JOURNAL OF THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
Vidyasagar University, Midnapore-721102, WB
Volume 17, 2024
(http://vidyasagar.ac.in/journal) **ISSN: 0973-3671**

From "A Flowering Tree" to *Cheluvi*: Context Sensitivity of an Indian Folktale

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Abstract

Down the ages, vernacular narratives are circulated and retained among the common-folk, forming a substantial part of Indian literature in the oral tradition. They also serve as tools of edification, the primary auditors being young children thirsting for listening to elderly narrators whose storytelling deftly interweaves lived experiences into these tales. Thus, traditional storytelling serves a dual purpose: as entertainment for the listeners and a mechanism of education deployed by the tellers. This makes the narratives repositories for academic analyses. A.K. Ramanujan was among the pioneers in the field of folklore studies in India, drawing global attention to the multifaceted nature of these tales, by collecting, documenting, translating and analysing some of them.

The proposed article shall focus on one such story, "A Flowering Tree", collected by A.K. Ramanujan. It is a folktale, the context-sensitivity and self-reflexive nature of which has accommodated multiple telling in different forms. This story has been the source text for many audio-visual adaptations across the globe: animation films, an opera and a movie. The first two forms have been faithful to the original story, with the girl getting reunited with her estranged husband, as is common in folktales. However, Girish Karnad did not end *Cheluvi*, the movie he directed, in that way. *Cheluvi*, drawing upon the same folktale, carries a message from its maker. Karnad's deep concern about deforestation is brilliantly presented in the movie in order to contextualize the folktale from the perspectives of dislocation and environmental sustainability while falling back upon Ramanujan's theories related to folklore at the same time.

Keywords: context sensitive, self-reflexive, multiple telling, deforestation, dislocation

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Introduction

Girish Karnad (1938-2019) has focussed on the necessity of an ecological balance for addressing the immediate crisis faced by planetary sustainability in his adaptations of folk literature collected and translated by his mentor, A.K. Ramanujan (1928-1993). Their common purpose was to bring these notions already extant in Indian folklore to recipients in the planetary community, via modern cultural forms like literary anthologies in English translation, theatrical performances and cinematographic presentations. As examples of this remarkable re-telling, one could refer to the plays *Naga-Mandala* (1990) and *Talé-Danda* (1995), and the films *Kanaka Purandara* (1988) and *Cheluvi* (1992)—created by Karnad out of Ramanujan's English renderings of Kannada folk literature.

Ramanujan pointed out that oral folk literature in India is an amazing storehouse of variety (including linguistic), sometimes with overlapping similarities depending on local intangible cultural forces. Many of these are women's tales, told during meals to young children in the joint-family while being fed by an elderly lady carrying a plate of meal in her hand with the children sitting around her; as she puts food into their mouths/hands by turn, her engrossing story distracts them from their meal. This practical means of dealing with many youngsters together opened up possibilities of edifying folktales, "told early enough to children to be important" (Ramanujan *UPP* 56), which slowly and consistently injected into their receptive minds notions about the deep ecological relationship between Nature and Man—how Nature nurtures human existence. Into this essential pattern was sometimes woven the supernatural element to make the story more attractive and memorable.

Ramanujan was considered eccentric for his obsession with collecting folk literature. However, he ignored adverse comments and continued with his passion for collecting folktales from lay narrators from the time when he was about twenty years old. The reputed linguist-folklorist gradually emerged from his prolonged and consistent research, translation, analysis and publication of his harvest, two of them being *Folktales from India, Oral Tales from Twenty Indian Languages* (1991) and *A Flowering Tree and Other Oral Tales* (1997).

This study shall begin with Ramanujan as a folklorist, proceed towards his lasting influence on Girish Karnad, and finally look at how Karnad imbibed the influence of his mentor.

