

Gendering the Genre: Interrogating the Fairytales of Colonial Bengal

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Abstract: This paper argues how the fairytales of colonial Bengal resist closure in absorbing the very silences of the gendered discourse of nationalism of which the genre is a product. The paper will try to address how the nineteenth century Bengali fairytales registered subversive moments in the process of the evolution of a new historical consciousness, one that both accepted and rejected the dominant categories of available gender identities. The paper deals broadly with issues of pregnancy and its representation in fairytales. It will examine how particular socio-cultural meanings of pregnancy play a vital role in the understanding of our fairy stories. The working definition of fairytale provided by Vladimir Propp insists that the functional axis of fairytale proceeds from lack toward fulfillment. While poverty has been the traditional marker of this lack in fairy tales from distant parts of the world, nineteenth-century Bengali fairytales have defined this lack especially in terms of childlessness. This is something symptomatic of the contemporary discourses of gender roles. This paper analyzes stories from collections like *Thakumar Jhuli* and *Folktales of Bengal* involving discourses of pregnancy and childbirth, motherhood and fatherhood in ways varied and critical, and exposes the very instability of the cultural meanings of these concepts.

Keywords: Fairytales, gender, pregnancy, labor-room, male-impotency, nationalism, colonial Bengal.

Recalling an early scene from Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth*, where Carmen, the very pregnant mother of the protagonist, Ofelia, feels a sudden need to vomit following her rebuke of Ofelia for carrying a book of fairytales, the question which has troubled me is whether the figure of the pregnant mother bears any special significance in the context of the film, especially in its use of the fairytale narrative not only as a thematic component but as a structuring principle. Whether the pregnancy narrative demarcates or delimits the generic scope of the fairytales is a question that I address in this paper. I look for the answers not in films from abroad but in the fairytales of colonial Bengal. The reference to the film, though brief and not pursued in detail, remains an important point of departure for my argument in this paper.

Shibaji Bandopadhyay in his seminal work on colonialism and children's literature in Bengal has observed how fairytales always move towards a definite telos but end by suggesting a timeless future: "so they lived happily ever after" (73). They show a consciousness of space but are apparently forgetful of time. Bengali fairytales have in fact spatialized time; crossing the seven seas and thirteen rivers are all that the prince takes in reaching the demon's den to retrieve the princess. But the complexities of dealing with time become unavoidable as soon as there is a pregnant woman present in the story. The span of her pregnancy is always specified in time; at times she is in a hurry to produce the newborn whose story it is going to be and at times the moment of delivery is

unexpectedly prolonged to arrive at the climactic scene. In both cases there is an attempt to keep the pregnant body outside the main narrative discourse, in the process, however making it all the more central to the cultural meanings of the text. The pregnant body is essentially marked by porous boundaries and thereby it takes on unstable connotations vis-à-vis the culture that produces it. The chief source of its fluidity is its ambivalent positioning in between visibility and invisibility. But it has always been the visible belly which has rendered the woman invisible. More recently, theorists have identified how the deployment of visual images of women's pregnancy not only alters their experience of being pregnant and their decision-taking capacity, but also alters the definition of maternity altogether (Maher 97). In *Disembodying Women*, Barbara Duden asks "How did the unborn turn into a billboard image and how did that isolated goblin get into limelight?" (7). The fact that the infant can be seen even before it exists in the world leads up to the erasure of the mother's subjectivity. It is a pre-formed person, "simply awaiting discovery" (Hartouni 23).

The working definition of fairytale provided by Vladimir Propp is relevant here. According to Propp, the functional axis of fairytale proceeds from lack towards fulfillment and the journey along this axis hinges on obtaining something precious from the other world followed by a return to the mundane world where the shift is necessitated by a stable string of thirty one "functions" (263). While poverty has been the traditional marker of this lack in fairy tales from distant parts of the world, nineteenth century Bengali fairytales have defined this lack especially in terms of childlessness. I shall be reading this as something symptomatic of the contemporary discourses of gender roles and their performance and shall also try to show how this reading can help us perceive something beyond the "universal", "timeless" status of fairytales. My reading would chiefly focus on four texts – *Thakumar Jhuli* and *Bongoponyasa Thakurdadar Jhuli* by Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar, *The Folk Tales of Bengal* by Lal Behari Dey and the story of *Kheerer Putul* by Abanindranath Tagore.

Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar in the preface to his *Bongoponyasa Thakurdadar Jhuli* has identified the labor-room of rural Bengal as the birthplace of the numerous circuits of stories which have continued to enchant life there from time immemorial (14). Dakshinaranjan's preface merits special attention because of the way it makes connections between the labor-room and fairytales. He even adds an annotation to further the discussion, elaborating how from the day the pregnant mother enters her labor-room it becomes a community-practice to entertain her with an unending flow of stories; stories narrated, sung, performed till the middle of night. On the sixth day of the child's birth everyone remains awake till dawn for it is believed to be the night when the "bidhata purush", someone like a divine messenger, will come down to write destiny on the infant's forehead (14). The author of the preface has also added that in our traditional medical discourses of the Ayurvedas this practice has been considered especially beneficial to the expecting mother's health. Dakshinaranjan's romanticization of the rural labor-room actually falls into a larger project of the time – one that has set out to locate markers where cultural differences can be negotiated vis-à-vis the habits and customs of the colonizer. Partha Chatterjee, in one of his seminal texts, *The Nation and its Fragments*

has elaborated a model in which he has shown how “[Indian] nationalism has separated the domain of culture into two spheres – the material and the spiritual” (119).

While in the material sphere the claims of the western civilization reigned supreme in terms of science, technology, economic organization and statecraft, the spiritual sphere remained unparalleled in its superiority to the West (119-20). Elsewhere he has suggested this was necessary for the Indian nationalists because they had to draw the closure to the question of women in society, an issue hotly debated by both western thinkers and reformers and also Indian nationalists (“The Nationalist Resolution of the Women’s Question” 237). While the British needed to highlight the “poor condition” of women in India to argue for the logical need of their “civilizing mission”, the Indian nationalists had to reclaim their women “to protect, preserve and strengthen the inner core of the national culture, its spiritual essence” (239). All these arguments are important here for several reasons. Women’s health and childbirth had been a constant focus in the “civilizing mission” of the colonizer who considered it “barbaric and medieval” to give birth at home with the help of midwives with no doctors, nurses or medicine. This, I argue, constitutes the moment of breach in the nationalist paradigm of thought which took pains to keep apart the western world of medicinal sciences and Indian women’s health and problems of childbirth primarily because the two belonged to two different spheres of action – respectively, the material and the spiritual. The two cannot be equated despite the connections they may have. This is the process of selection which characterizes the appropriation of colonial modernity. Dakshinaranjan’s representation surely has a political claim to make because we are to remember the tryst between Tagore and Dakshinaranjan in “collecting” the tales of Bengal in *Thakumar Jhuli* as a desperate attempt in replicating “the musical aura of the past” in “the present-day idiom of Bengali language” (Tagore xii). In writing the Preface to the book Tagore asks rhetorically “Can there be anything more *quintessentially indigenous* [my emphasis] than *Thakumar Jhuli* in our country?”(xi). This project of nation-building had its own silences and aporias which need to be discussed and for that we will have to go back to our fairytales once more.

The representation of the labor room complicates the fairytales to a great extent. The Bengali word for labor-room is *antur ghor* and as the Bengali dictionary tells us it denotes a separate place exclusively set for the pregnant mother till the birth of the child (Basu 570). It is quite different from the western labor-room that is precisely a medicalized space meant for the delivery of the child while the *antur ghor* is retained for a broader span of time. The western model of the labor room is located within the hospital which is a male domain as opposed to the *anturghor* which is primarily a feminine space. The *antur ghor* is a suspension of the marital bed when the woman is carrying her child. In post-pregnancy period, the *antur ghor* takes on a different function. It sanctions the female body’s return to normalcy by institutionalizing the suspended menstrual cycle followed by a dip into the Ganges after twenty one days. Altogether the *antur ghor* experience provides the new mother with rigorous social training upholding values like restraint, sacrifice and thereby reinforcing the conventional meanings of motherhood. More importantly, this is also a period when the woman is subject to constant vigilance and the policing is done by the other women of her family and

neighborhood. And exactly this is where our fairytales would lead us to while exposing the invisible links between the discourses of patriarchy and nationalism.

