

***Rakkhoshi Rani* in *Thakurmar Jhuli* : Contouring the Monstrous Feminine in Bengali Fairy tale**

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Abstract

The present work traces the representation of *Rakkhoshi Rani* as a female monster in “*Thakurmar Jhuli*” (1907) by Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumder, a collection of Bengali fairy tales. *Rakkhoshi Rani* is ambitious and eventually portrayed as a *femme fatale*, a personification of unique ‘undomesticated’ feminine attributes. She is enchanting, felonious, possesses inhuman power, shape-shifter and voracious in nature. She is not a ghost or spirit but a supernatural entity, evil at the core, contributing to the Bengali sociocultural belief, superstition, behaviour, and the collective unconscious. She occupies an integral part in the psycho-social cultural realm of the people in the geographical and ethnology-linguistic regions comprising West Bengal and Bangladesh. The fairy tale narratives critically reflect on the patriarchal social forces shaping the gendered paradigm of colonial and post-colonial Bengal. Therefore, the paper gauges the imperatives of negative and subversive traits of *Rakkhoshi Rani* as a monstrous feminine in the Bengali fairy tale collection of *Thakurmar Jhuli*, embodying male anxieties surrounding the threat posed by female sexuality and the simulation of male behaviour.

Key Words : *Bengali Fairy tale, Female Monsters, Patriarchy, Misogyny.*

Rakkhoshi Rani is integral to Bengali fairy tales, myths, legends, curses, insults, taunts, etc. The very fear of her existence is crafted not only in bedtime stories, folk metaphors and etymologies, or a spin on mythology for television series but also as gestures, practical jokes, and even the traditional conventional sounds used to scare children. The present work seeks to trace the representation of *Rakkhoshi Rani* through the premises and testimonies of Bengali fairy tales as collected in “*Thakurmar Jhuli*” (1907) by Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumder. A monstrous feminine like *Rakkhoshi Rani* made her way to the realm of Bengali fairy tale where Bengali intelligentsia is visited, recreated, and reproduced the ‘ideal’ femininity intending a ‘Rousseavian Romantic Revival’ (Paul 2021: 157) to counter, assimilate and adapt to western femininity, emancipation and empowerment. The premise of the paper is looking to explore the Monstrous – Feminine in Bengali Fairy tale as a source of fear and subversion, reinforcing the patriarchal power structure. The premise of this work is enthused from Ovid’s “*Metamorphoses*” which explores the domain of the female monsters. It is also inspired by Barbara Creed’s “*The Monstrous-Feminine*”, a contemporary feminist scholarship scrutinising female monsters as a source of

fear and subversion reinforcing patriarchal power structures. To explore female monster in Bengali fairy tale, the present work gauge the collection of fairy tale from colonial Bengal where the 'ideal' femineity is revisited, recreated, and reproduced intending a 'Rousseavian Romantic Revival' to encounter, assimilate and adapt to the western femininity, women emancipation and empowerment movements.

Rakkhoshi Rani is very ambitious. She lives in the *rajpur*, i.e., the royal palace. She is a royal consort and aspires to be the chief queen. She is a *femme fatale* with supernatural capacities. She is envious of her stepchild and the other wife of her husband. Interestingly, this 'other woman' is virtuous, docile but naïve, often side-lined, and devoured. *Rakkhoshi Rani* gradually overpowers the king and ousts other contenders by hook or crook until the virtuous consort's 'legitimate' prince takes control of the events and re-establishes the 'order'. She remains a demonic equivalent of the 'fallen woman'.—Hitherto, she remains part of the collective popular fear-psychosis, wisdom, morality, power and patriarchy, an essential mode of human communication (Gupta 2007: 3), social memory, typical lessons, and chauvinistic tropes.

