

Cogitation - II

A Textbook for the Second Semester B. A.
Optional English Literature Course

Editor
M. G. Hegde

Prasaranga
Akkamahadevi Women's University
Vijayapura – 586 108

UNIT - VI

Narrative, Society and History

“To read fiction means to play a game by which we give sense to the immensity of things that happened, are happening, or will happen in the actual world. By reading narrative, we escape the anxiety that attacks us when we try to say something true about the world. This is the consoling function of narrative — the reason people tell stories, and have told stories from the beginning of time.”

— Umberto Eco,
Six Walks in the Fictional Woods

Narrative and Narrating

When we speak about narrative today, we inevitably associate it with the literary type of narrative, the novel or the short story. The word *narrative*, however, is related to the verb *narrate*. Narrative is all around us, not just in the novel or in historical writing. Narrative is associated above all with the act of narration and is to be found wherever someone tells us about something. We are all narrators in our daily lives, in our conversations with others. Narrative is therefore closely bound up with the speech act of narrating and hence also with the figure of a narrator. Thus one could define everything narrated by a narrator as narrative. But what is it, exactly, that a narrator narrates? Is it a particular novel? Or is it the story that is presented in this novel? At this point Gérard Genette's distinction between the meanings of the French word *récit* ('narrative') provides a way out of our dilemma. Genette draws a distinction between *narrative discourse* (*récit* proper or the act of telling) and *histoire* (the story told). The story is then that which the narrative discourse reports, represents or signifies.

This chapter concentrates on fictional and imaginative narrative, with much of its material equally relevant to the novel, the short story and also to the non-fictional narratives and discusses the following propositions:

1. Stories are everywhere.
2. Not only do we tell stories, but stories tell us: if stories are everywhere, we are also in stories.
3. The telling of a story is always bound up with power, with questions of authority, property and domination.
4. Stories are multiple: there is always more than one story.
5. Stories always have something to tell us about stories themselves: they always involve self-reflexive and metafictional dimensions.

The simplest way to define narrative is as a series of events in a specific order – with a beginning, a middle and an end. We might think about Shashi Deshpande's short story 'The Stone Women' to illustrate the point. Put very simply, the story begins with the arrival of a newlywed couple at a temple, tells of the events at the temple and the couple's return to their hotel room and ends with a hint of something having changed. What is important in this description is the temporal ordering of what happens. By contrast, lyric poems, for example, are not typically thought to express or depict a series of temporally ordered series of events. Lyric poems characteristically use the present tense. Narrative, however, is characterized by its foregrounding of a series of events or actions which are connected in time. What happens at the end of 'The Stone Women' is determined by what happened earlier. The events are recounted more or less chronologically in Deshpande's story, in that the order of the telling follows the order of the told: first we learn of couple's arrival at the temple, then the visit to the temple, and finally to the hotel. But narratives also invariably involve what the narratologist Gérard Genette has called anachronisms – flashbacks, jumps forwards (or prolepses), the slowing down and speeding up of events and other distortions of the linear time-sequence.

Texts such as Virginia Woolf's 'The Mark on the Wall' dislodge our sense of temporal sequence. The story begins: 'Perhaps it was the middle of January in the present year'. This suggests that the events recounted span a number of months,

but by the end we have the sense that the story follows the wanderings of the narrator's consciousness over only a number of minutes or, at most, hours. Despite this and many other distortions of chronological order, however, Woolf's text is only readable insofar as it exploits our *expectations* of narrative sequence. Indeed, these distortions themselves can only be conceived against a background of linear chronological sequence.

Time, then, is crucial to narrative. But as the novelist E.M. Forster recognizes in *Aspects of the Novel* (1927), the temporal ordering of events is not the whole story. Forster makes a memorable distinction between 'The king died and then the queen died' on the one hand, and 'The king died, and then the queen died of grief' on the other. While the first 'narrative' includes two events related in time, he proposes, the second includes another 'connection', the crucial element of causality. The first simply lists two events, while the second provides the thread of a narrative by showing how they are related. The logical or causal connections between one event and another constitute fundamental aspects of every narrative. An obvious example would be detective stories. Detective stories rely, above all, on our expectation and desire for connection. They produce quite complex routes to a revelation of whodunnit, routes both determined and detected by the logic of cause and effect.

The beginning–middle–end sequence of a narrative also tends to emphasize what is known as a teleological progression – the *end* (in Greek, *telos*) itself as the place to get to. A lyric poem does not seem to rely on its ending to provide coherence: the end is not typically the place where all will be resolved. By contrast, we often think of a good story as one that we just cannot put down, a novel we compulsively read to find out what happens at the end. The narrative theorist Peter Brooks has studied ways in which readers' desires are directed towards the end, ways in which narratives are structured towards, or as a series of digressions from, an ending:

we are able to read present moments – in literature and, by extension, in life – as endowed with narrative meaning only because we read them in anticipation of the structuring power of those endings that will retrospectively give them the order and significance of plot.

But what is this end which we so much desire? Brooks and others have suggested that narratives move from a state of equilibrium or stasis through a disturbance of this stability, and back to a state of equilibrium at the end. The end of a narrative, the state of equilibrium, occurs when the criminal is discovered, when the lovers get married, or when the tragic hero dies. In addition, this end is characteristically the place of revelation and understanding. A part of the equilibrium that endings apparently offer is the satisfaction of epistemophilia, the reader's desire to know.

One of the most fundamental distinctions in narrative theory is that between 'story' and 'discourse'. As Jonathan Culler has suggested, a fundamental premiss of narratology is that narrative has a double structure: the level of the told (story) and the level of telling (discourse). These levels have been given different names by different theorists – the Russian formalists call them *fabula* and *sjuzhet*, the French structuralists call them either *récit* (or *histoire*) and *discours*, and so on. 'Story', in this sense, involves the events or actions which the narrator would like us to believe

occurred, the events (explicitly or implicitly) *represented*. 'Discourse', on the other hand, involves the way in which these events are recounted, how they get told, the organization of the *telling*. In fact, these two levels can never be entirely separated, and much narrative theory has been concerned to describe ways in which they interact.

