

Myth and its Relation to Folk- wisdom

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Abstract:

Since the dawn of life, human beings have been curious to find about the mystery of the creation of the universe, living creatures, and about human life also. This eagerness to search for the truth of something unknown offers the possibility to achieve knowledge or wisdom. Out of this concern and ignorance, they tried to build their own history of truth, which eventually resulted into mythology, folk tale and legend. These three aspects have been familiar as the product of folklore in the appearance of prose-folk narrative. Folk-wisdom implies the body of knowledge and experience that Springs from the beliefs and opinions of ordinary people. The morals or proverbs found in Aesop's *Fables* are also forms of folk-wisdom. From “The Hare and the Tortoise” humanity is reminded “slow but steady wins the race,” whereas “The Shepherd's Boy and the Wolf” teaches that “there is no believing a liar, even when he speaks the truth”. In Aesop's *Fables* there are stories based on mythic characters like Jupiter, Pandora, Hercules and others. The discussion of this paper will be concerned chiefly with the relation between folk-wisdom and myth and how this relation becomes a mode of expression in literature.

Key words: Folk-wisdom, myth, truth, knowledge, morals, literature.

1. Introduction

Of creation, people could seldom imagine anything that is able to answer the questions they have in their mind since their consciousness after being into this vast, gigantic world. They are so full of curiosity to investigate their existence, the nature, the world, and the Divine God that they worship. In this very quest, to look for the concealed, unknown, and undiscovered truth, the notion of knowledge or wisdom comes into its being. From the very outset, they started to compose imaginary stories of gods, of the creation of earth and its creatures. With this, chronically appears the notion of Myth and that of folk-wisdom. Out of curiosity, these two genres come into reality. Henceforth, I would discuss, in an acute way, how Myth and folk-wisdom channel through this mission for getting the answers related to the truth about creation.

2. Origin of Myth and Folk-wisdom: Ignorance, Truth, Knowledge, Creation

In their attempt to unravel this nudging mystery of their creation, people in the ancient period failed very obviously to seek out the answer. Thus, they started to believe that behind the mystery of creation of the world and its beings is none other than a supernatural presence who is the cause of everything in this world by managing and controlling the cause of the situation, something they could never be able to know.

Therefore, this failure of humans does emerge with a key solution to cope up with their own situation: they started to write down stories about gods, creation of the world, of the human beings. It is those narratives which may apparently seem fictional utterly, but still remain under shadows. Eventually, the birth of Myth took place. As far as the origin of folk-wisdom is concerned, it absolutely came from the intention of collective belief upon those beliefs and opinions that generate throughout the societies, in spite of geographical location. Its main aim is undoubtedly to keep people endowed with knowledge that has been genealogically passed from generation to generation.

3. Folk-wisdom

Folk-wisdom implies the body of knowledge and experience that Springs from the beliefs and opinions of ordinary people. Folk wisdom should be distinguished from folk cures or wives' tales

which generally refer to remedial practices. Folk wisdom could be traced in the proverbs, poetry, songs, stories, rhymes, and religions of all society. The telling off, “don't judge a book by its cover,” and the recommendation “strike while the iron is hot” are instances of folk wisdom found in Western culture. The morals found in Aesop's Fables are also forms of folk wisdom. From “The Hare and the Tortoise” humanity is reminded “slow but steady wins the race,” whereas “The Shepherd's Boy and the Wolf” teaches that “there is no believing a liar, even when he speaks the truth”. While a precise definition of wisdom is elusive, “wisdom is generally considered the pinnacle of insight into the human condition and about the means and ends of a good life”.

In an article “Wisdom: A Metaheuristic (Pragmatic) to Orchestrate Mind and Virtue toward Excellence” written by Paul B Baltes and Ursula M. Staudinger the conception of wisdom has been explicated clearly:

“The first branch, implicit theories of wisdom, consists of psychological research that is associated with folk-psychological and/or common-sense approaches, a line of work initiated by Clayton (Clayton & Birren, 1980), Holliday and Chandler (1986), Sternberg (1985, 1986), Orwoll and Perlmutter (1990), and Sowarka (1989). At stake here is the question of how the term wisdom is used in everyday language and how wise persons are characterised.

Wise persons permit five conclusions about the concept of wisdom: (1) Wisdom is a concept that carries specific meaning that is widely shared and understood in its language-based representation. For instance, wisdom is clearly distinct from other wisdom-related psychological concepts such as social intelligence, maturity, or sagacity. (2) Wisdom is judged to be an exceptional level of human functioning. It is related to excellence and ideals of human development. (3) Wisdom identifies a state of mind and behaviour that includes the coordinated and balanced interplay of intellectual, affective, and emotional aspects of human functioning. (4) Wisdom is viewed as associated with a high degree of personal and interpersonal competence including the ability to listen, evaluate, and to give advice. (5) Wisdom involves good intentions. It is used for the well-being of oneself and others.

