

Mir Shikari

the Romance

LIBAS PRESENTS A PREVIEW OF THE FORTHCOMING BOOK "RAJA RASALU AND OTHER FOLK TALES", TRANSCRIBED BY AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY LAHORE-BASED AUTHOR AND ACTIVIST NEELAM HUSSAIN, AND BROUGHT TO LIFE BY A SERIES OF PAINTINGS BY LAILA REHMAN, ALSO FROM LAHORE.

by Urvashi Butalia

of Raja Rasalu

It is with some trepidation and not a little ambivalence that one approaches a text where the expectation is that there will be little that is new, and while the sense of recognition and familiarity at looking at such a text is not without pleasure, it may not actually be enough to keep attention intact and concentration focused.

Hence, my initial slight – and I am glad to say totally baseless – hesitation at picking up this collection of folk tales from the Punjab. These much loved and well remembered folk tales form the staple that people of my generation – those for whom undivided Punjab still holds some meaning and a profound sense of nostalgia – have grown up with. Evenings spent sitting

around a crackling fire, eating *moong-phali* or *makki*, or roasting potatoes, listening to the escapades of Puran Bhagat or Baingan Pari still have the power to evoke not only a longing for a time gone by, but a sense of a past where it was possible to exist without television, where orality still had some meaning, and families still had some time, and a sense of community did



NEELAM HUSSAIN, STORYTELLER

The seeds of this book lie many, many years ago in the story-telling hours of my childhood, when my siblings and older cousins and I would sit entranced listening to the tales of the perfidious sparrow who got her come-uppance for eating the crow's share of *khichri*, of the princess with the sun and moon on her forehead, of Fazal Noor who terrorised both her husband and *jinn* and sent them running, and so many others – some remembered and others only partly so. The story-telling circle had no fixed venue – nomadic like the stories themselves, it would come together, once the working day was done, under the starry skies of hot summer nights against the whir of the pedestal fan stirring up a breeze, or it would form around the log fire on freezing winter nights, or around the glowing embers of a coal *angeetthi* in the late afternoon. Nor was it restricted to any one age group. It had little in common with the stereotypical middle and upper class 'bed time story sessions', with a bored and often impatient adult reading the mandatory Cinderella story or its equivalent to a sleepy child before rushing off to join more adult activities. All inclusive, like the wonder-tales that were our fare in these story-telling sessions, the listening circle cut across different age groups – young children, older cousins, aunts, uncles – whoever happened to be there and was interested, joined in and succumbed to the magic of the story-teller's voice. The one constant was the sense of anticipation immanent in the unravelling of the tale that carried us into lands far beyond the dew-wet lawn or high-ceilinged room or veranda, where handsome princes and peerless maidens faced untold perils, met on equal footing with *jinn*s and talking animals and lived happily ever after.

Just as there was no fixed venue for the story-telling circle, there was not

just one story-teller who enriched our lives. In those days before television, we looked to those around us for our entertainment in other places – in the books we read and in the stories we heard. Each narrative voice was different, as was the narrative store of each teller of tales. Nor did these story-tellers belong to one generation or class – there was Murad bibi, who brought us all up, starting with my father, whose account of Ganja or Baldy – the boy who was enticed off the ber tree by the wicked old hag for her cauldron, but who tricked his way out of her toils and returned safely home to his mother – was a great favourite. From my aunts, my father's elder sisters, we heard of the stories of the *jinn* with a beard like a bush and a rump like a battle axe and of the hunter's gargantuan wife whose daily meal consisted of a sparrow's tongue and a puff of *roti*.

Then there was my uncle Mohammad Shah from village Moinuddinpur in Gujrat – universally known as Mahnay Shah – who introduced us to Waris Shah's Heer and the romantic tales of the Punjab – of Sohni and Mahiwal and Mirza and Sahiban as he did to the animal tales that have their roots in Bidpai's wonderful collection. Of all these sessions, perhaps the most eagerly anticipated were the more rare occasions with my father, Ameer Hussain Shah. Drawing upon different cultural resources, he introduced us to different worlds. Not only did he tell us the tales already told, he would add to and invent new stories. Taking on the persona of different characters sometimes, he took us through the dimly lit twisted streets of Baghdad with Haroon al Rashid, where mysteries and marvels lurked in every corner; at others he would transport us to Stevenson's treasure island, where with bated breath we followed in the footsteps of Jim the cabin boy and his companions faced with the wiles of Long John Silver. He stirred our blood with Zola's "J'Accuse" and brought us under the spell of words that gave a voice to Othello's grief and despair when confronted with the irrevocability of Desdemona's death. Perhaps the story-teller in me was born in these listening circles, and with them, the story-teller's need to share this now almost forgotten pleasure with others.

