

Cathartic and Therapeutic Values of Story Telling

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Abstract: Story telling has been an ancient tradition in many cultures. Each civilization has a story to tell of its own. There have been oral traditions followed by written documents. It is indisputable that a story carries with it the genealogy, wisdom and ethos of a particular area or tribe. But it also carries the baggage of feelings, emotions and happenings which strike a chord with audience which help purge destructive feelings which would otherwise harm human psyche. In this respect, they act as powerful healing tools. They work silently, but surely. In this paper, an attempt will be made to rediscover the therapeutic values of stories since ancient times till now. Stories offer a rich repertoire of knowledge of things and people and offer solutions for many problems in life or at least give an understanding of the problems and help face them bravely. Examples are taken from oldest civilizations till date to highlight the effect of stories on human development.

Key words: Cathartic, genealogy, rediscover

Storytelling has been as old as the human civilization. Before language was discovered, it was pictorial. There were many stories handed over through oral tradition before writing came into existence. Stories are a means by which people can share their ideas, hopes, and fears. Most of the folklore has been orally handed over from generation to generation since hundreds of years. It is a tool that binds people together and helps build communities. They become the collective consciousness of a community.

Humans are hard wired for storytelling (Pickering and Garrod 2004)

All ancient civilizations have legends, myths, parables, epics and so on which reflect their identity. We are aware of the Greek, Chinese, Indian, Roman myths which bear meaning even till today. Humans have been trying to understand and explain the cosmos, emergence of life, disasters in the universe, complex human relations and so on. Each culture has tried to address the issues in their own way and these stories form the psyche of that community or civilization. For example the fall of man, the story of Adam and Eve in the Bible. In Indian Mythology, Indra's vajrayudha creates the thunderbolt: it is Zeus: the God of thunderbolt for the Greeks. Some have explanations for afterlife like the river of forgetfulness Hydres in Greek mythology and river Vaitharini in our culture. These stories handover the wisdom of ages encapsulated as stories. They signify the culture and tradition of community or a civilization. These stories also give a model and moral code of conduct for humans:

which acts are accepted and which aren't! We know pride is punished and treachery is wrong through the story of Prometheus. Some myths explain why eclipses occur (Rahu, Ketu) or how far how an angered mother can bring havoc on earth (famine) to get back her daughter (story of Hades and Persephone). Aesop's fables, the Panchatantra, Akbar-Birbal stories, Tenali Ramakrishna stories have entertained, educated and amused us for centuries.

Human life is too short to go through myriad experiences and learn. Stories offer a wide spectrum of experiences which humans can undergo and learn from. By identifying and connecting with the plot and characters of a story, a whole lot of emotions are generated and experienced de facto. These emotions, if let out in reality, could have been dangerous. By experiencing these emotions through stories, they are catharsized and healing takes place. Stories thus become a vent for unacceptable feelings or acts.

It was the intellect and the power of story which kept Scheherazade alive in the "Thousand and one nights". By raising the curiosity of the wicked Shahryar, she gains life and is saved from death. Again it's the Bhagavatha told by Shuka Muni which gave moksha to Parikshit who faced a curse of death in a week. Stories uplift you to wider realms and by being in the world of fiction, it becomes easier to shape the reality.

Sharing stories connects us to one another. When we convey both information and our personal experiences through storytelling, our listeners begin to connect what they hear to their own lives. Through this process, rapport is built, along with credibility and trust. Even the advertising industry is using stories for selling their products. In a matter of few minutes a story is told and we are tuned to it and believe it consciously or unconsciously.

Storytelling is one way in which people better understand the events that have happened in their lives (Lawrence & Paige 2013)

A person perhaps who lost everything in gambling, can relate himself to the Pandavas. Karna can be a solace for a man caught in bad friendship. The popular Tollywood and Bollywood films are a reflection of the popular sentiments and emotions of the people and by watching them, the audience can relive the experiences and perhaps look at their own experiences in a better perspective. It is not just adults, story-telling can be advantageous to children too. Apart from building vocabulary and imparting other language skills, stories are said to better express their emotions.

Children do not always have the words they need to express their emotions and thoughts, and storytelling is one way that supports them in building that emotional understanding (Figueroa- Sánchez 2008).

The findings of An Action Research Report By Elizabeth Erickson on "Effects of Storytelling on Emotional Development" state that telling stories with children benefitted them. It allowed the children the opportunity to hear about how someone else felt an emotion and dealt with it.

According to Freud, stories re-enact fundamental experiences of loss and recovery. In Freudian terms, stories engage a more fundamental human anxiety over loss. By dramatizing both loss and recovery, stories offer a safe and emotionally manageable means of rehearsing deeper fears. Freud's ideas go beyond the notion that we enjoy stories because we relate to the characters or events they portray. Rather, stories arguably bear deep-rooted similarities to the very structure of our emotional experience. By listening to and sharing stories people can gain better insight into those around them and themselves. Telling a story allows a person to reflect on their thoughts and express them with an emotion attached. Through reflection, a storyteller can gain deeper insight into one's self.

Any trauma or violence faced in childhood or otherwise gets concealed and repressed by memory for sustenance. These traumas can affect human behaviour in strange ways, if unresolved. Human psyche needs an outlet to resolve these issues which will otherwise hit back in unwelcome forms. This technique is used in counselling patients. They are told to narrate their experiences through which they revisit their past.

The narrators increasingly find themselves in a stream of memories; impressions, images, sensual and physical feelings and components of the remembered situation come up, some of which do not fit in their present situation and that they have not thought about for a long time. They gain new perspectives hitherto unseen in the past. Through the narration, the past is won back more as a real and accessible part of the life story.

African literature is replete with the trauma and violence of racism and the coping mechanisms. Because of the suffering under slavery, most people who had been enslaved tried to repress these memories in an attempt to forget the past. This repression and dissociation from the past causes a fragmentation of the self and a loss of true identity.

Maya Angelou says "There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story within you". The past cannot be erased. It remains in memory, sometimes as a collective memory in a race, which affects the present. We need to heal the past to have a meaningful present. The war literature too deals with the deeds of the past which affect the present.

In the novel "Beloved" by Toni Morrison, the ghost of slavery and the trauma of it haunts the main characters who fail to form an identity because of the repressed memories. Sethe, Paul D., and Denver all fail to form an identity. The disassociation from the past causes a fragmentation of the self and a loss of true identity. The narration makes them go through those memories, reassess them, realign them so as to reintegrate the past into the present. Eventually this leads to catharsis of emotions.

The key for this to happen is to distance oneself from the past through the narration and as the narration continues, to narrate oneself out of the linearity of the experiences from the time of the persecution. This helps to see the past objectively.

We see how the story goes cyclic, hinging around the central idea of the trauma of violence. Eventually, what is important is not necessarily wanting to eradicate the traces of the past in the present but instead learning to accept them so as to have a vibrant and meaningful present. This is the therapeutic effect of story-telling.

We can conclude that Storytelling is an integral part of human civilization. And, anyone can tell a story, making it an incredibly empowering and effective form of communication for multiple scenarios. Context, plot, characters, information, emotions are woven together to involve humans in the beautiful creative art of storytelling. It integrates individual into the community and ultimately at the global level. From being a pedagogical tool for language acquisition to psychological tool for emotional purgation, story is transformative. It transmits culture and traditions through generations and empowers self. So what is your story?

References

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