

# Construction of an Indian Literary Historiography through H.H. Wilson's "Hindu Fiction"

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**Abstract**— Postcolonial scholars are largely in consensus that the modern Indian literary historiography is a gift of our colonial legacy. Most of these scholars have looked at the classical Sanskrit texts and their treatment by the Orientalists. One genre that is often ignored, however, by them, is that of fables. Fables formed a significant section of the Indian literature that was studied by the orientalists. The colonial intellectuals's interest in selected Indian fables is reflected in H.H. Wilson's essay entitled "Hindu Fiction". The essay not only helps in deconstructing the motive behind British pre-occupation in the genre but also is significant in deconstructing the colonial prejudices which plagued the minds of the nineteenth century European scholars in general and colonial scholars in particular regarding the Asian and African communities and their literature.

**Keywords**— Colonial literary historiography, Indian fables, Panchatantra, Post-colonialism, Hindu fiction.

Postcolonial scholars, beginning with Edward Said, have exposed the project undertaken by the Orientalist scholars to study the history, culture and literature of the colonies in order to further their imperialist ambitions. Bernard Cohn, Aamir Mufti and Rama Sundari Mantena focused on the construction of Indian nationalism by the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century Orientalists like William Jones, Colebrooke and Wilkins.<sup>1</sup> Cohn discusses ancient Sanskrit religious literature like the *Vedas* and *Dharmashastras* which scholars like Jones translated and utilized in order to control the colonised. Mufti elucidates upon the process of formation of Indian literary historiography by the Orientalists. His focus too was on the classic Sanskrit texts like the *Vedas*, *Upanishads* and Kalidasa's plays. While most critics of colonialism have looked at the classical Sanskrit texts to elucidate how these were appropriated by the Europeans, few have noticed that another genre was gaining popularity among the Orientalist scholars of eighteenth and nineteenth century, both in Europe and India. The genre of fables became integral to the formation of Indian

literature and was widely analysed and institutionalised. This paper is a study of a crucial essay on Indian fables; H.H. Wilson's essay entitled "Hindu Fiction", which discusses the genre of apologues, its origin in India and its circulation all across the world.<sup>2</sup> The paper delves deep into the text in order to examine the treatment given to the genre by the scholars during colonialism. Why did Indian fables attract them? Was the study of fables like Panchatantra and Hitopadesha also a part of their agenda of better effective governance over the natives? Moreover, how relevant is the literary historiography formulated by them with respect to the fables of India in the twenty first century?

Discussion:

Wilson's essay, "Hindu Fiction" is a discussion on three collections of Indian fables, namely, *Panchatantra*, *Hitopadesha*, also a part of *Panchatantra* but discussed separately in the essay, and *Katha Sarit Sagara*. Drawing from the works of three contemporary scholars, Sylvestre de Sacy, M.L. Deslongchamps and Hermann Brockhaus, he seeks a connection between the *Fables of Pilpay* and *Panchatantra*, and between the fables of La Fontaine,

<sup>1</sup> Bernard Cohn's *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (1996), Aamir R. Mufti's *Forget English!: Orientalisms and World Literatures* (2016) and Rama Sundari Mantena's *The Origin of Modern Historiography in India: Antiquarianism and Philology, 1780-1880* (2012) study the construction of Indian historiography and how it shaped Indian nationalism.

<sup>2</sup> Wilson's "Hindu Fiction" was published along with his other essays including "Analytical Account of the Panchatantra" posthumously in a book called *Essays Analytical, Critical and Philological on Subjects Connected with Sanskrit Literature* (1864), edited by Dr. Reinhold Rost. The essay was originally published in *the British and Foreign Review*, Vol.- XXI, in July 1840.