Most recently, we extended our inquiry concerning wisdom to the study of proverbs and their relevance in accessing wisdom-related knowledge (Baltes & Freund, 1998). This research follows the notion of folk psychology (Haselager, 1997; Mieder, 1993) that much of a culture's historically acquired knowledge is stored in proverbs, and that accessing this body of knowledge is a major facilitator in achieving and interpreting a good life.

In this instance, we focused on the use of proverbs that reflect the three strategies of life management that Margret Baltes, Paul Baltes and their colleagues have identified as foundational to successful life development: selection, optimization, and compensation (M. Baltes & Carstensen, 1996; Baltes, 1997; Freund & Baltes, in press; Marsiske et al., 1995). Selection involves goals, optimization concern means to reach goals, and compensation denotes means that are invoked when established means fail to reach a given goal. Examples of such proverbs are: “Jack of all trades, master of none” (selection), “practice makes perfect” (optimization), and “when there is no wind, grab the oars” (compensation).” (Baltes and Staudinger)

The life of Aesop- the pioneer of folk-wisdom- is as much complicated as that of Homer, the most legendary of Greek poets. He was born, as has mostly been believed, about the year 620 B.C., and was a slave by birth. He had been in possession of two masters from Samos, Xanthus and Jadmon. It was Jadmon who liberated him from his slavery, as an incentive for his learning and wit. One of the advantages of a freedman in ancient Greece was to have the permission of taking an active contribution in public affairs. That helped Aesop to evolve himself from the servile ignominy to a position of high repute.

In his desire to instruct and to be instructed, he travelled through many countries. One of these ambassadorial travels, commenced at the command of Croesus, was the occasion of his death. Having been sent to Delphi with a large sum of gold for distribution among the citizens, he was so provoked at their covetousness that he refused to divide the money, and sent it back to his master. The Delphians, enraged at this treatment, accused him of impiety, and, in spite of his sacred character as ambassador, executed him as a public criminal. This cruel death of Aesop was not unavenged. The citizens of Delphi were visited with a series of calamities, until they made public

reparation of their crime; and, “The blood of Aesop” became a well-known adage, bearing witness to the truth that deeds of wrong would not pass unpunished.

4. Myth

To define the genus of myth one first always remembers instinctively about the Greek myth which revolves around the well known stories of Zeus, Poseidon, Hades and other famous mythic characters. The word has originated from the Greek word “muthos”, which means a story, narrative, or plot. Basically, Myth refers to a story that deals with Gods, humans and the mutual relation between them; quest of heroes and their first hand combat with giants or supernatural beings or even with other heroes. Thus, mythology implies collectively to all those narratives and beliefs- that could be of any group or a number of groups, in spite of their distinguished geographical margin.

Since the beginning, people have written myths because they wanted to know what kind of being they are. What makes them different from other beings like animals or birds? Who is the creator of this whole universe? Is there anyone above the sky, who is watching us from there? Who created this earth and the creatures on it? How day comes after night? Such questions like these keep coming in the mind of humans and this insinuation drives them to compose such stories which would be distinctly called Myth. By such narrative not only the mystery of creation is being materialised in a fictional format, but also such story-line also discloses an individual society's or group's history, culture, religion, and also collective psychology, civilization. As we know that such composition is nothing but a distinguished format of prose narrative and also something from which the whole universe of literature originates. Even though the famous myths, like that of Greek or Rome, had been written in the primitive ages, they still possess an enriched wealth material in them, which could be helpful both for literature and art. Springing from the mother figure called folklore, myth as a prose folk-narrative- something generated from the concept of oral literature- is a non-material part of folklore wherein we get the other two major aspects of folklore including myth- Tale and Legend.

5. Morals

The Parable and the Fable are all common and popular modes of conveying morals and interestingly both are part of folk culture and tradition. Each is distinguished by its own special characteristics. The *parable* is the designed use of language purposely intended to express a concealed and covert meaning other than that contained in the words themselves; and which may or may not bear a special reference to the hearer, or reader. The *fable* will refer to a brief but authentic narrative line; it will look for, like the Parable, to convey a veiled implication, and that by the skilful introduction of fictitious characters (may be human or non human and even also gods), not just by the use of language; and it will ever keep in view, as its high priority and inseparable trait, the great purpose of instruction or lesson, and will necessarily seek to inculcate some moral maxim, social duty, or political truth.

A *true fable*, if it rises to its highest requirements, always aims at one great end and representation of human motive, and the improvement of human conduct. Yet, it conceals its purpose under the masquerade of fictitious characters, by giving human attributes with speech the animals of the field, the birds of the air, the trees of the wood, or the beasts of the forest. In such a way, the reader shall obtain instruction without understanding the presence of the counsellor. Thus the superiority of the counsellor, which often conveys instruction, is remained under the veil, and the lesson comes with the greater acceptance when the reader is led, unconsciously to himself, to pursue what is pure, honourable, and praiseworthy, and to have his resentment against what is low, ignoble, and unworthy.

