A Feminist Reading of Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar's *Thakurma'r Jhuli*

Kajori Patra
Jadavpur University.

Abstract:

Bengali folktales are an extremely dynamic part of the Bengali culture, children grow up reading, listening to and watching television adaptations of the particularly important text of Bengali folklore, *Thakurma'r Jhuli*, which is compiled, edited and re-written from the pre-existing oral versions by Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar. *Thakurma'r Jhuli,* in spite of being one of the most well-known and well-documented text of Bengali folklores, still has insufficient research space. In this paper tries to show that *Thakurma'r Jhuli,* literally 'Grandmother's Bag of Tales', can be examined under the lens of feminism, because re-discovery of folktales under current research topics such as Queer studies and Gender studies only ensures the longevity of Bengali folklores.

Keywords: Folklores Study, Gender Study, Feminist Theories, Oral Narratives, Thakurma'r Jhuli.

1. Introduction

The popular French school of Feminist theory claims that the gender equation between male and female is not equal, but equivalent, which, obliquely, conveys that neither of them (the sexes) feels threatened by or is superior to the other. This naturally acknowledges the difference in the gender roles of the various sexes, and, subsequently allows the identification of a liminal space in Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar's *Thakurma'r Jhuli*, a prominent text of Bengali folklore, as that of feminism. The tales in *Thakurma'r Jhuli* are timeless and might have existed beyond documented time. It is astonishing that such stories can hold potential for what would later be recognised as the empowerment of women through femininity. *Thakurma'r Jhuli* becomes a text where embracing the women's position in the society gave the women a certainty and assertion over their life.

The unique aspect of folktales in Bengal is their potential for a feminist approach of reading. At the first glance, it might seem that the tales have minimal space for development

of a woman's character as anything else but the protagonist's rewards/love interests, but notably, the prime antagonists are often women, and not barely incidental, but powerful she-demons and evil queens. Certainly, these women do not get an acclamation for their power, but they are undeniably spectacular, and our folktales, instead of reducing women to weak characters make them real characters who have envy and anger, and most importantly, can induce terror. It took a long time for our mainstream literature to do what folktales do, to make the protagonist run away from and suffer because of a powerful woman, folktales give us women who must be feared.

Let us then look at the various aspects of feminism in the text.

2. The Power of Choice

Choice feminism is not a very recent school of theory, and has met with several arguments for and against itself. Choice feminism focuses on the individual women's choices that enables them to have a voice about the various power dynamics in their life. While this has been criticised by some sociologists, on the grounds that various existing socio-political ideologies shape women's choices, such as the choice of women to quit jobs due to inflexible maternity leaves or payments, but broadly, this concept of women taking their own decisions as a way of having control over the narrative of their lives is seen as a proto-Feminist, if not Feminist, act.

In the story, 'Kalabati Rajkanya', the heroine, Kalabati, has the power of free will, albeit, as much free will that a princess was supposed to possess without distorting social hierarchy. The story follows the seven queens of a childless king who are given a magical herb to prompt child-birth, and the elder queens trick the younger two by eating their share of the herb, leaving the younger queens to only barely get any. The five elder queens gradually give birth to five handsome princes and the younger two give birth to an owl and a monkey, Bhutum and Buddhu, respectively. The king is forced to disown the mothers of these two grotesque princes, and the younger queens, along with Buddhu and Bhutum, live in the outskirts. The story really picks up pace when a princess from a faraway land, Kalabati, comes across the sea and on being questioned whether she would marry any one of the five handsome princes, she only informs the queens of her vow to marry the man who can pass three tests that she had designed, i.e., bringing the flower of pearl, crossing the land of the three monstrous, cannibalistic old women and finding the 'dhol-dagar' (a magical artifact). We can see these

tests as tests of character that the princess designs in order to ensure that her potential groom possesses the attributes of:

a. Bravery to defeat the cannibalistic old women

b. Ability of logical thinking required to find the princess when her pet bird uses the 'dhol-dagar' to hide the princess.

c. Intelligence to fulfil the vows of princess by bringing her pearl flowers by taking it from her own hair-dress (since these flowers were probably rare and were hard to find).