Everything that we have said about narrative up to this point has concerned the sense of its linearity: narrative involves a linear series of actions connected in time and through causality. In addition to this linearity, we might consider another important aspect of narrative, namely the relation between teller and listener or reader. Indeed, rather than appealing to the idea of a sequence of events, Barbara Herrnstein Smith has argued that we need to ground our understanding of narrative in terms of 'someone telling someone else that something happened'. The significance of this proposition is that it redirects our focus from the events or actions themselves to the relationship between the author or teller and the reader or listener. As Jonathan Culler has put it, 'To tell a story is to claim a certain authority, which listeners grant'. Much of the work in narrative theory has involved attempts to discriminate among different kinds of narrators (first person or third person, objective or subjective, reliable or unreliable, so-called 'omniscient' or not, together with questions concerning his or her 'point of view', his or her 'voice' and so on). Our understanding of a text is pervaded by our sense of the character, trustworthiness and objectivity of the figure who is narrating. Moreover, it is often very important to discriminate between the narratorial point of view and that of the so-called implied author – a particularly important distinction in certain ironic texts, for example. Although Jonathan Swift's essay 'A Modest Proposal' (1729) would not usually be considered as a narrative, it does provide one of the classic examples of narratorial irony. In this essay, the narrator proposes that in order to deal with poverty and hunger in Ireland and to prevent children of the poor from being a burden to their parents, such children should be sold to the rich as food – a solution that would be 'innocent, cheap, easy, and effectual' (509). The narrator appears to make his proposal seriously but we necessarily conceive of an 'implied author' who has very different views and motives, and who is making a political point about the immorality of the English government in its attitude towards poverty in Ireland. Our understanding of the ironic force of the text necessitates a discrimination between the two voices or personae of the narrator and the implied author.

A consideration of the relationship between teller and listener or reader leads in turn to questions of power and property. One of the most famous storytellers is Scheherazade from *A Thousand and One Nights*. In these classical Arabic narratives, Scheherazade has been sentenced to death by the king but is able to stave off her execution by telling him stories. By ending her story each night at a particularly exciting point, she is able to delay her death for another day because the king wants to find out what happens next. What makes *A Thousand and One Nights* so intriguing for narrative theorists has to do with its enactment of forms of power. As Ross Chambers proposes, 'To tell a story is to exercise power'. Chambers argues that storytelling is often used, as in the case of Scheherazade, as an 'oppositional' practice, a practice of resistance used by the weak against the strong: 'oppositional narrative', he claims, 'in exploiting the narrative situation, discovers a power, not to change the essential structure of narrative situations, but to *change its other* (the

“narratee” if one will), through the achievement and maintenance of authority, in ways that are potentially radical’.

Narrative power, then, may be the only strategy left for the weak and dispossessed: without narrative power, they may not be heard. The social and political importance of stories is eloquently expressed by the old man in Chinua Achebe’s novel *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987):

‘The sounding of the battle-drum is important; the fierce waging of the war itself is important; and the telling of the story afterwards – each is important in its own way’. But, the man continues, the story is ‘chief among his fellows’: ‘The story is our escort; without it we are blind. Does the blind man own his escort? No, neither do we the story; rather it is the story that owns us and directs us. It is the thing that makes us different from cattle; it is the mark on the face that sets one people apart from their neighbours.’

Stories own us, and tell us, Achebe suggests, as much as we own or tell stories.

(Adapted from Monika Fludernik’s *An Introduction to Narratology*, New York: Routledge, 2009 and Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory* (Third Edition) UK: Pearson Longman, 2004)

Study Questions

- ‘Storytelling is often used as an ‘oppositional’ practice, a practice of resistance used by the weak against the strong.’ Discuss the statement with illustrations from the stories in Section VII
- Discuss the various aspects of narrative.

Telling Tales

A. K. Ramanujan

As Indian voices are a central concern of this *Dedalus* issue, I've chosen to speak of certain childhood voices -in tales heard from our grandmothers, aunts and cooks in the kitchen- and about how I hear them now. ... When I say, 'childhood voices', I refer not only to my own childhood but also to that of myriad others like me and also to children today in Indian villages. The tales I am talking about are ancient but current. Even in the most anglicised Hindu families or in large cities like Bombay and Calcutta, oral tales are only a grandmother away, a cousin away, a tram ride away, and mostly no further away than the kitchen. I hear that the nets of television will soon cover 90 per cent of the Indian population: I don't know if that will kill the folk narratives or adapt them or help disseminate them further. We will bracket that anxiety for now.

Though I shall use the first person singular often in this essay, I believe that neither the things I am talking about nor most of the recognitions are peculiarly mine.

Tales in Childhood

The only fairy tales we read in our early years were Grimm's and Andersen's, in English (as soon as we knew how to read it), among other things in a many-volume encyclopaedia called *The Book of Knowledge* that was in our father's library. We never told these stories to one another. We never connected these tales with the ones we heard downstairs from our grandmother or our cooks in the kitchen.

The stories we heard downstairs were in Tamil (or in friends' houses, in Kannada); they were oral, told by a grandmother, an aunt, or a cook, never by Mother. Authority figures did not tell these stories, at least not in our family.¹ My mother told me folktales only when she had lost her authority over me, when I was in my twenties and I was interested in learning about them. Furthermore, there were taboos against telling them during the broad daylight. They were told at dusk while we were eating, for South Indian stories tend to be mealtime rather than bedtime stories. Associated with relaxed loving figures, with sleep and food, the tales were formative influences and hypnotic. We were trying hard to keep our eyes open by the time we came to the end of the story and the meal, which were timed to coincide. The prince was married, the slandered bride reinstated, and the wicked stepmother thrown into the lime kiln, just when the morsel in the sleepy hand was the very last one. The tales in the English books had names like Cinderella, Snow White, Hansel and Gretel, but grandmother's had no names at all. The characters were people like a poor Brahmin and his scold of a wife, or two sisters, one kind and one unkind, who were daughters born to a dog that lived under the palace balcony, or clever daughters-in-law who terrorized even the goddess with their farts or outwitted their cruel but stupid

mothers-in-law. Our grandmothers, who had been both, always seemed to identify with the clever daughters-in-law.

