

The Last Folktale (book review)

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Balasaheb Labade has established himself as an experimental novelist from the publication of his first novel *Pipilika Muktidham*. This experimentation is used for expressing both content and form through an innovative narrative style. *The Last Folktale* is his third novel repeating, with a difference, the same narrative technique and literary style. This novel, created by using an amalgam of Magic Realism and Absurdist Fiction, has set aside all the conventional ideas of novel writing; as a result, readers have found it difficult to understand its content and form. It presents a highly effective picture of the disrupted world gone to pieces today and man's meaningless existence by using strange images, miraculous folktales and by rereading mythological tales in a modern perspective.

There is no point in presenting the plot outline of the novel because the narrator's life at present is just a routine in which nothing happens. The only way to make the meaningless living of his student friends memorable is to entertain by telling exaggerated stories to hostel friends on a fixed day every month. They are horror stories, either real or imaginary, as they are full of ghosts, dead bodies, witches and spirits of all types. This narration brings in some thrill in their otherwise dull lives. The alter-ego of the novelist—an uninvited narrator—comes in the novel quite often portraying different characters. A Pegasus-like winged horse repeatedly appears in the narrator's dream; the narrator's visits to the crematoriums owing to his friendship with a boy named Kachrya who is elated when corpses are brought for cremation—such absurdist events, anecdotes, stories and folktales underline the breakdown of life, lack of communication and meaninglessness of human relations. The author presents these aspects of life through the style of absurdist fiction to bewilder and confuse the readers, indirectly making them think about the purpose of this strange narrative.

In order to make these absurdist events more effective, the author gives it a stunning support of Magic realism. The author juxtaposes traditional folktales and horror stories full of spirits and ghosts with tales from Greek mythology. This is done in order to go deep into the subconscious and unconscious narratives in the human

mind to reach up to the deeper forest of the primordial urges and impulses in the human mind and exhibit the unnatural forces hidden therein. Sometimes there are sexual urges or unsatiated inspirations to dominate other persons. While describing the sexual intercourse of Digya with a witch, who is already dead, the author uses a new phrase 'spooky intercourse.' Thus, through the use of magic realism, when the author reveals a terrifying picture of twisted, disjointed and unsatiated sexual desires, the reader is stunned and dumbfounded.

Greek mythological stories juxtapose logical and illogical elements. That which is real and is consciously perceived is presented as reality either in piecemeal fashion or in a continuous flow by the uninvited narrator who tells mythological tales; however, his main function is to lift a curtain from the unconscious mind to exhibit the wild and weird depth inside. The unusual but effective diction and repertory of the author used in a non-linear narrative style with the help of illogical magical realism to probe into the depths of the human mind is unprecedented at least in Marathi literature.

This seems to be the plot outline of the novel. Of course, it's difficult to call it a plot. Then the question arises, what is there in this novel? It presents a journey of the unrestrained mind that sometimes asks questions or vehemently stirs up the elements at bottom of the mind. The author has worded it in an extremely galloping style. Using an extraordinary amalgam of magical realism and absurd fiction, this novel speaks through images that overwhelm the reader. Instead of telling a straightforward story and presenting conventional characters, the novel is highly adorned by an exceptionally unusual narratology to entertain the reader intellectually and wakes up the hideous reality that shocks the reader. The novel offers an experimental narrative that enables the reader to think and meditate for the first time in Marathi literature.

This novel gives an uncanny experience of viewing an abstract painting. It may be stated here that an abstract painting is not abstruse or beyond understanding of common spectators. When I see an abstract painting, I linger around it, slowly trying to follow the lines and colours used in it. I do follow something, but not all or enough of it. I get the feeling that it is trying to express the inner world of man, a truth about life, although it is misty or unclear. It seems to be eye-catching and arresting as it reaches near the grip of your palm, but it soon slips down like mercury. I try to catch it, pinch it, by broadening my efforts of understanding. This novel gives the same experience. It has undoubtedly become an arresting work of art. Though while reading, you don't follow it totally, it controls and captivates your mind by enriching your understanding. Like an abstract painting, this novel will be interpreted differently by

every reader on the basis of his literary competence. Being an author myself, I have done the same while reading it. Just as a great poem has different meanings for different readers, this novel, like a good poem, flows felicitously giving multiple meaningful possibilities.

