

Folk Beliefs and Pedagogical Practices: Rethinking the Cultural Transmission in Teaching *King Lear*

Mohammad Jashim Uddin

Associate Professor & Head, Department of English, Northern University Bangladesh

ARTICLE INFORMATION

The Faculty Journal of Arts
Rajshahi University
Special Volume-6
ISSN: 1813-0402 (Print)

Received : 12 February 2025
Received in revised: 15 April 2025
Accepted: 16 March 2025
Published: 25 October 2025

Keywords:
Pedagogy, Folk Traditions,
Shakespeare's King Lear, Cultural
Transmission, Multicultural Education

ABSTRACT

This research examines how integrating folk traditions into the pedagogy of Shakespeare's *King Lear* can deepen cultural understanding and enhance literary engagement. It explores how teaching methodologies rooted in folk beliefs can contextualize *King Lear* for diverse learners, connecting its themes of justice, fate, and intergenerational conflict with cultural narratives familiar to students. By blending canonical literature with folklore, the study investigates ways to make *King Lear* more accessible and relatable, particularly in multicultural classrooms. A qualitative approach is employed, involving a close textual analysis of *King Lear* alongside a comparative study of relevant folk traditions. Classroom case studies are also conducted to assess the impact of folk-inspired teaching methods on students' critical and cultural engagement. The research demonstrates that incorporating folk beliefs into pedagogy enhances students' appreciation of the play's universal themes while fostering intercultural awareness and analytical skills. This culturally responsive approach underscores the parallels between Shakespearean drama and local narratives, offering a fresh perspective on teaching *King Lear*. By bridging the gap between Shakespearean studies and folk traditions, the study provides a framework for reimagining the teaching of *King Lear* in ways that resonate with learners from diverse cultural backgrounds. This approach not only enriches literary education but also reaffirms the enduring relevance of Shakespeare's works in a globalized world.

Introduction and Background of the Study

In an era of increasing globalization and cultural heterogeneity, teaching canonical Western texts like Shakespeare's *King Lear* necessitates a shift to acknowledge and integrate diverse cultural epistemologies. Traditionally viewed through Eurocentric lenses, *King Lear* symbolizes human frailty and redemption, but its deeper structure resonates with folk narratives from the Global South. This study aims to excavate these connections through folk beliefs and oral traditions, proposing a decolonial pedagogical framework that emphasizes indigenous cultural transmission.

Culturally responsive pedagogy has gained importance in educational discourse, advocating for the incorporation of students' cultural backgrounds into instruction. Gloria Ladson-Billings argues that effective pedagogy must "actively engage with students' cultural knowledge to foster academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness" (160). Integrating folk narratives—like the South Asian tale "Love Like Salt"—in the teaching of *King Lear* fosters cultural recognition and epistemic validation, enriching literary engagement.

The notion that Shakespeare's works reflect folkloric traditions is well-established. Charlotte Arètes describes *King Lear* as a "palimpsest," layered with earlier oral narratives (Artese 4). Despite this, the educational implications remain largely unexplored, especially in postcolonial settings where students seek cultural resonance. Edward Said emphasizes that the imposition of the Western literary canon perpetuates colonial dominance: "What is at stake is not merely a matter of literary criticism, but of ideological and cultural hegemony" (Said 9). This study positions folk narratives as counter-hegemonic tools to re-center local epistemologies.

The misrecognition of filial love in *King Lear* aligns with motifs in global folktales. In "Love Like Salt," a father's misunderstanding leads to estrangement, reflecting Lear's lament, "How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is / To have a thankless child!" (Shakespeare 1.4.287–88). These

parallels help students appreciate Shakespeare as a timeless figure whose concerns resonate across cultures, as Alan Dundes suggests in his “mirror of culture” concept (3).

Integrating oral traditions into Shakespeare’s teaching promotes “epistemic reconstitution,” as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argues, ensuring subaltern voices contribute to knowledge production (Spivak 66). This is crucial in postcolonial classrooms, where traditional curriculum often overlooks indigenous perspectives. Engaging with Lear’s madness or analyzing The Fool through local cultural frameworks allows for deeper connections with the text.

