

**The Gendered Life of the Fairytale Tradition in Bengal:
1870-1925**

Thesis submitted to Jadavpur University

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by

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Certified that the Thesis entitled

The Gendered Life of the Fairytale Tradition in Bengal: 1870-1925 submitted by me for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Arts at Jadavpur University is based upon my work carried out under the Supervision of Prof. (Dr.) Rimi B. Chatterjee (Department of English, Jadavpur University), and that neither thesis nor any part of it has been submitted before for any degree/ diploma anywhere/ elsewhere.

Countersigned by the Supervisor:

Candidate:

Date:

Date:

“But some day you will be old enough to start reading fairy tales again. You can then take it down from some upper shelf, dust it, and tell me what you think of it.”

— C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*

To Anish Bibek

May you learn the power of stories and may you never take them for granted.

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis will seek to study the Bengali *rupkatha* as a literary genre of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The indigenous *rupkatha* collections that appeared during this period in Bengal, while purporting to be written transcriptions of an oral tradition, were effectively creating a new literary tradition distinct from the oral storytelling traditions that existed in the region. The thesis will investigate the historical circumstances of the emergence of this new tradition and discuss the position of women in relation to it as women's oral storytelling culture was the original source of most of the stories. It will study the engendered life of the literary tradition through the intersectional cultural politics of Bengal's colonial encounter with Europe, the emergence of a nascent nationalist consciousness laying stress on indigenous culture and the public debates on issues called "women's questions of the nineteenth century", all of which, the thesis will argue, shaped the development of the genre. Although the oral storytelling tradition of *rupkatha* was explicitly called a women's tradition by the collector-writers of the time, the most well-known of their collections have usually been studied by folklore scholars or as part of Bengali children's literature. This thesis aims to study the stories as part of women's popular culture that entered into literary circulation through the hands of writers of a different class, gender and cultural background.

Bengal from the latter half of the nineteenth century witnessed the publication of volumes containing stories drawn from oral storytelling traditions. There existed living continuous oral storytelling traditions in the region that dated back to hundreds of years, some of which were exclusive to women. While, on the other hand, Bengal had inherited ancient literary story collections such as the Pali *Jatakas* and the Sanskrit *Panchatantra*, *Hitopadesha*, *Katha Sarit Sagar* and *Brihat Katha Manjari* which contained stories that had in turn entered

into the oral traditions of the region. Colonial indologists like Max Muller¹ and William Norman Brown were excited to find that a large number of stories collected by colonial folklorists (including G H Damant who collected tales from Bengal²) could be traced back to classical literary texts. Thus, the stories that were collected in India (including Bengal) during the colonial period had come down through two distinct traditions, the oral and the literary. These two traditions were in no way mutually exclusive and there were constant borrowing and lending between them both. Infact, most of the important literary texts of ancient India, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* and religious texts like the *Vedas* were originally transmitted orally for a considerable period of time before they were actually written down. That oral and literary storytelling traditions have been interdependent throughout history was a fact that was not exclusive to India. Example of the literary entering into oral storytelling traditions only to return back to the realm of the literary can be found in the case of one the most celebrated collection of folk stories and oral fairy stories, the *Kinder und Hausmarchen* of the Grimm Brothers. Long believed to have been direct renditions of German folk stories, scholars like Hanz Rolleke, Ruth Bottigheimer, Jack Zipes, Donald Haase and others from the 1970 onwards have unearthed enough evidence to show that much of the tales told by their oral informants were infact derived from the French literary fairy tale traditions. However, the collectors-writers in colonial Bengal who led the large-scale literary engagement with Bengali oral stories, believed unquestioningly that the folk stories they were collecting originated within oral

¹ Giuseppe Flora, "On Fairy Tales, Intellectuals and Nationalism in Bengal (1880-1920)," *Rivista Degli Studi Orientali* 75 (2002): 26-27 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41913063>.

² W. Norman Brown, "The Pañcatantra in Modern Indian Folklore," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 39 (1919): 1-54. doi:10.2307/592712.

traditions from amongst the folk and were transmitted through word of mouth down the centuries.

The idea of the “folk” is an interesting concept that affected both the conceptualising of these story collections and their reception. While in regular usage, folk refers to the common people, often with a class bias, in that it refers to peasants and working classes in particular. Asutosh Bhattacharya in his discussion of the folk literature of Bengal in *Folklore of Bengal* described the folk as the unlettered masses living in one integrated social group.³ Bhattacharya included the lack of literacy within his definition of the folk. While this concept is widespread in popular definitions of the folk, it cannot be integral to the definition of the folk. The folk has been variously defined as “the expression of a certain vision of life, certain attitudes of the spirit, of thought, of culture, of custom, of civilisation which appear with their own clearly delineated characteristics”⁴ by theorists like Guiseppe Cocchiara who transcends the class bias with such a definition, while Alan Dundes defines the folk more loosely as “any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor.”⁵

Both Cocchiara’s and Dundes’ definition could explain the use of the folk as a site of national unity during the Swadeshi phase. Bhattacharya’s intertwining of folk with orality could also be found in the thought of the indigenous *rupkatha* writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Just as Bhattacharya defines folk as “unlettered”, Tagore in his

³ Asutosh Bhattacharya, *Folklore of Bengal* (Kolkata: National Book Trust of India, 2011), 7

⁴ Donald Haase. "Yours, mine or ours? Perrault, the Brothers Grimm, and the ownership of fairy tales", *Merveilles & Contes* 7, no. 2 (1993): 385 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41390373>

⁵ Donald Haase. "Yours, mine or ours? Perrault, the Brothers Grimm, and the ownership of fairy tales", *Merveilles & Contes* 7, no. 2 (1993): 385 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41390373>

juxtaposition of the folk as the autochthonous against the foreign had also juxtaposed orality against the literary. Similarly, Bhattacharya's "integrated social group" refers to an ethnic or national group which was exactly the conception of folk in the discourse created around the literary *rupkatha* tradition. Bhattacharya also writes of folk literature that it was popular literature in the real sense and that in almost every country, "folk literature has been the basis of higher literature."

While the hierarchy of high and low literature is difficult to agree with today, his next observation holds true, that "in India, the natural way of development from folk literature to modern literature was interrupted since the beginning of the nineteenth century owing to the introduction of English education and the adoption of Western ideas and thoughts"⁶ When a folk form like the *rupkatha* entered into *bhadrolok* literary culture, it did so mediated through a western literary form: that of the European folktale and fairy tale which had become the reference point for all of the collectors and writers.

In late nineteenth century Bengal, it was not the case that Bengali society was transitioning from an oral society to a literate society, but it was undoubtedly a time of great change. A new formal education system under the British colonial influence was rapidly spreading, both through the endeavours of Christian missionaries as well as through the indigenous efforts of the *Bhadrolok* classes. This also led to the spread of new curricula that were disseminated in both English and Bengali. The indigenous *rupkatha* collections published during this time were both written by and targeted at the classes who were the beneficiaries of this colonial education system. While English-language writers and translators like Lal Behari Day, Shirish Chandra Basu, Ramsatya Mukherjee, Sovana Sundari Devi and Suniti Devi were

⁶ Asutosh Bhattacharya, *Folklore of Bengal* (Kolkata: National Book Trust of India, 2011), 8

targeting the Anglophone reading public both within India and in England, Mitra Majumdar, whose books were in Bengali, was writing for the native colonial-educated classes. Rabindranath Tagore, who wrote a short prose piece as an introduction to Mitra Majumdar's *Thakurmar Jhuli*, refers to the child who has been made to read Martin's *Ethics* and Burke's *Reflections on the French Revolution*, at the cost of his own traditions and cultural heritage, as the intended reader of the book.⁷ Thus reactions to both the English language and European literature introduced into Bengal by the colonial education system were an important factor in the development of the Bengali literary *rupkatha* tradition.

Alongside this was the influence of colonial folkloristics as brought to Bengal by British administrators and scholars. British administrators were encouraged to learn about the native population that they had been brought in to govern, and Indian folktales, fairy tales and other oral stories became an important part of the knowledge that they sought to acquire. Their works were published not only in independent volumes but also in journals that were published specifically for the purpose. The *Indian Antiquary* was one such journal which published the works of the first collector of Bengali folktales and fairy tales, D H Damant, in several issues between 1872 and 1880 under the title "Tales from Dinajpur". Alongside the British administrators, the women who accompanied them also took up the task of collecting folktales and fairy tales. They were often encouraged in their pursuits by their male peers as the *memsahibs* were often able to gain greater access to native women and their storytelling traditions as compared to the British male collectors. A few Bengali *rupkatha* found place in the volume of stories published by a young British girl Maive Stokes, the daughter of a British administrator, whose *Indian Fairy Tales* was published in 1879. It was for the same reason that

⁷ Rabindranath Tagore, "Preface", in *Thakurmar Jhuli* (Kolkata: Mitra and Ghosh, 1907), 2

British collectors often employed native assistants who could provide access to native informants alongside with helping collectors in the act of translation and transcription. The first indigenous collector of Bengali *rupkatha*, Reverend Lal Behari Day, was solicited by a British administrator-scholar, Richard Carnac Temple, who wanted Day to publish a volume of stories told by the old women of rural Bengal.

The British efforts at collecting Indian stories were not isolated incidents, but part of a larger body of colonial folkloric efforts that rose alongside European imperialism. Its roots can be traced to the European Romantic Movement that had generated an interest in all things remote, both in terms of time and space. This renewed interest in old storytelling traditions included folktales, fairy tales, ballads and romances, and upgraded their status from ‘low’ culture to authentic productions of the literary sensibility of a people. Similarly, the orient and oriental traditions received a great deal of enthusiastic attention from critics and scholars as well as the general public. The Indian fairy tale and folktale collections authored and published by British men and women were the result of the intersection of both these interests. Along with this was the immediate need post the Mutiny of 1857 and the establishment of the direct rule of the British crown over India to learn more about the Indian people and their ethos, which could be employed for ensuring smooth running of the empire and preventing another such revolt.

Now, the European tradition of collecting folktales and fairy tales by the middle of the nineteenth century had already seen the scholarship of the Grimm Brothers and the publication of their landmark volume the *Kinder und Hausmarchen* in 1812 (Vol 1) and 1814 (Vol2). This volume and the Grimm Brothers’ work influenced and shaped the methods of collection of folktales and fairy tales across Europe and then across their empires. The Brothers’ work successfully crafted the tradition of literary fairy tales based on oral tales. The European literary fairy tale writers before them, the sixteenth century Italians Basile and Straparola, the

seventeenth century Perrault and women writers like Madame D' Aulnoy authored and published literary collections without claiming them to be literary transcriptions of oral stories. The Grimm brothers, deeply influenced by the German romantics Herder and Schelling, claimed authenticity for their work as direct transcriptions of oral German tales, (though it was in reality far different from their claims as two generations of scholars from Rolfeke, to Bottigheimer, Zipes and Haase have shown).