The Last Folktale tests the reader's intellectual and artistic ability. While reading it, one feels that one has understood something significant about life. In this way, the novel overpowers your mind by revealing the absurdist, meaningless philosophy hidden deep under the surface of human life. It mesmerises your mind and your process of thinking. I'm quite sure that at least discerning Marathi readership will certainly greet this literary work as a novel worthy to be placed in the first rank in contemporary times!

Laxmikant Deshmukh

Former President of All India Marathi Sahitya Sammelan

A Brief Author-speak!

I strongly believe that my novel, *The Last Folktale* stands out in Marathi literature as an experimental, unconventional and boundary-defying literary work. It is not a traditional novel, but a thought-provoking composition that uses the framework of folklore to examine complexities of contemporary society. But I have consciously avoided placing concrete meaningful suggestions in the novel. That is why, the novel compels the reader to pause, reflect and look inward. I have made an attempt to boldly transcend traditional literary boundaries and propose new directions for literary expression.

Human life is considerably similar several aspects and in many ways all over the world; hence we find similarities in folktales of different countries. A folktale is a reflection of how people live, and a story is told felicitously and entertainingly through it. The story of man's living is told wittily and tastefully through a folktale and is passed on from one generation to another generation. This is done through an oral tradition. Years later, folktales also got a verbal form. I think, a folktale has no ending. And still, I have given the title *The Last Folktale* to my novel. It has a suggestive meaning. There are all sorts of folktales told all over the world in different ways giving people strength to live. They present moral principles and human values. They tell you a philosophy of life by presenting a message about what is good and what is evil. Our living in

contemporary times is disjointed and disconnected, broken into pieces. Many people feel that they are cut off from the very essence of life. Personally, I am tormented by ugliness and dreadfulness in life. I have given an artistic form to the conflicts and problems in my life in this novel. I have expressed through the novel my life's conflicts—happiness and sorrow, pain and suffering, fear and compassion—as well as the competitive spirit deep inside me. Another significant difference I noticed while writing this novel was that I felt like shifting from a personal point of view to a social one—from 'I' to 'we.'

By writing this novel, I have given an artistic form to my practical experience. Hence, I have called it *The Last Folktale*. In a way, it's not written by me; the creative principle suppressed deep within me let me write it; I held the pen but an unknown hand wrote it for me. That's why it is a folktale. I earnestly feel, it is the last folktale. As my roots are firmly grounded in the Indian soil and my consciousness is typically Indian, I honestly feel that the novel could be called 'The Last Indian folktale.'

Balasaheb Labade

Translator's Note on *The Last Folktale*

Being an experimental novel, *The Last Folktale* is difficult to classify. It's partly modern and partly postmodern; it uses realism as well as Magic realism. It combines the real and the absurd. Going beyond Magic realism, it amalgamates Absurdist fiction in its content, form and structure. It doesn't have a conventional story; it however has a non-linear plot which a reader has to interpret. In a way, as Russian formalists say, it has no 'fabula'(story), it has, 'syuzhet' (plot) which is intricate and non-linear. It has substantially contributed to experimentation in narratology. In fact, in addition to the principal narrator, a lower-caste village boy who comes to a city for education and to make a career, there is an uninvited narrator—an alter-ego of the author—who narrates stories and folktales using the technique of Magic realism. In addition, there are several minor narrators who tell their own horror stories full of ghosts, witches, demons, spirits—which seem to be partly real and partly imaginary. This complex novel is like an abstract painting; however, a reader with a literary competence can delve deep into its depth. The novel challenges the intellectual ability and artistic taste of the reader. It

is hoped that an in-depth critical analysis of the novel by critics would soon explain to us its multifoliate content.

