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Folk Cosmology and Rural Psyche: Deconstructing Phanishwar Nath Renu's Select Short Stories

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Abstract

Phanishwar Nath Renu, widely celebrated for his iconic novels such as *Maila Aanchal* and *Parati Parikatha*, remains less explored as a master of short stories. While Renu himself resisted the label of 'regional literature,' his short stories are deeply rooted in the linguistic and socio-cultural fabric of Bihar, offering a vivid portrayal of its ethos. By embedding regional folklore within his narratives, Renu bridges the gap between literature and oral traditions, transforming folk cosmology into a profound literary experience.While his philosophical scope transcends the regional, his narratives remain deeply rooted in the cultural heritage, traditions, and dialects of Bihar, offering a unique lens to interpret its folk belief systems. This paper explores Renu's storytelling as a narrative repository of folk cosmology—a framework that interweaves localised worldviews with social practices, oral traditions, and spiritual ideologies. Through an analysis of key short stories like "Teesri Kasam," "Panchlaite," "Kaak Dhwani," etc., the study examines recurring motifs popular in folklore culture. This paper investigates Renu's short stories while underscoring how belief systems operate as both tools of identity preservation and socio-cultural negotiation. Positioned at the intersection of folklore and literary studies, this study offers a valuable contribution to both the disciplines.

Keywords: Bihari Folklore, Folk Cosmology, Folklore in literature, Myth, Regional Literature, Rural Psyche.

Introduction: Mapping Folklore in Literature

For cultural theorist Stuart Hall, culture is associated with *shared meanings*. Furthermore, "[m]eanings can only be shared through our

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common access to language. So language is central to meaning and culture and has always been regarded as the key repository of cultural values and meanings" (Hall 1). Unlike literature, which is preserved in its written form, folklore evolves through collective memory, making it a shared cultural repository. Folklores reflect the lived experiences, habits, and practices of marginalised communities, distinct from mainstream literary forms. This divergence underscores the democratic and participatory essence of folklore as a medium of cultural expression. Pierre Bourdieu's idea of the "habitus" explains why Folkloristics as a discipline is important in the process of understanding society holistically: "Habitus is a product of the environment or conditions of existence and is mediated by the family in the form of lessons in morality, taboos, worries, rules of behaviour and tastes" (Mander 428). German folklorist Lutz Rohrich believes that folktales are uncontrolled forms of human imagination and the ruling elite and culturally dominant groups have always tried to control and "reduce the imaginative capacities of the people" (McGlathery 119). McGlathery, editor of *The Brothers Grimm and Folktale* (1988), claims that different ruling elites have utilised folklores for different political purposes and thus, the "role of the same texts changes over time and space" (121). Folklore theorist and one of the earliest pioneers of ethno-historiography, Jan Vansina contends that oral traditions are the primary source of historical mappings of a nation. This view aligns with the nationalistic significance of the folklore as propounded by the Brothers Grimm. McGlathery also notes that Folkloristics as a discipline was "initiated by Johann Gottfried Herder, who coined the term Volkslied ("folk-song") in the 1770s, and by the Brothers Grimm, who made the Volksmärchen ("folktale") a symbol of national culture in the first decade of the nineteenth century" (117). Phanishwar Nath Renu, however, while assembling folklore in his literary canon, tries to hold a secular position. He stands like a objective observer and pens whatever he sees as an insider-outsider.[i]

American folklorist R M Dorson observes that, "distinctions between traditional and nontraditional or between oral and written literature are often shifting and elusive" (133). Within this framework, Dorson classifies folklore into four categories: The first group is called "oral literature," "verbal art" or "expressive

literature." This group contains folk narratives like myths, legends and folktales, folk song, folk poetry, proverbs, riddles and folk speech or folk language. The features of folk speech differ from the standard speech or language as the former has no hard and fast grammatical rules and pronunciation. The second group is called "physical life" or "material culture" of folklore. It takes into account the ways and knacks of earliest human living, for example, how a particular human community built their houses, how they made their clothes or prepared food and decorated their houses. The third group is called "social folk custom," which resembles "the rites of passage" observed in many communities. It includes rituals and customs associated with births, deaths, marriages, celebrations, festivals, public performances, folk medicines, folk religions, miracles, superstitions, games and recreational activities. The fourth and last group comprises the "performing folk arts" that further contains traditional music, dance and drama, along with folk musical instruments, dance costumes, etc.