A.K. Ramanujan's Ideas

Ramanujan actively involved scholars and academicians in discussions where problems were raised and solutions to them were sought, generating a nearly unending process of research. These were extended to more serious engagements in lectures and essays. It shall be useful to take a quick look at two such essays: "Is There an Indian Way of Thinking? An Informal Essay" (*CE* 34-51) and "Where Mirrors are Windows: Towards an Anthology of Reflections" (*CE* 6-33).

"˜Where Mirrors are Windows" argues that "cultural traditions in India are indissolubly plural and often conflicting but are organized through at least two principles, (a) context-sensitivity and (b) reflexivity of various sorts, both of which constantly generate new forms out of the old ones" (*CE* 8). Borrowing the term 'context-sensitive' from linguistics he applied it to the field of folklore to connote phenomena which were modified or even radically altered by the context in which they appeared. In the essay, "Is there an Indian Way of Thinking?" he draws attention to elements in Indian culture that are valuable and living as being 'context-sensitive', saying that no traditional Indian text comes without a context: a frame. They are framed by *phalasruti* promises which indicate to the reader/teller/listener about all the good that will result from his act of reading/telling/listening. They relate the text, of whatever antiquity, to the present reader—that is, they contextualize it. The firm belief in *phalasruti* is the foundational praxis for the flourishing of folktales and their context sensitivity, which he explains:

> Texts may be historically dateless, anonymous: but their contexts, uses, efficacies, are explicit. . . . And within the text, one tale is the context of another within it. . . . The tale within is context-sensitive—getting its meaning from the tale without, and giving it further meanings.
>
> . . . We need to attend to the context-sensitive designs that embed a seeming variety of modes [. . .] and materials. This manner of constructing the text is in consonance with other designs in the relevant culture.
>
> . . . Culture is enclosed in nature, nature is reworked in culture, so that we cannot tell the difference. We have a nature-culture continuum that cancels the terms, confuses them even if we begin with them. (*CE* 42-44)

Moving ahead, in answer to the question "Is there *an* Indian way of thinking?" (*CE* 34) he proposes that "There is no single Indian way" (*CE* 34). Karnad explains this, saying: "To him, all texts and performances are 'a transitive series, a "scale of forms" responding to one another, engaged in a continuous and dynamic dialogic relationship. Texts....are ...contexts and pretexts for other texts'" (AKR Memorial Lecture n.p.).

These texts may be found in three broad, alternative coexistent traditions which invert, oppose, and otherwise reflect on the so-called Great Traditions (*marga*). One of them is folklore, often included under little traditions (*desi*) or oral traditions, not necessarily or merely rural, and expressed through the dialects of the mother tongues. Folk myths often connect local myths with the pan-Indian ones, repeating the pan-Indian myths in jumbled versions, and as a form of systematic counter-discourse, often intentionally reversing the values in the pan-Indian telling.

The A.K. Ramanujan – Karnad Bonding

Girish Karnad admits in his interview with Anjali Nerlekar: "Oh, he was virtually a guru for me. A lot of ideas I just borrowed straight from him" (n.p.). He was a student in Karnataka College, Dharwad, pursuing B.A. in Mathematics, when he met Ramanujan, who was a young teacher in Lingaraj College, Belgaum. Their meetings were rare—during inter-college competitions. But the duo struck an immediate chord which lasted beyond Ramanujan's death in 1993. The relationship, both academic and personal, could be described as symbiotic with one helping the other. In the A.K. Ramanujan Memorial Lecture which Karnad delivered on 21 March 2012 at Ramjas College, Delhi, he describes Ramanujan's capacity to correlate: "But nothing remains disparate and unconnected in Raman's thought, and one day he realizes with a shock the connection between the Kannada oral tales and the world of Tamil Sangam poems" (n.p.). In his essay, "Two Realms of Kannada Folklore" (*CP* 485-512), Ramanujan writes: "Returning to Kannada folklore after several years of studying classical Tamil poetry, I saw a particularly simple and striking pattern I had not seen before" (485). In his A.K. Ramanujan Memorial Lecture, Karnad explains this movement from ancient Tamil to kitchen Kannada, from classical to the folklore, from a received system to improvised data which is characteristic of Ramanujan:

> Raman does something which few translators do: he explains to us why he has translated as he has done. He tries to establish that the words, phrases and equivalents he has used in his versions are not random. . . . Amazingly he found the new past in the mother-tongue culture. Regardless of what he is discussing, one can always sense in the background the home, teeming with the family, and at its centre, shaping the familial contexts, responding to them in different ways, the presence of the woman. (n.p.)

