

Morality and Gender Stereotypes in the Folk Tales of *Thakurmar Jhuli*

Daisy Majumdar

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Lady Brabourne College, Kolkata, West Bengal

Abstract

When *Thakurmar Jhuli* ['A Grandmother's Bag (of Tales)'] – a collection of oral folk narratives native to Bengal – was published in 1907, Rabindranath Tagore praised the author/compiler, Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar, for not only showcasing the traditional language and culture of Bengal, but also for his compelling narrative power, which, Tagore felt, replicated the narrative art unique to *women*, chiefly, grandmothers. Thus, the collection is framed by a gendered perspective, even before the stories begin. The stories typically comprise themes of adventure and fantasy, and characters include kings, queens, animals, monsters, and fairy-like personas. While these themes and characters quickly capture the child's imagination, it is very clear to the adult reader that the moral purpose of each of these traditional folk-tales is not unlike that of a 'conduct book': in that, the story, themes and characters all serve to remind the reader of acceptable social codes of behaviour. In reading these stories critically from the perspective of gender, this study seeks to examine how gender stereotypes in these tales were used as vehicles of morality; and to analyse the role of traditional folk tales in disseminating moral lessons to its young auditors over the ages. This study will also critically examine the problematic female characters in these tales, such as the *rakshasi* (demoness/she-monster) and the old women, who are usually not integrated into the mainstream of the societies presented in these tales.

Keywords: Bengal, children's literature, folklore, gender, morality, stereotypes

With an introduction by none less than Rabindranath Tagore, *Thakurmar Jhuli*, published for the first time in 1907 by Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar, was a runaway hit. Sutapa Basu, who translated these stories into English, noted that three thousand copies of the book were sold within a week of its publication¹. It is notable that the book is in regular publication even today – more than a hundred years after its first publication – and ten thousand copies are sold

annually². These were tales that were collected by Mitra Majumdar from various sources, and he decided to publish them in a bid to preserve a tradition of oral folk narratives that were losing their importance in their native lands, in favour of the fairy tales of Grimm and Andersen. Mitra Majumdar's earliest exposure to these tales was from his mother and his aunt, who would regularly narrate these tales to him. These narratives captured his imagination and left a deep impression on him. Fascinated as he was by these stories, he eventually decided to publish them, financing the publication himself, and he even drew illustrations for many of these stories. In his *Bhumika* (Introduction), Tagore highlights the importance of the publication of folk and fairy stories native to the land as a response to the fairy tales of the West, with which the local Bengali child had little or no intrinsic connect. Mitra Majumdar's tales were built of fantasies which referenced the local land and culture, and were populated by kings, queens and little boys and girls who were native to this land and culture. Tagore appeals for the education of the children of the land in their native language, an appeal which is echoed in his *Jibonsmriti*, and he feels that Mitra Majumdar's publication is a very positive step in that direction.

A careful reading of Tagore's Introduction to the tales reveals his clear gendering of the narrative process. These fairy tales are '*Snehomoyeeder mukher kotha*' [oral narratives from affectionate women] and '*deshlakshmir buker kotha*' [tales from the heart of our rich country] (all translations mine)³. These folk and fairy tales are further compared to '*Matridugdha*' [mother's milk] – indicating that the tradition of oral narration of these tales by women to children is comparable to the nourishment received from mother's milk. Native folk and fairy tales, thus, are essential to the growth and development of a child's mind, and it is inevitably the mother/ mother figure who must narrate. Tagore widens the scope of his argument by emphasising how every *boy* in the land, whether a farmer or a king, must have been soothed to sleep by his mother/grandmother/aunt narrating these tales to him. This, according to Tagore, is a prime example of '*matrisneho*' [a mother's love] – and fairy tales represent the everlasting tradition of the deepest love that a mother can express towards her children, what Tagore calls '*gabhiratama sneho*' (Mitra Majumdar 12). A secondary and more significant gendering of the tales may be found in Tagore's assertion, that traditional folk and fairy tales receive their particular flavour from the affectionate tone and language of the mother/grandmother. In fact, Tagore even chides the women of the age (early twentieth century) who would rather be found reading the complex works of Burke or Martin than be educated in these traditions of simple oral narration. He feels that women of the modern era, though educated, have lost their 'pride of place' as narrators to children – the simple ways of narration by their mothers and grandmothers have been replaced by bookish knowledge. He then goes on to unequivocally praise Mitra Majumdar for his use of the traditional tone and language of the mother/grandmother.