The stories of “Kironmala,” “Princess Kolaboti,” and “The Champa Brothers” from *Thakumar Jhuli* hinge upon the dangerous potential of the labor-room as an exclusively female space functioning outside the male supervision. Due to its veiled status it involves an ambivalent positioning between power and powerlessness. The supposedly vulnerable condition of the pregnant woman inside it grants a position of control and authority to other women who are in charge of her. All of the three above-mentioned stories are marked by the disappearance of the new-born child immediately after the birth. The other women deputed to take care of the pregnant mother are responsible for this as they are clearly jealous of the new privilege accorded to the expecting mother. They declare the child to be dead as a consequence of which the new mother falls a victim to the king’s wrath and is rendered homeless. In “Kironmala” it is the spinster aunts and in “Champa Brothers” it is the other queens who are the evil players. “Princess Kolaboti” is a slight variation of the theme where the youngest queen only gets to drink the leftovers of the other queens who have finished taking the magical herb prescribed to induce pregnancy. As a result the youngest queen gives birth to a monkey and subsequently is banished from the palace by the king.

When discussing Abanindranath Tagore’s *Kheerer Putul* or *The Condensed Milk Doll* we have to think whether it can be put into the same brackets with the other fairytales as it is certainly not part of any “collection” and is an original text. However there can be no doubt that it uses the dominant model of Bengali fairytales and also consciously plays with its conventions. In *Kheerer Putul* the labor-room is an absence for the child is never born. Yet the elder queen enjoys all the privileges of a pregnant woman including new house, good food, maids to look after and so on. The fact that the king cannot see his son for ten years until the day when the son gets married prolongs the period of the queen’s supposed pregnancy. It is again a female intervention that threatens it. The witch on recommendation of the jealous younger queen sells her poisonous sweets.

The nineteenth century was a turbulent time in the history of Bengal when all the distinctions between the categories of the public and the private were miserably blurred. The decisions taken within the four walls of female quarters had the potential to change the course of the history of the nation and the female body was the site where the questions of nationalist self-fashioning could be negotiated. The labor-room was private in its location but public in its function, a mediating space between the palace and the outside world – a life of privilege and a life of struggle. Once expelled from the labor-room, the mother and child together bring into focus the internal divisions that characterize the king’s kingdom. While the unfortunate children grow up fast and try to mend the ways of the world, the destitute mothers literally become working-class figures: the rag picker in “Champa Brother,” the maid servant in “Princess Kolaboti,” and so on. We may remember the monkey in *Kheerer Putul*. A representative of the common masses, visibly the “other”, he is instrumental in restoring equilibrium in the country. The return of the lost child then becomes a symbol of a possible reintegration of the nation.

Until then the labor-room remains a mystery. This is actually the mystery of origins to which the tale has to return. The entire point of a fairytale is to draw a “suitable,” “happy” closure to the narrative of origin – not only the origin of an individual but the origin of a nation.

The idea of male impotency is somewhat unique to these tales where the shame of being childless is assigned to the king instead of the more common practice of accusing and excommunicating the woman. The stories of “Madhumala”, “Pushpamala”, “Malanchamala”, from *Bongoponyasa Thakurdadar Jhuli* open with the king’s mourning for a child. It is curious the way he is called “antkunde”, the Bengali word for impotent where the gender is identified as masculine (Basu 48) in “Madhumala” and is shown to be living a life of humiliation and depravity for not being able to produce an heir where even the sweeper has the audacity to dismiss the king for being impotent. Does this signify an improved status of women in society? To locate this shift, I have looked into the correspondences between Freud and his Indian psychoanalyst friend Girindrasekhar Bose. Bose, noticing the absence of castration fears in many of his patients (most of them were middle-class, educated Bengali *bhadralok* of nineteenth century Calcutta), a symptom claimed to be universal in men by Freud, reported it to the latter (Indian Psychoanalytic Society 16-17). Bose has defined this absence as a “wish to be female” which was prevalent in Bengali men (17). Christine Hartnack’s postcolonial reading of the situation demands special attention here. According to her these men indeed wished to be female for they envied their own women who lived an unchanged life in the safety of the home, unaffected by the realities of colonial domination while they had to remain stuck to the colonial chronotope of the merchant offices (10). Following this line of argument, Hartnack interprets the wish “as a desire not to be tainted by colonialism, to belong to a world imagined to be all Bengali, thus untouched by the stresses and conflicts induced by foreign rulers, or as an imaginary withdrawal into a presumably ahistorical pre-colonial time, where the contemporary demands for change were not an issue” (147). In “Pushpamala,” impotency is represented as an equalizing force which makes the king no less a subject of pity than his executioner who is also childless. Even to highlight the absolute powerlessness of the king it is ultimately the executioner who is awarded a son and the king finds himself bound in an unwanted pledge of marrying his daughter to the executioner’s son. The sense of being powerless to change anything of the colonial reality remained omnipresent in the male consciousness which perhaps found its displaced expression in their experience of being impotent and childless in the fairytales of this time.

