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Animism and the Himalayan Folktales: Reading *The Legend of Himal and Nagrai: Greatest Kashmiri Folktales*

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Abstract

The Legend of Himal and Nagrai: Greatest Kashmiri Folktales (2019) is an interesting collection of Kashmiri oral stories/folktales that seek to document the Kashmiris' indigenous knowledge system and culture. These folktales, retold and collected by Onaiza Drabu, a famous Kashmiri anthropologist, contain stories about indigenous Kashmiris interacting with animals, plants, rivers, and soil. In most of these narratives, human stories intertwine with tales narrated by animals and other elements of nature to form a knowledge system that foregrounds a worldview combining the conscience of humans and animals. For instance, in the story "Himal Nagrai", the king of serpents, Nagrai falls in love with a king's daughter, Himal and this relationship highlights the numerous sacrifices that both Nagrai and Himal make to develop an eternal bonding of love. In another story, "Katji Batchi te Ael Byol" a swallow helps an old and poor man to become rich because this old man once had saved the bird from dying.

While critically reading these folktales from the perspective of animism, this paper shall use Robin Wall Kimmerer's and David Abram's insights to argue that these folk narratives contain a new ecological philosophy that emphasises, according to Abram, an "awareness of more-than-human world" (*The Spell of the Sensuous* 24). This philosophy generates a new sort of sensibility incorporating the "keen intelligence of animals …whose lives and cultures" associate with humans (*The Spell of the Sensuous* 24). Kimmerer's animistic philosophy also directs the attention of humans to the "plants" that "can tell us her story" (*Braiding Sweetgrass* Kindle Edition 10).

Keywords: animism, indigenous knowledge, animals, folktales

Onaiza Drabu's book, *The Legend of Himal and Nagrai: Greatest Kashmiri Folktales* (2019) is an interesting anthology of oral stories/folktales that records the Kashmiri indigenous community's way of life and knowledge system. These stories, as Drabu explains in the introduction of this anthology, capture the

imaginative mindscape of the Kashmiris (Kindle Page 8 of 173), representing "the way Kashmiris speak, and familiar to a native of the language" (Kindle Page 8 of 173). The mythical figures and characters of these folktales, through their narrations of different stories and experiences, define the Kashmiri worldview, reflecting a complex network of connections between humans, natural elements, animals, and legendary figures. Drabu's anthology is divided into four sections: "Tales from Pataal", "Tales from the Janawar", "Tales from Zameen", and "Tales from Bol Chal". In each of these sections, the stories present a variety of "perspectives" (Drabu Kindle Page 12 of 173) on Kashmiri indigenous culture, history, and religious rituals. One distinct feature of these folktales is the foregrounding of a community that consists of humans, animals, trees, natural elements, and mythical figures. Representation of the Kashmiri indigenous community in these folktales is not limited to the presentation of human experiences. In fact, tales narrating the experiences of animals, trees, hills, rivers, snakes, and imaginative mythical characters are also prominently presented. The human community, as represented in these tales, forms a close bonding with natural elements and animals to configure a new philosophical approach to life. A close reading of these folktales reveals that the philosophy of animism is deeply embedded in the cultural psychology of the Kashmiri indigenous community. This article seeks to critically interpret some of these folktales through the ecological philosophy of animism. In doing so, this article investigates the relevance of the philosophy of animism to a comprehensive understanding of the Kashmiri indigenous community's ideological outlook.

Animism and Its Significance in the Context of Drabu's folktales

David Abram, one of the key figures in the critical discourse of animism, discusses the idea of his "newfound awareness of a more-than-human world" (24) in his seminal critical text, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (1997). During one of his visits to North America, Abram while perceiving the influence of "other animals" on him, describes the "keen intelligence of other animals" and how the "lives and cultures" of these animals "interpenetrate our own" (24). This subtle sense of attachment to the surrounding animals and nature is at the core of the philosophy of animism. Abram also describes his attempt of talking to squirrels and "gazing … at a heron fishing in a nearby estuary" (24). Such acts of talking to animals and gazing at a bird are important from the perspective of defining human self. Abram realises that his attempts at establishing a connection with animals and birds made him "lose" his "sense" of identity (24) because of a new perception of self-imagining. While exploring this phenomenon in the later section of his book, Abram asserts that his body is an extension of the "vast breathing being" that wraps "all within a common flesh" (163). Abram's perception emphasises the idea of being one with nature, developing a self that is intimately connected to the natural surrounding. The idea of "a common flesh" suggests the act of forming an affective bonding with nature. In a similar vein, Robin Wall Kimmerer (one of the important critics