*Decameron, Cent Nouvelles* and Indian fables of *Katha Sarit Sagara* and *Panchatantra*. (1864, pp. 141-42) He states that it was definite that Indian apologues, depicting interactions between humans and animals, were transmitted from the subcontinent to Persia. From Persia, Arabic writers translated and emulated these works. Gradually, they were transmitted to Spain and Italy from where the rest of the European countries came under the influence of these fables. He further compares the mythical Pishachas, Vetelas, Vidhyadharas, Yoginis and Dakinis to Geniis and Peris of Arabian nights. (1864, p. 133) Wilson believes that the Spanish Jew Petrus Alfonsus borrowed material for his “Disciplina Clericalis” from Arabian writers who, in turn, had turned towards Hindustan for their inspiration. (1864, p. 124)

Philology, a tool generously employed by the Orientalists like Jones and Colebrooke is also utilised by Wilson to reach his inference that the European apologues have a connection with the Indian ones. Citing de Sacy and other scholars, he concludes that the popular European *Tales of Pilpay* indeed is a version of *Panchatantra*. He recites the story told by Firdausi in *Shah Nama* and by Masudi in “Golden Meadows”. It is believed by both these scholars that Noushirvan in the sixth century sent his physician Barzuya to India in order to procure Indian fables. The latter brought a copy of *Panchatantra* and translated it into Pehlavi. However, what had puzzled the scholars was the name of the author, which according to the Muslim writers was “Bidpai”. In the European works, he was known as Pilpay. The author of *Pancha Tantra* and *Hitopadesa*, as is widely known, is Vishnu Sarma. Jones was disposed to believe that Bidpai might refer to Baidya-priya or “friendly physician” and thus refers to Barzuya who brought *Panchatantra* to the Persian court. Comparing Sanskrit’s “Baidya” to the Persian “Baidya-i”, Wilson believes Baidya-i might have been converted into Baidpai owing to “the mistake of a copyist” which then became “the source of the perplexity” among the scholars. (1864, pp. 90-91) Similarly, *the Book of Sendebad*, the Arabic tale of a king, his son and seven vizirs, which was immensely popular in Europe and Asia, is said to have emerged out of an Indian work ascribed to a chief of Indian Brahmanas, Sendebad. (1864, p. 96) Philology, thus, comes to the rescue of scholars like Wilson and Jones in their scholarly ventures.

In order to make connections between the Indian and European fables more palpable, he compares certain motifs found in *Katha Sarit Sagara* with those found in European fables. He recounts the story of Guhasena, a young merchant in *Katha Sarit Sagara* who leaves his wife Devasmita and goes abroad for a season for his

trade. However, his wife fears her husband’s inconstancy. Before the husband leaves, the couple obtains divine red lotus flowers which would fade if either proved untrue. Wilson draws parallels with Aristo’s work where a cup of wine is taken as a test for the loyalty of the lovers. The wine would spill if an unfaithful lover tried to drink it. Further, he states that similar incidents can also be seen in *Morte d’Arthur* and *Amadis de Gaul*. (1864, p. 122)

Wilson, in ascribing the origin of certain type of fables to India, not only seeks to construct the historiography of Indian literature based on specific features, but also constructs an Indian identity for the natives. This Indian literature and identity is of course based on selective institutionalisation of texts and recognition of certain features as “Indian” in those texts. Throughout the essay, he stresses upon the “national” character of these fables. “The stories are always characterised by the features of Hindu nationality, and are illustrative of Hindu opinions, usages, and belief. They exhibit, in a striking and interesting manner, the peculiarities of the social condition of India”. (114) Earlier in the essay, he asserted that apologues were a “national contrivance, devised by them [Hindus] for their own use, and not borrowed from their neighbours.” (83) He repeatedly stresses upon the exclusive and unique nature of the certain Indian fables which had been transmitted to other nations. The reason Wilson believes that apologues with interactions between human beings and animals originated in India was because of the Hindu belief in transmigration of the soul. “With the Hindus it is but the second step in the doctrine of metamorphosis, as the belief that men and women become animals in a future life readily reconciles that they may assume brute forms even in this [life]. (136) He further discusses another feature of the Indian fables. He notices in certain fables the phenomena of leaving one’s body to enter into another’s and is quick to connect it to the Hindu philosophy of Yoga. (1864, p. 131)