The striking feature of all these explorations of Ramanujan is how he started with things which were considered small, almost insignificant, such as women's tales or songs, and from there went on step by step to look at some very important, if hitherto ignored, aspects of our lived social canvas. He was not contemptuous of the output of the illiterate and the weak, nor was he afraid to look at large issues. He managed to weave all these separate strands into the fabric of the entire tapestry of Indian culture. Grand designs hardly interested him; he never reduced a single tale to one conclusion. Like a good storyteller he knew that the imagination loves precision. One of the lasting contributions he made to folklore studies was bringing out the centrality of women's tales in Indian culture, particularly through folklore.

Women's tales, by and about them, thus serve as intangible archives, inviting multiple opportunities for their implementation in daily life. Although these tales are heavily lined with edifying value, their oral form obstructs their preservation, documentation and analysis. With globalization encroaching on the cultural geographies of the indigenous peoples, these intangible archives are threatened

with extinction. Sensing this endangerment, Ramanujan began collecting and documenting these folktales. He published them in the vernacular and in English translation and encouraged Karnad to use them for creating his own works. Karnad's words reflect the influence Ramanujan had on him:

> Let me finally explain what qualifies me to talk about Raman at such length when I was not his student…. My film, *Cheluvi,* is based on a Kannada folk tale which he had collected ('The Flowering Tree'). When I was at the University of Chicago and asked to write a play for the students, I didn't have to look far. I looked through his anthologies of oral tales, chose two, and combined them to concoct *Naga-Mandala*…. You know, I am sure, of the *akshayapātra.* It refers to a pot which never gets empty however generously you help yourself to its contents. Raman was an *akshayapātra* to me. (AKR Memorial Lecture n.p.)

Oral vernacular tales thrived on their own merit. A.K. Ramanujan collected as many of them as he could, translated them in English, and explained their significance, drawing attention to their multifaceted nature. In keeping with his views that folktales bear a contemporary relevance and that they are flexible, having the inbuilt capacity to accommodate messages, Karnad wrote the play *Naga-Mandala* (1990) in Kannada and English, and the screenplay for *Cheluvi* (1992) in Hindi.

"A Flowering Tree"

This is Tale No. 19 in *A Flowering Tree and Other Oral Tales from India*, and certainly the most popular. "A Flowering Tree" is "a tale that speaks of a woman's creativity, her agency, and the way it is bound up with her capacity for speech" (*CE* 413).

The tale centres on the girl's ability to become a flowering tree. The girl becomes a tree five times in the story: a pitcher of water is poured on her to transform her to a flowering tree; a second pitcher of water poured on the intact tree transforms her back to being the girl. Only the first and last shape-shifting are out of her choice. In the second instance, her mother, suspicious that she has been promiscuous, orders her to show her how she earned her money. The prince eavesdrops on one of these transformations and desires her. His parents pamper him; so he manages to marry her. Thereafter, in the third case, every night he compels her to become a tree in his bedchamber. It becomes like a sexual ritual—she becomes a flowering tree, he plucks the flowers and makes a bed out of them, and the couple sleeps on this bed. The growing pile of strange stale flowers outside the prince's bedroom window, rouses his adolescent sister's curiosity. She peers through a chink in their door, sees the transformation and has a tremendous urge to show-off this rare phenomenon to her companions. She compels the girl to go with her to the orchard and bullies her, forcing her to undergo the transformation, this becoming the fourth time in the story. In her

excitement, the sister-in-law ignores her promise not to harm the flowering tree: branches are broken by her companions. When the second pitcher of water is poured on the tree, the transformation is grossly incomplete—she is neither a girl nor a tree—her reproductive agency is destroyed.