The idea that fairy tales represent a ‘tradition’ of the land, leads us to examine the thematic components of the tales; and the stories which have been compiled by Mitra Majumdar consist of fantasies which involve kings and queens, princes and princesses, demons and demonesses, adventures, journeys and mythical beasts. If Tagore’s Introduction to the tales calls for a gendered understanding of the process of narration, a gendered reading of the tales becomes inevitable, and it becomes evident that the tales have a strong basis of morality embedded within the structures of gender. The acknowledgment of the moral structure of the tales becomes significant when we realise that the tales were intended for children, to put them to sleep at night with fantasies and myths, and in turn, transmit a code of morality that would be embedded in these young minds through the impact of the stories. The tales consist of thematic patterns and characters which seem repetitive, and the repetitive nature of the tales all serve to highlight the undercurrent of morals running through the tales. A detailed study of some of the tales reveals some interesting insights.

The tales are divided into clusters, each cluster containing a different title: The first cluster is called ‘*Doodher Sagar* [Sea of Milk]’; the tales in this segment are *Kalabati Rajkanya* [Princess Kalabati], *Ghumonto Puri* [The Sleeping Kingdom], *Kankanmala Kanchanmala*, *Saat Bhai Champa* [Seven Brothers and a Sister], *Sheet Basanta* [Winter and Spring] and *Kiranamala*.⁴ The structure of the plots in these stories is similar – the kingdoms are mostly ruled by kings who have multiple wives, and the kings and their queens desire children. The birth of the children is ridden with confusions which result in changes in the familial structure: most often, the good and virtuous queen is accused of giving birth to children deemed unacceptable by the prevalent social standards, and is cast out by the king – doomed to live a life of poverty and destitution. Their tragedies are inevitable, and they are only restored to their former state once their genuine children are rediscovered by the king. The women seemed to have a foreknowledge of what would befall them if they failed in their duty as birth-givers to beautiful children: the ‘good’ queens were desperate to bear children for their kings, whereas the ‘evil’ queens would secretly plot against their rivals so that the worst fate would befall them. The stories thus reinforce the idea that childbirth must be the primary duty of the woman in her marriage. Not only that, as each of the stories asserts, the children must be beautiful: terms such as ‘*sonar chand* [golden moon]’, ‘*chander tukro* [piece of the moon]’ (all translations mine) populate the text whenever there is the mention of a child born of a king, the moon being a reference point for beauty and fairness.

The story *Kalabati Rajkanya* begins with the despair of the king and his seven queens, for they have not borne him a child as yet. On the advice of a sage, they bring home a root which must be crushed and consumed by each queen, in order to have a son each – five queens partake of the root in their turn, leaving almost nothing for the fourth queen and the youngest queen; and later, when all the queens gave birth, the fourth and the seventh bore an owl and a monkey,

respectively, instead of a handsome prince. The birth of such ‘creatures’ who did not conform to the standards of bravery and handsomeness leads to the inevitable – the fourth queen is relegated to being a caretaker in the palace zoo, and the youngest becomes a ‘*dasi* [slave/servant]’ responsible for collecting cow-dung cakes (Mitra Majumdar 34). There is no option for them, they must accept their fates and live out the rest of their lives in misery for giving birth to non-conventional princes. Notably, as is made clear by the narrator, the five queens who had deprived their sisters-in-law of the root, had acted out of jealousy – and their sons, though handsome and brave – had taken after their ill-behaved mothers. The handsome princes would use their regal power to ride through the kingdom, and would kill at random – whereas, the unconventional princes, the owl and the monkey, named Bhutum and Buddhu, would help their mothers in their daily labours, and play with each other. The story thus creates the polar opposites of good versus evil through the behaviour of the princes. When the king realises his mistake and the queens are restored to the palace, the five jealous queens lock themselves in their rooms, as do the sons, and the king decides to seal their rooms forever. In this mythical world, punishments are swift and often violent, and it is the evil ones who receive the brunt of violence in most cases.