After undertaking the perilous journey across the sea, overcoming the obstacles and fulfilling the three wishes of the princess, when Buddhu, the monkey prince, asks Kalabati who she belongs to, albeit, who is her master/husband, she responds by saying:

"*Aagey chilaam baap-maayer*

Tar pore holaam nijer

Ekhon tomaar."

Translated as:

"Earlier I belonged to my parents

Then to myself,

Now, I'm yours." [1]

This gives a partial, if not complete, space to Kalabati, during when her parents had relinquished control over her and she belonged to herself. The folktales originated from a time that probably had no textual documentation, during which women were thought to be the properties of, initially the father and later the husband. However, Kalabati not only clearly states that she was her own master for a specific period of time, but also, she uses the term 'parents' as her owners, acknowledging both the maternal and paternal controls over her life.

When the evil five step-brothers try to drown Buddhu and Bhutum and claim Kalabati, she refuses to accept any one of the five princes as her husband at the expense of her life. When the queens declare that they would kill her if she refuses to marry one of the five human princes, she plots a clever deception, by claiming to be maintain a '*vrata*' or a period of religious penance for a month, thus extending her death sentence by a month.

Thus, Kalabati has intellect to take decisions for herself and prevent the violation of her right to decide.

3. Cross-dressing and The Role of The Masculine

Cross-dressing became more established as a critique of gender dynamics since it started being associated with theatres and Renaissance England. The problem that any orthodox society detects in cross-dressing is the disruption of the external gender-signals, the ignorance of the male dominion and superiority by dressing of the subordinate sex as the superior sex. This threatened a destruction of the hierarchy that utilizes clothing and mannerism to impose status difference. Fashion and clothing, throughout human history, has been an important tool in maintaining and organising an imagined order on which all societies have been based upon. For example, we are commonly accustomed to wearing jeans in the twenty-first century, which was originally the attire of the working class. Clothes were an important mark to distinguish the aristocratic class from the peasants in ancient societies like that of Egypt, and even fairly recently in Travancore, where among the Ezhavas, women of lower caste would have to pay 'breast tax' to be allowed to cover their breasts. In this context, where clothes can 'represent' about a person's status, economy or character, cross-dressing becomes a failure of this ginormous machinery. However, cross-dressing, as a part of social narrative, has been employed in oral narratives of *Thakurma'r Jhuli* perhaps even before it became recognised as a social problem of women claiming to own men's place and justifying it by performing better in that space than men, just like Kiranmala from the story, 'Kiranmala'. The narrative is essentially a bildungsroman of a woman who saves her brothers and performs tasks that men fail at; her only power, ironically, being her gender.

The story begins with the king of a kingdom marrying a common woman, who has two conniving sisters. When the sister's figures out that their youngest sister lives like a goddess in absolute luxury, they replace her children during their births. The queen conceives two baby boys and a baby girl in three successive years and the babies are replaced with a puppy, a kitten and a wooden doll respectively by the two evil elder sisters. The king, overwhelmed by this abnormality, abandons the queen. These three children are found by a pious, wealthy priest who brings them up as his own. Kiranmala, the king's daughter, is a very graceful woman who is an expert at household works, and her two brothers, Arun and Barun, are scholars. After the priest's death, the three siblings build a castle with their incredible ability and live there. After brief incidents, Arun decides to go to look for the golden bird that Kiranmala fancies to keep

in their palace, but he turns into a marble statue while going through the magical kingdom. Barun meets the same fate. Kiranmala now takes it upon herself to complete her brothers' task, by dressing herself as a prince. Since she is a woman, the wiles and magic of apsaras (heavenly females) do not work on her, she completes every task and saves her brothers and brings the golden parrot home. The parrot then devices arrangements that reunites the royal family which lives happily ever after.

During her early description in the story, Kiranmala is specifically shown to inhabit the space of the domestic femininity, her brothers learn scriptures, run after wild animals and climb trees to gather fruits, while her work is described in enchanting, floral language, her company is the calf Kajallata (also the name of an ornamental plant used to store kohl) and a deer, both representing completely passive docility, her task is to clean the house and pluck flowers for the priest's worship. She symbolises the divine space of femininity.

