



Oral Epics and Ballads- Narratives of Value systems and World views

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Abstract: *Oral epics and ballads are narrative poems that are performed in a community with the prime motive of upholding the beliefs and the world view of the society. The performances of these narratives are strongly embedded in the cultural matrix of the society. This article seeks to examine a few lesser known epics and ballads as representatives of their cultural ethos. The narratives are thus not a series of events that are linked by causality. The socio-cultural background and the respective value system of the society play a pivotal role in organizing the events in the narratives. The narrator audience rapport is established by the common ethos they share. The common cultural background ensures that the performances of these narratives are in alignment with their ideology. A change in social values is promptly reflected in the performance of the narratives.*

Key Words-Cultural ethos, narratives, oral epics and ballads, value system, world view

Narration

Among the oral forms of poetry, the genres of epic and ballad are hugely popular. Their occurrence in almost all societies world over indicate that these genres are in a sense an integral part of man's life. While epic narrative poems are tales of heroic deeds and valour or are creation myths, ballads revolve around historical incidents, love, passion, crime or everyday events that are sensational. On examining a few epics and ballads, it is apparent that they uphold the beliefs and value systems of the society. A common man's relation with these two genres of poetry holds the key to its prevalence in all societies. We can conclude that epics and ballads are embedded in the cultural matrix of a community and thereby strike a chord in the hearts of the people.

Epics and ballads are not a result of man's flight of fantasy that he indulges

in for the sake of entertainment. In the words of the Macedonian poet Konstantin Miladinov ,

Folk songs portray the intellectual development of a people and reflect its life. In songs people shows its feelings, in them it immortalizes itself and its feats of old, in them it finds its spiritual food and sustenance; thus in happiness and sadness, at weddings and dances, at harvest and grape gathering, at embroidering and spinning, in fields and forests, it pours forth songs as from a rich spring. (Qtd. In Sazdov 187)

These folk forms mirror the community's view of life, its aspirations, goals, idea of right and wrong and the values it upholds. They have played a crucial role in man's pursuit of understanding life while engaging with



the environment around him. Ever since he began living in communities, man has been on the path to establish a cultural identity of his own. He works with a set of values that are prioritized and asserted as essential to his life. It allows him to come to terms with what life doles out to him. It guides his life and his decisions. It defines his worldview which is passed from generation to generation in the form of narratives. Epics and ballads are the narratives that form a part of the cultural memory of a community. "A sung oral traditional ballad cannot be reduced to a mere chain of events. Organizing principles are at work on every level of its composition and performance." (Seeger 614) The organizing principle is formed by the value system and the worldview of the community.

Exploring a few little-known epics and ballads from this perspective reaffirms the contention that the tenets of a culture and their outlook to life are at play in the structuring of the folk art form. The Serbian epic *The Foundation Sacrifice of Skadar* is a folk epic and is one version of the foundation sacrifice legends in and around Slavic nations. Human sacrifice or immurement is a practice in many parts of the world. This epic deals with such a sacrifice associated with the building of Fort Skadar. Although a historical incident, there are about 200 variants of the master mason legends that occur in the south eastern countries of Europe. Over and above the differences in the setting and in the style of presentation, the significant variation lies in the manner in which each society relates to the tale and interprets it.

The epic revolves around the three brothers of the royal Mrnjavcevic

family. Although historically there were only two brothers in the royal family, the third was invented for the epic narrative. The oldest, King Vukrasin is firm on building a fortress at Skadar. But his efforts are thwarted by supernatural elements that are against the construction. Vukrasin refuses to accede to the demands of these forces and ignoring them, he goes ahead with the construction. He is distressed that what is constructed by day lies destroyed the following day. Finally, the King is instructed to make a sacrifice of the wife of the brother who would bring the meal for the masons the next morning. The brothers vow not to confide in their wives. The older brothers break the code and reveal the truth to their respective wives who the next morning refuse to take the meal feigning illness. The third brother's wife is caught unawares and is forced to take the meal for the builders. As she is immured she pleads to the mason to leave openings for her breasts and eyes so that she could nurse her infant. This request is conceded to. And the tale goes on that she nursed her son for over a year and the milk continued to flow, being a solace to many nursing mothers without milk. Thus a historical incident is adapted to the needs of a society and made symbolic.

Although the good is being punished and the bad rewarded, the shocking conclusion is not the takeaway. Vukrasin's act outwits fate but is disapproved by the people. The deprecating tone in the epic narration suggests that Vukrasin's decision to make a sacrifice to further his ambition against the wishes of the superhuman forces is condemnable, while it celebrates the goodness and the virtue of the third brother. The presence of evil and its



victory as opposed to the suffering of the good and the innocent are accepted as the ways of the world. Zora Devrnja Zimmerman in a study of the epic states that

The poem transforms historical data into symbolic events and figures, a transformation which elucidates moral patterns in human behavior. ... Guilt ridden cultural memories about foundation sacrifices may have encouraged efforts to articulate and rationalize the experience ...preserve for future generations the philosophical meanings that the events embodied.(379)