Our very literate father never told us stories like these, though he too knew them and had heard them in his childhood. But if he talked to us at all, he talked about astronomy, astrology, Euclid, often the Sanskrit Bhagavad Gita or poetry... or anything he happened to be reading. ... As we grew up, Sanskrit and English were our father tongues, and Tamil and Kannada our mother tongues. The father tongues distanced us from our mothers, from our own childhoods, and from our villages and many of our neighbors in the cowherd colony next door. And the mother tongues united us with them. It now seems quite appropriate that our house had three levels: a downstairs for the Tamil world, an upstairs for the English and the Sanskrit, and a terrace on top that was open to the sky where our father could show us the stars and tell us their English and Sanskrit names. From up there on the terrace, we could also look down on the cowherd colony, and run down noisily and breathlessly for a closer look if we saw the beginnings of a festival, a wedding, or a "hair to hair" fight between two women (with the choicest obscenities pouring from them), or a magnificent *vilayti*, or foreign bull, brought specially to service the local cows.

We ran up and down all these levels. Sanskrit, English, and Tamil and Kannada (my two childhood languages, literally my mother's tongues, since she too had become bilingual in our childhood) stood for three different interconnected worlds. Sanskrit stood for the Indian past; English for colonial India and the West, which also served as a disruptive creative other that both alienated us from and revealed us (in its terms) to ourselves; and the mother tongues, the most comfortable and least conscious of all, for the world of women, playmates, children, and servants. Ideas, tales, significant alliances, conflicts, elders, and peers were reflected in each of these languages. Each had a literature that was unlike the others'. Each was an other to the others, and it became the business of a lifetime for some of us to keep the dialogues and quarrels alive among these three and to make something of them. Our writers, thinkers, and men of action -say, Gandhi, Tagore, and Bharati- made creative use of these triangulations, these dialogues and quarrels.... Though I shall use the first person singular often in this essay, I believe that neither the things I am talking about nor most of the recognitions are peculiarly mine.

Women's oral tales

What follows is an oral tale - "The Dead Prince and the Talking Doll" - a typical favourite:

The king had a daughter. One daughter, but no sons. Now and then a beggar would come to the palace. He was strange, for every time he begged, he would say, "You'll get a dead man for a husband. Give me some alms." The girl used to wonder: "Why does he say such weird things to me?"

And she would silently give him alms and go in. The holy man (*bava*), this beggar man, came to the door every day for twelve years. And he said every day, "You'll get a dead man for a husband."

One day the king was standing in the balcony and heard him say, "You'll get a dead man for a husband. Give me some alms." The king came down and asked his daughter, "What's this talk, daughter?"

She replied, "This bava comes every day and says, 'You'll get a dead man for a husband. Give me some alms.' Then I give him something. He has been saying it for twelve years, ever since I was a little girl."

The king was disturbed when he heard this. He was afraid the prophecy would come true. He didn't wish his only daughter to have a dead man for a husband. He said, unhappily, "It's no good staying in this kingdom. Let's leave and spend our time in travels." And he got his servants to pack everything, and left the palace with his entire family.

Around that time, the prince of the neighboring kingdom fell mysteriously ill and died. But his body looked as if he had only fallen asleep. Astrologers said he would return to life after twelve years, so they didn't bury him. Instead, his father, the king, built a bungalow outside the town, laid his son's body in it, mortared and whitewashed the house on all sides, and left the body there, fully clothed and adorned. The father locked the main door and on it left a written message saying: "One day a chaste woman who has made offerings to the gods for her husband will come here. Only she can enter the place. When she touches the door, it will open. It will open to no one else."

It was soon after this sad event that the first king arrived there with his wife and daughter and his entourage. They were all hungry and began to cook a meal for themselves. The king's daughter went for a walk and saw cook a meal for themselves. The king's daughter went for a walk and saw the locked door. The lock was of exquisite design and gleamed from a distance.

She went near and held it in her hand. As soon as she touched it, it sprang open and the door opened. She went in. The door closed and locked itself behind her. Ahead of her were eleven more doors, one behind another. They all opened at her touch, and each closed behind her as she went through them.

Right in the heart of the house she found a man on a cot who looked as if he were dead or fast asleep. Before she could wonder about what was happening to her, how doors opened before her and shut behind her, she was in his presence.

His family had left provisions for twelve years in the house: vessels, dishes, clothes, grains, spices. The princess saw all these things around her.

She remembered the holy beggar's words and thought, "I didn't escape it: his words are coming true." She unveiled the face of the body. It was as dead as dead could be but as calm as a face in deep slumber. "Well, what's to be done? It looks as if I am imprisoned here with this dead man. Let's do something," she said, and started massaging his legs.

Meanwhile, in the forest, the mother had said, "The food is all ready. Where's our girl?" Her father had walked outside and called her. She was nowhere to be seen. But they could hear her cries from inside the house. They called out, "Daughter, why are you in there? Come out!"

She answered from within and told her father what had happened.

"I touched the locks, and they fell open. As soon as I came in, they locked themselves shut. I am alone here."

"What is in there?"

"A dead man is lying here. Nothing else."

"My girl, your luck has caught up with you. What the bava said is coming true. The locks can't be opened."

They tried to enter the house from the sides and from behind, but it was as if it was sealed.

They tried and tried and finally said, "What else can we do? We'll go and leave you to work out your fate." They left sorrowfully. Time passed, and they grew old.

For almost twelve years she tended and massaged his body. She would wake up in the morning in the locked house with twelve locked doors, and where could she go? She bathed and cooked, kept house and looked after the dead body, and thought about all the things that had happened to her.

Inside the locked house, night and day the princess massaged the dead man's legs, took ritual baths, worshipped the gods at the right times, and made offerings for her prince. Around the tenth year, an acrobat's daughter came that way. She looked all around the house, tried the doors, and at last climbed onto the roof.

The princess was lonely. She was dying to see another human face. "If there's a chink in the house, I could pull in at least a child. If only I could have a girl for a companion," she thought. Just then, she saw a young woman looking through a window.

"Hey, girl! Will you come inside?"