When Arun and Barun reach Maya Pahar (Magic Mountain), they are ensnared by hallucinations of beautiful women who, like the Nordic Medusa, turn the two princes into statues.

One of the most interesting aspect of 'Kiranmala' is Kiranmala's reaction after learning the fate of her brothers. *Thakurma'r Jhuli,* until this story, paints a rather emotionally vulnerable picture of women in general: most of them cry or lament at the slightest provocation. Kiranmala, surprisingly, accepts her brother's misfortunes with a degree of calm surety. It is specifically mentioned that she neither cries nor flies into the hysteria that was associated with women. instead, she is driven by a sense of duty, she completes her ritualistic household routine of watering the plants and feeding her pet animals, and then proceeds to dress herself as a prince in order to undertake the journey. It is curious that she should dress as a man, for there was no mentioned prohibition against women to travel to the Maya Pahar. We can second-guess that it is, perhaps not according to speaker/author's intentional motive, Kiranmala's desire to inhabit the masculine space better than the males. She does not, or rather cannot, permanently occupy a man's space, but must return to her own's.

When, dressed like a man, she begins her journey, her gait and motion are compared to the force of wind and blaze of fire, descriptions reserved for male movements, her journey is described as being long and tenuous, and she withstood storms and overcame forests and mountains and seas. She is, the text mentions, oblivious to who sees or ignores her. Since the immediate social context of folktales is Bengal, where women's clothing comprised of a veil

drawn over the face up to the chest, women were deeply conscious of the 'gaze' of society, and it was necessary for them to avoid the public gaze. Kiranmala's attitude of unaccountability of who gazes upon her or who ignores her is starkly different from hegemonic texts where women characters prefer the obscurity of hiding from the public opinion, which could, in fact, make or break a woman's character easily.

The moment Kiranmala lands on Magic Mountain, she is attacked by the enchanted beasts, the demons and monsters. They all threaten her by addressing her as "Prince". The enchantresses try to seduce her mistaking her for a prince. Kiranmala faces more natural perils.

The logic given behind Kiranmala's strength of character is that, the enchantment would work only on real princes, but she being a princess, she was not perturbed by the evil, seductive magic. However, it is also mentioned that, no matter what, Kiran kept her eyelids shut and kept walking. Kiran has to lose her gaze, in order to escape the gazes that were, as the readers can see, avoidable. It therefore becomes the failure of her two brothers' resolution; the gendered advantage seems to be a mere plausible excuse.

After reaching the Maya Pahar, Kiranmala takes advice from the golden bird, who guides her on what to do next in order to save her brothers. After she saves the thousands of princes who were stuck as stone statues, they fold their palms to show reverence and respect, such as the kind shown to elders or highly respectable individuals in Bengali society, and address her as:

"Saat juger dhonyo bir"

Translated as "Respected champion of all times".

Her brothers, however, address her as:

"Maayer peter dhonyo bon"

Translated as "Brave sister of our mother's womb".

It should be noted that the word 'bir' was a highly gender specific word, which referred to only gallant men, whereas, Arun and Barun are immediately aware of Kiranmala's identity and end her adventures through cross-dressing by revealing her true identity as that of a woman (their sister).

Upon returning, Kiranmala immediately transforms into her old, feminine self, thus successfully eradicating any trace of masculinity in her character. The audience/reader is made

aware that Kiranmala does not threaten the social order with her ability to inhabit the masculine space, and in fact had to cross-dress to ensure the security and continuity of her eternal feminine space. She begins to do household chores, promptly feeding the calf, giving it water, cleaning the courtyard, watering every plant carefully, planting the newfound pearl plant etc.