in the field of new animism), discusses the need for understanding the language of the earth to perceive the influence of nature on our identities. In his book, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plant* (2020), Kimmerer urges humans to listen to the "stories" narrated by the "land", which will lead to the healing of "our relationship with land" (Kindle Page 9 of 390). Kimmerer further appeals to humans to build a connection with plants so that we can listen to stories narrated by the plants, "The plants can tell us her story" (Kindle Page 10 of 390). Abram's and Kimmerer's critical observations provide significant insights that can be used to study the representation of Kashmiri indigenous community in Drabu's folktales. Kashmiri folk narratives bear testimony to the indigenous community's intimate bonding with plants, animals, and elements of nature. Kashmiri indigenous people engage in an interaction with non-human entities to develop a mode of existence that bears a unique vocabulary of animism. An analysis of some of the folktales shall explicate this phenomenon.

In the story of "Himal Nagrai", Himal is the daughter of King Balaveer and Nagrai is a snake (*naag*). Nagrai has the capability of transforming his body from a man into a snake and vice versa. After marrying Himal, Nagrai tells his wife about his real identity and also warns her about the approaches of the snake women who may come from the *paatal*[1] to corrupt Himal's mind. The snake women use tricks to detach Nagrai from Himal and on one occasion Nagrai while entering a spring is dragged by these snake women to put him in *paatal*. In the absence of Nagrai, Himal is depressed and she starts searching for him everywhere. Despite losing all her hope of meeting Nagrai, on one occasion she strangely discovers her husband near a spring and this meeting leads to the transformation of Himal's identity from a woman into a pebble. Transformation of Himal's identity enables Nagrai to carry his wife in his pocket (she is now a pebble) and they start living in *paatal*. Himal's experience of living in the underworld is challenging as the snake women torture her. When she unknowingly feeds hot milk to the baby snakes, the snakes die and this makes the snake women furious, leading to Himal's death because of the snake bite. Himal's body is brought to earth after death and Nagrai keeps a close watch on the corpse. Not knowing that a sage has granted Himal new life, Nagrai assumes the identity of a snake to embrace his wife. At this moment, a passerby notices a snake coiled around the body of a woman and kills the snake. Nagrai's death is followed by an expression of Himal's intense sense of grief and in order to be united with her husband Himal jumps into fire and dies: "In her grief, as she cremated Nagrai's serpent body, she jumped into the fire with it" (Drabu Kindle Page 36 of 173). This folk narrative evidently explains the intimate relationship between a human and a snake. Himal's identity is an extension of Nagrai's entity and vice versa. Expressions of human emotions are not limited to the human world as Nagrai too feels a strong urge to remain united to Himal. When Himal is transformed into a pebble, Nagrai starts loving the pebble which contains Himal's body. Thus, there are numerous references to the association of the human and the non-human

world in the legend of Himal and Nagrai, leading to the emergence of a new philosophy of existence based on mutual cooperation between a human and a snake. Himal's participation in the world of snakes foregrounds her desire to adopt a mode of living that seeks to orient a vocabulary of animism. She learns to cope with the lives of the snakes and takes care of Nagrai's household in *paatal*. This aspect is significant from Kimmerer's point of view because he elaborates on the necessity of learning the language of a place. A place, in his sense, has its linguistic rhythm, tone, and voice. This voice is different from the human language. Hence, according to Kimmerer, to become a "*native to a place*" involves a process of learning "*to speak its language*" (Kindle Page 48 of 390). While narrating his experience of associating with a place, Kimmerer discusses his efforts to "listen" to the "voice" of the "wind" in "pine needles", hearing the flow of "water trickling over rock", listening to "beechnut falling", "nuthatch tapping" and such other voices that are beyond human comprehension (Kindle Page 48 of 390). To grasp the language of a place, developing an intimacy with the land and its surrounding elements is mandatory. Kimmerer believes that learning the linguistic rhythm of a place requires a complete knowledge of "an intimate vocabulary" where each little voice of nature can be defined and understood (Kindle Page 48 of 390). The story of Himal and Nagrai foregrounds Himal's deep bonding with the land of snakes (*paatal*). She perceives the attitudes of snake women and also understands their temperament and their beliefs. During her stay at *paatal*, she is "kind and tender" though her presence makes the snake women jealous (Drabu Kindle Page 35 of 173). She laments before the spring water while searching for her husband and also discovers Nagrai coming out of the spring water. In her expression of emotions, she communicates with the elements of nature and animals which are suggestive of her efforts to forge a good relationship with the non-human world. Her ability to talk to the snakes, and communicate with the elements of nature are indicative of her awareness of the "voice" of a place. Her communion with Nagrai is suggestive of adopting "a common flesh" that dissolves the distinction between human and animal entities. The story titled, "Zinnimozour" presents interesting encounters between humans and animals. King Solomon, a character in this narrative, possesses the ability to talk to the "birds of the sky" and the "animals of the sea" (Drabu Kindle Page 77 of 173). As King Solomon is arrogant, a fish comes out of the river water and takes away his ring. This ring is precious because it offered King Solomon the "power to command the *jinns*" and to talk to "animals" (Drabu Kindle Page 77 of 173). After being dispossessed of this magical ring, King Solomon suffers, losing the power to rule his kingdom he becomes poor and wanders aimlessly from one town to another. When he ultimately gets back this ring, his connection with the "beautiful birds" (Drabu Kindle Page 78 of 173) and animals is re-established, and he regains his stature as a king. This folk narrative also portrays the character of a woodcutter, who listens to the voice of a bird and is rewarded for not killing it. In the case of King Solomon, the ring is indicative of his well-being as a king. When he displays his

