WOMEN RETELLINGS: CROSS-CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF MYTH AND FOLKTALES IN THE WORKS OF FLORA NWAPA AND SUDHA MURTY

Dr. Lalitha Sridevi J.

Assistant Professor, VNR VJIET,
Hyderabad, India
lalitha.india2k@gmail.com

Abstract

Cultures act as complex configurations of knowledge system or learning process. Rituals, proverbs, storytelling are patterns of this culture traditionally practiced in India and Africa since centuries, and the 'spoken word' is an important aspect of those performances. Colonialism has profoundly translated the oral traditions to modern forms of communication such as books, radio, and television. However, oral traditions are still alive in these countries in various forms of art. Especially in Africa, oral literature is the only way to discover the African personality. Orature remains an essential background to understand the dynamics and aesthetics of African works. In India, a large portion of the ancient texts or literature is rooted in oral traditions. The emphasis on individuals and their actions renders 'concreteness' to the narrative. As A.K. Ramanujan has rightly pointed out, folklore itself acts as a system that encompasses several languages and registers. Writers either translate, or create stories based on these rituals or songs that are progressive.

The paper focuses on the mythic narrative of the two women writers Flora Nwapa and Sudha Murty who use the concepts to enhance social and self-formation. These writers draw their inspiration and narrative skills from their foremother's gardens to enrich their literary texts. This gives rise to a rich artistic experience that include proverbs, riddles, songs, myths, allegories rendering structural elements to the narrative. The interconnectedness of women writers in creating images leads to an intertextual dialogue and makes them 'thinking back' performers. They believe that adapted structural elements of these narratives contribute to the aesthetic experience of the reader. They emphasize that these elements render authenticity to the text.

Keywords: cultures, knowledge system, progressive, 'thinking back' performers

Cultures are the configurations of learning according to S.N. Balagangadhara. Culture is not a discourse but more a product of experience. The cultural differences therefore arise out of the difference in configurations. Indian and African traditions and practices have woven together intricately for several thousands of years with rituals, proverbs and storytelling, forming patterns of this culture. Folklore which serves as a mirror of this culture forms a vital resource to understand human condition and the world around. Recent researchers in different communities indicate that folklore is a subculture that expresses the collective traditions of a group or community. Andre Jolles in his theory of simple forms emphasizes that the 'simple forms' of folklore such as myth, legends, riddles and fairy-tales are formed through language and become autonomous entities in the cultural process.

UNESCO website for intangible heritage also specifically mentions the need to save knowledge which is not recorded. In India, a large portion of the ancient texts or literature is rooted in oral traditions. African societies, on the other hand, handed down traditions from clan to clan, kin group to kin group for thousands of years and are therefore referred to as traditional. Most of the traditional systems in Africa are ethno-specific; they lack a written tradition. The 'middle range theory' proposed by Prof. Binford could be a reference point on how oral traditions provide the only window to cognitive mapping of a community. In countries such as India and Africa, folklore remains to grow with our culture and acts as a living force rather than becoming a relic.

In Africa, oral literature is the only way to discover the African personality. Orature remains an essential background to understand the dynamics and aesthetics of African works. The trickster tales for example originated from the Ashanti tradition of West Africa, spread to India and other parts of Asia. The stories reflect a web of communal relationships in a larger framework. There are always take aways from these stories even after societies fragment and disperse. Additionally, the emphasis on individuals and their actions renders 'concreteness' to the narrative. As A.K. Ramanujan has rightly pointed out, folklore itself acts as a system that encompasses several languages and registers. Writers either translate, or create stories based on these rituals or songs that are progressive. For instance, the Vedas in India refer to the great tradition and yet for centuries these have been orally transmitted.

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As the ancient African adage goes, "When an old man dies, a library burns to the ground", the importance of these oral traditions is evident. There is an intense richness and complexity in the cultural practices of various regions of West Africa. It is interesting to note that an understanding of the traditional societies of West Africa present a mosaic of cultures, languages and groups that represent the influences of external forces on the primitive religions of this region. The story of West Africa is that of indigenous and migrant populations covering a vast terrain. These traditional African societies believe in a central force or a high god in African religion called *chi.* For Africans, especially women, religion serves as a healing source to many of the problems they encounter in life.