A.K. Ramanujan analyses the story in his lecture titled "'A Flowering Tree': A Woman's Tale":

> As I said earlier, she is most vulnerable when she is a tree. She can neither speak nor move. She is most open to injury when she is most attractive, when she is exercising her gift of flowering. Each time she becomes a tree, she begs the one who is pouring the water to be careful not to hurt her. Yet, paradoxically, when she is mutilated, she cannot be healed directly. She can be made whole only by becoming the tree again, becoming vulnerable again, and trusting her husband to graft and heal her broken branches. . . . What are the differences between a woman and a tree? A woman can speak, can move, can be an agent on her own behalf in ways that a tree cannot. Yet symbolically speaking, the tree . . . expresses a young woman's desire to flower sexually and otherwise as well as the dread of being ravaged, a possibility that the very gift brings with it. (*CE* 425)

Elderly women narrators of this tale would possibly be re-living the complex and ambivalent feelings which, as young women, they felt towards their own bodies. Through the narrative, they also shared knowledge about anticipations and dangers with young inexperienced women receptors. With the opening of this dimension, according to Ramanujan, would enter the dual notion of the *akam* (Interior) and *puram* (Exterior) of classical Tamil poetics: the spaces in this woman-centred story are marked by the operation of *akam* and *puram* through alternations of domestic and public spaces in which the episodes take place (the forest [*puram*] — the girl's courtyard [*puram*] — the prince's bedchamber [*akam*] — the orchard [*puram*] — the bedchamber [*akam*]). Folktales indicate the aberrations introduced by human intervention which subvert natural patterns. Ramanujan discusses this in his analysis of "A Flowering Tree":

> ... one of the oppositions between a woman and a tree is that the former is an interior (*akam*) being, living indoors and having an interior space, and the latter lives outdoors, in a public space (*puram*). It is one of the ironies of this story that she is forced to become a tree in the wrong space, in the bedchamber. And when she becomes a tree in the orchard, the greatest harm comes to her. These transitions emphasize the special symbolic charge of the tree: it is not any old tree, but a phase in a human career; its past and future is human and female, capable of living both within and without. Such is the time-space, the chronotope, of this woman's tale. ... In the orchard, ... the young woman becomes a tree, full of fears that are

> all too real and unable to return to her whole human female being: she becomes a Thing, something that has the face of a woman but the helplessness of the tree. She is neither woman nor tree, but both, betwixt and between. The Thing cannot move by itself and does not speak. (*CE* 425-426)

This 'Thing' finds place in the servants' quarters (both *akam* and *puram* for the girl, indicating an in-between space for her in-between physical appearance). It is only her husband's intervention that she is able to return to her original female body: the estranged man recognizes his wife, hears her narration about how she has become this 'Thing', listens carefully to her instructions about how he can exercise his healing agency to restore her to completeness as a girl. Thus, the story ends in this way:

> Then she sat down and meditated.
>
> He poured the water on her from the first pitcher. She became a tree. But the branches had been broken, the leaves had been torn. He carefully set each one right and bound them up and gently poured water from the second pitcher all over the tree. Now she became a whole human being again. She stood up, shaking the water off her hair, and fell at her husband's feet. (*CE* 421)

This last transformation, through which her skill recovers, is voluntary, like the first one. Ramanujan suggests that "agency in these women's tales is connected with their being able to tell their own story and its being heard. After the first time, every time that she protests that she does not wish to become a tree, she is not heard; she is forced to do so against her will. Many women's tales end with this kind of self-story being told and being heard." (*CE* 426)

There are significant edifying aspects of this story: the girl has reproductive power; the husband is aware of his duty to protect and sustain her power; therefore, sustainability is viable only when the man actively employs his agency to sustain that of the woman. More important, however, is the essential fact that the ecological factors for this to happen also participate in the process. The utopian location—dislocation—relocation cyclic structure of the closed ended traditional folktale is firmly grounded in an assurance of undisturbed natural environmental equilibrium.

