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# Who Broke the Rule? Emotion, Ethics and the Play of Criminality in Contemporary Indian Folktales for Children

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***Abstract***— *What if a lie could be funny, a broken promise to be clever, and a criminal to be kind? In the world of modern Indian folktales, especially those produced after 2000s by platforms like Karadi Tales and Tulika Books, animated storytelling reimagines wrongdoing in playful and emotionally complex ways. This article explores how such visual narratives frame criminality not as a fixed moral failure, but as a site of humour, cleverness and even wonder. Rather than offering clear moral lessons, these folktales position the child as an active moral interpreter, invited to navigate shifting perspectives and emotional cues. Focusing on two animated stories, The Lion's Feast (2006) and Paati's Beats (2018) this analysis examines moments of mischief, deception, and ethical ambiguity without clear resolution. What counts as a crime - and who is the criminal - often depends on narrative framing and viewer response. In parallel, it draws on Narrative Positioning Theory (Davies and Harre 1990; Kayi Aydar 2019) to explore how children are invited to take up roles such as hero, trickster, or bystander. Ultimately, this study attempts to show how animated folktales encourage children to think about justice, not as a rulebook, but as a story to feel their way through.*

***Keywords***— ***Animation, Criminality, Folktales, Indian, Narrative positioning***

## I. INTRODUCTION

Children's stories have always done more than mere entertainment. They shape young reader's understanding of right and wrong, model social behaviour and invite emotional engagement. Traditional scholarship on folktales has largely emphasized their role in transmitting cultural norms and clear moral messages. Research on Indian children's literature, has extensively documented how such collections reinforced ethical binaries, offering children a singular moral framework to follow.

More recent work in children's media studies, however, highlights the child as an active interpreter, capable of navigating ambiguity and responding to emotional cues. While there is growing attention to the ways children interpret narrative and morality, few studies have examined how criminality and wrongdoing are framed in contemporary Indian animated folktales, or how children are positioned to negotiate ethical complexity within these stories.

This paper addresses that gap by tracing historical shifts in Indian children's literature, from didactic moral instruction to contemporary folktales that blend playfulness, mischief and ethical ambiguity. It examines how acts of mischief, deception and criminality are represented in these narratives and how children are invited to interpret them. Using Narrative Positioning Theory, this study analyses the ways young viewers are positioned as active participants in the story world, navigating shifting moral landscapes. The purpose of this paper is to explore how modern examine Indian animated folktales encourage children to think about

justice not as a rigid rulebook, but as a story to feel their way through, highlighting the ethical and emotional complexity embedded in contemporary storytelling.

## II. HISTORICAL SHIFTS IN MORAL FRAMING

### 2.1 From Clean Binaries to Curiosity

In Indian children's storytelling, the idea of crime – or more broadly, right and wrong – was once quite clear- cut. Stories traditionally acted as moral compasses: teaching, warning and guiding young readers with firm distinctions between good and bad. Ancient collections like the *Panchatantra Tales* (originally composed c. 3000 BCE; Pai, 2008) were filled with clever animals, tricky situations and crystal-clear morals. For example, in one tale, a jackal's cleverness helps him rise in power, but his arrogance leads to downfall – a direct caution against pride. This moral structure continued into the mid-20th century with the emergence of Amar Chitra Katha (est. 1967) which adapted Indian mythology, history and folklore into comic form. These stories, too, were built around dichotomies of virtue and vice: kings who lied were punished, demons were defeated, and brave, honest heroes triumphed. Narration was often from a singular voice, offering little room for alternate perspectives. Justice always prevailed, reinforcing a singular ethical framework.

However, over the past two decades, a quiet yet unmistakeable shift has transformed the landscape of Indian children's storytelling. Beginning in the early 2000s, a new generation of publishers has reimagined folktale narration in ways that remain culturally rooted, but feels fresher, playful, and open to curiosity. One of the earliest players in this transformation was Karadi Tales (est. 1996) which combined Indian folktales with immersive audio storytelling. Their narratives feature background music, expressive narration and sound effects delivered in Indian voices and accents. Whether in classroom or at bedtime, the stories feel like being read to by a family member – a storytelling experience rich in rhythm, warmth and cultural familiarity.

Tulika Books (est. 1996) emerged alongside Karadi, introducing multilingual, multicultural narratives. Stories span across geographies and include local expressions, dialects, food, attire, and familial customs. Whether it is a story set in the hills of Himachal or the backwaters of Kerala, children recognize elements of their daily lives – the polka-dot skirts oily braids with red ribbons, banana leaf meals, and exclamations like "Aiyyoo (Oh No!) or "Arre waah!" (wonderful). Illustrations of Tulika is deeply enhanced by local artist collaborations, mimicking handmade feel to the pages. Pratham Books revolutionized accessibility with the launch of Story Weaver in 2015, offering free picture books in over 50 Indian languages. A child in Assam (North-East state of India) and a child in Tamil Nadu (Southernmost state of India) can read the same story in their mother tongue. These stories reflect urban and rural childhoods - cricket in narrow alleys, buses full of chatter, potholed roads, and schoolyards with broken swings (Karadi Tales, 2006).

