On the Question of National Identity of Traditional Formulae as the Facts of Peoples’ Culture

Oksana A. Egorova*

Lomonosov Moscow State University, 1, Bld.61, Leninskie Gory, Moscow, 119991, Russia

Abstract

The article deals with the study of the differences between Russian and British fairy tales on the question of national identity. We consider the issue of national identity of traditional formulae as facts of various peoples’ culture. It is shown that the versatility of the fairy tale as a genre is made up of that common thing serving as a background for visual rendering of nationally driven differences in the mentality.

1. Introduction

Our time is the time of active international exchange in cultural values, where significant importance belongs to folklore. Fairy tales, as one of the traditional folk genres, have served as a plentiful source of the richest material for scientific studies for a long time, and integrating function in this row is the cultural studies. Folklore is a complex form of public spirit, an area of people’s spiritual culture that reflects the people’s perception of the world. The roots of folklore are a historical basis for artistic culture and go back to extreme antiquity. Folklore represents the main moral and ethical values of the people, which is believed to be called its ‘roots’ or ‘soul’. Today, in the era of total globalization and unification, resorting to the roots of large and small peoples, to folk culture has a special importance. Fairy tale as one of the most widespread, virtually universal folklore genres is that common basis that serves as a background for visual representation of nationally driven differences in mentality.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +7-495-510-5205
E-mail address: salpaks@mail.ru
The main characteristic of folklore language is conventionality. In tales this peculiarity is expressed primarily in the use of multiple and various traditional formulae. They are of a special interest for cultural studies since their affiliation with the culture facts is undeniable, and the most difficult issue of allocation of culture facts from ‘other facts not being the culture facts but representing the current activity’ (Rozhdestvenskiy, 2000) in this case was positively resolved back at the time of verbal being of folk tales. It was resolved based on ‘expert assessments’ that, from the view point of folk culture, can be considered most objective of all, with the ‘expert’ being the collective author – the very people.

So it seems interesting to consider the issue of national identity of traditional formulae as culture facts of different peoples, where the very universality of fairy tale as a genre makes that common that is background for obvious representation of nationally driven differences in perception of the world.

2. Comparative analysis of Russian and English fairy tales

2.1. Similarities in the main characters’ description

From a purely linguistic point of view, the notion of traditional formula, in accordance with a set of its segregation criteria, covers phenomena of all language levels – from one word to complete sentences and even paragraphs (Egorova, 2002). Thus, in Russian tales we can believe that names of many fairy articles and names of heroes being complex words such as magic table-cloth, Koshchei the Deathless Wizard, the Fire-Bird, Yelena the Fair, the Mare with the Golden Mane, Baba-Yaga, Zmei Gorinich are symbolic. At the same time, fairy tales also use expanded symbolic dialogues. They have comparably stable expression forms which are used in certain similar situations, and they are repeated in many fairy tales. They are characterized by component unity and stereotypically worded cues. Let’s look at the example of a widely used scene where the leading character meets Baba-Yaga witch:

Maryushka came to a glade in the woods and she saw a little hut on hen’s feet spinning round and round.

“Little hut, little hut,” said Maryushka, “turn your back to the trees and your face to me, please. Let me in to eat bread within.”

The little hut turned its back to the trees and its face to Maryushka, and in Maryushka went. And whom did she see there but Baba-Yaga, the witch with the switch, a bony hag with a nose like a snag.

Baba-Yaga caught sight of Maryushka and muttered:

“Ugh, ugh, Russian blood, never met by me before, now I smell it at my door. Who comes here? Where from? Where to?”

“I am looking for Fenist the Falcon, Granny dear.”

“He’s a long way off, my pretty one! You will have to pass through the Thrice-Nine Lands to the Thrice-Ten Tsardom to find him...”