The *Folk* in Phanishwar Nath Renu's Rural Cosmos

Folk is an essential element of literature, both written and oral. Phanishwar Nath Renu's works exemplify the idea that folklore serves as a repository of cultural memory and collective identity. He borrows the acute observation for rural life from Jahann G Herder who held that folk culture is always at the root of any national literature. Renu's narratives transcend the "regional" label, reflecting the concept of "polyphony" by integrating diverse voices and lived experiences of the village folk. His stories, in the Bakhtinian sense, carry a diversity of independent conflicting voices, each rooted in its own perspective and idiosyncratic stance. "Polyphony," as defined in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, is marked by "not a multitude of characters and fates in a single objective world, illuminated by a single authorial consciousness," but "rather a plurality of consciousnesses" which "combine but are not merged in the unity of the event" (Bakhtin 22). A similar dynamism emerges in Renu's short stories, with their diverse folk voices drenched in rural traditions and folk life.

Renu is capable of creating a complete folk-universe through his stories. 'Folk cosmology' might not be a very popular term in academic literature, but it has appeared in works that speak of indigenous worldviews and traditional knowledge systems. The term would best mean the way community-based cultures—the folk—comprehend and interpret the world around them, including natural phenomena, spiritual beliefs, and cosmological structures, often combining mythology, oral traditions, and practical observations, creating an entire sustainable ecosystem. The concept historically has roots in the study of folk religion and cosmology as expressions of localised cultural systems. The study of folk religion traces back to intellectual traditions of those like Johann Gottfried Herder and Giovanni Battista Vico (philosophers associated with the Italian Enlightenment), accentuating the cultural creativity of common people. Such frameworks often blur the distinctions between religion, belief, and superstition, importantly in rural or indigenous contexts. By exploring superstition, belief, and rituals as part of a rural worldview, this paper essentially engages with what could be understood as a folk-cosmological perspective.

In Renu, we find a symbiosis between literature and folklore, where he appropriately embeds the oral tales and songs to fit the context of his stories. His stories are interspersed with songs, local dialects, group rituals, and folktales popular among the village folk. Renu's stories simultaneously focus on the interplay between geographical and cultural landscapes. In Renu's focus on Bihar's Seemanchal, the flood-prone Kosi region, the relationship between the land and its people is highlighted. Although Renu himself distanced his work from being labeled as regional, his short stories are linguistically and socio-culturally rooted in the specific ethos of a specific region (Seemanchal) in Bihar. While Renu's philosophical scope transcends the regional, his narratives remain deeply rooted in the cultural heritage, traditions, and dialects of Bihar, offering a unique lens to interpret its folk belief-systems.

The research methodology for this paper is analytical and interpretive, focusing on the interplay of folklore and literature in Renu's selected short stories, curated from the collection *Sampoorna Kahaniyaan* in Hindi. By examining the amalgamation of folk and

literature, the study situates Renu as a cultural mediator, highlighting his role in preserving and transforming regional narratives within a literary framework. For the purpose of this paper, all passages attributed to Renu have been translated into English by the author.

