FROM FOLKLORE TO "FOLKLORESQUE": TRANSLATIONS AND ADAPTATIONS OF HIMALAYAN FOLKLORES

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Abstract

The Central Himalayan region of Kumaun is a land which has stirred the imagination of people since time immemorial, by virtue of the diverse range of prevalent oral traditions and customs. However, this region has suffered prolonged cultural isolation owing to its geographical position, and also on account of the inclusion of Kumauni language and culture with Hindi. This sentiment has been shared by various Kumauni artists, scholars, and academicians who attempted to integrate Kumauni oral traditions and culture with cosmopolitan popular culture by translating and adapting the oral narratives, leading to changing the dynamics of folklores considerably in the popular culture world. The integration of oral narratives into the popular culture with the change of context and structure, through films, comics, songs, games, literature, etc., has led to the emergence of the genre of folkloresque, which has further challenged the traditional perspectives and predefined social and cultural constructs.

This paper attempts to examine the emergence of folkloresque in various genres of Kumauni folklores, as they find their way into the popular culture through translations and adaptations. The paper also seeks to analyse how these translations and adaptations have not only led to the preservation, popularisation, and digitalisation of folklores, but they have also challenged the traditional perspectives in which the oral narratives and traditions were viewed, thereby creating liminal cultural spaces leading to a growing sense of cultural ambiguity.

Keywords: *Translation, Adaptation, Folkloresque, Ambiguity, Liminality*

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Folklores and the Emergence of the Folkloresque

Folklores are primitive and crude forms of human expression which are replete with symbols, themes, and metaphors narrating the journey of human civilization. They possess a liberated and fluid form, wherein the boundaries between natural, supernatural, and psychic world are usually dimmed. Repetitive tropes in folk narratives such as demons, fairies, ghosts, earthly and non-earthly beings provide a fertile territory to derive patterns for research and analysis. The language employed in various genres of these narratives influences the phenomenon of meaning construction thereby leading to the transformation and transmission of cultural ethos both vertically (from one generation to another), and laterally (between regions and nations).

Translating folklores in global languages, and rendering them into various adaptations is an ethical political act which leads to the preservation of oral narratives and traditions, thereby promoting cultural creolization (Haring 7). The most prominent feature of folklore is its dualistic characteristic, as it is universal and communal at the same time. The themes and metaphors employed in folk narratives across the globe are strikingly similar despite variability in the basic elements constituting the folk narratives such as language, beliefs, religious systems, moral and ethnic structure.

The process of translation and adaptation of folk narratives into the popular culture through films, comics, songs, games, literature, etc., is defined as "folkloresque" by Michael Dylan Foster and Jeffery A. Tolbert. According to them, the "folkloresque" is "popular culture's own (emic) perception and performance of folklore" (4). Any modern adaptation of traditional folklores may be regarded as folkloresque if it is in style of folklore; is connected to some traditional folkloric source outside the popular culture context; and it in itself is of some folkloric value, contributing to the transmission and creation of folklores. Hence, the concept of folkloresque, acts as a bridge between the popular culture and the traditional folk culture, and rightly defines the changing dynamics and relevance of folklores in today's globalised context. Folkloresque clearly defines "the ways motifs, folk ideas, and images operate within the production of commercial products" (Foster and Tolbert 8).

Stimulated by an increasingly borderless world influenced by globalisation and internet culture, the emergence of the genre of folkloresque, with the change of context and structure of folklores has led to redefining the traditional narratives, further influencing the process of meaning construction. Adaptations of oral narratives and traditions into various popular culture genres has led to changing the traditional perspectives in which these folklores were viewed, thus challenging the predefined social constructs, and giving rise to ambiguous and liminal cultural spaces. Similarly, translation of oral narratives into various global languages has accorded in the popularisation, documentation, digitalisation, and comparative analysis of folk narratives, leading to their preservation (though not in their original form).

Crossing Borders: Translation and Adaptation of Kumauni Folklores in Popular Cultural Context

Roman Jakobson defines translation as "the interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language" (233). Translation not only aids in interlingual transfer but also plays an essential role in intercultural communication, thereby enabling economic, political, and emotional

interactions between national and international communities. Translation of oral narratives and traditions also touch upon the political, cultural, and historical contexts between different cultures and regions. It intelligibly tries to present analogies between political, historical, and ideological contexts of different cultures, promoting respect for differences while rejecting both ethnocentrism and blind assimilation. Hence, translation is an arduous and conscientious task, which when complemented with technological expertise can enable folklorists in the systematic preservation, digitalisation, and documentation of folk narratives.

