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A Retelling of the *Abolkara* Trope in Manoj Das' 'The Lady Who Died One and a Half Times and Other Fantasies' : From Folklore to Theory

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Abstract

Folklore has convincing explanations for the quotidian that makes one's life what it is. Often the small, daily matters are overlooked in our quests for the grand/ sublime. And therefore, truth evades us. Post-truth might have declared the end of truth. But folklore brings it back using well-crafted narratives that address its readers, engaging their mind in various shades of perception. This paper aims to find out how folklore contributes to different theoretical perspectives that Humanities explores by making a close study of the retelling of the Abolkara trope of Odia folklore in Manoj Das' collection of short stories titled ' The Lady Who Died One and a Half Times and Other Fantasies.' It investigates the presence (or absence) of volition on the part of the characters in the tales which determines what they do to things done to them. Therein lies the key to survival, which means everything in the face of an unwavering pandemic.

Keywords: folklore, retelling, Abolkara, Jataka, Panchatantra.

The whole happiness of fairyland hangs upon a thread, upon one thread.

- G. K. Chesterton, Fairy Tales

The German word *Märchen*, from which we get the concept of the folk tale, embodies a world where mortal characters are endowed with or encounter supernatural powers. Sometimes, a special knowledge is akin to the extramundane. Why, one wonders, is there a need to rise above (or go beneath as the case may be) the natural or the mundane? To explain *le quotidien*, a new system of signs is perhaps required. A folktale does that. Why are there retellings of folktales? Because the 'everyday' changes. As we go through the times of the pandemic,

when all certainties are terribly compromised, the lure of the folktale is pressing. Manoj Das, in his book of stories titled 'The Lady Who Died One and a half Times', recalls the Abolkara myth prevalent in Odisha, India. The first five stories in the collection employ the popular figure of the ageing Samanta, a Brahmin traveller who explores new territories, and his young aide, Abolkara, whose name signifies 'the disobedient.' Why must disobedience be the basis of these stories? Had Abolkara been obedient to his master we would not have got a taste of the materiality of memory. That Samanta had earlier visited the lands where he is now accompanied by Abolkara is revealed to the readers only when the latter comes across strange relics/incidents and demands the stories they hide, believing that Samanta has answers.

A royal procession and a tomb that Abolkara witnesses and questions take us to the first story, after which the book is named. It tells us about the predicaments of Tanmoy, a devoted and brilliant disciple of Sage Dhiman who incidentally falls in love with Susmita, the daughter of Tantrik Chandagauranga. The description that introduces Susmita to the reader goes like this:

> No wonder, for her body was like a Champak flower, her eyes a pair of glittering stars. While sometimes they twinkled like diamonds, at some other times they were as gentle and inviting as two drops of dew. (Das)

If we let go of the simile structures which supposedly define the lady and assimilate the images used, we have a supernatural entity with a flower for a body and eyes that vacillate between three states of matter: solid(diamond), liquid(dew) and gas (hydrogen and helium of stars.) The concept of the posthuman condition is put forth with ease. That the boundaries defining the human body give way to the fusion of the human with other forms of life (with the non-human), is in sync with Robert Pepperell's statement in The Posthuman Manifesto : " There is nothing external to a human, because the extent of a human cannot be fixed." If the prefix post- anticipates something better than the current state, this description seems to emphasize that the human consciousness is inseparable from the natural. If we understand the ecofeminist ways of investigating descriptions that equate nature with woman, we will see that Tanmoy gives Susmita an agency while describing her body in terms of natural things. (Here one must note the word used in connection with diamonds: twinkle, and not the stronger word shine, which means that the imagery refers to unpolished diamonds.) Susmita becomes the architect of Tanmoy's fortunes as the story progresses. She performs a Tantrik rite that would make Tanmoy a king in the future. And Tanmoy, despite his desires to follow the footsteps of his guru, becomes

embroiled in the political issues of the region when the royal elephant pours the sanctified water on his head, thereby proclaiming him king of the land. The words of Susmita seem to provide the key : "What is the very basis of Tantra? Is it not Shakti, the feminine principle of Nature?" (Das) The union of the natural and the feminine, then, is not limiting but expanding the erotic and the esoteric to something sublime. Susmita retains her agency even in a spectral form. She gets into the dying body of Queen Haimavati, whom Tanmoy was obliged to marry, but does not allow him to touch her, thus indirectly saving him from transgressing the commitment he had once made to her. Before being killed in Haimavati's body by rebels of the kingdom, she punishes those officials who had conspired to murder her father and herself to free Tanmoy from obligations. And it is no wonder that the story is titled after Susmita as 'The Lady Who Died One and a Half Time,' and remained true to her claim that her action of performing the rites was one of selfless goodwill. When Samanta dismisses Abolkara's question about the sinner in the story as one which cannot be definitive, the readers understand that 'truth' is negotiable.