Another compelling aspect is the change of narratorial tone during chapter twelve, when Kiran starts to prepare for her journey. These stories are, like most folktales, narrated by a heterodiegetic, third person narrator, who addresses Arun and Barun by the pronoun 'tini'. Some Indian languages have the provision to use three types of pronouns, irrespective of genders, based on the amount of respect a person commands rooted on their education, age, societal status or gender. The narrator uses the pronoun 'se' for Kiranmala, implying that she is just a girl who doesn't merit much respect, unlike her older brothers who command respect by virtue of being princes, that is, males. However, in the twelfth chapter, the narrator, what appears to be accidentally or colloquially, addresses Kiran with the same pronouns as for her brothers, probably unconsciously elevating her to the same status as her brothers that her cross-dressing earns. It is as if, she had climbed up the hierarchy for a certain period of time. This 'mistake', however, ends in chapter thirteen (where the episode of cross-dressing ends), from when she is again addressed with the corresponding pronouns of 'se'.

Although Kalabati and Kiranmala differ in their various expressions of proto-feminism, the strand of feminism that binds them together is their credibility as characters to deserve eponymous stories. Usually, titular characters are recognised as protagonists in folktales, the title advises the audience/reader on whose side to take, who is the important character around whom the entire tale will be based. Representation of women in most older folktales are extremely wispy since most tales of supernatural genre contain an element of bravery which *automatically* demanded a male protagonist. These two stories, however, have been named after their women protagonists, thus choosing not to reduce the women into romantic interests of the heroes. Although, successive renditions of these folktales would interchangeably use the title, 'Buddhu-Bhutum' and 'Arun-Barun-Kiranmala' replacing 'Kalabati' and 'Kiranmala' respectively, the original edition still maintains the importance it gives to its female leads.

4.The Femme Fatale.

The villainy of women characters is usually associated with the independent woman's unnatural, violent and sometimes hysteric sexuality. Unlike men, women villains are not direct aggressors, they are predators and manipulators masquerading as seductresses. The femme

fatale arises from the need to give a foil to the traditionally domestic and docile women. the femme fatales are women who have spiralled out of the control of the men, those who disrupt patriarchy and threatens the male supremacy. *Thakurma'r Jhuli*, unlike a lot of other mainstream folktales, has a staple role of the femme fatale, the Rakshasi Rani, or the Demon Queen. This character has been used in as many as four stories, and is an extremely common trope in the Bengali folk literature.

The Rakshasi, in most stories, usually marries the king and builds familial relationship with him and sometimes conceives his child, only to suddenly start devouring the cattle or horses or humans and destroying or trying to destroy the human prince (from the king's human queen, other spouse). The suddenness of her actions give rise to two interesting speculations:

1. The Rakshasi was capable of killing the king and the people but she chooses to wait until she earns the king's trust, only to start a rampage once he starts to trust her.

2. The Rakshasi is interested, for some reason, to cohabit with the king and produce a human-rakshasa offspring

These two speculations actually build the case for the Rakshasi Rani to be the femme fatale. In order to earn the king's trust, the Rakshasi must marry him, and for the king to marry someone as hideous as a monster, she must use her wiles and charms. The king's apparent attraction to the monstrous Rakshasi is excused as the result of the Rakshasi's shapeshifting, seductive nature.

The Rakshasi Rani, albeit a villainess, is an extremely powerful character. In the story 'Neelkamal aar Lalkamal', Lalkamal is the son of the human queen, and Neelkamal, of the demon queen. After spending some quiet time in the kingdom, the Rakshasi Queen takes the reign (of terror) in her control, the king becomes a mere puppet. She kills the human queen and Lalkamal, and accidentally Neelkamal too, in anger. Later, the two princes are again reincarnated, and they embark on an adventure to defeat the Rakshasi.

In 'Dalim Kumar' the Rakshasi kills the human queen and shapeshifts into her form to live with the king and produce seven Rakshasa-human offspring, who again are 'eaten' by another Rakshasi, Pashavati. Both these Rakshasi women are immensely powerful and have killed many princes and kings. Later, Dalim Kumar, the human son of the king saves his half-rakshasa brothers and kills his stepmother (the Rakshasi queen) and Pashavati.

