Fable --- A Note

“Literature begins with the telling of a tale”.¹ Being driven by the intense urge for self expression, man loves to shape and share his personal experience. And such experience is fashioned into various forms of literary art. “This oral art of tale-telling is far older than history,” says Stith Thompson, “and it is not bounded by one continent or one civilisation. Stories may differ in subject from place to place, the condition of tale -telling may change as we move from land to land or from country to country and yet everywhere it ministers to the same basic social and individual needs.”²

This art of story-telling might take the form of the Tale, the Parable, the Allegory, the Satire, the Myth, the Anecdote, the Legend, the Fairy-tale, the Proverb and the Fable.

A Tale is a story. It is founded on fact and is accepted by the imagination. It need not contain a moral lesson. Its main purpose is to delight the reader and therefore is replete with action and romantic love leading to exciting adventures in a common theme. The best examples of this category are the Brhatkathā and the Arabian Nights.

The word Parable comes from the Greek “Parable” meaning “setting aside”. It suggests a juxtaposition that compares and contrasts the story with a new idea. It is a crafted use of language purposely intended to convey a hidden meaning, other than that expressed in the words
of the story. Most Parables are found in the Bible, and the biblical ‘Prodigal Son’ is the most famous of them all.

The term Allegory suggests a more expanded use of deceptive and oblique language. It is a manner of representation in which a person, an abstract idea or an event stand for itself and for something else. It can be described as an expanded metaphor. It is applied to a work of fiction in which the author intends the characters and their actions to be understood in terms other than that conveyed by the surface meanings. The surface or extended meanings involve moral or spiritual concept more significantly than the actual narrative itself. It is a difficult kind of writing because it demands such a passionate fusion of moral and the story as shall render the one unobtrusive as the other is entertaining. Critics usually reserve the term itself to works of varied length. Thus the following works can be called allegories: the Everyman, a medieval play; the Pilgrim’s Progress by John Bunyan; the Gulliver’s travels by Jonathan Swift; the Door in the Wall by H.G. Wells.

A Satire is a work intended to arouse ridicule, contempt or disgust. It abuses the follies of man and his institutions and is aimed at the correction of malpractices by inspiring both indignation and laughter with a blending of criticism and wit. We could mention the name of the Rape of the Lock by Alexander Pope.

A Myth is an old story, which explains the religious beliefs of a race or a people. It is laid in ancient or pre-historic times and deals with gods and sacred beings. “In terms of narrative,” says Northop Frye, “myth is the
limitation of actions nearer at conceivable limits of human desire”3

An Anecdote is “a short story, interesting or amusing, often about a famous person.”4

A Legend is a traditional oral narrative containing remarkable or supernatural elements that follow a pattern. Legends deal with persons, places and events. Because they purport to be historical and factual, they must be associated in the minds of the community with some known individual, geographical landmark or particular episode.

A Fairy-tale is usually applied to the stories where unusual things happen. They are not often about the fairies at all. It carries the reader into a wonderful land of make-believe. First, the characters are introduced and their troubles are told. The hero or heroin faces a problem that seems almost impossible to solve. Just when the things seem absolutely hopeless, a fairy or dwarf enters with some supernatural powers and saves the damsel or Prince charming in distress. It has always a happy ending. Examples are the story of Cinderella and the Jack and the Bean Stalk.

A Proverb is a crystallised summary of wisdom. Professor Taylor believes that “some (proverbs) are simple ... platitudes elevated to the proverbial dignity, others arise from the symbolic incident; still others imitate clearly already existing proverbs and some owe their existence to the condensing of a fable.”5
Definitions of the Fable

Giovanni Boccaccio said that all worthwhile literature was fable (fabula). He defines the Fable as “a connected occurrence which under the appearance of fiction, is exemplary or demonstrative and which reveals the author’s purpose only when the shell has been removed.”

Crabbe defines it thus: “The fable is allegorical, its actions are natural, but its agents are imaginary. The tale is fictitious but not imaginary. The fable has for it both, its agents and its actions are drawn from the passing scenes of life ---- tales are written for amusement, fables for instruction.”

