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Magic Meets Mundaneness: A Re-reading of *Thakurmar Jhuli*

Moumita Dutta

Ph.D. scholar

Vidyasagar University
Midnapore, West Bengal

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Abstract:

The tales of *Thakurmar Jhuli* were anthologized by Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumder in the backdrop of Swadeshi Movement in Bengal. Since then it has remained one of the most favourite children's classics and has been under many scholarly studies for assorted materials evident inside the tales. This book is the treasure trove of information and facts regarding the socio-economic and cultural pattern of the then Bengal. The stories might entertain the children and the adults alike for its fantastical appeal and heroic ideals, they are in reality, more than what they appear to be in respect to the realistic components carefully concealed under the garb of magic and fantasy. Historical, ethnological, social, economic, cultural, political and possibly many additional perspectives of reading might excavate the hidden materials lying quietly in *Thakurmar Jhuli*. This study is an attempt to search for the factual instances found inside the tales which essentially ford the readers to the shore beyond 'seven seas and thirteen rivers' in 'once upon a time'.

Keywords: Magic, Fantasy, Realism, Mundaneness, Children.

"Fantasy begins with seriously entertaining the impossible... Reality does depend upon what one views as probable or even as possible" (Morse, 1)

Fantasy and realism apparently seem to be two conflicting terms which can never come into contact with each other without having some disagreeable essence lending to art and thereby bringing about complete disharmony and chaos. Realism, by its very name seem to be stimulating our cognitive ability and demands a respectable position in art and literature being a veritable medium of the portrayal of life. On the other hand, fantasy with its pejorative implications is relegated to a very dismal nook of the book shelves and derogated as being mere 'children's literature' which itself bears a stamp of either enthusiasm or embarrassment.

Fantasy literature, in Peter Hunt's observation in *Alternative Worlds in Fantasy Fiction* has a dual status-

Fantasy literature is either taken seriously (and enthusiastically), or seriously rejected. It is the root of all literature, an area of advanced literary experimentation, and essential to our mental health; or it is regressive, and associated with self-indulgent catharsis on the

part of the writers; or it is linked to a ritualistic, epic, dehumanized world of predetermination and out of tune with post-romantic sensitivity: or it symbolizes the random world of the postmodern. (Hunt, 2)

However, fantasy has somewhat regained its prized status nowadays in world literature being applied in art in deliberate fashion and having been experimented with varied modes extensively and therefore, is unable to be dismissed by the literary experts the way it has been during much of the twentieth century. Diametrically opposite as the two terms ‘realism’ and ‘fantasy’ may appear to the readers at first glance, they are in reality not to be separated from each other without causing some harm to the very intricate manipulation of these twins in the text. Their intertwining characteristics need proper examination for better understanding of the underlying structural scheme of the two.

Let us consider what Fyodor Dostoevsky has to opine on fantasy in art

“The fantastic must be so close to the real that you almost have to believe in it.” (Scanian, 133)

And here is another valued opinion on fantasy in fiction by Manlove

A fiction evoking wonder and containing a substantial and irreducible element of supernatural or impossible worlds, beings or objects with which the mortal characters in the story or the readers become on at least partly familiar terms.(Manlove.C.N, ix)

Fantasy, as a literary coinage might have been relatively new as a genre, nevertheless, it has been in actual use in literature and various forms of art from time immemorial when only an oral culture pervaded human civilization, the element of fantasy can be traced in every niche of our cultural existence from folk tales, fairy tales, mythologies and all sorts of folk art. India has been presumed to be the very fount of the folk tales (Jacobs, preface) which are abundantly found in every region of the country and Bengal proves to be in possession of an immensely resourceful reservoir of this age-old tradition of storytelling.

Stories especially of fantastical in nature are reserved for children in particular, as their credulous minds are more receptive to the imaginary and somewhat improbable characters and situations. Bengal has seen children in every house tugging hard at the corner of the saree¹ of grandmother demanding stories and this desire is fulfilled gladly by the eldest member (grandmothers in most cases) of the house. Therefrom has come the title *Thakurmar*² *Jhuli*³ in Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumder’s time-honored classic for children who have ever since served by its indefatigable beckoning of magic and on the other hand have been widely informed of our culture of bygone eras.

