

Dissecting The Toto Myths, Tales, and Legends: Review of *Oral Stories of the Totos* by Ketaki Datta

Sreetanwi Chakraborty

Assistant Professor, Amity Institute of English Studies and Research, Amity University, Kolkata, West Bengal, India.

Mail Id: schakraborty3@kol.amity.edu | ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2936-222X>

Bibliographic Information:

Name of the Book: **Oral Stories of the Totos**

Author: **Ketaki Datta**

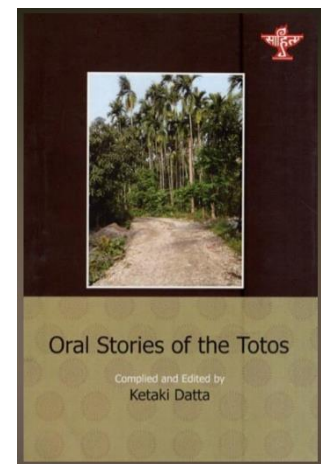
Publisher: Sahitya Akademi

Pages: 134

Language: English

ISBN: 978-93-5548-046-0

Price: INR 150



In the seminal work *Postmodern Narrative Theory*, the author Mark Currie points out about theoretical fiction:

“Some fictional narratives seem to be more theoretical than others. Sometimes writers seem to choose consciously between fiction and the dry abstractions of a theoretical work.” (Currie, 48)

In another work named *Short Story Theories: A Twenty-First Century Perspective*, the author Viorica Patea says in the chapter titled “The Short Story: An Overview of the History and Evolution of the Genre”:

“A story is a way to say something that can’t be said any other way, and it takes every word in the story to say what the meaning is. You tell a story because a statement would be inadequate. When anybody asks what a story is about, the only proper thing is to tell him to read the story. The meaning of fiction is not abstract meaning but experienced meaning, and the purpose of making statements about the meaning of the story is only to help you to experience that meaning more fully.” (Patea, 1)

For author Ketaki Datta who has compiled and edited *Oral Stories of the Totos*, the meaning of fiction acquires not this abstract meaning. It is a consummate appraisal of the lives lived, the social, religious, economic aspects of the Toto community, a small tribe living in the Alipurduar district of West Bengal. She takes a profound interest in the cultural production and amalgamation of their artistic forms, linguistic diversities and community cohesion that makes them very different from the other neighbouring people included as part of the Koch, the Mech, the Bhutanese tribes or even from the Rajbongshis to a large extent. As we examine the introduction and then each of the chapters very carefully, we find how there is the reference to a 'cultural osmosis' by the author, and intercultural weddings have given rise to an exchange of cultural diversity from Nepal. The balancing act happens when the Totos have to retain their old socio-cultural milieu and yet be open and adaptive to the newer, incoming alternative ideas from Nepal and other neighbouring countries.

The book contains detailed chapter divisions and segments that depend on Toto folk tales, on the tales that are genuinely in Toto tongue, and a comparative analysis of Toto tales with other folk tales and legends of the world. Each story is unique, each experience is tinged with a new fervour where the author has consciously maintained the lucidity and the flavour of the original meaning, expressiveness and sentiments, the resultant effect of which is a rich tapestry of imagistic and linguistic grandeur that never fails to provide literary and academic finesse. Just as we are so accustomed to find the animal images in *Aesop's Fables* or in the *Panchatantra*, in *Oral Stories of the Totos* also replete with animal stories, ghost stories from the villages, mythological tales related to Sita's banishment, creation of man and woman etc. The art of storytelling translated emotional features and retention of the uniqueness of Toto culture- Ketaki Datta's narrative acquires a modern dimension of storytelling that does not negate the traditional essence of the tribe. For instance, in one of the stories, Hispa and the Pudua Hills, the author commences the narration with a vivid, pictorial elimination between nature and human, and also blending both in terse yet effective words:

"These are two hills of Totopara: Hispa and Pudua. The Pudua Hill happens to be the maternal uncle of the Hispa Hill. And the Hispa Hill is the nephew of the Pudua. They were never on good terms with each other. We come across such relationship among humans as well. Their bone of contention had been the height, since ages." ([Datta](#), 34)

The simple stories of two hills not in good terms with each other and the bone of contention as visible among human beings- simple narratives excavate the deeper, more practical aspects of life. Loss, rage, competitive spirit, and a desire never to compromise. It is quite laudable how Sahitya Akademi has been working relentlessly to highlight the translated narratives and edited volumes in English of the marginalized tribes and communities through their works. For a re-reading and re-presentation of the Totos, this book is undoubtedly a collector's companion.