For their contemporary readers and scholars, the Grimms' work became a landmark for fairy tale collections and influenced the collection of fairy tales throughout the nineteenth century. Their influence across Europe and some of their colonies have been studied in the 2014 book *Grimms' Tales around the Globe: The Dynamics of Their International Reception* (2014) edited by Vanessa Joosen and Gillian Lathey. However, that British collectors and the colonial British education system had brought the Grimm Brothers to India and influenced both the colonial and indigenous collections of Indian folktales and fairy tales, though mentioned by sub-continental scholars like Ashraf Siddiqui, has not been critically studied till date. The influence of the Grimm brothers can be traced and was openly acknowledged in the works of the British collectors and some of the indigenous collectors collecting in English, like Lal Behari Day and Ramsatya Mukherjee. However, the influence of the Grimm Brothers' thoughts and methods can also be traced in subsequent *rupkatha* collections and the discourses surrounding them even when they did not receive open acknowledgement. The first chapter of this thesis has been dedicated to tracing these colonial influences.

The end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth also saw the growth of an intellectual discourse around the Bengali oral story-telling traditions spurred by the rise of Indian nationalism and the Swadeshi movement in Bengal. Publishing of *rupkatha* stories became a political act aimed at challenging the hegemony of the British colonial education system and its impact upon the children of the literate classes. This phase witnessed

the pioneering work of Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar who published in colloquial Bengali two collections containing tales drawn from oral sources, *Thakurmar Jhuli* (1907) and *Thakurdadar Jhuli* (1909). Both the volumes have remained landmark texts in the history of Bengali print publication. The first partition of Bengal in 1905 was opposed by the Bengali intelligentsia and caused a new wave of nationalistic feeling. This led to widespread efforts at the revival of *swadeshi*, that is, the indigenous culture of Bengal and caused a renegotiation of the *bhadrolok* relationship with folk and popular cultural forms. Reviving the Bengali folk storytelling traditions among the educated upper and middle classes was a part of this project. This set the stage for the publication of literary texts of oral stories and Rabindranath Tagore became a leading figure in such efforts. Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar's work was framed through the discourses generated by the *swadeshi* cultural resistance. *Thakurmar Jhuli* subtitled "Banglar Rupkatha" or Bengal's *rupkatha* was projected as the indigenous answer to the western fairy tale by members of the Bengali intelligentsia like Dinesh Chandra Sen, Swarnakumari Debi and Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore's wrote an introductory essay to the Mitra Majumdar book where he also pointed out the connection between the *swadeshi* cause and the *rupkatha* collection. On one hand, this conceptualisation of the stories was well within the boundaries of the romantic nationalism of thinkers like Herder which had inspired the Grimm Brothers. The Grimms' conceptualisation of the "volkskund" and the literature of the *volk* (folk) was also done in nationalistic terms.

Tagore went on to present a conception of *rupkatha* stories through a series of binary oppositions: Bengali *rupkatha* stories/ English fairy tales, organically created/synthetic factory made, cottage industry of grandmothers/Manchester mills and by association *rupkatha*=*swadeshi* versus English fairy tales=foreign and *rupkatha*=oral versus English fairy tales=literary. Implicit in this presentation was the valorisation of one half of these binary

oppositions and also the fact that the English fairy tale was the reference point for the definition of the genre of stories that was being published.

Thus, these nineteenth and early twentieth century categorisation of *rupkatha* stories demonstrate how genres emerge and exist through interrelations. Ralph Cohen writes:

A genre does not exist independently; it arises to compete or to contrast with other genres, to compete, augment or interrelate with other genres. Genres do not exist by themselves; they are named and placed within hierarchies or systems of genres, and each is defined by reference to the system and its members. A genre, therefore, is to be understood in relation to other genres, so that its aims and purposes at a particular time are defined by its interrelation with and differentiation from others.⁸

The literary genre of *rupkatha* that emerged in the late nineteenth century through the hands of writers like Lal Behari Day and Sirish Chandra Basu was on one hand *contrasting* with the genre of western fairy tales, since they were aiming to present “Indian” stories that belonged to the same category of tales as those collected by western writers and thus add to international scholarly activities. On the other hand, during the Swadeshi phase, *rupkatha* as a literary genre was *competing* with English fairy tales in an effort to counter their hegemonic dominance over the English-educated Bengali upper and middle classes.

While the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century writers continually emphasised the *rupkatha* as an oral genre and claimed that their volumes were simple

⁸ Ralph Cohen, "History and Genre", *New Literary History* 17, no. 2 (1986): 207. doi:10.2307/468885.

straightforward transcriptions of oral stories, this thesis will argue that they were in effect creating a literary genre that was distinct from the oral tradition. To begin with, the writing down of oral stories was not a simple and transparent act. The production of the written text is a process that, in itself, requires critical attention. Jack Zipes observes that one can see a single fairy tale text as a “symbolic act” infused with the ideological viewpoint of the author.⁹ The manner in which the *rupkatha* texts that were written during this time were informed by the ideological viewpoints of their authors will come in for a critical enquiry. Oral genres were defined on the basis of content, and in terms of content each of the oral tale genres that belonged to Bengal’s storytelling tradition, that is, the *bratakatha*, the *upakatha* and the *rupkatha* had much in common. They all drew upon common subject matter found in human society.¹⁰ Animal fables or *upakatha* used animals to talk about humans and social organisation. Oral wonder-tales or *rupkatha*, despite the fantastical events and actions of their plots, had their foundation in real social issues. And religious elements were not integral to ritual tales or *bratakatha*, which were also focussed on human relationships and social functioning. This led to a fluidity in the oral tradition which allowed tales to pass from one storytelling genre to another with minor changes.

Asutosh Bhattacharya observes that a number of *bratakathas* that were used for religious rituals had actually been derived from *rupkatha* and *upakathas*, and it was quite possible to strip them of their religious elements and reinstate them as *rupkathas* and *upakathas*.¹¹ Similarly, analysis of a number of *rupkathas* will reveal them to have been derived

⁹ Jack Zipes, *Fairytales and the Art of Subversion: The Classical Genre for Children and the Process of Civilization* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 3

¹⁰ Asutosh Bhattacharya, *Folklore of Bengal* (Kolkata: National Book Trust of India, 2011), 8

¹¹ Bhattacharya, *Folklore of Bengal*, 32

from *bratakathas*.¹² Thus within the oral tradition, genres existed side by side, they grew from one another and provided a flexibility that allowed the possibility for stories to easily shift from one genre to another. The stories participated in a given genre but were not fixed to it. In his 1966 book *Banglar Lok Sahitya*, Asutosh Bhattacharya collected and classified stories from Bengali oral traditions which included stories that had been published in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century volumes, on the basis of their content. In such a classification, *rupakatha*, *upakatha* and *bratakatha* narratives are jumbled under various categories such as stories about miraculous birth, stories about magical action, stories about ghosts, stories about gods, stories about cruelty, stories about stupidity etc. However, such fluidity was no longer possible within the literary tradition.

As the literary genre of the Bengali fairy tale was constructed during the late nineteenth century, the genre came to be recognised both as derived from a women's oral tradition and as *shishu sahitya* or children's literature. The genre of *shishu sahitya* was itself a colonial product which came into existence under the influence of the vastly popular Victorian English genre of children's literature. Ramendranath Tribedi first coined the name *shishu sahitya* in his extensive introduction to Yogindranath Sarkar's *Khukumonir Chara* (1899). The Bengali oral tradition was never exclusive in terms of its audience and it was never meant to be a children's genre at all. Asutosh Bhattacharya makes this important observation in his discussion of folk literature where he says that within oral culture, stories of all kinds were aimed at a general audience. Furthermore, an investigation of their themes makes it clear that much of the material that these stories dealt with were beyond the grasp of children. For *rupkatha* narratives dealt with romantic love, while *upakathas* talked of life and social philosophy, and *bratakathas* dealt

¹² Bhattacharya, *Folklore of Bengal*, 14

with common good.¹³ However, in literary circulation *rupkatha* came to be associated with children. This occurred through dual processes of agreement between the authors with the reader on one hand and the reader and the text on the other.

Northrop Frye had suggested that “the genre is determined by the conditions established between the poet and his public” and Fredric Jameson building on Frye, asserted that genre is a literary institution and a social contract between a writer and a particular public “whose function is to specify the proper use of a particular cultural artefact.”¹⁴ Now, when the *rupkatha* was brought forth as a literary genre for the literate classes of Bengal, the discourse generated around the genre by authors and enthusiasts configured the genre as a children’s genre and communicated the same in great detail to the intended readers. Lal Behari Day claimed that he had set out to create “a collection of those unwritten stories which old women in India recite to little children in the evenings”¹⁵. Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar and Rabindranath Tagore in their respective prefaces to *Thakurmar Jhuli* discussed at length their intended reader as the young child who attended colonial schools and studied a foreign curriculum but was starved of indigenous wonder-stories. These stories contributed greatly to the pleasures of childhood that the authors of the essays had been fortunate enough to experience in their childhoods.

This pleasure was now being denied to the child because the women of the households could no longer tell these stories.¹⁶ Unrecognised in such declarations was the boundaries of class within which their statements were formulated. The extension of this argument was that

¹³ Bhattacharya, *Folklore of Bengal*, 24

¹⁴ Ralph Cohen, "History and Genre", *New Literary History* 17, no. 2 (1986): 207.
doi:10.2307/468885.

¹⁵ Lal Behari Day, “Preface”, in *Folktales of Bengal* (Kolkata: Uccharan, 1993), ii

¹⁶ Stated both in Rabindranath’s Preface and Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar’s Introduction to *Thakurmar Jhuli*.

the deracinated state of women necessitated intervention in the form of written publications by male writers so that the stories remained in cultural memory. This is similar to how ‘progress’, as defined by the European Enlightenment, sidelined women in many traditional occupations, such as healing, where modernity was thought to take away women’s ability to ‘do good’, even though that ability and associated lore and skills had been deeply circumscribed by cultural suspicion of women’s agency in the preceding historical age.

Similar sentiments among the anthologists echoed the Victorian association of children (and to a lesser extent savages/primitives) with fairy tales. This association was also present in the myths generated around the work of the Grimm brothers. Jack Zipes writes that the first English translation of the Grimm Brothers’ *Kinder und Hausmarchen* by Edgar Taylor published in two volumes in 1823 and 1826 as *German Popular Stories* generated some major myths about the work of the Grimm Brothers. One of the most significant of these myths was that the tales were intended for children which they were not despite the title of the volume¹⁷. In fact the Brothers had, in their own lifetime, published a heavily edited and censored shorter volume that was aimed at children and was distinct from the original book. In Victorian England, fairy tales were eventually published en masse for children after the violence and sexual references present in the work of the Grimm Brothers and fairy tale writers before them such as Charles Perrault, Madame D’Aulnoy and Basile were edited out.

Tolkien commented on this while maintaining that there was no essential connection between fairy tales and children that “the association of children and fairy-stories is an accident of our domestic history. Fairy-stories in the modern lettered world have been relegated to the

¹⁷ Jack Zipes, *Grimm Legacies: The Magic Spell of Grimm’s Folk and Fairy Tales* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), xi

‘nursery’, as shabby or old-fashioned furniture is relegated to the playroom, primarily because the adults do not want it, and do not mind if it is misused.”¹⁸ Since the British print market impacted the print market of colonial Bengal, English fairy tales had become popular reading material for Bengali children of the literate classes. There were also popular translations of English fairy tales in Bengali such as Sukholata Rao’s *Chotoder Grimm Brothers*. Hence, when *rupkatha* in literary circulation competed with the English fairy tale, it did so as a children’s genre.

