

reviewed by NILOFUR FARRUKH

The Romance of RAJA RASALU and Other Tales

compiled and annotated by Neelam Hussain
illustrated by Laila Rehman

The *Romance of Raja Rasalu and Other Tales* is an important documentation of the intangible heritage of Pakistan. This collection of Punjabi folktales presented in English translation is accompanied by a text in Punjabi and a glossary which takes into account both local and global readership.

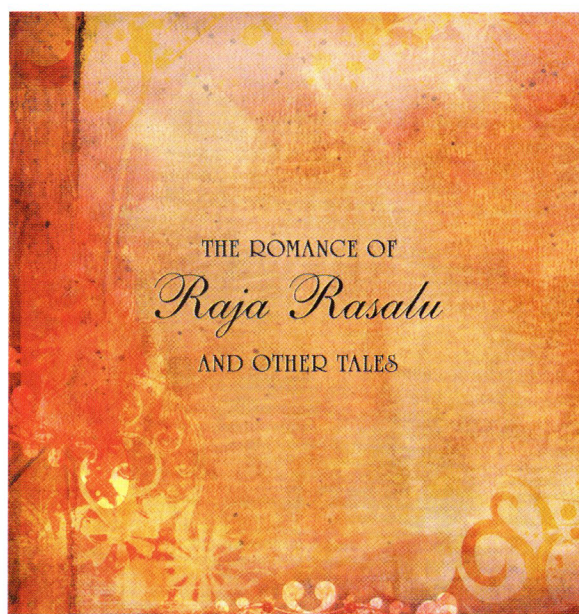
This well designed and vibrantly illustrated book has the potential to attract new audiences to folk literature and further the appreciation for rustic plain-speak and earthiness of the characters, around which the tales of romance, betrayal and revenge revolve. Populated with 'jinns', talking animals, shrews and buffoons, sages and rulers, this mosaic of history and imagination belongs to a region that spreads from Abbotabad in the North and Rawalpindi in the South. Attock marks its western boundary and the Soan River its Eastern limits in present day Pakistan.

The folk tales bring to the surface voices of common people and deals with their aspirations which are often narrated with bawdy humor. Royalty and the powerful become the butt of jokes which firmly places the original audience of these tales outside the courts. Packed with violence and cruelty, it seems to offer vicarious relief to the downtrodden listener as villains invariably meet a harsh end.

It is interesting to note that the stories in *The Romance of Raja Rasalu and Other Tales* come from multiple sources. The editor Neelam Hussain has fused narratives by three late-19th century British Folklorists:



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R.C. Temple, Flora Annie Steel and Rev Charles Swynnerton. In the introduction the editor informs us how an attempt to record the narration of Baba Inayat—a storyteller from Kasur District—was made at the Simurgh office but did not prove successful. The storyteller, conscious of gender and class hierarchy, tended to self censor the coarse language and content and intersperse it with modern terms instead of sticking to the original version. This also compels us to reflect on oral narrative as a creative form that evolves with the storyteller who may adhere to the central plot but continues to assimilate the influence of time and location.

In the introduction the editor examines these Punjabi fables in the context of the colonial agenda and writes "...this collection is a political act to the extent that it affirms the value of a genre that lost ground not just to the authority of the written word and the book, but to the exigencies of history and the political imperatives of the British Raj."

She also adds that "since 1947, the pre-Islamic oral tradition has been marginalized by the priorities set by Islamic ideology with a tilt towards the Saudi Arabian brand of religious identity which has ignored the layered cultural template of this region." This is a valid debate that needs to be mainstreamed to understand the land identity of the people which is so integral to national history.

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between the passive heroines of The Grimms' *Fairy Tales* that were altered from the original to reinforce the 'Cinderella syndrome' to portray them as meek and submissive, unlike the feisty women of *The Romance of Raja Rasalu and Other Tales* that love and connive with equal passion. Disguised as men, they create a space to assert their power. In this section titled 'Nation and Narration A Note', Choonara extends the discussion under sub-headings like the 'Empire Theory of Folklore,' 'The Argument Against Orality,' 'Politics of Interpretation' and 'Gender as a Contested Site of Power'.

Krishan Kanna, in a short commentary on the illustrations of the book, points to the historical value for this book, as for the first time an attempt has been made to illustrate these tales. The responsibility of this visualization rests on the shoulders of Laila Rehman, an established artist, who brings her distinctive style to the iconography in which the flower and the circle emerge

as a reoccurring motif. The floral motif which is derived from the *gajinda* or marigold, with its lively yellow shades and robust form, is seen by the artist as an apt symbol of the Punjabi people. Exaggerated perspective conveys the drama and fantasy so intrinsic to the tales, and the rich palette a reminder of heightened passions. The ever-present sphere as the moon and sun with its loaded symbolism, dominates compositions to lend visual linkage.

The cameo drawings in pencil with thumbnails of the central characters act like the lens of a kaleidoscope that open a world of colorful personalities and raw emotions as Neelam Hussain and her team are linked to countless storytellers through the cultural continuum of these timeless tales.