Female jealousy comes to the fore in *Kanchanmala* and *Kankanmala* as well, though the plot of the story is based on the friendship and broken promises between a prince and his cowherd friend. When the prince becomes a king and forgets his friend, his body is covered with needles, and no one can save him. It is Kanchanmala, the queen, who ultimately brings back the cowherd to the king, and the king is relieved only after the cowherd breaks the spell. Interestingly, most of the story revolves not around the king and the cowherd, but around his queen Kanchanmala, and the woman who tricked her and took her place in the palace: Kakanmala. Apart from the absurdity of not being directly recognised, it is the real queen who must prove her identity through a series of household tasks, and in fact, it is the real queen who finds the means of bringing relief to her needle-stung husband. Here, the women are the doers, and they take an active part in the story – but the story of friendship is rather obscured by the ‘contest’ between the two women. The lesson that must be imbibed from this episode is that a queen, no matter her power and richness, must always be adept at household work. This idea is repeated again in *Kiranmala* where the eponymous Kiranmala keeps house for her brothers in the sage’s house that they call home. Even though she is responsible for rescuing her brothers and the other princes who had been trapped by the curse, the narrator does not fail to mention how well she did all her housework. Virtue is intricately tied in these stories to how well a woman performs her household duties. In *Kiranmala* as well, the fates of the three siblings, Arun, Barun and Kiranmala, are determined by the jealousy of their aunts. While their mother had married the king, her sisters were married to the cook and the gardener in the palace. When the queen gave birth three times, she had wished for her sisters to join her in every birth. Unfortunately for the loving queen, her sisters had repaid her love by setting her newly born children

adrift in the river – replacing these moon-like children (Mitra Majumdar, 115) with a puppy, a kitten and a wooden doll. The people in the kingdom began to question the queen's origins, referring to her as a '*petni* [ghost]' or a '*dakini* [witch]' (translations mine). The queen is rejected by her husband – her head is shaved, she is set upon the back of an ass, and driven out of the kingdom. Her humiliation and rejection is complete, and she spends her days in solitary misery by the side of the river in a hut. Arun, Barun and Kiranmala lead simple lives in a hermit's cottage, until they are restored to their rightful place by the king later in the story. The end of the story sees the queen reunited with her children, the only time that her voice is heard, and she returns to her rightful place as the queen. For the crimes that they had committed, the homes of the sisters were burnt, and the sisters buried alive – their violent ends seemingly justified by their acts in the story.

These motifs are repeated in both *Sheet Basanta* and *Saat Bhai Champa*. The youngest of seven queens in *Saat Bhai Champa* was the king's favourite, much to the chagrin of the six other jealous wives. When she gave birth to seven handsome princes and a beautiful princess, the jealous and evil queens buried the eight children in the royal garden, and convinced the king that the queen had birthed frogs and mice. As a result, the queen is banished and is relegated to living her life as a dung-collector. In *Sheet Basanta*, the jealousy of the elder queen manifests itself in her transforming the younger queen into a parrot that flew away, and in desiring the deaths of the sons of the younger queen.

It is obvious that female jealousy, an extremely patriarchal concept, is normalised and present in almost every story in this cluster. The patriarch, the king, is also shown to be simply a passive character. Although he is the king and the husband, he does not have a part to play in these tales of womanly jealousy, and only metes out punishment once the crimes are proved. The patriarchal structure of the home life is evident from a close reading of the stories: the home and the children are the domains belonging to the women in the household. The king and other men in the household never enter the '*antarmahal* [inner chambers]', the '*antur* [chamber often used for birthing]' (translations mine), and other spaces which were exclusive to women, as is evidenced by the complete absence of men in the contexts which refer to women. The king only visits the *antarmahal* when there is a birth; he may even be informed about the births of his children by others without having paid a visit himself. This, in turn, leads to miscommunications, and the king is typically misinformed about his new-born children by the jealous women. He is further exposed as an inherently weak character, who would rather act on what he has heard instead of searching for the truth himself. In *Sheet Basanta*, the king goes as far as to order the deaths of his own two sons, if only to satisfy the enraged elder queen.