Now this idea of “to whom” the *rupkatha* stories belonged affected both the reception of the stories and was integral to the discourse that was generated around these stories. The question of ownership, states Donald Hasse, is “not an idle question”. The specific view of the reader and the author have an “impact on the reception of fairy tales in so far as they determine how we both read and use fairy tales.”¹⁹ The literary genre of *rupkatha* also came to be accepted as children’s literature through the reader’s acceptance of the texts as such. Since, the genre was already defined in relation to the English fairy tales popular in the Bengali print market, the readers’ expectations from the printed *rupkatha* texts was pre-determined.

The texts were also edited with the intended reader in mind. For example, Suniti Devi, introduced tropes and conventions that would be familiar to readers of Victorian fairy tales, such as fairies as magic helpers of hapless young princesses, into the *rupkatha* stories that she collected in her book *Indian Fairytales*. Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar who was writing specifically with a juvenile readership in mind, censored out all references to rape, incest or

¹⁸ J. R. R. Tolkien, ‘On Fairy-Stories,’ in *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*, ed. by Christopher Tolkien (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1983), 130

¹⁹ Donald Haase. “Yours, mine or ours? Perrault, the Brothers Grimm, and the ownership of fairy tales”, *Merveilles & Contes* 7, no. 2 (1993): 393. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41390373>

acts of violence that can be found in other versions of the same stories written by different writers. This ultimately resulted in a century of scholarship that viewed literary *rupkatha* as children's literature.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth century consensus among the writers and readers of Bengali *rupkatha* seemed to have been that these stories belonged on one hand to the national child and on the other hand to the national woman. While the national child was marked out as the recipient of the stories, the national woman was identified as the original bearers of the tradition. Orality was intertwined with womanhood, an association that Tagore overtly and writers like Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar and Rev. Lal Behari Day covertly makes through their reference to the indigenous female storyteller in their prefatory essays. While this association was based on the social reality of women having abysmally low literacy rates at the time, this association was also important to the late nineteenth century nationalist consciousness. Women, were integral to the political opposition to the colonial state by Indian nationalists in the late nineteenth century.

This is not to say that women were given an active space in the political opposition or allowed mass participation, rather women had become the site on which the political opposition was staged. The condition of women had been evoked throughout the nineteenth century by the colonial state and social reform movements as a problem of Indian tradition. The same woman was now recruited by nationalists in the defence of Indian tradition. Since, cultural resistance was an important part of the political resistance during this time, women and indigenous cultural traditions conflated within the political thought of the time. Partha Chatterjee showed how early Indian nationalism had separated the “domain of culture into two

spheres”: these spheres were linked to the differential realms of the inner and the outer, the *ghar* (home) and the *bahir* (world), the spiritual and the material, the female and the male.²⁰

The outer sphere of material culture involved daily exchange of men with the colonial state which necessitated their submission to and compromise with the colonial powers. It was thus important that the inner spiritual sphere occupied by women within their homes remain sacrosanct and women remain the incorruptible bearer of traditional culture. This sphere was to be treated as sacred, as were the women and indigenous traditions. Women, nation and tradition were thus linked in a tight chain. This is the association evoked by Tagore in his Preface to the *Thakurmar Jhuli* when he talks of the indigenous woman who bore the storytelling tradition that was at the heart of national culture.

Tanika Sarkar too has emphasised the central place of the family and Hindu conjugality in the nationalist political consciousness. These nationalist discourses on women and the women’s question becomes relevant for understanding the *swadeshi* discourse around the *rupkatha* tradition and will be explored in this thesis. The position of women within these discourses around the *rupkatha* tradition vis a vis its conception of womanhood and girlhood, as well as the representation of women in the texts are important points of enquiry. As the literary tradition was claiming to have derived from a women’s oral tradition, a comparative study of the tradition alongside other popular women’s folk storytelling traditions, most notably, the *bratakatha* tradition is an exciting field of enquiry.

An important moment for the literary *rupkatha* tradition was thus when Bengali women started writing and publishing these tales. Two such writers were Sovana Sundari Devi, a niece

²⁰ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), 120

of Rabindranath Tagore and member of one of the foremost families of the nineteenth and the early twentieth century Bengal, and Suniti Devi, the daughter of the leader of the younger branch of the Brahmo Samaj and social reformer, Keshab Chandra Sen and also the Maharani of Coochbehar royal family. Sovana Sundari published *The Orient Pearls* in 1915 and Suniti Devi's *Indian Fairytales* appeared in 1923²¹. Both English-educated and well read, they had been to England (Suniti Devi was a courtier in the court of Queen Victoria and successive kings) and were the elite even among the class of new women of the early twentieth century. It is owing to these factors that their choice of English as the preferred medium of writing comes of no surprise. The question of whether their works can be read as a reclaiming of the female storytelling tradition despite their *Bhadrolok* class affiliations is something will also be explored in this thesis. The early twentieth century Bengali reader readily accepted the texts within the prescribed genre definitions. Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar, who was the only collector in this period who wrote in Bengali can easily be identified as the most popular within Bengali print culture. While some of the other male writers, most notably, Reverend Lal Behari Day, are also remembered in both popular and scholarly circles, the women writers of the literary *rupkatha* tradition remain largely forgotten. It is, therefore, important that they be studied in their own right and for the ideological counterpoints that they can possibly provide to the canonical male writers.

The emergence of the literary genre of *rupkatha* in late nineteenth century and early twentieth century Bengal occurred at the intersection of Bengal's colonial encounter and the rise of an early nationalist consciousness. This marked a transformation of what existed as part

²¹ Shovona Devi, *The Orient Pearls* (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd, 1915).

Suniti Devi, *Indian Fairy Tales* (Calcutta: The Art Press, 1923)

of a popular women's oral storytelling into a literary genre that entered print circulation. The colonial encounter influenced the collections and shaped the writing of these literary texts. It was also during this time that the genre of *rupkatha* in its modern signification emerged as a result of these historical forces. As an oral tradition was transformed into a literary tradition, the process of transformation from an oral genre into a new literary genre involved a series of erasure and addition. The new literary genre was established through an implicit contract between the colonial educated *bhadrolok* writers who communicated their conception of the new literary genre and their literate middle and upper class readership who accepted the concepts. This thesis aims to investigate them.

Methodology

The period that this thesis is examining has largely held published folktales and fairy tale stories as simple texts which directly represented the oral story in print. The stories were almost always thought to have oral origins and bear an uncomplicated relationship with their progenitors: the untainted common folk. Intertwined with the oral and the folk was a romanticism induced notion of simplicity and purity. This had also caused a logical connection to be made between the stories of oral origin and children. These assumptions about the nature of folktales and fairy tales have underlaid the field of fairy tale studies throughout the first half of the twentieth century. These assumptions have also been at play in methodologies like the structuralist studies of fairy tale motifs, types and functions and psychoanalytical studies of cross-cultural tales.

While many valuable issues have been discerned by these methodologies, their universalising tendencies and treatment of the fairy tale as an ahistorical artifact is problematic. On one hand the textual complexities arising from the processes of writing, collection, editing, translation, publication, reception, processes which were integral to the meaning making of the published texts have been overlooked, and on the other hand the cultural and historical context

of individual texts have not been taken into account. Yet these issues remain centrally important for a proper understanding of fairy tale texts as scholars like Donald Haase, Jack Zipes, Ruth Bottigheimer, have demonstrated through their studies of the western fairy tale which have taken into account the influence of the social in shaping the tales of the western literary tradition starting from sixteenth century mercantile centres, to seventeenth century French courts and parlours and the eighteenth/nineteenth century German politics. Consequently, fairy tale readings have focussed both on the editorial history as well as socio-historical contexts of tales.

Haase traces the starting point of the fairy tale scholarship with focus on textual and socio-cultural history of the published volumes to the research of Hans Rolleke in the 1970s, who studied the Grimm Brothers work (which was one of the instrumental texts that gave birth to the nineteenth century view of folktales and fairy tales) and showed how their volume *Kinder Und Hausmarchen*, contrary to long held belief did not contain simple transcriptions of oral German stories but was shaped by layered processes of deliberate (often extensive) authorial interventions, selection of stories, choice of tellers. The collection in turn was subject to various myth making by its recipients both within Germany and outside that had affected the understanding of the Brothers' scholarship. This socio-cultural turn has also greatly shaped contemporary feminist readings of the fairy tale which itself has had a distinct tradition behind it mostly concentrated on the psychosocial reception of the tales and their influence on women. Feminist scholars using psychoanalysis and later social constructivism have variously shown fairy tales to have internalised misogyny as well as to have preserved matriarchal myths. However, these studies, both feminist and otherwise have been concentrated on western fairy tales with tales from other cultures receiving focus only recently.

This thesis intends to study the rich tradition of Bengali fairy tale texts derived from folk tales of the late 19th century and the early 20th century by contextualising it in the social history of the period. The study will recognise the complex intertextuality of the texts which

combine folk narratives with authorial interventions while focusing on aspects of gender as embodied in the tradition and given currency by it. One major challenge for this study has been the absence of any kind of archival manuscripts of the published texts that could throw light into the process of revision/rewriting/editing. The critical study of the *Kinder und Hausmarchen* was greatly benefitted by the discovery of the Olenberg manuscripts which allowed scholars to track the stages of the Grimm Brothers' editing of their material. This thesis has had to work around the challenge by critically studying versions of the same stories which were collected by different authors.

Research Objectives

1. Study the intersection of social, political and cultural forces that generated interest in the fairy tale in the second half of the nineteenth century. Study these forces as frames of reference which shaped the published texts.
2. Study the major literary influences on the development of the tradition and for that considering the worldwide legacy of the Grimm Brothers, study the legacy of the scholarship of the Grimm Brothers in Bengal and how it affected the indigenous collector-writers.
3. Place the collector-writers of fairy tales in their socio-historical contexts and investigate how these contexts shaped their individual writing.
4. Study the Bengali *rupkatha* as indigenous women's cultural tradition and investigate the reason why the oral tradition was considered endangered by the end of the nineteenth century. Do a comparative study of the *rupkatha* texts with other contemporary women's popular cultural traditions.
5. Study the emphasis and erasure of specific gender identities in the identification of the literary tradition's intended reader and in the conception of its ownership in the

discourse woven around the tradition by the collector-writers and members of the indigenous intelligentsia. Investigate the reasons why.

6. Study elements of social reality underneath the fairy tale fantasy. Investigate whether the fairy tale texts reproduce heteronormative structures of gendered social relations or resist them? Study alongside this specifically the authorial interventions that shaped the literary text's representation of gender and considering the intertextual nature of the published texts study whether such impositions were seamless.

Research Questions

1. Why the flowering of interest in the Bengali fairy tale starting with the 1870s? What were the socio-cultural and historical forces at play? How did they affect the story texts?
2. What were the literary influences behind the establishment of a literary tradition of Bengali fairy tales based on oral texts?
3. Who were the collector-writers who published fairy tale texts based on oral tales in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century? In what way were their works shaped by their individual milieu and contexts?
4. Why can the Bengali *rupkatha* be called a women's tradition? Can the voices emerging from the *rupkatha* narratives be compared with other contemporary women's popular culture?
5. What gender identities and gender roles were emphasised in the discourses woven around the *rupkatha* tradition and what were erased and why?
6. Do fairy tale plots and its fantastical figures have basis in social reality? Can heteronormative social structures of gender be traced in them?
7. What models of gendered behaviour and gender roles emerge from the texts? To what extent was it the result of authorial interventions? Do the stories resist authorial

narration and throw up moments where the narratorial voice breaks and subversive voices emerge?

