

Thakuma'r Jhuli: Identifying Bengali Folktales in the Context of Structuralism and National Identity

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Abstract

Folktales are often powerful tools of the construction of national consciousness and simultaneously hold potential for the change and alteration of nationalism through construction of a pseudo-national identity. Hence, our long colonial past suppressed our powerful folktales, the allegories that hid potentials of national changes. This article proposes to look at Bengali folktales with a perspective of representation of national values: identifying the recurrent tropes used to highlight the national requisites, the conditions that were deemed to be necessary to recognise the identity of a nation. I have tried to use Vladimir Propp's method of Functions and Spheres (Propp, Vladimir; Morphology of the Folktales, 1958) in order to recognise the repeating bromides that take forward the folktales not just as bourgeoisie appropriation but as a moving entity. This paper attempts to analyse Daksinaranjan Mitra Mazumdar's *Thakuma'r Jhuli: Banglar Rupkatha* (1907) and Lal Behari Day's *Folktales of Bengal* (1883), trying to locate the structuralist pattern to enforce nationhood.

Keywords: Folktales, Structuralism, Post-Colonial, Oral Culture, *Thakuma'r Jhuli*.

The paper is started by recalling a famous rhyme associated with Bengali folktales:

Thus my story endeth,

The Natiya-thorn withereth.

"Why, O Natiya-thorn, dost wither?"

" Why does the cow on me browse?"

" Why, O cow, dost thou browse?"

" Why does thy neat-herd not tend me?"

"Why, O neat-herd, dost not tend the cow?"

"Why does thy daughter-in-law not give me rice?"

" Why, O daughter-in-law, dost not give rice?"

"Why does my child cry?"

"Why, O child, dost thou cry?"

"Why does the ant bite me?"

" Why, O ant, dost thou bite?"

Koot! Koot! Koot!

(Mimicking the ant's pointless act of biting)

----- (translated by Lal Behari Day)

We can make a rough guess from this apparent nonsensical poem about the vast space of the stories, covering plants, animals and eventually filtrating to the child who is being tortured by an ant. The purpose of the folktales thus becomes almost healing, to calm the tensed child; and also, emphasise on a chain of actions have been set forth by a mere ant. The protagonists in our folktales are, similarly, not Herculean characters, but characters of meagre power or origin.

The Context of Folktales:

India is the meeting place of diverse cultures. Our folktales, predominantly oral, therefore, require a great commitment to memory and travel through a vast geographical area, and these two factors exist with years of permutation and combination, resulting in conjugation or repression of individual tales. The collections that we can avail today, thus, contain the versions of tales that:

1. Have survived the changing times, remaining the fairly popular version.
2. The editor preferred or had access to.

I will use the example of the two folktales of same plotlines but different names that I have found in two different collections. In Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar's *Thakuma'r Jhuli*, the plotline of *Patalakanya Manimala* goes like this: The prince and the minister's son acquire the Naagmani (stone on snake's head) which assists them in obtaining Manimala, the princess. The princess is abducted by a local king and the prince is lulled to sleep by poisonous snakes, when his friend saves the princess by dressing as a mad man and in the process, earns a bride, the local king's daughter. Now both the pairs escape and live happily in their previous kingdom. In Lalbehari Day's *Folktales of Bengal*, the synopsis of story titled "Fakirchand" is the same, only, the minister's son doesn't marry the other princess, he goes on to save the prince's life three times from terrible ordeal, but he cannot justify his actions as it would turn him into a statue. The prince however, in a frenzy of anger, mistrusts his friend's intentions and forces him to recount for his acts, thus turning him into a statue (plot extension). Similarly, we find folktales with strands of similarity with folktales beyond Indian context. For example, the story of *Ghumonto Puri* is similar to the popular tale of "The Sleeping Beauty", where a Rakshasa replaces the witch in putting the princess and her

entire kingdom to sleep, until a prince arrives and breaks the curse. The story of *Ded-angle* is the quest of Thumbelina-like character that is diminutive. Mythical stories might seem absurd but are certainly non-arbitrary; they seem to reappear in regional folktales, separated by physical distance. Therefore, we cannot call them entirely unique to a place, as the recurrent thought-process keeps iterating in currently unconnected places. This strongly hints at some kind of “order in this apparent disorder” (Levi-Strauss). We are therefore the origin of our folktales; we have lived our folktales unbeknownst to us.