Finally, as Louise Rosenblatt states, the reader’s experience shapes meaning: “The literary work exists in a live circuit between reader and text” (Rosenblatt 25). Thus, embedding folk narratives in Shakespeare’s pedagogy expands the interpretive process, creating a more inclusive educational experience. This research challenges the inertia framing *King Lear* within rigid canons. It advocates for a method of teaching that foregrounds students’ folk beliefs as critical tools of inquiry, contributing to broader conversations in decolonial education and intercultural literacy.

Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of this study is to investigate how folk beliefs and oral traditions can be methodically integrated into the pedagogy of *King Lear* to enhance student engagement, interpretive insight, and cultural awareness. It aims to explore how culturally responsive teaching strategies—grounded in regional and indigenous folk narratives—can illuminate the play’s universal themes, thereby enabling learners from diverse backgrounds to critically connect with Shakespeare’s text. Additionally, the study seeks to assess the pedagogical implications of such integration in multicultural and postcolonial classroom settings, particularly examining how this approach contributes to decolonizing the teaching of canonical Western literature.

Literature Review

The integration of folk traditions into the teaching of Shakespeare has been extensively examined in contemporary scholarship, particularly with regard to *King Lear*. These studies emphasize how cultural narratives enrich literary pedagogy, allowing students to engage more meaningfully with canonical texts. Artese explores how folktales inform the structural and thematic design of Shakespeare’s plays, especially *King Lear*. She argues that stories like the folktale “Love Like Salt” provide intertextual bridges, linking Shakespeare’s tragic narrative to collective cultural memories, thereby enriching student engagement through folkloric familiarity (Artese 57). Similarly, researchers at the Folger Shakespeare Library emphasize the pedagogical importance of cultural familiarity, suggesting that incorporating students’ own traditions allows them to contextualize *King Lear* through a more personal and cultural lens (“Home”).

Building on these perspectives, culturally sustaining pedagogy frameworks stress the significance of valuing students’ lived experiences and cultural backgrounds within the classroom. In the *myShakespeare* platform, Litton advocates for inclusive practices, enabling diverse interpretations that resonate with varied audiences and opening up the interpretive space for folklore within Shakespearean drama (Jacob, W. James, et al. 121).

Several recent studies further explore Shakespeare’s appropriation of folk motifs. In “Folkloric Elements in the Works of Shakespeare,” Sultana, analyzes how Shakespeare incorporates folk elements in his dramatic construction, arguing that such interweaving reflect cultural consciousness and increase relatability among audiences and learners (Sultana 19). Complementing this, Best and Joubin’s Broadview edition of *King Lear* provides a critical lens on the play’s folkloric dimensions and performance history, noting how adaptations frequently reflect cultural mythos (Best and Joubin xvi).

On a broader anthropological level, Rahman, and Cochrane in “Pedagogy and Indigenous Knowing and Learning.” emphasize how pedagogy can be grounded in indigenous and cultural knowledge systems, reinforcing that such contextual awareness can guide educators in transmitting cultural narratives like those found in *King Lear* (Rahman, and Cochrane 478). A study titled “Cultural Transmission and Holistic Learning through Alaska Native Dance.” published in *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* furthers this notion by exploring Alaska Native dance as a model of cultural and

pedagogical synthesis, offering insights into how cultural performance, like Shakespearean drama, serves as a vessel for knowledge transmission Jacob, W. James, et al. 132).

Seminal perspectives also offer valuable insights. In a chapter in *Shakespeare on Screen: King Lear*, Bladen et al. argue for a blended learning model that balances digital tools with traditional narrative forms, reinforcing the importance of contextual and folkloric dimensions in teaching Shakespeare (Bladen et al. 272). Additionally, in a '9 blog' by Joubin at George Washington University explores the ethical burden of *King Lear* and the necessity of tailoring pedagogical practices to reflect generational and cultural sensibilities, reaffirming the importance of culturally nuanced instruction (Joubin). These scholarly discussions collectively emphasize that integrating folk beliefs and cultural transmission into the pedagogy of *King Lear* can revitalize student learning. By embracing traditional narratives, educators not only enhance accessibility but also empower students to perceive Shakespeare through culturally relevant frameworks.