"Yes," said the acrobat girl.

"Do you have any father or mother? If you do, don't try to come in. You can't get out. If you don't have parents, come inside."

"Oh no, I've nobody."

She pulled the girl in through the window. The acrobat girl was agile. She twisted and contorted her body and got in. The princess was happy; she had company now. With a companion inside, time went fast. Two more years rolled by.

The prince's twelve years were coming to an end. The time for his life to stir again was near.

One day, when the king's daughter was taking her bath, she heard the omen bird speak from the branch in the window. It said, "The twelve years are coming to an end. If someone will pluck the leaves of this tree, grind them and press them in a silver cup, and pour the juice into the man's mouth, he will come to life again."

The king's daughter heard it. At once she plucked some leaves, pressed the juice out into a silver cup. Just when she was about to put it to the dead man's lips, it occurred to her that she had not bathed yet. She would finish her bath, purify herself, offer worship to the Lord Shiva properly, and then give the juice to the prince. So she put down the cup and went to bathe and offer worship.

The acrobat girl asked her, "What's this stuff in the cup? Why is it here?"

The princess told her about the bird's message and what the cup contained. soon as she heard all this, the acrobat girl thought this was her chance. While the princess sat in worship, the acrobat girl parted the dead prince's lips and poured the juice from the silver cup. As the liquid went in, he woke up as if he had only been asleep. Exclaiming, "Shiva, Shiva!" he sat up straight. He saw the woman next to him and asked, "Who are you?"

She said, "Your wife."

He was grateful to her. They became husband and wife while the princess, the woman who had served him for twelve long years, sat inside, long absorbed in prayer.

When she came out, she heard the two of them whispering intimacies to each other and thought, "O Shiva, I did penance for twelve years, and it turned out like this. Obviously, happiness is not my lot." She began to work as their servant, while the prince and the acrobat girl sat back and enjoyed themselves.

Yet, after all, she was a princess, born to a queen. The other girl was only an acrobat's daughter. The prince began to see the difference between them in manners and speech. He began to suspect something was wrong. So later in manners and speech. He began to suspect something was wrong. So later that day, he said to both of them, "I'm going out for a hunt, and then I'll go to the city. Tell me what you would like."

The acrobat girl, who had been longing for her kind of gypsy food, asked for all sorts of greens and some dry flat bread. He was disgusted. A woman should ask for saris and silk and blouses, but this one asks for wretched dry bread! Then he told the acrobat girl to ask the other woman in the house what she would like. The princess answered, "I don't want anything much. Just tell the master what I'd really like is a talking doll."

"This one is strange too. All she wants is a talking doll," he thought.

After a good hunt in the jungle, he brought the acrobat girl the evil-smelling greens and leaves and dry bread from some gypsies, and for the princess a talking doll. The acrobat girl was overjoyed at the sight of the rough food; now she began to thrive and get color in her cheeks.

That night, after everyone had eaten and gone to bed, the talking doll suddenly began to speak and said, "Tell me a story."

The princess answered, "What story can I tell you? My own life has become quite a story."

"Then tell me your life's story," insisted the doll.

So the princess told the doll her entire story, as I've told you so far. Just like that.

The doll nodded and said, "Hmm, hmm," as the princess told her tale. The prince, lying awake in the other room, heard it all. Finally she said, "I left the silver cup there, on that ledge, and that woman gave the juice to the prince before I got back from my prayers. Now she's the wife and I'm the servant. That's the way it turned out." And she ended the story.

As he heard the story from where he lay in the next room, the prince felt his anger mounting. When the story came to an end, he took a switch and lashed at the acrobat girl sleeping next to him, and drove her out of the house.

"You're not my wife, you're an acrobat wench! Get out of my sight!" he screamed.

Then he went in and consoled the princess who had served him lovingly for twelve years; and they talked to each other all night happily.

In the world outside, his father and mother had counted up the days and years. They knew twelve years were over and were anxious to see what had happened to their son. They came, and all the town with them. They found the doors unlocked and in the heart of the house the couple, prince and princess, whispering loving words to each other.

Gratefully, the father-in-law and the mother-in-law fell at the feet of their young daughter-in-law and said, "By your good work of many past lives and your prayers in this one, our son came back to life. He looks as fresh as if he has just woken up from a long night's sleep. It's all your doing."

They took the young couple to their palace, and celebrated the wedding. They took the young couple to their palace, and celebrated the wedding with great pomp and many processions. For the grand occasion, they sent for the bride's parents, who had grown weak and old. Their eyes had become like cottonseed, and they were ready to lie down in the earth. But their spirits revived at the good news, and they too hurried to the reunion at their daughter's wedding.

That is what I would call a woman-centered tale. Such tales share special characteristics. While tales that feature princes who go off on quests for the golden bird in the emerald tree invariably end in wedding bells, tales with women at the center of action almost never do so. The women meet their husbands and are married formally or informally in the first part of the tale, often at the very beginning, and then the real story, usually nothing but trouble, begins. In this matter, they are unlike European tales of the Cinderella or Snow White type, which always conclude the action with marriage.

A characteristic pattern of the Kannada women-centered tales begins with a first union, often a marriage, followed by a separation, and ends with a reunion, a firmer bonding between the woman and her spouse. In several of these tales, the middle part features the death of the husband, separation of the most drastic kind, as in this one (and in the classical tale of Savitri), and in the latter part of the tale the wife restores him to life. In the story of the dead prince, the separation reaches its worst phase, the maiden's twelve years of waiting and suffering, when the acrobat woman suddenly usurps her place and becomes her husband's lover. Among other things, it expresses, I think, an upper-class woman's fear, the rivalry of a supposedly more vigorous, cunning lower-class woman.

For the prince on his quest, a kingdom and a bride are the prizes he wins after his adventures and hardships- that's his initiatory scenario. But in the women-centered tales, as in the classical analogues of Sakuntala and Savitri, it doesn't seem enough for a woman to be married. She has to earn her husband, her married state, through a rite of passage, a period of unmerited suffering.

