

## Moral Ethics of East and the West: A Comparative Study of Panchatantra and Aesop's Fables

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### Abstract

Comparative literature is an academic field dealing with the study of literature and cultural expression across linguistic, national, and disciplinary boundaries. The Panchatantra Tales from India was originally written in Sanskrit by Pandit Vishnunarman. It is a compilation of inter-woven series of tales in prose and poetry, mostly animal fables. Aesop's Fables are simple animal fables usually between particular animals who act like humans and concluding with a moral. Though Vishnu Sharma belongs to East and Aesop belongs to West, both used animal fables to illustrate their situation for the political allegory. Both the writers have invested animal characters in their stories with certain human qualities -fox for cunning, the hare for timidity, the dog for fidelity and the donkey for foolishness. The Panchatantra Tales and Aesop Fables have a great purpose of giving moral instruction at the end of the story. The paper endeavors to show that Panchatantra and Aesop's fables contain wisdom of ages for people of all classes. The paper focuses on the similar themed stories from both which contain the essence of moral ethics. Both the fabulists contributed imagined qualities super infused by human likeness upon the animal world. Through simple but fascinating stories, it teaches us important lessons of life that we tend to overlook as we mature. In this ever dynamic and competitive world, the lessons from Panchatantra and Aesop's fables are still highly relevant enlightening us to the path of success and peace.

**KEYWORDS:** Panchatantra, Aesop's fables, moral, ethics

### What is a Fable?

Folktales are generally part of the oral tradition of a group and are more frequently told than read. They are passed down from one generation to another and take on the characteristics of the time and place in which they are told and speak of universal and timeless themes. They possess the element of telling. Folk tales may include fairy tales, tall tales, trickster myths, myths and legends. They mainly belong to the countries with ancient cultures and carry with them the precious treasures of a particular culture. Fables differ from parables, fairy tales and folk tales mainly in that they feature animals, plants, birds, forces and elements of nature as characters of these stories. They teach people how to behave well and treat other people amicably. **Fables** are also popular among children as they have animals and birds that speak and reason. The word fable is derived from a Latin word '*fabula*' meaning a story. It is the derivative of a word '*fari*' which means 'to speak'. Thus fable can be defined as a brief story intended to provide a moral lesson at the end. In literature, it is described as a didactic lesson given through some sort of animal story. It is a story that employs plants, animals, force of nature and inanimate objects giving them human attributes. such as the ability to speak and to

reason. These animals and birds are personified to provide moral lesson, to laugh at human follies and to satirize human vices and weaknesses. Each animal or bird represents a human virtue or vice and how they affect the personalities of an animal or bird thereby giving a message to human beings.

M.H. Abrams defines a fable as “a short narrative, in prose or verse, that exemplifies an abstract moral thesis or principle of human behavior; usually, at its conclusion, either the narrator or one of the characters state the moral in a form of an epigram “(Abrams p7)

Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines fable as: “Fable is a traditional short story that teaches a moral lesson, especially one with animals as characters; these stories considered as a group. (p544)

Jack Zipes, in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Children's Literature*, defines a fable as a literary work in which 'animals are substituted for human characters'. (P 41)

### **Comparative Literature**

In order to compare the fables of Panchatantra and Aesop's Fables we should first define comparative Literature and its relevance in appreciating and understanding the literatures of two different countries and cultures. Comparative literature is an academic field dealing with the study of literature and cultural expression across linguistic, national, and disciplinary boundaries.

Comparative literature "performs a role similar to that of the study of international relations, but works with languages and artistic traditions, so as to understand cultures 'from the inside'. (3)

Comparative literature is an interdisciplinary field whose practitioners study literature across national borders, across time periods, across languages, across genres, across boundaries between literature and the other arts (music, painting, dance, film, etc.), across disciplines (literature and psychology, philosophy, science, history, architecture, sociology, politics, etc.). Defined most broadly, comparative literature is the study of "literature without borders"

R.A.Sayce has distinguished comparative Literature from General Literature by saying that General Literature is the study of Literature with regards to linguistic frontiers. Comparative Literature is the study of natural literatures in relation to each other. (P 3)

**East vs West.**In Puraṇas animals are shown as the incarnations of gods or goddess often in the form of animals and birds. In the Ramayana and Mahabharata, there are many incidents where animals act and behave like humans. Hundreds of fables were composed in ancient India during the first millennium BC, often as stories within stories. These included Viṣṇusarman's the Panchatantra, the Hitopadesa, Vikram and the Vampire (Vetāl) etc.In the later period, with the development of Katha, new form of Fable began to acquire shape.