Thakurmar Jhuli being published in the very midst of Swadeshi Movement⁴ in Bengal in 1907 became somewhat of a flag bearer of our old traditional values deeply rooted in our indigenous culture and in a way, resurrected Bengali folk tales from obvious oblivion. Though Lal Behari Day had already published his *Folk-Tales of Bengal* in 1883, nothing could be compared with

Thakurmar Jhuli in regard to its popularity. The Bengali intelligentsia became overtly enthusiastic about its worth in Bengali culture and it was readily accepted as one of the foremost of Swadeshi products in the literary history of Bengal. Rabindranath unequivocally prized Dakkhinaranjan's effort to collect the stories and willingly penned the preface to the collection. In his words:

Can there be anything more quintessentially indigenous than *Thakurmar Jhuli* in our country...However, I would like to offer my gratitude to Dakshiranjan babu! In transcribing the oral tales of the grandmothers into printed words, he has amazingly succeeded in retaining the flavour of the original while managing to keep the tales fresh and evergreen. (Majumdar: xi,xiii)

Rai Saheb Dineshchandra Sen aided Mitra Majumder greatly to publish his *Thakurmar Jhuli* from a renowned publisher at a time when his collection of folk tales had been ridiculed by the publishers he visited for print. After its abundant praise from every quarter of Bengali people, Dineshchandra himself highly approved of the tales in his *The Folk-Literature of Bengal* in respect to its native authenticity :

...It is not affected by any pedantry or scholarship in classic literature or any modern propagandism...He is in love with the tales as they are related by the rural people of the lower Gangetic valley, and gives a faithful version of what he has heard. (Sen, 195)

Equally jubilant seemed Aurobindo Ghosh in his appreciation for *Thakurmar Jhuli* :

The book has marked out an epoch in our literature....This is sure to give him a prominent place in the rank of prominent poets and writers- Bandemataram. (D. M. Majumder, [5])

Thakurmar Jhuli, though nowadays has been relegated to the children's classics section in Bengali literature and has been endowed with little respect in regard to its heralding a very significant genre in the first decade of twentieth century, it has been attracting scholar's attention in an increasing rate regarding the multifarious facets it holds to the society of Bengal.

Talking birds and animals, prince defeating horde of demons singlehandedly, princess possessing unearthly beauty, witches playing havoc in the kingdom, and opulence and splendor of every kind with most astonishing details that enthralls the readers in *Thakurmar Jhuli* may have indeed something more to offer beneath the layers of grandeur and magnificence of magic and fantasy. As fantasy cohabits with reality, we are unable to overlook the 'realistic' elements in predominantly fantastic tales and this fantasy.

Children in this era hardly have can indulge in such paradisaal pleasure of listening enraptured to the stories of 'rupakatha'⁵ uttered by the old grandmother with her high deftness in the story telling ability. Her employment of proper inflection, caricature and imaginary imitation of fantastic situation and characters inevitably cast the magic spell on the young minds that has the

power to transport them immediately to the land of farthest regions possibly known by any living being. The young minds, years back, had no trouble locating the fairyland across the seven seas and thirteen rivers, nor did they question the imaginary existence of *bengama* and *bengami*⁶, *suka* and *sari*⁷ who would help the heroes of the tales to expedite their adventures. And so substantial was their fear of the evils that they had to gasp in horror in the description of the witch's radish like teeth and big colossal ears. Winged horse, magic mountains, flying asp, jewel enthroned snake, bird of gold, diamond trees, sea of milk, river of pearly fluid and anything and everything that could be conceived in the mind, had a particular expression in the stories uttered by the grandmother. Such was the thrill and delight of the stories, that no late-evening could be thought of spending in activities other than weaving dreamland through the stories.