In 'Sonar Kati Rupar Kati' the Rakshasi takes the form of an enchanting lady, whom the king finds in the forest and takes home to marry. The queen initially had a bone to pick with our hero, the prince, whom she tries to kill using various devious plans, ultimately causing the prince to travel to the land of demons, from where the Rakshasi originates. In the land of demons, the prince meets a beautiful captive princess whom the other Rakshasas have captured and frees her, killing all the Rakshasas in the process.

Although the fate of the Rakshasi queen is always sealed, it is her actions throughout the main body of the story that accounts for her power. She has the power of terrorizing, but she uses it judiciously. The queen begins with using her techniques to emotionally manoeuvre the king. In most of these folktales, the protagonist is the prince/princess, that is, an young-adult individual. The Rakshasi, capable of defeating valiant kings, however is usually defeated by these young-adult princes/princesses, probably since the target audience of these stories are children or young-adults. The Rakshasi Rani is undoubtedly the strongest character in these stories, and even the princes have to depend on tricks and techniques to defeat her, and they cannot defeat her by dint of their physical strength. There is no winning against this woman in an open fight. She not only is a physically stronger person but also is clever and can manipulate the king to marry her and as well order the princes to do her bidding.

It might intensify interest to look at her metaphorically, since folklores are often thought to be hyperbolic or metaphorical representation of reality. The femme fatale was known as the 'devourer' of men, this, of course, doesn't refer to actual eating but destruction of the man. Rakshasi Rani, however, actually eats the people as a mean of destroying the kingdom. She acts out the metaphor literally.

In the male dominated structure of most folklores, Rakshasi Rani is an epitome of almost infinite power. She challenges the masculine concepts of courage and valour, creating a space for herself which is feared by the men. Her appearance has a dual nature, which is reasoned by her shapeshifting abilities. She has the enigmatic and attractive form, as well as the threatening and fearsome form. Her roles as both the seductress and the villain are explored literally by giving her two different forms, both starkly different from one another, to serve her purposes of attracting and then oppressing. She hypnotises the king, he becomes 'stupid' and 'powerless', he cannot act out, he becomes a helpless, mute spectator, she brings the men to their knees and then destroys them.

In various subsequent editions of *Thakurma'r Jhuli*, whether translations or compilation by different editors, stories hint at a third space of gender, which humours the speculation of a proto-queer-acceptance-culture. We see this space being constructed by cross-dressing, an act that is literally interpreted as the repressed desire to cohabit two or more different genders. In "The Story of Prince Sobur" (Day, Lalbehari, *Folktales of Bengal)* we see the merchant's youngest daughter crossdressing as a sannyasi (male saint) and Kiranmala clothes herself in the attire of a prince.

5. Conclusion.

The language of the folktales marks the shift of folktales from one context to another. Folk cultures are community cultures, practiced in open, communal gatherings. The earliest folktales were associated with fire, fire was the communal property around which members of a community, after laborious days, exchanged stories, where elaboration and addition began. However, as communities became more nuclear, and individual was more or equally important than community, familial rites replaced communal rituals, the space of folktale shifted from an open discussion to children's literature. It lost its purpose as the reception of knowledge and became mere fairy tales. In Chinua Achebe's novel, *Things Fall Apart*, he talks about Nwoye, who loved his mother's folk tales but "…his father wanted him to be a man. And so he feigned he no longer cared for women's stories…" Therefore, we can see that the silence of the folktales began with the de-masculinization of the folktales, when community stopped participating as a whole and it became the "women's stories". The role of fire ritual became secondary and folktales shifted to children's bedrooms as bedtime stories often told by older females of the household, which gradually gave it a lyrical quality. Being the so-called women's stories, the elements of folktales gained a status of unimportance, the supra-sensual elements came to be recognised as womanly and womanhood itself earned the title of irrationality. It therefore becomes very less surprising that the tellers of the story, the women who are given the complete autonomy over what tales shapes the earliest memories of the children, incorporated elements of female power threatening the male hierarchy. In Bengali folklores, not all women are timid and docile, not all women are plot devices, some women are quite formidable in their own rights.

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1. All translations from Bengali text are by the author

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