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Multiple Audio-Visual Telling

The flexibility of folktales accommodates not just multiple telling, but telling in and through multiple genres. "A Flowering Tree" has proven to be one of the most popular Indian folktales in various audio-visual media, particularly for its content which is extremely pertinent for an awareness of the deforestation-generated planetary crisis accosting the twenty-first century. An animation film dubbed in English, *A Flowering Tree* (available in YouTube) dated 17 March 2020, ends with the prince happily reuniting with his wife, the girl-flowering-tree who now has a permanent limp following her being manhandled by her sister-in-law and her companions.

Another animation film by Meera Krishnamurthy, also titled *A Flowering Tree*, premiering on 18 December 2018, made a significant impact.

John Adams has made a successful opera in two acts, called *A Flowering Tree*, commissioned by the New Crowned Hope Festival in Vienna, and others (to celebrate the 250th anniversary of Mozart's birth), which premiered on 14 November 2006 in Vienna.

The Flowering Tree: A Dance Drama has been performed by Natya Dance Theatre Company, Chicago, premiering in Houston on 17 March 2016.

Cheluvi (1992)

In order to retain its contemporary relevance in times when carbon footprints mark almost every terrain, "A Flowering Tree" calls for an open ending—where questions will echo in the mind(s) of the receptor(s)—questions with no immediate answers, questions which must be continuously chased in search of answers. In the closed ended source folktale, the girl is united with her estranged husband, indicating that they live happily-ever-after. Since this telling belongs to the age-old oral folk intangible cultural heritage of India, the promise of conservation and sustainability was feasible. It is this last important ecological agency that has been exposed to continuous violation and threat, leading to the planetary crisis facing Earth.

Ramanujan writes in the essay, "Towards a Counter-System: Women's Tales" (*CP* 429-47):

> In an indissolubly plural culture like that of India, one may look for context-sensitive systems. . . . Such a presence of reflexive worlds; such a dialogic response of one tradition to another; the copresence of several of them in one space, parodying, inverting, facing and defacing each other, sharing and taking over characters, themes, motifs, and other signifiers but making them signify new and even opposite things—this is characteristic of Indian creativity. (*CP* 447)

With colonization and industrialization, deforestation has overtaken the planet over the past couple of centuries leading to circumstances in which the faith in happy endings has died out. Therefore, Karnad moulded the ending of "A Flowering Tree" to "signify new and even opposite things" (*CP* 447), making it context-sensitive for upholding the present planetary crisis, which he had identified in 1992, when he wrote the script of *Cheluvi*, his praxis stemming from A.K. Ramanujan's theory on the relevance of folktales: "Texts then are contexts and pretexts for other texts" ("Who Needs Folklore?" *CE* 535-36). The destructive human agency is portrayed by the dominating patriarchal figure of the father-in-law in the movie, whose double encroachment into the personal life of his son as well as the natural environment concretizes the worries about sustainability and survival. He intends to get his son married once more, for which he begins preparations to construct a magnificent palace where his son will live happily-ever-after with his new wife, by clearing the trees in the woods where Cheluvi (Kannada word meaning 'beautiful girl') had been mutilated when she had taken the shape of the tree. Cheluvi's husband returns to the spot of her mutilation with Cheluvi (now deformed into a human face kind-of engraved on the tree-trunk), as instructed by her, intending to replace the broken branches on the trunk and pour the pitcher of water over the arrangement to get her back to her former human self. All that he finds is brisk activity of felling tall trees and immediate removal of the cut tree-parts: Karnad carefully arranges a powerful visual representation of sinister organized anthropocentric deforestation activity. To the distraught husband it was clear that the broken branches of her body-parts were gone with the rest of the felled trees. The young man, stood at the intersection of the devastation of the forest and that of Cheluvi, bearing witness to the exercise of destructive familial authority which disregarded his desires and decisions. Karnad anticipated what Kathleen Dean Moore writes in the Epilogue titled "The Road to Cape Perpetua" to *Keeping the Wild: Against the Domestication of Earth* (2014): "Ecologists call this the sliding baseline; what we accept as normal is gradually changing. This is what we must resist: finally coming to accept that a stripped-down, dammed-up, paved-over, poisoned, bulldozed, radioactive, impoverished landscape is the norm—the way it's supposed to be, the way it's always been, the way it must always be. This is the result we should fear the most" (219-220).