Faith and Fear: Superstition in Renu's Storytelling

Superstition, frequently dismissed as irrational, functions as an adaptive strategy within rural systems, reflecting Geertz's assertion that religion provides a "model of and for reality," giving coherence to the rural worldview (Geertz 93). There are countless prescriptive and prohibitive norms in folk traditions that stem from superstitions. In the story "Sirpanchami ka Sagun," there is a farmer who gets his spud in bad shape, which is regarded as a bad omen. His wife gets it repaired: "On the day of the Sirpanchami, every farmer thinks about good luck (*sagun*) only. On that day, everyone is careful not to fall into an argument, to become prey to an evil eye, or to be sneezed at by someone . . ." (Renu 187). It is believed that on that day, "at the time of plowing, whoever's ox excretes, he will not lack water or manure the entire year. Otherwise, whoever's ox sits down, only God can take care of him!" (Renu 188). Such observations foretell if good luck or bad luck befalls the villagers' household. Villagers seriously observe those details, and also create antidotes to nullify or at least weaken the accidental bad luck that they happen to come across. When Singhay, the farmer protagonist of the story, notices that Kalu has damaged his plough-knife, he believes as if, "not the plough-knife, but his fate had been damaged" (Renu 188).

The farmer's damaged spud, regarded as a bad omen, underscores the community's tendency to attribute personal or agricultural misfortune to symbolic events. Such practices align with Alan Dundes' structuralist approach, where cultural motifs like omens and rituals function as shared cognitive templates to navigate uncertainty (Dundes 196). The statement, "not the plough-knife, but his fate had been damaged," reveals the deeply ingrained connection between material misfortunes and metaphysical explanations. Furthermore, the antidotes to bad luck reflect what Marcel Mauss describes as the exchange of symbolic acts to maintain equilibrium in social and cosmic orders (65). Such rituals reaffirm communal ties

while mitigating anxiety about unforeseen outcomes. The story "Sirpanchami ka Sagun" vividly illustrates the intricate 'folk cosmology' surrounding concepts of *sagun* (good omen) and *apsagun* (bad omen) that govern rural life. These beliefs, as William Bascom points out, "validate the cultural ethos and provide a framework for interpreting everyday occurrences" (343). Village customs, often rooted in superstition, represent what Bascom calls the *validation of culture*, where belief systems act as a guide to behavior and ritual, and serve to justify social practices and maintain cultural continuity (Bascom 348). These customs, though sometimes dismissed by outsiders, operate as a vital framework for identity and collective memory.

Crows are birds associated with bad luck in many cultures. The sound of a crow, often considered a bad omen in many North Indian cultures as well, exemplifies what Alan Dundes describes as the symbolic use of folklore motifs to externalise human anxieties (Dundes 12). In Renu's story "Sirpanchami ka Sagun" for instance, Singhay's pessimism is aggrandised by a crow's croak, which he interprets to bring a misfortune—*Tedha faal, tedhi takdeer*! which means that "crooked tools will only bring bad luck" (Renu 188). Similarly, in another story titled as "Kaak Charit," Kisanlal attributes all the misfortunes of his day-to-day life to the crow—*Kisanlal samajh gaya hai, uske durbhagya ke mool me kaaga aur kauwa hi hai. Uske sare dukh dard ka kaaran* (Kisanlal has now understood that crows sit at the root of his unfortunate life. The cause of all his miseries) (Renu 364). Such a belief system responds to what Bascom identifies as folklore's function in validating existing fears and experiences (349). Villagers connect nature to the uncanny and try to comprehend the happenings of their lives through nature's link which in this particular story, is the crow.

However, in Renu, we also find such belief systems being questioned or challenged in the end. Towards the end of "Kaak Charit," when the crow's cry precedes good news, Kisanlal finally is able to contend—*Savitri, kauwa humesa ashubh hi nahin bakhta hai* (Savitri, a crow is not always inauspicious) (Renu 366). This shift in folk consciousness, reflects what Victor Turner would refer to as "liminality", marking a transition from blind superstition to critical

awareness, where belief systems are checked and reevaluated within the communal contexts. This indicates fluidity of cultures which aids a society to cognitively progress.

Symbolism and Fantasy: Renu's Folkloric Imagination

"Folklore is collective fantasy and as fantasy, it depends upon the symbolic system of a given culture" (Dundes 64). It is the symbolism in folklore that makes it more complex than what meets the eyes. The symbols carry layers of meanings and are intentionally loaded. Terms in folklore studies like "identification" and "interpretation" popularised by Dundes help decode the meanings encrypted in folkloric symbols. What the author Renu specialises in, as a bridge between literature and folklore, is the contextualisation of the particular folkloric text in his stories, whenever required. In this way, his stories align with Dundes' emphasis on the interplay between text and context which holds highest importance in creation and interpretation of folklores.