Literature Review

The literary tradition of Bengali *rupkatha* emerged at a particular point in history which marked the intersection between the mature phase of British colonial rule in India and the rise of the early Indian nationalism, in the last decades of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. It was at this point that the concept of tradition (as in heritage) and a specific conception of national womanhood had been called into service as part of the resistance to the colonial state. The personal domain of family, conjugality and socio-religious practises had effectively been made political and used as a weapon to defend Indian culture against perceived British onslaught.

This context is extremely important for understanding the indigenous discourse that grew around the *rupkatha* tradition as this discourse was seeped deeply in the political discourse of the time and imbibed the constructs of gender from it. Accordingly, the history of gender and the state as researched by Partha Chatterjee and Tanika Sarkar has been relevant to this study. The arguments made in this thesis which trace the discourse around the *rupkatha* tradition to nationalist thought draws from Chatterjee's observations made in the chapter "The Nation and its Women" from his book *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Post Colonial Histories*²². Chatterjee has observed that the idea of Indian tradition and Indian womanhood were intimately linked first within the colonialist discourses, then in the social reform project and finally in the nationalist discourses that grew in the late nineteenth century. The public debates on the condition of women that took place in the nineteenth century and are

²² Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995)

popularly referred to as the women's questions of the nineteenth century were not about the particular condition of women in a particular socio-historical location, but rather about the "political encounter"²³ between the British ruled colonial state and the tradition of the colonised people. In the section, Chatterjee further argues that the very idea of Indian tradition itself, which came into focus in the white colonialist thought on Indian women, as well as in the social reform project, was itself a product of colonialist thought.

The British had constituted this idea of Indian tradition through a process of exclusion that had fixed upper caste practises as representative of the entire society and given exclusive access to upper caste men in matters of civil law. On the other end, when Indian nationalism grew to oppose the British, the defence of this Indian tradition was important and nationalists took up the women's question not as a problem of the contemporary social treatment of women but as a perceived problem of Indian tradition. Chatterjee's thesis becomes important for understanding the discourse that grew around *rupkatha* as it was also around the idea of tradition and that too around a women's tradition. As tradition was linked to the women's question, the reverse was also true in that women were linked to tradition. Women were identified as the primary bearers of tradition and the nationalist eulogy of indigenous tradition included the eulogy of a particular vision of indigenous womanhood that was consistent with the nationalist discourses. This had ramifications for writers of *rupkatha* like Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar and commentator/collector like Dinesh Chandra Sen who were invested in the nationalist vision of the period.

²³ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), 119

The linking of women and tradition in the nationalist discourses was also achieved through a line of thought that saw the division of culture into two realms. This was also discussed by Chatterjee in his essay “The Nationalist Resolution of the Women’s Question” published in the landmark volume for the history of gender in colonial India, *Recasting Women* edited by Sudesh Vaid and Kumkum Sangari.²⁴ In order to reach a convenient compromise between the contrasting needs of adopting some of the British cultural mores (necessary for the daily intercourse that took place in the sphere of work and other public places) and preserving a distinct cultural identity based on indigenous cultural tradition, nationalist thought separated domain of culture into two realms- the material and the spiritual, that is the outer and the inner. This binary when applied to day to day living, divided the material and spiritual spheres as the world and the home and thus by extension the masculine and the feminine.

In the essay Chatterjee argues that Indian nationalist discourses justified the adoption of western modernity by stating that the western techniques of the organisation of material life was superior to that of the East. It was this that had given them a distinct advantage and allowed them to colonise the eastern people. This western material culture was to be learnt from and traditional eastern culture accordingly reformed vis a vis its material aspects. However, in the spiritual domain, the east had nothing to learn from the west and here the east was far superior. This belief in the superiority of eastern spiritual culture was pervasive, even Tagore, who was otherwise critical of militant nationalism when writing the prose pieces that went on to

²⁴ Partha Chatterjee, “The Nationalist Resolution of the Women’s Question”, in *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, ed. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (New Delhi: Kali for women, 1989): 233-253

constitute his book on Nationalisms, believed that the East had its superior spiritual culture to offer to the West who must learn and reacquire the spiritual values it has lost.²⁵

In the late nineteenth century colonial Bengali/Indian nationalist discourse, the superior spiritual culture of the east, its inner culture, was constituted as the core of its self-identity and centre of its national culture. In contrast, the material outer world was a place where the Indian man must accept his inferiority and his colonised status in his exchange with the colonisers. It was a world of daily humiliation and compromise. In the inner domain, on the other hand, his head could be held high but since he essentially belonged to the outer world, the inner sphere essentially belonged to the Indian woman. She was the bearer of spiritual culture, traditions and the core of national self-identity. Now, Tagore in his Preface to the *Thakurmar Jhuli* places the *rupkatha* tradition in the context of these two spheres of the material and the spiritual. He employs a series of binary oppositions to position the *rupkatha* tradition relative to the European genre of the fairy tale and these binaries evoke the nationalist division of spheres. The European/ English fairy tale is a literary culture that is the product of the English Manchester mills, therefore, is a product of material culture whereas the *rupkatha* tradition is an oral culture belonging to the homely grandmothers that is essential for nurturing the national child and strengthening the national spiritual core.²⁶ Yet Daksinaranjan's project was a typical project of modernity, in that he was participating in the creation of a new literary genre which was dependent upon print circulation and targeted at the mostly urban literate middle classes that had come into existence through Bengal's colonial encounter.

²⁵ Rabindranath Tagore, *Nationalism* (London: Penguin, 2009)

²⁶ Rabindranath Tagore, "Preface", in *Thakurmar Jhuli* (Kolkata: Mitra and Ghosh, 1907), 3

This new literary genre was based upon the older storytelling tradition and thus was bringing orality into the realm of the literary and adapting it to suit the needs of the contemporary. Chatterjee's, on his part, observes that the nationalist discourses were not rejecting modernity for the traditional but attempting to make "modernity consistent with the nationalist project"²⁷. Chatterjee observes there was a common consciousness during this time that old norms that were breaking down because of the forces of the time were on one hand unsalvageable and on the other not enough to actually deal with the circumstances of the present. New norms were thus needed for the modern world but they could not be made through blind imitation of the west. These observations are helpful for contextualising the paradigm of the *rupkatha* writers and commentators. Furthermore, the anxiety that Tagore and Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar displayed regarding the threatened westernisation of the indigenous women during this period can be contextualised from Partha Chatterjee's discussions in the "Nation and its Women". Dakshinaranjan had lamented the fact that Bengali mothers who have been the traditional teller of these tales and who work it wan to propagate the stories, had lost them and could no longer tell them.²⁸ Tagore on his part had mentioned in the Preface²⁹ his prior failure to have the stories written down by an educated female hand. He wrote that he had found that their linguistic style had strayed far away from the natural language of the oral stories.

²⁷ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), 120

²⁸ Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar, "Introduction", in *Thakurmar Jhuli* (Kolkata: Mitra and Ghosh, 1907), 8

²⁹ Rabindranath Tagore, "Preface", in *Thakurmar Jhuli* (Kolkata: Mitra and Ghosh, 1907), 3

The pressing need to conserve the stories which required that the tales be put in print through male intervention suggested that the spiritual core was no longer capable of continuing with its core traditions. The core had been contaminated. This anxiety was a theme that Chatterjee says can be traced in the didactic essays written by nineteenth century moralists, in novels, dramas, farces, satires and even in the patua scroll paintings. It was however, as Chatterjee says, difficult to find actual historical counterparts even in the most anglicised of families for the gross caricatures and hysterical depictions of the westernised Indian woman. These depictions were aimed at evoking laughter and moral condemnation but also played a role in forming public opinion that went on to actually contribute to the development of a female educational curricula consistent with the nationalist vision. Female education also went from being a contentious subject to widely accepted necessity needed for locating women in their proper place in the modern world. This proper place undoubtedly was linked to domesticity and to conjugality.

Now, conjugality in particular and the family in general also received attention and intense scrutiny within the nationalist discourse. Tanika Sarkar in her book *Hindu Wife Hindu Nation* discusses how despite the divide between the spheres of the private and the public, corresponding to the home and the world and the male and the female, the Age of Consent Bill, the only social reform law bill to be passed in the late nineteenth century (in 1891), effectively blurred this divide because it was a public incursion into the domestic realm. This also brought the domestic realm out into the public and discussions of political justice and rights were articulated through the arrangement of human relationships within the domestic and their nature, ideals and virtues.³⁰ Infact, family relationships became a metaphor for the political

³⁰ Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife Hindu Nation: Community, Religion and Cultural Nationalism* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001), 243

relations between the colonial state and the colonised masses. To elucidate, parallels and contrasts were drawn between the relationships between men and women within households and the British colonisers and their subjects in the public sphere. However, as Tanika Sarkar notes nationalist discourse was at great pain to hide the fact that this effectively meant that private relations were also political. They suggested that Indian conjugality was based on the willed surrender of the woman to the man unlike the colonial relations where the Indian man was forcefully subjugated to the English man. This willed surrender of the woman showed her spiritual superiority and by extension the superiority of the core values of Indian tradition and Indian spirituality. This difference became grounds for challenging the colonial relations.

Placed in this context, Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar's representation of women characters clearly show the influence of such nationalist discourses. I have attempted a thorough critical reading of these figures in this thesis. This conception of willed surrender of the Indian woman also runs through the early critical reception of Mitra Majumdar's stories notably in the readings of Dinesh Chandra Sen³¹. The central place that was accorded to conjugality in the stories of *Thakurdadar Jhuli* and in many of the stories of *Thakurmar Jhuli* can also be linked to their time and milieu through Sarkar's study. Sarkar notes how conjugality became "the centre of gravity around which the discursive field of the family organised itself"³² and family came to be recognised as a man's real place of work (a fact Sarkar infers from the lack of workplace situations in the Kalighat *pata* scroll paintings as well as the fiction of the nineteenth century). She observes that this myth of willed surrender of the Indian woman to

³¹ Dinesh Chandra Sen, *Folk Literature of Bengal* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1920)

³² Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife Hindu Nation: Community, Religion and Cultural Nationalism* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001), 198

her spouse and by extension social laws that necessitated her complete submission, also played a huge role in the counter discourses to the social reform bill on the age of consent that was introduced in the late nineteenth century. Nationalists saw the colonial government's introduction of social reform bills as an intrusion into the private sphere where indigenous laws should have complete autonomy and this nationalist camp who Tanika Sarkar calls "the rivalist-nationalists" actively called out such intrusion as unnecessary. Sarkar notes that they argued that indigenous social law though apparently harsh to women and often detrimental to their physical well-being, commanded the willed submission of women to them. Thus by extension, they argued that the superiority of Indian traditions and Indian womanhood was such that Indian women were ready to sacrifice their well-being, their happiness and if need be their lives for the sake of family, community and *shastric* law. Autonomy of the community and the indigenous right to self-rule in the domestic sphere were supreme for her. This is the context against which this thesis will critically analyse the female figures from the *rupkatha* texts of the period.

