

Saumitra Chakravarty

Intersections: a Journey towards Empowerment of Women in Australian and Bengali Folk Tales

Abstract I: This paper attempts a comparison between the folk tales of the Australian aborigines and the rural societies of Bengal. Through an analysis of the commonality of themes, modes of narration, the significance and symbolism of each set of tales and the variations they undergo when narrated by different sets of tellers, this paper tries to establish a partnership between ethnic societies across the world with particular emphasis on the projection of women in their folk narratives. It also highlights the necessity for self expression experienced by these women who are the worst victims of a dominator culture and how the tale becomes a fulfillment of their desire for liberation from their predicament.

Abstract II: Questo articolo stabilisce un paragone tra i racconti tradizionali degli australiani aborigeni e le società rurali del Bengala. Attraverso un'analisi dei temi comuni, delle modalità di narrazione, della rilevanza e simbolismo di ciascun gruppo di racconti e delle variazioni che essi presentano quando vengono narrate da narratori/narratrici diverse, questo saggio stabilisce un collegamento tra società etniche in luoghi geografici molto lontani con un'attenzione precipua a come vengono rappresentate le donne nella narrazione tradizionale. Il saggio sottolinea anche la necessità di auto-espressione di queste donne che sono gravemente vittimizzate da culture di dominanza. Tali racconti diventano modalità espressiva per esaudire il loro desiderio di liberarsi dalla loro situazione di inferiorità.

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The telling of tales is part of a rich oral tradition handed down through the generations in rural and indigenous societies. Stories are not merely a source of entertainment, but are associated with the communication of survival strategies and codes of conduct in ethnic societies. Since the focus of this paper is on the folk narrative as a medium of empowerment, particularly of women, I will attempt to analyse how it can be used as a vehicle of self expression and social mobility for the underprivileged. With little resources available to them in their battle against the elements, disease, poverty and epidemics, evil spirits and shades of the dead, the tales they tell are sagas of courage, endurance, survival, adaptation and of invincible faith in their medicine men and shamans, their ojhas, gunins and kurans. It is through these oral narratives that they find self expression in the face of displacement and dehydration of their essential identity. The acclimatization with the environment resulting in interchangeability between human and plant or animal life, the internalization of animal qualities like physical strength, courage, cunning or industry, the power of flight, are all factors in these narratives of securing one's position in one's natural habitat. Consequently, these appear as symbols of wish fulfillment in these tales, through the self assertion of the subaltern in the victory of the weak over the strong, the disempowerment of threat perspectives, the breakdown of class, caste and gender hierarchies. Folklorist and writer Clarissa Pinkola Estes, herself raised of old country people steeped in the oral tradition, highlights its therapeutic potential in her Introduction to *Wild Women*: "I had been taught as a child to recognize story as a quintessential medicine. I understood from years of being fed and groomed by the old women in my families, that story in all its many variations can in right time and place, with proper application, give help to the hurts and wounds of simply having lived life" (Pinkola Estes 1994: 16).

The mode of narration varies from the ceremonial to the informal, shifting its venue from the private to the relatively public domain. With this, the identity of the teller changes from the master tellers or singers who may occupy an elevated spiritual

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position in the clan, to the women who have a story for every occasion. In fact, in differentiating between *upakatha* (folk tale), and *rupakatha* (fairy tale) on the one hand and *vratakatha* (ritual narration for ceremonial occasions) on the other, within the oral tradition of Bengal, there is a significant shift of domain and mode. There is a similar necessity to differentiate between the ritualistic posture, mode and accompaniment to the narration of the Australian tellers like Mirawong and Frank Gurramanamana, mentioned later in this essay and the tribal mothers telling tales around the campfires at night. A change in the domain and the teller brings about a shift in the focus and the perspective of the narration.

