

Women in Lal Behari Day's *Folk-Tales of Bengal*: An Exploration

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Abstract

Lal Behari Day's *Folk Tales of Bengal* is one of the popular books on folk and fairy tales that help children to transport themselves to the world of imagination. This book has been published in the year 1883, and ever since this book has been riding high on the popularity scale. The twenty two stories that we get in its repertoire mirror the customs and culture of Bengal, and also of our nation as a whole. These stories also uphold the apparent simple ways of life of the characters. The characters in this book range from kings and queens to simple ordinary people, and the stories present how these characters deal with their internal and external social lives. Due to the wide range of character roles, and their vivid experiences, this paper attempts to scrutinize the status and position of women folk both in the household and in society. This paper also endeavours to unlock the psyche of men while dealing with women, with a view to exploring the underlying misogynistic trend existing in our society.

Key words: folktales, gender roles, misogyny, patriarchy, violence

Introduction

In the preface of *Folk-Tales of Bengal*, Lal Behari Day has mentioned that he felt lucky enough as a boy to listen to hundreds and thousands of folk tales and fairy tales from a person called Sambhu's mother, and it was for this Sambhu's mother alone Lal Behari Day's childhood days were transported to a happy world of fantasy and imagination. The stories narrated by that particular woman might have impacted his mind to a great extent, and that is perhaps why his ears longed to hear the same old stories over and again while he was on his way to compiling this book, called *Folk-Tales of Bengal*, which ultimately got a shape in the year 1883. The experience of living in the fantastical world of kings and queens, and ogres and ogresses, was something, in all probability, not exclusive to L. B. Day. This is a kind of experience that almost every little child is familiar with, and the glory of folk and fairy tales survives in a child's varied experience. That folk tales and fairy tales are an integral part of our childhood days is accepted by all, and that this particular literary genre creates a long lasting impact on the psyche of the readers is also a proven fact now.

Donald Hasse has pointed out the diversity in the nature of the term 'fairy tale'. He says, "For some, the term denotes a specific narrative form easily identified characteristics but for others it suggests not a singular genre but an umbrella category under which a variety of other forms may be grouped" (1:322). It is true that as in other countries, in our country also, folk tales have a strong hold in the domain of literary genres, and run parallel with the mainstream

literature. These narratives serve patriarchy productively and are treated as an indispensable tool utilised effectively for preserving, transmitting and transferring social norms, beliefs, customs and ideologies “before we can know differently” (Dworkin Introduction 26). The stories in the anthologies of fairy and folk tales are chosen with utmost care with a view to serving greater purpose of imparting the teachings of social norms and culture, which get drilled into our minds effectively from the days we get acquainted with these stories. The tasks of casting our psyche into patriarchal moulds, and then manipulating us to acquire appropriate behavioural pattern are being productively accomplished through these tales in a convincing fashion. The impact of these tales is so intense and profound that in an unconscious state, these tales get alive, and we emulate the characters or pre-set gender roles, wittingly or unwittingly, without even testing the authenticity and validity of the teachings of these age old tales in the current social set-up of modern India.

Fairy tales and folk tales also operate as an influential patriarchal agent. They are effective means of reinforcing male domination because they do not appear oppressive. They retain power because, with their ability to persuade, the structures convince the woman that she is destined to be subordinated. Cultural structures are, therefore ideological providing a system of beliefs that seek and attain the woman’s consent to be subordinated. (Nayar 83-84)