Alas! Those days are gone. We are living now in the cyber-world with everything digitized. Fantasy is now not a matter of smoky dreams, but of virtually real and visibly existing fact on the tiny screen of television. Gone is the unlimited expanse of the mind as also the infinite possibility of creative ability of the children. 'Wonder' is not the word to be found in the dictionary of the children, they too are bored with the technological feats around them. Much joy is lost from their childhood, much damage is done to their originality when stereotyped images appearing on the screen constrict their originative capability. So now is the time to revive their enthusiasm in tales like *Thakurmar Jhuli* which is the product of the very soil from which they themselves have also sprung.

Tales in *Thakurmar Jhuli* can very well be kept aside for mere children, however the facts that emerge to the adults if scrutinized carefully may yield results that in fact be quite unsettling. From the very motive of indoctrination in order to abide by the set rules, to follow the existing arrangement, to serve the authority with utmost humility, appropriation of gender roles and to standardize the prevalent class structure can be found with a highly destabilizing agent of subversion, revolt and protest of various kinds in the apparently innocuous frame of the stories. Nevertheless, many a real life situations and objects as well are to be found scattered throughout the stories which enhance and confirm our knowledge of bygone eras and systems prevalent in the society.

A very popular sea vessel named 'mayurpankhi'⁸ was not some figment of fantasy, ships like *mayurpankhi*, *sukapankhi*⁹ were very much real in Bengal's history when the mercantile communities used to go in the sea voyage with fashionable ships having the face of a peacock or other birds on the prows of it (Sen, 65). And now we know that peacock was introduced to countries like Babylon and other western part of Europe by no other than sea-faring Indians. In the tale 'Kolabati Rajkanye' we have not only the mention of the two ships, but have illustrations of them as well. In the same story we find reference to *shil-nora*¹⁰, a traditional grinding stone which still can be found in every home of Bengal primarily for grinding and pasting spices.

In 'Kanchanmala and Kankanmala', we see how the day of harvest was being celebrated by making and distributing typical Bengali sweet meats called *pithe-puli*¹¹ with its variety in shape,

style, size, taste and name like *chandrapuli*, *mohanbansi*, *kheermurali*, *chandanpata*, *aske pithe*, *chaske pithe*¹² etc. . This mouth-watering delicacy in Bengali society is a highly relished dish still now. However, the reference to the dish goes much deeper than mere names when we find that food-items too had certain class division. High class women were more proficient in culinary ability than that of the lower class and this becomes very prominent when we see that the fake queen who should actually have been the maid-servant failed to make superior pithes like the real queen did. Bengali women still decorate the floor with *alpana*¹³ on auspicious days. They decorate the floor with coloured rice powder drawing patterns, symbols, signs of prosperity and health etc. like the queen in the story 'Kanchanmala and Kankanmala' did while the usurper was unable to show her skill as she belonged to the lower rung of the ladder in the society. This little acts show how certain expertise over certain arts held sway over one's birth and lineage.

Polygamy in the Bengali society had been a prevalent practice at the time, as we find many of the tales like 'Sheet-Bashanta', 'Neelkamal and Lalkamal', 'Princess Kolaboti', 'Saat Bhai Champa' had references to more than one wives and this added to the heightening of the tension in the stories as the financially unsecured queens hankered after the king's attention trying to banish the rivals procuring any evil means that might work for their purpose. The co-wives are seen all the time engaged in fighting, bickering and putting tantrums in the palace maddening the king and sometimes tricking him by vile ways. Their lack of peacefulness and instability of minds can be attributed to the deep-rooted patriarchy in the social system where a queen is requisite only to produce male-heir to keep the royal line unbroken or they might go out of favour.

Infertility appears to be a common syndrome to be plaguing the society high and low. While queens in the stories like 'Kolabati Rajkanye' or 'Saat Bhai Champa' had failed to produce any child during the early part of the story causing the king immensely depressed, we find in the shack of the wood-cutter in the story 'Der Anguley' the poor man had had the same trouble. However, one question lurks behind is why a woman is always marked as infertile effacing any possibility of deficiency in the male characters. If seven queens fail to produce any heir by one king, naturally the doubt falls upon the king, however, patriarchal structure happens to be limiting our sights within a very comfortable periphery. The clutch of patriarchy did not spare the field of education, while the two brothers in 'Kiranmala' were given lessons in scriptures and philosophy, the sister had to learn only the domestic chores, ironically enough it was she who rescued her brothers by her courage, determination, fearlessness and wit.