In all such stories, there is no *karma*, no act of good or evil in a past life that motivates the present and rationalizes misfortunes, as there is in the epics. Though karma may be mentioned in passing, the concept is not part of this worldview. Actually, no reason is given for the wife's misfortunes or for the prince's twelve-year period of deathlike hibernation. Sometimes it is a curse or a prophecy, entirely unearned, unconnected to character. In a classical text like the Mahabharata, every action is motivated by the actor's previous actions. The chain of cause and consequence is unrelenting. cause and consequence is unrelenting.

Not that our storytellers did not know about *karma*. Whenever Mother was angry with one of us, she (and all her fellow mothers, and all their mothers) scolded us with phrases like "You are my *karma*, my *prarabdha* (accumulated bad deeds), come now to torment me in this life." Such terms of abuse as well as the Sanskrit epics were full of the concept of karma and its consequences. One had to be careful to do good deeds and accumulate *punya*, or merit, and avoid bad ones, which would heap up *papa*, or sin (for want of a better word), with evil consequences in our divine accounts. We also believed when we were children that if anybody was thirsty and needed water, we shouldn't refuse it. If we did, we would surely be born as lizards in the next birth. But in the stories grandmother told us, there was rarely any mention of karma or rebirth. They usually felt confined to a single life span and seemed to work on a theory of action rather different from *karma*.

Donald Davidson and other philosophers speak of the difference between actions and events. I find the distinction useful here. Actions have actors; actions express actors. Actions have reasons; actors are responsible for what they do, and character is destiny. But events happen to people. Events have no reasons, only causes.

Narratives motivated by *karma* convert all events into actions; in them everything has a reason, as in the Mahabharata. But there is much in human reality that is not controlled by human beings - accident, social and economic institutions, nature itself, especially nature in its most intimate human form, one's own and others' bodies. The uncontrollable part of nature cannot be rationalized, especially in the moment of crisis. It can only be accepted or watched, laughed at or sidestepped and bypassed by human ingenuity. In these oral tales, this reality is not reasoned away but faced. Here actions, human actions, are seen as events. They have causes, no reasons. By enduring them and watching for a moment of change that is the apt moment for action, and acting then, usually speaking out, telling one's own story, one comes through. That's why many of these tales end with the heroine telling her own story to "a significant other" (often through a device, like a talking doll or a lamp), resolving the crisis, ending her separation, reuniting with her husband and her kin. The tale then becomes her story. Till then she has no story to tell. The whole tale is the tale of her acquiring her story, making a person of her, making a silent woman a speaking person.

Stories about Stories

The power of such tales may be why it is crucial that stories should be told and why there are stories about not telling stories and about why they should be told. Here is one such story about stories:

A poor widow was living with her two sons and two daughters-in-law. All four of them scolded and ill treated her all day. She had no one to whom she could turn and tell her woes. As she kept her tales of woe to herself, she grew fatter and fatter. Her sons and daughters-in-law mocked at her growing fatter by the day and asked her to eat less.

One day, she wandered away from home in sheer misery and found herself in a deserted old house outside town. She couldn't bear to keep her miseries to herself any longer. She told all her tales of grievance against her first son to the wall in front of her. As she finished, the wall collapsed under the weight of her woes and crashed to the ground in a heap. Her body grew lighter as well.

Then she turned to the next wall and told it all her grievances against her first son's wife. And down came that wall, and she grew lighter still. She brought down the next wall with her tales against her second son, and the remaining fourth wall too with her complaints against her second daughter in-law.

Standing in the ruins, with bricks and rubble all around her, she felt lighter in mood and lighter in body. She looked at herself and found she had actually lost all the weight she had gained in her wretchedness.

Then she went home.

This Tamil tale begins with a woman beleaguered and enclosed, and ends with her in the open, all her four walls demolished. The old woman tells her stories, her family secrets, only to lighten herself, not to enlighten anyone else. Nothing is said about her cruel family being converted, becoming kinder; only she has changed, unburdened of her sorrows.

In our classical literature, too, storytelling is a form of performance. Stories are not merely utterances; they are part of the action. They change its course, but they affect the addressee. In this tale, the tales of woe are told to express and affect the speaker's own mood, to change the speaker's state of being. Telling the story is cathartic for the teller of the tale. Such a notion of catharsis is not part of the Indian classical aesthetics. Note also how emotions have weight - the characters are literally, not metaphorically, "burdened," "heavy-" or "light-hearted." Tales and dreams take metaphors literally. Such literalization is not merely a literary device. It implies the sense that emotions and thoughts are substances. Material and nonmaterial things are part of a continuum of *sthula* and *sukshma*, "gross" and "subtle" substance allowing transformations. One substance may become the other.

In another tale, a barber discovers, while he is shaving the king, that the king has a donkey's ears:

The king orders the barber never to tell anyone about them on pain of death. So he keeps the secret, but the more he keeps it to himself the fatter he grows. His wife is alarmed and, after much trying, wheedles the secret out of him.

At once she begins to grow round, looking more and more pregnant, till one day, unable to bear the burden any longer, she digs a hole in the ground and tells her secret to the hole and covers it up.

Out of the buried secret springs a tree. One day, the palace drummer breaks a branch off the tree and makes some drumsticks. When he beats his drum in the palace assembly, the drum says, "Dum dum dum, the king, dum dum, has the ears, dum dum, of a donkey, dum dum. The king has the ears, dum dum, of a donkey, dum dum!"

Nothing is lost, only transformed.

Stories and words have not only weight; they also have wills and rages, and they can take different shapes, as in the following example, "The Tales' Revenge":

A rich man from Mysore has a son. Another, from Kanara, has a daughter. The men are traveling and meet on the way. When they find out about the son and the daughter, they begin to talk about a marriage alliance between them. While doing so, night comes on. They eat together, and as they are falling asleep, the Kanara man asks the other to tell him a story. The other man knows many stories but will not tell him any and goes to sleep.

While the Kanara man lies awake, he hears voices as in a dream. One says, "This man won't tell or teach a story to anyone. We are choking in his belly. When he walks under the banyan tree, I'll fell a branch and kill him." Another says, "If he escapes that, I'll crush him when he walks through the narrow passage between two rocks. The third one says, "I'll wait in his plate of rice as a fish hook and get him when he eats." The fourth says, "If he survives all of you, I'll become a snake and kill him."