Position of Women in *Folk-Tales of Bengal*

The cultural trend reflected in many folk tales is unfortunately misogynistic, sometimes presented in an overtly fashion and sometimes in a covertly one. This trend of depiction of negative image of women and an attempt to perfect those women through acts of violence passes from generation to generation, and in a way conditions the mind of both men and women to have a strong belief that misogynistic attitude in society is something very natural and there is nothing grave in it to ponder over. In *Folk-Tales of Bengal*, the notable book by Lal Behari Day, we get a collection of twenty-two narratives which reflect the overall cultural tradition of Bengal. If we recall the stories of this book, we would find that the number of women characters in these tales is innumerable, but the position that they hold is not very constructive or productive. Their chastity is judged, and entity is measured by the standards set by men. Most of the woman characters are flat characters and are categorized under two heads, “good” and “bad”. Women belonging to these two sections stand at polar ends, for we witness in the stories that “good” is always good, and “bad” is always bad. “The dual image of women presents the qualities in their extremes. Either the woman is extraordinarily good, touching divinity or she is unimaginably evil, baser than the basest” (Chaudhuri). Women who are “baser than the basest” (Chaudhuri) in *Folk tales of Bengal* are generally active and powerful and therefore endure punishment of the crudest form. It is inevitable that “A large hole, as deep as the height of a man, was dug in the ground; the maid-servant [read as any woman of sinister disposition] was put into it in a standing posture; prickly thorn was heaped around her up to the crown of her head: in this wise was the maid- servant buried alive” (Day “The Story of the Rakshasas” 97). It is not necessary that only an evil woman would receive punishment. Women belonging to all strata are at the mercy of men and any woman can be killed, thrashed, mutilated, deserted, and abducted anytime as far as whims of men are

concerned. In “Strike But Hear”, for an example, an innocent wife who was mistaken for an ogress was brutally killed by the father-in-law with a hammer (Day 152-53) “A Ghostly Wife” counterfoils “The Ghost-Brahman” as it reveals the differential treatment of society while dealing with men and women separately. In the story “A Ghostly Wife”, the *sankchinni* (“a kind of female ghost”) who assumed the form of a Brahman’s wife tried to destroy the order of the household of the Brahmin. In the end, she was caught by an *Ojha* (“an exorcist”), who in turn “took up his slippers and began belabouring her with them” (Day 198). She was “shoebeaten” (Day 198) until she confessed her fault. In “The Ghost-Brahman”, on the other hand, a male ghost committed the same misdeed of assuming the form of a Brahman and then disordering the happy family life of the Brahman. But surprisingly enough, unlike *sankchinni* (“a female ghost”) in “A Ghostly Wife” there was no disgraceful punishment awaiting this male ghost in “The Ghost-Brahman”. The male ghost was captured in a phial in the end, and the real Brahman was asked to throw the phial away “into the bottom of the sea” (Day 185). That was all. The male ghost in “The Ghost-Brahman” was punished just like the female ghost in the story “A Ghostly Wife”, but the shameful manner in which the punishment of the female ghost is described is actually missing in the description of the punishment of the male ghost.

Folk-Tales of Bengal records a peculiar tension and competition existing among women characters. Their jealousy for one another knew no bound, and was so profound that they sometimes proved malevolent for one another. Sometimes the beloved queen of the king would command the eyes of the other pregnant queens to be “plucked out of their sockets” (Day “The Boy whom Seven Mothers Suckled” 122); sometimes a woman would make the co-wife “do all the menial work in the house; rebuked her all day and night; and did not give her enough to eat” (Day “The Bald Wife” 275); and sometimes barren queens would form an alliance with a midwife to replace newly born children of the king’s favourite queen by puppies in order to undermine her position in the eyes of the king which would lead to driving her out of the palace (Day “The Boy with the Moon on his Forehead” 239-40). Stepmothers are depicted as evil-hearted women whose hearts were always filled with venom. They hated their stepsons and did not hesitate to harm their step children. The focus of the women characters was on fight, both figurative and literal, with one another in order to secure a permanent position in the hearts of their husbands. Deprived of education and decision-making powers, they chose to fight and quarrel with the persons of their own species not for overcoming their lacunas, but for gaining a place in the heart of men.

In the folk and fairy tales we find a growing tendency to present women characters as objects of male gaze. Day’s *Folk-Tales of Bengal* is not exclusive in this regard. Beauty myth persists strongly in these narratives. All the female protagonists in Day’s stories are of “surpassing beauty” (Day “Life’s Secret” 21) because possessing a beautiful face is the prime criterion of getting married to princes and kings, and even to an ordinary person. If a girl meets this criterion of owning a beautiful face, other criteria for getting married are generally waived, as in the narrative “The Story of Swet-Basanta” in *Folk-Tales of Bengal*. During the time when the son introduced a stranger-girl to his merchant father and homely mother, “the merchant and his wife were so struck with the matchless beauty, grace, and loveliness of the stranger, that without asking any questions as to her birth, the nuptials were celebrated” (Day “The Story of Swet-Basanta” 100). Even the so-called ugly but powerful demoniac women in the narratives of *Folk-Tales of Bengal*, knew the importance of possessing a beautiful face, and seemingly were well aware of the psyche of men. Consequently, beautiful

faces emerged to be an effective tool for “ugly” women to ensnare men. This recurrent thematic pattern is referred to in many stories. “The Story of the Rakshasas” (Day 71-97), “The Boy whom Seven Mothers Suckled” (Day 121-26) are only few such examples in which these “ugly” women by assuming the form of “good” in reality craved for power and wealth. Patriarchy felt that their ugliness was reflected on their ugly appearance and as they were brutally killed or crushed down in the end, their power-loving excessive ambition also met with an abrupt end.

