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COLONIAL AMBIVALENCE AND LAL BEHARI DAY'S CONCERN WITH FOLK TALES

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ABSTRACT

Lal Behari Day's collection of folktales from Bengal was the first printed book of folk narratives from Bengal. Its impact on later collections of Bengali folktales has been substantial. Richard Carnac Temple's suggestion to assemble such an edition occasioned the compilation of these tales. However, the distinctive ambivalences in Lal Behari's collection of tales stem from his unique identity as a native Christian preacher. The paper "Colonial Ambivalence and Lal Behari Day's Concern with Folk Tales" examines Lal Behari Day's defying and evading conventions, specifically how they relate to the dominant narratives that moulded Bengali colonial discourse and Day's writings.

Keywords: Ambivalence, Bengal, Colonialism, Folk Tales, Lal Behari Day, Nineteenth Century

1. INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, folktales have developed through an oral tradition, evolving with each performance until finding a home in literary compilations. Cultures that rely on written texts tend to have different hesitancies and evasions regarding oral genres, as there is always a fear of interpolations, omissions, and deliberate twists by performers/narrators of these tales, leading to certain pertinent questions about the authenticity of the text(s). *Folk Tales of Bengal* (1883) of Lal Behari (1824 – 1894) was the first printed collection of folk narratives from the Bengal region. Ambiguities characterise the compositional transformation of nebulous oral narratives into a solidified printed text, and they are present in Lal Behari's compilation and translation of oral tales (into English).

On the periphery of this kind of transformation, one can frequently notice evasions and ambiguities regarding power discourse(s) and archetypal formulations. Lal Behari stated in the book's introduction:

"I heard many more stories than those contained in the following pages, but I rejected many, as they appeared to me to contain spurious additions to the original stories I had heard when I was a boy. The stories given in this book are a genuine sample of the old stories told by old Bengali women from age to age through a hundred generations". (ix)

This astonishingly honest revelation regarding the ellipses makes Day's works appealing as they try to capture the supposedly "authentic" stories not corrupted by "spurious" interpolations. However, the collection was initiated only after the request of Richard Carnac Temple, a colonial administrator and an anthropologist, itself speaks of the ambivalence of the project, which is a quest for authenticity, and yet in the process of authenticating these folk narratives, the elisions and omissions become a means of asserting an order to the orality whose intention was to gain better access to colonised's culture rather than an innocent activity of just being a literary compiler. It piques our interest in the oral histories that Day immortalised in his collection but have not achieved the same level of renown as the Bangla literary canonical figures Dalim Kumar and Phakir Chand.

Thus, Day paved a challenging path in compiling this collection, *Folk Tales of Bengal*, as he tried to put together what he experienced as a child. Yet, his Western education, colonial upbringing and Christian conversion told him to find an authentic voice that goes along the modernist project of precariously decoding order to an otherwise vast realm of everyday practice in almost every village of Bengal. Yet, in getting that authenticity and scientificity of discourse, he consciously omitted the colonial context, as there is almost no reference to the coloniser and its culture in the compilation. The compilation is done upon the request of a colonial administrator, who, with his "white man's burden," wanted to have such a compilation to use the same as a means to administer knowledge and thereby project the "Orient" not as it exists but as it suits the process of othering to fixate the European self, as pointed out by Edward Said in his seminal work *Orientalism* (1978).

Let us delve into the socio-cultural fabric of some of the *Folk Tales of Bengal* to have an overview of what day attempted - In "Life Secret," the Raja, his queens Duo and Suo, and their realm were utterly unencumbered by the Raj and Company; in "The Adventure of Two Thieves and Their Sons: Part I", the two criminals, feeling the effects of their unsavoury reputation, "decided to support themselves by honest labour" and stumbled into a container "full of gold mohurs"; in "The Story of a Brahmadaitya", a laird named Brahmadaitya offered a hungry Brahman one hundred bighas of "rent-free land" in exchange for a branch that the Brahman could pluck from a cursed banyan tree. The stories touch on socioeconomic realities with no colonial presence. Still, the world these tales depict—the mohurs, the rent-free *jaigir*, etc.— refers to the Sultanate's and Nawabi Bengal's era. Even though there are no direct allusions to Islamic mythology, fakirs occasionally bring remedies to the queens of Duo and Suo in "Life's Secret". There are references to early European contacts in passing, but their references are purportedly to a pre-Raj era.

We don't encounter sahibs, sepoys, or other imperial guard members. The question that arises from Day's exclusions is this: how could a Bengali folktale collection from the late 1800s, which was, in many respects, the beating heart of the Indian Empire, fail to address the topic of colonialism? In the *Preface*, he gives credit where credit is due by telling us that the idea to compile Bengali folktales first came from the renowned folklorist and British military and civil officer Richard Carnac Temple. (Day, *Folk Tales of Bengal*, vii).