Durkheim was among the earliest sociologists to point out the "religious origin of the notion of economic value" which was further imagined by Mauss and others (Mauss 70). Folk religions, as Marcel Mauss highlights in his theory of exchange, often involve rituals and offerings that foster reciprocal relationships between humans and the divine, strengthening communal bonds. Birju, the little boy in Renu's story "Laal Paan ki Begum," thinks of bribing the wish-fulfilling spirit (*Jin Baba*) who is believed to live on the tamarind tree. Birju believes that if he offers the first brinjal fruiting from the plant he had sown himself, the *Jin* would fulfill his wish and send his father soon to take them to the fair—*usne man hi man imli par rahne wale jinbaba ko ek baingan kaboola, gach ka sabse bada baingan, usne khud jis paudhe ko ropa hai! . . . jaldi se gadi lekar bappa ko bhej do jinbaba*! (In his heart, he offered a brinjal to the *Jinbaba* residing on the tamarind tree—the largest brinjal from the plant he had sown himself! . . . Send the car quickly, *Jinbaba*, and send Father!) (Renu 157).

Birju bribing *Jin* to hasten his father's return demonstrates Marcel Mauss' notion of "symbolic reciprocity in gift exchange,"

where offerings to supernatural entities are seen as transactions to fulfill desires. This cultural behavior also reflects Arnold van Gennep's notion of the *rites of passage*, situating rituals and beliefs as transitional acts that mediate between the natural and supernatural. Suiting this context of the boy invoking the *Jin* for wish fulfilment, one could consider Gennep's distinction of an "indirect rite" from a "direct rite"—

> A direct rite, for example a curse or a spell, is designed to produce results immediately, without intervention by any outside agent. On the other hand, an indirect rite—be it vow, prayer, or religious service—is a kind of initial blow which sets into motion some autonomous or personified power, such as a demon, a group of jinn, or a deity, who intervenes on behalf of the performer of the rite. The effect of a direct rite is automatic; that of an indirect rite comes as a repercussion. (8)

Even Mauss thinks that the link between exchange contracts among people, and those between humans and deities, highlights a crucial aspect of the theory of "sacrifice." This relationship is especially evident in societies where economic and contractual rituals are performed. Malinowski, however, extends the value of gifts from pure sacrificial performance to "barter with bargaining" (Mauss 71). In such contexts, individuals often embody spirits, which in Birju's case is the *Jinbaba*, functioning as their representatives, particularly when they are masked or possessed by the spirit whose name they invoke. Thus, these exchanges and contracts extend beyond human interactions to involve sacred beings associated with them (Mauss 13). When Birju tries to bribe the spirit with the first eggplant from his tree, he certainly is bargaining it in exchange for an early return of his father which he believes the *Jin* could magically facilitate.

In "Laal Paan ki Begum," Birju's mother is seen ranting about her daughter Chamiya, who is not home yet—*Chamiya ke sir bhi chudail madra rahi hai . . . aadhe angan dhup rahte jo gayi hai sahuayin ki dukaan chova-gud lane, so abhi tak nahin lauti; diya-baati ki bela ho gayi* (A witch is hovering over Chamiya's head . . .

half the courtyard was still sunlit when she'd left for the shop to buy dry-fruits and jaggery but hasn't returned yet; it's already time for the evening lamps to be lit) (Renu 153). Chamiya's mother thinks that it is because of some *chudail* (a female evil spirit) who has possessed her daughter that she has not returned home until the evening. The mother's indication that Chamiya's delayed return might be caused by some *chudail*, reflects what Clifford Geertz describes as the "webs of significance" people spin to make sense of their realities in their cosmos (5). This unusual delay is linked to the spirit possession here. The ritual of "diya and baati" is common in Indian cultures in the north and the south. Birju's mother further complains of her husband's unpunctuality to take them to the village fair—*Suraj bhagwan dub gye. Diya-baati ki bela ho gayi. Ab tak gaadi . .* (The sun-god has set. It is time for the evening prayers. Yet no sign of the bullock-cart) (Renu 156). Birju's mother is worried that her husband is not back in time which also dampens her excitement of going to the fair.