Publishers like Tara Books, Ektara Publishers and Magic Box continued this revival, blending old storytelling forms with new perspectives. Tara Books, for instance, pairs traditional Indian art styles like Madhubani, Warli, Gond – and pairs them with contemporary retellings. These books are part story, part art piece, maintaining the rich visual traditions of Indian oral culture. What sets these publishers apart is their deliberate choice not to imitate Western storytelling formats. Instead, they centre brown-skinned children, cotton saree-clad grandmothers and uncle fixing old scooters. Steel tiffin boxes, neem trees, barred windows, and marigolds populate the background.

This visual world acts as an "Image bank" that helps Indian children relate story to self. Importantly, the storytelling voice has changed. Dialogues mimics real-life speech – siblings' squabble, grandparents scold gently, and regional expressions abound. Characters no longer speak in formal, stilted tones but in natural, familiar ways, preserving linguistic diversity. Yet, the most significant change lies in the treatment of morality. While stories of *Panchatantra* or *Amar Chitra Katha* emphasized fixed punishments for dishonesty or disobedience, newer stories explore ambiguity. Modern tales are built around minor mischiefs: hiding a sibling's toy, sneaking sweets or fibbing to avoid homework. These are not presented as crimes, nor are the characters always punished. Instead, readers are encouraged to empathize, reflect, and sometimes laugh. Resolutions are less about punishment and more about understanding. The aim is not didacticism, but engagement. Children are asked not simply, "What is right?" but "Why did they do that?" or "Could the villain have had a reason?".

### 2.2 Folktales Reimagined

For centuries, Indian folktales have been mainly oral stories – narrated under banyan trees, and passed down through generations, with rich regional variations in language, imagery and tone. *The Panchatantra, Jataka Tales, Hitopadesha* and other collections became foundational texts where everyday wisdom, humour and moral insight is combined in animal fables. These tales were not confined to written texts; they were embodied in performance, puppetry, song, and communal retelling – an evolving tradition rather than a fixed set of morals. In recent decades, as children's literature in India expanded through the

printing press and new publishers emerged, folktale forms were adapted into modern media: comic books, puppetry series and illustrated books embraced regional aesthetics while retaining the openness of storytelling. These formats preserved the elastic moral form and cultural specificity which is prevalent identity of folklores.

The last two decades have seen a further transformation: Indian folktales are now presented through animation, digital platforms, and multilingual editions. While many stories remain ancient, the folklore tradition is not static. Contemporary animated tales often emulate features of folktale – episodic rhythm, playful repetition, local colour – while adapting to their form of visual and auditory impact. Folklore remains central but is now used to spark imagination, question morality, and explore identity. Tales of trickster jackals, greedy kings, or magical forests are told with humour or from multiple perspectives. A formerly one-dimensional villain may now be shown in a sympathetic light, and children are positioned not just as learners, but as interpreters. The child reader or viewer is encouraged to feel their way through justice, rather than following a strict rulebook.

*The Lion's Feast* is based on a well-known Tamil folk narrative, updated through visual humour and music, but still structured around classical tropes of deception, hospitality and reversal. *Paati's Beats,* through an original story, echoes the folktale mode through its episodic rhythm, exaggerated characters, intergenerational setting, and oral-style narration. In both, there is no central moral preached, but a world revealed – through repetition, rhythm and delight in everyday mischief. These stories do not aim to teach one fixed truth. Instead, like folklores, they invite retelling, adaptation and interpretation.

By positioning the child viewer as both insider and outsider to the world of the story, they uphold the folktale tradition as a living, breathing form – where even an elderly woman chewing betel leaf or a lion waiting for his meal can become part of a shared cultural imagination. Thus, folktale as a genre in India today includes both age-old narratives and newly crafted stories that draw on the folktale aesthetic: community-rooted, emotion-rich, adaptable, and open-ended in meaning. These are not just retellings; they are folktales reimagined for contemporary child audience.

## III. PLAY OF CRIMINALITY IN FOLKTALES

### 3.1 Guilt, Empathy and the Shape of "Wrongdoing" in Children's stories

In children's literature, the idea of crime is not always what adults associate with court, theft or physical harm. Instead, wrongdoing is often framed through disobedience, deception, mischief, or unintended harm. These stories rarely involve law enforcement or legal consequences but focus instead on emotional and ethical concepts like guilt and empathy. The emotional resonance of such moments often determines how young readers interpret these acts, particularly when characters are shown experiencing guilt or regret.