As an emic storyteller, Lal Behari, thus, plays a conflicted role. He was born in the village of Sonapalashi, in the Bardhaman area. In his dealings with others, he is an outsider (a Christian convert from Alexander Duff's school) and an insider (a native Bengali man, though born in a caste which did not have the same pedigree as the upper caste because of which, upon his conversion, there was no hullaballoo in Calcutta while upon Krishna Mohan Banerjea and Michael Madhusudan Dutt's conversion, Calcutta uproared) (Macpherson). In his one-of-a-kind role as a native folktale compiler, Day's emic and etic strands paradoxically intersect, buffeting his evasions, opening up vast possibilities of ambivalence that Day had to deal with in compiling these tales. After receiving Temple's request, Day gathered his collection of Bengali folktales, acknowledging his role in the colonial paradigmatic discourse of control.

Cultural exchange was an inevitable byproduct of colonialism, and Lal Behari Day exemplifies this in many respects. An example of the fundamental contradiction in late-nineteenth-century rhetoric of the *bhadralok* is Lal Behari Day's association with the Baptist cause. He was a missionary and urban thinker who saw through the feudal zamindari model's fallacy. His book *Govinda Samanta* (1874) reflected the injustices done by the zamindars of Bengal and the Permanent Settlement in 1793. The readers are made to sympathise with the *ryat*'s degradation'(as *Gobinda Samanta* is thought to be an authentic portrayal of Bengal *ryats* (farmers), and also with the pain of a Hindu widow. This was the famous liberal-urban stance, but it served as Day's justification for becoming a Christian and his critique of the Mughal-Hindu social system's inevitable decline.

On the other hand, Day's acceptance of his Bengali heritage and the permanence of his native birth colour this. Day could not undo his native allegiances, and he was not accepted as a Baptist with similar standing to the Western ones. In this ambivalent space, he devoted his literary sensibilities to portraying the authentic Bengal and, in the process, omitted what his Western education and colonial entrapments could not accommodate in his narratives.

In his story about the exploited *ryat* in *Gobinda Samanta,* Lal Behari would offer one of the first written catalogues of Bangla's ghosts (*bhūts*). The *bhūt*, known as *Mamdo,* is undeniably Muslim. The embodiment of perfect virtue, known as the "Brahman" *bhūt* or *brahmadaitya*, resides in the Banyan or Bel tree and leads a life of the pure spirit. The Kayastha, Vaishya, and Sudra descend into the lowest social strata and lead a life of abject poverty. These are exceptionally tall and slender men. Do not let these near a mandir because they are immoral and sexually immoral. Next, there are the *skandha-kātā*, who were humans when they had their heads severed. They scour the swamps. And how could anyone have omitted the *petnī*, the blatantly curvaceous, foul-smelling feminine shade? The virginal figure known as *Shānkchihnī*, who wears a white sari and waits in the shadows of trees for an unwary victim at midnight, also lurks nearby (*Govinda Samanta*, 105-108). While pretending to be objective in his narration, Lal Behari frequently allied himself with these folk ideas via his protagonist, Govinda. In portraying the *bhuts,* Day epitomises in the text the communal and caste biases of the day but consciously did away with the British and missionary presence. As a (supposed) collaborator of colonial and missionary activities, Day's roles thus were marked by ambivalent sensibilities.

Because of his background as an Indian convert, Lal Behari insisted on being fundamentally different from his European contemporaries, a fact that frequently prompted his signature ambivalence (Macpherson). These haunting traces from his background frequently appeared in his writings (such as *Candramukhir Upakhyan)* and collection of folk tales, which he used to paint a nuanced picture of rural life.

In the introduction to Bengali folktales, Lal Behari expresses this deeply problematic position of contradictory affiliations - of writing about the people who were both ossified stereotypes to be looked down upon (even sympathetically), of giving a voice to the older women and children of a bygone childhood tinged with nostalgia, of identifying deeply yet objectifying due to absolute necessity. This troublesome act of remembering is where Lal Behari starts:

"In my *Peasant Life in Bengal*, I make the peasant boy Govinda spend some hours every evening listening to stories told by an older woman called Sambhu's mother and the best storyteller in the village." (vii)

As the day goes on, it turns out that Sambhu's mother is accurate and the source of his childhood tales, not a made-up character. According to Lal Behari's account in *Govinda Samanta*, Sambhu's mother was approximately fifty years old. After her husband passed away, she spun thread to sell to weavers (*Govinda Samanta*, 125). The children of the hamlet would gather at her house for evening conferences, during which she presented folk tales orally. In this context, one can refer to Raja Rao's *Kanthapura,* where he speaks about how each village in India has its own *Sthalapurana* and how the older women of the village play the active role of disseminating the *sthalapurana* to the future generations. Like Achakka in *Kanthapura,* Sambhu's mother is well-versed in her keen observation and narrative grandeur.