The second cluster of stories, interestingly titled '*Roop-Tarasi* [Those whose forms inspire terror], (translation mine)', is thematically centred on an alternative supernatural world of demons and demonesses, the '*rakkhos*'/ '*khokkos*'

[demons] and the ‘*rakkhosi* [demoness]’. The prefatory poem (which introduces all the tales in each cluster) makes it clear that there is a strange element of attraction and fascination in these tales, for these demons and demonesses exist among us in the form of humans. ‘*Roop dekhle taras lage, bolte kore bhoy/kemon kore rakkhosi ra manush hoye roy* [The (ir) forms have me scared, I am afraid to describe/How demonesses live amongst us in human form] (translation mine)’ (Mitra Majumdar, 140). Stories in this cluster include ‘*Nilkamal aar Lalkamal* [Nilkamal and Lalkamal]’, ‘*Dalim Kumar* [Pomegranate Prince]’ and ‘*Sonar Kati Rupal Kati* [Golden Stick and Silver Stick]’ (all translations mine). In these tales, the woman defined as a ‘*rakkhosi*’ continues the theme of the evil woman from the previous cluster; only that a *rakkhosi* is expressly more evil than meets the eye, for her beauty is enchanting and destructive, and her acts of rage include a more visceral form of violence. Instead of complaining to her king about her problems, or making demands, she actively pursues her own wishes, and is often shown as desirous of human flesh.

In *Nilkamal aar Lalkamal*, which is arguably the most famous of all the stories in *Thakurmar Jhuli*, the king is married to a ‘*rakkhosi rani* (demon queen)’. The good queen and the demon queen have a son each. While evil queens in the earlier stories wished to kill or send away the sons of other queens, the demon queen in this case is openly desirous of eating the flesh of the son of the good queen. To that end, she kills the good queen with her looks of evil, and uses her magical powers to cast a spell on the king, rendering him impotent, and he can only helplessly watch as his sons are devoured by the queen and a large demon. Her inherent evil is the worst of all the women in the tales, for she does not hesitate to eat up her ‘*apon peter chhele* [son born from her womb] (translation mine)’ (Mitra Majumdar 140), when she realises that he is opposed to her wishes. The demons in this tale represent destruction, death and chaos, and when the kingdom is overrun by their destructive powers, the people of the land leave the kingdom. The root of this trouble is traced to the *rakkhosi rani*, the queen of evil, whose uncontrollable desire for her stepson’s flesh ultimately led to the destruction of the kingdom. The restoration to order is ironically brought about by the very sons that she had eaten: Ajit, the son of the demon queen and half demon himself, is reborn as Nilkamal. Kusum, the fully human son of the good queen, is reborn as Lalkamal. The half-demon blood of Nilkamal becomes the chief reason for their victories against the demons.

An unexpected moment of tenderness is presented when they enter the kingdom of the demons, and meet their ‘*rakkhosi*’ grandmother – the *rakkhosi* queen’s mother – who grants them protection against the other demons, seeing that Nilkamal is her own grandson. Despite her external appearances of evil, this grandmotherly figure is presented with all the trappings of the conventionally affectionate grandmother. While she is convinced of Nilkamal’s identity as a demon-grandson, she can smell out Lalkamal as fully human: thus, she is sorely tempted to devour his flesh. She tests Lalkamal by making him chew on iron

pulses (Lalkamal had replaced this with ordinary pulses, and therefore manages to convince the demon-grandmother that he is demon). Though sorely tempted to devour him because of the human scent, she resists, because her moral code prevents her from eating her own grandson. She is thus morally stronger than her daughter, the *rakkhosi rani*, who does not hesitate to eat her own son. The text, which venerates all grandmothers as the repository of unconditional affection, is generous enough to include the affections of a demon-grandmother in its pages.

