



Revisiting Traditional Folk Tales in the 21st Century

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Abstract

It is a fact that tales have played a crucial role in the construction of moral values for the humanity. However, the 21st century has introduced different norms in terms of tales and their characters. In this context, the didactic role of the tales has gained another dimension, gradually leaving a gap as for its function in the educational setting. With the emergence of information technologies, the interpretation of tales has changed for the sake of presenting a more varied entertainment for children. Unfortunately such tendencies toward children's needs have posed threats to the real function of the moral teachings that can be drawn from tales. This study aims to present suggestions to update the 21st century tales so that they can meet the expectations of the children in terms of changing values in order to strike a balance between the past and the present. To bridge the gap, taking the input the children receive from ICT into consideration, there is a need to provide educational context essential for contemporary life as well as moral values tales give. Therefore it is the responsibility of educators, families and authors to revisit and reinterpret the tales in order to meet the needs of today's children.

1. Introduction

It is known that folk tales are the production of oral storytelling tradition which came long before humankind found the writing systems. For centuries they were not written down; however, they were passed from generation to generation. The activity associated with traditional tales is storytelling. Hence, folk tales and storytelling as one of the oldest ways of conveying messages have been encountered in all cultures [1], [2]. Zipes [3] points out that tales are marks that leave traces on the human struggle for immortality.

Traditional folk tales usually have settings which reflect the characteristic locations of the culture in which they have emerged. For instance, the setting of places can be castles, palaces in European cultures, temples in Asian cultures, huts or deserts in African cultures. The time references in folk tales are not clearly given, hence, almost all of them start with an opening sentence like "once upon a time in a small village..." The setting of place and time creates an atmosphere which triggers imagination of children. The characters are flat; they are good or evil, honest or dishonest. Good ones always win by struggling a lot and mostly using supernatural powers. The characters are not always human; nonhuman ones with human characteristics are often seen. Most of the main characters remain beautiful, strong, noble, and wealthy. Folk tales have simple plots in which events happen very rapidly. Like their plots, the themes are also simple, such as generosity, honesty, tolerance, sincerity, courage, etc., which allow children to question directly about the right and the wrong. Since almost all folk tales have similar themes, it can be said that they are universal. Elia [4] points out that there are different cultural representations in tales, however the collective imagery includes the essential themes of human nature such as life, death, friendship, fear and desire. The language used in tales is simple and repetitive, which makes them easily told and remembered. Because of these characteristics folk tales have always attracted children's interest.

Traditional folk tales did not appear in the written form until the 19th century. They were passed from adults to children for centuries. The first written versions were published in Europe in the 19th century and since then they have become associated with children's literature. In addition to their function of entertaining children, tales have been used for pedagogical purposes, which are in accordance with their traditional use in order to teach culturally and socially preferred values [5]. Moreover, "folk tales

can help children appreciate the reality of human diversity and increase children's empathy with people of other cultures" [6]. Since they convey a moral message and are practical for classroom implementation, they have been appropriate tools for more motivating teaching activities.

2. Revisiting the Traditional Folk Tales In Terms of Their Setting, Life Styles, Characters and Moral Teaching

Using traditional folk tales for pedagogical purposes has been preferred by teachers and material designers for ages as they present a lot of benefits. Because many tales are short, they are quite convenient to focus on in one lesson contact hour. They are available almost everywhere, particularly with the help of current technological tools; hence, it is not a burden for teachers to find and select a suitable one. Children who read tales become more aware of expectations, problems, and wishes of other people living in different settings and may develop a sense of empathy. They may learn that all people need love, affection, understanding, justice and security. Through tales, children start to question different opinions and attitudes, and tend to draw the moral given. All of these benefits make them valuable teaching resources.