"History is preserved not in the art object but in the tradition of making the art object....It is eaten, it is worn; culture consists in passing on the technique of its making. Stories are made to be told, and songs to be sung. In the singing and the telling, they are changed.... Transformation, rather than permanence, is at the heart of this aesthetic, as it is at the heart of most women's lives." (Marcus 222)

A feminist and socialist scholar of the modern era Jane Marcus describes vividly how oral traditions and written word are connected. These fine connecting threads of African women writers make them good storytellers with novel stories. The unique voice they render to the narrative in the postcolonial context is significant to understand the tradition of Orature in an African setting.

African women take on the role of creators in weaving new stories about themselves by realizing their potential to shift from the traditional roles thrust upon them. This paradigm shift in the portrayal of African women established them as an emergent articulating force in the literary world. Contemporary researchers on oral literature in Africa identify that women literary texts depict power relations in society in which women also act as powerful resources of knowledge tales. The folktales of Nigerian Igbo communities such as akuko-ala and akuko-ifo referred to as the tales of the land and the tales of imagination respectively serve the function of artistic expression. Orature therefore focuses on the interpretation of women's experience of day-to-day events. Jan Vansina, one of the foremost historians on Africa reiterates the difference between African oral history and orature. He observes that oral history is concerned with a series of events while orature represents interpreting the experience artistically. (Vansina 13). The first generation of women writers Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta later recorded the experiences of women in their works.

For Indian women writers, powerful women protagonists formed the core of major literary texts, re-creating their own stories. The reviewed interest in myths and other forms of folklore led to the encouragement of 'thinking back' women writers whose characters are remembered for their indomitable spirit and resilience. These women writers use language as a reflection of societal issues and the literary texts as a window to express their recordings of society. It is interesting to note that some of the women writers from both the countries mention the influence of their foremothers' orature on their works. Writers such as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Kavita Kane and Sudha Murty draw on pre-existing women from Indian mythology but render a unique perspective to the character.

In the West African oral cultures, women writers use orature not only as a language tool but also as transmitters of cultural values through the use of metaphors. The emphasis is more on the performative style so that the narrative becomes the focal point of the text. In these texts, the audience could interpret the message by linking the metaphors and other literary devices with the images. West African women writers took up the challenge of presenting the nuances of relationships in family and society at large by connecting the threads with orature. Stories, one of the significant forms of orature, serves a dual purpose of providing instructions that are not direct but representational. Action plays a major role in these instructions as the reader analyses the situation based on the context which is implied by characters in the narrative. It is a way of offering insights about the world.

In Indian cultures, there are incredible stories which focus on 'acting to know'. These stories offer a practical approach to solve a problem. At every stage, individuals interact with others in a social hierarchy that enriches the repertoire of orature. In both African and Indian cultures, the act of storytelling and inclusion of myths, proverbs represent an important trait of preserving the rich oral tradition through patterns of thought. Stories, therefore, cannot be viewed as simple tools to explain something but are complex pedagogical instruments to demonstrate action.

In West African societies, 'griottes' influenced the socio-cultural milieu by sharing stories with the community. They excelled in the art of storytelling and used sophisticated language to narrate stories with historical and cultural significance. They were usually elderly women who were original in their style, language use and

performance. Their professional skills displayed mastery of the form and they were assigned important position in society due to their wisdom.

Flora Nwapa, one of the important first generation women writers from West Africa, contends that the glory of her status is shaped by these 'griottes' or oral historians who influenced her with stories about Ogbuide, the woman of the lake. Flora Nwapa carved a niche for herself with her first novel *Efuru* (1966) which changed the dominant male perspective of women in Africa. Her novels infuse folk idiom and myths into the stories that enhance generational continuity.

