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Nature, Female Body and Menstrual Ambiguity: A Literary Representation of Menstruation in Indian Folktale *A Flowering Tree*

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Abstract:

The female body has been subject of learning, unlearning and relearning about mankind from the advent of human civilization partly because of its physical, social, political and religious subjective interpretations; and partly due to its natural, cultural and ecological contextualization in different structures. It has not only created a wide range of patterns for women to follow in different cultures but has also constructed dichotomous perspectives regarding to menstruation, the most productive phase of woman. The binary oppositions produced in relation with menstruation have provided the spirit of celebration of ‘first blood’ along with circulating unreasonable and unscientific biases and taboos against ‘woman power’; hence the women have faced many physical, social and cultural agonies due to the ‘menstrual ambiguity’ from centuries in place of enjoying their unparalleled strength in being the centre of human genesis.

The Indian folk literature has expressed varied aspects of human experiences from human birth to death; from political, social and economical apparent boundaries to intellectual, philosophical and spiritual apotheosis of eternity; and from ignorance to knowledge; and female body has not been exception. In various cultures and literatures there have been long debates whether ‘female body’ is pure or mundane; whether it tends to instigate or soothe; whether a woman has right on her ‘body’ or it has only a role to submit or satisfy; whether it is only an ‘emotion’ or has some tuning with intellect also; hence bringing a complex ambiguous nature about female body, menstruation and menstrual blood and bliss, and for folk literature it is not untouched subject. Woman and Nature constitute core soil for creation of folktales in India.

Sometimes they are personated within each other in such way that they convey their real identities, plights and reasons of existence. Indian folktale *A Flowering Tree* is its best example where Nature, female body and issue of their productivity have been dealt together.

In this process literature has played a vital role in highlighting, sensitizing and recognizing it as universal statement; defining the texts under new critical tools with having women in its centre; and developing interdisciplinary approach to find new avenues and spaces for wider solutions. The present research paper tries not only to understand the concept of 'female body and menstrual ambiguity' and correlation of woman and nature through the lens of eco-critical and literary representation of female productivity, menstruation and taboos related with it folktale "A Flowering Tree" but also to investigate the social and cultural status of women in Indian society in present scenario.

Keywords: Female body, Menstruation, Menstrual Ambiguity, Cultural studies and Folklores.

Folk literature of any nation conveys the primitivism of its common people whose thoughts and feelings are inbuilt into it in the most native, spontaneous and realistic manner and who since time immemorial have used it to voice their experiences, to throw light upon the relationship of man and nature, and to show the omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent preaching entity of nature. Folk literature is part of collective consciousness to invoke the subtle, lucid, sublime and simple existence of mankind. Folktales are deeply rooted in social milieu and highly sensitive to the emotions of individuals and groups. Their entertaining, engaging and easily intelligible nature makes them memorable, unique and flowing through the ages. "As long as they are told they vary, merge and blend" (Dorson 59). Folk literature is the lore of unlettered people transmitted by word of mouth. In a lecture, eminent littérateur U. R. Ananthamurthy said "The spoken word is kept alive by the lowest of the low. Proverbs are like Vedas for the poor" (IGNOU lec. 1). Like written literature, it consists of prose and verse narratives, poems and songs, myths, drama, rituals, proverbs and riddles.

Folktales and folklores utilize the traditional recollections to reconstruct the past. It is the beauty of folklores and tales that they cannot be studied in isolation but need intermingling of folk and elite culture, and fusion of different disciplines like Anthropology, Sociology,

Psychology, History, Literary studies, Linguistics and Education. Hence folk literature is interdisciplinary in its nature which makes it relevant, contemporary and soil for all kind of studies in present scenario because “folklore specialists begin to thinking of their areas of inquiry as living phenomenon with hopes, both for the present and the present” (Soumen 7). Here lies the importance of folk literature in understanding the most ancient yet ever relevant subject, i.e., the celebration of female body and menstrual ambiguity which leads to the origin of many taboos associated with it in the Indian society.

Going through the various forms of folk literature we come to know that folktales are used as a vehicle to transport the culture of any nation in various languages and of different times to the readers. Women issues and Indian social system are not exceptions for folktales. In social structure there are many folktales which represent women in various shades and situations, and hence show Indian cultural value system. *A Flowering Tree* is an interesting folktale which speaks not only status of women in society but makes us aware about health and reproductive ability of women, and how menstruation is essential part of their whole persona which should not be considered as a taboo. It also suggests that there is unique relationship between nature and female body which should not be abused, exploited and mutilated for preserving good health of human society and environment.