Nevertheless, the 21st century teachers have to look for new approaches while using them in their classrooms by taking the changing social patterns and scientific achievements into consideration. If they follow the traditional way for using them in their teaching settings without making any change in their content and without reconsidering the moral values that can be drawn from them, they may not address to the needs of the children living in an entirely different world in the 21st century. Moreover, the traditional tales which become much more appealing with the opportunities of today's technology may not meet the expectations of the children if they are presented with the same contents and the moral messages.

The settings of traditional folk tales, as summarized above, are not similar to the locations commonly found in a typical urban area. Most of today's children visit the castles and palaces for touristic purposes and do not usually live in the deserts or isolated remote villages because of the global shift from rural areas to urban areas. The tales also tell about the life styles of a society that exists in an ambiguous time period. These life styles reflect the attitudes, values or world views of that particular period. They are plain, simple and the opposite of the lifestyle of modern times in which children live. Today's life style is completely different from the ones in the tales

- First of all, today's tendency is toward urbanism; whereas, the rural life is highlighted in the tales.
- The congestion of a typical urban life which children have already become familiar with cannot be found in them. There is no traffic rule to obey and no school bus to wait for.
- While children travel by using several vehicles, the characters of the tales ride camels, horses, donkeys and sometimes travel by flying magic carpets.
- Today's children and their families go to supermarkets or shopping centers or even use on-line shopping facilities for their needs whereas shopping is just a matter of exchanging the goods in the tales.
- The children who are currently using mobile or smart phones and the internet may have difficulty in visualizing the pigeons that send urgent messages in the tales. As a consequence, they cannot easily imagine and comprehend the life styles told in the tales.
- The characters in the tales are either good or bad, innocent or sinful, honest or dishonest. The differences in their attitudes and behaviors are like the difference between white and black, without a grey tone.
- The gender discrimination between male and female characters is often felt. The females are not usually as active and competent as males; they usually wait for a prince, a sultan or a heroic male character to get rid of their troubles. Witnessing the role of women in their immediate environment, the children may get confused with the subliminal message coming from the tales. In modern world, the children are aware of the fact that the women can stand

on their own feet and the men cannot be very strong or competent all the time. Also, they experience that all the step mothers cannot be evil as some of them are the members of the divorced or separated families.

- In addition to the setting, the life styles and the characters, the moral values conveyed with the tales need to be reconsidered. It is obvious that the technological revolution has changed the life styles of people almost everywhere in the world. The different life styles have brought the new attitudes, values and views. The children who are exposed to technology are aware of these new values. Hence, the values given through the tales need to be taken into consideration.

3. Educational Implications and Conclusion

It is obvious that revisiting the traditional folk tales and adapting them to the needs of today's children is a pedagogical necessity. Kohlberg [7] points out that children need to be in an environment that allows for open and public discussion of daily conflicts and problems in order to develop their moral reasoning ability. Therefore, it is the responsibility of parents, teachers and teacher educators to update the traditional tales. The responsible bodies can organize seminars and workshops in which the tales can be analyzed with a critical look. The curriculum designers can review the content of the tales offered as instructional materials. The teacher educators can lead to the discussions on how the tales can address to the contemporary needs of children in initial teacher education programs. The teachers can plan creative writing activities and ask students to update the tales. The parents can be more sensitive and careful while selecting the tales for their children's reading pleasure. In such a process, bearing the following views in mind can be useful:

- The settings of the tales must be enriched and varied by choosing new locations which can reflect the characteristics of urban life styles. Instead of the palaces, castles, or small villages, there can be the green parks, big avenues, museums, sports centers or schools of today's cities.
- The characters must be given new traits suitable for the 21st century citizenship. Thus the characters in the updated tales can understand not only their own wishes and problems but also others' desires and expectations by realizing the universal right that all humans deserve love, affection, hope and safety. These characters must not reflect the ethnic, gender or religious discrimination. They must be more concerned for a clean and well protected environment. They must use their critical thinking skills and scientific knowledge instead of relying on supernatural powers.
- When the settings, life styles and characters are updated, the values transmitted through the tales also change. In today's world, there must be more emphasis on peace, cooperation and sharing.

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