The story which deals with the idea of pregnancy and the corollary issue of breastfeeding is “Shankhamala” from *Thakurdadar Jhuli*. “Shankhamala” which settles the dispute of “the real” mother by a unique test in which the two mothers are asked to make a public display of their ability to breastfeed. As a result the real mother turned out to be the one whose milk went straight into mouth of the boy without faltering a little as opposed to the false one whose milk could cover only a short distance coming out of her breast. The episode is significant in showing how the female body is discursively constructed where it is literalized that a woman’s body and her reproductive abilities indeed constitute her social position. We must here refer to Rousseau who talked at length

on the debate between the efficacies of breastfeeding and wet nursing in the context of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Europe. In Rousseau's argument wet nursing represented a complete moral travesty in need for reform which he saw as symptomatic of a society in political and social decay (Beauvoir 526). Penny Weiss and Anne Harper point out that Rousseau's criticisms of wet nursing were not to do with the quality of a mother's care but rather with the dangers it presented to blood ties and patriarchal patterns of family (52). To save a declining moral order Rousseau even put women on public display, and what they displayed was a capacity for "perfected pity," "the possibility of free-imagining bodily needs and compulsions as ethical, and putting the impulse of commiseration to the service of the social order" (Wingrove 34). They created "a maternal spectacle," (159), as a defense against the civilizational contamination of what is "naturally" good and "naturally" feminine. In turning motherhood into festivity, Rousseau invoked the dangers inherent in coalescing the categories of the private and the public, the personal and the political. We cannot forget that a touching spectacle was still a spectacle, and virtuous display was still a display. The ending of "Shankhamala" features a similar spectacle which serves the function of restoring the real mother to her glory, that of punishing the false mother and sustaining the family and the kingdom. It answers all the questions of the legitimacy of Shankha's pregnancy in the absence of her husband, guaranteeing her chastity.

Speaking of pregnancy we cannot help thinking in terms of hunger, desire and excess – ideas related to female biology with which patriarchal society has been uncomfortable. The female body lactates to regulate its excess. Self-preservation and self-gratification are the carnal points of the narrative of pregnancy no matter how much patriarchy denies them. In "The Boy whom Seven Mothers Suckled" from Lal Behari Dey's *The Folktales of Bengal*, the elder six queens eat up their own newborn babies out of severe hunger. The only exception is the youngest queen who decides to keep her son alive and all the six queens help in nursing him; they all suckle him; the child is born to not one but seven mothers. The story is central to this discussion for it registers the lacunae of the dominant discourses of pregnancy and motherhood that operate primarily by glorifying the sacrificial and ever-suffering image of the mother. The story of "Malancamala" is even more rebellious in rendering the connections between motherhood and sexuality clear and obvious. Married to a new born child Malanca feeds her own husband. The boy takes full control of his wife's breasts and since there is no father to confront he grows up without knowing the oedipal wish.

The entire question of the struggle between the reified image of the mother-goddess and the "real" woman of flesh and blood claiming to live in her own right is dealt by Abanindranath Tagore in *Kheerer Putul* where goddess Shashthi is unable to control her lust for the condensed milk doll. Even being a "goddess" her human needs are alive. When the text equates and replaces the doll with a real (male) child the issue is even more complicated. Shashthi, a Hindu folk goddess, venerated as the benefactor and protector of children, especially as the giver of male child, takes on an alternative independent female identity in the text. Perhaps what we are seeing is the woman coming into age, growing increasingly conscious of her body, emerging out of the Bengal Renaissance with too much force to be safely enshrined within the perfect private sphere which colonial

modernity has designed for her. This is the threshold moment in the formation of a new historical consciousness where the long-held beliefs of a culture are contested. Thus the fairytales had to end without proclaiming a closure.

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