The Panchatantra 'Five Treatises' is a compilation of inter-woven series of tales in prose and poetry, mostly animal fables. It was compiled in Sanskrit (Hindu) and Pali (Buddhist). The compilation, attributed to Pandit Vishnu Sharma, is considered by most scholars to be dated around 3rd century BCE, and to be based on older oral civilization. Through cross-border adaptations and translations, the Panchatantra remains the most popular work of literature, especially amongst storytellers. Panchatantra is "certainly the

most frequently translated literary product of India", [Olivelle2006] and "these stories are among the most widely known in the world." [Ryder] Apart from its objectives and narrative, tales of this ancient Indian work illustrates the primary Hindu principles of *niti* - the wise conduct of life. The Panchatantra consists of 5 parts, apart from a brief introductory narrative. Each of the five parts revolve around a frame story, which further contain embedded stories, sometime three to four levels deep. Panchatantra goes by many names in many cultures.

There is a version of Panchatantra in nearly every major language of India, and in addition there are 200 versions of the text in more than 50 languages around the world. [Patrick Olivelle (2009).]

To quote Edgerton (1924)

...before 1600 it existed in Greek, Latin, Spanish, Italian, German, English, Old Slavonic, Czech, and perhaps other Slavonic languages. Its range has extended from Java to Iceland... [In India,] it has been worked over and over again, expanded, abstracted, turned into verse, retold in prose, translated into medieval and modern vernaculars, and retranslated into Sanskrit. And most of the stories contained in it have "gone down" into the folklore of the story-loving Hindus, whence they reappear in the collections of oral tales gathered by modern students of folk-stories. (P3)

The Panchatantra is a unique contribution of Ancient India to the world, particularly to the world literature, that has equally delighted the young and the old, educated and uneducated, rich and poor, high and low - for over two thousand years. As D.L. Ashliman has mentioned:

"They were among the first printed works in the vernacular European languages, and writers and thinkers throughout history have perpetuated them to such an extent that they are embraced as among the essential truths about human beings and their ways."

The primary purpose of Panchatantra is explained in the 'Preface' through a story that a king of Mahilaropya named Amarasakti had three stupid, dull-witted sons named Vasusakti, Ugrasakti and Aneksakti. Though their names were suggestive of power as the suffix of each name 'sakti' suggests power, they lacked wisdom. Unsurprisingly the king was worried about their future and despaired of their inability to learn. He approached his minister and wise men for advice. A minister named Suman said that science, politics and diplomacy were necessary for the rulers but they require life-time to master. Therefore, he suggested that three princes should be taught the essence of the scriptures and other great texts as life was short while knowledge was endless. He suggested that there was an aged wise Brahmin called ViṣṇuSarman who was adept in all sciences, diplomacy and scriptures and would be able to impart knowledge and wisdom to the three princes within six months in a very pleasant, amusing manner. The king entrusted ViṣṇuSarman his three sons for training in knowledge, wisdom and worldly skills. ViṣṇuSarman adopted an unconventional method of using fables to impart knowledge and wisdom to the three princes. He interwove the stories making them entertaining and indirectly preaching the lesson of life and named it **Panchatantra** (Five principles/ doctrines) that communicate the essence of moral wisdom, diplomacy, pragmatic approach to problems of life, social relationships, politics and administration. This story clearly shows that the primary

purpose behind the composition of Panchatantra was to teach the principles of conduct to the three young princes.

