Gendered representation engendering fantasies: An analysis of Abanindranath Tagore's *Kheerer Putul*

Shuvra Mondal

Abstract

From a feminist perspective, this article explores how Abanindranath Tagore's *Kheerer Putul* is predicated upon a thoroughly patriarchal setup. With an apt historicisation of the text within the prevailing parameters of its time and culture, this article critiques the sexual biases that are written into a literary work. It is not to be read as a lexical text but should be seen in a visual context, where the artist may have the liberty to stretch the contours of the eyes of two women characters outside the circumference of their faces. Focusing on the complex aspects of patriarchy against women and their self-expression while analyzing *Kheerer Putul*, this article is, therefore, an attempt to understand the politics of the dominance of men over women. In so doing, it shows how Abanindranath Tagore's text can lend itself to a feminist analysis.

Keywords: patriarchal, Abanindranath Tagore, feminist, lexical, dominance

Harking back to the portrayal of 19th century Bengali women, we find that women had no legal or social status other than that derived from their position within the family, in which their primary role was to produce male heirs. According to Therborn, "In the beginning of our story all significant societies were clearly patriarchal. There was no single exception."[1] This patriarchal belief system undercuts even those works that have been customarily considered 'good' writing and until about a century ago, were primarily composed by men, for men. The most renowned of literary texts within popular circulation centre on male heroes—Oedipus, Tom Jones, The Three Musketeers, Captain Ahab, Huck Finn, Leopold Bloom—who exemplify masculine characteristics and ways of feeling. In the first section of this essay, there is an attempt to explore patriarchy and the roles played by a woman in Bengali folk tales. The second section gives an account of the author and the source of the text. The third section explores the novel in detail and attempts to analyse how Abanindranath Tagore's work is a masterpiece of children's literature.

Most societies are pervasively patriarchal- i.e., they are phallocentred and operate in such way that subordinates women across all spaces – social, familial, political, financial, social, legal and aesthetic. Women themselves are ideologically schooled into internalizing the ruling patriarchal belief system and are conditioned to criticize their own sex and to participate within this process of subordination.

Within this patriarchal setup, women characters in literary texts are rendered negligible and subordinate and are spoken to either as complementary or subservient to their male counterparts. Such literary texts without independent female players and actors, either treat the woman as a pariah, or ask her to de-cognize herself by taking up the position of the male subject, thereby appropriating masculine values and ways of being, feeling and acting. As Simone de Beauvoir points out, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman [...] It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature [...] which is described as feminine."[2] Through this cultural process, the masculine in our culture has come to be widely identified as active, dominating, rational; the feminine, on the other hand has come to be identified as passive, timid, emotional, and traditional.[3]

The Bengali folk tales are basically female stories. The stories themselves center around women; they abound in women characters, and foreground a seemingly woman's world – revolving around marriage, childbirth, nurture, acquiescence, self-sacrifice, thoughtfulness to others, the residential concerns of the way of life. The *Rupkatha* (Bengali Fairy-Tale) often pitches women in antagonistic positions – pitting the idea of the 'good woman' against the 'bad woman'. Women act as fiendish connivers, plotting against high-minded rulers. Women play a central part in making and unmaking the world of Bengali *Rupkatha*. Young women are, at times, depicted as heroes in control of their lives and destinies. On the one hand, there seem to be the passive women – powerless, detached, delicate, caring, subordinate, and unattractive. On the other hand, there are the women of action – confident, in a position of power and autonomy. This double bind of representation creates the binary opposition between the 'good woman' and the 'bad woman'. Either she is valorized for her traditionally feminine virtues or she is villainized and presented as conniving and unfathomably fiendish.

