

INDIA

PRASAD, LEELA, RUTH B. BOTTIGHEIMER, and LALITA HANDOO, eds.
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As with many a scholarly project initiated by women, the impetus for this transnational collaboration was the marginalization of gender analysis within larger scholarly discussions, in this case, within the International Society for Folk Narrative Research. At this organization's 1995 meeting in Mysore, India, Bottigheimer and Handoo put together (multinational) gender-related sessions. The two subsequently edited the papers and published them in another venue (Zooni Publications in Mysore), which accounts wholly for Handoo's designation as co-editor of this short volume. Essays were revised for the current volume of South India-only entries. According to Bottigheimer's afterword, co-editor Leela Prasad (Duke University) took a lead in this decade-long revising process, a role facilitated by her access to resources in the West. Although Bottigheimer (a Europeanist) authored the afterword in which this volume's history is laid out, it is not clear what role(s) she played in editing it.

Chapter 1, "Anklets on the Pyl: Women Present Women's Stories from South India," written by Leela Prasad, serves as the introduction to the volume. Prasad begins with a Telugu "cradle song" as an illustration of "the remarkable crisscrossing ways in which women in India assimilate 'women's experiences' and arrive at self-understandings that are deeply shared despite their divergences and fluidity" (2). Indeed, this appears to be a key assertion of the volume as a whole, which seeks to delineate a "female-oriented poetic" (2) in South Asian women's storytelling. Prasad indicates that the four essays to follow focus on "women-centered" narratives in the sense laid out by RAMANUJAN (1991), which Prasad describes as those narrated by, shared among, and/or being about women. This reading of Ramanujan is somewhat different than my own. Ramanujan was very careful to distinguish between what he called "women-centered" tales, in which women are the main protagonists and that exhibit a cultural "counter system" ("an alternative set of values and attitudes, theories of action other than the official ones"; RAMANUJAN 1991, 53), and the generically broader set of stories told by women. (It is also possible to isolate "counter-system" elements *within* single folktales and *within* particular tellings of stories that are not overall "women-centered" in his sense; DAVIS forthcoming). Prasad does, however, indicate that the stories examined in the volume "explore and interrogate" "female roles, and role-playing itself... as they are enacted, enjoyed, suffered, reversed, or negotiated by characters in the stories or by narrators themselves" (4).

Prasad reviews the historical progression from imperial-era folktale collections to more contemporary, ethnographically situated folktale collections in India, the latter of which attend more carefully to narrators, contexts, and performativity. Prasad reviews the postmodern turn to reflexivity in folklore and anthropological studies, and indicates the degree to which the volume's authors engage in such practices. All of the authors are "halves" in multiple senses, and each chooses different degrees and means of self-reflection on the relationships between their identities and the knowledge they produce. The last paragraph of Prasad's introduction seems to forget these dilemmas of situatedness and difference, however, by asserting that the relation of narrators, stories, and researchers is one of "intimacies." Yes, but not only intimacies: why the need to end the introduction with such a rosy assertion?

The rest of Prasad's introduction includes interrogation of the four essays to follow in regard to the interpretive agency of narrators and audiences and the relationship between the actual life experiences of those participating in storytelling sessions and the narratives (genres, repertoires, interpretations) they produce. She aptly notes that a common theme found in the essays is the storied interrogation of the politics of kin relations and gender roles.

In a brief paragraph, Prasad also raises the thorny issue of presenting summaries of narratives in scholarly essays, recognizing this tactic as stemming from practical academic and publishing pressures, as well as potentially resulting in unexamined and (for the reader) unexaminable interpretive bias (14). While it is not the responsibility of this particular volume to explore this dilemma in more depth, it is an issue that merits further discussion among folkloric/anthropological scholars. (At the end of her essay, Prasad includes full transliterations of the songs included in her text.) Another issue meriting greater attention is signaled by a lone sentence seemingly plunked into the middle of Prasad's introductory essay: "Intriguingly, alternative destinies in these narratives do not seem to include caste-ordered worlds" (19). Just as with gender and intertwined with it, caste is a central organizing principle in much of South India. The absence of interrogation of caste (in contrast to gender) in the narratives represented in the volume bears greater scholarly reflection and commentary. (One author, Venugopal, notes caste identities in her storytelling cases, but says they had no impact on the outcome of her research question.)