In English tales such formulae are also very popular. They are vocalized by negative characters – giants, elves’ king, evil Red Ettin – who smell humans in their houses, for example:

‘Snouk but! And snouk ben!
I find the smell of an earthly man,
Be he living, or be he dead,
His heart this night shall kitchen my bread’

Linguistically, the formulae in Russian and English tales represent a wide range of stylistic phenomena: epithets (Koshchei the Deathless; Marya Morevna the Lovely Tsarevna; dark/dense/thick/ green/ forest, fine steed, fine maiden, cherry cheeks, golden hair, bonny man, coal-black steed, magic wand), comparisons (…the girl-baby grew white as milk, with cheeks like roses and lips like cherries; his goggle eyes were like flame of fire), set expressions, which are met in strictly determined points of the text (Beyond the Thrice-Nine Lands in the Thrice-Ten Tsardom; By the Will of the Pike, do as I like; ‘Fee, fo, fi, fum! I smell the blood of a Christian man…’), lexical and syntactic repetitions etc.

From the point of cultural studies, all this variety of above mentioned linguistic and – more broadly speaking – philological phenomena meeting the criteria of folklore formula character, pursuant to Rozhdestvenskiy’s theory of culture facts (2000), can be defined as precedents and rules. The first are ‘expressions’ of people’s esthetics and wisdom, readily injected into the text (bonnie lady; fine girl; dark forest; golden hair; she was as sweet as a rose;
eyes like a coal of fire), the second set the rules of joining the certain elements in a fairy tale text (they went on, and they went on, till they came to a castle; so they rode and they rode and they rode, till they got out of the forest; but the wave grew, and grew, and grew behind them, until it reached the giant’s waist; then it grew and grew until it reached his shoulders; and it grew and grew until it swept over his head). And both of them are undisputable attributes of the text affiliation to folklore tradition that is people’s culture.

Fairy heroes, events and characters get both in Russian and in English tales stable, permanent epithets, that facilitates creation of homogeneity and predictability of folklore text content. Their comparative analysis allows to understand which feature of folk temper and image are significant for Russians and for English people, as permanent epithets cover not all qualities of characters, usually highlighting only those of them that are deemed as principally important.

The most common epithet of positive assessment of male characters that contains syncretically indiscrete assessment of both external and internal properties is the adjective good (good man/husband/boy). The next in terms of currency is a number of epithets expressing such male temper qualities as unselfishness, kindness, simplicity and even naivety (good, kind, kind-hearted, simple, foolish). As regards female fairy characters, the most universal epithets in both traditions are adjectives that give positive evaluation of a character’s appearance: fair, beautiful, bonnie. The most important features of female temper in both fairy traditions are intellect, wisdom and common sense (wise, clever), as the women in many cases help main hero to cope with difficult tasks and resolve difficult issues. Other positive properties of male and female characters both in Russian and English tales sort of take a backseat and don’t find such successive expression in epithets.

2.2. Differences in positive and negative description

An exclusive legacy of the Russian fairy tale tradition however is expanded through permanent epithets representing poetic formulae such as: a little hut on hen's feet spinning round and round; Baba-Yaga, the witch with the switch, a bony hag with a nose like a snag; the Horse with the Golden Mane.

But English tales are characterized by a method of accumulation of simple adjective epithets also used for enhancing the impression at description, for example: beautiful, shiny, yellow, golden egg; the dreadful, terrible, horrible beasts. This difference in approaches leads us to significant difference in mentality: irrepressible imagery of thinking and rich imagination of a Russian man on one side, and self-command, even some unidimensionality, demonstrated by the Englishmen who don’t allow themselves, even being under strong emotions, to heavily deviate from reality.

Stronger certainty of thinking and 'reality' of images is also manifested in English fairy tales in a selection of formula comparisons. So, comparisons usually describe quite thoroughly appearance of a character: they describe the paleness of a girl’s face, the beauty of her eyes, cheeks, lips and hair. In addition, the beauty of English fairy tale characters is rather real, ‘earthy’: eyes as green as grass, lips like cherries, cheeks red as June roses.

The heroine of Russian fairy tales has ineffable beauty:
Tsarevna Maria, a maiden as fair as the sky at dawn,
the fairest maiden that ever was born.
Vasilisa the Wise and Clever, a maiden fair beyond compare.
...her eyes as bright as the rays of the sun.