arrogant human self, the power to communicate with birds and animals is lost. He mourns for the loss of this power, repents the injustice done to others, and realises the need for assuming a self that looks beyond human self-interest. King Solomon regains his earlier power after passing through a phase of penitence that teaches him the value of developing an intimate bonding with animals. King Solomon and the woodcutter have to depend on the good wishes of a fish and a bird respectively to become successful. Both of them become aware of the notion of a "common flesh" and the need for listening to the voices of animals and birds. The folk story titled "Katji Batchi te Ael Byol" emphasises the significance of building an intimate network of beings. Birds of various breeds, bees, and humans associate themselves in an environment of mutual trust and cooperation. At the beginning of the story, a decrepit man is happy to see "a small nest of swallows" (Drabu Kindle Page 87 of 173) in the ceiling of his house, but this happiness is short-lived because he finds that a small swallow has broken its leg. This man takes proper care of the bird and feeds it to heal the wound. Impressed by the attitude of the old man, the mother swallow decides to build a friendly relationship with him. In this context, the mother swallow recalls her endeavour to save a baby phoebe which ultimately led to a formation of friendship with the mother phoebe. The phoebe similarly remembers her efforts to protect small flycatchers from the trappers which made it possible for the phoebe to become a close friend of the mother flycatcher. Through a series of such narratives of friendship the old man, the swallow, the phoebe, the flycatcher, and the hoopoe form an intimate relationship. The mother swallow gets help from the other birds to procure precious pumpkin seeds for gifting the old man. These pumpkin seeds are planted in the garden of the old man and when the pumpkin grows heavy the old man cuts it to find pearls inside it. Thus, this tale shows the ability of the old man to perceive the pain of the baby swallow. In the absence of the mother swallow, the old man notices the suffering of the bird, finding that the bird is unconscious, he opens the "bird's tiny beak" and spits into its mouth (Drabu Kindle Page 87 of 173) to restore the swallow's consciousness. Later, when the swallow brings the pumpkin seeds for planting in the old man's garden, the old man smiles to find the baby swallow "a grown bird" dropping "the seed into the lap of his *pheran*[2]" (Drabu Kindle Page 90 of 173). The old man's intimate bonding with the swallow reflects his desire to listen to the voice of the bird, understanding its impulses and feelings. The swallow and the old man are inseparable entities linked to a "common flesh" and they speak a language that is evocative of the vocabulary of animism.

In the tale titled, "Manut te Panzow", the emotive bonding between humans and nature is asserted. Manut perceives the suffering of the "tall poplar trees" that are shivering and "quivering because of cold" (Drabu Kindle Page 94 of 173). Unable to bear the distress experienced by the trees, Manut wraps a large cloth around the trees. This act is followed by another event in which Manut realising the agony of a piece of land that is "dry and eroding" feeds it with oil (Drabu Kindle Page 94 of 173). During his visit to a nearby spring, when Manut tastes

