

**STORYTELLING AND YOGIC TRADITION: SEARCHING FOR SPIRITUAL
LITERARY AESTHETICS IN THE TALES AND PARABLES OF SRI
RAMAKRISHNA**

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Abstract

Stories are a peek into the development of human civilizations and storytelling is an inherent human tendency. From entertainment and aesthetic pleasure to moral teaching, metaphoric delineations of philosophies and encapsulation of cultural history of a particular society—stories serve various purposes. Yoga is a tradition as old as the Vedas. In the strictest sense, Yoga is a philosophy. In a more liberal sense, Yoga is a way to union with the Eternal. It aims at attaining a balance between the mental and the physical, the internal and the external. It is this liberal definition that the paper taps into. The paper aims to read and analyse the tales and parables of Sri Ramakrishna by proving the intersection of the literary with the spiritual thereby establishing the indispensability of the literary and the spiritual. Spirituality has been an inextricable but a long ignored part of the literary tradition of India. Taking a cue from the concept of erasure propagated by Derrida, the paper demolishes this demarcation and attempts to read the interaction between these apparently different disciplines. The paper attempts to gather the literary devices, symbols and techniques used in the tales to show rather than tell stories about spiritual jewels.

Keywords: *Yoga, storytelling, erasure, Sri Ramakrishna, Derrida, aesthetics.*

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- Deeksha Sharma

Oral culture has perpetuated not only tribal or folk but also spiritual traditions in India for long. The spiritual gems are often handed down capsuled in the form of stories, parables and tales. They have their own way of being. These stories find a way into the individual's psyche by tapping into metaphors and symbols from everyday life while dealing with the gravest ideas of spiritual reality. The characters are often unnamed and secondary. They are not developed or built upon. Most of them are flat but bear a semblance of reality. Sometimes the characters retain their real name if these stories are coming from the experience of the teller. These are often rich in Aristotelian thought and all else is secondary and that is why it remains with us for so long. Let's go back to our childhood days and acknowledge that what remains of the grandmother's tales and *Panchatantra* or fairytales is not the character or the literary devices but the idea behind the story. Hence stories work in tandem with how our mind works. It is like a sieve that filters out details and after many years what naturally remains is the thought behind the story. One doesn't remember dates or details from a history book but a story gets deeply embedded in one's psyche. Storytelling is not just a fictional, imaginative venture but a way of communication of ideas and thoughts that otherwise would have been lost with time.

A tribal hand down rituals, origination tales and rules of the tribe in the form of stories. Similarly, a guru communicates the spiritual essence of his life and experience through the tales, stories and parables. The reason a story lives so long in our memory while a chapter from a book doesn't is because that is how our mind makes meaning at every level. Indian philosophy and, especially the Gita, talks about how a man makes meaning of things around him through memory and ego which in Indian philosophy are a part of human mind. This memory is a collection house of events and situations one goes through and the story develops when this memory interacts with ego. They nurture and interact with each other. This process of interaction between the ego and the memory to make meaning resembles the act of story formation and storytelling. Hence, the human mind is essentially structured to form stories and make meanings out of it. From a psychological point of view, stories are an essential part of human's psyche deeply engrained in their collective unconscious. From time immemorial, human beings have tried to tell a story whether through cave painting, singing, dancing or ritual. Story, thus, is at once a record of one's experience and at the same time an attempt to understand and comprehend one's experience. Hence, storytelling is an indispensable human proclivity.