The idea of a book on the folktales of the Punjab took shape many years ago, but the opportunity to do so was to take more time. The stories in this book are based largely on those recorded almost a hundred years ago during the British Raj, by Flora Annie

Temple. They had set out to discover the workings of the 'native mind' through their stories, and there is little to doubt that their initial intentions did not change; however, as evidenced in the tone of these different narrative voices, they too seem to have fallen under the spell of these wonder-tales. The stories in this collection are accompanied by the parallel narratives of Laila Rehman's illustrations. The purpose of this book is purely to share these tales with new reading, listening 'circles' in the hope that new readers will also fall under their spell and in so doing, recover a forgotten source of pleasure. ●



Rasalu's birth

THERE IS THE VERY NEW AND UNIQUE ELEMENT OF A VISUAL TEXT, NOT ONE THAT NECESSARILY AND LITERALLY 'ILLUSTRATES' THE WONDER-TALE, BUT ONE THAT ACTS AS A PARALLEL AND INDEPENDENT TEXT, TELLING ITS OWN STORY, ENCOURAGING THE READER TO UNRAVEL ITS OWN MYSTERIES, TO SPOT BIRDS HIDDEN IN THE FOLIAGE, MESSAGES INSCRIBED IN THE TEXT, AND TO 'SEE' A DIFFERENT UNIVERSE



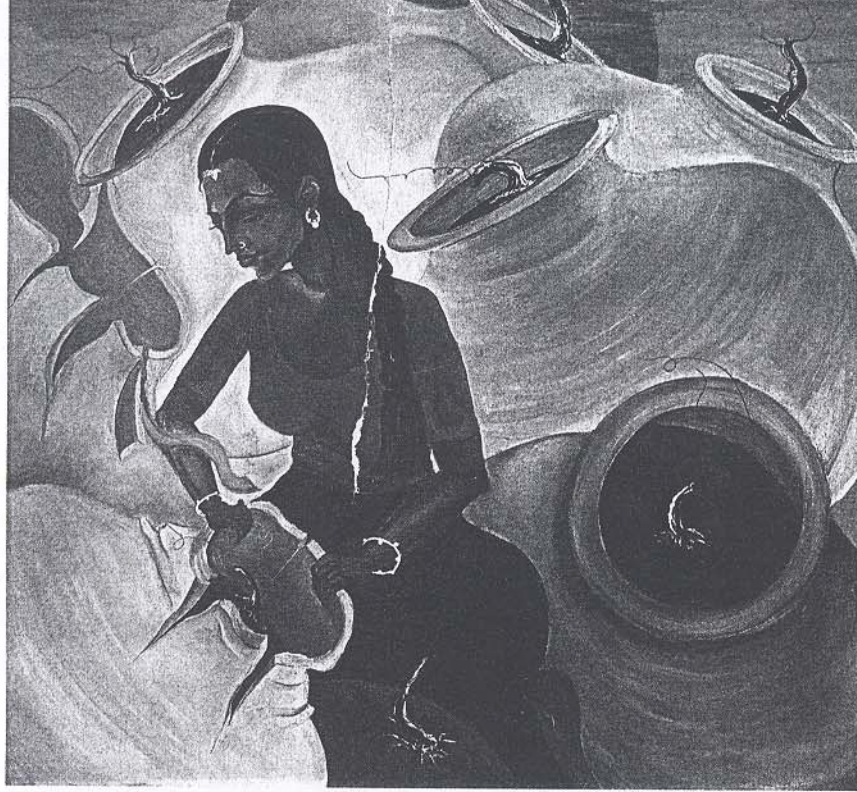
Fate of Rani KokiJan

not denote something sinister. But other than recalling all this, and turning a fleeting glance to the ephemeral pleasures the past holds, why read yet another collection of Punjabi folk tales?

The book under review offers not one but several answers to this question. In its very first line, the formidable and at once scholarly and passionate introduction tells us that this is a book that is meant to be enjoyed. And as if to make good this promise, the book offers us not one, but three parallel texts. The tales themselves are at once robust, funny, violent, sexual, peopled simultaneously by animals, birds, and humans. The boundaries of good and evil, of real and imagined, of animal and human, are constantly, and skillfully, getting subverted.

Then there is the erudite and elegant introduction, which takes the reader through the history of the folktale or wonder-tale, and delivers a feast of knowledge and information that help to read what are for many very familiar





Ghulam Badshah

LAILA REHMAN'S DRAWINGS FORM A FITTING MEDIUM FOR THIS TWENTY FIRST CENTURY RETELLING OF THE TALES OF YORE. THE INTRODUCTION WRITTEN BY SCHOLAR AND ACTIVIST NEELAM HUSSAIN PROVIDES US WITH A BOOK THAT SHOULD, ONCE AND FOR ALL, PUT TO REST DOUBTS ABOUT NEW APPROACHES TO FAMILIAR TERRAINS

the very new and unique element of a visual text, not one that necessarily and literally 'illustrates' the wonder-tale that we hold in our hands, but one that acts as a parallel and independent text, telling its own story, encouraging the reader to unravel its own mysteries, to spot birds hidden in the foliage, messages inscribed in the text, and to 'see' a different universe.

