



The Crisis of Identity in Folk Literature: A Postmodern Perspective

Saurabh Lohchab¹, Dr. Surekha Ahlawat²

¹ Research Scholar, Department of English, M.M.H. College, Ghaziabad, Uttar Pradesh, India.

² Professor, Department of English, M.M.H. College, Ghaziabad, Uttar Pradesh, India.

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.14.1.153](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.14.1.153)



Article info

Article Received: 06/01/2026
Article Accepted: 04/02/2026
Published online: 09/02/2026

Abstract

This paper analyses the transformation of folk literature including myths, tales, and legends as it confronts the challenges of the postmodern era. Traditionally, folklore served as a stable, essentialist (fixed, unchanging) mechanism for establishing cultural identity and transmitting unifying truths. The Postmodern condition, formulated through Jean-François Lyotard's "incredulity towards metanarratives" (grand, totalizing stories) and globalizing forces, upsets this balance, setting in motion a crisis of narrative identity. This paper contends that this crisis is resolved not by abandoning folklore but through its radical adaptation. Assuming the post-structuralist strategies of fragmentation (breakdown of an integrated self and linear narrative), hybridity (mixing of cultural forms), and critical parody, folk narratives morph into dynamic instruments negotiating fluid, multiple, and non-essentialist identities. From modern urban legends to post-colonial Indian literature, this analysis has shown that the folklore of today remembers cultural memory and resists vigorously the rigid, totalizing assertions of the past with which such memory was often imbued and, in the process, has retained its critical relevance in an unhinging world.

Keywords: Folk Literature, Postmodernism, Cultural Identity, Metanarratives, Hybridity, Fragmentation, Post-colonialism.

Introduction

The Foundation of Stability in Folk Literature: For many years, folk literature was the bedrock of ethnic identity and continuity. Traditional stories represented an essential paradigm for the transmission of the shared values, signs, and history from one generation of people to another (Chichelberger 527-534). In this paradigm, identity represented a solid and

unique construct that was gradually extracted from the long-held tradition of the people (Chichelberger 528).

These stories provided a kind of "real truth and knowledge" for communities, which led them towards self-knowledge and a feeling of community's wholeness through providing moral models and successful resolutions of symbolic conflicts (Chichelberger 528). The very

essence of this system and its stability were based upon the conviction of the "unchangeable and objective truth" of these stories.

The Postmodern Challenge to Unity

The stabilizing function of folklore is confronted for the first time in history with the skeptical critique of the postmodern condition. The postmodern worldview believes there is no chance for universal truths, fixed meanings, or integrated metanarratives in history.

At the same time, the consequence of globalization, which is interspersed with the diffusion of popular culture throughout the world, leads to processes of "intercultural penetrations that disrupt national and communal identities on a profound level" (Kaul; see Lieber and Weisberg 274). This creates a situation that requires people not only to rebuild their own identities but to rebuild them within a situation that sees the erosion of cultural foundations that had defined them (Sunayna 129). Conversely, the failure of collective folklore in the provision of meaning within a world that finds its identity divided on a psychological level reflects the extent of these crises.

The philosophical approach to understanding this shift is produced by key thinkers, including Lyotard, who criticizes grand narratives, Michel Foucault, exploring the role of discourse as a tool of power, Jacques Derrida, questioning meanings, Stuart Hall, proclaiming the fluidity of cultural identities, and Linda Hutcheon, who highlights critical parody as the key approach to engaging with tradition.

Thesis Statement

The crisis of identity in folklore literature is not an occasion for the death of the traditional, but one of necessary transformation, since, in an acceptance of postmodern fragmentation and hybridity, folklore today succeeds in resisting definition, in becoming an

ever-changing site of intertextual exploration of the very identities of the global world.

Literature Review

The study of identity in folklore is inherently divided between two critical perspectives: the essentialist focus on continuity and the postmodern focus on multiplicity.