Yoga is a tradition as ancient as the beginning of time. Evidence of yogic traditions have been found as early as in the Rig Vedic period. Like any other tradition, yogic principles have also sustained through tales, stories and parables that a guru shared with his disciples. One of the first written records of such interaction is found in the Purana and Upanishads. The paper attempts to demolish the invisible, imaginary boundary between literature and spirituality, by unravelling the use of one in the other. In this case, the use of literature in spiritual discourses of Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Ramakrishna was a spiritual iconoclast born in a Brahmin family of Kolkatta as Gadadhar Chattopadhyay. From a very young age, his interest did not lie in dry, un-innovative education. He wanted a hands-on experience of life. His curiosity could not be satiated by anybody. During one of my visits to his birthplace at Kamarpukur, I happened to meet a family that prided itself on knowing about Ramakrishna's childhood. Their ancestors were neighbour to Ramakrishna's family and they shared how they grew up hearing anecdotes from Ramakrishna's life. In the midst of a conversation, I laid my hands on a beautiful anecdote from his childhood that defines his life. As a young boy, Gadhadhar didn't like going to school because he thought that all that was getting taught in the name of education was nothing but foofaraw. During a lesson on subtraction, his master asked him to solve a problem, to which he replied that what he was teaching was all trash because life is built on the simple principle of 'joga'. The term 'joga' literally meant addition but spiritually the connotation was that of union or yoga. Thereafter, his whole life became an ardent quest for the reality of life and he found it. Later, when a young strapping Namenda asked him if God could be felt and realized, he replies yes just like I can talk to you and see you, you can see and talk to God. Hence, he laid the foundation for the making of a spiritual stalwart, Swami Vivekananda, who is still inspiring and shaking many out of their skins.

In one of the anecdotes entitled "How a Guru Taught his Disciple to See God, Sri Ramakrishna talks about how and when God vision can be attained. The desire should be strong enough to burn your insides and haunt you day in and out. His tone is simple, symbolic and at the same time ironic. He says that human beings are often seen vouching for their love and devotion for God, but they never attain God vision because the intensity of desire is still wanting. The story begins with a disciple asking a guru, when can God vision be attained. The guru takes him to a lake and holds him under water till the time he starts struggling for breath. Gasping for breath, when he comes up. The guru is seen smiling in answer. When one starts feeling as fervently for God as you started feeling for a swig of breath, be assured God vision is near. Simple, yet profound. It establishes the fact that God vision can be attained but only a handful are after him and out of those handful many still lack the intensity.

A spiritual mind sees connections everywhere while a logical mind deducts. So, is evident in the anecdote from Ramkrishna's own life. He saw connections everywhere. His

was a unity vision. In a tale entitled “ This is indeed the world”, Ramakrishna relates how once he asked his nephew Hriday why he bought a bull-calf and yoked it to a chain and fed it daily. Hriday replied because he wanted to take this bull to his farm in Sihore and use it there as a yolk. This idea of a young calf chained, getting readied for his future in the farms is a symbol of how the world and maya operate on human beings. How they get attached to a small thing and then it becomes their life and they are unable to think beyond its future. Never able to think what if it doesn't go their way. The idea of the young calf unaware of his future is symbolic of a young human being that soon would enter the rut of life without knowing its reality and soon the routine and mundane reality of life would take its toll on them. Although to Freud and Lacan, a metaphor is a device used to substitute the repressed in a human's psyche with something else . But, in Ramakrishna's tales and parables the common everyday reality works as a metonymy to unravel the basic concepts of human life like world and maya. Metonymy, in psychoanalysis, works on the principle of displacement. But, his metaphors are metonymic in nature in the sense that they are just like the tip of an iceberg that goes deeper than it seems. Often these symbols work as a trigger to unravel the deepest spiritual concerns and agonies. So, his tales and parables are cathartic rather than operating on the principle of repression.

In another tale entitled “In the forest of the world”, Ramakrishna postulates the role of three basic natures of human beings—Sattva, Rajas and Tamas and asserts that moving beyond all these gunas is the aim of a spiritual being. To him, these gunas if used prudently can be a good tool in the hands of human beings. In one of his discourses in the Gospel, he uses the analogy of the usefulness of a thorn in taking out another from the skin. But, the aim is to throw away both in the end and not cherish the two thorns as a prized possession. Most of the sannyasis prize Sattva and work at developing that nature in oneself. He insists that the aim is to throw away tamas by using rajas and conquer rajas by using sattva and then throw away all. This throwing away symbolize being unaffected by these natures. That is his ideal of a spiritual life. He likens these three basic natures of a human being to three robbers in the tale. Tamas is represented by the robber who wants to kill the victim, rajas is represented by the robber who suggests to tie the feet and hands of the victim and sattva who is represented by the robber who returns to free him of the bondage and set him free but could not take him to his destination . Instead, sattva just points to the path to one's destination. He compares this world to a forest and life to a journey in the forest where these three basic natures work as robbers:

Under the protection of Satva, man is rescued from anger, passion and other evil effects of tamas. Further, Satva loosens the bonds of the world. But Satva also is a robber. It cannot give man the ultimate Knowledge of Truth, though it shows him the road leading to the Supreme Abode of God.(Ramakrishna 62)

In one of his tales, one finds him getting sarcastic about people who think they have learnt a lot by reading books. He mocks at the English system of education that overly develops analytic and logical capacities of the mind and diminishes the value of experiential knowledge. Spiritually, materially or physically, experience and not logical analysis is the foundation of real knowledge. In "There are such men indeed!", Ramakrishna narrates an incident in which a man who has just experienced a house come crashing down in front of him informs of the matter to an educated man. At once, the educated man is seen rummaging through all the newspapers and on finding no news of that sort he denies its existence. His point is very pertinent even today. Unless we have gathered facts from authentic sources, we won't believe. But, the problem is what if the other person is the witness of the event. That is somehow not fact enough. With time, one has lost faith in experience as a source of knowledge and depends heavily on written stories that often get qualified as facts. Thus, a resuscitation of oral literature has become an academic goal these days.

His tales and parables centre around a human being's spiritual agony- - of living in the world that offers so many fetters, of the basic human nature, of deepest philosophical ideas and of many existential questions. Since spirituality is all about a human being's evolution and has nothing to do with just goodness and purity. In one of his tales titled "There is need for everything", he emphasizes how even wicked people have an important role to play in the world. The tale amalgamates real life incident and a story from Ramayana that finds its resonance also in Purana to bring out the importance of wickedness in the world. The conversation between Rama and Sita becomes a symbol to elucidate the real life experience. The intertextuality and fluidity of the tale cannot be ignored since resonance of a similar tale is depicted as a conversation between Shiva and Parvati in Shiva Purana:

There is need for everything. Once Sita said to her husband: "Rama, it would be grand if every house in Ayodhya were a mansion! I find many houses are old and dilapidated." "But, my dear," said Rama, "If all the houses were beautiful ones, what would the masons do?" God has created all kinds of things. He has created good trees and poisonous plants and weeds as well. Among the animals there are good, bad, and all kinds of creatures - tigers, lions, snakes, and so on. (Ramakrishna75)

In other profound and short parables titled "The root of all troubles" and "The jar of desire can never be filled up", he talks of the nature of desire. "The root of all troubles" is structured more like a fable with animals as characters. A kite swoops down and catches a fish, some crows start chasing it. The kite tries escaping but the crows leave the kite only when the fish falls from the clutches of the kite. Such is the nature of desire. One finds a resonance of a shloka of the Gita in this. The desire in another place he says is important and the only way to live and work in this world is to have a desire. One needs to

understand that the hypnotism with the thing or ideal one cherishes too much should be shaken off which is what he admonishes. It also hints at the fact that all karmas have at the root a desire. To read the tale as one dimensional and stating it talks about relinquishing desire would be reiterating the same mistake that many logical minds do. In one another place in the Gospel, he emphasizes the importance of desire for realized beings to live and work in this world. Thus, his concept of desire is not one-dimensional. The hypnotism with the object of desire to the extent that the object becomes you, is what he is talking about. If one gets deeper, the act of objective distance from the fish (the object of desire) of the kite gives it a clear sight. This hints at the process of meditation where one becomes an objective onlooker at his own thoughts and desires which unfetters one's mind from the clutches of desire. In "The tiger that lurks behind worldly joys", one gets an insight into human mind and the impact of desire more clearly. It begins with a man discovering a kalpataru that starts fulfilling all the desires that come to his mind. After reveling for some time, a fear of tiger eating him up crosses his mind. Since he is sitting under a kalpataru, the fear gets translated into reality and he is eaten up by a tiger. Such is the nature of human mind and desire. Human beings are responsible for their own destiny and situations. This idea resonates with the philosophy of existentialism that came quite later and also hints at the potential numerous possibilities of a human mind.