Bengali fairy tales and cultural identity are intertwined so that this monstrous feminine reflects the very culture she is set in. As the people are careful about this gendered power-play, they are conscious of the vices and virtues of patriarchal hierarchy. Women's Domestication and subsequent subordination are the conscious fruits of such oppressive stakeholders. For example, the general perceptions of women being lustful and fickle, therefore, resort to tricks to seek vengeance or fulfil their whims and fancies. At the same time, social evils like Child Marriage, *Gauri Daan*, *Kaulinya Pratha*, *Satidaha*, the absence of the socio-legal provision of Widow Remarriage and the denial of Property Rights to Women caused severe social marginalisation of Hindu widows. Hence, the fairy tales codify Bengali women's sexual practices by segregating one section of women from their socio-cultural moorings. Ratnabali Chatterjee has tried to show how women were transformed from social beings into criminals through a hostile act of commodification and victims at a later stage of their life through the British Empire (Chatterjee 2016: 65). An elaborate code of socialisation was thus devised for the women to ensure that they fit into the patrilineal, patrilocal caste and family structure of the Bengali Hindu. (Bagchi 1993: 2214)

Interestingly, the Bengali fairy tales, too, could not trespass such gruelling gender disparity, vitiating social subaltern and social vulnerability of marginalisation. Thus, *Rakkhoshi Rani* is represented as malicious and resentful in her desire to take a sip of the power of the queen, as pointed out in *Neel Komol aar Laal Komol*, *Dalim Kumar* and *Sonar Kati Rupar Kati* tales of the *Thakurmar Jhuli*. She employs charms to climb the social ladder and enjoy the queen's state. It is noteworthy to examine the limitations imposed by patriarchy even on this powerful woman, as her desire for hegemony is focused strictly on the position of queen and never the king. This idea of the shape-shifting supernatural female monster taking up the queen's identity is shared. However, through a more critical lens, one can discern this as a need to free herself from the shackles of double marginalisation since the reverence a Queen receives becomes a

fair bargain, although her voice and wielding of power are restricted within the confines of the stellar and ornate walls of majestic palaces.

In *Neel Komol aar Laal Komol*, deadly *Rakkhoshi Rani* has a disturbing desire for the flesh of her step-son Kusum and finally devours her son, Ajit, offering a paedophilic undertone. Moreover, we find parallels in the castration complex when the king becomes *boka* (mute and stoned) as he wants to stop the *Rakkhoshi Rani* and draw his sword. In *Dalim Kumar*, a treacherous, deceitful *rakkhoshi* disguises herself as an older woman to cast a sinister spell in the dice containing the soul of the legitimate queen, devours her and takes up her place as the queen. *Rakkhoshi Rani* enjoys the pleasures of the palace and participates in the household chores. Though she bears seven sons with the king, her mouth-watering fantasies about *Dalim Kumar* intensify in her vengeful schemes against him by blinding him. Here, parallels can be drawn from the sexual advances of stepmother Tishyaraksha that cost blinding of Kunal, son of Maurya Emperor Ashok, found in the Buddhist narrative of *Aúokâvadâna* or *Oedipus Rex* blinded himself as he unwittingly became sexually involved with his mother, Jocasta in Greek Mythology. In *Sonar Kati Rupa Kati*, four friends – *Rajputra* (prince), *Mantri putra* (minister's son), *Saudagar putra* (merchant's son) and *Kotal Putra* (son of the police chief) – are lost in a forest, where they encounter a *Takahashi*. She gulps all, but *Rajputra* is somehow saved. *Rakkhoshi* disguises herself as a beautiful lady and manipulates the country's king to marry her. Thus, she becomes the queen. Now *Rakkhoshi Rani* hatches plot in her quest for the *rajputra*. Her 'wanting qualms' with the young males in this story offer a poly amorous undercurrent. Furthermore, in both stories of *Neel Komol aar Laal Komol* and *Sonar Kati Rupa Kati*, we find a cannibalistic old woman as the motherly figure to the *Rakkhoshi Rani*.

It is to be noted that *Rakkhoshi Rani* prominently reflects the grave issues that contemporary women used to deal with if they wanted to assert sexual freedom and individual ambition. These narratives are myriad and tricked down orally from one generation to another with the gradual sociocultural appropriation that an apocalypse befell the city after such a woman wins over the circumstances. Also, good fortune can only be restored after such a woman is slain. The legitimate prince often succeeds in such a miraculous mission and meets his fiancée, either a damsel in distress or a virtuous domesticated princess, in due course. Hence, tales of *Rakkhoshi Rani* are an accessible tool for matrilocal subversion of the current social order. The ambitious queen in the garb of *Rakkhoshi Rani*, however, subservient to the king, is still the First of all women, which makes her position quite luscious to further the stratification of a fallen woman. She is the transgressor, powerful, yet vulnerable queen who does not metamorphose herself according to the ludicrous codes of femineity, chastity, morality and conduct set by the men around her.