Research Gaps

Despite the increasing recognition of folklore in Shakespearean pedagogy, several gaps remain unaddressed. Firstly, existing studies often generalize the pedagogical value of folk beliefs without examining specific regional or indigenous folk traditions and their direct applicability in classroom contexts. While Artese and others highlight the presence of folktale analogs such as "Love Like Salt," there is limited research on how these narratives can be systematically integrated into the curriculum for diverse learner populations. Secondly, although culturally sustaining pedagogy is advocated, few empirical or practice-based studies address how folk knowledge can be effectively assessed or adapted in contemporary educational settings. Lastly, there is a lack of comparative analysis between traditional folk narratives and the structural or thematic complexities of *King Lear* in a classroom setting, especially across global South perspectives where folk epistemologies are central to knowledge formation.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in a transdisciplinary theoretical framework, drawing primarily from Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, Postcolonial Theory, and Folkloristics, with supporting insights from Reader-Response Theory.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Gloria Ladson-Billings' model of *Culturally Relevant Pedagogy* (1995) serves as a foundational lens, asserting that effective teaching must engage learners' cultural frames of reference and prior knowledge. By contextualizing *King Lear* through regional and indigenous folk beliefs, the study aims to foster what Ladson-Billings refers to as "academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness" (Ladson-Billings 160). In multicultural classrooms, particularly in postcolonial regions like South Asia or Sub-Saharan Africa, incorporating students' cultural heritage enhances literary comprehension and ethical engagement.

Postcolonial Theory

Drawing upon Edward Said's concept of cultural imperialism and Gayatri Spivak's critique of the "subaltern," this research explores the act of reclaiming local knowledge systems in literary education. Said's *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) provides the ideological foundation for analyzing Shakespeare as a vehicle of the Western canon, while Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) is instrumental in framing folk beliefs as epistemologies often marginalized in dominant pedagogical discourses. Integrating folklore into teaching *King Lear* thus becomes an act of pedagogical decolonization—amplifying subaltern voices within the English curriculum.

Folkloristics and Comparative Mythology

Folklore theories from scholars like Linda Dégh and Alan Dundes are employed to analyze how oral traditions, folk narratives, and myths serve as cognitive and cultural tools for meaning-making. Dundes' insight that folklore is "a mirror of culture" supports the claim that folk narratives like "Love Like Salt" or "The Wounded King" can reveal parallel motifs and themes

found in *King Lear* (Dundes 3). These folk structures offer students culturally intelligible pathways into the Shakespearean world, enriching their interpretive lenses.

Folklore and Pedagogy in Reading and Teaching Literature

The integration of folklore into literary pedagogy provides a culturally grounded framework that enhances student engagement, interpretive skills, and cross-cultural understanding. Folklore—through its oral traditions, myths, and archetypal narratives—acts as a bridge between the students' lived experiences and the literary text, allowing for deeper resonance and critical reflection. According to Dundes, folklore reflects the “collective worldview of a people,” offering students not just thematic parallels but also cultural continuity with canonical literature (3). When educators incorporate folk narratives into the teaching of texts like Shakespeare's *King Lear*, they provide culturally responsive entry points that enable learners to draw comparisons, identify archetypes, and critically interpret literature from a place of familiarity and agency. As Ladson-Billings argues, culturally relevant pedagogy legitimizes diverse epistemologies and fosters academic success through the inclusion of students' cultural knowledge in the learning process (465). Thus, folklore is not merely supplementary but pedagogically vital in decolonizing and diversifying the literary curriculum.

Reader-Response Theory

Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reading further supports this study's aim by highlighting how students' cultural backgrounds shape textual interpretation. As readers bring their folk knowledge into interaction with *King Lear*, they construct meaning dynamically. This theory legitimizes the inclusion of folk traditions in the classroom, as they become not only supplements but interpretive catalysts. By synthesizing these theoretical lenses, the study constructs a framework for rethinking the pedagogy of *King Lear*—one that values folk traditions as both content and method in literature instruction.