The *true fabulist*, therefore, performs a most significant role. He is neither a narrator, nor an allegorist. He is a great teacher, a corrector of morals, a censor of vice, and a commander of virtue. In this consists the superiority of fable over parable. The fabulist is to create a laugh, but yet, under a merry guise, to convey instruction.

Professor K. O. Mueller, a German scholar and Philodorian, or admirer of ancient Sparta, who introduced the modern study of Greek mythology, said that:

“The fable originated in Greece in an intentional travestie of human affairs. The 'ainos,' as its name denotes, is an admonition, or rather a reproof veiled, either from fear of an excess of frankness, or from a love of fun and jest, beneath the fiction of an occurrence happening

among beasts; and wherever we have any ancient and authentic account of the Aesopian fables, we find it to be the same.” (Mueller)

The construction of a fable involves a minute attention to- (1) The narration itself; (2) The deduction of the moral; and (3) A careful maintenance of the individual characteristics of the fictitious personages introduced into it.

The narration should relate to one simple action, consistent with itself, and neither to be overloaded with multiple details, nor distracted by a variety of circumstances. The moral or lesson should be so plain, and so intimately interwoven with, and so necessarily dependent on, the narration, that every reader should be compelled to give to it the same undeniable interpretation. The introduction of the animals or fictitious characters should be marked with an unexceptionable care and attention to their natural attributes, and to the qualities attributed to them by universal popular consent. Many of these fables are characterised by the strictest observance of these rules. They are occupied with one short narrative, from which the moral naturally flows, and with which it is intimately associated.

Dodsley, an English bookseller, poet, playwright, and miscellaneous writer, said:

“Tis the simple manner in which the morals of Aesop are interwoven with his fables that distinguishes him, and gives him the preference over all other mythologists. His 'Mountain delivered of a Mouse,' produces the moral of his fable in ridicule of pompous pretenders; and his Crow, when she drops her cheese, lets fall, as it were by accident, the strongest admonition against the power of flattery. There is no need of a separate sentence to explain it; no possibility of impressing it deeper, by that load we too often see of accumulated reflections.” (Dodsley)

6. Relation between Myth and Folk-wisdom: Prose Vs Oral literature

As has been already explicated, out of the pursuit for knowledge people created such genres like myth and folk-wisdom. Both appeared eventually as a product of human curiosity for truth. Even

though they failed to figure out that actual hidden knowledge, they didn't give up to their failure. But rather they proceed with the hunch of imagination to create a fictional truth (that is myth), something that subsequently becomes a vast beehive of literature. It's very likely to accept the fact that chronologically myth came much before folk-lore; in fact, the presence of myth has smoothed the passage for folk-wisdom, otherwise it would have been quite impossible to write stories upon mythical gods or goddesses. Myth itself is an institution of literature, which is authored by anonymous writers from centuries, of whatever continent it is. Even though it has no proper authoritative presence, this genre is coming under the lineage of prose folk narrative, since most of the stories of all myth are in prose format.

Significantly, folk-wisdom has some pioneers like Aesop, Demetrius Phalereus, Nevelet, and many other names to be related with. These famous names appeared with the intention to convey moral lessons or instructions to the common folks which "involves good intentions" and for the "well-being of oneself and others", with the assistance of virtues and vices as well. Moreover, folk-wisdom has this mission for the betterment of common good, unlike myth functioning like a story and also as a wish fulfilment for the presence of divinity for common people. In fact from childhood, people are more acquainted with the stories of fables rather than that of myths; as all the parents intend to build a rational life for their children. If one looks at the history of fables, it would be uncovered that throughout the world it is the stories of Aesop's *Fables*, which have been translated in multiple languages for the readers. As a matter of fact, Aesop's *Fables* is the second popular work of art just after *The Holy Bible*.

Chaucer, George Orwell is among those eminent authors who have been inspired chiefly by the persuasion of fables in their works, making them well-known authors in the field of literature. Whereas, there are those names like Shakespeare, Eliot, Sartre, Heaney, Yeats and some others, with whom we could adhere to the genre of myth.

7. Conclusion

Therefore, one must proclaim that even though folk-wisdom and myth are of different rank, they are actually intertwined with each other. Both qualify or complement each other constantly, each works as a supplement for the other, for accomplishment. One must not forget the presence of

mythic characters in the fables of Aesop (the presence of Jupiter, Hercules, Mercury) and some moral lessons one could acquire from the mythic stories as well (Paris, Anteus, Medusa and some others). This crucial procedure of influencing each other indeed had been initialised in Greece centuries ago, which is again the same old headquarters of wisdom.

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