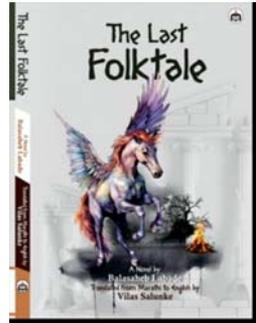


Books Review-1

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Author: Babasaheb Labade/Translation: Dr
Vilas Solankhe/Publisher :Authors Press New
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The Deconstruction and Parody of ‘Meaning’ in Cultural and Literary Narratives, in Balasaheb Labade’s *The Last Folktale* Translated into English by **Vilas Salunke** – Seema Bhaduri



Mr. Labade’s hugely experimental narrative *The Last Folktale* applies in original ways, the idea of death as metaphor to the state of contemporary Indian society at large. Here is a meta-narrative and anti-novel, a parable cast in the mould of a folktale that fuses myth, superstition, traditional belief systems and journalese in bizarre ways through the dreams, fancies, memories and reveries of several narrators to portray the complex and harsh reality of our times in the form of a dant-katha, a folk-tale. This translation by Dr. Solankhe’s places *The Last Folktale* amidst a wider canvas of the world literature.

The Last Folktale presents a variegated montage of life as lived by the downtrodden, marginalized poor living in the outskirts of society. The many tales here hover around a few young men’s daily lives lived with petty jobs chiefly in and around the crematorium where caste – Hindus will not work. Their social life includes in a big way their rites and rituals based on superstitions, performed on New Moon nights. This world of a circumscribed reality feeds their imagination and conditions their vision. The narrator and the uninvited character-narrator who straddle both worlds – the present fettered one, and the larger one of glamour, hope and betrayal, reflect occasionally on their existentialist plight, and arrive upon their respective insights. These two dwell alternately on the larger city- life, the education and the job-market

offered here, the rampant corruption among writers and publishers, and the systematically botched efforts of the marginalized to unite for a better deal with the indifferent government officials. Progress and sequential action finds no place in this narrative, perhaps because there is none in the lives of these characters who have nowhere to go, no plausible hope to chase.

Reminding one of the myths of Odysseus in Joyce's *Ulysses* there appear in this anti-narrative, two overarching mythic superstructures, Greek and Indian, that contextualize the urban Indian socio-psychical realities. Pegasus and Harpy symbolize the eternal conflict of good and evil in material life. The myth of Shiva and Shakti appearing a little later in the narrative, refers to the timeless cosmic game of purusha and prakruti that in Indian myth, shapes all creation.

In the early pages of this narrative the narrator, a graduate with distinction, grapples with his restless, thought - ridden mind and the angst of being. He ruminates on the Cartesian dictum – I think so I am, to understand himself but finds it wanting. This dictum had ushered in the era of Western Modernism with its pillars of individualism and reason, linear time and progress. This had stoked many developments with far-reaching consequences, eventually leading to the rise of Existentialism and the Absurd in Western thought, art and literature. The narrator realizes that the alternate Indian dictum , 'I exist so I am,' is the more appropriate. But the thought processes of this jobless young man from a marginalized community who is now looking for work in the city, are desultory. He dreams hopefully of Pegasus amid all the darkness and corruption around him. This reminds one of Stephen invoking Dedalus to save him, in Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young man*.

This anti-novel which challenges all socio-cultural narratives and their claims to 'established' centres of meaning, presents certain common realistic, surreal, and existentialist experiences repeatedly; the categories often merge as a Kafkaesque world with a fluid, dream-like space-time opens up, its overflow of language exhibiting the great art of meaning little despite its rapid flux of partly formed ideas, thoughts and imaginings. This little that stands out, is a radical subversion of all hegemonic power-

structures that govern our socio-cultural and educational institutions, and control their meaning. It parodies their corrupt policies, their myopic vision.

Mainstream narratives are all about meaning. In this anti-novel, talks shift ceaselessly from one topic to another unrelated one without rhyme or reason. The same happens within and between sentences as well. At the Ganapati festival, the narrator breaks away abruptly from his description of the grand procession accompanying the idol of Ganesha to dwell on women and their plight in our society. But when he appears in the red-light area, questions rising within him on his own criminal silence in this matter disturb him so much that he escapes to join the procession once again, producing now a long, meaningless list of the names of the streets that the procession is passing through.

The ghosts' weak attempts at rallying themselves for their betterment is repeatedly subverted either organized larger religious forces like the Tantriks, or by unknown social powers. A truck appears on site where the gathering begins, raises the speed of its engine such that the noise renders the speaker's words, inaudible. The narrator however, remains unconcerned all through; he never received any benefit from the government despite all Babasaheb Ambedkar's rulings.

Jonathan Swift had satirized his political opponents by means of his Lilliputians. Prof. Labade strips his characters of the façade of identity by converting them all into ghosts. This fantasized world then becomes his stage for scathing attacks on the corrupt power-play in our institutions that have determined the meaning and structure of our lives. Unlike Lilliputians however, the ghosts here finally turn out to be no piece of fantasy. The centrality of identity in modern life is bunked, it is after all, a socio-cultural construct, a superimposition on the person concerned. As a character puts it, it is the birth marks on one's body that carry greater significance since they connect one to one's own mysterious powers.