However, Sarkar discusses how even the nationalists were forced to accept that indigenous law was detrimental to women as the social reformist camp cast an intense scrutiny on the body of the young brides, a great number of whom often were maimed and killed because of early marriage, premature sexual intercourse and early child bearing. The much publicised case of the death of Phulmoni Dasi, a 10 year old girl due to marital rape in 1889, brought much of these debates between the social reformers and the revivalist-nationalists out into the open. Sarkar also notes the presence of the informal tribunal of the community before which both sides had to explain their positions. The death of a child required serious re-evaluation of both the political positions and as the case was heard in court, medical evidence was presented that established the detrimental nature of child marriage on the life of the young child brides. Tanika Sarkar's analysis of the case in her essay "A Pre-history of Rights" becomes important

for my study of the *rupkatha* tradition as I will study the figure of the girlchild within the contemporary discourses generated around the *rupkatha* tradition. This case and the debates surrounding it, and subsequently the debates surrounding the Age of Consent Act of 1891, (which was also passed as a direct result of the case) was important for the early conception of indigenous colonial girlhood. While dealing with the issue of consent and the suitable age of marriage, both sides were forced to confront the question as to whether they were talking of a woman or a mere child.

That Bengali culture had little concept of a state of girl hood that preceded the state of a female being a wife and subsequently a mother, has been discussed by both Jasodhara Bagchi and Ruby Lal in their studies of the gender history of the nineteenth century. Both of these studies have been relevant for my thesis and will be discussed in a while. The important point that Tanika Sarkar notes is that a conception of immaturity for the female sex, a state of physical unreadiness when she is unable to play the role of wife and mother first develops from these debates on consent and early marriage. In her essay, Sarkar details out the positions of the social reformers, the British administration and doctors, and the revivalist nationalists in the public debates on the age of consent. and As the social reformers generalised the particular case of Phulmonee to shed light on the general lot of the Bengali child bride, Sarkar writes that they read her wan face, her premature ageing, and her fatigue and early death as something induced by premature sexual contact and child bearing.”³³ Similarly the medical authorities who presented evidence at the trial of Phulmonee’s husband, while studying her corpse and admitting that even at eleven and above the statutory age of 10, her body was sexually

³³ Tanika Sarkar. "A Prehistory of Rights: The Age of Consent Debate in Colonial Bengal," *Feminist Studies* 26, no. 3 (2000): 612 doi:10.2307/3178642

immature, had to generalise beyond the individual body and state that menarche did not prepare the female body for safe intercourse and that premature maternity was dangerous, if not fatal.

While the British medical authorities did not recommend legislative interference into the Personal laws which governed civil matters like marriage, these discourses generated a notion of girlhood for the female sex that preceded her existence as a sexual being. Sarkar also makes the important point that through all the strands of opinions, British, medical voices, reformers and revivalist-nationalist consent was defined as the physical capacity for sexual intercourse and was never tied to the notion of choice of partner or even emotional maturity. Consent, like puberty, became a biological category. These debates and Tanika Sarkar's detailed description of them will help me contextualise the ephemeral presence of the girl child within the *rupkatha* tradition and her marked absence in the discourses generated around them. The girl child occupying the intersectional position of being a child and a woman, thus falling into both the demographics that was made out to be the recipients and the bearers of the tradition should have been the primary focal point of the discourses.

Jasodhara Bagchi has studied the socio-cultural position of the girl child in nineteenth century Bengal in her essay "Socialising the Girl Child in Colonial Bengal"³⁴. She makes the important point that the girl-child bound within her family and community was reared with an emphasis on "maternal nurturance" which was in preparation of her role as future mother of the community. Her nurturing occurred through an elaborate process of socialisation that included cultural forms that were mostly oral in nature. *Bratakatha*, proverbs and adages alongside rituals that ensured that she fitted into the patrilineal and patrilocal caste

³⁴ Jasodhara Bagchi, "Socialising the Girl Child in Colonial Bengal," *Economic and Political Weekly* 28, no. 41 (1993), 2214-2219. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4400259>.

Hindu family structure. Her “mental universe” writes Bagchi was “one long preparation to be good wife and good mother”.³⁵ Bengali religious culture was also part of this process of socialisation since it, like Bengali culture in general was permeated by the culture of “*vatsalya sneha*”, that is, the affection of a mother for her offspring, and this was at the heart of both the dominant religious cults of Bengal. The Shakta cult with its worship of Durga and Kali as the major goddesses, had the theme of mother-child relationship in its worship where the worship of Durga was framed as the visit of the married daughter to her natal home and the *agamani* and *bijaya* songs (that accompanied her worship) vented the grief of the mother at the loss of her daughter because of her marriage. The other cult of Vaishnavism also had the Yashoda-Krishna mother and child relationship at its centre. The strong emphasis on motherhood within Bengali culture lead to the girlchild being seen as proto-mother. She was encouraged to play games that would reflect her domestic duties as wife and mother and her childhood would be subsumed within preparation of the roles she was expected to play. My study of the girlchild within the *rupkatha* tradition will take Bagchi’s observations into account.

In the essay Bagchi also comments that this cultural emphasis on motherhood did not mean that that the actual social conditions of women was praiseworthy in colonial Bengal. The process of socialisation was ultimately aimed at the subjugation and subordination of women through the continuous reproduction of a patriarchal social system. However, she qualifies, that women were not unquestioning victims of these practises. Since women were in control of much of this process of socialisation, as the older women in the patrilinear family took charge of teaching the new entrants (the daughters and the child-wives) the *bratakathas*, proverbs and

³⁵ Jasodhara Bagchi, "Socialising the Girl Child in Colonial Bengal," *Economic and Political Weekly* 28, no. 41 (1993), 2214. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4400259>.

adages that was to govern a woman's life, these cultural forms were carried forward by women. Thus, these were also autonomous spaces allowed to women.

Bagchi leaves out *rupkatha* from the list of cultural forms that formed the socialisation process of women/girls. I will take that up in this thesis and study how the *rupkatha* operates as a means of socialisation that also reproduces the gendered structure of patriarchal Bengali society while at the same time, being traditionally a cultural form carried forward by women, allows some degree of freedom to vent the grief and frustrations of women. Bagchi's essay also traces the entry of social reform into the life of the nineteenth century Bengali woman, that is, both the efforts of Raja Rammohan Roy and Vidyasagar, who employed Shastric authority, particularly Manu to end fatal practises like sati, and then attempt to "improve" the lot of women through remarriage of widows and allowing girls entry into the world of letters. While they had to overcome conservative challenges to their efforts which included folk beliefs that education induced widowhood (some of which can be found in *rupkatha* stories as well) Bagchi notes ironically how their efforts at employing the shastras for their cause actually gave sanction to practises that would become the source of oppression of women.

Rammohan Ray's preference for a life of strict celibacy, austerity and avoidance of sensual pleasure for the widow instead of death at the funeral pyre of her husband actually paved the way for Vidyasagar's efforts and the pitiable condition of widows in caste Hindu household. Vidyasagar's attempts a widow remarriage was framed through the discourse of the right channelling of female sexuality for the security of the community structure and the dangers of unregulated female sexuality. Subsequently, with the rise of Swadeshi nationalism, the *desaja* (indigenous) practises were glorified and the Hindu woman's fasts, ritual practises and penances became the hallmark of the purity of Indian national identity. This is the phase that saw many collections of *bratakathas* to highlight Bengali cultural heritage. The same is true for *rupkatha* narratives which Bagchi does not address. The same period saw the rapid

spread of women's education, the publication of pamphlets and periodicals for her benefit improvement and at the same time, a real fear of the westernisation of the Bengali woman.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Bagchi opines that the dichotomy of the inner and outer could not really hold in the life of the caste Hindu woman as she had to negotiate both the outer world of colonial education while also uphold the indigenous practises and rituals that was deemed essential for the identity of the community. However, what remains true through all of these phases in the view of the girlchild through the lens of her future roles as wife and mother. Bagchi's conclusion that "her upbringing was that of a good well-protected proto-bhadramahila, encouraged to play feminine games of doll's house, read books suitable for girls, discouraged from physical activity and from developing a spirit of adventure"³⁶, allows this thesis's project to contextualise the discourses generated on *rupkatha* in the lived lives of the nineteenth century girl/woman.

Ruby Lal who also studied the figure of the girl child in 19th century India focuses particularly on the historicity of the lived lives of women/girls. In a statement that resonates with Tanika Sarkar, she says that while the nineteenth century women's question became the central symbol of the colonial encounter, the girl child/ woman appeared only as object and as the site of contestation. This caused "attendant questions of woman's life stages, agency and self-creativity" to disappear.³⁷ Sarkar had also, in her discussion of the Age of Consent Debates of the late nineteenth century observed that the colonial government while consulting a wide range of people never asked for any women's opinions. Similarly, there were no female voices in the reformist campaign, and the reformists were driven more by concern for the future of the

³⁶ Bagchi, "Socialising the Girl Child in Colonial Bengal," 2218

³⁷ Ruby Lal, *Coming of Age in Nineteenth Century India, The Girlchild and the Art of Playfulness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 32

nation and community than by the concern for the problems of women as perceived by them. Women by and large were reduced to being sites on which the reformist campaign and the revivalist-nationalist counter campaign were debated. Ruby Lal's study extends the analysis further to say that both the colonial and the reformist texts present the figure of a "static" woman who is tied to domesticity, both in terms of space and performance and it is these figures that have also remained in focus in academic texts that have sought to study the mature phase of British colonialism. Lal instead proposes that in order to historicise women, to see female subjects in a range of life stages, (childhood, girlhood and womanhood) inhabiting various worlds of duty, aspiration, fantasy and freedom, one has to go beyond and look beyond these reformist and colonialist textual representation of women. Although Lal's study is primarily focused on North Indian spaces and lives and for that she goes back to texts produced in the early nineteenth century before much of the colonialist and reformist discourses were generated, her argument that making a woman was a male project and that becoming woman was product of greater negotiation and not a stagist teleological progression are important points. This focus on moments of agency and autonomy in the lived lives of women is important for understanding the functioning of cultural forms created by women.

This thesis will also be looking at women's narratives (stories told by women to women and women to children in the closed space of the *andarmahal*) distinct from *bhadrolok* and colonialist narratives although they come mediated through the hands of these male narrators. Lal foregrounds an idea of playfulness that can be extended to include authorial playfulness, which allows great scope for variety of female actions, the possibilities of which are foreclosed in *bhadrolok* writings about women. What also comes out from her historical enquiry is what she calls the "luminal figure" of the "girl child/woman". The adult female and the girl child are often collapsed into one another in the discourses of the nineteenth century. Her observations on distinct stages of female lives missing from the linear narratives of the male intelligentsia

of the nineteenth century is relevant for my study of the position of girlhood within the discourses created around the *rupkatha* tradition. These discourses were also of *bhadrolok* creation.

Distinctly belonging to male middle-class intellectual heritage, the *rupkatha* discourses also “birth women”, to use Lal’s words. My study will further investigate and build on Lal’s observations that if women seem to be at the centre of nineteenth century social discourses, it is through male writings about them and not on their own. And that this was in effect the continuation of the marginalisation that women/girl children faced in everyday social space, and a reflection of the constraints that was placed on her autonomy and right to self-governance.