The Pattern Of Thakuma'r Jhuli And Similar Folktales:

While analysing the most prominent Bengali folktales, some recurrent tropes are spotted. I will mention their order, but we must remember all the tales do not incorporate all of these plot lines in one story, but a certain combination of which formulates any number of folktales in the Bengali context. Two seemingly similar acts might have different significances according to their order of appearance in the tale, for example, affluence in the beginning of the tale shall have no similarity to affluence at the end of the tale even if the tale cyclically reaches its initial position of rest and normalcy after a struggle against the threats to the same.

A Saussurean structuralist model might be used for explaining folktales using his division of language into *langue* and *parole*. In the context of Bengali folktales, the folktales' premise forms the *langue* and the individual mythical plotlines form the *parole*. The *paroles* operate as individual tales by themselves which are woven into stories, used and reused in other stories as well. They act according to the situation, there is a chance of prediction and selection, as each *parole* gives space to more *paroles*, and the *paroles*' selections make folktales, which, again, are not stand-alone pieces but have variations and disintegrations at various levels.

I have categorized folktales as –

Didactic: where there is a choice between moral and immoral actions and the child lives with the trials and tribulations of the hero and imbibes his virtuous victory.

Non-didactic: where there is no moral war, and the protagonist must utilize cunning and treachery in order to succeed in life, the role of this story is to present to the child an unbending will which does not retreat at the face of an ordeal of a much higher order than him (or her) but utilises intelligence to discover a route to success, examples of these include “Sheyal Pundit”, where the cunning protagonist is a small, meek animal who wins against an adversary of bigger size and power.

Didactic tales shall be used in this article more widely, as they are more prominent in Thakuma'r Jhuli. We will try to organise these according to the conditions:

1) The story can begin with the following binaries:

A. A situation of excessive opulence

B. A situation of extreme poverty

The child is subconsciously introduced to the principle of madhyammarg or the Middle Path, abstinence from indulging in lavish pleasure, by unmasking inherent lacks or dangers within it; poverty is generally shown as lack of industriousness, pointing out that good things require to be found. This simple binary assists the child to grasp the situation well, since the child's mind is a structuralist mind, where the boundary lines are strict and non-fuzzy and clear domains of black and white exist. Therefore, highly exaggerated and polarised characters are more believable than grey characters of complexities, which we can expect the child to understand only after they have a firm sense of the domains (Bettelheim). This binary will then lead to two possibilities:

A. The excessive opulence will face threats due to:

2. External aggression.

3. Internal grief.

B. The situation of extreme poverty can have only two alterations in fate:

B.1) Lack of intelligence.

B.2) Strained economic condition.

We shall discuss this in details in the second half, let us first try to see troupe 1.A, "Excessive Opulence".

A. Excessive opulence will, naturally, bring with itself the absence of monetary limitations and is the ideal situation for the beginning of quest like tales (quasi-quest) where the reward is not financial or honorary gain (unlike knights), but spiritual salvation of the hero, either in terms of romantic gains or gain of experience and power. Thus, it is important for the child to be able to understand that the protagonist desires something superior to economic profit. This situation of excessive opulence will be contested, for the natural aim of continuation of the story, by:

2. External Aggression: Generally, in the form of the mythological demons, Rakshasa. Now, we posit in front of a serious and obvious question, who is the Rakshasa? When asked to describe, Bengali children will present a number of characteristics such as, dark, tall, fearsome, unknown, insane, bloodthirsty. Thus, what we immediately see is a sense of detachment from familiarity and a sense of the foreign being associated with the Rakshasa. This is a process of creating the binary between the Self and the Other, where the Self is

determined by the cumulative of what the Other is not; the difference in habits, customs, politics, laws, lands (Hegel). We can see the act of feasting on humans (or poultry/cattle) as just metaphor for mass destruction. Are the Rakshasas social outcasts or just the opposite? In the story, the Rakshasa clan always overpowers and subdues the humans, for a while. This incurs an interesting speculation: The Rakshasa clan appears as the victorious clan which is successful in overtaking a tribe, only to be forever etched in their memories as the bloodthirsty Other (destroyer). Thus, the entire narrative essentially becomes the victim's narrative; and the folktales end up becoming a narrative parallel to the popular history written by the victors, providing the victim's view point on the external, aggressive victor and thus, every folktale becomes not just a cautionary tale, but also a fabrication and extension of history, where the victims hide themselves in phantasmatic narrative of the victory of the (victim) indigenous clan which real history does not permit. This aggressive demon type cast will again have variations, such as:

C. The Rakshasa woman: This character marries the king and builds familial relationship with him and conceives his child only to one day start devouring the cattle and humans and destroying or trying to destroy the human prince (from the other queen). The suddenness of her actions seems to establish a belief that:

- a. The Rakshasa woman wanted to conceive a semi-human child for unknown reasons (instead of ravaging immediately upon her arrival).
- b. The Rakshasa woman is eager to attack in secrecy, first earning king's trust and then destroying his kingdom (which will allude to the historical context of how the British came as merchants and left as rulers).

The Rakshasa woman is an interesting postcolonial character to look at. This is a woman who is the other, but is desired or incorporated in the original clan. We can recognise the fetish for the exotic Other, the colonial dilemma, the exoticization of the colonizer by the colonised or vice versa. Thus, marrying the Rakshasa woman, or woman of the victorious clan, gives the colonised a social position of controlling the woman, who in turn represents her entire clan, the mastery over one woman (representative of the victorious clan) is not just a sexual, but a primal gratification. This situation is what Fanon describes as the desire of the Black Man for the White Woman, where the dynamics of power suddenly comes to the Black Man through sexually dominating the White Woman (Fanon, 1967). The marriage of a central character to a Rakshasa woman is of pivotal significance as this woman is seen to bring immense destruction, often acting as the carrier of this destruction. This almost acts as a cautionary tale against not only fraternising the Other, but also another significant fact that often, danger is brought upon oneself by one's own thoughtless actions, we invite our danger through unjustified desire (although this desire is supported by the fact

that the Rakshasa woman is capable of converting herself into an attractive maiden who latches onto the heart of the target spouse, this beauty is shape-shifting, because originally every Rakshasa must look hideous by default which sets them apart from the tribe, and sets forth the interrogation of the root of attraction, otherwise impossible, towards a humanoid creature). In the story, *Sonar Kati Rupa Kati*, the Rakshasa woman takes the form of a beautiful maiden crying in the forest whom the king (always nameless) marries as the queen, and the queen, (Rakshasi) causes havoc in the kingdom.

D. The Rakshasa-human child: The child of the Rakshasa woman and mortal man (generally the king, father of the protagonist), who is a cross-species altogether (which again is curious, unless the Rakshasas are actually humans from other tribes) and the redeemed character. He is the representation of miscegenation or hybridization, which is a common occurrence in borderlands. In postcolonial studies, “The region which this aggressive diasporic movement of European settlers reached at any point became defined as the frontier. The settled area adjacent to this was also known sometimes as the borderlands.” (Ashcroft, Bill) The story unfolds in the borderland marked by sexual and interpersonal relationships between two different clans, and the Rakshasa child, the half-brother to the mortal protagonist, is the living embodiment of a carnivalesque-like situation, as an individual born as the result of suspension of normal moral and social laws, he is a subplot, helper and hero-surrogate and has capabilities for tremendous power and possibilities. What do we therefore call this individual who exists on the threshold of duality, a potential grey character, with both black and white domains? Is he what Fanon calls the native elite, the person whose origin is associated with one clan but his spirit lies with another? He cannot receive acceptance in either of the clan, as his original clan will see him as blood traitor and his adoptive clan will see him as the inferior. In *Lalkamal aar Neelkamal*, Neelkamal is the hybrid prince, whose sole purpose is to defend his brother from the other Rakshasas (who do not dare to act against him). However, Neelkamal always retains the step of a morally lower pedestal than Lalkamal and their respective metals are iron and gold, as iron symbolises faithful, unbending strength but never superiority, and gold was, needless to say, the royal metal.

