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**Folklore and fakelore: an address to a long-going debate about
the authenticity of folklore content in America.**

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Abstract:

This paper will focus on the long-going debate in the discipline of 'American Folklore' about its some part of the content should be considered 'Authentic Folklore' or not. Well-known folklorists from America addressed this question from time to time. The researcher will include the foremost works which are addressing this problem and try to give an understanding of the problem. The term American Folklorists is used for the discrimination between folklore which can be proven as authentic as per the general characteristics of folklore and other content which seems to be folklore content but fails to be authentic. They use the term 'Fakelore' to such content. For the sake of understating researcher will use American folk legends as an example of discrimination. This paper will through some light on this particular topic so it can be helpful to other research scholars in developing a primary understanding of American Folklore itself.



Introduction

As discipline folklore emerged out of anthropology. In its early days' folklore was a branch of it and then developed as a separate discipline. As discipline folklore studies the cultural part of anthropology. Where various aspects of any particular group like their customs, rituals, taboos, omens, beliefs, festivals, traditional attires, ornaments, tattoos, games, house designs, wall paintings, cookery, food items etc. in addition to this list of contents 'Folk literature' is also part the folklore academia.

Every folk group have its folklore and one individual human being can be part of more than one such group. For instance, a student of the college who belongs to African American community then he will be a part of both cultures the first one from his family background and another one from the college. interaction of such individuals with different cultures also results in an addition of new content into different cultures that makes the scope of study in folklore versatile in nature where roots of one single content of a particular cultural group into other groups. Because of such variable nature of the study material the term 'folklore' becomes a toilsome task to define by one universal definition.

In every individual group the understanding of what can be included as folklore and what should be excluded changes. Therefore defining 'folklore' with one universal definition is almost impossible. As per the solution to this problem folklorists came up with an idea to draw out general characteristics of folklore. With the help of such characteristics, it became easy to define folklore content. As a result folklore's growth as a discipline and further research was possible.



Discussion of folklore definition is a very broad subject in itself. *Funk and Wangnalls Standard Dictionary of folklore, mythology and legend* by Maria Leach a prominent work in the discipline of folklore worldwide contains 21 definitions of the term folklore in itself given by different folklorists of America only. all of them follow a similar way of using its characteristics of it to define the term. Another approach to defining the term folklore was given by Francis Lee Utley who used the term 'Operational definition' to define the term folklore. he studied all the twenty-two definitions and tried to find similar words used to describe the nature of the term. As he states - "I present the abbreviated results of my analysis. In the first place I have sought for keywords which might find their place in an austere common definition. These words are oral, transmission, tradition, survival, and communal." (Utley 193)

The approach of operational definition works on the principle that what common characteristics are present in the content that is the present focus of the study. One should define folklore and folk literature according to that.

The whole folklore academia can be classified into three major parts for the sake of understanding the discipline. The collection part is where the folklore content has been collected by the folklorists from the fieldwork to the texts, and the theoretical part is where folklorists define different concepts and also includes various theories from other disciplines like literary criticism, psychology, and social science. etc. and the third part where scholars of the discipline use these theoretical bases for the analysis and interpretation of the content collections.

Because of the variable nature of the folklore as the study material, it was defined by its characteristics but even then, the universal application of these characteristics is questionable. In the later years of folklore as discipline researchers



find out that in some cases of folklore content, they didn't fulfil all the characteristics of folklore, especially some content in the area of Folk literature. And some malpractices also took place in the collection part of the folklore which resulted in many contents that lookalike folklore but as matter of fact intentionally created by the authors for financial gains.

These two issues of the discipline are addressed by many prominent folklorists in their works. Where either they addressed the contents that fail in some essential characteristics of folklore or the malpractice of literary creation's collection in the name of folklore.

To understand, the first issues of folklore characteristics one should be aware of the characteristics of folklore. What they are and how they helped the discipline in the differentiation between authentic folklore and false content. The list of these main characteristics that can apply to most contents and proves it as authentic folklore contents are 'Oral transmission of the content, versions, anonymity of the creator, simplicity of the language, survival through circulation etc.

Folk literature content fails in some characteristics of folk literature

The definition of folklore itself is not universally applicable and there are approaches like operational definition where the basic term itself can't be defined without its context to the content. As the whole folklore is classified into two major parts verbal and non-verbal contents. Folk literature is a major part of the folklore discipline. As mentioned earlier only content that follows all the characteristics of folk literature is accepted as authentic content of folklore by scholars. This is the general point of view towards the contents. Affects the collection part of the folklore discipline



where the collector has to check the authenticity of the content before including it in the collection.

The major issue in the fieldwork arises when one content or sometimes a whole category of such content fails in one or more essential characteristics of folklore. such content raises two major questions in this situation the first one is whether to reject the content as folklore or include it as folklore content and if the folklorist includes the content or the category in the collection then the definition of the folklore itself becomes questionable. In such cases, folklorists often refer to the old collation works done by other folklorists in fieldwork of other cultures. If the content fails in one characteristic but follows another it can be included in the collection.

For instance, one such characteristic is 'anonymousness' in which the creator or the author of the folk literature content must be anonymous. The reason behind this characteristic is that the content must be created by the folk to express their emotions without the fear of society and not by an individual looking for a name and fame. But in many cases in American folk literature, the content's origin and creator are known which fails the content in this characteristic but collectors included the content based on other characteristics like versions, popularity among the folk, and survival through oral transmission. Such cases can be found in any culture where such contents are part of the folklore even after failing in one or two characteristics. That is also the reason why folklore cannot be defined by one universal definition and not even by fix set of characteristics of it.