The tales of Panchatantra are ethical in essence, that promote a worldly, pragmatic and rational attitude based on the experience of life. It is believed that birds and animals have some basic instincts, qualities and they behave accordingly. On the contrary Human beings are more complex and it is difficult to understand their motives and thoughts as they are conditioned by education, culture, environment and other socio-economic factors. Human beings can be taught benevolence, ethics and goodness through these fables. The animal characters of Panchatantra have a continual character. For example the lion is strong but lacks wit; the jackals are crafty but not brave, the cat a hypocrite, while the heron is stupid yet honest, and so on. The view of life presented in the book is the life with astuteness, a sense of judgment that distinguishes between what is right and what is wrong. It also aims at exposing the falsehood, hypocrisy and snobbery and in the process producing wit, humor and amusement

Aesop's Fables, or the Aesopica, is a collection of fables credited to Aesop, a slave and storyteller believed to have lived in ancient Greece between 620 and 564 BC. Aesop is legendary for the life he lived over 2000 years ago and mostly for the hundreds of fables that have been attributed to his name since. Aesop is recognized as the emergent of the folklore- fable during the ancient Greek period. However, it is believed that he spent much of his life in Greece at the court of King Croesus in Athens. Of diverse origins, the stories associated with his name have descended to modern times through a number of sources and continue to be reinterpreted in different verbal registers and in popular as well as artistic media. It is believed that he was a slave who lived in Samos, a Greek island in the eastern Aegean Sea but some believed that he came from Ethiopia. The name of his first owner was Xanthus. It is also believed that eventually, he became a 'Free man'. In his biography *Plannudes*, he has been described as an ugly, deformed dwarf even mute from birth. As the result of his kindness to some priests, he was miraculously given the power of speech. (Meziriac M. D. Life of Aesop, P-7) Aesop used his power of speech both to mock as well as to impress his owners.

Aesop's Fables are allegorical prose compositions, in oral form or in written form, with animals, birds, plants, trees and other inanimate objects as characters they are often comic or satiric in tone conveying a moral, social or political message. Today, the Aesopic fables, which have been developed in ancient times to teach political wisdom to adults, is commonly used to instruct children in practical wisdom and to entertain them with its fantasy world of talking animals. Aesop's Fables are often defined on the basis of common internal characteristics. In a major similarity with Panchatantra, animal types in the Aesopic fable tend to represent types of human moral qualities and vices. For example, fox represents cunningness, ass represents stupidity, lamb represents helpless innocence and wolf represents ruthlessness. The Aesopic fable often appears as an instructive tale, deploying the elements of humor, cynicism and satire, to show that common sense and moderation for self-preservation are pre requisites to survive in this world. Aesop's Fables are often defined by contrast with the literary genres of folktale, allegory, parable, and proverb.

"Aesop was such a strong personality that his contemporaries credited him with every fable ever before heard, and his successors with every fable ever told since."(Parker)

*Aesop's Fables* is a huge collection of around **313** fables on different subjects. As *Aesop's Fables* travelled a long voyage of time period, certain changes might have been added. Mostly his fables travelled in oral tradition. Aesop travelled from one place to another telling various fables to the people. Samians sent him to court of Croesus in order to persuade Croesus not to attack Samian people. Croesus was highly impressed by the fables of Aesop that he put aside his plan of conquest on Samos and gave a good position to Aesop in his court, where Aesop got some leisure to write down his fables. Later on around 300 B.C. the four significant collections of *Aesop's Fables* came in to existence by Demetrius of Phaerum, especially as the reference book of fables and for writers and speakers to quote. The major issue of Multiple Interpretations came when Phaedrus in 55 A.D. composed his „Latin Verse“ version of the fables which was based on Demetrius“ collection. Phaedrus expanded *Aesop's Fables* and added some stories from other sources and his own“. (Ben E. Perry p-12)

**Similar fables:** Though Vishnu Sharma belongs to East and Aesop belongs to West, both used animal fable to illustrate their situation for the political allegory. Both have invested animal characters in their stories with a certain human quality -fox for cunning, the hare for timidity, the dog for fidelity and the donkey for foolishness. Vishnu Sharma, being a sage haddwelt in the forest and therefore had maximum chance of knowing the instincts and inborn characterization of each of these animals. Aesop, being a slave, lived in the farm house due to his ugly appearance. Thus he had a good opportunity of observing the domestic creatures of the forest.