In the morning, they resume their journey. The Kanara man reopens his marriage negotiations. They agree on dowries, gifts, and other such things. "Then let's go see the young man. We can fix the wedding dates as soon as we have done that," says the girl's father. And he adds, "You know how it we have done that," says the girl's father. And he adds, "You know how it is these days,

we've been looking and looking for a bridegroom. Nothing fits. Sometimes even the hands seem too short." The Mysore man adds, "That's right. If it's not the hand, it's the leg that falls short," and invites the Kanara man to visit his house nearby. The other says, "I'll walk with you on one condition. You must do as I say for the next couple of days." The Mysore man finds the request odd but agrees, thinking, "These chaps from Kanara are a bit strange anyway." They start walking.

On their way, they come to a banyan tree. "Look here," says the Kanara man suddenly, "Let's not go under the banyan tree," and he guides the Mysore man away from it. No sooner have they passed it, when down comes a big branch. "It was lucky we were not walking under it," says the Mysore man, but the other says nothing. Then they come to a place where they have to pass between two rocks. The Kanara man leads the other man away from it and goes around the rocks, when suddenly a boulder comes rolling down into the passage. "Lucky we were not there," says the Mysore man.

When they reach his house, the Mysore man prepares a big meal, and they sit down to eat. As soon as he begins to eat his rice, the Kanara man asks that all the rice be given to him. He quickly snatches the other's plateful of rice and overturns it. The host is surprised and offended at his guest's strange behavior, but they move on to other kinds of food. When they've finished eating, the Kanara man asks, "Shall we see the young man now?" But the young man's mother says, "He isn't around. He has gone to his uncle's place." He is really inside, but they don't want him to be interviewed, that's all.

It's night. So they make beds and offer one to the guest. But the Kanara man insists on sleeping in the same room as his host and his wife. "How can you do that? We'll give you a bed in another room," says the shocked host. But the Kanara man insists on sleeping in the same room, and does.

He stays awake. While the host and his wife are fast asleep on their cot, a snake comes slithering in toward them. The wide-awake Kanara man pulls out a knife and cuts it down just as it is climbing the legs of the cot. Its blood spatters on the cheeks of the host's wife and, fearful lest it be poisonous, the Kanara man quickly wipes it off her cheek with his dhoti. She wakes up startled, finds this strange man touching her, and screams. Her husband wakes up and is about to attack when the guest restrains him. Before it gets worse, the Kanara man speaks out: "You may wonder why I have this knife in my hand, and why I touched your wife. I'm not after your wife. Just look under the cot." And he shows them the pieces of dead snake.

He also tells the bewildered Mysore man the whole story about the tales that had vowed revenge for not being told, and how he had saved his host that had vowed revenge for not being told, and how he had saved his host from the banyan branch, the rocks, the fish hooks in the rice, and now the snake. He pulls out from his pocket the previous day's rice in his handkerchief, and shows him the fish hooks. "That's why I told you I'd come with you only if you would do as I asked you to. You can now see why." The Mysore man wonders aloud, "Why is it I have kept all the stories to myself?"

Then they return to the wedding talks, and in a few days the wedding takes place.

But the wedding guests gossip and whisper to each other, "Ayyayyo, look, the bride has one hand shorter than the other. And the bridegroom has half a leg!"

When the groom's father says to the bride's father, "How can you do this to me?" the other says, "But I told you, these days, everything is short, even hands!" The groom's father says, "But I told you, not only hands, even legs sometimes fall short!"

In this tale, stories have a special function. The two fathers both have something to conceal from each other - a daughter with a short hand and a son with half a leg. One of them asks for a story, and the other refuses to tell him one. There seems to be a suggestion that a secretive man tells no tales. In another tale, a clever woman

finds a thief by letting them respond to a story she tells. To tell a story is to discover or reveal a secret.

And such stories also tell you why tales have to be told. They have an existence of their own, a secondary objectivity, like other cultural artifacts. They are part of what the philosopher Karl Popper calls the Third World, or World 3: neither subject nor object, but a third realm that depends on and enters into the construction of both subjects and objects. It is in this sense perhaps that "myths speak man, rather than man speaking them," as Levi-Strauss would say. They are there before any particular teller tells them; they hate it when they are not passed on to others, for they can come into being again and again only in that act of translation. If you know a tale, you owe it not only to others, but to the tale, to tell it; otherwise, it suffocates. Like chain letters, traditions have to be kept in good repair, transmitted, or else beware, such tales seem to say, things will happen to you. You can't hoard them.

In another story told all over South India, a son can't understand why his poor mother gives away half the food she earns each day:

The mother says that she is, after all, an ignorant old woman, that only Shiva knows the answer to such questions. So the son sets out to find Shiva and to ask him the question about giving away food. On the way the son meets a king who has built a tank, but it is dry; a snake who is stuck in a hole, unable to move in or out; a tree that is unable to produce any fruit; and hole, unable to move in or out; a tree that is unable to produce any fruit; and a man whose legs are crippled by paralysis. As the son meets each of these people, each one tells him to ask Shiva for the cause of his special problem and a cure for it.

When the boy finds Shiva, he is chewing betel nut with Parvati after a hearty meal and tells the boy that each of them has been keeping something to himself?the king has a grown daughter whom he has not given away in marriage, the snake has a jewel in its hood he must give away, the paralytic has all sorts of knowledge he is hoarding, and the tree is hiding a treasure in its roots.

As you can guess, they are eager to give the young man the jewel, the learning, the treasure, and the princess - all, of course, thanks to his mother's *punya*, merit gathered by her daily gifts of food, with which the tale begins.

Daughters, wealth, knowledge, and food must circulate. These are *danas*, or gifts, that, in accordance with their nature, must be given away. Stories are no different. Communities and generations depend on such exchanges and transfers.