Folklore and Fake lore

The term '*fakelore*' is coined by renowned American folklorist Richard Dorson in his work *Folklore and Fakelore: Essays Toward a Discipline of Folk Studies*. This work was a



reaction to the malpractice of labelling literary works created with intention of popularizing them in the name of folk literature by some well-known folklorists of that time. This is a serious issue with American folk literature. Dorson pinpointed a few works with the name of the collectors doing such felonies. He states

“...But far from fulfilling its high promise, the study has been falsified, abused and exploited, and the public deluded with Paul Bunyan nonsense and claptrap collections. Without stirring from the library, money-writers have successfully peddled synthetic hero-books and saccharine folk tales as the stories of the people.” (Dorson 335.)

In this work, Dorson addresses the issue with the example of Paul Bunyan a famous lumberjack legend. And accused the whole American legend’s tradition of being fakelore including other famous figures like Pecos Bill, John Henry, Old Stromalong, etc. in the list. Later part of the work Dorson notes the definition of folklore and its oral circulation as an essential characteristic to validate his argument.

“Folklore by any definition requires the proof of oral vitality. The tales, songs, sayings, crafts, pass down the generations by word of mouth. Print may help along their distribution, but a tale that lives only in print is literary, not folk. The wider the gulf between the written and spoken forms, the less chance exists for traditions to cross back and forth. With the Paul Bunyan and other hero tales, an impossible gap separates the slender vein of oral anecdote from the dressed up, invented, or derivative stories that have cascaded from the presses since the 1920s.” (Dorson 336)



Challenging the whole American Legend collections done by other folklorists. Dorson pointed out the difference between folklore and fakelore. This small article of him becomes a serious reminder to all American folklorists and scholars of the real process of folklore content collection and publication. A long debate started between two groups of folklorists in America ones who were in support of Dorson's opinion and others who were against it.

The term fakelore in later years was used to refer to such content that lookalike folklore but is the intentional creation of authors with some motif behind them. Another noteworthy opinion was given in 1958 by Maria Leach another well-known folklorist of America and a prominent member of the American Folklore society. Her opinion was in the form of a collection entitled *Rainbow Book of American Folktales and Legends*. This collection was a conscious effort to show the versatile nature of American folktales. In this endeavour of hers, she included the American legends in her list including Paul Bunyan, Pecos Bill, Old Stromalong, John Henry and many others. She just not added these legends to the list but also gave her opinion and clarification to the misconception about these legend folktales. In the entry of Paul Bunyan's tale at the end she addressed the question of the authenticity of the content. Leach states –

“Many people have assumed that Paul Bunyan never was an authentic folklore figure, that he was a character invented by the lumberjack industry. It is true that in 1914 ex lumberjack named W.B. Laughead wrote advertising booklet for Red River Lumberjack Company containing a number of Paul Bunyan Yarns...” (22) First she noted the real source of the Paul Bunyan with reference then she addressed the authenticity question by- “But W.B. Laughead did not make up his stories about Paul Bunyan- at least not all of them and perhaps none out of whole cloth...”



In the ending part, she noted the efforts done by folklorists namely Daniel G. Hoffman and Herbert Halpert, who tried to find the root of the Paul Bunyan tales. This whole practice was a reaction to the work of Dorson. Surprisingly Paul Bunyan's tales were in circulation since the 1840s way before W.B. Laughead wrote anything about him.

This whole case study of Paul Bunyan explains another point of view of American folklorists regarding such controversial content. Rather than accusing the content of being fakelore, one should do proper research about it.

Another case of popular literary work's addition as folklore content can be found in the same text. In the section of 'Local Legends and Popular tales' Leach included an interesting content entry 'Young Charlotte'. This is a legend tale of a girl named Charlotte who lives in the woods with her family and one day goes to New Year's Eve party in the village with her friend Charlie. It was a very cold night and Charlotte frozen to death before they arrived at the party because her dress was not capable enough to keep her warm.

This tale is a ballad written by one author. An author named Seba Smith first published the poem in a newspaper entitled *The Rover* with the title of *A Corpse Going to a Ball* in 1843 in Maine. This literary work was inspired by a real incident.

This should be sufficient to reject it as folklore and must be called fakelore in a conventional way. Yet it is placed in the collection as an authentic folktale. Leach explains the whole confusion by – "This is a folklore in reverse. Here is a ballad of known single authorship, which becomes so popular with people everywhere that it is now classified as a folksong. There are now more than thirty known texts; and grandmothers all over the United States 'Remember' that night it happened." (255.)



Conclusion

As this whole discussion can be endless with numerous different case studies of individual contents as well as whole traditions. Generally, this kind of debatable entry can be found in each folklore group where either content is failing at a few characteristics of folk literature or it is a literary creation of an author. Rejecting such entries as authentic folklore with radically fix norms harms the actual flexible nature of folklore academia. If any literary work find's its way into folk literature, then there must be some criteria it should be fulfilling. To consider it as a case of reverse folklore but malpractice of intentionally creating content which replicates the features of authentic folklore is not acceptable in folklore academia. The culture and lifestyle of any group are constantly evolving with technological advancements and the urbanisation of the living spaces. As a result, a new kind of folklore material is emerging. For instance, urban legends, internet myths, etc. digital advancement is shrinking the world by connecting everyone with one thread of the internet. In such an environment folk literature characteristic like the anonymousness of the creator is hard to exist so other characteristics like the popularity of the content, different versions of the content and its constant circulation among the folks should be considered when one is discriminating between folklore and fakelore.



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