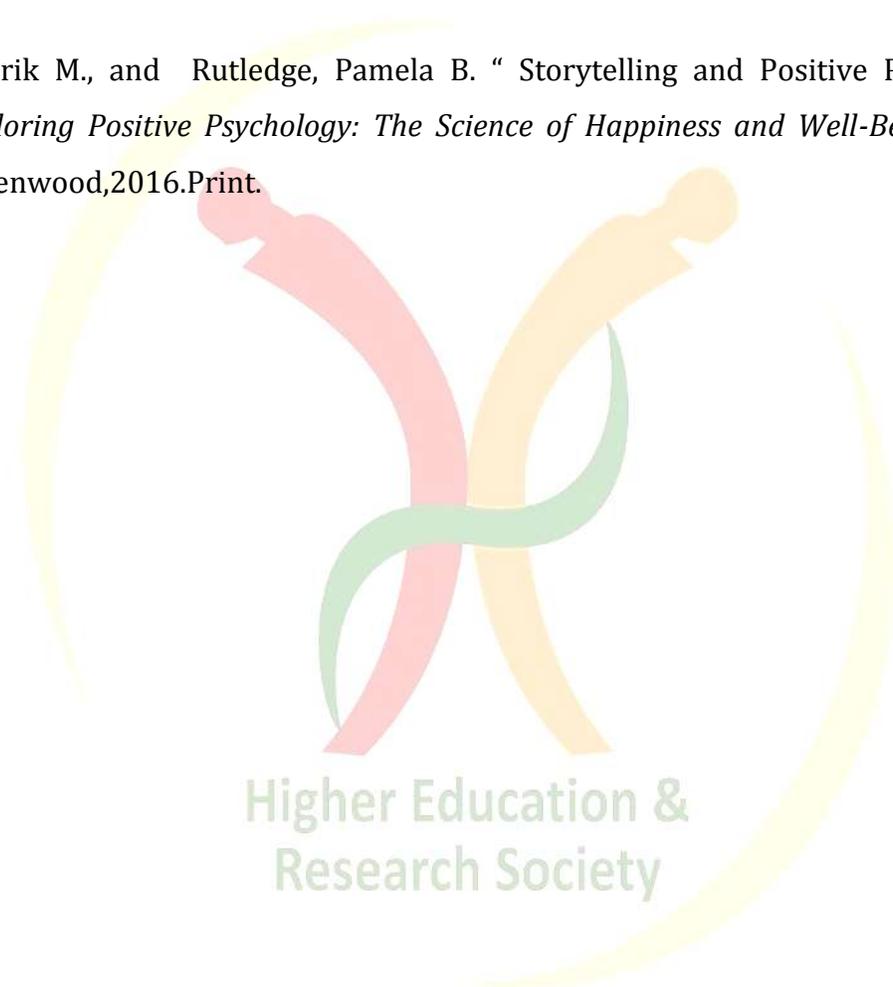
These tales are simple, lack a strong structure or literary finesse and yet find a home in our collective unconscious. On the one hand, one encounters images of a jar, forest, tiger, kite, sadhus and yogis which are metaphors from everyday life that come to mean more than just what they denotatively signify. On the other hand, one encounters images from mythology and legends like kalpataru that are connotatively likened and juxtaposed with things from real life. This juxtaposition of the real and the imaginary, the concrete and the abstract is what sustains in a human mind. Although they do not subscribe to the conventions of canonized, classic literature yet they strike a chord with us. In *Exploring Positive Psychology*, Gregory and Rutledge assert: 'In positive psychology, meaning is a primary component of happiness and creating a life worth living, and therefore, our well-being is also a product of our narratives, myths and culture.' (154) The profundity of these spiritual tales lies in the multiplicity of meanings layered in short incidental tales where a lot of symbolism comes into play. To use a psychoanalytic idiom, these tales facilitate the movement from Lacanian symbolic to the real in a human being's psyche.

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