Another reason for which a woman, in these tales, could have gained social respect was her child-bearing capacity. This biological privilege generally aids a woman to get a raise in socio-economic hierarchy. “The Boy with the Moon on His Forehead” is an example of such a case. Here, the daughter of a poor cow-dung picker was overheard by a child-less king that she would bear “twin children, a son and a daughter, the daughter will be divinely fair, and the son will have the moon on his forehead and stars on the palms of his hands” (Day 235), and instantly did the king wish to marry her in order to get an offspring. A barren woman, however, does not get any acknowledgement in society and this picture is portrayed in folk tales as well. K. D. Upadhyaya in “On the Position of Women in Indian Folk Culture” discusses the plight of a barren woman. According to Upadhyaya, a barren woman gains no respect in society. She is hated by all in her family and society. No one wants to have a look at her face as she is considered to be an inauspicious woman, and therefore is barred from attending any religious or social ceremony (86). This obnoxious and blatant social attitude is mirrored in the story “Life’s Secret” in which the issueless queen was deemed inauspicious, by a mendicant. “The Suo queen went to the door with a handful of rice. The mendicant asked whether she had any children. On being answered in the negative, the holy mendicant refused to take alms, as the hands of a woman unblessed with child are regarded as ceremoniously unclean” (Day 13). The value of a son, on the other hand, is supremely high in our society as everyone wants a son here. The presence or absence of a son has the potentiality to make or mar a situation in the household. Importance of a son is also depicted in the tales, collected by Lal Behari Day. A woman without a son has no significance in the life of her husband. In “Life’s Secret”, without any hitch in the conscience, the king left Suo queen and went to Duo Queen. He left Suo queen as the latter had nothing more to offer to her husband as her son was already believed to be dead. She was loved by the king till her son was alive. The moment her son was thought to have died, she was abandoned (Day 18).

Ranging from a king to an ordinary Brahman, in *Folk-Tales of Bengal*, all enjoy polygamous relations. In “The Boy with the Moon on His Forehead” (Day 234-52), the king had six queens and married another; the story “The Boy Whom Seven Mothers Suckled” (Day 121-26) also witnesses eight queens of the king; the king in “Life’s Secret” (Day 13-27) had two wives. In “The Story of Swet-Basanta”(Day 98-111), Swet was incidentally made the king of a strange land and he had to marry the queen of the land despite having a legal wife. What is more surprising in the story is that Swet never for once remembered his previous wife, whom he left in the forest, once he became the king of that strange land (Day 105-06). In “The Story of the Rakshasas” (Day 71-97) too “a poor half-witted Brahman” (Day 71) had two wives, “one human and the other demoniac” (Day 75). Day justifies polygamy in his tales, and presents it as something very normal. The fact that a woman, other than gratifying his needs, has no value in her husband’s life gets manifested when the widower “lost no time in marrying a young and beautiful wife” (Day “The Story of Swet-Basanta” 100) once his spouse’s demise occurred. Contradictorily, a woman in absence of her

husband in Indian social context is expected to waste “her days and her nights in sorrowing and sighing” (Day “Phakir Chand” 40) just like the abducted princess in “Phakir Chand” exhibited her bereavement appropriately according to the patriarchal norms and conventions. “She took pleasure in nothing; she would hardly speak to anyone; she wept day and night” (Day 40).