**MORAL:** *A well-meaning friend may not be able to help a person because of the person's own stupidity.* In Panchatantra's '*The Cranes and the Tortoise*' the two cranes were friends of a tortoise. Once the river became dry and so they decided to take their friend tortoise from the dead lake to another, as an act of friendship. They held a stick in between their beaks and the tortoise hung to the stick holding it with its mouth. The tortoise is amazed by the beauty of the surroundings and opened its mouth. Before it could utter a word, it slips down to the ground and is smashed to jelly. The aim of the story is that even friends cannot help a fool. But here a foolish tortoise displays a greater degree of foolishness than even the proverbial donkey. The Panchatantra story of '*The Sweet Song of a Donkey*' also reveals that even a friend cannot help the stupid. A washer man had a donkey named *Uddhata* which carried heavy bundles of clothes on its back every day. But the donkey's all hard work was in vain as he was not well fed by the washer man. The washer man during the night time let the donkey loose to go and graze in the fields and every morning he would return on time to the washer man house. Wandering in the fields *Uddhata* met with a jackal. One day both entered the fields and ate the cucumbers well. One day the donkey said to the jackal that he would sing as he was feeling happy. The jackal replied that a song would buy trouble and they may get caught. It is said that the man with a cough should give up theft, besides, the donkeys do not sing, they bray. The donkey paid no heed to the words of caution of the jackal. So the jackal suggested that he would guard the gate and look out for the guards who were sleeping. The donkey started to sing loudly. The angry guard found the donkey and beat him so mercilessly that the donkey was physically incapacitated temporarily. Somehow, the donkey managed to drag himself out of the field to the waiting jackal. The jackal looked at the donkey and said in a sympathetic tone that he was sorry to see him in this pathetic condition. He had already warned him, but he didn't listen to his advice. The

donkey realized his mistake and felt sorry for not listening to the good advice of jackal. A similar kind of story is also seen in The Fables of Aesop as in '*The Foolish Mouse*'. The story begins with two mice that saw a cat sitting quietly with her eyes closed and tail curled round her paws. One of the mice was very much impressed as the cat appeared to be very gentle and harmless, and wished all the cats were like that, so he could make friend with the cat. The other mouse warned him, for his stupidity. The cat was their natural enemy. The cat would not spare him if he came within its reach. But the mouse did not listen to her friend's advice. He went near the cat in a friendly manner, but before he could say hello to the cat, the cat pounced upon the mouse and ate him. The mouse ultimately got its lesson but in the harder way.

**MORAL:** *People often begrudge others what they cannot enjoy themselves.* In another Aesopic fable, The '*Dog In The Manger*', a dog lay in the manger, and by his growling and snapping prevented the horses from eating the hay which had been placed for them. One of the horses said to his companions, what a selfish dog he was, he cannot eat the hay himself and yet he refuses to allow those to who can eat. Now the farmer came in. When he saw how the Dog was acting, he seized a stick and drove him out of the stable with many a blow for his selfish behaviour. Similarly in the story '*The Magic Pond*' from The Panchatantra Tales in the forest, there was a pond which had strange magical powers. Any animal that happened to fall into the pond would turn into a human being. But if the same animal fell twice into the pond then it would get back to its original form. One hot summer the two monkeys were playing on a tree, which was above the magical pond. They both slipped into the magical pond. When they came out, one of the monkeys has turned into a beautiful girl, while the other had turned into an ordinary looking man. Not satisfied with his ordinary looks. The monkey decided to take another dip in the magical pond, hoping to become handsome. The girl who had been a monkey persuaded him and said, "*Do not go looking for what you do not have. Be content.*" But the man jumped into the pond and was instantly turned into a monkey again. He tried again and again but he remained monkey. A man from the circus saw the monkey and took him to the circus to perform the trick. The monkey spent all his life in the circus. The beautiful girl married a handsome prince and led a life of ease and luxury. In another Aesop's Fable, A '*Greedy Dog*', Once a dog managed to get a piece of bone from the butcher's shop and prepared itself comfortably to gnaw at the piece of the bone. It came across a bridge over the stream. While crossing, the dog happened to see his own reflection in the water. Thinking that it was another dog with a piece of meat in his mouth, he decided to have that piece also. So the dog in order to frighten the other dog opened his mouth to growl at him, he lost hold on the piece of meat he was having in his mouth. The piece of meat dropped and reached the bottom of the stream. So, because of his greediness for more, he lost what he already had and he had to go hungry. Aesop's Moral: *Some people are foolish enough to lose what they have in trying to get what they do not have.*