The rising and setting of the sun governs the day-to-day activities of the people in Renu's rural depictions. Days begin early in the morning with the energy of the sun, and as soon as the sun sets, daily activities slow down. This association of day and night with the worshipping rituals associated with the rising and setting of the sun, reflect the rural psyche, reassuring a cultural belief system. Nights are often associated with the activation of negative energies of nature like *bhoot, pishach,* etc. (negative spirits). The reference to *diya-baati ka bela*—a ritual of offering evening prayers for the sanctity and safety in Indian households—underscores Victor Turner's concept of the "communitas," where shared rituals sustain community bonds during transitional times like dusk. The association of night with negative energies such as *bhoot* and *pishach,* and of day with positive tasks, also reinforce Claude Levi-Strauss' structuralist idea of binary oppositions, found deeply ingrained in rural consciousness.

In Renu's most celebrated short story, "Teesari Kasam," which was later adopted in a film of the same title, the protagonist Hiraman's perception of Hirabai as a fairy reflects the interplay between folklore and rural psychology. Hiraman's comparison of Hirabai to fairy, *abbey ye toh pari hai . . . bacchon ki boli-jaisi*

maheen, phenugilasi boli . . . (she is an angel . . . her voice is as tender and glass-like gramophone) (Renu 129), functions as a metaphor deeply rooted in popular imagination, where supernatural entities like fairies symbolise unattainable purity and beauty. As Dundes notes, recurring motifs like the fairy figure in folk narratives often represent cultural archetypes that help define social norms and beliefs. Hiraman's admiration for Hirabai's beauty and the fragrance of champa flowers, *aurat hai ya champa ka phool! Jab se gadi mahmah mahak rahi hai* (Is she a woman or a Plumeria-flower! Since the cart smells fragrant) (Renu 128), exemplifies the same.

This comparison further highlights the popular notions of beauty, rather standardised ones in a local setting. Village people are less groomed than actresses (represented by Hirabai in the story), hence causing the bizarre attribute to her looks by a common villager (represented by Hiraman). This reinforces Alan Dundes' structuralist theory, where "fairy" is not just a metaphor but a symbolic representation embedded in the collective rural consciousness, highlighting the binary oppositions between common villagers and idealised figures of beauty. According to Alan Dundes, tales that perform the same functions can be grouped under a single type. Rather than relying on vague elements of plot, a classification system based on clear structural features can be established. Citing Propp's analysis of 100 fairy tales, Dundes notes that each story adheres to a common structural pattern, leading Propp to assert that structurally, all fairy tales belong to the same type (*The Meaning of Folklore* 95).

Animism, Rituals, and Social Order in Renu's Fiction

In "Panchlait," the villagers' reverence for the *panchlaite* (a pressurised kerosene lamp)—an object initially viewed with suspicion—can be analysed through Mauss' concept of the "gift and its social functions," where the ritual purification of the machine before use can be seen as an attempt to establish reciprocal relations between the villagers and the newly acquired item, treating it as a symbolic "gift" that must be properly acknowledged before it can be fully integrated into their lives (Mauss 11). After the village *Panch*s get the mysterious *panchlaite* home, they decide to evoke their gods first; the ten rupees they had saved from the purchase was decided on

to be used for buying materials for the worshipping ritual before they lit up the lamp for the first time—*Bina nem-tem ke kalkabjewali cheez ka punyah nahi karna chahiye. Angrejbahadur ke raaj me bhi pul banane se pahle bali di jati thi* (one must perform rituals before installing something unnamed that makes unfamiliar noises. Even during the reign of Angrez Bahadur, sacrifices were made before a bridge was constructed) (Renu 182). The villagers treat the lamp as an alien entity, fear it, and find difficulty in trusting it. They would first purify it by praying as well as offering some incense and sweets to it, in order to make it a familiar entity. The village folk are yet to learn how the machine functions, and are skeptical about its behaviour—*Rastey mein sann-sann bolta tha panchlite*! (ascribing some onomatopoeic sound to the machine) (Renu 183). This act of ritualising the *panchlaite* also echoes Gennep's idea of liminality or threshold, where the transition from the unknown to the known is marked by sanctifying ritual acts that affirm an entity's entry into the web of social cohesion—

> Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions. (Turner 95)

The villagers' need to perform a ritual of purifying the lamp before they could use it also signifies their need to stabilise the social and spiritual environment after introducing an external object, again underscoring Turner's idea of the "communitas," where shared rituals re-establish collective unity and solidarity (96). Liminal phenomena contrasts two societal models—a hierarchical structure with "politico-legal-economic positions" marked by "more or less," and, a transient egalitarian phase where individuals form an "undifferentiated comitatus" under ritual authority (Turner 96). In Renu's village, the authoritative position of the *Sarpanch* (village head) affirms the second kind of society, which is unorganised and unstructured, always in transition, and most importantly is guided by

the rituals carried by the elderly authoritative persons like the *Sarpanch*.

When no one in the village is able to light the petromax, and disappointment spreads among the villagers, one of the villager comments, *kal-kabjewali cheez ka nakhra bahut hota hai* (electronic machines are very moody) (Renu 183). This exaggerated description of the lamp as a "*kal-kabjewali cheez*" endowed with mysterious powers and human-like attributes such as having tantrums, points to what could be referred to as "folkloric imagination," the process by which ordinary objects are imbued with supernatural qualities, reflecting how the village folk interpret and interact with unfamiliar items. The lamp, though an inanimate object, is anthropomorphised, symbolising the villagers' tendency to ascribe human traits to the unknown, which helps them make sense of and integrate it into their belief systems. This perspective aligns with the "animistic" qualities of folklore, where the boundaries between the living and non-living are blurred through cultural interpretations. This also corresponds to Alan Dundes' thought on cognitive structure in folklore, where the mind uses symbolic systems to process and make sense of the unknown.

Finally, the village-romeo, Godhan's re-admittance into the community after proving his expertise with the lamp speaks to the fluidity of social roles in village society, as explored in Gramsci's theory of "counter-hegemony," where local norms and practices allow for the renegotiation of status and identity, particularly when dignity is at stake. "Through intellectual activity in the broadest sense, primitive notions of folklore and common sense as acquiescence to the existing order could be transcended, and this was the necessary condition for radical political transformation" (Schwarzmantel 92). By appealing to subversive and gradual changes within the village community, Renu highlights the power of the liminal folk groups to be capable of transforming themselves towards national progress.

Cleansing and purifying rituals hold significant cultural importance in various regions across India, including North Indian states such as Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, where the River Ganges is

deeply revered for its purifying virtues. In Renu's short story, "Ek Adim Ratri Ki Mahak," the sacred river symbolises the cleansing of sins and attainment of purity. This reflects the widespread belief that consistent immersion in the Ganges absolves accumulated sins from several lifetimes. The protagonist Karma therefore declares, "chaar mahine tak teeson din Ganga me nahaya hai Karma. Char 'janam tak' paap ka koi asar to nahin hona chahiye!" [Karma, having bathed in the holy Ganges for one twenty days in a row, is now immune to the effects of sin for another four lives!] (Renu 374). This suggests the widespread belief that consistent immersion in the Ganges absolves accumulated sins from several lifetimes. Such symbolic acts of purification resonate with the anthropological perspective of Victor Turner, who–in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*– emphasises the liminal nature of rituals, just like that of cultural groups. The act of bathing in the Ganges can be interpreted as a transitory phase, wherein the individual moves from a state of spiritual impurity to one of renewed sanctity, reinforcing communal and religious identities. Additionally, Clifford Geertz's concept of religion as a 'system of symbols' provides a lens to understand how the Ganges functions as a potent symbol of divine power and purity. In Renu's narrative, the Manihari Baba reiterates this reverence by exclaiming, *ghat-ghat ka pani peekar dekha - sab feeka. Ek gangajal meetha* . . . (I have tasted the waters from every shore – all bland. Only the water of the Ganges is sweet . . .) (Renu 374). This assertion not only underscores the sacredness of the Ganges but also reflects its perceived superiority over other rivers, reinforcing its central role in cultural cosmology. Alan Dundes highlights that such rituals often serve as vehicles for transmitting collective beliefs. The invocation of "Gangajal" as uniquely "sweet" aligns with oral traditions that celebrate the Ganges not merely as a physical river but as a repository of cultural memory and shared spirituality. In Bihar and beyond, this sacrality is perpetuated through both oral narratives and literary representations like Renu's.