Dr. Samuel Johnson, in writing the biography of the poet, John Gay, defines the fable as under: “A Fable, or an Apologue, such as is now under consideration, seems to be, in its genuine stage, a narrative in which beings irrational, and sometimes inanimate, are for the purpose of moral instruction, feigned to act with human interests and passions.”

La Fontaine defines the fable as follows: “A fable consists of two parts, which might be termed body and soul; the story being the body and the moral, the soul.”

Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg define the fable as under: “The didactic sub-division of fiction we may call fable, a form which is ruled by an intellectual and moral impulse as romance is ruled by an artistic
One. The human intellect being what it is, the fable tends towards brevity in narrative and is inclined to lean heavily on romance for narrative articulation if the narrative art has anything like a sustained flight in time.”

K.O. Mueller puts it as “an intentional travesty of human affairs”.

Stith Thompson defines the fable as under: “When the animal tale is told with an acknowledged purpose, it becomes a fable. They usually attach an actual maxim, though this is not necessary. But the moral purpose is essential quality, which distinguishes the fable from other animal tales.”

Louis Untermeyer defines it as follows: “A fable is a kind of myth, a legend that has been told and retold until it acquires new meaning. Frequently it has an added purpose and is used (in the words of Samuel Johnson) ‘to point a moral and adorn a tale’. But though, a fable usually teaches a lesson, it is often enjoyed as a fantasy for its own sake.”

David Richter defines it as “a rhetorical fiction in which each detail of plot, characterisation and language is chosen in order to make us understand something in the external world…”

F.R. Leavis speaks of the moral fable essentially in similar terms but appropriately emphasizes the element of instant recognition in it. In the fable, he says, “the intention is peculiarly insistent so that the representative
significance of everything in the fable --- character, episode and so on--- is immediately apparent as we read.”\textsuperscript{15}

Thomas Noel defines the fable as “the short didactic narrative, commonly employing animal characters, also known as the animal fable, the Aesopian fable or the apologue.”\textsuperscript{16}

The Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English defines the fable as under: “a short story, especially one with animals for the characters and with a moral, as Aesop’s Fables.”\textsuperscript{17}

The Random House Dictionary of the English Language defines it as follows: “A short tale to teach a moral; often with animals or inanimate objects as characters; an apologue.”\textsuperscript{18}

\textbf{Fable—Tale --- Parable}

We cannot differentiate the Fable, Tale and Parable by the aforesaid definitions alone. It will now be seen that the Fable how far differs from the other similar forms, namely the Tale and the Parable.

“The fable partly agrees with and partly differs from the tale and the parable.”\textsuperscript{19} The Parable shows less interest in the analogy between the particular instance of human behaviour and human behaviour at large. The Parable and the Fable have their common in the pre-literate oral cultures and both of them are means of handling down folk-wisdom. However, their styles differ. The Fable tends towards
sharply observed social realism (which eventually leads to satire) while simple narrative gives them a mysterious tone and makes especially useful teaching spiritual stories. “It will contain, like the Tale, a short but real narrative, and it will seek, like the Parable, to convey a hidden meaning and that is not so much by the use of language as such as by skilful introduction of fictitious characters and yet unlike the Tale or the Parable, an inseparable attribute, the great purpose of instruction and will necessarily seek to inculcate some moral maxims, social duty or political truth.”  

D.D. Croxall and Roger L’Estrange observes, “The fable is distinguished by the one peculiarity referred to in various definitions mentioned earlier, viz., that the animals are avowedly introduced as a veil or disguise under which to represent the actions, motives, sentiments and thoughts of men, to direct whose politics, passions and opinions is the aim and object of the author. From this fact it becomes clear that the fable is clear from the popular legendary stories relating to the beasts which abound in the South African fables and escapes also those strange mythological transmutations and of most gentile cosmogonies.”  

This is a brief discussion on the characteristic features of the Fable in general. In the next chapter we are going to introspect the beast fables in the domain of Sanskrit literature.
References