The Traditional vs. Fragmented Self

The traditional paradigm focuses on the cohesive aspect of folklores, where stories are seen as mirrors of "basic psychological structures" to establish identity (Chichelberger, Critical, 530). The modern literary critique, on the other hand, focuses on the instability, multiplicity (multiple, non-integrated selves) of identity, and the defiance of single categorizations (Vaschenko).

Theorists such as Stuart Hall also clarify that "identity is a 'moment' that is open to transformation by contemporary difference as well as by shared history" (Hall). The problem occurs because traditional folklore, which once contained fixed solutions (Slobin 19), "no longer knows how to deal with a psychological crisis that is essentially characterized by chaos and consists in the discovery that 'ultimate truth did not exist'" (Sunayna 129).

Theoretical Gaps and Adaptive Strategies

In fact, it becomes imperative to analyze traditional myths from an entirely different perspective, since they themselves exemplify metanarratives (Lyotard). It therefore becomes crucial to attempt an understanding of how these cultural resources can sustain themselves within this radical skepticism.

This study fills that gap by examining the actual adaptive process for this change and finding the solution through critical intertextuality, which is sometimes implemented through the tool of parody (a repetition with critical difference of an authoritative text). Linda Hutcheon describes the process of parody as "a repetition with

critical difference," the dualistic movement that at once acknowledges the tie to the original heritage and at the same time criticizes the ideological claims of that heritage (Hutcheon). This is the tool that enables postmodern folk tales to reclaim the shape of the tradition even as they express non-essentialist identities.

Theoretical Framework

The fluid process of identity reinforced in modern folk stories uses the underlying theme of postmodernism and post-structuralism (an ideology which challenges the belief of interpretive frameworks, based on the work of philosophers such as Lyotard, Derrida, and Foucault).

The Decentered Subject and Meta-Narratives

The crisis begins with the breakdown of the metanarratives, a religious or national epic that once unified populations (Lyotard). Postmodernity requires "incredulity towards the metanarratives," supplanting it with "little narratives" or fragmented contextualized ones (*petits récits*) for Lyotard.

This tendency makes the subject de-centered; identity ceases to function as an essence embedded within a larger historical truth to instead become a fleeting relational construct (Vaschenko).

Discourse, Power, and Deconstruction

In relating to the topic of folk narratives and identity imposition, the theories of Michel Foucault regarding power and discourse are highly applicable. According to Foucault's theories, "truth" can be defined as a system of "ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements" (Foucault).

Traditional folklore often acted as a mechanism of cultural power, imposing a "law of truth" that categorizes the individual marks him by his own individuality and attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on

him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him. (Foucault)

Such a framework shows how stories arrange individuals to make them subjects of this subjugating structure.

Deconstruction, a tool of meaning analysis that shows meaning is always deferred, used by Jacques Derrida, helps supplement this critique in that it disrupts the binary oppositions that were used to solidify traditional notions of identity through storytelling. "This ambivalence enables the concept of identity to be understood not as a static object but as a complex web of relationships."

Cultural Identity as Fluid and Constructed (Hall)

Stuart Hall goes on to elaborate this non-essential view of identity when he states that 'cultural identity is an open structure, dynamic, fluid, and transformative' (Hall). The stress on both the 'being' and the 'becoming' aspect of identity is given importance by Hall when he states that 'Identity' is both being and becoming.

This paradigm is particularly important in the context of diaspora because people are always forced to improvise, and hence they are always negotiating their identities through different cultures, thus confirming the hybrid nature of the modern identity (Vaschenko).

Analysis / Discussion

Fragmentation and Psychological Reality

The Postmodern folk tales embody the modern experience of fragmentation (Sunayna 129). The definitive and resolving trajectory of the traditional hero's tale, which resulted in a fixed identity (Chichelberger 530), is instead being supplanted in modern tales with shard-like, nonlinear storytelling. This deliberate storytelling choice reflects the experience of existing in a state of turmoil and diverging viewpoints, forcing the viewer to make connections between disconnected truths.