The second story titled 'The Last Demoness' begins with another relic: a piece of stone from a forgotten monument atop a hill. The way this discovery by Abolkara leads to the unravelling of a *jataka* tale and its retelling emphasizes the agency of objects in outliving the time frame which brought them into existence. The piece of stone is not just a mnemonic device. It also makes a statement about the fall of a once flourishing aristocratic colony and inclines the listeners of the story towards woodlands. The *jataka* tale narrated by Samanta stops at the point where the demon mother dies on the riverbank grieving for her human husband and their son, the Bodhisattva, who abandon her for a secure future. But Manoj Das extends the tale with the birth of a girl before the death of the pregnant demon. The girl is as monstrous as her brother, the Bodhisattva, is human. The story, however, is not about the Bodhisattva, but the demon girl. She is adopted by a rishi who, on growing old, hands her over to Vratarup, an inhabitant of the hilltop colony. When the rishi mentions that she is the last of her species, he brings in the concepts of evolution and the survival of the fittest. The demons are no more required on earth because the humans have acquired the demonic qualities of corruption, violence against fellow beings and hunger for power. Vratarup accepts the responsibility of finding her a groom but fails. The radical leader cannot be so radical as to accept a demon for a wife. The affluent nobleman is not affluent enough to accept her without a dowry. The musician is not a connoisseur of art at all, for he cannot imagine a demon being a dancer. The landlord transcends his identity and assumes himself the lord of the

otherworld. He prefers a nymph to a demon if he must accept a supernatural consort. In the end Vratarup marries the demon and brings her to the colony. It is important to note that the demon looks exceptionally beautiful when she comes with Vratarup. The onlookers are both mesmerized and intrigued because their stereotypical notions of a demon are demolished.

> Although this was centuries before the birth of journals, the tribe of reporters existed.One of them was busy making a fast sketch of the bride. Another stepped closer to the couple and asked Vratarup, 'Were you not supposed to wed a demoness? But we see a damsel whose beauty would outweigh the combined beauty of all the princesses of our Jamvudwipa!" (Das)

This passage gives us a picture of what we envisage as post-truth or alternative facts. Post-truth has largely been defined as the phenomenon of facts being less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief. The inhabitants of the colony wait outside the house of Vratarup to know the truth, but when Vratarup informs them that his demon wife has transformed herself into a human so that she mingles with the 'normal' womenfolk, the truth is eclipsed, and feelings of suspicion replace solidarity. The resultant chaos renders the colony a space to be avoided, thereby converting it gradually into a ruin. The abjection of the demoness in the story gives way to the abjection of the colony. In "Posthuman Teratology", Patricia MacCormack stresses that monsters are monstrous because they are not not-monsters. There is an inexplicable ambiguity about them. They question the 'myths of human integrity, biologically and metaphysically.' (MacCormack 303) The demon-wife does question all things considered human, exposes the chaos inherent in a show of civilization and then goes into the forest to live in harmony with her husband.

The third story named 'The Lion Who Sprang to Life After a Century' begins when Abolkara questions Samanta about a roll of lion's hide that Sage Trichakshu considers so sacred as to prevent him from unfolding it. Samanta, in answer, refers to the *Panchatantra* story of a dead lion granted life by three scholars who are then devoured by the hungry beast. According to him, the Vishnu Sharma story is incomplete. Sage Tridev, who is the founder of the hermitage run by Sage Trichakshu, sends his brilliant disciple Dhiman along with the three sons of the local king when they intend to return to their kingdom to attend upon their dying father. On the way, the three royal brothers, to demonstrate their prowess, chant hymns that unite the scattered bones into a skeleton, add flesh and blood to the frame and then bring the dead lion to life. Dhiman's warnings go unheeded, and the three brothers lie at the mercy of the hungry lion. Just before the lion pounces, however,

Dhiman, who had climbed on to a tree to save his life, informs the lion that the three brothers have given him life. At this point, the folklorist negates the argument that the lack of language makes an animal different from and less than humans. He gives the lion the power of speech and we understand his predicament. The lion is thankful to Dhiman for preventing him from committing the sin of killing those who granted him life, but he is also troubled because he cannot handle his ravenous hunger. One must eat after one is born. Here we move towards two branches of scholarly study that Humanities engages with: Animal Studies and Death Studies. George Bataille distinguishes between humans and animals in terms of their awareness of death. Humans understand and philosophize death, whereas animals can be merely afraid of death. Hence, the obsession of humans with various rituals associated with corpses. Animals die without rituals. In the context of the story, the brothers do not respect the dignity of the remains of the dead lion. They need no one's permission to conduct an experiment with the scattered bones. The lion is not allowed to be part of the natural cycle of birth and death. And after he comes back to life, he must die again because murdering his life-givers would be a sin and eating Dhiman, who has given him knowledge, would be sacrilege. As Animal Studies highlights, human suffering is always privileged over animal suffering. (Nayar 268) But the story respects the sacrifice of the lion who offers his hide to Dhiman as 'Gurudakshina.' Dhiman, however, considers the lion his fellow seeker and hence, hands over the hide to his guru, sage Tridev, who preserves it as a precious symbol of benevolence and realization. The relic busts the constructed inferiority of animals and establishes that oftentimes they are more humane than human beings.