Talking of the more formal mode of narration in the rural societies of Bengal, the ritual chanting of the *vratakatha* together with simple votive offerings, generally by an upper class woman before an assembly of rural women, is associated with the performance of a vow or with the worship of the Goddess Sarvamangala/Mangalgowri. It marks the intersection of tribal and mainstream myths and tales with their culture-specific terminology. The ritual chanting and listening to the body of stories associated with this benign version of the Mother Goddess, is believed to have a salvific element for these women who are victimized in a patriarchal society, regardless of their class or caste as I have highlighted in an earlier essay (Chakravarty 2009: 2). More formally, the narration of the written version of this oral tradition, called the *Mangal Kavya*, done by both men and women, takes place either at fairs and marketplaces or by moving from house to house in the village during the festival celebrating that particular goddess. It is accompanied by singing and dramatization and the illustration of the story through scrolls and pottery painted with vegetable dyes by rural artists. In Australian aboriginal society, the narration, mainly of Creation myths, by a master teller, is an almost mystical experience. The special powers of communication some of these tellers/singers are blessed with, the physical posture they adopt while telling the tale, accompanied by tap sticks, drums, drones or monochords, through dance enactments and song cycles, the paintings on mess-mate bark

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and rock which often accompany the tale, lend it the sanctity and power of a religious ritual. Margaret Clunies Ross notes, "As the earliest observers realized when they took the word corroboree into the English language, the essence of much Aboriginal tradition lies in its multi-media nature" (Clunies Ross 1986: 238).

On the other hand, coming to the more informal aspect of story-telling, tales which have been handed down for generations are also narrated by mothers to their children in rural and ethnic societies, with the specific purpose of enforcing taboos, prescribing peripheries and imparting lessons about the wild and its ways. Aboriginal Australian women tell stories to children assembled around their grinding stones and their camp fires. Stories act as wish fulfillment: what one dreams of eating or the power one would like to possess in one's battle with the elements or with the social establishment. In both the cultures under study in this essay, these narratives often form an important lesson in adaptation to the surrounding environment. In the folk tales of the Australian aborigines, stories hint at where the dugong, wallaby and cockles are to be found, where the long-necked turtle lays its eggs and where the goanna burrows during the dry and cold weather, thus imparting knowledge of hidden food reserves and valuable survival techniques to the listening children as in the W. Wonguri-Mandjigal Song

Circling around, searching towards the middle of the lily leaves to reach the rounded roots

At that place of the Dugong...

At that place of the Dugong's tail....

At that place of the Dugong; looking for food with stalks

For lily-foliage, and for the round nut roots of the lily plant

(Hall 1981: 14).

In the Indian context too, tales tell of hidden reserves of food, which give the tribal or low caste individual, particularly the women, a capacity for survival even in

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drought situations. In the Malto folktale of the Santhal Parganas of Bengal, the six jealous wives kill the youngest and throw pieces of her body into the village pond. Various edible leaves grow out of her flesh, new ones each day, which draw the wrong-doers to the scene of crime in search of food. In the Indian context, narratives which form the vast repertoire of the folk and fairy tale genres, the *upakathas* and *rupakathas* are told to children during mealtimes rather than as bedtime stories. They serve the dual purpose of entertainment and incentive for the required action. There is a special indulgent relationship between teller and told, as in the situation of the children of a joint family gathering around a favourite aunt or grandmother or a group of half-naked tribal children around a clan matriarch, sitting out the hunt or the harvesting. The kitchen, the threshing and winnowing room, the courtyard or the village clearing – almost any place can be the chosen venue for story – telling. In this context, A. K. Ramanujan observes in his essay *Telling Tales*, “Authority figures did not tell these stories” (Dharwadker 1999a: 449).

Meanwhile turning to the two sets of folk tales, we may observe certain common themes and motifs. If survival against a harsh, unyielding environment and poverty is one aspect of social empowerment, self expression against a background of oppression is another, as is evident particularly in the women’s tales. It will be the purpose of this paper to analyse the folk tales of Bengal and of Australia, particularly of the Northern Territories, as a medium of empowerment for the women in indigenous and rural societies as already stated in this essay. These women who belong to an impoverished and dispossessed people, are indeed its worst victims, subjugated both in terms of caste/ethnicity and gender.

