Dissecting anthropomorphism in folklore through the lens of psychoanalysis

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The most speculative, reflective and thoughtful body of current folklore theory belongs to the psychoanalytical school that memorializes Freud. This is also called the school of interpretation (Dorson, 1963). Psychoanalytical readings interpret myths, fairy tales and folktales in terms of symbolism and imagery. They penetrate deeply into unconscious and subconscious and unravel the hidden impulses, desires, fantasies, repressed wants and inadequacies of an individual. When this theory or approach is applied in analyzing folklore materials; apart from interpretation in terms of symbolism, we also interpret different societal aspects through it. For example, a lower caste's person's desire to climb up the social ladder of success, a person's wish of marrying a beautiful or handsome mate, a poor person's wish of owning his own house, a rabbit's desire of becoming the ruler of the forest, etc. (Jacobs, 1892). Freud's primary interest in folktales was a therapeutic one (Dundes, 1996). He believed that by analyzing a tale that appeared in a patient's dream or a
patient’s favorite tale, something significant about the sources of that patient’s mental problems could be discovered.

The relationship between folklore and psychoanalysis was therefore understood to be mutually beneficial. This implies that folklore probably can genuinely assist in the practice of psychoanalysis and psychoanalysis too could be of possible value in elucidating the content of folklore. Therefore, the task of the folklorists is to decipher the latent meanings in folk customs, beliefs, rituals and games. Here we examine some of the emergent societal behaviors depicted via anthropomorphism in folklories through the lens of psychoanalysis.

Folktales depict and describe human emotions, feelings, desires, passions, personal experiences, social etiquettes, joys and deprivations. We come across many folktales using animals, birds, trees and other inanimate objects as their protagonists (Jacobs, 1892). In these folktales, animal and other characters are used as a means to depict human action and behavior. They reflect human values, desires, aspirations, beliefs as well as human follies and mistakes. The tales have
consciousness, passion, vices as well as virtues like humans. So, the purpose of these folktales is

correction of human behavior which in turn leads to morals. Consequently, the folktales shape the

overall laws, rules, regulations and code of conduct of the society. The trees and snakes in these

folktales speak human language and voice up not only human emotions of love, care, and kindness

but also the cruelties of mankind over them. Recent examples of tales revolving around animal

characters like The Jungle Book, The Lion King, Finding Nemo, etc. and cartoon characters like Tom

& Jerry, Garfield, Donald Duck, Mickey Mouse, etc. continue to portray and use similar strategies

in modern times. The non-human characters put a mirror in front of the readers for understanding

the inherent message and deep layered meaning. Furthermore, some folktales reflect the

psychological underpinning of human desires and wanting by employing animal characters. This

is evident in “The jackal who wanted to be a peacock” in which a jackal mistakenly drops into blue
dye and gets colored like a peacock (Anand, 1978). He likes this and starts pretending like one. On

one aspect, folktale breaks the stereotypical image of a jackal; at another level this reflects an

unsatisfied and incomplete life wherein one is ready to forgo his identity to adapt another, which

is better and beautiful. He even concocts a plan that God has given him a boon, which only reflects
his foolishness. He keeps on justifying himself and is not ready to become his real self; as he enjoys his fake self; until his dye gets washed off with water only to embarrass him. His mother’s stance that jackals can never become peacocks reflects that one cannot change one’s essential traits and characteristics whatsoever. This may also point towards caste issue, wherein one is bound to live in the tribe/clan/caste one is born in.

The animal characters so employed enable the readers to observe the situation from a distance and look out for those follies, shortcomings, negativities which may otherwise be ignored by human beings. The virtues which people and the society esteem; the follies they ridicule; the vices they condemn are all to be seen in the animal characters. The motive is more of psychological as human beings resist any advice; howsoever valuable it may be to them if given directly. But the indirect advice given through the medium of the tales doesn’t affront their ego. This is how non-human characters have been put in the service of human beings to spread intellectual messages and morals. These non-human characters provide mirror to reflect ourselves. They reflect human emotions, fears, aspirations, dreams and the like feelings to resemble human life as closely as
possible. They are endowed with human qualities like consciousness, passion, vices and virtues. They know how to differentiate between right and wrong; they make judgments; and they have passionate feelings like love, hatred, jealousy, etc. like humans. Travelled from the past, folktales still hold indispensable importance of correcting, educating, moralizing and entertaining the society with imaginative tales yet so close to the reality.

References