Rakkhoshi Rani is the inferior alternative to the apparent dominant sex in society. She is subservient and tries to find momentary happiness in domesticity and motherhood. However, she has ambitions. She is competitive. She seeks sexual emancipation. Thus, this woman crosses the sexist traditions, socio-normative beliefs, and customs set by men. Why such stories were

to be reread during the Swadeshi movement? Bengali fairy tales encompass the traditional expectations and superstitious deterrence from educated and emancipated women. The female monsters not only allowed colonised Bengalees to think of a glorious indigenous past along with its virtues and vices, own oppression, and benevolences but also attempted to unite the Bengali Hindus and Muslims on a constructed shared memory of a common past while subverting the sway of Puranic Hinduism to Buddhist Jataka Stories and myths and local cults and cultural infusions; which according to Raymond Williams, is, after all, “an intentionally selective version of a shaping past and a pre-shaped present, which is then powerfully operative in the process of social definition and identification (Williams 1977: 115).

There is no doubt that these tales and *Rakkhoshi Rani* as the monstrous feminine in them allowed the western-educated Bengali urban youths to remain rooted in its rural legacy of morality, ethics, femineity and patriarchal ambitions within British cultural colonisation. Hence, the most popular anthology of Bengali fairy tales set in regal kingdoms and enigmatic locales interpret the stratification of women as either divine beings or a demonic equivalent of female monsters despite their financial affluence. These female monsters have been perturbed through preposterous patriarchal standards where polygamy and sexual freedom are natural to men, juxtaposing honour and lack of agency for women. Therefore, by doing so, they were constantly in a relationship with the “prior knowledge” versions of the colonisers - a link established horizontally between rural Bengal and the Western canonical knowledge received through colonial education, creating a notion of an “anachronistic present”. However, spatial-temporal nuances of a large amount of social history and cultural identities in between have yet to be acknowledged (Chatterjee 1995: 11).

Furthermore, *Thakurmar Jhuli*, a collection of Bengali fairy tales, served as entertainment. These tales became not just a Bengali Hindu household treasure but also liked and cherished by their Muslim cousins. Parallely, the female monster in them aided a vehicle of social protest. It also permits the unapproved actions or words or deeds forbidden to be done by the expected standards of cultural behaviour, and doing so validates the culture (Bascom 1954: 346). It has been creating a very crucial discourse of ethnocentric nationalism, socio-hierarchical change, alteration and continuity, cultural subaltern or hegemonic symbols, subjective and subjective items, and icons; hence, it is a continuous process of flux and is inherently dynamic. Gramsci investigated society’s micro-level structure and focused on the hegemonic relationship between the dominant and subordinates. Following that, if we investigate elitism hegemonising over the subalterns within the foray of Bengali fairy tales, the element of social stratification and subordination does not remain limited to the macro hierarchies of socio-economic class and division of labour. However, it stretches to the micro hierarchies of social proliferation rural-urban, upper-caste – lower-caste and gender roles of the female monsters. This mechanism critically reflects on the patriarchal social forces of the hegemony of sensible but individual consent of the subaltern female monster like *Rakkhoshi Rani*.

In conclusion, it can be stated that *Rakkhoshi Rani*, as the monstrous feminine in Bengali fairytales, made it possible to look at the artifacts of one's history with an outsider's gaze. She is deeply connected to the social process and its functioning. She cannot exist independently and needs to work within the context of society and community. Her interaction as the living individual and her social, cultural, economic and political set-up play a pivotal role even after her apparent demise. The artistic, creative, and imaginative process of the Bengali fairy tale narrative of the female monster often has some inherent inconsistency, flux, and change, yet certain principles and standards are held or challenged to maintain the set and typical cultural values; it is anonymous.

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