"The multiplicity of folklore itself frequently emphasizes the instabilities of traditional authority." Thus, "the ancient Indian animal fable series, *The Panchatantra*," which "contains animal stories about how to attain a desired end, how to gain power over others," has "been attributed to two fanciful authors, Vishnu Sharma or Vasubhaga, and now exists in more than 200 variants worldwide" (Sil). Such a tradition of multiple storylines already undercuts the authority of textual individuality.

Moreover, the Kashita migration story of the Native American tribes of the southwest, which combines factual storytelling with allegory and supernatural feats like Hiawatha's fight against the cannibal giant Atotarho, shows how fact and myth merge in Native American storytelling in ways that cannot be contained neatly within the confines of any one truth (Vaschenko 95-96).

Hybridity, Migration, and Cultural Negotiation

Migration and globalization cause the massive movement of people and hence the need for the adaptation and revival of cultural identity (Vaschenko). Various communities migrate and adapt the different cultures into the new settings and hence the development of new forms of folklore genres from the adapted cultures (Lieber and Weisberg 274). Cultural identity within the diaspora community is the "improvisation of changeable narratives," by people who are ever identified with different ethnic groups (Vaschenko).

This struggle is captured by the West African trickster spider Anansi, who is exported with other enslaved Africans to the Caribbean. While Anansi used intelligence in fighting superior foes, it represented the resourceful survival that enslaved Africans practiced in order to establish a flexible identity in slavery through cultural negotiation (Usman and Crous 115). In modern literature, the theme and topos from African oral tradition are deliberately used but presented in the format of English literary

tradition, in order to generate a hybrid literary folklore that fuses the past cultural experiences with the challenges posed by the urban reality (Usman and Crous 114).

Such approaches outline the process through which these forms of culture are maintained through the negotiation of conflict and the adoption of the non-essential self-conception. The below case studies will explain how these narratives are utilized in a postmodern fashion in an attempt to cater to the complex identities.

Case Studies

Case 1: Urban Legends as Petits Récits

Urban legends are an example of the metanarrative age in folklore adaptation. Urban legends spread through digital media as well as oral tradition, influenced by the current social fears (Slobin 19). Urban legends include localized and small-scale folklore that depicts modern society (Brunvand). They differ greatly from the foundational myth.

As "Lyotardian petits récits or little narratives," for instance, they provide instant critical perspective on collective fears without ascribing any notion of universal narrative coherence (Lyotard). More often than not, they essentially substitute for "fading religious narratives or traditional mythologies," standing as a momentary palliative tactic that mirrors "the randomness and contemporaneity of modern society" ("Urban Legends" 56). The research conducted by Jan Harold Brunvand into this modern mythology illustrates its significance in "constructing cultural identity and moral instruction in a complex world" (Brunvand).

Case 2: Mahasweta Devi and Subaltern Identity

In post-colonial societies, there is a conscious return to the oral traditions to harness the folklore as a critical reservoir of collective knowledge to counter hegemony imposed through writing (Devi). Mahasweta Devi's writing practices set a shining example here.

"Devi was primarily interested in the oppressed Adivasi (tribal) communities whose tales had to be suppressed (Devi)." Through her works like "Arenyer Adhikar" (Right to the Forest), which told the story of folk hero Birsu Munda, the Adivasi traditions were brought into the mainstream because "by being taken up into imaginative fiction, the folk tale was transfigured into a socio-political tool that asserted the multifaceted Adivasi identity" (Devi 124; see also Usman and Crous 114). This celebrates the diversity that is part of the definition of the Adivasi.

Case 3: W. B. Yeats and Hybrid National Identity

In particular, the Irish folklore that W.B. Yeats employed offers a historic paradigm that can be used in the management of conflicted identity. As an Anglo Irish Protestant, the poet employed Irish folklore in the creation of a personal Irish identity by integrating his English language background with the mythology of the peasant (Carrassi 157).

