

# Dialogues Across Time: Omair Ahmad's *The Storyteller's Tale*

JASBIR JAIN

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**Abstract:** The present paper is about the long multicultural inheritance of the oral narrative, its multiple origins and use in the modern narrative. Orality need not necessarily be placed in an historical context as its moral value long survives its original context. The significant thing is the presence of the listener/s, which serves as a congregation and almost a ceremonial presence of the narrator. The tradition of oral narratives has travelled across time and space and religious and secular discourses.

Omair Ahmad's *The Storyteller's Tale* locates the narrative in mid-eighteenth century, a narrative with historical context on destruction and dislocation. Against this there are nearly half a dozen male and three women narrators. Each narrative reveals a tale of trust and betrayal, love and revenge, power and ambition. Often repetitive in their narratives, the idea of difference within repetition is fully explored as an engrossing and meaningful discourse unfolds itself, both admirable and tragic in its impact. The strength of narrativity and meaning is wrapped up in its orality leaving the reader/listener sharing the powerful emotions.

Several different locales are used: war, woods, small kingdoms, urban scapes, etc as the narrative travels from Delhi to Awadh.

*Keywords:* Orality, betrayal, trust, love, friendship, relationships, repetition

Orality is a rich inheritance that has survived over the centuries. It has multiple origins - religious discourse, public communication, children's literature - and is marked by the presence of a listener or listeners. It is a tradition interlaced with history, moral values, and human responses. In its reaching out to an audience it bridges distances. As a form, the oral narrative has travelled across time and space. In India, the epics are filled with sub narratives, which lend themselves to reinterpretation.<sup>1</sup> Then we have the *Kathasaritasagar* and the form of the 'Katha'. There are Vrat Kathas, and *Satyanarayan Ki Katha* among others. They are didactic and moralistic in intent. And can be used for political awakening as the Gandhi Kathas in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*. Sarah Joseph uses stories for ecological purposes. These have come to inhabit the modern narrative, especially in language literatures, wherein the spoken voice is prominent and storytelling a ceremony.<sup>2</sup> Examples of embedded orality abound in many classics. One wonders whether it reaches out to the illiterate or does it voice the marginal voice but whenever it enters a mainstream literary narrative it arouses interest. Contemporary writers often use it as a dislocatory strategy. Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Mario Vargas Llosa make abundant use of it in several of their novels.

The oral narrative travels across geographical space and cultures. In India, the 'Kissa' has travelled to us, as have the *Thousand and One Nights* and the Persian *Totu Maina Ki Kahani*. I could go on giving endless examples, but the important thing in its invasion of the modern narrative is to further stress its multi-layeredness and re-formation of discourse. Githa Hariharan uses myths in several of her novels. *The Thousand Faces of Night*, her very first novel, comments on the strength of the myth as a multiple discourse. When the maid narrates the myths, they are liberatory, but when her father-in-law voices the Sanskrit version, they are restrictive. In *When Dreams Travel*, she uses the *Thousand and One Nights* as a take-off point to address women's issues, their battle for survival, their suppressed desires, and unrealised dreams. Their hidden strengths and the quality of feminine bonding is also foregrounded. In *Ghosts of Vasu Master*, orality is used for addressing the obtuseness of the underdeveloped pupil, Potato Head, as Vasu narrates his mother's recipes and both teaches and inspires him and gets him to respond.

This lengthy introduction was intended to bring the oral narrative into the modern stream. Omair Ahmad's<sup>3</sup> *The Storyteller's Tale* covers both time and space. Located in the eighteenth century, the invasion of Ahmad Shah Abdali (1757) is the dislocating factor. The unnamed storyteller is the traveller who carries his past with him as an inexperienced rider he rides out of the devastated city with a royal past. He is dehousing and dispossessed. All the other main characters in the novel receive the titles of their positions, such as Begum, Mirza and Khan Sahib. But names are only provided for the younger generation, the subordinate characters, the animals, and the outcasts. The storytelling turns into a dialogue. After the first tale is over, it is followed by another. For the weary traveller had sought his way to a haveli he had spotted from the top of the hill.