While this epic upholds certain values that are to be nurtured, the following ballad reflects the world view of its community. The Spanish ballad, popular in Brazil, *Count Claros of Montalbain* is about the unwed daughter of a count who gets pregnant. On knowing the truth, the father and the brothers are furious and wish to safeguard their honour. They decide to immolate her. Meanwhile she sends word to her lover Count Claros who comes disguised as a priest at the nick of the time. Just when the pyre is prepared to burn the daughter, Count Claros barges in and pushes the father. Seeger who recorded a live rendition of the ballad in a small town in Brazil remarks that the audience enjoyed the ballad, approved the ending, and welcomed it with much glee. "This gruesome ending was told with a smile and received with approving laughter.... From the perspective of total identification with the lovers his impromptu immolation is morally, socially, and poetically justified."(596) An oral rendition of a poem explicitly

reveals the values that a community has agreed upon. The values that are communicated by the singer and received by the audience are mutually accepted. Any suggestion of unacceptable ideas would outrightly be scorned and rejected.

This is evident in another ballad too. This too is a Spanish ballad but was popular among Judeo-Spanish or Sephardic communities of Morocco, *La Fratricida Por Amor* or The Girl who Killed her Sister for the Love of her Brother-in-law. This ballad tells the story of a woman who falls in love with her brother-in-law and kills her sister to make love to her brother-in-law. The brother-in-law does not realize it and makes love to her, assuming it is his wife. The next morning he suspects something foul and discovers his murdered wife. He is blamed for it and is condemned to death. As he is about to be executed, the woman confesses the truth. A crime of love and passion is viewed in myriad ways. The published version is more Christian and lurid in its description of the crime and the passion. It decrees death as the just punishment for the sin committed.

Madeline Sutherland who reports that there are as many as nineteen variants of this ballad in the Sephardic tradition, records that the oral traditions are devoid of violent descriptions. Their focus is more on the moral aberration and the means to set it right. The fact that the woman came forward to confess to save the man is seen as a redeeming feature and therefore deserves to be exonerated is the opinion of one version. Again, in some versions she lays down her own punishment of that of having her hands and legs cut or tied and dragged through the streets. But around six



versions of the ballad do not end on this gruesome note but go on to assert "the dead remain dead/the living make peace." (qtd. in Sutherland 307). Yet another resolution that is proposed in Version 10 is that of marriage.

The dead remain dead,
the living put things in order,
In the morning of another day,
he married her.(308)

This solution of marriage may jar the nerves of a Christian listener who does not empathise with the Sephardic world view according to which the crime that had unsettled the peaceful life needs to be fixed. Sutherland interprets it as

What matters most in these conclusions is the restoration of harmony; what has been disrupted must be reestablished. This resolution, which is found in the greatest number of Judeo-Spanish versions, suggests that the most important task at hand is to insure that life goes on....How does society respond to adulterous desire and fratricide murder? It is the moral dimension ... that the printed text takes into account. There is also a more practical issue to address, the restoration of order. This is the problem that most concerns the singers.(308)

All in all, the Sephardic societies' aversion to violence; urge to make peace with life; tendency to restore order that has been disrupted by employing practical solutions are guided by the notion that life must go on.

Besides being dictated by the value systems of a society, ballads and epics are governed by historical forces too. The epic traditions of Montenegro is a case in point. There are two distinct traditions of epic poetry in Montenegro. The first employs the language of myth and is set in a period that is before the Turkish occupation of the land. Ever since the Turkish occupation, another tradition that is observed is that of recording history. According to Kilibarda,

The memory of historical events of the Montenegrin people is preserved in their oral epic tradition and this aspect of content distinguishes it typologically from oral epic that precedes the written tradition. (280)

He also notes that the Montenegrin bard who would sing eulogies about 'sarac', a horse of an ancient warrior describing him as possessing supernatural powers, wouldn't present a living hero in such exalted language or in sublime terms. Anything but an honest rendition of a living hero was outright rejected and ascribing superpowers to him was construed as an insult to the warrior. The extremely honest Montenegrins presented contemporary history truthfully but their past the pre-Turkish period was painted in colourful terms. The need to preserve a sense of pride in their past was necessitated by the Turkish occupation and therefore such a tactic was adopted:

Among the "universal forms of folk art," the presence of historical thought and memory and the ideological and



psychological need of the enslaved people to maintain connections with their historic past- from which they were severed by the Turkish invasion- were prominent categories.(280)

The decision to embrace truth and brace themselves for it, all the while preserving their sense of pride in a glorious past was deemed imperative. This ideology is communicated in the simultaneous existence of both the kinds of epics- one extremely fantastic and the other rigorously truthful. This distinctive feature of exhibiting apparently conflicting worldviews is a response to the changing needs of people with the passage of time.

This brings us back to the contention that the underlying principles that work in the tradition of epics and ballads are not simple and permanent. The re-creation of narratives adapt to the demands of the changing socio-political conditions which indicate that the value systems of a society too are not constant. The audience response being of primary significance, the approach to the plot and codes of conduct presented are aligned with the mindset of the audience. The bond between the audience and the performer is ensured by a tacit understanding of the common value system. The narratives that are employed thus communicate the prevailing cultural ethos of a community.

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