During the 1870s with the establishment of vernacular schools, and with the development of print and journalism in the Central Himalayan region of Kumaun, British administrators, and Christian missionaries began translating, documenting, and publishing local folk narratives, in an attempt to capture the epistemological space of local populace, so as to effectively impose the colonial rule of the British Raj (Cohn 4). E.S. Oakley, a Christian missionary with the help of Tara Dutt Gairola published the first work on Kumauni folklores in 1935. The work was titled *Himalayan Folklores*, and it attempted to present the English translation of various folk legends from Kumaun and Gharwal. Oakley reported on the folk traditions of Kumaun in his works, in an attempt to critique the local folk life and traditions, which to him appeared primitive and weird. Deploring the folk culture and traditions, Oakley admits that his works were aimed at proving "that India needs a better faith" (11). Russian Indologist Ivan Pavlovich Minayve, during his travels in Kumaun in 1875, collected local folklores with the help of rural folk, which he translated and published in Russian. Atkinson's *Himalayan Gazetteer* is a voluminous work which documents the topography, geography, history, and culture of Kumaun and Gharwal. This work has elaborate sections on the social norms, folk traditions, and religious beliefs of Kumauni folk. Grierson's collaborator Pandit Ganga Dutt Upreti published *Proverbs and Folklore of Kumaun and Gharwal*, a copy of which was presented to Queen Victoria, and is kept at the Royal Collection Trust.

These translated versions of various folk narratives of Kumaun during the colonial era, present the interaction between the foreign rulers and the local Kumauni population, and in doing so posit the Occidental perspectives against the Orient. A constant need to distinguish between Asia and Europe can be observed in these translations, and this bifurcation by western translators led to reinforcing their superior sense of national, racial, and imperial identities (Naithani 64). Translations of folk narratives by colonial powers led to the absorption of local folk narratives under the overreaching umbrella of colonialism, which further suppressed the regional identity along with local folklores (Naithani 71).

After the translation of Kumauni folk narratives was attempted by the British administrators and missionaries during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, various culturally aware locals, realising the significance of translating Kumauni folk narratives from their own perspectives and experiences, began translating, adapting, and documenting Kumauni folklores. The romantic folk ballad of Rajula and Malushahi has also been translated and recreated many a times in the popular culture. One such translation was attempted in the 1980s by Gopi Das, Mohan Upreti, and Konrad Meissner. They fashioned this popular ballad, "into a cultural commodity for consumption" (Pande 156).

The practice of adaptation of oral narratives and traditions is prevalent since time immemorial; however, the concept was popularised in 1962 by Hans Moser in his seminal paper *Folklorismus in Our Time.* According to Moser the adaptations of folklores occur in any one of the three forms – folklore is performed away from its original local context; popular motifs of folklores are playfully imitated by another social class; and the use of oral tradition and folk material to invent and create new folklore versions outside the known traditions (Newall 131). Adaptations of Kumauni folklores have transpired along the same lines. Attempting to integrate traditional folk performances with his cosmopolitan view of aesthetics, Pandit Uday Shankar in 1938, inaugurated a cultural academy in Almora. However, he was met with hostility as he ignored traditional caste norms and the academy was shut

down in 1944. Pandit Uday Shankar's attempts motivated various Marxist Socialist scholars and intellectuals from Kumaun, and under the able leadership of P.C. Joshi, folk artists such as Mohan Upreti, Brijendra Lal Shah, and Tara Dutt Sati once again attempted to integrate traditional Kumauni folk culture and performative arts. They travelled widely across the country to perform folk songs and plays, and in doing so generated new plays and songs which though were derived from traditional Kumauni folklores, were modified to suit the contemporary cosmopolitan context. The popular song *Bedu Pako Baramasa*, which was composed and popularised by Mohan Upreti and Brajendra Lal Shah is a prominent example of folkloresque. This song became the official song of the Kumaun Regiment, and has been revived in popular culture time again for mass consumption. A Bombay film producer Salil Chaudhari, approached Mohan Upreti, asking the latter to include folk music in his film Madhumati (Pandey 153), resulting in the inclusion and recognition of Kumauni folk songs in the popular Bollywood culture.

In today's day and age of social media and internet culture, a variety of adaptations and renditions of folk songs have emerged which can be categorised as the folkloresque. The folk song *Jhan Diya Boju Chana Bilori* has a variety of adaptations, which include its acoustic rendition by Gaurav Pandey; its pop presentation by Papon (a popular Assamese singer) in the Dhaka International Folk Fest in 2017; and its dramatic adaptation *Shakuna De* by the Uttarakhand based musical band *Pandavaas.* Jagar of folk gods and goddess such as Golu Devta, Gangnath, Rajula Malushahi, Jiya Rani etc., have been popularised and digitalised by means of various social media platforms such as YouTube. DD Uttarakhand, a regional channel of Doordarshan also airs a variety of programmes based on Kumauni folklores along with their adaptations. The folk songs and ballads of Kumaun have been a part of various adaptations in the popular culture, and have been sung and recorded in a number of versions for radio, CD, VCD, DVD, films, television, and social media.

Adaptations of various folk materials are also in vogue. The traditional *Aipan* art from Kumaun has been adapted to suit the needs of the modern

society. In place of the traditional *aipan* made with *bisvar* (rice paste) on *geru* (wet ochre mud), patterns made with red and white paint have become popular as they stay longer on the surface. Traditionally these *aipans* were made on walls, windows, ledges, and floor, as opposed to the modern times, where we can see them on the nameplates outside homes, on pillow covers, wall hangings, bags, stones, bells, book marks, and even on contemporary apparels (Arya "et al" 7). Similarly, the traditional *Pichora* of Kumaun, was only worn by married women, and was given to the bride on the day of her marriage. In olden days it was made locally by dyeing a piece of cloth in the shade of amber with *haldi* (turmeric), over which red dots with *pithiya* (vermillion) were hand painted with the help of a 25 paise coin. However, it can be observed that today the traditional *pichora* is mass produced in mills and factories, and has converted to a cultural commodity. A variety of incarnations of *pichora* are seen in the market today, in the form of shawls and stoles, in contemporary jewellery, and as decorative pieces.