A. K. Ramanujan notes in his essay on *A Flowering Tree: A Woman’s Tale*, that in folktales, as in any other form of narration, “the gender of the genre” (Dharwadker 1999b: 413) becomes important in the interpretation of the tale. Writer Githa Hariharan has highlighted this issue in her novel *The Thousand Faces of Night*, where the father-in law’s stories emphasize the patriarchal value system which the

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ideal wife must abide by, whereas the grandmother's talk of how women can carve out their own lives, despite social and familial pressures. I will take up this theme from two aspects. Focussing on the contrast between the projection of women in tales about men and the woman-centred tale, it is apparent that women, regardless of their class, caste or religious affiliation, are doubly victimized by the dominator culture of which they are part. This culture subjects society to the segregation based on gender binaries not only in terms of social or familial status but also of ethical norms associated with each in terms of their position within the hierarchy. These are inherent within the symbols and the terminology of narration of the tale. Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger, in her essay, records how a female religious healer, despite the comparatively elevated position she held within the community, talked of victimization. She said there are only two castes, that of men and that of women, the latter always occupying victim status (Burkhalter Flueckiger 1997: 80). Telling tales, chanting *vratakathas* in a comparatively public domain creates a common sisterhood of suffering and envisages a liberation from that predicament, if only in the projected scenario of the narrative.

Turning to the first, it is important to notice how in tales told by men about male heroes, there is a celebration of heroic exploits as in those about clan heroes narrated by the tribal tellers in Australia. In Bengali folk and fairy tales, there is the crossing of the 'seven seas and thirteen rivers' (a recurring motif), on a winged *pakshiraj* steed by the hero, the successful undergoing of several life-threatening experiences to win the prized and coveted woman, kingdoms and material wealth as reward, the woman being merely a prize to be won. Where man tries to defy his environment in both cultures and to project himself as larger than life in his tales, woman seems to succumb to the factors that enslave her. Thus in a woman's tale, suffering and oppression earn their own reward of self-expression to a chosen listener. The narration itself is a redemption. Comparing men and women's narratives in a different context in Bengali literature, Partha Chatterjee in *Women and the Nation*, says that while men's autobiographies were called *atma-charita*,

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thus associating them with an entire body of heroic *charita* literature denoting the exploits of kings and saints, the women's autobiographies were simply called *smriti-katha* or memoirs, which normally contrasted an oppressive past with a more liberated present (Chatterjee 1999: 138-139). The same principle may be applied to folk tales. I will take up two Bengali stories to illustrate this theme. In both these stories, the woman is apparently a secondary character at the outset, dominated by familial relationships and pressures, but becomes the principal one by the end, through her newly acquired capacity for self expression. The first, which is located in the natal home, talks of the seven brothers who had tasted their sister's blood from a finger cut while cooking and found the food particularly delicious. They are further tempted to taste her flesh (Bandopadhyay 1969: 63). Killed, chopped up and buried by them, she takes on the shape of a lotus or bamboo shoot (in different versions of the tale), that speaks up when approached by the mother or the in-laws and brings the wrongdoers to punishment. In the second story which is located in the conjugal home, traditionally associated with oppression and suffering for the bride, we see the six elder sisters-in-law who kill the youngest when she demands shell bangles like theirs. The edible leaves that grow out of her flesh, cannot be collected by anyone other than her husband before whom she chants her tale of woe following which, the murderers are exiled, thus negating the harsher realities of a woman's silent suffering in her marital home in a patriarchal society. However, a primary analysis of the two stories justifies to an extent what Gloria Goodwin Raheja says in her essay, that though suffering is a common denominator that unites these women's narratives, not always do they speak with the same voice (Goodwin Raheja 2003: 174). Nor are the perpetrators necessarily men. In fact, in at least one of them, the rescuer is a male. Also, while in the first the woman is victimized even in the comparatively safer domain of the natal home, the 'baper bari', the second takes place in the 'conjugal home, the 'sasur bari' with its association of servility, subjugation and the instinctive fear rooted in the minds of women, noted in many wedding songs of women.