But why the return to the folktale today? Both as reminder and warning, the introduction tells us, for those for whom reading the stories is both an act of discovery and remembrance, and for those who belong to a generation "that knows only the transient pleasures of satellite television and the glitz and glamour of today's consumerist entertainment". Nor is the re-entry into this world guided by what might be seen as a moral imperative, to bring to light tales that ostensibly re-establish what is good and evil, or the supposedly simple values of village and forest life, or the 'simple' class divisions of kings and commoners. Instead, as the painstakingly re-

searched introduction establishes, the folk or wonder-tale, even though it has been used otherwise (as in many parts of Europe, say, where it was rewritten to establish a somewhat restricted nationalist ethic), provides entry into a world where boundaries are blurred and where humour is rampant and often wicked, cruelty is both deliberate and incidental, and sexuality lurks beneath the surface of many a seemingly simple story.

Despite this, patriarchy reigns supreme, and is reinforced, in the case of the Punjabi folk tale, through the colonial encounter in which it became necessary to divide cultures into more acceptable and hierarchised forms, and indeed into somewhat sanitized versions. The fact that the folktale was associated with a colonized and subject people, served to help to devalue it as well and therefore to relegate it to the margins except for the clues it provided to the mysterious workings of the 'native' mind.

Equally, it is important to recall the

folktale today because of the ways in which it recalls a more communal kind of activity, or indeed a space in which the storyteller and her listeners can connect, share, perform and take delight in the art. In the age of the computer and television, or the DVD and CD, such simultaneously intimate and collective, communal forms of sharing, where entertainment and education mix effortlessly, are few and far between.

Not only does the editor's introduction take us then through the content of the folktale and its political uses as well as the changes it has seen, it also brings to our attention the continuous process of telling and retelling which is integral to the creation and sustenance of wonder-tales, the license such tales inherently provide for different tellings in different settings, and the interesting history of what is lost, and what, if anything, gained, in the transition from the oral narrative to the written word. The versions of four colonial retellers of Punjabi folk tales are here discussed and interesting comparisons with re-renderings of Grimm's tales and other European tales are made that shed further light on the ways in which the form has changed over the years.

Suffice it then to say that the detailed introduction to these somewhat new or newer versions of the stories that we know, helps us to locate them and contextualise them not only historically but in terms of literature, orality, the written word, and social mores and values, bringing in humour, characterization, subversions and a whole host of other things.

Equally important though is the visual text. Every listener of a folk or wonder-tale builds up her own mental picture of what Raja Rasalu, or Rani Saunkhni could have looked like, or about the ghoulishness of the ghoul or about their altered appearances when they choose to masquerade as someone else. To then have one appear before you, albeit in a drawing, could bring both recognition and wonder.

Laila Rehman's beautiful and detailed drawings of the world of the folk or wonder-tale of the Punjab, brings to life an atmosphere and surroundings that will immediately and directly touch the hearts of readers. Often the nuance of the written word, the hidden meanings that lie beneath the apparent story that is being told, is difficult to capture visually. And yet, the visual medium has its own strength, the layering of colour and shade, the texture of leaf and earth, the mean-



The Death of Rasalu

ings embedded in meanings and the whole presenting, at once, a story that can be divined not in a linear way as it might be told verbally, but by building layer upon layer of meaning, by, in a literal sense, seeing the colour green and seeing the yellow and blue that lie beneath. Laila Rehman's drawings then form a fitting and entirely appropriate medium for this twenty first century retelling of the tale of yore, and together with the tales themselves, the introduction written by scholar and activist Neelam Hussain, they provide us with a book that should, once and for all, put to rest doubts about new approaches to familiar terrains. They exist, and here is evidence of one that does more than just that and provides us with a much needed alternative to the straitjackets of so many ideas and ideologies that inhabit our twenty first century world. ●

"Raja Rasalu and Other Folk Tales"
To be published in March by Simorgh Publications

LAILA REHMAN, THE ARTIST:

The paintings I did for the "Rasalu" book were composed by selecting the single point in these seamless folk tales, which to my mind captured the essence of each particular story. As the tales are peopled with many characters and incidents, I felt they too had to be brought into the visual narrative. My solution for this was to then do a series of black and white drawings, which are a totally different scale from the paintings and are different too in their medium, being pencil on paper as opposed to oil on paper; thereby further embellishing these wonderful, witty and thought-provoking stories. The drawings are interspersed in the text while the oil paintings introduce each story at the beginning. This has been a learning experience for me, in understanding the wider meanings of these tales, their multi-layered context and the connections made with other sources of myth and fantasy, which has always informed my own work. ●

