

is a major factor here, leading to the cohesion of their society, whichever anthropological model is used.

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## INDIA

BLACKBURN, STUART. *Moral Fictions: Tamil Folktales from Oral Tradition*. Folklore Fellows Communications 278. Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 2001. 338 pages. Maps, appendices, glossary, illustrations, bibliography, index. Hardcover, €33; Paper €29. ISBN 951-41-0898-1; ISSN 0014-5815.

Stuart Blackburn has published a selection of one hundred Tamil folktales, which he recorded during 1995–1996 in different regions of Tamil Nadu. Fortunately the period in folklore studies when pieces of folklore were supposed to explain themselves is over. Sources are usually published together with commentaries and theoretical insights of researchers. In this manner, Blackburn's book is not only a rich and entertaining anthology of oral narratives, but it is also a monograph, whose main thesis is formulated in the title: the author sees the tales as moral fictions.

Oral and written literature of India has played a significant role in folklore studies since the time of Theodor Benfey and his research on the transmission of the tales of Pancatantra in different cultures. There are only a few books, however, that present Indian tales from oral performances. It would be fair to compare *Moral Fictions* with two other recent books, *Mondays on the Dark Night of the Moon* by Kirin NARAYAN and *A Flowering Tree* by A. K. RAMANUJAN. The first of them is a narrative ethnography from the Kangra district in North India, Himachal Pradesh. It introduces twenty-one womens' tales together with rich contextual data and examples of oral literary criticism—a term introduced by Alan Dundes to denote the tradition-bearers' commentaries and their interpretations of folklore. Due to Ramanujan's untimely death, his collection of seventy-seven Kannada tales has less contextual information and commentaries than originally planned.

*Moral Fictions* includes more tales than the above-mentioned books; regarding the balance between material and researcher's interpretations, it represents the middle ground that lies between Narayan and Ramanujan. Blackburn provides more information about the performers, local culture, and performance contexts than *A Flowering Tree*. He has also included discussions between the storytellers and the audience, a valuable key to understanding the reception of the tales by local people. Like Ramanujan, Blackburn mainly focuses on the textual side of these stories, yet he differs from Narayan who draws vivid portraits of the storyteller in her everyday settings. True, as Blackburn has published tales from forty-one people, it would be unreasonable to expect that he should have presented abundant reflections of these meetings and added the biographies of his tellers. We learn several illuminating details, such as the fact that the age of his informants ranges between ten to seventy; some of them have not attended school at all but others hold M.Sc., M.A., or Ph.D. degrees.

Most of the tales have been published according to the tale-telling sessions. Any reader who is familiar with European folktales would recognize the Tamil versions of famous tale-types such as "The Dragon-Slayer" (AT 300), "The Kind and the Unkind Girls" (AT 480), "Cinderella" (AT 510A), and others. Blackburn's classification of his tales according to the Aarne-Thompson system is a remarkable achievement because many of them appear in

distinctively Tamil colors. Besides humans, animals, and demons, Hindu gods, such as Siva, Parvati, Kali, and Ganesa also figure in them. Most of the tales belong to the tales of magic (AT 300-749), novelle (AT 850-999), and jokes (AT 1200-1999); the number of other tale-types is considerably smaller. As folktale is a living genre in India, the reader can find references not only to the realia of the past but to modern inventions such as an electrical fan, a lorry that is needed to bring home the gifts of the heroine, and photos that help to identify characters. The marvelous elements, regarded by some researchers as the key for understanding fairy tales, appear in many tales. We read about various transformations (for example, snakes and scorpions who turn into jewels and gold, a man who turns into a hawk); talking ants and animals who help the heroes; a human's marriage with a rat-wife; the revival of somebody whose body has been cut into pieces; a little finger that substitutes for the heroine and talks with wild animals, and so on. Disjunction between the poetic realm of folktales and the every-day world is evident. The author does not focus, however, on the fantastic elements, but instead stresses the importance of moral lessons in his reading of the tales, where crimes tend to be followed by punishments. According to Blackburn, tales "register the moral concerns of the narrative community" (277). This thesis connects different narrative genres of Tamil folklore introduced in the book and sounds convincing. Following the observances of Ramanujan, Blackburn draws attention to the contrast between the religious and philosophical law of karma and the mechanism of punishment in folktales. The notion of retribution through karma is extremely rare in them; punishment is usually carried through by human, demonic, or divine agency. Thus, in spite of the fantastic elements, the folktales offer a more rational theory of retribution than the Hindu law of karma, which is an issue of religious belief.

The afterword of the book is as fascinating and thought provoking as the anthology itself. Blackburn discusses the ethnical genres, the performance of folktales, and folktales' relationship with local society. He interprets some prominent tale types and their heroes. Even more questions could be asked about the connections and discrepancies between the moral and immoral issues in the narrative world and real life. Blackburn's study provides further evidence about the difference between male and female tellings but of what kind of connection is the one between tales and society, a society shaped by caste divisions?

*Moral Fictions* is an inspiring, informative, and useful book, and a balanced monograph that introduces both new sources and sound interpretations of them by one of the leading researchers of Indian folklore.

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