**MORAL:** *When greed begins, friendship ends.* In the story '*The Monkey and The Crocodile*' from The Panchatantra Tales once there was a monkey on a jamun tree. The tree was on the bank of a river where a crocodile and his wife lived. One day the crocodile came near the tree and became friend to the monkey. In turn, the monkey gave juicy jamun fruits to the crocodile every day and the crocodile gave it to his wife. One day the crocodile invited the monkey to his house for dinner. Sitting on the back of the

crocodile, he reached the middle of the river when the crocodile said that his wife wished to eat the monkey's heart. Cleverly the monkey replied that he has left his heart in the tree, and if he had told him earlier then he would have brought it with him. The foolish crocodile took him back to the bank. The monkey climbed the tree and to safety. Instead of honouring the friendship the monkey the crocodile wanted to kill him. Thus the crocodile lost his good friend because of his greed and foolishness. The moral of the story is when greed begins, friendship ends. Similarly in Aesop's fable, *The Crow and the Fox* the crow with a piece of cheese in its mouth, was sitting in the branch of a tree. The fox crossing by saw the crow with the cheese. The fox immediately used trick stating that his voice was very sweet, and asked the crow to sing a song. The moment foolish crow opened his mouth to sing, the cheese fell to the ground. Thus the clever fox ran away with the cheese.

**MORAL: As You Sow So You Reap** In the collection of Vishnu Sharma's The Panchatantra Tales the following story proves for the proverb. Once upon a time, there was a rich merchant called Naduk. But times were bad and his business was suffering. He decided to leave the city and find his fortune in a new place. He sold off all his possessions and paid off his debts. All that he had left was a heavy iron beam. Naduk went to say goodbye to his friend Lakshman, and requested him to keep the beam for him till he returned. Lakshman promised to look after it for him. For many years, Naduk traveled far and wide, building his fortune. Luck was with him, for he became rich once again. He returned home and bought a new house and started his business again. He went to visit his friend Lakshman who greeted him warmly. After a while, Naduk asked him to return his beam. Lakshman knew that the beam would fetch him good money so he was loath to return it. So he told Naduk that he had kept his beam in the store-room and the mice ate it. Naduk did not seem to mind. He asked Lakshman to send his son home with him so that he could hand over a gift that he had bought for him. So Lakshman sent his son Ramu with Naduk. Naduk locked up Ramu in a cellar in his house. By nightfall, Lakshman was worried and came to ask about the whereabouts of his son. Naduk replied that on the way to his house, a hawk swooped down and carried the boy off. Lakshman accused Naduk of lying. He insisted that a hawk could not carry off a fifteen-year-old boy. A big fight ensued and the matter was taken to court. When the magistrate heard Lakshman's side of the story, he ordered Naduk to return the boy to his father. But Naduk insisted that a hawk carried off the boy. The magistrate asked him how it was possible. He replied that if a huge iron beam can be eaten by mice, then a boy could definitely be carried off by a hawk. Everyone in the courtroom burst out laughing. The magistrate then ordered Lakshman to return the iron beam to Naduk and that Naduk return Lakshman's son to him.

Akin kind of story in Aesop's Fable is the story '*The Lion, the Wolf and the Fox*'. A Lion, infirm with age, lay sick in his den, and all the beasts of the forest came to inquire after his health with the exception of the Fox. The wolf who was a sworn enemy of the fox, utilized the golden opportunity the wolf told to the lion that all the animals are praying for his recovery, but the wolf is not to be seen. The lion got very much angry and shouted at him as to why he did not come to see him. The fox understood that it was the cunningness of the wolf. The Fox replied that he is aware of the lion's illness and he went in search of a doctor to find a way to cure his illness. The doctor had advised that if the lion wears the skin of a freshly killed wolf, he will be cured. The lion immediately

pounced at the wolf before he could plead for his life. Thus the wolf, in trying to put the fox in a difficult situation, got what he deserved. **Aesop's Moral: As you sow so you reap**