Tagore's story of two queens—the suffering elder Duorani and the pampered younger Suorani—and their change in fortunes that come about is presented as tale of the triumph of good over evil.[4] He describes Suorani as materialistic – "jewels and ornaments as vast as that of seven kingdoms" taken together filled the chests of Suorani.[5] Even after giving his best, the king has failed to satisfy the demands of his younger queen. All the ornaments collected from the seven kingdoms by the

king do not satisfy the queen's appetite. However, we find the elder Duorani only wishing for the king's safe journey and being contended with the black-faced monkey brought by the king for her. In a battle of good versus evil, the story concerns a woman's attempt at attaining selfhood and economic independence.

As we delve deeper into the text, we get to know that it is the wicked Suorani who is behind Duorani's miserable condition:

> That demoness used black magic on my Raja and took away my seven storied palace, seven hundred maids, and seven locks of treasure. Now she resides in abundance on her flowery bed in a golden temple. She took away my Raja who was everything to me and made me a pauper.[6]

Yet, a little further in the text, the patriarchal confines of society becomes evident:

> In spite of having everything, it was due to some ill premonition that I could not give birth to a son. Oh! How I must have sinned in my previous birth....that I had to lose my family, my womb, my husband to another..."[7]

One also observes that it is Duorani's foster son – the burnt- faced monkey who vows to repay the wrong that the elder queen suffers. A little further in the text, we hear the monkey pledge:

> I shall avenge your sorrow, my mother. I shall return to you, your golden palace, your princely abode, and your seven hundred attendants. I shall reinstate you and your golden child in your rightful place, in the golden temple, beside the Raja. Only then shall I be true to my name. [8]

Thus aided by the black-faced monkey brought by the king for the elder queen, fortunes turn, especially for Duorani. Naturally, when the king hears the news from the monkey that his elder queen is pregnant with a son, he starts to favour her, in keeping with the patriarchal archetype. At the beginning of the tale, we come across the different conditions of the two female characters – one who lives in poverty and neglect while the other who lives in royalty being the king's favourite. It is the monkey's plot which makes sure that the neglected Queen has a child, thereby restoring her rightful place in the kingdom. This changes the fate of the ugly and neglected elder queen. On the other hand, the beautiful younger Queen is shown to suffer for her misdeeds.

The contrasting fates of Duorani and Suorani demonstrate the above-mentioned representational duality vis-à-vis women. In *Kheerer Putul* through a narrative of 'good' versus 'evil', we witness how these two women characters, are rendered through a binary opposition. Abanindranath Tagore, through his *Kheerer Putul*, attempts to show how both the queens embody patriarchal projections, apropos the social expectation on them to produce an offspring and be a good wife to their husband, the king of Deepnagar. The author mixes the feudal with the supernatural, mythological and the fable-esque to create a narrative that foregrounds patriarchal assumptions of women of the then society. What is worth discussing are the ways in which Tagore shows how societal norms define women and their modes of negotiating with patriarchy through his story *Kheerer Putul.*

Notes

[1] Göran Therborn (2004). *Between sex and power- Family in the world, 1900-2000. John Urry (Ed.)*, (London and New York: Routledge), 17.

[2] Simone de Beauvoir (1949). *The Second Sex: Book II*, (Middlesex, U.K.: Penguin Books), 01.

[3] M.H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham*, "A Glossary of Literary Terms"*, (Delhi: Cengage Learning India Private Limited, 2019), 125.

[4] About the author and the text: Abanindranath Tagore (1871-1951) was a marked painter of the Bengal School of Art. He was also an eminent writer, known especially for his Bengali Folk Tales. This book *Kheerer Putul* is a simple and touching tale about the cream doll, the fate of Duorani and a crafty monkey. It was *Kheerer Putul* and his other classics which immortalized him as a renowned writer, revealing the essence of his genius.

[5] Abanindranath Tagore (1896). *Kheerer Putul*, (Calcutta; Ananda Publishers), 22.

[6] Tagore, my translation, p. 22.

[7] Tagore, my translation, p. 22.

[8] Ibid.

For this paper, I have translated a few relevant paragraphs from a later day publication of Abanindranath Tagore's Bengali text of *Kheerer Putul* that first appeared in 1896.

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