the water of the spring he finds it "dull and bitter" (Drabu Kindle Page 94 of 173), which urges him to pour sugar into the water. Manut's acts explicitly display the philosophy of animism, reflecting his urge to connect to the agony of nature, his feeling for and communication with the natural entities are genuine pieces of evidence of learning the language of a place. Kimmerer discusses the possibility of creating a "grammar of animacy" that can lead "to whole new ways of living in the world" (Kindle Page 57 of 390). This new mode of living shall provide a democratic space to all the species of the earth, avoiding the idea of "tyranny" this sort of living shall render "moral responsibility to water and wolves" and it shall be governed by a "legal system" that "recognizes" the existence of "other species" (Kimmerer Kindle Page 57 & 58 of 390). Manut's attitude to nature substantiates the formation of such a mode of living in the world. The "grammar of animacy" is deeply embedded in the intimate relationship between Manut and the natural entities. In a similar expression of this notion of living, the folk story titled, "The Goat and Her Children" presents the perspective of a goat who considers the old master and his house as its home. After being in exile for a long period of time, the goat realises that its real home is not the green and open meadows but the village where its old master lives. While explaining the idea of home to its children, the goat asserts that its home is not "these fields" that are "lovely and free" but a place where they all shall "find peace" (Drabu Kindle Page 105 of 173). When the goat arrives at the village with its children, the inhabitants of the village "welcome her" and treat the children with care and affection. Residents of the village have been eagerly waiting for the arrival of the goat and since her return to the village, the members of the community start narrating the tale of a "prodigal goat who returned home" (Drabu Kindle Page 106 of 173). This affective bonding between a goat and the villagers is expressive of the human endeavour to create spaces that are democratic in spirit including "whole new ways of living in the world". The notion of home in the context of this story captures the essence of "grammar of animacy" as humans learn to talk to a goat, listening to its story and narrating it. Reference to an "intimate vocabulary" can be located in the folk narrative titled, "Sen Kisser" in which a sage feels pity for a crow, advising it to plant seeds of trees that shall help it to protect itself from the enemies. Intimate bonding between humans and other species is therefore an important feature of these folktales. A critical analysis of this bonding demands a deep study of the affective dimension of the "grammar of animacy".

Affect and the Philosophy of Animism: A New Critical Approach to Kashmiri Folktales

In the discussion of the Kashmiri folktales there are ample references to the affect and its impact on the relationship between humans and other species. This affect works as an adhesive enabling humans to communicate with the elements of nature. Emotions of pity, sympathy, fear, pain and suffering play a pivotal role in shaping the aesthetic of animism in these folk narratives. Neil Campbell's essay,

"A New Gentleness: Affective Ficto-Regionality" sheds light on the significance of affect in contemporary ecological studies, which now has become relevant to the conceptualisation of space and reconfiguration of human identity. Campbell proposes to discuss his concept of "affective critical regionality" from the point of view of "seeing the local" space as a site of a complex network of interactions between "the social, mental and environmental spheres" (Kindle Page 72 of 343). In the process of describing his concept, Campbell refers to the notion of "an assemblage" (Kindle Page 74 of 343), which, according to him, is defined by Stewart[3] as "landscapes and bodies of all kind" that also "strikes the senses" (qtd. in Kindle Page 74 of 343). Thus, the notion of "regionality" includes an affective linkage of the human, the natural elements, and the place of habitation. In Campbell's view, the concept of "affective critical regionality" is "always ecological" because it restores and "activates", "holds onto and lets go, contains and edges; it *worlds*" (Kindle Page 75 of 343). Campbell mentions Heidegger's notion of "worlding" (qtd. in Kindle Page 75 of 343) to elucidate the relevance of this notion to comprehend the concept of "an assemblage". In fact, Heidegger's notion of "dwelling" contains the essence of "an assemblage". Kate Rigby in her article, "Earth, World, Text: On the (Im) possibility of Ecopoiesis" elaborates on Heidegger's notion of "dwelling" which, according to Heidegger, contains a "fourfold" (qtd. in Rigby 430) dimension. Rigby explains that the "fourfold" consists of the "earth" and its "topography" including the "biotic community"; the "sky" and its seasonal changes; the "divinities" and the "humans" (Rigby 430). Rigby further observes that Heidegger's notion of dwelling in a place involves an act of "interweaving" of the four different aspects of dwelling (Rigby 430). Thus, associating with natural entities and shaping one's own identity based on such an association is essential to the perception of dwelling. The notion of dwelling captures the essence of "attuning oneself" to the elements of nature, to other species, and to a "natural environment" (Rigby 430 & 431). This sort of attunement plays a considerable role in defining human ontology, as the human in such a condition is not separated from the other species but is psychologically connected to the natural entities. Heidegger's notion of "dwelling" is embedded in the philosophy of animism. Abrams's concepts of the "common flesh" and the "vast breathing being" are an extension of the notion of "dwelling", as humans feel the emotions and spirit of the other species in their effort to attune to the physical environment. Kimmerer's idea of the "grammar of animacy" contains the Heideggerian notion of "dwelling" too, since knowing the river, grass, and animals requires a refashioning of the human sense of self to understand how nature communicates to us. Attuning to the environment is integral to the production of Kimmerer's "intimate vocabulary" which seeks to develop a new discourse of interacting with nature. Hence, the philosophy of animism contains the idea of forming an affective bonding with natural elements. This bonding transforms the human body into an "assemblage" (Campbell's concept), a meeting point of all the things, species, and elements of nature. Drabu's folktales are distinctly evocative of the ideas of "assemblage" and "dwelling". Himal's