He also attributes to the nature of the Hindus their inability to show dignity towards women. Hindus, for Wilson, unlike the Europeans, even in their fables “demonstrate the depravity of women”. This, he believes, is the difference between the fables of “domestic manners” of Hindus and the chivalric romances of Europe which “pay homage to the virtues and graces of the female sex”. The chivalric romances, then, owe their “parentage” to Northern European countries, “women being even held in higher honour amongst the Teutonic nations than among those of the south of Europe or the East.” (115) Aamir Mufti observes that the Orientalists created a national literature using “certain Brahminical

texts, practices and social and cultural imaginaries from ancient times”. However, he further states that a “unique national civilization” was constructed through the reinterpretation of certain texts. (2016, p. 111) Wilson, in this essay, not only canonises fable collections like *Panchatantra* and *Katha Sarit Sagara* into “Indian literature” but also reinterprets them in order to emphasize what he believes are distinctive Hindu and “Indian” characteristics.

Within this project of formulating a national literary historiography is also another project of allocating places to the various nations on the ladder of civilisation. It is not a simple “East” versus “West” binary as Edward Said in his theory on Orientalism would have us believe. Wilson’s essay reflects that the colonisers had created a spectrum with various shades occupied by various societies on the basis of how civilised or barbarous they are. The Northern European countries being “the most civilised” came at the top. They respected their women and had produced more sophisticated literature in the form of chivalric romances. Although they emulated some of the Indian fables, they “make the [borrowed] examples more effective”. (125) The countries in the south of Europe appear below North since they had been soiled by their proximity to “Near East”. There is an inherent glorification of Northern Europe. Since the southern countries of the continent came under the influence of the “Near East”, they too seem to come down in the hierarchy of civilization. The Arabs are at the bottom since they are seen as a barbarous and brutal race with no creativity who only imitated the Persian and Indian works. In Wilson’s words, Arabs were “not a story-telling, not a literary, not a scientific people.” They possessed some rudimentary poetry but it contained nothing like the “rich and diversified pictures of the social life which at first evidenced the more advanced civilisations of Persia and India” (111) The Arabs are also accused of destroying the literary culture of Persia following their conquest of the latter.

While the role of religious Sanskrit literature consisting of the *Vedas*, *Upanishads* and *Dharmashastras* in the formulation of Indian literature and Indian nationalism has been thoroughly investigated by Partha Chatterjee, Piyali Sen Ghosh and Bernard Cohn, the role of fables in this formulation has seldom caught the eyes of the post-colonial scholars. However, as Wilson’s essay clearly reflects, fables, primarily *Panchatantra*, *Katha Sarit Sagara* and *Jataka* tales, were equally crucial to the construction of Indian literature and identity and had attracted the Oriental scholars. *Hitopadesha*, a collection of fables within *Panchatantra*, was first translated in 1787

by Charles Wilkins, the founding member of the Asiatic Society of Bengal. It was then modified and commented upon by William Jones in 1789. Wilson too provides a list of translations made in the nineteenth century. In 1804, a translation of *Hitopadesa* with an introduction by Colebrooke by the Serampore press. The text was also reprinted twice in Europe, in 1810 in London and in 1829 in Bonn. In the nineteenth century, a lot of European scholars like Deslongchamps, Silvestre de Sacy, Theodore Benfey and Max Muller too dedicated themselves to the study of *Panchatantra* and *Jataka* tales. (Muller, 1881) The introduction to an 1885 edition of *Kalilah and Dimnah or Tales of Pilpay* claimed that there were rarely any books, ancient or modern which were “so widely circulated or rendered into so many languages as the collection of tales known as ‘The fables of Pilpay or Bidpai’, ‘The Book of Kalilah and Dimnah’..”. (Keith-Falconer, 1885, p. XIII) Several editions of these collections were published in India. *Hitopadesha* was introduced to the Kannada people in the nineteenth century. The missionaries too published and circulated these fables. *Katha Saptati* comprising of tales from *Panchatantra* and *Aesop’s fables* was published by Wesleyan Mission Society in Mysore between 1830 and 1840. Rev. F. Kittel and Rev. Garret of the Basel Mission edited and published stories from *Panchatantra* in the years 1864 and 1865 respectively. (Datta, 2005, pp. 1253-54)

