes place either immediately or soon after the loss or 'disruption'.

The 'Resolution' is the protagonists' successful revenge and teaching the thugs a good lesson in *Bellows for the Bullocks*, the wise- man's idea of putting a large stone and re-establishing the gold pot in *The Hoarder*, the traveller's supreme wisdom and master-stroking story in *A Traveler's Story*, the con-man's failing to give a written note of the ownership of the well in *The Silver Well* and the farmer's witty repartee in *The Farmer's Present*. The new- Equilibrium is achieved soon after in all the select folktales.

These tales, therefore, have succeeded in maintaining the age- old tradition of societies. They have bound together regions like a thread weave pearls.

What is interesting to note is that E. B. Tylor in his book *Primitive Culture* (1871) has refuted the thought postulated and maintained by Theodar Benfey and Max Muller. The latter

believed in the monogenesis and atomistic origin – i.e. these tales originated from a single source and then spread all over the region. But E. B. Tylor advocated against this theory of Theodor Benfey and Max Muller, believing in the polygenesis and multiple origins of cultures and folklores; Parasmoni Dutta in his “Brief History of Folklore Studies with Special Reference to India” says that:

... A cultural trait or an item of folklore could have independently originated at two or more places unrelated to each other, either at the same time or at different times, but at similar stages of human progress. It was believed that evolution of mankind followed a singular universal path of progress in every place, with three absolutely identical stages everywhere – savagery, barbarism and civilization ... (25)

These select set of stories do not vary startlingly in form and content also because they broadly belonged to a limited geography of Haryana and neighbouring regions. But they have succeeded since time immemorial in delivering mythic messages and logical formulations to the community at large by the manner of holding a complex level of communication on myriad levels. In earlier times they were read out and passed on only as tools of moral dictates, cultural treasures, and pass-time tools of entertainment. The focus in those times was on the text oriented details. But towards the twentieth century through the present times, new enlightened approaches developed and many folklores, through close readings, were broken up for subtle hints of feminisms, Marxist tendencies, homosexual tones, and other multi-dimensional frameworks, as Dutta observes “in contrast to the text-oriented exercises of the earlier scholars, shifting the attention more to the field than to the library” (27).

American scholars like Robert Gorges, Kenneth Goldstein, Dan Ben-Amos, Alan Dundes, and Roger Abrahams, to name some, belong to the new generation critics who studied folklore from multi- dimensional frameworks.

Bibliography

- Chowdhry, Prem. “Militarized Masculinities: Shaped and Reshaped in Colonial South-East Punjab.” *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 47, no. 3, May 2013, pp. 713–750., <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24494165>. Accessed 12 Nov. 2021.
- Corporation, Haryana Tourism. “Folk Tales: About Us.” *Haryana Tourism Corporation Limited.*, <https://haryanatourism.gov.in/folk-tales#>.
- Dutta, Parasmoni. “Unit-2 Brief History of Folklore Studies with Special Reference to India.” *EGyanKosh*, IGNOU, 1 Jan. 1970, <https://egyankosh.gkpad.com/page/38823>.
- Folktales of India - Tales from Haryana - The Hoarder*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SqCWly6Nx7Q>.

Kutty, Kva. "A Traveler's Story (Haryana Folk Tale)." *Times Of India (Speaking Tree)*, 24 Oct. 2012, <https://www.speakingtree.in/blog/a-travelers-story-haryana-folk-tale-103618>. Accessed 10 Dec. 2021.

MDU. *English - II Bachelor of Arts (B.A.)*. MDU Press, [https://mdu.ac.in/UpFiles/UpPdfFiles/2021/Mar/4_03-02-2021_11-48-03_English-II_BA_\(BA2001-II\).pdf](https://mdu.ac.in/UpFiles/UpPdfFiles/2021/Mar/4_03-02-2021_11-48-03_English-II_BA_(BA2001-II).pdf).

Pathak, Sushmita. "Cow Dung Soap Is Cleaning Up In India." *Npr.org*, 3 Oct. 2018, <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2018/10/03/653739760/cow-dung-soap-is-cleaning-up-in-india>.

"Social Status of a Haryanvi Rural Woman: A Reflective Study through Folk Songs." Access date: 14.12.2021. <https://web.iitd.ac.in/~singhk/home/Phase1.htm>.

"The Farmer's Present." *Kidsgen.com*, https://www.kidsgen.com/stories/folk_tales/the_farmers_present.htm.

"Veerbhoomi Haryana/हरियाणाकेप्राचीननामवस्थान." *Jatland Wiki*, https://www.jatland.com/home/Veerbhoomi_Haryana/%E0%A4%B9%E0%A4%B0%E0%A4%AF%E0%A4%BE%E0%A4%A3%E0%A4%BE_%E0%A4%95%E0%A5%87_%E0%A4%AA%E0%A5%8D%E0%A4%B0%E0%A4%BE%E0%A4%9A%E0%A5%80%E0%A4%A8_%E0%A4%A8%E0%A4%BE%E0%A4%AE_%E0%A4%B5_%E0%A4%B8%E0%A5%8D%E0%A4%A5%E0%A4%BE%E0%A4%A8.

=====