body is an "assemblage" of stone, water, snakes and fire. Her notion of "dwelling" is indicative of her deep association with land, sky, gods and humans. She reconfigures her identity to include different elements of nature in her philosophy of life and Nagrai (the snake) is an integral part of her existence. After Himal and Nagrai die, the ashes of their bodies are thrown in spring water which is to date known as the spring of Himal and Nagrai. Manut's notion of "dwelling" includes trees, land and water. His acts of wrapping a cloth around trees, pouring oil on land, and mixing sugar in water are suggestive of his desire to include the natural elements in configuring his self. His body too is an "assemblage" of different natural entities. The goat in the above-mentioned story is an interesting character as she, like the humans, defines her notion of "dwelling" which motivates her to attune to the human world. This folktale instead of foregrounding the perspective of humans draws attention to the animals that are keen to orient a sense of identity based on mutual cooperation and affective bonding between animals and humans. The village where the goat returns and addresses as her home is representative of Campbell's concept of "affective critical regionality". This specific region (village) evokes a notion of living based on an emotive bonding between all the species and natural entities. In the story of the old man and the swallow, there is a reference to the swallow's attempt to communicate with the old man who has been kind enough to save the bird from dying. The presence of the nest of swallows inside the house of the old man and the communication that takes place between the two different species foreground the Heideggerian notion of "dwelling" where the interweaving of the four distinct aspects of "dwelling" occur. Thus, the Kashmiri folktales in Drabu's anthology represent an ecologically conscious world where mythical characters and legends redefine the philosophy of human life.

Conclusion

Drabu's collection of folk narratives, as this critical study reveals, are interesting sites for comprehending the intersection of affect, animism and philosophy of "dwelling". These tales are relevant to the contemporary scenario because technology has created a rift between humans and nature. Technology has entered the human world to intervene in the process of connecting with the natural environment. Humans now are mentally more attached to technological gadgets than nature. This aspect is noted by Rigby in the following observation in which she asserts that "the more technologically enframed our world becomes, the more completely we block the way to what Heideggerian, in a Rilkean turn of phrase, terms "the Open"" (431). Rigby states that being in "the Open" "means something like all that is undelimited" (431). In order to counter the effects of technological gadgets on our existence, Rigby invokes the poets to ""sings up" the dwelling place, weaving the fourfold into the poetic word" (432). Rigby claims to borrow the term "sing up" from "Australian aboriginal cultures" (432). Drabu's folktales are indeed songs of different dwelling places located in the Himalayas that weave the Heideggerian notion of the "fourfold" into the stories

that contain the essence of "the Open." This notion of "the Open" bears a special significance if this entire discussion is considered from the perspective of the Anthropocene. Rigby's and Heidegger's insistence on dwelling in "the Open" encapsulates a philosophy of being that does not seek to prioritise the distinctions between various animal and natural species, the emphasis is actually on cohabitation and mutual harmony. This sort of dwelling is indeed encouraged in the discourses on Anthropocene. Clive Hamilton, Christophe Bonneuil and Francois Gemenne in their essay, "Thinking the Anthropocene" explain the contemporary environmental scenario and state that the "advent of the Anthropocene" has challenged "established boundaries between nature and culture, between climate and politics, between natural sciences and the social sciences and humanities" (Kindle Page 5 of 188). The Anthropocene views the global ecological crisis from an earth-centric approach which includes all the elements of the earth, dislodging the earlier anthropocentric approach. Anthropocene, according to Hamilton, Bonneuil and Gemenne, encourages a new way of looking at nature and animal species, influencing "modern humanities and social sciences" to redefine "social, cultural and political orders" (Kindle Page 4 of 188). Hence, the human social order, as per the Anthropocene is no longer about humans but consists of all the species of the earth. Drabu's folk narratives foreground a society that emphasises the need for creating a new social space where cooperation between animal and natural species is a fundamental aspect. Therefore, these folktales contain resonances of the Heideggerian concept of "the Open" and the notion of the Anthropocene.

Notes

[1]*Paatal* means the underground world. In mythical narratives, the inhabitants of *Paatal* are considered to be inferior to humans who live on the earth.

[2]*Pheran* is a traditional Kashmiri dress. It is a loose garment worn by both men and women on the upper part of the body.

[3] There are numerous references to Stewart's essay "Regionality" in Campbell's article.

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