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ORAL LITERATURE : ITS SIGNIFICANCE AND ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Oral Literature is the verbal form of literature that precedes written form of literature. This literature passed on from one person to another through word of mouth. Oral literature, not only contains the folk tales, ballads, dance, myths etc., but it also serves the purpose of imparting moral and ethical lessons to individuals. My research paper also focuses upon the structural patterns of the oral forms of literature. The younger generation, while passing on the verbal forms of literature, may introduce variations in its patterns, content, forms and they may make a few additions and deletions. But unlike written form of literature, all these changes are anonymous i.e. they do not belong to any one author. My research paper also focuses upon the various folk stories, myths, legends, songs that have become very much popular among the people and with time, their importance has not faded. Oral literature is the repository of artistic expression in society and is a channel to find balance, harmony and beauty in the world. This literature, through various genres, emphasize upon the need to understand pain, suffering and evil. It also encapsulates the traditional knowledge, beliefs and values about the environment and nature of society itself. Various stories of adventure and bravery not simply entertain the younger generation but also inspire them to face various difficulties and challenges that life poses before people. Thus, my paper lays stress on the importance of oral tradition of literature in shaping and polishing the personality of the individuals.

**KEYWORDS-** Oral Literature, Structural patterns, Repository, Encapsulates, Polishing and Artistic expression.

Oral literature is used to describe the tradition in written civilizations in which certain genres of literature are transmitted from one generation to another through word of mouth. This type of literature is confined to the so-called folk or people of a culture and the literature of this type is unlettered i.e. it does not use the written form. Epics, ballads, prose tales, rituals and lyric songs, as genres, existed orally before writing was invented. Lord Albert has quoted Khaled Hossani who says, "I grew up in a society with a very ancient and strong oral story telling tradition. I was told stories, as a child, by my grandmother, and my father as well" (8). Writing came very late and this does not mean that common people waited for years or centuries to tell stories or sing songs. Rather, they did all these things verbally. Oral literature includes stories and songs and other people's sayings that a person has heard and listened to, sung and told, without any intervention of writing. The creator or transmitter did not write the song or the story but sang or told it. Similarly, the receiver

did not read the story or the lyrics of the song. Therefore, these stories and songs are therefore, not only oral but also aural, i.e. they are not simply told but are also heard. Simone Okumba Miruka has quoted James Allen who says, "For the creation of a masterwork of literature, two powers must concur the power of the man, and the power of the moment, and the man is not enough without the moment" (60).

Oral literature is the repository of the critical knowledge, philosophy and wisdom for non-literature societies. This literature through narrative, poetry, song, dance, myths and fables and texts for religious rituals provide a portrait of the meaning of life as experienced by society at its particular time and place with its unique existential challenges. This literature portrays how one is to live a moral life and explains the nature of one's relationships to divinity. It, thus, retains the knowledge of society which is passed on to succeeding generations. John Miles Foley has quoted Alan Ganner who says, "My background is deep and set in deep time, and in a narrow space, oral traditions going back a long, long time which I inherited" (81). This literature contains the history of the society and its various experiences, ups and downs. This kind of literature brings before the people the belief systems of the society that imparts sense to life. It provides a guide to human behaviour and how to live one's life. In other words, it can be said that oral literature plays a very important role in shaping and polishing the personality of the individual.

There are various advantages of oral literature:

1. It can be given anywhere and at any time. This form of literature is transmitted from one person to another by any adult who has knowledge of some historical facts.
2. Oral literature is less expensive form of literature as compared to other sources of historical information such as books and museums. The main reason behind this is that for this kind of literature, one does not need to sell or buy any kind of information.
3. For oral literature, the speakers as well as the listeners do not necessarily master themselves in reading and writing.
4. While narrating stories, if certain questions arise in the minds of the listeners, the latter can ask questions to the speakers in order to gain in-depth information.

Oral literature is also the repository of artistic expression in a society. Its beauty spreads across cultural frontiers. This literature is a channel to find balance, harmony and beauty in the world and it also emphasizes upon the need to understand pain, suffering and evil. It explains the causes of human suffering, justifies them and suggests ways of mediation and the healing of suffering. Ruth H. Finnegan has quoted Edwidge Danticat who says, "These were our bedtime stories. Tales that haunted our parents and made them laugh at the same time. We never understand them until we were fully grown and they became our sole inheritance" (301).

Through oral literature, humans need for religious belief is fulfilled. John Miles Foley has quoted Martin Lindstrom who says, "The World's holy texts are built on ancient oral traditions" (58). Through stories, tales, songs, myths, legends, stories of saints, the speaker explains to the listener the work of the gods, the nature of human weaknesses as well as the working of the whole world and universe. Oral literature serves to communicate ideas, emotions, beliefs and appreciation of life. Through various stories, the younger generation is familiarized with the customs, traditions and rituals of the past generation. Many mythological stories have a way for teaching morals, ethics and manners to the younger ones. Tales of adventure, bravery not simply entertain the younger generation but also familiarize them with various new challenges and difficulties of life and also teach them the ways through which these difficulties can be solved. Oral literature fosters a feeling of solidarity with others who have had similar experiences.