Maria Nikolajeva can be drawn, a pioneer in children's literature, offers insight into this process. In her 2012 article "Guilt, Empathy and the Ethical Potential of Children's Literature", she argues that children's books function as emotional laboratories where young readers can explore complex feelings like remorse, forgiveness, and moral uncertainty in a safe space. When characters act unethically or ambiguously, literature encourages children to engage in perspective-taking, practicing empathy without real-world consequences. Contemporary Indian visual folktales like *The Lion's Feast* (Karadi Tales), *Paati's Beats* (Tulika Books), and digital stories from Pratham' s Story Weaver platform embody this shift from moral clarity to moral curiosity. In *The Lion's Feast*, an elderly couple deceives a lion to save themselves. Although they lie and break a promise, the tale prompts laughter rather than judgement, subtly inviting readers to question whether deception can be justified or even compassionate. This complexity aligns with Nikolajeva's notion that children do not require rigid moral rules; rather, they benefit from narratives that ask them to understand and empathize with morally ambiguous characters.

Similarly, in *Paati's Beats,* the story centres on an elderly woman whose love for rhythm and everyday joy is met with disapproval. Paati, who has no teeth, finds pleasure in grinding paan on a stone pestle and thus making music with her hands – a daily act that irritates her husband, Thatha. His frustration is not rooted in logic, but in habit and discomfort with her expressions of vitality. The conflict here is domestic and emotional rather than legal or moral: Thatha excludes her, subtly policing how joy is allowed to manifest. As Paati's rhythms eventually draw the neighbourhood into celebration, the story repositions her from nuisance to nurturer. Readers are gently invited to empathize with Paati and recognize that exclusion – especially within intimate spaces – is a quiet but significant form of wrongdoing. The resolution arrives not through punishment but through recognition and emotional transformation. These stories help young readers feel discomfort, joy, and even doubt. And this is the 'emotional education' that Nikolajeva highlights.

### 3.2 Understanding Guilt: More Than Just Saying Sorry

According to Nikolajeva, guilt is not a simple feeling. Its complex because it involves more than just knowing a rule has been broken – it requires understanding *why* it was wrong and *how* that action may have hurt someone else. This emotional insight is not always easy for young readers, who may not yet have the social or psychological tools to grasp what a character is truly experiencing. Take a simple scenario: a child in a story lies to an adult. If the story merely states, "He feels guilty," it leaves too much unsaid. Is the child guilty because he got caught? Because he hurt someone? Or is he simply afraid of being punished? Nikolajeva argues that literature becomes far more powerful when guilt is shown through emotions and behaviours – what scholars call "emotion discourse" or "emotion ekphrasis". This might look like a character avoiding eye contact, falling silent, doing something kind to make up for a mistake, or even having a nightmare.

In stories for young readers, these subtle signals help them emotionally navigate ethical situations. They might begin to ask: *What would I do? Would I forgive this character? Do they deserve it?* This is where the real ethical power of children's stories lies: they do not always provide clear answers. Instead, they invite young readers to explore uncertainty and empathy for themselves. In contrast, older Indian stories like *Amar Chitra Katha* often presented morality in black and white. Heroes and villains were sharply divided, and readers were not encouraged to empathize with the villain. In the mythological story of Ramayana, the character Ravana kidnapped Sita, who is the wife of Rama. In this scenario, Amar Chitra Katha comics present Ravana as bad – full stop. There was little room to explore his motives or feelings of guilt. But contemporary stories allow children to dwell in that ambiguous middle ground. Maybe someone makes a selfish choice for a kind reason. Maybe a lie ends up saving someone. Maybe a child rebels – not because they are "bad", but because they are protecting a friend or asserting their identity.

Nikolajeva suggests that such stories challenge readers to think more deeply. They prompt not just the question "What happened?" but also "How did that feel?" and "What would I do in that situation?". It is in these quiet, emotional reckonings that children begin to grapple with complex ethics – not by being told what is right, but by *feeling* it.

## 1. Narrative Positioning through Folktales: Emotional Complexity in Crime

Every compelling story positions us emotionally. We laugh, we worry, we admire cleverness, or we pause when something feels just a bit off. These reactions are not spontaneous – they are carefully shaped but the way a story invites us to take up certain roles, perspectives and values. Narrative Positioning Theory offers a framework to understand how stories do more than entertain. They align audiences with characters and moral stances, subtly shaping how actions, emotions and ethical dilemmas are interpreted. This is especially important in stories involving wrongdoing or moral ambiguity. In children's storytelling, these themes are presented with care. Rather than instilling fear or punishment, visual folktales often provide emotional entry points for children to explore the boundaries between right, wrong and the in between.