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It may also be noticed that suffering and possible death of the female victim, are often pre-requisites for the right to self expression after rejuvenation, the new and more focused self emerging out of the old after an intervening period of transformation into a plant or animal form. In the two Bengali stories noted above, the transformation into naturalistic forms represents the process of adaptation into the surrounding landscape and thus is an important step in the journey towards empowerment. The evolving capacity for self expression represents the diminishing of the threat perspective from patriarchal hierarchies which stereotyped women as silent followers of the prescribed norm. The liberation following the narration by the victim is itself a process of wish-fulfilment, with the husband or the in-laws projected as potential rescuer and avenger. This is most often not true in a real life scenario, where the husband's loyalties lie more with his own family than the *parer barir meye*, the 'alien' girl from another family. This contrast between the subaltern's real life predicament and her liberation through the folk narrative, is highlighted by Sarah Lamb while discussing her experiences in Mangaldihi, a village in Bengal. She says that it is through such oral narratives that many Bengali women scrutinize and critique the social worlds they experience, giving voice to their experiences through the language of story (Lamb 1997: 55)¹.

The other common theme in the two Bengali stories is that of transformation of the murdered girl into a bamboo shoot, a lotus or a coxcomb in various versions of the tales. This is also found in the *vratkathas* and the *Mangal Kavyas*, the epics derived from this oral tradition. In the story of the *Chandi Mangal* for example, Chandi, originally a tribal hunter goddess, transforms herself into a golden iguana in order to solicit worship from a hunter and his clan and establish her own cultic status on earth, independent of the fact that earlier goddess cults were gradually absorbed into the andro-centric hierarchies of Hindu religion. In the story of the *Manasa Mangal*, the goddess of snakes constantly undergoes conversion from *deva kanya* (literally, daughter of the gods) to *naga kanya* (daughter of the snakes) to exact terrible vengeance upon her detractors, both divine and human.

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Both acts of transformation are part of the process of empowerment in the narrative. Tales of snake women, of women mating with animals to produce superhuman children are all part of the folk repertoire. In another Bengali folk tale a woman gives birth to a mongoose that is far more intelligent and resourceful than its human siblings, thus indirectly empowering its mother.

Turning to the second aspect referred to earlier, these tales counter the normal hegemonic tendency of a patriarchal society by a tale which espouses the cause of the weak and victimized, by reversing caste, class and gender hierarchies. For instance, we see crime given its due punishment even at the cost of self preservation, thus empowering the victim. In the first Bengali story about the seven brothers who killed their sister, the brothers kill themselves when confronted by their guilt, in the second, the brothers-in-law of the victim, exile their own wives for killing the youngest. We also have examples of the inversion of social demarcations in other stories as in the defeat of the Brahmin or king in a battle of wits by the lower castes or in an intellectual debate with a woman. In the Bengali story of the Laughing Fish, the wise Brahmin of the court under threat of death from the king, finds himself helpless to solve the riddle of why the fish laughed till his young daughter-in-law comes to his rescue. She says the fish laugh because the king is so foolish that he cannot see through the deceit of his queens who harbour lovers dressed up as female attendants within the palace and here he is trying to separate male fish from the female. In another story called Lakshmimoni's Husband, a rich merchant asks his seven daughters the question as to whose will decides their fate (Mazumdar 1977: 116). In a predicament similar to that in *King Lear*, the youngest bravely answers that it is her own will that will decide her future destiny and is thrown into the forest by her egoistical father. Her rise to power and wealth through her expertise in making peacock feather fans which she sells in the local market, is not only a saga of female empowerment similar to the Kannada tale of The Flowering Tree cited by A.K. Ramanujan², but also of a woman's empathy with the forces of nature. For instance, the banyan tree protects her from

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the wild animals by sheltering her within its trunk and provides her with the wherewithal to earn her way out of destitution because she feels for it. The wise birds Byangama-Byangami tell her of magic herbal remedies to cure her dying husband because she saves their offspring from a poisonous snake. It also tells of the reversal of fortune suffered by the erring father, his dependence on this daughter and her restoration of his wealth and status through the money she has earned in the forest. Tales like these reverse the dominator-victim or predator-prey relationship so that strong survival instincts surface.