In agreement with the edifying pattern of folktales, the young man expresses his understanding that this site of devastation is not for him; he does not give up hope although Cheluvi is crestfallen. He drives away from there with Cheluvi, in the same bullock cart in which they had arrived, telling her that they will search for the right place where they can live together without the aggressive human invasion into the idyllic space: a place where there will be forests, birds, animals and an ecological completeness to sustain them.

Issues Fore-grounded in *Cheluvi*

> Women-centric tales, told by women in the oral tradition, expressing an alternative discourse and their indigenous interpretations, generating counter-narratives to male-centric tales.
>
> The relevance of gender in the story which determines the point-of-view: in the text; of the narrator; and, gender of the auditor/reader/audience
>
> The theme of separation and suffering experienced by a constructed self, narrated by a woman, invites recounting of similar experiences by the woman auditor.
>
> The vernacular 'little tradition' (usually woman-centric) gaining precedence over the Sanskritic 'great tradition' (usually patriarchal) in the oral folktale tradition, which employs context sensitivity in the flexibility of the narrative.

The location—dislocation—uncertain quest for relocation dystopian linear structure of the open-ended context-sensitive re-visit to the folktale has no firm ground which may offer an assurance of undisturbed natural environmental equilibrium. Karnad seems to anticipate the apprehensions expressed by environmental critic Lawrence Buell:

> But perhaps the most intensely debated of all the issues surrounding moral extensionism has been the more general question of the relative claims of an anthropocentric or humankind-first ethics versus a nonanthropocentric or ecosystem-first ethics of whatever kind. (227)

Therefore, the young husband's words of assurance to the disfigured Cheluvi sound less convincing and more uncertain as he promises to take her to the natural landscape where they can find bliss.

Conclusion

The unifying factor among these audio-visual adaptations of A.K. Ramanujan's translations into English from oral folktales in Kannada, is their necessary edifying message for the co-existence of the human and non-human, as well as an acknowledgment that nature sustains life. Ramanujan have made them available, along with his linguistic and folkloristic comments, to readers beyond the ambit of Kannada. By adopting the method of translation from the page to the stage and film, Karnad has left a green footprint towards situating the folk literature of Karnataka in the planetary scenario by pointing out its contemporary relevance when derangement threatens ecosystem(s). Like folk literature which always aims towards crossing boundaries, Karnad's representations have facilitated crossing linguistic barriers to communicate the message of the need for sustainability for a holistic approach to existence, embedded in the traditional folk literature of Karnataka, to the rest of the world.

Cheluvi (1992) works out what Vandana Shiva has said in the chapter on "Women in Nature" in her book *Staying Alive* (1988) as she argues against the Cartesian development-paradigm saying:

> The ontological shift for an ecologically sustainable future has much to gain from the world-views of ancient civilizations and diverse cultures which survived sustainability over centuries. These were based on an ontology of the feminine as the living principle, and on an ontological continuity between society and nature – the humanisation of nature and the naturalisation of society. not merely did this result in an ethical context which excluded possibilities of exploitation and domination, it allowed the creation of an earth family. (41)

Cheluvi's husband understands that "women and nature are associated *not in passivity but in creativity and in the maintenance of life*" (Shiva 47) which he must restore for a viable sustainability. Here lies the relevance of "A Flowering Tree" and its ecological context-sensitivity.

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