Besides the rivers, galaxies too strongly affect life in rural cosmology—*Idhar hathiya-nacchattar achha jhara tha. Kheton mein ab bhi pani laga hua hai* . . . (Here, the *Hathiya Nakshatra* had brought good rain. The fields still have water in them . . .) (Renu 376). As explained in a column by *Aaj Tak*, "it rains continuously in the

last week of Ashwin month. It is called Hathiya Nakshatra. The farmers of Hathiya Nakshatra are eagerly waiting because the water of this Nakshatra is considered good for the crops" (1). In such belief systems, the position of celestial bodies, such as planets and constellations, is thought to influence human lives and natural phenomena, such as rainfall. In the pre-scientific era, communities sought to comprehend nature by observing the movements of the sun, the moon, and the stars. Even today, these folk practices persist, showcasing a reliance on what can be termed as primitive wisdom. This belief ties into what Geertz would define as a 'web of significance' woven by a community to make sense of their environment. Similarly, Bakhtin's concept of the "chronotope" can also be employed to interpret how time and space in Renu's narrative are interwoven with the rhythms of rural life, creating a symbolic connection between the cosmos and agricultural cycles. Furthermore, Gennep's "rites of passage" can provide a lens to view such cosmological beliefs as integral to transitions within the agrarian calendar, functioning as communal rituals that sustain socio-economic practices. Gennep defines *rites de passage* as "rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age" (Turner 94), encompassing the beliefs around the agrarian calendar. The notion of the *Hathiya Nakshatra* demonstrates how "folk cosmology" and agricultural practices converge, preserving cultural identity and continuity amidst modernity.

Conclusion

Phanishwar Nath Renu's short stories offer a rich tapestry of "folk cosmology", where superstitions, rituals, and supernatural beliefs are intricately woven into the fabric of rural life. While Renu portrays these beliefs with empathy and authenticity, he also encourages a critical re-evaluation of their validity, which is evident in his narrative endings. For instance, in "Kaak Charit", the villagers gradually move away from blind superstition, and in "Panchlait," caste barriers are challenged to prioritise an individual's worth over their social identity. Renu's nuanced approach reflects a deep understanding of the rural psyche, where folklore serves as both a tool of identity preservation and a medium for socio-cultural negotiation. Renu's engagement with folklore is thus both

celebratory and critical. He applauds the cultural richness of rural traditions while subtly questioning their relevance in a rapidly modernising world. His stories serve as a testament to the enduring power of folklore in shaping the rural psyche, offering valuable insights into the interplay between tradition and modernity in contemporary India. While this paper has explored several themes around folk culture, a more detailed examination of Renu's portrayal of women characters in his short stories remains a valuable avenue for future research. By situating Renu's work within broader scholarly dialogues on folklore and cultural studies, this paper highlighted the enduring relevance of Renu's stories in understanding the complexities of rural life in India.

Endnote

i. Renu writes from the heart of Bihar—its soil, its language, its idiosyncrasies. He knows these people as only an *insider* can. Yet as a storyteller, he becomes the *outsider*—quiet, watching from the margins, a mere observer. His characters speak for themselves, and he simply lets them be. He hardly seems to force a dialogue, or make an authorial intervention in his stories, but registers them raw and real, unfolding naturally.

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