Literary adaptations of Kumauni oral narratives including their translations have enabled these oral narratives to stay relevant in today's digital and cosmopolitan world, further aiding in their preservation and popularisation. Namita Gokhale's *Clever Wives and Happy Idiots*, is a retelling and the first English translation of the Kumauni folktales collected by the Russian traveller and Indologist Ivan Pavlovich Minayve during his travels in the hills of Kumaun. *Where God Dwells* by Kusum Budhwar, contains English translations of Kumauni and Garhwali folktales, myths, and legends. Deepa Aggarwal's illustrated work *Folktales from Uttarakhand*, is a literary adaptation of Kumauni folk tales for children. These literary adaptations of Kumauni folklores preserve a racial heritage that has been transmitted from prehistoric times amongst the Kumauni populace. These adaptations are the result of mental alterations of successive ages, by the process of internal change and foreign contact.

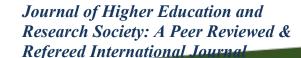**Folklore, Folkloresque and the Creation of Liminal Cultural Spaces**

The concept of liminality was given by the Belgian folklorist Van Gennep, to describe the second of the three stages of the "rites of passage."

Folkloric rituals exists in all cultures around the world, and are the vehicles which bring about socio-cultural transition. Cultural liminality refers to "being on a threshold" (Victor 465), and it is a state of transition from one social and cultural state into another. Liminality when analysed in cultural context is the period of potentiality, wherein various ideas, words, symbols, and metaphors found in various folk narratives and rituals co-ordinate together to produce this state of transition. It must be noted that various folk narratives portray turnabouts from normal social status and norms, for example, in a variety of folktales due to a reversal of fortune the rich are portrayed as poor, and the poor become rich; kings and aristocrats are reduced to the level of commoners while the commoners wear the insignia of rule. Such metanarratives and codes of presentation found in folklores bring about a realisation in the minds of the performers and the spectators that how far have they transgressed their own ideal social standards, calling into question such predefined social ideals, thereby paving way for sharp social change.

Folk narratives, and ritual performances have played an integral role in influencing the social structure of Kumauni society, as they have been popularising some common yet powerful social norms within the community. During the 1950s, while Mohan Upreti was involved in popularising Kumauni folk songs and folk musical instruments such as the *hurka* (an hour-glass drum, made of animal hide), he was castigated from the Kumauni Brahmin community on charges of playing the *hurka.* Groups who considered themselves as elite or belonging to the higher caste, even disassociated themselves with the folkloric rituals and the performance of bards. However, these contemptuous attitudes and social norms have weakened with the inception of folkloresque in the popular culture. A variety of rearranged and remodelled representations of folk narratives and rituals throughout various genres of popular culture, has enabled people to be more accepting of the differences in beliefs, ideas, meaning construction and social values. Kumauni women have also been involved in deconstructing the traditional gendered roles, and have been re-constructing their identities and redefining their role in the society.

Translation and adaptation of folklores and the emergence of the genre of folkloresque in the modern cosmopolitan world has aided in creation of liminal cultural spaces which though have paved the way for social change, by challenging the traditional socio-cultural norms, have also given rise to a sense of traditional and socio-cultural ambiguity. What once was considered "scared," and was viewed inside the social frame alone, has today been remodelled and rearranged in various adaptations, and is now viewed as profane, secular, and mundane (Turner 468). An example of this can be observed in the adaptation of the traditional *aipan* art of Kumaun. The geometric patterns which were once drawn during sacred ritual ceremonies in a particular manner with defined rituals, can be now seen painted over everyday objects of use as decorative patterns. This transition from the sacred to the secular, though has popularised and contributed in preserving the folklores, but has also generated a sense of traditional ambiguity, leading to traditional norms and rituals being constantly challenged.

It is evident that the form of folklores has changed considerably, and the folkloresque has liberated traditional folk narratives, and redefined social norms. The integration of Kumauni oral narratives and traditions into various popular culture genres has led to a dynamic shift in power structures in Kumauni society, as the emergence of folkloresque has led to showcasing and broadening the space of several cultural artifacts to a global society, thus encouraging and empowering people in margins, especially women to come into the mainstream. *Minakrti: The Aipan Project*, started by Minakshi Khati is one such example. The project aims to modernise aipan art while maintaining the authenticity of its traditional style and uses social media to promote it. Women from nearby villages are hired for the job thus empowering them and providing them with an artistic medium for self-expression. Emergence of the genre of folkloresque has also enabled social transformation which is expressed at economic, political, social, aesthetic, and subcultural levels, and has helped digitalise, popularise, and preserve folklores.

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