The narrative works out through several motifs appearing repeatedly, the most prominent ones being the ideas of existence and death. While

the activities connected to the crematorium and the spirits comprise the major part of this narrative, it is the ineluctable existence of the self and the consciousness of it that occupy the two narrators' thoughts even as they continue to face the external world around. In a moment of heightened awareness one of them claims, 'I'm Shiva', the eternal Creative Force in life. In the second case the narrator, tired of all his depressing thought, just drops them all and to his utter amazement, discovers that what now remains in the emptiness, is he himself. 'I exist...my mother exists...' he exclaims. This realization leads to another one that appears later in this narrative, namely that thought itself separates the thinker from the truth, from what he desires. So Pegasus the imaginative idea or form of the truth he has been seeking, ceases to be a distant dream anymore. It exists already, in the normal horse that symbolizes wisdom, nobility and power to act. With growing awareness the narrator finds his image of truth dissolving further, and finding expression in the torch-bearers of enlightenment – the Buddha, Jyotirao Phule and Babasaheb Ambedkar. Metaphorically, death is revoked.

The present-day obsession with labour no matter what its kind or intent, comes up for parody in various forms. Students dig the soil and cut trees for no purpose under the Earn and Learn Scheme. The small daily chores of the young boys at the self-run hostel kitchen, are listed with mock seriousness. A student who has cleared SET is lauded and told to study well, and in the same breath, to play cricket, organize a social gathering and a meeting. A senior student discusses Plato and Aristotle with the boys as they dig the soil. Professors do not teach; they help students out with their minor official needs instead.

The narrator refers to another 'folktale in the making', that being the current obsession with mobiles and how this is adversely affecting the powers of the brain particularly among children, stunting creativity. There appears a lengthy narration of the richly bedecked palanquin of Vetaal – the King of Ghosts; this could well be a veiled satire on some major political figure who has appropriated tyrannical powers over the public. A talk on Tukaram's *abhangas* veers off to a ludicrously detailed analysis of the structure of a skull. This talk then turns to a lengthy monologue

on owls, their types, powers, likes and movements, and finally, to how their roving eyes follows people. Next to come up are certain Indian mythic figures and their mysterious powers. Next there appear references to the narrator's family matters, the Khandoba temple, the evil apsaras, and finally to how one's creative force operates within oneself.

This disorderly assemblage of often uncanny matter of the past and present, real and surreal, physical and metaphysical, fact and fiction, serious and bizarre, celebrates decentering, deconstruction, bricolage and aporia. The process peters down from the largest narrative unit – the chapter, to the smallest, the sentence structure. As narrative techniques, these have been taken from the West; their underlying larger philosophy however, is Indian.

The nature of self and the nature of creativity continue to occupy the narrators despite all the pell-mell around. The uninvited character-narrator realizes that creativity increases as one gets more and more integrated to one's inner being. Where such integrity is missing 'only bubbles of words arise.' This state of integrity has no parallel. It is the only beauty. Where this state is missing it is the externals of intelligence, ideas, trade and technique, all aimed at marketing and power – building, that take over. The digital media and socio-political propaganda cater to such production. Writers today therefore, aren't writers at all, he claims.

Mocking all tradition the narrator exclaims, 'shaastar shaastar, kon kelay shaastar...', questioning the veracity of those who has established these traditions in the first place. Here is a challenge all authority that muffles the creative instinct in the individual.

One metaphor beautifully captures the elusive nature of the quest for truth. Mr. Beejankur, a tender sprout still rooted in its seed, comes to the narrator. He's blind. Says the narrator, the blind of this category have eyes and yet they keep travelling in search of God. The narrator plants this 'seed – cum – sprout' on his walking stick as he walks into his darkness, trying to grasp God. He finds neither God, nor himself. Why? Because the *beejankur* on his walking stick, the nascent idea of God objectified, is distracting him. Truth or God, exists within the self

alone. This realization has a great impact on the narrator – he says he won't write for others any more. 'I exist on my own... I'm writing for all...' The implication goes deep. Self is all, and vice versa. The 'Other' has disappeared, like Pegasus.

This refreshingly bold and experimental meta-narrative has fused several major themes and narrative devices of modernist and post-modernist fiction innovatively with the styles and techniques of the traditional Indian folklore, to present a holistic view of the contemporary Indian mind and reality. The narrator since he represents a marginalized community and is himself a displaced educated and yet jobless individual, his perspective presents this multiply fractured contemporary Indian reality from the underside. This work can indeed claim to be a literary classic of our times.

This translation communicates to a high degree, the flavor, style and diction of original text in the vernacular. The translator has maneuvered conventional usages in the English language dexterously to keep his translation as close as possible to the turns of phrase and idiom of the simple rustic folk in the original. Phrases like 'four-five umbrellas', 'girls moving like uncontrolled cows', 'a girl like wheat', and, an 'earlobe flapping', in the text, delight the reader with their freshness. This particular work makes a truly valuable contribution to the corpus of modern Indian literatures in English translation by presenting in English as close a version of the original to the international readership.

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