Turning to the tales of the Northern Territories in Australia, it is important to differentiate between the roles women play in the tales told by the male tellers and in the women's tales. Taking the example of the Creation myths, we find that though women play an important role in them, their narrators are more often men than women. The Creation myths talk of the odyssey from Gondwana to the featureless Australian landscape, 40,000 years ago resulting in Dreamtime, which mythologically symbolized the reshaping of the terrain by the aboriginal ancestors and the imprint of the evolving society and tribal law upon it. These myths reflect a oneness with the environment to a degree where human becomes interchangeable with plant or animal life. Thus in the tales told by Mirawong the tribal teller of the Northern Territories, the sun is an old woman who drives the spirit of cold-weather-time before her with a blazing torch and allows the frogmen of the storms to build up the clouds above. The angry thunder women of the skies battle with each other and hurl into the heavens their lightning-flecked stone axes. Another myth explains the waxing and waning of the moon as the story of a woman who becomes emaciated through repeated sexual intercourse and has to fatten herself on a secret diet of buried roots. In a song cycle sung by the tribal singer Frank Gurrmanamana of Arnhem Land (one of the five regions of the Northern Territories) there is the myth of the creative acts of an old woman Modj who, in the creative period of Dreamtime, went about waving a stick creating creeks and billabongs. Such songs which celebrate the creative acts of women

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are however sung at sacred ceremonies where women are not allowed and if they happen to be present, only the 'outside versions' are sung. In myths about the Earth Mother, there is mention of initiation ceremonies which involve blood-letting of specially chosen young men in secret caves dedicated to her at Uluru/Ayers Rock. These men are fed seeds which are ground with breast milk, which represents the body of the Great Mother. This is as opposed to the andro-centric focus in the ritual of sharing bread and wine in the Christian Mass. Again, women are never present at such initiation ceremonies.

Analysing two folk tales, also narrated by Mirawong of the Northern Territories, we see the heroism of the clan hero celebrated and the woman treated as a mere sex symbol. The first tells of how a great fisherman-hero Dunia lusts after his seven daughters, and of how their mother punishes him by casting him into the waters of a lagoon from a great height. With the help of the Old Woman of the Brown bittern totem, Dunia has himself converted into a white crocodile and his daughters into the Yungamurra water girls who are fated to co-habit the same lagoon. The girls sing sex songs to lure young men to their doom till the clan hero Manbuk captures one of them and ritually purifies her to make her his wife. The tale celebrates his impossible feats to retain her despite the curse of the lily lagoon. But the curse reclaims her and she is once again absorbed into the waters of the lagoon even after Manbuk gets the Sun woman to dry it up. Manbuk leaps into the sky to continue his pursuit. In the second story, two tribal half-brothers discover their mothers cooking a goose with the heat generated by their bodies as they chant sex songs, lusting after their own sons. The brothers convert themselves into crocodiles to drag the women to death by drowning as punishment for breaking a tribal taboo. In both stories, the woman is a victim of a patriarchal value system that perceives her sexuality as a threat to the stability of its social ethos.

In contrast to the strict enforcement of peripheries drawn by men, in the tales told by the tribal mothers around the campfires, we find a symbolic representation of both the threat perspectives that circumscribe a woman's existence and her

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battle to overcome them with the scant resources available to her. This is particularly evident in the stories about Wulgaru.

Where Wulgaru capered, roared and pranced
To scare away
The tribal mothers who gathered seeds
From mulga trees, the grass and reeds
And grinding these for their daily needs
Spun yarns as old as time (Harney 1959: viii).