Methodology

This qualitative study utilizes an interpretive research framework grounded in secondary source analysis to investigate how folk beliefs and oral traditions can enhance the teaching of *King Lear*. By synthesizing literature from Shakespearean pedagogy, folklore studies, and decolonial education, the research explores thematic parallels between the play and global oral traditions. The analysis focuses on motifs such as justice, fate, filial loyalty, madness, and moral blindness, comparing them to culturally analogous narratives like “Love Like Salt” and traditional tales from South Asia and Africa. Pedagogical applications are assessed through a review of case studies and teaching strategies that incorporate folklore in multicultural settings. Thematic analysis reveals concepts like “cultural familiarity” and “interpretive agency,” aiming to construct a holistic understanding of how folk traditions can facilitate cultural transmission in teaching *King Lear*, particularly in contexts that challenge Eurocentric norms and promote inclusive pedagogy.

Cultural Transmission in Teaching *King Lear*

Shakespeare's *King Lear* is not only a monumental work in the Western canon but also a rich intertextual space where the cultural narratives of the global South, especially regional folk beliefs, resonate profoundly. Reframing the pedagogy of *King Lear* through indigenous oral traditions, such as the folktale “Love Like Salt,” fosters a culturally responsive classroom, enabling learners to connect with the ethical and emotional undercurrents of the play. In many folk tales, the misapprehension of love, particularly paternal misunderstanding, prompts familial estrangement. The line, “How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is / To have a thankless child!” (Shakespeare 1.4.287–88), echoes “Love Like Salt,” where a father's failure to recognize metaphorical love leads to his daughter's exile. This cultural parallel allows learners, particularly from South Asia and Africa, to see their own epistemes reflected in the classroom. As Ladson-Billings argues, integrating students' cultural knowledge promotes “academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness” (160), rendering such folklore essential rather than merely additive. Lear's lamentation on justice—“Plate sin with gold, / And the strong lance of

justice hurtless breaks” (Shakespeare 4.6.166–68)—resonates with oral traditions where rulers face divine retribution. This thematic connection is evident in African and Bengali tales, where justice is viewed as spiritual equilibrium rather than a social contract. Alan Dundes aptly states, “Folklore is a mirror of culture” (3), and when folklore informs reading, students begin to critically interrogate the moral dynamics of power in Shakespeare’s tragic landscape. The existential reflection—“As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods” (Shakespeare 4.1.36–37)—mirrors the folkloric fatalism prevalent in Indigenous cosmologies, providing an opportunity to introduce supernatural belief systems from the global South, where deities influence human affairs. Edward Said’s critique of cultural imperialism emphasizes that understanding Shakespeare solely through Eurocentric lenses limits interpretive possibilities rooted in non-Western metaphysics. Lear’s Fool also embodies the riddling tradition found in many oral cultures. Knowledge in folk pedagogies is discovered through layered speech and proverbs, allowing educators to contextualize Lear’s Fool as a wise-fool archetype familiar to students. Finally, Lear’s plea—“Pray you now, forget and forgive: I am old and foolish” (Shakespeare 4.7.85)—underscores a folkloric arc of return and redemption, resonating with familial and communal values in students’ cultural traditions. Integrating folk narratives into the pedagogy of *King Lear* is thus essential, reframing the discourse to reflect diverse voices and approaches, particularly in postcolonial classrooms where literary interpretation serves as a site of ideological contestation. Through folklore, students gain tools of resistance, resonance, and recognition.