A Flowering Tree is a folklore translated into English from Kannada by A.K. Ramanujan and appeared in his book *A Flowering Tree and Other Oral Tales from India* in the year 1967. Actually, it is woman-centric tale and attempts to create an interconnected relationship between woman and nature. “The ecofeminist outlook of the tale provides it a new dimension and proves to be benchmark folklore for showing the plight of women health issues” (Dharwadkar 329). Before understanding the thematic beauty of the folktale, we need to go through its text that goes like this.

A Flowering Tree is tale of a young girl who lives in a certain town with her mother and older sister and to help her impoverished family she turned into a beautiful tree by performing a strange ritual with her older sister. They carefully perform the ritual which requires two pitchers of water – one to transform the younger to a tree and the other back to human form. Her older sister plucks flowers from the transformed tree making sure that she does not damage any other part of the tree. She then converts her younger sister to human form by sprinkling water on her.

They sell them at the King's palace after making garlands with help of magically produced flowers. They keep this secret to themselves.

One day out of curiosity the prince tries to find out the secret behind the origin of flowers. He eventually finds the secret origin of flowers and forces her mother to get married with the girl with magic. Meanwhile the younger daughter has to demonstrate how she transforms into a tree to pacify her angry mother.

After the forced wedding the prince does not touch and speak to his wife several nights. On being forced she performs the transformation ceremony for her husband without her own desire. Her envious sister-in-law compels her performing the transformation on one night and breaks her branches while plucking the flowers along with her friends. They pour water on her improperly. After conversion into the human form, she acquires only half a body without hands and feet and turns into a wounded carcass. She has no option but to crawl into a gutter in a naked body. With help of a cotton wagon driver, she reaches in a town where her husband's elder sister has been married to the King. She has been brought to the palace and kept at the main door as a 'thing' for decoration. Meanwhile, the prince, full of remorse, has been turned into a beggar and wandered across the country.

The wandering, lost and unrecognizable prince reaches to the town of her elder sister who identifies her brother and brings him to the palace where he has been bathed and fed. But the prince does not utter a single word. In a worry his sister tries all sorts of ways to make him speak and to be happy. One day looking the half body of his wife he immediately recognizes his lost wife who narrates to him the complete incident and requests him to perform the water ritual in a hope to be normal again. The water ritual becomes successful and she gets her full body again.

Hence the tale reflects on issues of the 'Female Body', its power, authority on it, its identity, perception of society and its co-relationship with the 'Nature'. The representation of female body in the literature has been subject of debate and raises many questions. Particularly, *A Flowering Tale* not only concentrates to highlight the beauty of female body but also brings forth the truth behind the menstruation in a metaphoric way in form of 'flowering' of tree. In the tale when the younger girl is protected, cared and watered well after transformation in a tree and producing flowers, she regains her powers without any bodily harm. But when she is utterly

ignored in the palace, mutilated and abused mentally and physically, she turns into a crawling creature. Hence, symmetry between female and nature has been created in the tale. While commenting on the theme of the tale A.K. Ramanujan himself remarks that the tale clearly makes us aware about the preservation of nature and respect of women which are backbone of growth of any nation:

One could say many things about this story. For instance, one of its themes resonates with our present concerns with ecology and conservation. (A Women's Tale par. 7)

Further he suggests that the ecological perspectives of the tale turn it into a 'guidelines for conservation of environment' which is as important as giving the recognition of women in the society as an individual. As balance in nature is necessary for good health of ecology, the understanding the importance of menstruation as a vital and procuring phenomenon is essential for healthy human society.

There is also the suggestion that a tree is vulnerable to careless handling like a woman. A tree that has come to flower or fruit will not be cut down; it is treated as a mother, a woman who has given birth. Thus the metaphoric connections between a tree and a woman are many and varied in the culture. (Ramanujan par. 9)

Normally, in society menstruation is an ambiguous discourse which no one wants to talk openly. If it becomes necessary to talk of it in public, the help of some image, metaphor or natural imagery is taken to murmur about it. The commonest form of such symbol is 'flowering' which needs proper care and security. In the tale the heroine, the younger girl with magic, feels ashamed of transforming on the wake of enforcement by her husband who does not speak and touch her many days after marriage. His compulsion on his wife for transformation seems to be 'virginity check' of modern days. She is dependent on her husband for getting her real body. She does not have authority on her 'body' and loses her identity once she accepts the authority of her husband. In this respect A.K. Ramanujan says in his essay "A Flowering Tree: A Woman's Tale":