Though all the stories in *Thakurmar Jhuli* except the animal and humorous stories are centered on the limitless wealth of the royal family and their manner of living in luxury, we happen to be peeping into the hut of poor people once in a while when unfortunate queens in the tales were sent into exile. In 'Kiranmala', when the king volunteered to find out the condition of his subjects, he eavesdropped on the conversation between the poor sisters whose sole wish was to eat well. Later, in the story the king banished his once beloved queen with utmost humiliation by mounting her on a donkey in tonsured head after which incident the queen left the country and

lived across the river in a most hapless state. In ‘Saat Bhai Champa’, the youngest queen was reduced to the status of a rag-picker clothed in tatters until she was reinstated in the end. In ‘Kolabati Rajkonye’ two younger queens were left to live in misery, one selling cow dung cakes¹⁴ and the other working as a cleaning maid. Juxtaposed with this are the descriptions of luxury of the palace indwellers, how their leisure hours were being spent on hunting, gossiping, relaxing under the care of innumerable maid-servants etc. Precious gems, stones, jewelries had abundant mentions along with the coveted metals like gold and silver which were used even in making beds, hulls, oars, plates and goblets etc. On propitious days or on days when the king seemed to be boundlessly happy, he gave away the jewels to the subjects who were more than eager to have them.

Very naturally there are references to princess surpassing any beautiful woman on this earth and they usually possessed long rain-cloud hairs, fair skin and enticingly pretty face descriptions with which we are quite familiar from the matrimonial columns of newspaper even till today.

Curiously, the tales of *Thakurmar Jhuli* did not reserve any place for divine intervention or inspiration either. The characters had to pay for their mistakes or reap the good fortune sowed by their courage, love and wisdom. There is hardly any mention of any name of gods and goddesses from Hindu pantheon or from other religion. The sole thrust has been put on the action and motive of the characters. Princes are shown as incredibly courageous to gain victory over the witches, demons and khokkas¹⁵ only after which were they entitled some kingdom or a greatly aspired hand of a princess. The fathers-in-law seem to be very willing to offer the prince his kingdom or half of it as dowry on the day of marriage with his daughter. Queens are measured on the scale of goodness by their piety, submissiveness and conforming to set customs against which are they either rewarded or punished. Kings too are not spared, they have to live in misery or sometimes in destitution for their gullibility, foolishness and lack of wisdom. To sum up, people are shown in the tales without wearing any garb of supernatural ability endowed by some favouring deity, rather their inner worth and strength- physical, mental and moral are being very much emphasized.

Therefore, though we find many fantastic elements strewn across the tales, the real-life details can hardly be overlooked. Both magic and mundaneness are so woven into the stories that their relationship appears to be inseparable, instead of labeling it as a mere children’s fantasy we need to look beyond the surface structure so that we can become conscious of the varied sketches of real life as well as amuse ourselves with the magic-sip from the enchanted goblets.

Notes:

¹ South Asian female garment

² Grandmother in Bengali

³ Bag in Bengali

⁴ Anti-partition movement in Bengal which had had its genesis in 1905 and continued up to 1911

⁵ “they are simple tales in which the super-human element predominates” D.C Sen 1920 : 232

⁶ Imaginary birds

⁷ Mythological bird

⁸ Large sea vessel with a decorative peacock in its prow

⁹ Shape of the bird suka on the prow of the ship

¹⁰ Shil--large flat pentagonal stone with a pitted surface and nora--a small black pestle-shaped stone

¹¹ Type of cake made of rice flour, vegetables, jaggery, coconut, syrup etc. and extensively found in Bangladesh and India; associated with the harvest festival known as ‘nabanna’ in Bengal

¹² Types of authentic Bengali sweets and pithes

¹³ Colourful motifs and sacred painting made on the floor by a paste made of rice powder and has religious significance in Bengal

¹⁴ Traditionally used as fuel in India

¹⁵ Small demons

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