In African Oral literature for schools, Jane Nandwa and Austin Bukonya define oral literature as, "these utterances, whether spoken, recited or sung, whose composition and performance exhibit to an appreciable degree the artistic character of accurate observation, vivid imagination and ingenious expression"(Kirmani 20). The Canadian Encyclopedia suggests that the term oral literature is sometimes used interchangeably with folklore, but it usually has a broader focus.

There are various kinds of oral literature-

1. Mythological stories that explain objects or events in the natural world as resulting from the action of a supernatural force or entity (a god).
2. Legends are stories coming down from the past, often based on real events. These are also often regarded as historical. Sometimes they may have certain parts that are fantastic or unverifiable.
3. Folk Tales are brief stories passed by word of mouth from generation to generation.
4. Tell Tales are also folk tales. They are often light hearted as well as humorous in tone. They contain highly exaggerated unrealistic elements.
5. Fairly Tales are stories that deal with mischievous spirits and other supernatural occurrences, often in a medieval setting.
6. Parables are very brief stories which are told with the purpose of teaching a moral lesson to the younger generation.
7. Fables are brief stories which are often narrated with the main aim of imparting a moral lesson to others. The difference between parables and fables is that in parables, human characters are used to make story while in fables, animal characters are more often used to present the story.
8. Spirituals: They are the religious songs which are a part of African- American traditions.
9. Epics: An epic is a long story which is often told in verse. An epic includes heroes and gods. Epics have often been passed on orally from one generation to another. There are no known authors of these epics. These stories are penned down by anonymous authors. They are grand in length as well as in scope. An epic provides a portrait of legends, beliefs, laws, arts and ways of life of people.
10. Proverbs: Proverbs are traditional sayings that do not simply have a surface level meaning but also a hidden meaning.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the works of folk oral literature were considered to be the products of a collective popular mind. Contemporary folklorists favour the theory that individuals are the creators of the oral tradition. In the basic examples of ancient folk oral literature, however, the words are associated with ritual actions and the verbal text and ritual actions always have a practical and an important purpose to fulfill. Dr. David Leeming, in his book *Storytelling Encyclopedia: Historical, Cultural and Multiethnic Approaches to Oral Traditions around the World*, asserts "storytelling and our obsession with narrative is a characteristic of every culture throughout all time. The oral tradition of storytelling is expansive, inclusive and one major hallmark of the human experience that transcends any time, cultural and technological boundaries" (21). Since this manner of storytelling predates the printing press or even various other recordings of history, its next to impossible to isolate the very first instance a story teller gathered an audience. The oral tradition and its sheer pervasiveness throughout the culture defy one given starting point. After cave paintings and archaic forms of story through ancestral dancing, we see how various myths emerged from all cultures. Walter Ong says, "One of the common threads among these myths around the world is what we know of an archetype: a pattern, situation, character or symbol that recurs in the psychology of human beings" (71). So, examples of this might be the damsel in distress, the hero with fatal flaw, loyal retainers, the creature in the night, water as a symbol for change and so on. Myths have laid the foundation for the archetypes that we have come to expect somehow in every story.

Common myths around the world include the European myths of Zeus, Hera and the other gods which are used to explain natural occurrences, such as drought or infertility. Indian myths include Vishnu, Siva and Devi. We also see from American Indian myths evidence of sky gods and trickster higher beings. A key figure central to the dispersion of stories is the story teller, and this figure has worn many faces and roles throughout history. Some cultures associate story with so much power that "a storyteller is essentially a being with special spiritual insight and powers. This would be the equivalent of a medicine man or a healer in a tribe" (Kabira 54). Other story tellers were vagabonds, people of the road, who simply travelled around and collected stories like treasures. The best example we have for the existence of the oral tradition is the emphasis placed on storytelling as literature develops. As the beginning line of *Mahabharata* says, "If you listen carefully, at the end, you'll be someone else". This shows that an orally transmitted story has the power to transform one's

personality and change one's inner being. In Irish-Celtic myths regarding Tuatha de Danann, a truly great story speaks different truths to different members of the audience depending on what they needed to hear.