If we take recourse to our reminiscing ability, we shall find out how the Asiatic Society also played an important role in highlighting the Sociological perspective of the Toto Folk Tales. Bimalendu Majumdar's *A Sociological Study of the Toto Folk Tales* does not represent a paradigmatic shift in the study of the tribe. However, since there are incisive portions that deal with village organization, *Totopara*, storyteller-listener relationship and engagement and also the religious facets of the small and isolated tribes like the Totos, the book becomes a trustworthy document for future studies on the Toto tribe.

Datta's book, on the other hand, is more equipped with an intrinsic literary richness of its own. What belongs to traditional moment-spinning and antiquity acquires a kaleidoscopic vision in her diction, phrases, expressions, images and in the fluidity of her style. The lines are not just thrown perfunctorily; they are rigorous in communicating through the Toto oral narratives a distinct identity and existence of their own. Monsters, magicians, doting parents, and a young damsel in distress- we are so accustomed to relating to these stories across cultures. For instance, in the story of Mentumu, Datta writes about the parents Wangdi and Onkoma who had a daughter named Mentumu. Her husband was Janapu, residing in another village. The parents left their home for tilling the land but exposed the real condition of the village that was vulnerable in the hand of the monsters. The monsters used to ravage the village, feed on cattle and one day while Mentumu fell asleep while spinning thread, they also abducted her. She was taken to the custody of the demons, giants and a vigilant sorcerer-woman who forbade the demons to kill her. Gradually, it becomes a story displaying the prowess and intelligence of Mentumu, a fine power game ensues when she makes use of the magician's wand and returns to her village. The story ends with a promise where Janapu, Mentumu and her parents live happily ever after:

“A kite was flapping its wings near her and she implored the kite to reach her husband the news of her arrival.” (Datta, 44)

Hence, far from just being a simple compilation, the book is also a distinct representation of the indigenous culture and marginalized narratives. If the empire has already started writing back, then what better value addition to it than this book? The Totos have never failed to live up to their traditions, old and ancient myths, and cultural cohesion- a force that does not terminate into a long-drawn battle of identities where their uniqueness is bound to get eroded. Datta's compilation is an authentication of this identity that now becomes a more immense, more globalized phenomenon, and not just any regional folkloric narration.

References

- Currie, Mark. *Postmodern Narrative Theory*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010.
Patea, Viorica. *Short Story Theories: A Twenty-First-Century Perspective*. Brill, 2012.
Datta, Ketaki. *Oral Stories of the Totos*, Sahitya Akademi, 2021.

Reviewer's details: Sreetanwi Chakraborty is an Assistant Professor in Amity Institute of English Studies and Research, Amity University Kolkata. She graduated from Presidency College Kolkata, did her Postgraduation from the University of Calcutta, and obtained her M. Phil from Rabindra Bharati University on *The Sleeping Beauty Wakes Up: A Feminist Interpretation of Fairy Tales*. This was published as a book in 2019, and it received the “Rising Star” Award for non-fiction category at New Town Book Fair, Kolkata. She has been the recipient of the “Charuchandra Ghosh Memorial Award” for securing the highest marks from Calcutta University. At present she is pursuing her Ph. D from Ranchi University (submission in February 2022). She is the Chief Editor of a

bilingual biannual academic journal Litinfinitive, with more than 14 indexing of international repute and archived in 57 international libraries. Apart from academic publications in reputed national and international journals, her translations and literary articles have been published in Bengali and notable English journals and magazines in India, Bangladesh, and South Africa. Her areas of interest include Indian English poetry, Indian English drama, Feminism and cultural politics, and South Asian Diasporic Studies. She has passed 5th year in Rabindra Sangeet, with distinction and 4th year in classical music from Prayag Sangeet Samiti, Allahabad. She is a trained painter in oil, acrylic, water colour and charcoal.