The extent of women’s marginalisation in the nineteenth century is explored by Monomoyee Basu in her monograph *Hindu Women and the Marriage Law*³⁸. Basu’s study demonstrates how most of the arguments against child marriage in the second half of the nineteenth century focus on the detrimental effect of child marriage on young men and the larger community, even while the argument was for raising the age of consent of girls. She provides historical documents that present some of these postulations on child marriage: essays and commentaries published in the leading periodicals like the *Samvad Pravakar*, the *Bamabodhini Patrika* and the *Somprakash* as well as arguments put forth by reformers like Vidyasagar.

Basu quotes from Vidyasagar where, while arguing against child marriage, he referred to a conception of conjugal immaturity resulting from immature spouses entering into a marital union, but most of his focus remained on the health problems of children that resulted from

³⁸ Monmoyee Basu, “Hindu Women and Marriage Law”, in *Women and Law in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004)

such a union. His concern was also on the detrimental effect these marriages had on the education of the young men who married early. Basu also provides examples of resonating arguments in the articles published in the periodicals which argued that early marriage was likely to distract the attention of young boys from their studies and thus hamper their education. Such early distraction would ultimately cause them to descend into poverty. A number of these articles also simultaneously declared that early marriage caused early death, ill health and was the main cause for the decay of the human race.

In sharp contrast to these later voices, Basu presents an excerpt from the newspaper *Samachar Darpan* that had published a letter written by “[a] few Bengali women from Chinsurah”³⁹ in 1835 where they had decried child marriage for depriving young girls of the scope of education and introducing them to a life of early slavery. The letter refers to the ages four, five, ten and twelve as tender age and indignantly declares that the men of the country deserve the rough treatment meted out to them by the British because of the way that they have treated their women. Such voices were completely erased during the actual debates around child marriage that was taking place during the placing of the draft Native Marriage Bill and the Age of consent Bill in the late nineteenth century.

These voices also effectively constitute a counter discourse to the myth of women’s willed surrender to indigenous social practises that was floated by later conservative nationalists. This context is relevant for studying the work of the women collectors of *rupkatha* stories and investigating their view points to the position of women especially as I seek out women’s voices in the narratives. Basu’s study on the increasing marginalisation of women

³⁹ Monmoyee Basu, “Hindu Women and Marriage Law”, in *Women and Law in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), 39

within *Bhadrolok* discourses and debates needs to be taken into account while discussing them. The social position of women in Bengali Hindu society is also brought out through position of certain marginalised demographic section of women.

Basu discusses the condition of the Hindu widow who had no personal or economic freedom and was not permitted to own property or remarry. Forced to lead life as a pariah, she was barred from auspicious occasions and made to discard every kind of earthly pleasure. On the other hand, these women/girls were open to sexual exploitation. Basu provides statistical data to show the number of widows working as prostitutes in Kolkata. Compounding the social problem were practises like Kulin polygamy and the dowry system which lead to young girls seen as “duhita” who milked her parents dry and “arakhshaniya” who could not be protected. This contextual history will come up as I will attempt to locate women, and especially those marginalised life stages such as girlhood, widowhood and late spinsterhood within the texts and the various prose essays that were published alongside the texts.

The larger gendered social history of childhood in general and not just the gendered social history of childhood of nineteenth century Bengal needs to be taken into account for this. Hence, I have referred to Mary Jane Kehily’s essay in her edited volume *Introduction to Childhood Studies* where she traces the development of childhood as a social category. Her study demonstrates how western childhood came to be represented with increased differentiation from adulthood beginning from the sixteenth century in Europe.

The development of this new concept coincided with the rise of a number of other social changes such as the growth of a new education curriculum, rise in the number of books aimed at children and development of specialised clothing for children. It is important to remember that it is to the sixteenth century, that contemporary fairy tale scholars trace the early development of the literary tradition of western fairy tales. However, Kehily qualifies her observations by stating that the term “childhood” is misleading because it was only boys who

were singled out as a distinct and different category and that it was boys who were the first specialised children. And it was not just boys but middle-class boys. Thus historically, the concept of childhood was class specific and gender specific however the concept at the same time was built to disguise these differences.

The differentiation between age groups was represented through class-specific boyhood while the discourse that was created suggested it was universal. This was a common exclusionary trope employed in particular by founders of the Enlightenment. While the concept was mostly implemented within the middle-class family, that family was constructed as the 'family in general'. The nineteenth century amplified this process, supercharged by rapid expansion of the middle class. Kehily suggests that certain social myths such as the innocence of children, their closeness to nature propagated during this time successfully denied and disguised the complexities, exclusions and contradictions of childhood's historical construction and made these qualities into essences [Blake is probably to blame here]. These social myths can be traced in the writings of nineteenth century Bengali intellectuals as well, albeit in a class specific and gender specific context, and without the recognition of these specificities. The observation made by Kehily that the concept of childhood ultimately is derived from and remains embedded within the codes that constitute what children mean to adults is extremely significant.

The social marginalisation of women in the nineteenth century was not just limited to their lived lives and the social discourses and constructs surrounding them, but also extended to the increased marginalisation of cultural forms belonging to women, especially the popular cultural forms. Sumanta Banerjee discusses the marginalisation of women's popular cultural

forms in his essay in *Recasting Women*⁴⁰. He discusses how both the British colonialists charged with the white man's burden of liberating the native women from what they viewed as a licentious, ignorant and impure social milieu, and later the Bengali *bhadroloks* who derived some of their cultural views from the colonialists, developed a common standard of behaviour which scrutinised and rejected some of the cultural forms popular among women.

This scrutiny and rejection was exercised through the implementation of a model of female education that while attempting to "emancipate" women sought to redefine her and recast her based on concepts learnt from the colonialists but modified by the needs of indigenous patriarchy. Banerjee qualifies that it was the women of the *bhadrolok*'s own homes who were the first recipients of this anxious gaze and it was required that these women be purged from what was viewed as the pernicious influence of certain literary and cultural forms. These cultural forms, Banerjee writes, were derived from the rural folk but had migrated to the city along with the mass migration of poorer men and women from villages into the city. This migration was the inevitable result of the break-down of village economies and the cultural forms migrants brought with them were enriched and moulded by scenes and motifs borrowed from the city; while they simultaneously kept alive these folk forms in the urban space. Interestingly, Banerjee explains that these cultural forms, popular among women transcended class boundaries in their popularity. This was possible because the language used by these forms were common to women of all classes. The dialects and idioms traditionally used by the folk forms were intelligible to all women and hence there was no distinction of high and low as far as these women's popular cultural forms were concerned.

⁴⁰ Sumanta Banerjee, "Marginalisation of Women's Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Bengal" in *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, ed. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (New Delhi: Kali for women, 1989), 127-179

It was with the introduction of the colonial female education systems into the household of the *bhadroloks* that a schism occurred in the homogenous cultural world of women. Banerjee goes on to discuss a number of cultural forms such as the *kheurs*, *kirtans*, *agamani* and *vijaya* songs and the roles they played in the lives of women. He does not refer to the *rupkatha* but the *rupkatha* was also a cultural form of folk origin that employed specific dialects and idiomatic language use which was slowly lost to the women of the *bhadrolok* homes alongside the other popular cultural forms that became the direct target of the *bhadrolok* onslaught. In certain ways it was collateral damage in the *bhadralok* project of emancipating and educating their women.

When the Swadeshi cultural revival renewed interest in such forms at the end of the nineteenth century, members of the indigenous intelligentsia like Rabindranath, Dakshinaranjan and Dinesh Sen were anxiety-stricken over the alienation of the new women from the traditional *rupkatha* storytelling form and lamenting the cultural loss. Hence, the reference to “thakurma” or grandmother who was representative of an older womanhood and could be the repository of the stories. Hence also the need for male *bhadrolok* intervention as a conservationist effort. Banerjee’s observations can be traced in the Preface to *Thakurmar Jhuli* written by Rabindranath. Furthermore, Banerjee goes on to discuss how these popular forms became vehicles through which contemporary secular problems could be articulated.

This was true even for those forms which used religious myths, for example the *agamani* and *vijaya* songs, the *kheur* and the *kirtan*. In effect, these were the same forms that Jasodhara Bagchi had discussed as the means of socialisation of young girls and women into a patriarchal and patrilinear social structure. However, her qualification that women were not merely passive recipients of these culture resonates with Banerjee’s analysis as he goes on to explain the psycho-social function of these women’s cultural forms as means of articulation of

the grievances against the ill-treatment meted out to women and thus a medium of emotional release, albeit temporary.

These cultural articulations allowed women an autonomous space and an acceptable means through which grief and even dissent could be channelised. Banerjee cites examples where religious devotion is pushed to the back ground as contemporary issues faced by women takes the forefront. The poverty of Uma's husband and the suffering of the young bride, the huge distance between her marital and natal home which made reunion with her natal family possible only fleetingly. Similarly, Radha's emotional sufferings at the absence of Krishna and his many affairs became a template for the bitter cries of the Bengali wife at her profligate husband. Banerjee also notes that while these forms did not make any serious engagement with the issues that constituted the women's question and the social reform debates of the nineteenth century such as Kulin polygamy, sati, widow remarriage, child marriage and female education, there were countless examples of songs and doggerels making oblique references to such issues by taking a dig at co-wives or mocking old men for wanting to marry young women.

In a similar way it might be possible to trace the roots of fantasy as woven in *rupkatha* stories back to the social realities faced by the women creators who synthesised the stories. However, they also come to the reader layered through the *bhadrolok* literary intervention. The *bhadrolok* anxiety with the acceptability of such an autonomous space for women is discussed by Banerjee in great detail. It was fear he suggests of outright rebellion that prompted the *bhadrolok* to abandon the attitude of "complacent indulgence and to launch a campaign against women's songs in particular and against contemporary popular and folk cultural forms in general."⁴¹ And their objection was both to the form and the content as well as women's

⁴¹ Banerjee, "Marginalisation of Women's Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Bengal", 141

participation in them. Thus, women artistes in particular, the *Boshtomis* or *Vaishnavite* singers who roamed the streets, the *kathakata* reciters, and the women storytellers who had access to *bhadrolok andarmahals* were the direct targets of the *bhadrolok* cultural purge. At the same time, it was necessary for them to also purge the “coarse untutored expletives and expressions”⁴² that was common to both their women and the women of the lower classes (effectively the street) from the vocabulary of their women. Similarly, stories about the assertive Vidya or the adulterous Radha or any other character that deviated from a strictly submissive domestic role had to be suppressed as models of female behaviour. The popular and folk-derived cultural forms were ultimately forced to retreat to the villages and find refuge in the same space from which they were born. It is not surprising then that by the end of the nineteenth century, Reverend Lal Behari Day while attempting to publish a book of *rupkatha* stories had to go about looking for a village woman to be his Grammer Grethel and tell him stories. Similarly, Mitra Majumdar traveling around the villages of Mymensingha to collect stories, would lament in his preface the loss of continuity of the tradition among the women of his acquaintance. Sumanta Banerjee also notes that tracts were published in periodicals like the *Bamabodhini Patrika* that warned of the effects of women secretly reading *Vidya-Sundar* or *panchalis* in close quarters as subverting the objective of female education.