More and more storytellers travel from one place to another and as oral story telling is the story telling of the people, therefore, the stories spread from one place to another, from one town to another, from one state to another and from one country to another. The singing of epic songs is also very ancient. It is clear that it began before writing was invented. Telling or singing has long had a place in social behaviour patterns. Laments, for example, are sung or chanted as part of the rituals practiced at times of death, and no doubt, times have changed and people have become modern in their lifestyles and thinking, yet this custom has been kept alive since time immemorial. There are specific works, the specific oral traditional stories, songs and short literary forms in all their variants. Examples of these are the ballad of "Barbara Allen", the epic of "Marko Kraljevic and Musa the Highwayman" and so forth. The oral literature also consists of oral traditional poetries. It may be that from the beginning, some stories and songs were brief, simple and ephemeral. They consisted of loosely structured short lived anecdotes and songs with a limited frame of reference.

A speaker, who may be singer or a storey teller, does not memorize a fixed text. There is no fixed text to remember-what a thing the speaker has in mind is the story about the tale or a song that he is going to narrate. A specialist in Arabic epic, Dwight Reynolds, who has collected oral epic in the *Nile Delta*, "explains the importance of the story. He told how in that tradition an older singer, while walking along with a young boy who was learning, to sing the epic, would say to him: Now tell me what happened at such and such a point in the story. The boy would then have to tell him that part of the story. This was the first thing he had to absorb to the point of being able to tell it himself" (201). Oral traditional epic is not merely entertainment but has a serious function in its society. It contains the ideals and values of the society as well as a concern for the basic problems of both the community and the individual, and how to solve them or to become reconciled to these that are insoluble. Kirmani has quoted E Anne Mackay who says, "Indeed, if these final decades of the millennium have taught us anything, it must be that oral tradition never was the 'other' we accused it of being; it never was the primitive, preliminary technology of communication we thought it had to be. Rather, if the whole truth is told, oral tradition stands out as the single most dominant communicative technology of our species, as both a historical fact and, in many areas still, a contemporary reality" (56). These are embodied in the myths with which, in my opinion, epics, including Homer's and others in ancient Greece, originated. The *Illiad* and *Qdyssey* depict the valiant actions of the heroes, their powers in combat, their courage in facing the unknown and the supernatural and their skill in overcoming the obstacles.

In attempting to trace the unfolding of oral traditional aesthetics, one realizes that some story tellers or singers were more talented than others and that they influenced the way in which stories were told and songs sung by introducing what have later been called figures of speech, thus establishing artistic norms and enriching the tale or song. Miruka has quoted John Trudell who says, "Because we are all of an oral tradition in our beginning histories, the voice of the poet in this particular society will be heard" (200). Thus, in the course of time, written form of literature replaced the oral medium. Oral traditional epics, oral traditional ballads, oral traditional lyrics and ritual poetries, oral traditional praise poems, oral traditional wisdom poetry like proverbs and riddles, oral traditions prose stories like folk tales have the poem or tale as a more or less fixed entity with its own wording and identity. These tales and poems are transmitted from one generation to another in a traditional society as verbal entities with a certain distinctive verbal content each having its own more or less stable set of word and its own identity. The tales and the songs created were oral as well as a traditional. The younger generation mastered the art of narrating a tale and singing a song from the previous generation. The younger generation perfects the tales and songs with their own creative style, make modifications in the form of additions and deletions, yet sustaining the text by itself. They move on to pass the similar art in the most meaningful and effective way, which at the same time happens to be pleasing and suitable. Albert Lord has quoted Simone Schwarz-Bart who highlighting the importance of elder says, "When an old person dies, a whole library disappears" (126).

Oral and written literatures differ in their authorship and audience. In oral cultures, the memory of authorship, though never entirely absent, is of little general importance occasionally with songs but not with

myths, folktales and rarely epics. Each reciter introduced variations, some of which are taken up by the succeeding generations for whom the previous version is looked upon as a model in itself. So, changes in oral literature are constantly introduced but these changes are anonymous. Written literature and oral literature share similar characteristics, including the use of heightened language and literary techniques such as alliteration, flashbacks, foreshadowing, narrative hooks and plot twists. The two styles differ however, in that oral literature requires one or more performers who hold responsibility for conveying the emotion, intent, action, storyline and conclusion of the entire piece.

Oral literature encapsulates the traditional knowledge, beliefs and values about the environment and nature of the society itself. In sum, oral literature may encompass many genres of linguistic expression and may perform many different functions for the society. Oral literature makes us aware of ourselves, other human beings, our environment and our history. Stories, songs, proverbs, riddles and jokes in oral literature use colourful words and vivid images to describe human beings, their feelings and their behaviour towards one another. These performances also portray natural phenomenon like landscapes, plants and creatures in the same lively language. They also recount events and happenings in our lives and in the history of our societies. Hence, these performances stimulate our observation and imagination. We begin to understand the things described better and in a new light. Oral literature, thus, gives us insight into people, things and events. In the end, Foler has quoted Louis L. Amour who opines, "I don't travel and tell stories, because that's not the way these days. But I write my books to be read aloud, and I think of myself in that oral tradition" (56).

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