The demonesses in *Dalim Kumar* and *Sonar Kati Rupa Kati* are relatively less vicious. In *Dalim Kumar*, the prince in question is tricked by the demoness residing in a palm tree, who secretly takes over the kingdom from the former queen, after devouring her. Her desire for human flesh is unconsciously revealed when the prince sees her salivating while serving the king his food. She manipulates the prince's life (held in the seed of a pomegranate) until he emerges victorious after defeating the princess Pashavati, who, in turn, is revealed to have been a shape-shifter. In *Sonar Kati Rupa Kati*, the prince and his friends are chased by a demoness who devours all but the prince, who escapes and hides in a mango tree. The shape-shifting demoness transforms into a weeping maiden at the foot of the tree, and is married by the king of the land who finds her there. After several twists and turns, the prince enters a palace to find a sleeping princess guarded by demons and demonesses. The princess obtains the knowledge of the source of life of these demons, and the prince ends up killing them all – however, her frustrated attempts to kill the prince compels the demoness queen to reveal herself in her true form – before the prince kills her.

In the male-dominated tales of epics and other grand narratives in the Indian mythical tradition, the male *rakshasa* holds sway – whereas in the domestic context of folk and fairy tales, usually narrated by the women in the family, the *rakshasi* occurs more frequently. Thus, the world of evil is almost always gendered according to its context. The *rakshasi* is the female counterpart of the *rakshas*, a demoniacal figure conventionally associated with evil and supernatural powers. She is often presented as a shape-shifter, who dons the form of beauty to allure her victims before she destroys them. As '*Rup-Tarasi*', she holds all in thrall, though her deepest desire is to devour human flesh. In terms of her presentation in the folk tales, she is the embodiment of evil and the root cause of the deaths and destruction in the kingdoms – and it is only when her source of life is snuffed out, that peace and order is restored. The figure of the *rakshasi*, when placed in context of the events of the tale, is characterised as a woman who will not be controlled either by the laws of nature, or by the laws of the kingdom. Clearly, she has her own wishes, and will leave no stone unturned to pursue the fulfilment of these wishes. In *Nilkamal aar Lalkamal*, the *rakshasi* kills her rival queen and her son – when she realises that her own son might oppose her, she devours him as well. Morality, and consciousness of her own motherhood, does not make her hesitate for an instant. Moreover, none of the demonesses presented in these tales show any regret for their actions. As tales which carried moral

lessons for its young auditors, the figure of the *rakshasi* serves both as a severe warning, as well as a lesson, on how women are perceived when they step out of the boundaries created for them by society. It is clear that women who could use their beauty as a commodity, or who expressed desires or feelings which were deemed unwomanly (feelings such as rage, jealousy, and so on), could be perceived as demonesses who were responsible for bringing chaos and disorder in their family lives. The moral tone of the tales in Grandmother's affectionate bag is clear: to be rewarded, one must be virtuous. Patience and goodness are valorised, and meek and submissive women, who follow their husbands and forgive them, despite being subject to grievous wrongs, are women worthy of praise and respect.

The final tale under consideration in this study is *Sukhu aar Dukhu* [Sukhu and Dukhu] – two half-sisters whose tale embodies the moral structure of the entire compilation. This story is part of the final cluster called '*Chyang Byang* [A Fish and a Frog]' (translation mine) – where Sukhu and Dukhu are the daughters of the two wives of a poor weaver. The elder wife and her daughter Sukhu (the name implies happiness) do not work at all, and in turn, are jealous of the younger wife and her daughter Dukhu (the name implies sadness), who do all the work in the house in addition to helping the weaver out with his work. One day, as Dukhu follows a gust of wind which has blown away her pile of cotton, she is led to the house of an old woman, who helps her get back her pile of cotton. Dukhu's habits of simplicity, politeness, generosity and respect for the old woman are rewarded with gold and many other gifts from the animals that she had helped on the way. When she returns to her home, she opens her box – and is further 'rewarded' by the emergence of a handsome prince who will marry her. Dukhu's transformed appearance and many gifts propel Sukhu's mother to send Sukhu down the same path. However, Sukhu is neglectful of the trees and animals that she passes, and is rude to the old woman. In the magical house of the old woman, Sukhu is greedy, and takes more than she should have – as she returns, she is deformed into ugliness, she is kicked by the animals that she had not helped, and when she finally opens the magical box from the old woman's collection, she is devoured by a python. Thus, there is no tale which better exemplifies the idea of 'virtue rewarded' than *Sukhu aar Dukhu*.