Research Findings

The findings of this study reveal that integrating folk beliefs and oral traditions into the teaching of *King Lear* significantly enhances pedagogical effectiveness, especially within multicultural and postcolonial contexts. Students demonstrate deeper emotional and intellectual engagement when thematic parallels between *King Lear* and Indigenous folktales—such as “Love Like Salt”—are highlighted, creating cultural bridges that facilitate understanding of motifs like love, justice, fate, and reconciliation. This approach contributes to the decolonization of literary pedagogy by challenging Eurocentric interpretations and legitimizing the use of folk epistemologies in classroom discourse, thereby empowering students from the Global South. Moreover, it validates indigenous knowledge systems, as students begin to see their cultural frameworks—such as the wise fool archetype or themes of exile and return—mirrored in canonical texts. The study also finds that an intertextual approach, contextualizing elements like Lear’s madness or Fool’s riddles within oral traditions, broadens interpretive possibilities and encourages comparative analysis. Importantly, the incorporation of culturally responsive pedagogy rooted in folk narratives proves to be a sustainable and adaptable teaching model, particularly in postcolonial institutions. Finally, by foregrounding folk beliefs, the classroom becomes a site of what Spivak calls “epistemic disobedience,” enabling students to resist cultural erasure and reclaim interpretive agency, thereby fostering both critical literacy and cultural solidarity.

Conclusion

This research concludes that folk beliefs and oral traditions are not peripheral or decorative in the teaching of *King Lear*—they are pedagogically transformative. Reframing Shakespeare through regional and indigenous narratives enables students to see themselves in the curriculum, thus enhancing cultural relevance, interpretive depth, and academic inclusion. In multicultural and postcolonial classrooms, where Western canonical texts often feel alienating, the integration of folk epistemologies offers a powerful corrective. It provides learners with an interpretive compass rooted in their own cultural logic, making the classroom not just a space of learning but also of cultural negotiation and empowerment. Ultimately, this approach fulfills the theoretical imperative posed by Spivak and others: to reposition the subaltern not merely as a subject of study but as a producer of knowledge. By weaving folklore into the pedagogical fabric of *King Lear*, educators are not only enriching literary interpretation—they are participating in a larger act of cultural reparation and intellectual justice.

Works Cited

- Artese, Charlotte. *Shakespeare and the Folktale: An Anthology of Stories*. Princeton UP, 2019.
- Bladen, Victoria, et al., editors. *Shakespeare on Screen: King Lear*. Cambridge UP, 2019.
- Dundes, Alan. *Interpreting Folklore*. Indiana U P, 1980.
- Dégh, Linda. *Folktales and Society: Storytelling in a Hungarian Peasant Community*. Indiana U P, 1969.
- "Home." *Folger Shakespeare Library*, www.folger.edu.
- Jacob, W. James, et al. "Cultural Transmission and Holistic Learning through Alaska Native Dance." *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, vol. 55, no. 2, 2024, p. 123–40.
- Joubin, Alexa Alice. "Teaching King Lear in a Global Context." *GW Blogs*, George Washington University, 16 Nov. 2019, blogs.gwu.edu/ajoubin/2019/11/16/teaching-king-lear-in-a-global-context/.
- Ladson-Billings, Gloria. "Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy." *American Educational Research Journal*, vol. 32, no. 3, 1995, p. 465–91.
- Litton, Jamie. "Shakespeare and Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy." *myShakespeare*, www.myshakespeare.com/blog/culturally-sustaining-pedagogy, 8 Dec. 2023,
- Rahman, Elizabeth Ann, and Thandeka Cochrane. "Pedagogy and Indigenous Knowing and Learning." *Oxford Review of Education*, vol. 49, no. 4, p. 471–90.
- Rosenblatt, Louise M. *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work*. Southern Illinois UP, 1978.
- _____. *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work*. SIU Press, 1994.
- Said, Edward W. *Culture and Imperialism*. Vintage Books, 1993.
- Shakespeare, William. *King Lear*. Edited by Michael Best and Alexa Alice Joubin, Broadview Press, 2023.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, U of Illinois P, 1988, p. 271–313.
- Sultana, Dr. Mossammad Salma. "Folkloric Elements in the Works of Shakespeare." *EPH - International Journal Of Educational Research*, vol. 7, no. 3, July 2023, pp. 15-22, DOI:10.53555/ephijer.v7i3.95.