The stories of different characters, presented as folktales are representative stories of different groups. The realistic narrative of the principal narrator presents the harsh reality of the downtrodden class in India. Problems in higher education, deterioration in political scenario, corruption in economy, increasing hypocrisy in social issues, crumbling of spirituality are honestly presented. The narrator and his friend Kachrya literally live in the precincts of a crematorium—a place where human life ends. The terrifying reality of the world around the burning corpses—poor boys searching for gold ornaments and coins thrown over the dead by delving deep into the flowing river—is devastating. Kachrya observes the dreadful *Aghori* cult. This enables the reader peep into the mystery of the occult and superstition. The author also presents folktales from Greek mythology in a modernist way. There is a discussion of farmers agitation at Delhi, casteism in all walks of Indian life and social issues of the cell phone-addicted generation. Though there are horror stories that terrify readers, the author never supports belief in superstition. Instead of drawing conclusions, his tales push readers to think further. There are no clear-cut conclusions about human life, only clues and suggestions that enable you to think and meditate. Hence the author calls his novel *The Last Folktale*; in a way, it could be ‘The Last Indian Folktale.’ The author suppresses links in the stories and episodes, presented in a non-linear way, because he expects his readers to read in between the lines. The novel uses a variety of literary styles—there are poems, Hindi dialogues, emails, folk songs to give you the real experience of the Indian content presented therein. Archibald MacLeish says about modern poetry, *A poem should not mean / But be*. Replace the word ‘poem’ by the word ‘novel’ and it might apply accurately to Balasaheb Labade’s novel *The Last Folktale*.

As a translator, *The Last Folktale* presents great many problems while rendering it in English. In my career as a literary translator, I never used footnotes for clarification of vocabulary which have no equivalents in the target language. I believed that footnotes hamper readability of a translated text. To successfully convey complex cultural references from the original Marathi novel in English was not easy. At a certain stage, I felt like using footnotes while explaining the Indian context and meaning of difficult Marathi words in English. But I put my foot down and continued to find English equivalents while using original Marathi words. I offered brief explanations of difficult words in English text itself. I hope this endeavour has retained the novel’s

readability in English. I hope non-Marathi readers from India and abroad would appreciate my efforts as a translator.

Vilas Salunke

About the Author

Balasaheb Labade is Professor of Marathi working as Head, Department of Marathi, Guhagar College, Guhagar, District Ratnagiri, affiliated to University of Mumbai for the last 15 years. He is a poet, lyricist, gazal writer, storyteller, novelist, critic, editor, researcher. He is a Ph.D. Research Guide and, as an academician, has written several textbooks and scholarly books of criticism. He is a renowned poet, novelist and scholar of Marathi literature. He has written poems which are published in four collections of poetry entitled *Mahadwar*, (2015), *Mumbai, Bambai, Bombay* (2017), *Ek Kaifiyat* (2021) and *Blatenta* (2023). He has written four novels: *Pipilika Muktidhaam*, 2019; *Shevatachi Laographia*, 2022; *Kaalmaker Live*, 2023 and *Chibore Yuddha*, 2024. His first novel *Pipilika Multidham* received six awards as an outstanding novel from different literary associations. He has edited six books and written three books of criticism. The original Marathi novel of *The Last Folktale* entitled *Shevatachi Liographia* received six awards/prizes: (1) State level Hausa Mantri Samiti Excellent Novel Award, (2) Keshavsut Literary Award, Pune (3) 'Dnyan Maharshi Award' for Excellence in literature from Marathaboli Institute, (4) Swami Vivekanand Memorial Sahitya Bhushan Award, (5) Maharashtra Sahitya Parishad, Nagar Branch, Best Novel Award, (6) Special Novel Award, K.M.S.P. He is an experimental novelist who has gone beyond conventional narrative style of the novel form. He presents contemporary reality through metaphors, images and symbols combining magic realism and realism. His fiction has elements of both Modernism and Post-modernism. No wonder he is a difficult author to comprehend and interpret. Reach him at balasaheb.ml@gmail.com and his cell phone +91 9145473378.