3. Internal grief: Internal grief uncovers the basic principle of lack to the child. The child is shown that even under circumstances of perfect opulence, there is a deep-seated desire, which causes grief; and hence, no mortal is free from grief but they can only strive to solve them (and move on to the next problem). Internal grief can be categorised into two types of crisis:

E. Lack of male heir: The folktales, sometimes unjustifiably brave, deals with the topic hushed down by patriarchy: male impotency. Often it is the king who is unable to produce a child in spite of possessing several queens. The need for a male heir is the sole driving force

of some stories; like *Buddhu Bhutum*, where the king is withdrawn in grief as his subjects label him as “aantkure” or the Bengali colloquial for impotent or childless, and his seven queens share his grief as well.

F. Male heir is present and physically fit: This will again seem like a situation without any apparent problem but will soon be followed such occurrences as are common with 3.E (Lack of male heir) as well:

4. A rivalry between the queens of the polygamous king. Most folktales conclude, with the exception of one (Day, Lalbehari, “The Boy Whom Seven Mothers Suckled”, *Folktales of Bengal*), with the king being left with only one queen (the protagonist’s mother survives as opposed to the stepmothers). Is it therefore a criticism of polygamy? Are our folktales trying to show us the natural human instinct of complete mate rights on one’s spouse and the inevitable and unaddressed rivalries that have existed in the harems of our kings? Although retrospective, every Bengali is aware of the *Suyorani* and *Duyorani* (polygamy), or the elder queen and the younger queen, of whom the younger is generally protagonist’s mother. It is quite likely that these binaries are actually one whole character split in halves: The mother who is the care giver, the nourisher and nurturer and the mother who is careless and angry and hurtful. Therefore, these two spheres actually make one complete human being, the mother figure. A variation of this is the elder sisters of the queen who frequent the palace, and take a position of jealousy against their fortunate sister, the wealthy queen.

5. The young Prince develops a desire to explore the world and visit places: This natural circumstance of exploration is a very celebrated theme in folktales, where the protagonist, either willingly or unwillingly, embarks on a journey to distant lands and visit terrible and beautiful places. This in turn causes grief and suffering for either the parents (who are left alone) or the prince himself who faces perils during the journey.

6. Let us elaborate 3.E (Lack of male heir). This situation will be followed by receiving particular eatables from deities or divinities, which assists the queens to conceive children, curing the impotency of the queens (and king).

7. However, this situation will be followed by a mishap that will lead to misuse of the herb either deliberately or non-deliberately by the elder queens to exclude the younger queen(s) from this conceiving ritual.

For example, in *Buddhu Bhutum*, the king gives the seven queens a magical root to divide amongst themselves and eat, however, the elder queens accidentally forget to share it with the younger queens, causing them to drink the water that has been used to wash the pestle and mortar.

8. The child birth, both normal and conceived by magical properties, will eventually have two natural outcomes:

G. Every queen conceives a child, although the *Suyorani*(s) would inadvertently hate the children of *Duyorani*(s). The children of the *Suyorani*(s) are either inactive (might or might not be reunited with the prince) or malignant (might try to harm the heroes and act as foil to them, by manifesting acutely disturbing psyche, they would high-light the heroes' benevolence or positivity.)