As he finds his way to the haveli, his presence is not noticed all at once, but then he seeks their hospitality for the night and tells a tale in return. This is a story about an unwed mother, who is helped by her father to escape to the forest against the wrath of the villagers. In her place, her father is killed, and their house set on fire. In the forest the woman is confronted by a wolf cub and she feeds him, along with her new born son, on her breast milk. The boy, named Taka, meaning nameless, shares his name Taka with the wolf and the mother than gives her son the name Wara (free). As time passes, the wolf grown up, the woman takes to tying him with a rope when she leaves Wara alone. Once, when she is out in search of food, wild dogs attack Wara, and Taka, pulls at his rope in order to save his brother. But when the woman returns, noticing blood on Taka's mouth, a feeling of distrust and betrayal overtakes her, she kills him with her axe. This tale is of significance because it speaks of love and life, the sacrifice of the father, the growing distrust in the woman's heart and the misunderstanding that follows. The very idea of brotherhood is attacked. This tale is also important because it offers material for reinterpretations and scope for re-narration.

After a night's rest when the traveller reappears next afternoon, the Begum offers him hospitality for another night and proposes to don the role of a storyteller. All this is possible because the Mirza is away on his conquests. She envies her husband his freedom. Free spirited and bold and of Pathan heritage, she seeks expression for herself. Ahmad's story has multiple frames: there is the outer structure of the main narrative and inside this are several other stories, each offering continuity of two kinds – one linked to the first story, the other a continuation of the hidden narrative of suppressed desire and unfulfilled love, of dreams and longings, of sibling relationships not permitted to take their own course and of compulsions and failures. Within the individual stories there is,

at times, a third strand which comments on the narratological strategy. The Begum's tale is a reworking of the first story, and it reflects both on her powers of imagination and her value system, how she interprets and inducts it with new meaning and directions. It steps out of the forest to an inhabited area, to the pursuits of men and to an empire, which has changed many hands. But on its borderlands was a place called Thakir. The Begum describes the Amir as 'an intelligent man of great feeling', a man who was fortunate enough to find a wife his equal. (One wonders whether this is a silent comment on her own marriage). They had a son, who they named Aresh (generosity). But then the child's mother dies and the heartbroken Amir, in search of a wet nurse picks upon a woodcutter's wife. The Amir takes upon himself to name the woodcutter's son a name that will be worthy of him. Reluctant to give the Amir this right, the couple tries to hedge their way out of it. But persisting, the Amir named the child Barab (pillar). The two boys, Aresh and Barab, grow up as brothers. The former growing up in his freedom and the latter burdened by his inheritance. But that is not to be for long for their destiny is controlled by others more powerful and overlaid by inequalities of birth and inheritance. When a prospective match is sought for Aresh, both the boys are attracted towards the young lady who visits them. Even though Aresh pushes Barab forward, lends him his clothes the relationship does not materialise. Despite Aresh's efforts to equalise the difference, it doesn't work. Soon the time comes for them to part, to take up new responsibilities. Aresh is sent away to a magistrate friend as an apprentice in law and justice and Barab to the army to guard the empire. Unused to a city, Aresh is amazed at Yasurat, where he is to join the magistrate and his family. Humble and graceful, he soon begins his job as the magistrate's assistance, keeping his young eyes open to fathom people hearts and the impulse which may have ended in crime. In his uprightness he refuses to yield to the magistrate's wife's seductive tactics and in return he is accused of rape and thrown into prison and sentenced to death. The magistrate, though aware of his innocence, cannot declare him so, 'Too much rides upon her reputation, my reputation – I can't sacrifice all that for you' (59). The world of justice is thoroughly exposed by the magistrate's attitude who to protect his own reputation and a guilty wife is prepared to send a promising young man to his death. The magistrate visits Aresh in the prison cell and he also brings a bag with him which contains weapons of death with which Aresh could either kill himself or the guard. He decides to kill himself, thus releasing his soul to keep his appointment with his brother.