These notions are not confined to grandmothers, peasants, and unlettered types in the culture. In a largely nonliterate culture, persons of every kind and from every level have vast nonliterate substrata within them. Thus, folktales and other genres like proverbs, riddles, and songs, each in its own contextual slot, are constitutive of consciousness -not only for the illiterate but for everyone. Oral literature precedes other kinds in India in the lives of individuals and communities. It offers forms, presumptions of meaning, that are filled out by later living. It would be interesting to

study Indians' favorite folktales and their role in modeling and "scripting" Indians' psychic and relational lives. Even Sanskrit mythologies have to be studied not only from texts, as they have been, but on the ground -as they are selectively remembered and told in context. For they are not only in written texts; they also have a parallel life in the oral traditions. They have been studied as if they were all equidistant, equally well known to every native, equally important. And they have been quarried for the commentators' own (usually Western) concerns, like psychoanalysis, without any regard to which myths or episodes are valued by the users, or how and why. We need to work at Indian mythologies as if they were folklore in order to get a nuanced and true sense of what they are about. By doing so, we could also hear the dialogue between the Puranic mythologies and the nonliterate creations like those the Puranic mythologies and the nonliterate creations like those carried and polished and renewed by nameless and subtly powerful grandmothers.

Tales have Relatives all over the World

In childhood when we heard stories like "The Tales' Revenge," we could not have known that they were told all over India, even all over the world, and that they had had past lives in old texts like the *Kathasaritsagara* (The Ocean of Story). I didn't know for a long time that there were international indexes of types and motifs, marked with numbers just as library books, bank accounts, and prisoners -and not only prisoners- are these days. I discovered these folktale indexes when I accidentally met an American folklorist, Edwin Kirkland, in a small town in Karnataka in my early twenties, and we spent two happy evenings swapping tales and riddles and proverbs. When he went back to Bombay, he sent me Stith Thompson's *The Folktale*, in which I found worldwide parallels for my household tales. I then reread the Grimms, discovered Afanasiev's Russian tales, and found the eleventh-century Sanskrit reworkings of local tales, *The Ocean of Story*. This last work was translated into English by C. H. Tawney in the nineteenth century, in ten volumes, with fascinating cultural histories by philologist N. M. Penzer on things we used every day, like betel leaves and umbrellas - their distribution, their uses in ritual, their profound symbolic values. The Brothers Grimm, or my idea of them, also became a model, and I started collecting folktales somewhat methodically from everyone around - my mother, aunt, friends, and people in the surrounding villages. I was twenty-three and I discovered what I had lived in and what had lived in me since childhood - the unofficial verbal world of the dialects, that literature without letters (*eluta eluttu* in Tamil).

Connections and contrasts began to appear between the mother tongue tales and the Sanskrit myths, between the tales of Indian villages and kitchens and the European tales of Grimm and Afanasiev. ... I find from the type indexes, and from old issues of journals like the *Indian Antiquary* (especially 1890-1900), that this version of the story is also told in different parts of India. But the oldest version is in

the eleventh-century collection, *Kathasaritsagara*, which opens with the revenge of the untold tales. "The Tales' Revenge" is told among the Gond and Bastar tribes in central India. There are German studies of "Faithful John" showing that the story was initially Indian. But, strangely, or not so strangely, all the indexes, even the Indian ones, assimilate the Indian tale to the European type of Faithful John, for the indexes are made from the point of view of European materials. Reversals of form and meaning are not perceived or noted - only similarities in motif and generalized structure guide the typology.

Tales are interregional or international in plot and motif but not in what they tell and mean. Types in the indexes keep tallies, but they tell us nothing about meanings. Only individual tellers and their tellings do. Tale types and motifs are useful bibliographical devices; they must not mask differences but lead us back to their sources, the tellings, to what are usually dismissed as variants. For not invariants, but their living use by the variants, is our study. The much-maligned but quicksilver variant is our true focus.

Stories for Small Children

The stories change a great deal depending on where they are told, who tells them, and to whom they are told. The grandmother telling a story to a child in a kitchen at dinnertime, the *vratākatha* (or ritual tale) told in the outer parts of the house or the yard, the mendicant teller who recounts a romantic tale on the *verandah*, or narratives of the professional bard who is invited to sing, dance, and recite a long the professional bard who is invited to sing, dance, and recite a long religious or romantic epic in a rich man's hall or a public area - these are all different in genre, style, number of stock formulas, and topics, in the accompaniment of other actors or instruments or props like pictures.

We seem to move through a continuum here from *akam* to *puram*, from "interior" forms to "exterior" ones, as the classical Tamils would say. These two important words carry a set of concentric meanings according to context. *Akam* means interior, heart, self, house, household; *puram* means exterior, outer parts of the body, others, the yard outside the house, people outside the household. I have argued elsewhere that genres, themes, occasions, styles, and other discourse properties in the South Indian communities tend to illustrate the poetics of *akam* and *puram*. They come in arrays, in a sort of ecology of genres, where each has a niche, a function. Each occupies, expresses, and constitutes a "finite province of reality." Myth and folktale, proverb and riddle, theatre and ritual performance have places on this continuum, this scale of forms. Let me illustrate the notion that tales have special features for certain audiences with just one kind of story, the kind that is told to small children.

Here is one we all heard as small children - "Sister Crow and Sister Sparrow." It is a story told in several languages today in South India:

Sister Crow and Sister Sparrow are friends. Crow has a house of cow dung, Sparrow one of stone. A big rainstorm washes away Crow's house, so she goes to Sparrow and knocks on her door. Because she is feeding her children, Sparrow makes Crow wait at first. When Crow knocks again, Sparrow is feeding her husband. When Crow knocks a third time, Sparrow is putting her children to bed. Finally, she lets Crow in and offers her several places to sleep. Crow chooses to sleep on the chickpea sack. All night long, she munches on chickpeas and makes a katum-katum noise. Whenever Sparrow asks her what the noise is, Crow says, "Nothing really. Remember you gave me a betelnut? I'm biting on it." By morning she has eaten all the chickpeas in the sack. She cannot control her bowels, so she fills the sack with her excrement before she leaves. Sparrow's children go there in the morning to eat some peas and muck their hands up with what Crow has left. Sparrow is angry. She invites Crow again to visit, and when she is about to sit down, puts a hot iron spatula under her and brands her behind. Crow flees, crying Ka! Ka! in pain.