In Chapter 2, Lalita Handoo examines "stupid son-in-law stories," using examples from several locations in southern India. Drawing on the Aarne-Thompson index, Handoo characterizes these as a subgenre of numskull tales. Handoo asserts that "Despite the son-in-law's high social status in the Indian kinship system [sic], the popularity of stupid son-in-law tales in India, indicates the sensitive attitudinal state of both the son-in-law and the narrating society that identifies itself with the girl's family and probably with the female sex as a whole" (36). While designating such tales as an expression of "counter-system" in Ramanujan's sense, Handoo uses a psychoanalytic frame, in part, to situate these stories as "female fantasy" in which the hero is depicted as a bumbling simpleton. Handoo includes translations of ten tales, some of which are from her own personal collection; she notes the existence of variants from other regions and sources. As Handoo points out, the tales have the following in common: a son-in-law creates a problem due to his stupidity and is mocked within the story or in the telling; his character is equated with low status (e.g., a thief or an animal); and he ultimately regains his status by accident rather than valor or wisdom. Handoo suggests that this story genre requires further investigation and can thereby contribute to an understanding of "the semiotics of gender bias in Indian society" (52). Of all of the contributing authors, Handoo's approach to her materials is the most purely textual.

In contrast, Saraswathi Venugopal focuses in her essay (Chapter 3) on storytelling *events*, and the role that gender plays in story *tellings* in the South India context, "where performance presupposes gender distinctions that reflect social structures and kinship norms" (55). In this essay, Venugopal is interested in comparing female audience responses (in mixed audiences) in rural and urban settings. She includes five tales, two of which were told in one (village) setting and three in another (city) setting, both in Tamil Nadu. The author was present only at, and indeed staged, the "urban" event. The educational and class statuses of the participants at the urban event were higher than those of the participants in the rural event. After examining audience members' comments during the events, Venugopal concludes that gender trumps geographical location in audience response and, more precisely, that while women's *social* locations (rather than geographical locations) affect the tenor of their expressions of resistance to patriarchal norms, women in both social

locations do express some such resistance. Venugopal's contribution is important for its focus on audience participation and, conceptually, for its understanding that the relevance of gender in constructing events is contextually intertwined with other aspects of those events, such as location, and the educational attainment and class identity of participants.

In Chapter 4, Narasamamba examines narratives of Muslim women in the Godavari district of Andhra Pradesh. Muslim neighborhoods there often have an elderly woman identified as an *Ustādbi*, a teacher who trains children/girls in Urdu and in the recitation of the *Qur'an* and other prayers. Narasamamba characterizes the tales told by these women as part of a counter-system, in that their female characters are protagonists and problem-solving agents. She occasionally jumps too readily from interpretations of the fantastical narrative world to assertions about social facts and psychological states/motivations of storytellers. For instance, she asserts: "This woman's telling maintains the heroine's central position in the family, a social fact that is rarely recognized in the larger society. In this way the narrator fulfills a psychological need within 'her' story world where she has authority to create gender justice, which is essential for the very existence of her being" (75). The author asserts that "women have turned their segregation to their advantage" by creating and telling stories in single-sex contexts that contradict dominant constructions of gender (83). The weakness of Narasamamba's contribution is this tendency to over-reach in her conclusions. The strength is in her unique presentation of particular genres of stories by Indian Muslim women in community educational/socialization leadership roles.

While Narasamamba grapples with the common theoretical knot of the relationship between (folk) *narrative* and (gendered) social *reality*, Kanaka Durga takes on a less common theoretical project: how to map the relationship between "narrators' personal identity and personality" and "those of the characters and events in the narratives themselves" (88). She examines poetic narratives (songs) and personal (autobiographical) narratives performed by Rājamma, an old woman in Andhra Pradesh. I am not sure why the author uses the term "poetic" rather than "folk" in contrast to "personal" when differentiating narratives. Clearly "folk" is a troubled term; on the other hand, personal narratives might well also be "poetic." Kanaka Durga argues that through Rājamma's poetic and personal tales one gleans a desire for a gender-egalitarian social system. She traces convergences of events, characters, motifs, and performative styles in the two types of narrative. Further, Rājamma herself discussed how recitation of poetic narratives consoled her about and reminded her of her personal life experiences. Kanaka Durga concludes, "By articulating the events of her life within those of her narratives, Rājamma converged her 'self' with her 'creations'" (115); and, further, that desires Rājamma could not actualize in her own life but revealed in her personal narrative are actualized by characters in her poetic narratives. In regard to methodology, Kanaka Durga asserts that folklore expressions cannot be properly appreciated without being contextualized within the personal life experiences of those who produce them.

While some of the essays in this volume are methodologically stronger than others, as a whole the volume is an important contribution to the study of South Asian folklore and women's expressive practices. It certainly reinforces Ramanujan's insights about women-centered stories, while offering very specific exemplars thereof. The volume is also important for highlighting the work of Indian women scholars working within their own and neighboring women's traditions.

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