The Begum's story enlarges on the same theme as the storyteller's but it shifts it from the forest to the palace. The cycle is still not complete. The storyteller has another story to tell and thus his stay is further extended. He feels bested by the Begum's story. A woman who has not had his experience had narrated a powerful tale, one which has also gone to prove her imagination and power of invention. His story is a continuation of the Begum's story and focuses on Barab the child born in the woodcutter's family and not trained in violence. But his personality is still possessed by his parental inheritance – sometimes his mother whispers the name Taka – which in fact belongs to the first story. 'It was like living with a ghost in the house, a presence that could be sensed, but never seen. Barab grew up haunted with the name that his mother would speak, but never acknowledge (70-71). Taking to muttering in his sleep, Barab had to share the name of his former self with Aresh. But as Barab grew older, even though he discarded the conscious memory, an unconscious memory possessed him. When the woodcutter gifted both the boys with knives when they were eleven, the memory is fully aroused by watching

the sunlight gleam on the knife. Then it was not Barab but Taka: 'It was Taka who felt the throb of violence in the wood, and who instinctively knew that the steel of the blade would taste like blood. It was Taka who laughed in the woods in sudden delight. Taka who finally took possession of Barab, held his body and laughed with his voice' (72).

And then this is the opportunity to reintroduce the story of Taka and Wara. The young boy struggled to reclaim his body. Aresh weeps at the ending of the story, an emotion that the listener/reader has felt all along. How can a mother's love turn to hatred just like that 'why couldn't she just let him loose? What kind of love is that?' (73). Barab disagrees. Barab's response is an explanation not only of the first story but it also addresses the major issue in relationships that of inequality. 'Taka was a wolf, he could not have lived his life being a brother to a human.... Taka repaid his debt; he proved his love while it still existed. He died guiltless, without betraying those whom he had loved' (74). It was thus his childhood name forced on him the act of violence. Feeling an increasing strangeness in himself, one day, Barab told Aresh, 'We can't be friends' (78). The cause for this is the inequality of birth and hence of destiny.

In the meantime, the Amir is engaged in training Barab in war strategy by placing armies, castles and siege engines in place and engaged in bygone battles, and 'wars the world hadn't yet seen' (83). Through this he is teaching him the art of leadership, where his will controls the direction of the battle. Barab was thus trained to lead armies and to shoulder responsibility. A time comes when, in order to save the state, Barab decides to mislead the enemy, while the Amir can prepare for war. With only a handful of soldiers, he meets the raiders. The whole party was aware that they were too few and the attack meant sure death. Barab, before setting out, sends a letter to Aresh, to remind him of his promise to meet on a certain day, and he too dies in the border battle that ensues, I ke Aresh in the magistrates' cell. The meeting between brothers – Aresh and Barab – is this a meeting between ghosts, a meeting which sends out mixed responses amongst the audience. Is it tragic? Sublime? The keeping of a promise beyond death? 'There was silence when the story came to an end, or perhaps it was a set of silences, since the reactions of the audience had many flavours' (94). But in this the Begum also sees an insult to Mirza, who is also a brigand, a raider, in search of new conquests. And she is the kind who needs to have the last word. Through the agency of Mehrunnisa – her maid – she conveys to the traveller that his welcome is over and he should leave on the next day in the morning, but she also she pins him down to another story session, where he is to be the listener and she the teller. The storyteller held all raiders in the category of Ahmad Shah Abdali, and hated them. 'He despised them and knew that they were destroying something that they couldn't build, and whose greatness they couldn't even fully grasp' (96). Abdali had destroyed the city of poets. And though he tenders his apology, it is to no avail. The last story in this series is titled 'The magistrate's wife and the girl'. The Begum is upset because the storyteller had taken her 'own fable, a story of her own lands and opened vistas within it that she had not seen. He had undressed her like a lover, with care, marvelling at a beauty that she had never noticed' (99).