Children laugh a lot at this story - especially at the crow filling the sack with her excrement, Sparrow's children getting their hands dirty with it, and Sparrow's revenge. But it is an ambiguous story. Sparrow, obviously a tidy and successful housewife, is not given to incontinence; her house is firm, her routine well ordered - psychoanalysts would happily relate these virtues to anal continence. Crow is disorderly, incontinent. Her house of dung cannot withstand a storm; she can neither control her all-night guzzling nor the morning's unloading of her bowels. She is punished by a branding on her bottom. On the other hand, I have always felt a certain ambivalence, and so did the tellers and the other children, about Sparrow. She is not generous or hospitable; she keeps Crow waiting in the rain. Because of her grudging hospitality, one feels Sparrow somewhat deserves Crow's untidy return. Children laugh gleefully at Sparrow's discomfiture and enjoy Crow's filling the sack up with nightsoil.

The typical audience for this kind of story consists of children who are just being toilet trained (three to five years after birth, much later than children in America are trained). Patterns of toilet training are said to be significant in any psychoanalytic interpretation of personality. We know that Indian patterns of child rearing are strikingly different from American ones. The Crow and the Sparrow story, I've often thought, was part of our toilet training. Many of the stories of this sort are not only about small animals (sparrows, ants, frogs) winning over bigger ones. They are also quite preoccupied with urination and defecation, with sphincter control, as children of that age tend to be. Martha Wolfenstein's book on children's humor documents this preoccupation in English children. A collection of Indian stories told to small children would be instructive. Such stories also talk about the discomfiture of small people - mocked for their shortness or thick lips and the anger they feel, the projections that cannot quite distinguish self from nonself. ...

I must hasten to add that tales are not psychological in the way they treat the insides of each character; most folktale characters have no insides, no psychological depth. But the tales explore psychological issues in the design and outcome of the action.

In the Crow and the Sparrow story, the contrast in characters, their houses, their behavior, and the presence of an audience of children in the story itself enact psychological notions. Like all fantasies (and unlike psychological novels), tales do not explore or express psychological truths in parts, characters, or single episodes but in relations, in the patterns and figures these elements make as a whole. All sorts of things we express conceptually are expressed through these narratives in their concrete relational webs: self and other, developmental stages, male and female, rites of passage, intimacy and alienation. Even more than mythologies, which contrary to fashionable psychological explanations, tend to deal with social and cosmic issues rather than psychological matters, the domestic tale is concerned with near kin and family, with *akam* in the Tamil sense, as interior forms, and therefore with all those relations with oneself and significant others that together make or unmake, move or arrest, the self in its career.

Tales speak of what cannot usually be spoken. Ordinary decencies are violated. Incest, cannibalism, pitiless revenge are explicit motifs in this fantasy world, which helps us face ourselves, envisage shameless wish fulfillments, and sometimes "by indirection find direction out."

What is supposed by analysts to be repressed and hidden is open and blatant in these tales: fathers pursue daughters; brothers, sisters. Cannibal sisters eat their younger siblings; mothers marry sons unwittingly and bear sons, thereby messing up neat kinship diagrams; and young men wish to marry no women but instead their own left halves.

Beginnings and Endings

The tales do not always follow an opening formula like "Once upon a time." Yet special phrases found only in folktales, like *ondanonda kaladalli*, "at one time" in Kannada, and *ore oru urie*, "in a certain town" in Tamil, often mark the opening of tales. These turn the key for our entry into a taleworld and a taletime, and let us cross a threshold into another kind of space.

And there are closing formulas that mark our exits from this tale world. My favorite in Kannada is *avaralli, navilli*, "they are there, and we are here." In Telugu, they say, "The story has gone to Kanchi, and now we come home." In Tamil, they say, *kade kadeyam, karanamam*, "seems like a story, O a story, as if that's a reason."

These closures break any identification with the characters, separate our world from those of the stories, emphasize their fictive nature, their artifice and fantasy. Furthermore, when my favorite tellers tell a story, there are no adjectives at all describing inner or outer features (as there are in bardic tellings) - that is, there is no editorializing, no telling us what to feel. It is almost as if the story tells itself. When the characters speak, there is no sense of realism but a sense that they are speaking in quotation. They seem to say, *Larvatus prodeo*, "I advance, pointing to my mask," as Roland Barthes would have said.

Folklore, contrary to romantic notions of its spontaneity or naturalness, is formal. It makes visible its forms. Identification and disidentification (of the listeners with the characters) have their triggers in the tales and happen at different stages of a tale or

a performance - not unlike the processes by which a person is possessed or dispossessed in the course of a possession ritual.

I once found in a tale translated from Oriya a charming closing sentence. It says very well what I wish to say about breaking the link with the fictive world that may seem quite real while it lasts, though it is not. At the end of a romantic king-and-queen story, the Oriya teller says, "I saw the prince the other day at the market, but he wouldn't talk to me."

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Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. Discuss the distinction Ramanujan makes between the father tongues and the mother tongues and the interaction between them.
2. What anxiety about the future of the folktales does Ramanujan express in the first paragraph?
3. What difference between the Western tales 'the tales in the English books' and Kannada folk tales does Ramanujan notice? What is he trying to suggest through that distinction?
4. The three levels of Ramanujan's ancestral house becomes a metaphor for the triangulation of intellectual formulations in India. Elucidate.
5. Discuss the characteristic pattern of the woman centered tales and their implications.
6. Examine Ramanujan's argument that agency in the women's tales is connected with their being able to tell their own story and its being heard.
7. Metafiction, or fiction about fiction, where the tellers reflect on tales and telling in the form of tales, also tells us regarding the way the culture thinks about folktales. What functions do the 'stories about stories' have in Indian culture?
8. What are advantages and limitations of folktale indexes?
9. What is the function of the stories meant for the small children?
10. Do you think the concepts like *akam* and *puram* can be fruitfully used to develop a typology of folktales? Examine how adequate they are to discuss the Indian folktales.
11. Reflect on the beginning and ending of the folktales used in the essay in the light of what Ramanujan suggests in the final section.
12. List the characteristic features of the folktales discussed in the essay.