#### *Conclusion*

The plot construction and styles of the fables in both The Panchatantra Tales and Aesop's Fable is very simple and direct indeed. In The Panchatantra Tales the characters are given meaningful names, for example, the lion is Madotkata, and the donkey is called as Uddatha. Vishnu Sharma in fact had used characters from the royal class like a king, princes, Brahmin and minister as instruction to the princes.' Aesop does not name his characters. His characters are mainly from lower class of life like hunter, goldsmith, shepherd boy and so. As he was a slave his style of depicting the characters are different. They are all known by their common names such as the lion, the monkey, the ass, the tiger and the peacock. In both the works, supernatural elements and gods and angels appear. Animals in fable do have one significant difference from animals in the real world as the Greeks saw them: they have the ability to speak, which in the real world is restricted to human beings.

The characters are mainly animals' of the forest and birds of the air and sometimes human beings and supernatural beings. They all speak; act and reason as if they were human beings. Each of them display some element of human character such as common sense, wisdom, courage, enterprise, feelings; stupidity, greed, guile and craft. The lion is majestic, the horse proud, the fox cunning, the hare timid, the monkey imitative and the ass patient and hard working. These characters are all simply variants of the ordinary human being, woven into a meaningful tale where animals are actuated by human motivation. Stories about animals are only useful lessons for human beings if human beings have traits in common with other animals. For the analogy between human beings and other animals to hold up, human beings must be understood as being a kind of animal themselves. There is a fable that makes this point:

Following Zeus's orders, Prometheus fashioned humans and animals. When Zeus saw that the animals far outnumbered the humans, he ordered Prometheus to reduce the number of the animals by turning them into people. Prometheus did as he was told, and as a result those people who were originally animals have a human body but the soul of an animal. (Perry P240)

The stories comprise of an introduction to the animals and the rising action emerges from the introduction of the motives and the comparability of each character in the active practice of worldly wisdom; the conclusion is invariably loaded in favour of the wiser, the stronger, and the more diplomatic. This is followed by the moral lesson about virtue and vice.

The other objective of using animals in the fable is that the reader perceives the similarity between himself and the character in the fable. The reader always identifies with the characters and enjoys or suffers with them. Such identification raises and disturbs the human feelings and passions and might eventually lead to '*Catharsis*'. The tales in which animals can talk are by no means confined to India, but is found in other folk-lore as well. It is a good literary technique to impose the sins of hypocrisy and cunning and

avarice of mankind on the animals. One of the distinguished features of a good fable is that it has a moral lesson at the end of each narration. It is implied in the narration itself, yet it is told separately at the end of the each fable. It is very clear that Aesop's purpose was to instruct through entertainment. Throughout the fables, foolish decisions are punished, often by death. Intelligence, on the contrary, gets a good reputation in the fables. Those who are smart, or at least clever, can turn situations to their advantage. Today, the Aesopic fables, which was developed in antiquity to teach political wisdom to adults, is commonly used to instruct children in practical wisdom and to entertain them with its fantasy world of talking animals.

Thus we can see that though both the writers belong to different cultures and different life styles they had many similarities as well as dissimilarities. Both the fable writers contributed imagined qualities super infused by human analogy upon the animal world and developed the stories to their supreme heights through the animal character with a moral interpretation. Both The Panchatantra Tales and Aesop Fables have a great purpose of giving moral instruction at the end of the story. In a nutshell it can be said that Panchatantra and Aesop's fables contain wisdom of ages for people of all classes. Through simple but fascinating stories, it teaches us important lessons of life that we tend to overlook as we mature. The Fables may not be able to define Virtue and Vice, but they can give you some examples of what these things look like and suggest for which of the two should be chosen in particular situations and what the outcome of that choice is likely to be. In this ever dynamic and competitive world, the lessons from Panchatantra are still highly relevant enlightening us to the path of success and peace. Through the wisdom of its fables the 'Panchatantra' offers a vision of ourselves, and in the process, it makes us aware of the fact that solutions lie within ourselves. The fact cannot be denied that Vishnu Sharma in the east and Aesop in the west are instrumental in animal stories rapidly getting popularized in the television cartoons in the present generation.

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