The fourth story titled 'Jewels from the Sky' begins with a nightmare that Abolkara has. Here we find mention of two artefacts that haunt a sleeping Abolkara: a dagger and some jewels. Samanta, on being questioned, begins narrating another Jataka tale. The Bodhisattva is the disciple of a Brahmin guru who comes in possession of the art to make jewels fall from the sky. The art, to be fruitful, requires a specific time (that comes once in hundred years) for the rites to be performed. The guru is eager to try his new skill as the propitious time advances. The Bodhisattva warns his guru regarding the futility of such a skill for mendicants, but to no avail. Circumstances contrive the capture of the guru and the Bodhisattva before he can perform the rite. While the Bodhisattva is set free so that he gathers the ransom money, the guru is taunted by the bandits. Despite being warned not to show his skill before the thugs, the guru does so, the jewels fall, and the bandits celebrate. The din draws a band of fiercer bandits and, when it becomes clear that the guru cannot repeat his

feat immediately, an array of deaths follows in consequence of lust for the jewels. When the Bodhisattva returns, he finds the dead body of his guru and of all the members of the two bandit factions. He performs the last rites of his teacher and informs the king about the jewels, who then uses it for the benefit of his citizens. Thus far the Jataka tale goes. However, there is more to the story. The king never uses it for the benefit of the masses. He is overcome with lust too and intends to kill the Bodhisattva so that nobody else knows about the jewels. When his attempt is foiled with the Bodhisattva waking up, the king confesses:

> O great soul, I really don't know! I was possessed by a strange conviction-that it would be simply impracticable, even unreasonable, to claim the treasure without killing you! I had never known a more crazy sensation than this. (Das)

This hints towards what we call affect. In the words of Sara Ahmed, " Affect is what sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects." (Ahmed) The jewels pass on from one generation to the next, and they have an insidious effect on every possessor. According to Samanta, they are still hidden in the cave. Abolkara, too, comes under a lusty trance and is saved by his master. The reader of this story cannot help wondering whether (s)he has chanced upon the rogue jewels. One never knows!

The final story of the Abolkara series is titled 'The Last Night.' It is an extension of the Panchatantra story of the old man with a young wife, as Samanta conveys. Mahapatra, an old man in his eighties marries (for the eighth time) a young girl of sixteen. There is no affection for the old man in the heart of his young bride. One night, when a bandit breaks into their home, the unexpected happens. Instead of robbing them, the bandit pities the young woman and advises her to try to love the old man, for the fate cannot be altered. This sparks a realization in the minds of both husband and wife. While the wife lets go of her carnal needs and begins caring for the old man in the spirit of maternal affection, the husband visits a hermit requesting him for the boon of youthful vigour so that he may please his wife. The hermit advises him not to interfere with nature, but the old man is adamant. What the hermit then proposes is an instance of EcoGothic (Smith and Hughes) :

> Well, I can only direct you to mustering some youthful vitality for a short period. There is a small waterfall in a hidden Himalayan valley. Should you bathe in it three times a day and then lick some germinal worms lurking in the swampy crevices of the rocks, you can develop the prowess you're hankering after. That the prowess, when related to this feeble

> and decadent body of yours, is bound to appear ridiculously disharmonious, is a different matter. (Das)

The wife, when she comes to know of this strange and nauseating project undertaken by her husband, is shattered. The hermit tells her that her husband would be alive for a year more. The old man returns a day before his foretold death. His tryst with the uncanny has rendered his appearance unnatural. He has a 'feverish smirk', as described by Samanta. The wife is determined not to let her husband give vent to his unnatural passion, with the intention of saving him from degradation in the next birth. After cooking a meal for him, she retires to the shrine in her house and meditates till she breathes her last. The husband, as foretold, dies at dawn, purged of his sexual perversity. Samanta elaborates that this step taken by the lady has cast a noble aura around the village of Ahladpur, and this aura exists in the collective memory of the villagers. This explains Abolkara's question about why a pair of dog and cat, who behave like enemies outside the village, become friends when they enter it.

The five narratives remain true to the spirit of a fairytale which Chesterton puts forth in his essay 'Fairy Tales.' Had Tanmoy remained committed to askesis, he would not have had to suffer the way he did. Had the Bodhisattva and his father given the demoness her due, she would have lived a happy life, like her daughter did. Had the three royal brothers listened to Dhiman, the lion's dignity in death would not have been violated. Had the Brahmin pundit listened to the Bodhisattva, he would not have unleashed the malicious jewels on mankind. Had the old man listened to the hermit, he could have lived on with his young wife, sharing a platonic relationship with her. The key, then, lies in reading folklore with an uncritical mind. Only when we do not question the uncanny, the fantasy and the supernatural that make up the world of folklore, shall we chance upon the thread that promises harmony. And then we shall decipher the different strands that make up the single thread, the strands being the different aspects of theory that provide lenses for the seeker who wishes to read between the lines.

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