H. Only *Duyorani* has children and *Suyorani* (or evil sisters) would hate the children. In this situation(s), the next course of plotlines is common for both the above-mentioned cases:

9. The queen who plots against the other is a Rakshasa woman in disguise and will go on to produce Rakshasa children as mentioned in 2.C. The Rakshasa queen will ploy to eat her step son and destroy the kingdom. This leads to the next course of action similar to F.5.

OR

10. The children will have miserable lives (along with their mothers) because of the torment of the elder queens (and the king who has been influenced). Sometimes they will be disposed of by the elder queen or the evil sisters, (for example in *Sheet-Basanta*, the two princes, Sheet and Basanta were condemned to execution by the hangman who then took pity on them and let them remain alive). However, the surviving children will have different disorders or powers that are important for the continuation of the story:

I. Apparent non-human entities: Children will be born as animals or flowers and plants, the queen maybe transformed into an animal. This apparent animal-human binary perhaps arises from the emotional closeness that a child feels with an animal; more comparable to the child than an adult, is the animal, whose life is drawn by strict, easy boundaries. The animal prince is also married to a human princess, without any cross-species or bestiality problem. For the child, it is far easier to relate to an animal or plant, than a real prince.

Alternatively, although this animal-as-the-offspring-of-a-human-queen (in *Buddhu Bhutum*, where Buddhu, a monkey and Bhutum, an owl are both the magical offspring of the king and queens; and in *Saat Bhai Champa*, the princes reincarnated as magnolia flowers and the princess as a parul flower) could be non-human, but in the story *Arun, Barun, Kiranmala* when the king, who was previously told that his queen had produced a puppy, a kitten and a wooden doll instead of human babies, visited the house of the three siblings who were actually his children, the wise parrot enquired the possibility of humans to produce animal offspring and the king recognises his mistake. These royal children's fates are of two categories:

a. Wait till the king or queen (mother) comes to rescue them. This takes the reader directly to situation 22.

b. Similar to 10.J

J. Humans with special abilities: They are characterised by valour and courage and take course of the prince who wants to explore like the case of F.5.

11. What is the course of the prince in F.5?

The prince goes out willingly to explore (for example in the story *PatalkanyaManimala*) or is forced to go out by either the evil queens or the Rakshasa queen who is beginning her rampage.

12. The prince is accompanied by a hero surrogate or a companion who is again of three types:

a. The hybrid rakshasa brother from 2.D, who helps the hero in situation 16, in case the danger is related to Rakshasas (for example Neelkamal from the story *Lalkamal aar Neelkamal*).

b. Friends who simply accompany the prince (for example, in the story *Sonar Kati Rugar Kati*).

c. Friends who save from perils (for example in *PatalkanyaManimala*, the minister's son (prince's best friend) saves both the princess (from the unwanted marriage to another prince) and the prince (from the poisonous serpents)).

13. The prince (and company) travels through various trials and tribulations and manages to overcome every problem. These problems are often magical or mythical in origin. The test of the protagonist also lies in certain actions that require them to assist others (for example in *Sukhu aar Dukhu*, Sukhu, the affluent antagonist pays no heed to the pleas of the infirm, and achieves only a miserable end whereas Dukhu, who helps anyone who appeals to her, achieves a glorious life). This signifies the need for modesty, Bengali culture has its roots spread into the dictum of 'Atithi-deva-bhav' and a culturally transmitted and cherished respect towards the Elders of the clan.

14. The prince (and company) arrives at a strange land of mortal danger; the element of danger is specified for receiving the princess:

a. The princess is being held captive by Rakshasas who have kept her in a magic-induced comatose state by using the *jiyon kathi* and *moron kathi* (two magical metal sticks also called *sonar kathi* – gold stick and *rupar kathi*- silver stick), a touch of which makes the princess dwell in eternal sleep until the sticks are replaced again.

b. The princess desires something that has to be brought by anyone in order to be able to meet the conditions to marry her.