Some of the stories, which could get a place in Lal Behari Day’s compilation, give a clear admonition of danger to women who chose to move outside their hearths without their male counterparts. “Phakir Chand” and “The Story of the Rakshasas” are two such stories in *Folk-Tales of Bengal* which give a clear cue that women should not dare to be adventurous; they must not cross over the *Lakshmana rekha* (“a border line drawn by Lakshmana for Sita”) set by patriarchal ideologies, and if they disobey the norms they alone would have to shoulder the blame of experiencing perilous situations. The message that patriarchy wants to convey to all women through these stories is short but clear. Women should confine themselves to the four walls of a cage called home, which alone can assure them safety. Exposure to the outside world would invite the attention of evil eye, and keenness to explore might destroy their lives. The prince in “Phakir Chand” (Day 28-60) married a princess belonging to a subterranean palace. Once when her husband was in the embrace of a deep slumber, she dared to visit the upper world all alone. Her first two successful visits to the upper world made her over confident, and kept her husband in darkness. Emboldened by the thrill of freedom, the princess repeated her action but this time, luck deserted her because another prince, smitten with her captivating charm, caused her abduction. Again, in “The Story of the Rakshasas” (Day 71-97), Keshavati who was married to Champa Dal, expressed her wish to visit the world outside her palace. Her husband was good enough to take her out, but the very first day of her visit proved fatal as she tied a long strand of her hair to a shell and made it float down the river. On receipt of such a strand of long beautiful hair, Sahasra Dal got infatuated with the possessor of such hair and became obsessed with her thoughts. His melancholy propelled his mother-in-law to appoint her personal attendant, who was actually a *rakshashi* in disguise. Eventually this ogress, through her guile, managed to bring Keshavati out of her house when Champa Dal, Keshavati’s husband was in deep sleep, and ultimately abducted her. In both these narratives, a similar pattern has been followed. First of all, the husbands were in deep slumber when the incidents of abduction took place. These tales kindle a doubt relating to the safety of women without their male partners; and are also suggestive of the fact that women are secured and safe only when they passively accompany a male or follow their husbands. Secondly, the beautiful wives stepping out of the world without consent definitely implies a sort of disobedience on the part of the wives. Disobedience of patriarchal rules is something that patriarchy condemns. So getting captivated is to be treated as a kind of justified retribution, and abduction is also a clear sign of caution to the female readers by patriarchy that wants women to restrain themselves from going out for exploration. Quite a lot of preaching is being done in support of confinement of men in these two accounts. But a woman can be pushed out of her house any time when a man decides to do so. Women are at the mercy of the will and whims of men. The story “The Story of Prince Sobur” (Day 127-138) suggests that whether a woman would be permitted to stay at her house or not, depended entirely on the man of the house. The youngest daughter of the merchant was banished by her father for failing to satisfy the ego of his father. She did not comply with her father’s wish of flattering him, and as an outcome, she was driven out of her father’s house. So the stories like “Phakir Chand” (Day 28-60) and “The Story of the

Rakshasas” (Day 71-97) mention the peril that women would invite if they dare to go out alone, but “The Story of Prince Sobur” (Day 127-138) narrates a story in which a woman was thrown away to confront the perils of the outside world only because a man wanted her to be in that circumstances. It is justified because it is taken as a part of her teaching. The father told her, “This very day you shall leave my house without a pice in your pocket” (Day 127), without even thinking of the adverse consequence that might occur to a banished girl without money. Patriarchy also is unwilling to see women displaying power. Patriarchy is accustomed to witness men rescuing women, and not women rescuing men. That is perhaps why when the female protagonist in “The Story of Prince Sobur” (Day 127-38) was about to rescue prince Sobur, she had to assume the form of a man. “She put on the garb of a Sannyasi, and with a dagger in her hand set out on her journey” (Day 135).

Conclusion

Lal Behari Day’s *Folk-Tales of Bengal*, therefore, reflects a world that belongs to men. Women are mercifully given a space only because a society cannot survive minus women. Men and women in this book are not complementary to each other but their relationship is that of “dominance and subordnance” (Millet 25) in which the actual reign of power is with men, and female characters are there to serve patriarchy well by enduring subjection to men’s whims. Violent acts towards a group can be of varied forms. Malavika Karlekar also defines ‘violence’ as, “Violence – understood not only as physical harm but also as discrimination, deprivation, denial of access to resources, intimidation, exploitation, and other means whereby economic and social inequality is perpetuated – is the tool that reproduces the inherently hierarchical structure of the family” (Bhattacharya 57). So when women in *Folk-Tales of Bengal*, depict a negative image of women in general, it also emerges as a unique form of subtle violence by patriarchy to condition the belief system of the readers to alienate and estrange womanhood from empowerment.

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