A tale told by Jalna, a woman of the Waddaman tribe to the children gathered around her, narrates how a poor woman Wungala defeats Wulgaru, the Evil One. As Wulgaru threatens, rants and raves, the defenceless woman Wungala struggles alone to save her child with nothing more than the meal she is preparing for him. She initially pretends indifference to Wulgaru's threats, but when he actually attacks her with outstretched claws, she slams the hot, sticky meal cake she is making out of crushed seeds, on to the demon's face. In another such tale narrated by Yanu, a woman of the same Waddaman tribe, a tribal girl Weinga destroys Wulgaru after she is taken captive by him. In the cave where she is being held, she paints a devilish monster on the sleeping Wulgaru's leg, which causes him to cut it off with an axe in fear, leading to her escape with the leg as a trophy. There are entire folk cycles revolving around the defeat by the aboriginal women, of Wulgaru the evil one, sometimes disembodied and depicted by a single enlarged organ. Other evil figures like the Argula of the West Kimberleys, Mubaditties on Melville and Bathurst islands and the Namorodo of West Arnhem Land of Australia are associated with sorcery and therefore more sinister. Faith in witchcraft and magic forms an important ingredient of the lives of indigenous people because of primitive beliefs and superstitions. But this is so also because of the troubled and fearful microcosm of the tribal world where their only armour

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against natural disaster or human evil is the power of magic. In the tales of Bengal, women use magic and witchcraft to tame the husband, incapacitate the rival in a polygamous marriage or use as a therapy against the curse of childlessness.

Like the image of the quilt employed by African-American women writers in their writing, stories are woven around each other and into the essential fabric of these ethnic and rural societies. Belief in these tales is implicit. They are part of the journey towards empowerment. In an Australian tale, the narration of a tale by a master teller has the power to make a bundle of twigs burst into flames. Through them, the local culture of these indigenous people is kept alive and in them, they discover their essential identity in the face of rapid disinheritance from the mainstream culture. An Indian tale tells of a story and a song that a woman keeps pent up within herself. They long for release and fly away to take up different shapes when she is sleeping with her mouth open. As Linda Deigh says in her essay, *Folk Narrative*, folktales have no "final form: they stiffen and freeze when they are no longer told, as if they were written on paper. As long as they are told, they vary, merge and blend" (Dorson 1972: 59-60). The folk tale is kept alive by being told. No single class or caste has a monopoly to it, it must be passed down from generation to generation acquiring colour and context through the clan, familial or gender identity of the narrator.

NOTES

1. While discussing her experiences in Mangaldihi, a village in Bengal, Sarah Lamb talks of the old woman's story in which the mother-in-law is associated with sacred objects. It is sacrilegious for the daughter-in-law to touch her while in an unclean condition and for this, the daughter-in-law has to do penance, whereas in real life, old women are neglected by both son and daughter-in-law.

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2. In the Kannada tale of *The Flowering Tree*, cited by A.K. Ramanujan, a woman's conversion into a flowering tree gives her creativity and the ability to fight poverty by marketing her own produce/potential of flowers every day.

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Saumitra Chakravarty has presented papers on gendered approaches to texts in many international seminars. Her research articles have been published in journals like *Intersections* of the Australian National University, in *Le Simplegadi* and *Il Bianco e il Nero* of the University of Udine, in *Bells* of the University of Barcelona and in Indian journals like the *Atlantic Literary Review*, *The Literary Criterion*, *The Critical Endeavour* and in books like *The Goddess Awakened*, *Vignettes of Indian English Literature*, *Explorations of Indian English Drama*, *Women's Writing in English*, *Multiculturalism in Indian Drama*. She has translated short stories of Bengali women writers on women's issues in her book *Three Sides of Life* and is author of a volume of poetry entitled *The Silent Cry* and co-author of a book of essays entitled *The Endangered Self*.

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