15. The prince acquires a magical agent or receives a sermon from mythical *Byangama* birds (characterised by wisdom and purity). Sometimes this magical agent will also act as a prince- surrogate and help the prince in difficulties (for example, in *The Story of a HIRAMAN*, HIRAMAN (parrot) rescues the princess and saves the king).

16. The prince defeats a secondary villain (this might also be the end of the story which then paces forward to situation 23) and acquires something precious (*Gajamoti, Naagmani* (precious stone found on heads of elephants and snakes respectively), the sack of magic etc.).

Or prince-surrogate defends the prince.

Alternatively, situations 15 and 16 are interchangeable.

17. The prince receives the princess and a kingdom.

18. The prince and princess decide to return home but face several odds in the way, of magical or non-magical sources (sometimes the princess is captivated).

19. The prince (and companion) embarks upon main quest, to defeat the original villain (only in case of rakshasa step mother).

20. Prince finds the hidden soul of the rakshasa. It is important to note that the Othering of the Rakshasa occurs on two levels:

* Physical- Enlarged limbs, excessive dentition, deformed bodies and unnatural heights.

* Intellectual- Since the Rakshasas have the capacity to physically overpower the human, the humans are characterised by higher intellect and possess superior spirituality over the rakshasa (who are fooled into accepting where they've hidden their life-soul). The prince therefore uses the information to destroy the life of the rakshasa clan. Here the prince (our indigenous protagonist) ceases to be the "Figure of Lack" and becomes the stock character of intellectual Bengali.

It is interesting to observe how the key to the fall of a mighty clan often resides in a very meagre thing, like a honey bee or a stick etc. This juxtaposition of power and fragility adds a dramatic angle to the folktales.

21. The prince and princess reach the prince's homeland.

22. The villainous queen or sisters are unmasked and are punished (by either burying them alive, or making them walk over iron thorns or killed in direct combat, in case of Rakshasi).

23. They enter a state of opulence and live happily ever after. It is important to realise that this does not make the child believe in the eternity of life, but just emphasises the fact that

strong bonds of affections make the finite life pass from the limitations of mortality to a life replete with positive affectionate relationships, essentially highlighting the emphasis on emotions than monetary gain.

24. Let us explore the possibilities of 1.B, the situation of extreme poverty which can have two plotlines:

a. Strained economic conditions

b. Lack of intelligence of the protagonist.

Both these situations will result in achieving similar kinds of pathways:

K. Meets the wrath of the king due to his stupidity (for example, in *Brahman aar Brahmani*, the king calls upon the stupid brahman to find the lost jewels of the princess or condemn him to the gallows).

L. Divinities or offspring try to solve their problems, either by giving a magical object (like a pot that never ran out of sweetmeats) or the offspring acquires magical things which help them to claim their fathers back (For example in *Ded-angule*, the protagonist defeats the dacoits and saves the princess in order to buy his father back). The magical objects given by divinities can sometimes be misused, and then used properly, spanning the story across incidents.

M. Runs into a Rakshasa woman and story follow a course similar to 2.C.

25. Poverty is ended due to acquiring kingdom or magical objects and is followed by situation 23.

The language of the folktales marks the shift of folktales from one context to another. Folk cultures are community cultures, practiced in open, communal gatherings. The earliest folktales were associated with fire, fire was the communal property around which members of a community, after laborious days, exchanged stories, where elaboration and addition began. However, as communities became more nuclear, and individual was more or equally important than community, familial rites replaced communal rituals, the space of folktale shifted from an open discussion to children's literature. It lost its purpose as the reception of knowledge and became mere fairy tales.

It becomes, therefore, the responsibility of any folklorist from countries whose folklores stand on brink of extinction, to look back, and identify tropes that have found Tribes are no longer isolated; cultures are no longer separate. We are now one world and our exchange of culture is so inherent that any culture that has not been contaminated seems fantastical to us. Globalization has perhaps put an end to the uniqueness of our myths, because now, we cannot specifically point at a collection of myth as ours and rear them in-

vitro, maintaining the purity of a culture. Cultural appropriation is the continuation of culture.

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