The Igbo people from West Africa believe that Uhamiri, the Lake Goddess is a central, powerful deity who heals the community and reaffirms recovery and strength. She is often referred to as Uhamiri or Mami Wata. She acts as both the afflictor and healer for women who bestows fortune on them, yet creating challenges in their lives. The myth of Uhamiri is prevalent in most of Nwapa's works. She modifies the existing myths associated with the Goddess to empower women. While the male-authored texts focus on the effect of goddess figure on the male subject, Nwapa's *Efuru* is on the woman's needs. In her first novel *Efuru*, Nwapa's mythical retelling of Uhamiri acts as a source of strength for Efuru, the protagonist, to cope up with her problems. Efuru begins to question herself about the transformed image, from the day she becomes a worshipper of Uhamiri. In the process of finding a solution, she feels that she is 'growing logical in her reasoning'. Nwapa redefines the spirit of womanhood through the image of lake deity. The myth of barrenness as a symbol of failure is explored in the novel. But Efuru becomes more aware of her identity as a woman transcending the domestic realm. Nwapa, through *Efuru* challenges the 'post-colonial' male hegemony and power struggles prevailing in society.

Using the lens of 'Nego-feminism', Nwapa infuses myth in these stories to design her plot; unfold the action and the consequences of the presence of the goddess of the lake in the both *Efuru* and *Idu*. It was after husband Adizua's disappearance and the death of her daughter Ogonim that Efuru begins to make sense of her connect with Uhamiri as she recounts her dreams to her father: "I dream several nights of the lake and the woman of the lake… I got to the bottom of the lake and to my surprise, I saw an elegant woman, very beautiful, combing her long black hair with a golden comb. When she saw me, she stopped combing her hair and smiled at me and asked me to come in … I followed her like a woman possessed … Then she showed me all her riches. As I was about to leave her house under the water, I got up from my sleep …" (Nwapa 146). The Woman of the Lake is a symbol of every woman's spirit of independence and self-fulfilment.

A similar experience is projected in her second novel *Idu*. The title is a reference to the ancient Benin kingdom that marked a point where the blue sky touched the Earth. The protagonist of the novel *Idu* is a recreation of this myth that dead people can come back alive. Idu decides to join her husband Adiewere to the land of the dead: "…He has cheated me…leave me alone. I am going with him" (Nwapa 210). Nwapa's use of myth, folktales in the novel offers an interconnectedness between the world of living and the dead. Idu violates the traditional norms of marrying her husband's brother after Adiewere's death and rather prefers to die with her husband. She exercises her freedom to take a decision about her life.

Nwapa's *Never Again* depicts the stories of women during war who display tremendous courage during crisis. The setting of the novel is the Nigerian Civil War narrated from the perspective of a woman who seeks peace during the Civil war. In *Never Again*, Nwapa chooses the religious source Uhamiri as an important form of strength for Kate, the protagonist of the novel. The success of Uhamiri towards the end of the novel is mythically symbolic of woman's resilience and strength to withstand the existing male disorder. The Lake Goddess signifies freedom and power who is capable of protecting her people from invaders. People relied on the mythical power of the Lake Goddess to save the land. Initially when they witness the fall of Ugwuta, women cry, "Uhamiri, why have you treated us this way?" (Nwapa 54). This aspect of Nwapa's novel reinforces Frazer's argument that myths are important modes of learning that explain the unintelligible rituals.

Stephens and McCallum define myth retelling as an act based on the author's memory of the pre-texts. This might sometimes lead to the possibility of the author creating a monomyth from these texts. However, preserving the knowledge systems is a primary role of myth retellers. Sudha Murty, known for her contribution to children's literature is a compelling writer whose works stimulate imagination and creativity in young minds. Sharing her thoughts about storytelling with Times of India, Sudha Murty admitted that she firmly believed in the immense power of storytelling and its innate ability to captivate the attention of both kids and adults. A prolific writer globally recognised for her Indian stories, Sudha Murty is considered one of the highest selling Indian female authors. She acknowledges her grandmother Kristakka for instilling in her, imaginative and creative abilities.