The last story is the magistrate's wife's, told after Aresh's death. On the third day of mourning, while Aresh's body was still laid on blocks of ice, she invites the most notable women of the city to the temple, where Aresh's body lay. Eager to clear her name for being the cause that led to his death, she pleads innocence and presenting them all with knives, she asks them to go and view Aresh's body to gauge how handsome he was, majestic in a way that one was irresistibly attracted to him. They all grasp their hands, in

wonder as they admire him and cut their hands. Except one. She is the girl who had visited the Amir's house, as a possible suitor for Aresh, when she was only fifteen. And as both the boys were attracted toward her. Aresh pushed Barab forward. The match did not materialise but the memory still lingers. Here is a story within a story. No farewell is ever complete or final. The confession of the magistrate's wife has reopened the past for the young woman, Nisia. Though this memory is past, the magistrate's wife still feels envious of her. Nisia has her own regrets of having missed a life with Aresh and living as his wife in Thakir, a beautiful place. But her parents called her back. Life was never the same after that. But Nisia did not figure in Aresh's story. It was a brief courtship of a bouquet of flowers one morning. After that only Barab came her way. And like a character who is still lingering behind the curtains, when the play is already over and Aresh is dead.

Like Nisia, after listening to this tale, the reluctant traveller is also sad. For would he come across a woman like Begum again in his travels a woman who could speak, invent and imagine like her? The Begum used stories to express herself. Few women were capable of that. As the journey proceeds from the devastated Delhi, through the badlands of Rohilakhand, the traveller finds his way to Awadh and many years have passed when a young man visits him. He is the Mirza's son, who had been requested by his mother to meet him so he could teach the young man a lesson – 'About what?' The young man replied – 'About leaving your love.'

The storyteller than tells him: 'After the leave-taking. . .there is the leaving. And once you have left, you discover the ten thousand things that you will still carry memories of touch, scent and sight. It is only after leaving is only after leaving that you discover the city within you has changed, and its roads wind now in different destination. After the end of love there is the unloving, when you can engage in the ceaseless hunt for all the things to be taken out, and somehow discarded, when you can fight against the new roads and try, futilely, to return to what you were before.' (118).

This leave-taking doesn't end there. It is followed by a realisation of one's own incomplete journey – 'The maps have changed, the continents have shifted, and the horizons are not what you remember.' The journey still continues, however difficult and dreary it maybe, but 'the courage to see that the first step is always departure' (118).

The storyteller's tale is an ongoing journey of relationships, of love, distrust and betrayal, of death and love, of grieving and repentance, of longing and desire of the need for freedom and the possibility of alternative routes within bondage. The Begum d longs for freedom. She cannot go out like the Mirza on journeys of adventure. Why was it that the Mirza could ride to war, could lead men to battle, and hold them by the leash of loyalty to him while she remained trapped here?' (32). This is a desire she fulfils through the strength of her imagination, her horse-riding and her own rebellious nature. The stories they exchange, build a strong narrative of their own. In actuality, the traveller tells two stories, and the Begum responds by two. Then there is the aftermath of the son's visit to Lucknow, but by the manner in which they are interwoven and the characters find new lives in fresh stories with changed names, they simply seem to multiply as they move from a forest to an empire, Thakir; from a wolf cub to a woodcutter's son And then the continuing journey to a city- a gradual enlargement of space and opening out of civilizational dimensions. And then passion, followed by revenge. In the fifth one – which again is a double story consisting of the confession of the magistrate's wife and the long suppressed longing for Aresh in Nisia's heart! All the stories work with the emotions that crowd one's life, while the exchange between the traveller and the Begum's son is a summing up of life – the need to go on, to hoard memories and yet to move on.