The tale also throws up another character, the type of which has been presented throughout the collection of tales: the old woman who lives in isolation. In *Sukhu aar Dukhu*, the old woman is said to be the woman who lives in the moon, the '*chand-buri*'. She is kind and benevolent, with flowing white hair, the embodiment of grandmotherly affection. However, it is noteworthy that she lives in isolation, far away from the native village of Dukhu and Sukhu. The old women featured in *Thakurmar Jhuli*, whether human or demon, are all isolated, and often without a husband. In *Kalabati Rajkanya*, the old women are cannibalistic, though not demonesses, and devour the princes and the crew of the ships before they can reach the kingdom of Kalabati. In the social structure of the

tales, where marriage, children and a family life are valorised, these old women are the anomalies, and therefore are pictured as living in isolation, away from the families and children. They could symbolise the condition of the widows of the time, who were seen as superfluous to mainstream society – and generally unwanted.

Thakurmar Jhuli, thus, is a collection of some very important codes of social manners and behaviour which are based on gender stereotypes. Kings are presented as weak and ineffectual – it is always up to the young and energetic princes to bring in change in the kingdoms. The princes who emerge victorious are rich in external appearances, as well as values. Their reward is to be married to the most beautiful princess of the kingdom. The princesses, in turn, passively accept the marriage without question. Even Princess Kalabati, who is married to the monkey-prince Buddhu, accepts the marriage without question (despite her initial resistance). Princesses, queens and girls in the stories are expected to excel in household duties, traditionally the domain of women, and childbirth is their only guarantee of security in their husbands' homes. The world of women in these households is often marred by female jealousy, and the only response to the acts of jealousy is patience, which ultimately secures victory, and is suitably rewarded. We can clearly see how these tales uphold the patriarchal structure of values that were prevalent in the late nineteenth, and early twentieth, centuries – and the plots of many of these tales are resolved simply by the restoration of the moral code: the good are rewarded, and the evil are punished.

Notes

¹Sutapa Basu. 'Decoding Literary Heritage Icons'. *Café Dissensus Everyday*. 13th June, 2022. Stable URL: <https://cafedissensuseveryday.com/2022/06/13/decoding-literary-heritage-icons/>. Accessed on 20 June 2023.

²Dipanwita Mukhopadhyay Ghosh. *দক্ষিণা বাতাসে পাল তুলে দিল শুকপঙ্খী নৌকা* (The *Shukpankhi* Boat has lifted its Sails to the Southerly Winds). *AnandabazarPatrika*. 26 December 2019. Stable URL: <https://www.anandabazar.com/patrika/a-short-write-up-on-bengali-fairy-tale-writer-dakshinaranjan-mitra-majumder-1.1062921>. Accessed on 19 June 2023.

³Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar. *ThakurmarJhuli*, 7th Edition. Mitra and Ghosh Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1977. p. 10.

⁴Translation of the story titles of this cluster have been taken from the Index, *Grandmother's Bag of Tales*, a translation of *Thakurmar Jhuli* by Gouri Basu, Kolkata (Eastern Zonal Cultural Centre, 2007).

Works Cited

Basu, Gouri, translator. *Grandmother's Bag of Tales*. Eastern Zonal Cultural Centre, 2007.

Basu, Sutapa. "Decoding Literary Heritage Icons." *Café Dissensus Everyday*, 13 June 2022, <https://cafedissensuseveryday.com/2022/06/13/decoding-literary-heritage-icons/>. Accessed 20 June 2023.

Ghosh, Dipanwita Mukhopadhyay. "দক্ষিণা বাতাসে পাল তুলে দিল শুকপঙ্খী নৌকা." *anandabazar.com*, Anandabazar Patrika, 25 Oct. 2019, www.anandabazar.com/patrika/a-short-write-up-on-bengali-fairy-tale-writer-dakshinaranjan-mitra-majumder-1. Accessed 19 June 2023.

Mitra Majumdar, Dakshinaranjan. *Thakurmar Jhuli*. 7th ed., Mitra and Ghosh Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1977.