Day acknowledges the value of these oral histories but probably consciously ties them to a time before colonisation in *Folk Tales of Bengal*. The only way to reclaim this past is to reminisce about a time when one was naively innocent. As a result, he has trouble finding someone to narrate the folk tales he is collecting for his compilation:

But where was an old story-telling woman to be got? I had myself, when a little boy, heard hundreds - it would be no exaggeration to say thousands - of fairy tales from the same old woman, Sambhu's mother…but I had nearly forgotten those stories... How I wished that poor Sambhu's mother had been alive! But she had gone long ago to that bourne from which no traveller returns, and her son Sambhu, too, had followed her thither. (*Folk Tales of Bengal*, viii).

As this passage shows, the *bhadralok* discourse of the late nineteenth century is characterised by an acute sense of immutable change. There is a widespread belief that Indian folktales symbolise the country's rustic simplicity, pure childhood innocence, and cultural heritage. Ashis Nandy, in *The Intimate Enemy,* speaks about the homology of how the coloniser looks upon a child as an inferior version of the adult and how the colonised is looked down upon as a child who needs to be educated to make them cultured/civilised. British Romantic poets William Wordsworth's and William Blake's association and celebration of childhood with pure innocence is wholly disregarded and inverted in the coloniser's discourse. To establish the homology to ascertain the religious duty of the white man to supposedly extend civilisation to the non-West and thereby justify colonialism and the missionary presence, the child is now seen as someone who needs to be educated/civilised and thereby derogated to a status lower than adults.

The coloniser's initial reaction to the British homologies was to imitate the coloniser's culture, stereotypes, and parameters to prove oneself better than the coloniser. Soon, however, the fascination to imitate was inverted during the decolonising process, and the cultural stereotypes were shattered, giving rise to counter-discourse. In his Satyagraha, Nandy discusses how Mahatma Gandhi championed the child-like pure innocence and "perfect weakness" to fight the mighty military colonial British regime (Nandy 13). Though Lal Behari Day was writing much before Gandhi entered the Indian political scenario, he too championed a child's innocence. At the same time, he made choices of his folk tales to present authenticity and not merely led by his missionary Western education.

Sipra Mukherjee (2013), too, examined Lal Behari' Day's ambivalences as a Christian missionary preacher in India via the lens of his Bengali novel *Chandramukhīr Upākhyān* (1859), where he speaks about the dichotomy of how the nineteenth-century youth of Calcutta were caught between Brahmoism and conversion to Christianity because they were fascinated for the western ideals. Such ambivalences characterise Day's literary creations as a native Christian convert; he could neither be one with the Western Christians nor do away with his fascination for Indian culture and civilisation. To borrow a phrase from Homi Bhabha, Rev. Day's ambivalence can be characterised as "double, but not yet one."

Thus, while looking at Lal Behari Day's evasions as a storyteller, we must look at his avoidances in a broader context. His stories are filled with subversive elements that are shocking. In "Phakir Chand," the protagonists mutilate their friends and children. In "The Story of the Rakshasas," a *rakṣasī* fools a Brahmin by pretending to be his long-forgotten wife, an apparent reference to *kulīn* polygamy. In "The Adventures of Two Thieves and their Sons," two crooks enlist the help of a renowned "Professor of the Science of Roguery" to educate their boys. A spectre's role-playing as a spouse, lover, or husband brings back repressed memories that torment the narrator and those who listen to him. However, Day's evasions counter these subversions, solidifying the Indian village as an idyllic, otherworldly paradise. Although Lal Behari Day moved to Calcutta to pursue his education and later for his professional and literary life, his fascination and faith in idyllic rural Bengal and its inherent problems, inhibitions, customs, culture, and sensibilities form a thematic link to his significant works. The tales that Lal Behari Chose to compile in *Folk Tales of Bengal* may be the progenitors of the multi-faceted postcolonial identities we hold today as they represent the same ambiguity, the same fascination for the West with a tinge of subversive anticolonial underpinnings which coexist contrapuntally to provide us with a distinct postcolonial identity. Their continued existence would shed light on haunted stories, both old and new, helping us understand our biases, wrongdoings, compromises, and confessions, and yet, at the same time, celebrate our continuous struggle to fight our fascination for scientificity, rationality and order.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None .

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