What was the reason for the preoccupation of the Orientalist scholars with the ancient Sanskrit fables? Fables were seen as documents on “the science of Niti or Polity”. In Wilson’s own words, these apologues constituted “the system of rules necessary for the good governance of society in all matters not of a religious nature”. The tales dealt with education of the princes, the future rulers, and instructed them “both in those obligations which are common to them and their subjects, and those which are appropriate to their princely office”. (85) As Bernard Cohn has reflected, the project of the Orientalist scholars was not just motivated by their desire for knowledge through ancient Sanskrit texts. This knowledge “was to enable the British to classify, categorize and bound the vast social world that was India so that it could be controlled”. (1996, p. 4) Fables were a way of knowing how the earlier rulers had controlled their subjects so that the present administrators could effectively rule them. Wilkin’s translation of *Hitopadesa* is entitled, “The *Hitopadesa of Veeshnoo-Sarma*, in a series of connected Fables, Interspersed with Moral, Prudential and Political Maxims”. This title clearly reflects the agenda of the Oriental scholars. The interest

of the nineteenth century scholars in the collection of fables was, therefore, not purely intellectual, but was also guided by their political motives. The didactic and the moral tone of the tales would perhaps have appealed the missionaries who actively propagated them. These fables suited the civilising mission which the British had undertaken upon themselves under the fervour of the eighteenth century European Enlightenment.

Further, the nineteenth century British scholars believed that these ancient apologues were an integral part of the lives of the people in the Indian subcontinent. It was through these tales that the Indians understood the world around them. An article entitled "Native Society in India" published in the *Asiatic Journal* in London illustrates how fables formed a part of the lives of the natives. The example provided is that of a state trial in Jaipur where Sunghee Tola Ram defends his stand in a case against him by reciting the tale of a Rajput and a lion. The thirsty Rajput seeks the help of a lion to find some pure drinking water. Lion tells him where to find it. The Rajput then drinks his fill, kills the lion and uses its skin to store water for his journey ahead. Another instance is provided by Lieutenant Boileau who recounts how during his tour through Rajputana, the villagers used a fable to talk about the barrenness of a desert between Bikumpoor and Poogul and discouraged him from crossing that patch of desert. (pp. 270-271) Such incidents perhaps encouraged the British scholars to delve deeper into the study of Indian fables.

So, fables were translated, analysed and published widely across India and Europe. However, it was not all the fables which attracted the Orientalists. Since most of the scholars only devoted themselves to ancient Sanskrit texts, only a few collections of ancient Indian fables were looked at. Did India not produce any such tales after *Katha Sarit Sagara*? Or was it as the British authors suggested that "all the works which give lustre to Hindoo literature are of very high antiquity" while no works after that aimed "at the same lofty objects"? (Hugh Murray, p. 358) Even now, *Panchatantra* continues to hold a pivotal position in the realm of fables with newer translations and interpretations. Interestingly, Wilson's historiography of fables was not just accepted but also widely circulated all across the world. It still holds an inevitable position in the historiography. *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, for instance, published in 1965 and republished several times in the following decades, provides almost an exact account of the history of Indian fables as that provided by Wilson. (Alex Preminger, p. 269). As G.N. Devy in his

work *After Amnesia* suggests, the modern literary historiography is still hugely indebted to the western theories since the nineteenth century. (pp. 6-55)

Conclusion:

Therefore, the essay is crucial not just to investigate the nineteenth century scholarship on Indian fables, but is also instrumental in providing an assessment of a genre largely ignored in the post-colonial scholarship. This paper was an attempt to just reflect upon how fables, usually considered trivial and categorised as Children's literature, gained an invaluable position in the nineteenth century. The contemporary scholarship, however, is content to accept the knowledge handed down by the nineteenth century Orientalists. There is a need to look at this historiography with scepticism and realise its linear construction as that created to suit the needs of the colonisers. If looked at with this perspective, perhaps the scholars will stop taking the word of the Orientalists in the case of fables as the word of Gospel.

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