I will attempt to trace this fear of the assertive woman (often as the enemy within) that percolated within the *bhadrolok* consciousness in the works of the *bhadrolok* writers. In the case of the early twentieth century *bhadramahila* writer of *rupkatha*, it must be remembered that these women writers were themselves the recipient of the model of female education championed by the *bhadrolok* classes in the preceding century. Their choice of English as the

⁴² Banerjee, “Marginalisation of Women’s Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Bengal”, 163

medium of expression and style of writing ultimately bears testimony to Banerjee's ending lament that "education no doubt helped the *bhadramahila* to gain access to the sophisticated literature which was being produced by her male peers, to the debates that were raging on social reforms in intellectual circles, to the new concepts of white-collar domestic bliss...but in the process she lost something else—the potent and vigorous language of women's popular and folk cultural forms, the nimble witted drollery and the gusto that her mother shared with the *panchali* singers and *jhumur* dancers of the past"⁴³

While discussing narratives produced and written by women, this thesis has referred to A.K. Ramanujan who has a number of interesting essays on women's tales and the counter system in them⁴⁴. In the essay, "Towards a Counter-system: Women's Tales", apart from translating and transcribing certain women's folk stories from the south of India, he makes a few observations which are relevant to my enquiry of *rupkatha* as a literary tradition derived from an oral storytelling tradition belonging to women. He observes that when we talk of women's tales, it can mean both tales told by women as well as tales that have women as their central protagonists. In "Telling Tales" Ramanujan links women's tales with the divided half of the interior or *akam* which is the intimate sphere, as opposed to the exterior *puram* which was the realm of the veranda or the outer quarters of the house mostly occupied by men and also by professional storytellers. Ramanujan observes that most of these tales told by women to children or other women present an ecosystem contrary to the dominant Hindu philosophy

⁴³ Banerjee, "Marginalisation of Women's Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Bengal", 168

⁴⁴ A. K. Ramanujan, "Towards a Counter system: women's tales", in *The Collected Essays of A. K. Ramanujan*, ed Vinay Dharwadkar (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 429-447

A. K. Ramanujan, "A Flowering Tree: A Woman's Tale", in *The Collected Essays of A. K. Ramanujan*, ed Vinay Dharwadkar (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 412-428

of Karma which is reflected in the classical tales. Karma, he says, is dependent on three variables: causality, that is, the non-randomness of human action, ethics, that is, good and bad action and the ability to gain *punya* or merit or *papa* or demerit through them and re-birth, that is, the belief that past lives contains explanations and motivations for present action. Instead women's tales seem to be dependent on a concept of arbitrary fate, often that which is written in the head of the newborn, which dominates human life.

However, Ramanujan is also emphatic in rejecting a distinction of classical and folk as completely different and opposed to one another, he says that “it is not useful to work with terms such as ‘classical’ and ‘folk’ as terms in simple opposition” instead he suggests that “they should be seen as parts of a cline, a continuum of forms, the endpoints of which may look like two terms in opposition.”⁴⁵ On a similar note, he writes that what has been considered as classical literature, the two great epics, and the puranas also have a life within the folk that is both linked as well as different from the textual material. “Sanskrit mythologies have to be studied not only from texts, as they have been, but on ground—as they are selectively remembered and told in context.”⁴⁶

Stories change depending on who they are told to and who is telling them. This opens up the field of study and has enabled this thesis' critical enquiry of mythic figures and characters that inhabit the twin world of the great epics as well as the folk universe. While Ramanujan also observes the interconnectedness of various kinds of women's storytelling genres, it is Asutosh Bhattacharya who had extensively studied the interconnected existence of

⁴⁵ A. K. Ramanujan, “Towards a Counter system: women's tales”, in *The Collected Essays of A. K. Ramanujan*, ed Vinay Dharwadkar (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 429

⁴⁶ A. K. Ramanujan, “Telling Tales”, in *The Collected Essays of A. K. Ramanujan*, ed Vinay Dharwadkar (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 456

oral genres in his book *Banglar Lok Sahitya*. This work becomes important for understanding the formation of rupkatha as a literary genre as in certain ways distinct from the oral story traditions it was derived from, as well as, for a comparative study of the various women's "katha" narratives articulating the same life concerns and thereby providing a historical glimpse into their lived lives.

The link between nationalism and Bengali literature aimed at a juvenile readership has been studied by scholars like Supriya Goswami, in her book *Colonial India in Children's Literature*. While she briefly discusses the efforts of Rabindranath Tagore and others at collecting folk tales, her main focus among other Indian texts, is on the Bengali writers of original literary tales such as Upendrakishore Ray Chowdhury and Sukumar Ray. Shibaji Bandopadhyay in his reading of constructions in Bengali children's literature of the nineteenth century, *Gopal Rakhal Dondoshomash*, makes the same link. Furthermore, he hints at the class and gender aspects of the creation and reception of texts like the *Thakurmar Jhuli*. He also attempts to provide a reading of the first story from the book, demonstrating how it could be read from various perspectives, such as that of the king, the prince protagonist and the princess at the centre of the story. His analyses throw up interesting starting points for my investigation of the reproduction of gender roles in the texts and construction of gendered identities in the discourse created around the stories.

The linkages between the swadeshi nationalist movement of the late nineteenth century/early twentieth century and Bengali fairy tales has been studied in a detailed piece by Guiseppe Flora titled "On Fairy Tales, Intellectuals and Nationalism in Bengal (1880-1920)". Flora traces the changes in the *bhadrolok* engagement with folklore and details out the *bhadrolok* reception of folktale and fairy tale texts. He notes the influence of the swadeshi movement, and the sense of history of folktale writers and scholars of the period who believed in the distinctness of Bengali culture due to its Buddhist past and its supposed practise of a

casteless popular Hinduism. The essay discusses in great detail how these intellectual traditions and politics affected the project of folklore collection and reception. Flora points out how the entire body of fairy tale writing in colonial Bengal was subsumed within the bourgeois pantheon of children's literature and this often came in the way of a proper evaluation of writers like Mitra Majumdar. Furthermore, he discusses the censorship of female characters of folktales and fairy tales and the attempt to mould them to suit Puranic models of the chaste womanhood by *bhadrolok* scholars such as Dinesh Chandra Sen. Without identifying any female writers of Bengali fairy tales, he points out how for Sen, fairy tale writing was a male project.

However, Flora understates the importance of women as bearers of folkloric traditions in the *bhadrolok* engagement with folktales in the nationalist phase. This one suspects, is from his lack of access to Bengali texts such as Rabindranath Tagore's Preface to *Thakurmar Jhuli* and Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar's foreword to his *Thakurmar Jhuli* and *Thakurdadar Jhuli*. These prose pieces which do not come up in his discussion but are centrally important for understanding the intellectual tradition around Bengali *rupkatha* in the nationalist period. In these texts women are propped up as the central site of folk and thereby national culture and tradition. These are important points of enquiry for my thesis and thus I build on Flora's work and move further along.

The idea that the concept ownership of a storytelling tradition affects its reception is discussed in detail by Donald Hasse in his essay "Yours, Mine, or Ours? Perrault, The Brothers Grimm, and the Ownership of Fairy Tales" where he particularly focuses on the reception of the Grimms' tales by the German public. This argument has been instrumental in this thesis' reading of the fairy tale tradition in Bengal. Haase showed how the conception of the folk *volkskund* of the Grimms, that is the repertoire of the folk from which they claimed their tales originated contributed to the later use of their stories by German nationalists as the folk was

conscripted into the nation building process. The folk as the centre of national culture was also an idea that would later be put forward by the swadeshi nationalists in Bengal and comes up for discussion in this thesis.

Sadhana Naithani, who has argued for the study of colonial folktale and fairy tale collections as transnational texts with recognition of the forms of power play that went into the production of them, has been important for this thesis' study of the European collectors working in Bengal. Naithani in her book *Storytime of the Empire* argues that British imperialism had created an entire hegemony of knowledge production alongside political hegemony and both of these forms of power yielded control over the colonies. Knowledge about the natives, important for running the empire but also for collection in the colonial archive was based upon folklore. She shows how the flow of knowledge was directed towards the metropolis, London, with established societies that processed the knowledge gathered by Britishers from the colonies.

The nature of this scholarship was thus transcultural and transnational, whereas folklore scholarship within Europe was bound within issues of national unity. Naithani's observations provides a framework within which to place colonial collections of Indian folktales. However, my study of the fairy tale collections in Bengal also departs from some of her observations. Naithani has argued that nationalist scholarship of folklore by natives themselves in the colonies were not as "voluminous or expansive"⁴⁷ as that done by the colonialists. This does not hold true in the case of Bengal, where the Swadeshi cultural revival project resulted in a flurry of indigenous scholarly activity on folklore both in terms of collection and study.

⁴⁷ Sadhana Naithani, *The Story-Time of the British Empire: Colonial and Postcolonial Folkloristics* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 4

Naithani's reading of Reverend Lal Behari Day, the only Bengali collector she has studied in the book, I will argue, oversimplifies his position as a native contributor of the colonial archive.

The first chapter of this thesis also builds upon the work of scholars, such as Donald Haase, as mentioned above and others, who have studied the scholarship of the Grimm brothers with focus upon their interventions in the oral tales they proclaimed to have collected and the legacy left behind by their scholarship in the anglophone world. Jack Zipes in his book *The Grimm Legacies*, discusses the afterlife of the landmark volume of fairy tales and folktales published by the Grimms, the *Kinder und Hausmarchen*. He concentrates upon the myths generated around the brothers work: most significantly that the stories were absolutely unaltered oral tales rendered into print by the brothers, that they were collected from the ideal folk storyteller, old rustic women, that they were all derived from oral traditions and that they were meant for children. These myths influenced generations of collectors who worked all over the world in the nineteenth century and beyond, and carried the perceived Grimms style of folkloristics with them. Zipes points out how much of the ideas that constituted the brothers' legacy actually gained currency not from the Grimms' work itself but from the work of their translators and commentators. He points out Edward Taylor as an example who was the first person to translate the *Kinder und Hausmarchen* into English and was responsible for interpreting the Grimms work for the anglophone world. Zipes' book also engages in a detailed mapping out of the brothers' legacy, the most important of which was the intertwining of “nationalist politics and folkloric endeavours”⁴⁸ which sought to gain respect for German folk culture.

⁴⁸ Jack Zipes, *Grimm Legacies: The Magic Spell of Grimm's Folk and Fairy Tales* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 01

The Brothers believed, drawing from ideas of the romantic nationalism of earlier German philosophers, that folk culture was the true national culture of the unified German people. Zipes discusses how this provided the impetus to later collectors to go out and collect from the “*volkskund*” in a Grimms like enterprise of trying to conserve oral culture and bequeath it to the literate reader of a different social class. Zipes also asks the question whether the Grimm brothers consciously began collecting folk and fairy tales with the intention of bequeathing the legacy which they did. To answer this question Zipes studies their various letters correspondence and manifestoes in which they declared their purpose. Now, while the Grimm brothers’ legacy in Europe and in European colonies as far away as Latin America has been studied, the influence of the Grimm brothers in colonial Bengal of the 19th century has not received attention. It has only received passing mention in the work of scholars like Ashraf Siddiqui and Asutosh Bhattacharya, although early attempts at folktale and fairy tale collection by British and Bengali *bhadroloks* was not beyond the legacy of the brothers.