Yeats adapted the tales for self-expression purposes. By identifying his belief system in the occult with peasant lore, establishing a connection based on a shared primitive theology, Yeats was able to establish an equivalence "between himself and the peasantry" (Carrassi 160). By establishing this connection, he was able to tap into "Irishness" without identifying with "the Catholicism of the peasantry" (Carrassi 161). This enabled him to construct an identity hybrid, one which was nationalist but not Catholic, proving how "Identity is constituted not simply from nature, but from nature worked over into art" (Carrassi 157).

Counter-Arguments / Alternative Perspectives

However, there are opposing views regarding the postmodern approach to understanding folk literature. For instance, certain thinkers feel that the postmodern approach may end up losing any possible

linkage to heritage in a search for stylistic expression. It is argued that the overall purpose of folk literature is the establishment of fixed identities and that it is a component that defines the need to maintain a particular identity (Chichelberger 527). The conflict between identity and society is a "prominent literary theme" that was current prior to the postmodern period; hence, the "identity crisis" has been imposed retroactively.

However, this criticism neglects the inherent adaptability of folklore itself because it is essentially "a living art form" (Slobin 19). The change that takes place is one of destruction on the one hand; on the other hand, it is imputed to be a move that is essential from the point of view of adaptation. The essential psycho-social need of folklore itself to offer emotional equilibrium and to ensure cultural continuity is intact irrespective of the change that takes place in the form (Slobin 19).

Conclusion

Identity Crisis in Folklore Literature represents a creative challenge emerging from the clash between the authority of tradition and postmodern doubts. "The call for fixed and uniting truths became obsolete with the fall of metanarratives and the entry into a culturally transnationalized age."

The analysis verifies that there has been a successful integration of folk literature as it has shifted from a rigid source of essentialist truth to a more dynamic critically engaged model of identity negotiation. Through the use of fragmentation, multiplicity, and critical parody in a postmodern post-colonial framework of meaning making in narratives of either the current anxieties of the urban landscape or as a tool of post-colonial reclaiming of meaning and identity in any immediate postmodern context or cultural practice, folk narratives echo the necessarily fluid dynamics of a postmodern self.

Works Cited

- Brunvand, J. H. (1981). *The vanishing hitchhiker: American urban legends and their meanings*. Norton.
- Carrassi, V. (2023). Yeats as a folklorist: The Celtic twilight and Irish folklore. *Studi Irlandesi: A Journal of Irish Studies*, 13, 157–167.
- Chichelberger, H. (2015). Determining the cultural identity of a child through folk literature. *American Journal of Educational Research*, 3(4), 527–534.
- Devi, M. (2023). Mahasweta Devi and postcolonial identity. *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences*, 8(1).
- Foucault, M. (2005). *Discourse, power, and identity*. Emerald Publishing.
- Hall, S. (1990). Cultural identity and diaspora. In J. Rutherford (Ed.), *Identity: Community, culture, difference*. Lawrence & Wishart.
- Hutcheon, L. (1985). *A theory of parody: The teachings of twentieth-century art forms*. Methuen.
- Kaul, V. (n.d.). Globalisation and crisis of cultural identity. *International Research Journal of Arts and Humanities (IRJAH)*, 34(1).
- Lieber, R. J., & Weisberg, R. E. (2002). Globalization, culture, and identities in crisis. *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 16(2), 273–294.
- Lyotard, J.-F. (1984). *The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Sil, T. K. (2023). The lessons of Pañcatantra and its relevancy in the present society. *The Arts Faculty Journal*, 13(18).
- Slobin, M. (2017). Folklore, nostalgia, and crisis. *Quaesitum: The Journal of the Literary Arts*, 1(2), 19–32.
- Sunayna. (2023). Postmodernism and fragmentation in literature. *Migration Letters*, 20(1), 129–138.
- Urban legends: Echoes of society. (2024). *ACR Journal*, 56–70.
- Usman, J., & Crous, M. (2018). African folklore: A catalyst in contemporary African fictions. *Issues in Language Studies*, 7(4), 114–128.
- Vaschenko, A. (1996). Oral historical epic narratives. In A. Wiget (Ed.), *Handbook of Native American literature* (pp. 91–97). Garland.