For Sudha Murty the complexity of Indian mythologies are shrouded in magical mysteries, yet revealing those treasures in a simple way is equally difficult. She portrays women who are loyal and courageous. They are

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resilient and have the power to bring transformation. Her mythological narratives are not merely stories but metaphors- metaphors of change across cultures. As a myth reteller, she is interested to write about some of the powerful women who changed the fate of dynasties, who could take decisions on par with men. In the process of recreating these myths, she weaves into her stories the unbelievable, the ahistorical, and the unknown as plausible.

In *Unusual Tales from Indian Mythology*, Sudha Murty focuses on myth as knowledge system implying that these tales are worth knowing about and worth remembering. Through strong women characters, Sudha Murty's collection of tales explores feisty women who redesigned their destiny. Sudha Murty challenges the status quo by offering fresh perspectives about women characters. She reimagines the well-known characters and events from Indian mythology to reinvent a spectrum of human experiences, especially women, within these tales. She employs conventional retellings in the *The Daughter from a Wishing Tree: Unusual Tales about Women in Mythology* by including the myths of unheard women voices such as Ravana's sister Surpanakha and his wife Mandodari. Unlike the existing versions of Surpanaka's tale who is usually depicted as a catalyst in the war, Sudha Murty presents her as someone who refuses patriarchy and seeks revenge. In *Unusual Tales*, Murthy combats the representation of women as meek individuals through these characters. For instance, in one of the stories, Goddess Lakshmi is portrayed as an independent, decisive woman who questions her husband Lord Vishnu for mocking at one of her brothers. Sudha Murty clearly places the 'mythological' as a narrative rooted in beliefs and traditions. In *Unusual Tales* she refers to the mythological story of Ganges, the mother Ganga in which Lord Vishnu appears in the form of a dwarf named Vamana. She tries to reinterpret the received versions of stories thereby compelling the reader to rethink and value the significance of these myths.

Sudha Murty emphasises on the importance of rivers in our lives and how they impact women's lives, similar to Flora Nwapa's concept of Mami Wata. Sudha Murty describes the origin of the Ganges referred to as Gangamoola or Varaha Parvata. Nooni, a young, curious girl in *The Magic of the Lost Story* asks Seshu about Gangamoola. Seshu gives her insights into the story of the Ganga and its origins. Nooni then starts to explore the origin of Tungabhadra.

The characters and the plot of the narrative is woven around the river Tungabhadra. " We treat the river as if it were a woman, and women are honoured with a *morada bagina* on any auspicious occasion". (Murty 146) Nooni recollects how Seshu refers to the Tunga as 'Amma'. Tunga is personified as the mother who gives everything to her children. The presence of the river transforms the landscape rendering the Western Ghats flora and fauna. This idea resonates with the concept of Mami Wata in Flora Nwapa's novels. Her last novel *The Lake Goddess* deconstructs the local traditions and customs to promote the cause of womanhood. Both Nwapa and Sudha Murty describe their hometowns offering divergent perspectives about the myths and folklore of the place. Both the writers discuss the confluence of rivers- Nwapa mentions the rivers Urashi and Niger in *The Lake Goddess* and Sudha Murty about Tunga and Bhadra in *The Magic of the Lost Story*.

Flora Nwapa and Sudha Murty act as myth retellers by challenging the deep rooted versions of stories accepted by the community or group. The tales transcend cultures by incorporating memory, myth and history to make the stories more believable. A critical engagement with these mythical narratives renders scope for individuals to challenge the existing beliefs and find meaningful solutions in the contemporary context. As Sudha Murty rightly pointed out, it is essential to stay true to one's culture as it provides strong foundation to individuals. These cultural practices could be restored or preserved through associations and connections with the past. We could reclaim the lost traditions by exploring Indian mythological tales from unconventional perspectives and alternative viewpoints. By challenging traditional interpretations, these women retellings bring unheard voices and characters to the forefront, question established norms and historical dimensions. By embracing unconventional perspectives, we open doors to a more inclusive and deeper exploration of mythological folktales and legends.

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