About the Translator

Vilas Salunke, a retired Professor of English, is a literary translator from Pune, Maharashtra. He has been an active translator of Marathi poetry and fiction into English. He published *Blooms of the Earth: Selected Poems of Kusumagraj*, a Dyanpeeth Award winner Marathi litterateur, (Writers Workshop, Kolkata, 1999). His English translations of 32 short stories of G.A. Kulkarni—a Sahitya Akademi Winner and outstanding short story writer in Marathi—published in three books: *A Journey Forever: 'Iskilaar' and Other Stories* (2010), *Shadows in the Desert: 'Vidooshak' and Other Stories* (2014) (Both by Leadstart Publishers, Mumbai) and *A Different Drummer: Selected Short Stories of G. A. Kulakrni*, (Popular Prakashan, Mumbai) received critical acclaim from all quarters. He translated Sadanand Deshmukh's Sahitya Akademi Award Winner *Baromaas: Twelve Enduring Months* (Popular Prakashan, Mumbai, 2013), a regional novel of contemporary significance. This book It was prescribed as a text for a course in English Translation at B. A. (English Special) level in Shivaji University, Kolhapur. He translated in English Rajesh Patil's autobiography *Maa! I've Become a Collector!* (2019) published by Harper Coillins, India. He has recently translated Bharat Sasne's novel *Two Friends: A Perspective of the Third* (2019) and Saniya's novel *Migration: for a Space of her own* (2022) (both published by Innovations, Mumbai), Manohar Shahane's novel '*Putra*'-*The Son: A Tale Told by an Indian 'Outsider'* ((Padmagandha Prakashan, Pune, 2021) and Laxmikant Deshmukh's *Dancing on the Vault of Death, a collection of Sports Fiction* (Vishwakarma Publications, Pune, 2023). Two of his books of English translation are now in the press: Sharankumar Limbale's Dalit novel *Vandemataram* (Ratna Books, New Delhi) and Vidyadhar Pundalik's 13 short stories entitled *Fragrance of Short Fiction* (Padmagandha Prakashan, Pune). He has also translated from English into Marathi. In addition to the authoritative biography of *Steve Jobs* by Walter Issacson (Diamond Publications, Pune, 2011), he translated in Marathi two outstanding Man Booker Prize Winner novels: Eleanor Catton's 850-page masterpiece *The Luminaries* (2019) and Julian Barne's novel *The Sense of an Ending* (2020). There are twenty books of translation to his credit so far. Reach him at vilasalunke@gmail.com and on his Cellphone +91 9922924360.

Blurb

The Last Folktale, created by using an amalgam of Magic realism and Absurdist fiction, has set aside all the conventional ideas of novel writing. No wonder, readers find it difficult to understand and interpret its content and form. It presents a highly effective picture of the disrupted world gone to pieces today and man's meaningless existence by using strange images, miraculous folktales and by rereading and reinterpreting mythological tales in a modern perspective. The alter-ego of the novelist—an uninvited narrator—comes in the novel quite often portraying different characters. A Pegasus-like winged horse repeatedly comes into the narrator's dream; the narrator's visits to the crematoriums owing to his friendship with a boy named Kachrya who is elated when corpses are brought for cremation—such absurdist events, anecdotes, stories and folktales underline the breakdown of life, lack of communication and meaninglessness of human relations. Though the content and characters are rooted in the Indian soil, the realistic threads are left loose so as to let the reader look upon it as a folktale of contemporary life. The author presents these aspects of life through the style of absurdist fiction to bewilder and confuse the readers, indirectly making them think deeply about the purpose of the strange narrative used in the novel.

The author juxtaposes traditional folktales and horror stories full of spirits and ghosts with tales from Greek mythology. This is done in order to go deep into the subconscious and unconscious narratives of the narrators and characters in the novel to reach up to the hidden forest of the primordial urges and impulses in the human mind and exhibit the unnatural forces functioning therein. Sometimes there are sexual urges or unsatiated inspirations to dominate other persons. Thus, through the use of magic realism, when the author reveals a terrifying picture of twisted, disjointed and unsatiated sexual desires, the reader is stunned and dumbfounded.

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