These stories, despite the aura of distance they carry, are very real. Even the very first story where the wolf cub shares Wara's mother and his cast-off name. Located in mid-eighteenth century, it keeps on defining physical locations and relates to history. The writer's strategy is to remind us constantly of the fact that such emotions are real, not very distant from our own times or lives. The presence of a listener who is determined to switch rules in almost every story is another factor. It is not only the Begum who takes up throws a challenge, it is even Nisia who narrates her own story to the magistrate's wife's confession bringing out the difference in the way the two women have faced disappointment in their love. From the earlier stories also the Begum has a firm control over her desires – it is not only the traveller who was attracted towards her, she too was more than half in love with him for he offered an antidote to her loneliness. The game they play is akin to a game of chess, later reflected in Amir's training sessions with Barab. The repetition within these stories – changed names with similar meanings, similar conflicts with different endings – is both creative and enriching. It also adds to the meaning as the winding narrative sets to reveal its hidden layers and suppressed meanings. As Deleuze has worked out in his work *Repetition and Difference*, no repetition is ever the same, 'Repetition is not generality. .... Reflections, echoes doubles and souls do not belong to the domain of resemblance or equivalence; and it is no more possible to exchange one's soul than it is to substitute real twins for one another'. He goes on to expound, 'To repeat is to behave in a certain manner, but in relation to something unique or singular which has no equal or equivalent' and perhaps this repetition 'at the level of external conduct echoes. for its own part, a more secret vibration which animates it, a more profound, internal within the singular' (1).<sup>4</sup> We find repetitions working very significantly in Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, reflecting on faith, doubt, and conflict, to reveal the triangular relationship between the father, his son and God There are three different endings in the narrative.

The distance in time in Ahmad's *The Storyteller's Tale* narrative is not a distance from life. It is in an identifiable historical period. It does not present the self-enclosed or enticing world of Alladin or Sindbad the Sailor. Instead it summons us to dwell within the narrative to explore our own emotions, to imagine loss and to find meaning in our experiences. Ahmad's *Tale* different from his other works, works with an unfamiliar ground and yet one so much a part of our childhood. Fascinating and absorbing, it does not unravel itself in one reading. It offers a rare example of storytelling. So far removed yet so close. It touches both our heart and mind, like a sad song or unsung ghazal. It is close to a fable, loaded as it is with meaning, leaving its readers free to approach it from any angle – narratological, structural, gender, power, jealousy and so many other ways, leading one to multiple journeys of interpretation. Where then is reality? I need here to refer to Paul Ricoeur's concept of mimesis, expounded so beautifully in his *Time and Narrative*. Ricoeur works with three stages of mimesis: Mimesis<sub>1</sub> is an objective description of how human action actually takes place, the second stage, Mimesis<sub>2</sub>, is the emplotment. It serves as a mediating function. The third and the final stage, Mimesis<sub>3</sub>, integrates the imagined and the experienced – the actual lived experience and the fictive perspective.<sup>5</sup> Ahmad's world is inhabited by recognisable human characters, who could exist in any age. And around them he weaves a fascinating tale of love and disappointment, of hatred and revenge, of dreams and passion, and of friendship and trust.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup>This is evident in Girish Karnad's plays and several other writers like Shankar Shesh and others, who have used stories from the Mahabharata and reinterpreted them for our times. Refer Karnad's *Yayati* amongst several others.
- <sup>2</sup>My reference, here is to Sarah Joseph's *Gift in Green* (Malayalam, translated simultaneously into English). In Joseph's novel the storyteller has a ritual bath and then proceeds to tell the story. Every time there is a different storyteller and at the end of the story the audience invariably wants to find out, 'how can we use it in life?.'
- <sup>3</sup>Omar Ahmad's other works include a political history of Bhutan and the eastern Himalayan region and a novel *Jimmy the Terrorist*, shortlisted for the Man Asian Booker Prize and has been awarded the Crossword Prize. A journalist by profession, he lives in the US.
- <sup>4</sup>See Deleuze's Introduction to his *Difference and Repetition* (1968), translated by Paul Patton, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.
- <sup>5</sup>Ricoeur's concept of mimesis is spread over all the three volumes, but the summing up takes place in the third volume.

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