Take *The Lion's Feast*, for example. On the surface, it is a humorous tale about an elderly couple tricking a lion. But a closer look reveals how narrative positioning works at multiple levels. The couple is initially shown as vulnerable – old, trembling and confronted by danger. This invites the audience to align with their fear. As they devise to plan to outwit the lion, our emotional alignment shifts from concern to admiration. Their cleverness reframes the act of deception not as cruelty, but as ingenuity. The lion, introduced as a threat, is progressively repositioned. His exaggerated expressions and comic tone render him less frightening and more laughable. When he returns to find no feast, his animated anger fades into disappointed confusion. A flicker of sympathy might arise, but it is quickly replaced by humour when he discovers only a burp is left behind. Through these tonal shifts, the viewer moves fluidly between emotions – never firmly judging, but always feeling. What's striking is that the story never condemns or praises the couple outright. They move from victims to tricksters to comic heroes. The lion shifts from predator to punchline. These fluid positions allow children to explore ethical complexity without the need for moral instruction. Wrongdoing, in this case deception, is framed as a survival strategy, softened through humour and framed by emotional nuance.

*Paati's Beats*, a musical folklore told by Jeeva Raghunath, also makes use of shifting narrative positions to explore social conflict and emotional transformation. The story centres on Paati, a toothless grandmother who loudly grinds and chews her paan. The rhythmic noise initially sparks laughter, delight and playful participation. Through exaggerated animation and sound design, children are invited not just to witness the humour, but to engage with it physically and vocally. Soon, the narrative introduces tension: Paati's husband, Thatha, grows irritated. His frustration is never aggressive but presented as familiar and almost endearing. This introduces dual alignment – children empathize both with Paati's joy and Thatha's discomfort. As Thatha seeks help, the situation spirals into absurdity. Animals were brought in to mask the noise, each adding their own sounds to the household. This escalating chaos creates layers of engagement: amusement, disbelief and

curiosity. Here, too, the story avoids fixed moral categories. Thatha's actions are silly but relatable. Paati remains unapologetically herself. Neither character is fully right or wrong. The emotional shift prompts viewers to experience contradiction: annoyance alongside affection, disruption alongside delight. The emotional climax arrives when silence finally returns. Thatha, now used to the vibrant chaos, finds the quiet unsettling. When Paati resumes her chewing, the sound that once annoyed him becomes comforting. This reversal is not achieved through didactism but through emotional repositioning. The viewer, having travelled this journey, also reinterprets the sound – not as nuisance, but as love.

Through this arc, *Paati's Beats* demonstrates how stories can generate ethical reflection not through explicit judgement, but through layered emotional engagement. Like *The Lion's Feast*, it resists easy moral binaries. Noise is not inherently bad, nor is silence always good. Trickery is not evil, and discomfort is not always a problem to be solved. Instead, these tales offer complexity: sound, identity, and affection are shown to be entangled, and the viewer is positioned to explore those entanglements through feeling. In both stories, the audience is never positioned as passive recipients of a moral message. Rather, they are invited to realign their sympathies, reconsider their responses, and question simple judgements. These folktales operate as emotional laboratories, echoing Maria Nikolajeva's argument that children's literature functions as a space for practicing ethical emotions such as empathy, guilt, and forgiveness. What makes these narratives so effective is not their message, but their method. They do not preach. They prompt reflection by immersing children in emotional tension and resolution. Narrative positioning becomes the tool through which young viewers feel their way through ethical ambiguity. Together, *The Lion's Feast* and *Paati's Beats* reveal how Indian visual folktales craft rich emotional landscapes where children are not taught what to feel, but how to navigate what they are feeling. Through humour, rhythm, conflict and reconciliation, they cultivate ethical awareness without rigid rules. In doing so, they prepare children not just for storytelling, but for life's moral complexity – where joy and discomfort often coexist, and where resolution lies not in certainty, but in understanding.

## IV. CONCLUSION

Stories told to children are never just stories – they are emotional landscapes where laughter, wonder, fear, irritation and affection converge. In today's animated visual folktales, especially those drawing from Indian traditions do not remain as theoretical relics, but function as vibrant tools for emotional storytelling and becomes a subtle, yet powerful narrative strategy. Tricksters are not always punished, elders are not always wise, and children are not always obedient. Through this, the stories invite the viewers to enter complex moral worlds without the pressure of fixed judgements.

Narrative Positioning Theory positions the child viewer as an active interpreter of shifting roles, moods, and outcomes; and audiences are invited to laugh, wonder, doubt, or sympathize – all within the space of a few minutes. This interplay fosters a form of narrative literacy, where children learn to navigate not only the surface plot but also the deeper social and emotional cues embedded in the story. In the end, perhaps the greatest lesson these tales offer is that it is okay not to have all these answers – as long as right questions are asked, and the doors are kept open for laughing a little along the way.

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