As I said earlier, she is most vulnerable when she is a tree. She can neither speak nor move. She is most open to injury when she is most attractive, when she is exercising her gift of flowering. Each time she becomes a tree, she begs the one who is pouring the water to

be careful not to hurt her. Yet, paradoxically, when she is mutilated, she cannot be healed directly. She can be made whole only by becoming the tree again, becoming vulnerable again, and trusting her husband to graft and heal her broken branches. (par. 14)

This is what the Ecofeminism suggests. Eco-feminists argue that the patriarchal society's values and beliefs have resulted in the oppression of both woman and nature. It ignores woman's work, knowledge and strength (Nayar, 2010, 250). Ecofeminists believe that the qualities of woman and nature as reproduction and nurture are both attributes given by males resulting in domination and exploitation. Mental and physical violence are employed as power tool to control woman and nature in patriarchal social structure and system. As in the present tale husband enforces the younger girl to perform transformation act.

Ecofeminists seeks the solution in the older myths and religious beliefs in which nature has been revered because they affirm that all human and non-human lives are embedded in nature; they legitimate female power, female bodies and female sexuality (Nayar 250). In the same tone A.K. Ramanujan writes that the tale is a remarkable example of oral narration to sensitize the males to give respect to female body, desire and sexuality:

A woman can speak, can move, can be an agent in her own behalf in ways that a tree cannot. Yet symbolically speaking, the tree isolates and gives form to her capacity to put forth flowers and fragrance from within, a gift in which she could glory, as well as to the vulnerability that goes with it. It expresses a young woman's desire to flower sexually, and otherwise, as well as the dread of being ravaged that the very gift brings with it. In telling such a tale, older women could be reliving these early, complex, and ambivalent feelings towards their own bodies—and projecting them for younger female listeners. If boys are part of the audience, as they often are, the male could imaginatively participate in them, which might change his sensitiveness towards women. (par. 14)

A Flowering Tale also reflects on female's hesitation and fears about her body in an insecure society. The taboos attached with her different phases of development of her body parts, especially puberty and menstruation, and a silence around her sexual desires and satisfaction create a menstruation ambiguity in the society which is attacked by the present tale. Ramanujan compares the female body and nature overlapping each other in the tale and penetrates this menstruation ambiguity tactfully:

In the orchard, with the wild pubescent girls, she becomes a tree, full of fears that are all too real, and she is unable to return to her whole human female being: she becomes a “thing,” something that has the face of a woman but the helplessness of the tree. (par.22)

Analyzing the status of women in society and reasons behind their social position Simone de Beauvoir, a radical feminist expresses in her famous book, *The Second Sex* that the mystification and stereotyping of woman by men has played pivotal role creating patriarchy (222). Man, and Women are, therefore, constantly engaged in this Subject-Other relation where the Man is the Subject and the Woman the other. It is based on this myth of the woman as inferior Other that gender inequalities are perpetuated (Nayar 88). In the same tone and in the process of reflecting on woman's position in society the present tale broods over the reasons of origin of patriarchy in society and how it diminishes the entity of woman. The younger girl, the heroine of the story, attains the identity of 'a magic tree', 'flowering tree', 'a wonder' 'a mystery' 'a commodity' 'a thing' of decoration but not a woman. Her 'paradise' is lost due to her own 'curiosity, magic and knowledge'. Her mystification and stereotyping promotes and strengthens the patriarchy and male mind-set around her; she is abused, exploited, mutilated, and turned into a 'half body crawling into a gutter' before the happy ending when she regains 'her full body'.

Hence, *A Flowering Tale* is a story of a girl fighting with patriarchal values. Moreover, it is a literary reflection on relationship between woman and nature, female body, menstruation ambiguity and challenges faced by women in patriarchal society. The tale is so alluring and suggestive that it attracts many critics for critical appreciation. Stuart Blackburn and Alan Dundes aptly observe:

In a widely quoted essay, he showed that women's tales are sometimes “counter-tales,” revealing alternative understandings of such key Indic concepts as karma and chastity. But one feels that his deepest insights tended toward the personal rather than the cultural, as revealed in the unfinished essay “A Flowering Tree” included here, in which he listens to female voices and leads us into the delicate pain of a young woman's maturation. (Notes on the Tales par. 1)

In conclusion it can be opined that *A Flowering Tree* is an Indian folktale, being originally told in South India in Kannada and narrated in many other languages, a message of environmental preservation creating a parallel between nature and woman; and suggests that women should not be considered only a 'body', menstruation is a natural phenomenon; and they are beyond of physical identity and 'weaker Other'.

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