The most popular, and substantially universal descriptive formula of the Russian tale, is certainly used not only towards the female character, but also in relation to a male character, his horse, fairy palace etc.: so beautiful was she/he/it that it could not be pictured and could not be told, but was a true wonder and joy to behold! Its importance has some out-of-the-limit nature, pointing at the fairy exclusiveness of an object it defines.

The rich imagination of the Russian men and pragmatic self-command of the Englishmen affect selection of permanent epithets that determine magic assistants, fairy means and articles. While in Russian tales that reflect ancient culture of the Slavs and their perceptions about the surrounding world epithets serve for individualization and pointing at their various qualities and properties: Self-Playing Psaltery, the Dancing Goose, the Glee-Maker Cat, silver saucer and golden egg, quick-and-nible-the-size-of-a-thimble, sack-help-me-out-with-a-whack, Milk River with Fruit-Jelly Banks, rosy-cheeked apple, in English fairytale tradition the very common generalized
adjective magic only points at functional purpose of those articles: magic wand, magic beans, magic table, magic sword, magic shoes, magic donkey, magic flask etc.

Framing (start and final) and medial formulae of English and Russian folk tales belongs to the most important constituent attributes of this folklore genre and, thus, may be considered precedential facts of the culture.

In both traditions, fairytale formulae of the starting action and end-piece embody main genre-forming attributes of a fairy tale, unity of its poetics and stylistics. They formalize characteristics that are fundamental for the fairy tale, in particular space and time characteristics.

Both in Russian and English fairy tales starting topographic formulae in most cases have undefined nature: In a certain kingdom, in a certain land; in a great castle; in a forest; in a house; once upon a time etc. But peculiarity of the English fairy tale tradition in this case lies in significantly higher certainty of the English thinking: along with indefinite and abstract raising actions in English tales not infrequent are also indications to quite definite time of action with mentioning of historical and legendary figures: in the days of the great King Arthur...; in the reign of King John etc. The certainty of thinking of English people is also manifested in the fact that they think by more specific categories of a fortress, county, city: in Bamborough Castle; in Norroway; at Dalton, near Thirsk, in Yorkshire, while the starting formulae of the Russian tales contain only the widest notions of country, state, kingdom: Beyond the Thrice-Nine Lands in the Thrice-Ten Tsardom.

The main function of final formulae in both traditions is to point at a happy conclusion of the narration. But in Russian fairy tales final formulae are multiple and various, and, in addition to stating about final wealth of characters, they also place a special emphasis on an end of narration of the tale, reward the tale-teller, tell about his presence at the banquet:

...Ivanushko had a well, in this well was a bell, and that’s all I have to tell;

So that was a little tale for you, and I’ll have some butter too!

Here we again see unrestrained game of imagination of Russian tale-tellers who don’t burden themselves with the desire to arrange reasonable narration. And final formulae of the English tales are represented only by one type that tells about final prosperity of characters, and always use words happy, happily, happiness. For example: ... and they were all very happy, and good, and loving, as long, as they lived.

So in due time he came to the throne and lived a long, happy, and good life as king.

...and lived many years in happiness and prosperity.

3. Conclusion

Having analyzed the texts of Russian and English fairy tales we have distinguished some similarities and differences in the perception of the world’s picture. Some adjectives are considered to be the most common epithets of positive assessment in the description of male and female characters. In English fairy tales some adjectives are characteristic for the description of heroines, while in Russian tales they are used not only towards the female character, but also in relation to a male character, his horse, fairy palace etc. It has also been determined that the rich imagination of the Russian men and pragmatic self-command of the Englishmen affect selection of permanent epithets. A significantly higher certainty of the English thinking also influences the final formulae of the conclusion making it not so multiple and various as that in Russian fairy tales.

Thus, plenty of emotionally tinted – including metrical and rhymed - formulae containing something unusual and attractively interesting for listeners, emphasis of “other-worldliness” and unreality of a fairy narration once again supports the conclusion about the love of the Russian people to something fairy and magic. While English formulae that are mainly more real are indicative of the drive to stay as much as possible within the limits of something that can be understood and is ‘terrestrial’ or real.

References