The vocabulary employed in many of the prefaces, introductory essays of these collectors that provided critical insight into the motivation of the authors and contributed to the discourses surrounding the Bengali fairy tale tradition, can be connected to the discourses on fairy tale scholarship created by the Grimm Brothers. My thesis has studied the engagement of the collectors in Bengal with the Grimm Brothers’ legacy which created the foundation for the Bengali literary fairy tale tradition. Christa Kamenetsky in her essay “The Brothers Grimm: Folktale Style and Romantic Theories” further discusses the Grimm Brothers creation of the link between the folktale style “*buchmarchenstil*” and the poetic style that grows organically out of nature or “*naturpoesie*”. This link Kamenetsky shows was deliberately forged by the Grimm brothers and this allowed them to create a vision of their work as directly representative of the German masses and the organic German nation (a unified entity unlike the politically

divided states the Grimms lived in). It was their belief in the philosophy of romantic nationalism espoused by Herder and Schelling that lead them to embark on such a project.

Now, as the popularity of their work grew this link between “buchmarchenstil” and “naturpoesie” began in turn to be associated with children and became part of the myths that circulated about their work. My thesis will study how the fairy tale scholarship embarked upon in Bengal during the phase of the swadeshi cultural revival in the aftermath of the first partition of Bengal, if not fertilised by the Grimm Brothers project, definitely paralleled it.

Chapter Divisions

Chapter 1

The first chapter of this thesis will study the early influences that contributed to the development and shaping of the Bengali literary fairy tale genre. It will trace the influence of the Grimm Brothers in Bengal, whose legacy as far as the collection of fairy tales derived from oral tales was concerned, had spread across the globe. It will also study British colonial efforts at collection fairy stories in Bengal who were contributing to the imperial archive of folktales and fairy tales, and investigate the legacy that they left on subsequent indigenous writing of fairy tales.

Chapter 2

The second chapter will study the indigenous collector-writers of Bengali fairy tales and the editorial history of their collections. It will place them in their contexts and study the intellectual, social and political history of the period as broader frames of reference which shaped their writing. Their ideological standpoints will be studied and its influence on their collections will be closely analysed. The aim will be to negate the idea of the literary tales as unproblematic simple transcriptions of oral tales, and show the active participation of contemporary fairy tale discourses in the burning social issues of the time.

Chapter 3

The third chapter will study the gendered life of the nineteenth century Bengali fairy tale. It will investigate contemporary popular conceptions around the tradition such as the belief that the *rupkatha* was an endangered women's oral cultural tradition by the end of the nineteenth century and the gender specific identifications of the tradition's recipient and bearer. The study will focus on the social status of women and social construction and erasure of specific female life stages in order to study its impact on the continuity and reception of the storytelling tradition. The chapter will use both internal evidences from the texts and the accompanying introductory pieces as well as comparison with other contemporary women's popular cultural forms in order to establish its argument. The Age of Consent Debates and the debates surrounding issues of marriage and consent that formed "the nineteenth century women's questions" will also be referred to for the same purpose.

Chapter 4

The fourth chapter will focus on the *rupkatha* texts themselves in order to contextualise the fantastical in social realities. It will investigate how these stories were embedded within the gendered structures of the folk communities from which they emerged and the literary communities within which they circulated. The chapter will locate within their cultural context the stories' presentation of the fairy tale trope of female rivalry, the representation of female figures from the margins, the girl/woman as hero and modes of female heroism. It will also study the stories for possibilities of women's counter voices. The aim is also to understand how the stories in turn influenced the gender constructions of the same communities of readers and hearers.

CHAPTER 1

Colonial Legacies

A literary work is never produced in vacuum. A web of socio-cultural forces and power relations come into play during the time of production and reception of a text. Hence, the sudden flowering of fairy tale collections in nineteenth century Bengal was also the result of specific socio-historical circumstances as well as literary influences. The very first attempts at collecting fairy tales and folktales in the Indian subcontinent had been undertaken by British colonial administrators, Christian missionaries, colonial indologists and their unmentioned native assistants.⁴⁹ The first major collector⁵⁰ of Bengali fairy tales was D. H. Damant while he was posted as Magistrate and Collector of Dinajpur. He contributed a number of tales collected from Dinajpur (North Bengal) to several volumes of the journal the *Indian Antiquary*⁵¹. The very first issue of the journal published in 1870 carried some of his stories. An Englishwoman, Maive Stokes, followed him with her volume of stories collected from her servants titled *Indian Fairy Tales* in 1879. It should be noted that none of these volumes were exclusive fairy tale collections but also featured some other folktales along with fairy tales. However, with such works, they were adding to the already expanding compendium of Indian

⁴⁹ Sadhana Naithani has observed the colonial phenomenon of employing native assistants the extensive but often unacknowledged contribution of William Crooke's native assistant Pandit Ram Gharib Chaube, Richard Carnac Temple's Chaina Mull to the Englishmen's folktale collections and the intimate but unequal relationship shared between the men. Her study of the life and work of Pandit Ram Gharib Chaube has been published as *In Quest for Indian Folktales*. Refer to Sadhana Naithani, *In Quest for Indian Folktales* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006)

⁵⁰ Ashraf Siddiqui, *Folkloric Bangladesh: A Collection of Essays on the Folk Literature of Bangladesh* (Dacca, Bangla Academy, 1976), 12

⁵¹ The *Indian Antiquary* was an orientalist journal founded and edited by James Burgess in 1872. The journal was largely related to the study of India and Indian history. It originally ran between 1872 and 1933 and had been revived twice as *The New Indian Antiquary* (1938-47) and *Indian Antiquary* (1964-71). Richard Carnac Temple was one of its later editors, from 1884 till his death in 1931.

folktales and fairy tales that was being collected by other noted British collectors and indologists such as G. A. Campbell, Richard Carnac Temple, William Crooke, Rev James Long and Mary Frere in other parts of India. The Romantic Movement in Europe had generated a renewed interest in folklore a century earlier. The radical spirit which swept through as a result of romantic philosophies emphasised imagination as the force of creation and created a love for all things remote, both in terms of time and space. This did much to democratise literary appeal in general and was instrumental in reviving the love for fairy tales, ballads and romances. The crowning moment of this spirit as far as folk and fairy tales were concerned, was the publication of the *Kinder und Hausmarchen* by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm in 1812 (vol 1) and 1814 (Vol 2). The Grimm brothers, deeply influenced by the German romantics Herder and Schelling, would devote a lot of their scholarly efforts during their lifetime into developing and revising this masterpiece. Although the history of literary collections of fairy stories dates back to sixteenth century Italy and journeys through seventeenth century French parlours before making its way to Germany, the publication of the *Kinder und Hausmarchen* was a watershed moment because the “Brothers were among the first scholars to recall and establish the historical tradition of ‘authentic’ folktales (fairy tales included) that stemmed from oral storytelling”⁵² The fairy tales of Basile, Straparola, Perrault, Madame D’ Aulnoy were literary creations that never claimed authenticity as literary transcribing of oral storytelling traditions. The Brothers emphasised the opposition between ‘kunstpoesie or literature created artificially by writers in which category all of these earlier works fell and ‘naturpoesie’ which they were collecting.⁵³ The Grimm brothers’ collection met with immediate success and

⁵² Jack Zipes, *Grimm Legacies: The Magic Spell of Grimm’s Folk and Fairy Tales* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 2

⁵³ Jack Zipes, *Grimm Legacies: The Magic Spell of Grimm’s Folk and Fairy Tales* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 23

subsequently had a huge impact on later collectors in Europe, as well as the rest of the world. The nineteenth century British collectors carried some of this impulse to India. Moreover, in the aftermath of the Indian Mutiny of 1857 and the consolidation of India under the British crown, knowledge about the natives was believed to be integral to the smooth running of the empire. Sadhana Naithani notes that “in this process folklore played an important role because most colonies were predominantly oral cultures. Orality became the source of all kinds of writing on the colonised.”⁵⁴ A number of collectors of fairy tales based on oral stories were thus men who held British administrative positions in India. Along with the Christian missionaries these men were instrumental in inspiring native *Bhadroloks* into taking up the task of collecting Bengali fairy tales. A number of native collectors, notably Rev. Lal Behari Day and Shirishchandra Basu directly mentioned the Grimm Brothers and the British colonial collectors as inspirations and influences behind their efforts. Other native collectors, notably those writing during the period of the *Swadeshi* awakening in Bengal during the turn of the twentieth century produced volumes as a reaction to the colonial project. Hence even if colonial folkloric endeavours or the Grimm Brothers do not find mention in their introductions or prefaces, they were nonetheless products of the time and subject to its socio-cultural-literary influences.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Sadhana Naithani, *The Story-Time of the British Empire: Colonial and Postcolonial Folkloristics* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 5

⁵⁵ Rabindranath Tagore began his preface to Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar's *Thakurmar Jhuli* by lamenting the fact that western fairy tales had become the sole reading material of Bengali children, thereby acknowledging the popularity of English fairy tale writers who were themselves deeply influenced by the Grimm Brothers and their stories. One must note here the immense popularity Grimm's fairy tales enjoyed in England as a result of Edward Taylor's translation of the *Kinder und Hausmarchen* as *German Popular Stories* in 1826. There was no doubt that Rabindranath's western fairy tales would also have included Grimm's stories. Rabindranath then went on to project Mitra Majumdar's work as a laudable attempt at conserving a fast disappearing indigenous tradition.

Jack Zipes while attempting to write a social history of the fairy tale genre looks at ‘the process of writing as part of a social process, as a kind of intervention in a continuous discourse, debate, and conflict about power and social relations.’⁵⁶ British colonialism had generated multiple discourses about the colonised and folkloristics was one of them. The power relations between the coloniser and the colonised permeated into the printed volumes and resonated in the relationship between the English Christian writer and the native Hindu/Islamic teller, between the English text and the Bengali narrator. The native folktale collections that appeared in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century in both Bengali and English interacted with this discourse and power relations, as well as with each other.⁵⁷ Together they formed an intricate web of folktale and fairy tale collections, transcriptions, storytelling and scholarship that spread out in these few decades and left a lasting imprint on the cultural history of Bengal. This chapter will first discuss the legacy of the Grimm Brothers in colonial Bengal and then move on to look at the contribution of the British colonialists.

1. The Grimm Brothers’ legacy in Bengal.

The *Kinder und Hausmärchen* had run into seven editions between 1812 and 1857 and had been translated into one hundred and fifty languages, many of them within the Brothers’ lifetime. The collection of stories, not all fairy tales and definitely not children’s tales, despite what the name might suggest, was a resounding success in Germany and all over Europe from the moment of its publication. For the Grimm brothers “the tales embodied a romantic wish-

This was the first fairy tale collection to appear in Bengal in vernacular. It was a written intervention aimed at preserving oral storytelling traditions and therefore the volume was a bearer of cultural memory and Bengali identity.

⁵⁶ Jack Zipes, *Fairytales and the Art of Subversion: The Classical Genre for Children and the Process of Civilization* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 2

⁵⁷ The work done by Reverend Lal Behari Day and Rabindranath Tagore was also influential in inspiring a number of other writers to take up the task of collecting Bengali folktales.

fulfilment dream that would unite the German people and bind them to a culture that they could honour. Their collecting had nothing to do with children or children's literature or simply 'entertaining' adult readers. It had everything to do with 'artistically' creating a German popular culture rooted in the belief systems and customs of the German people".⁵⁸ The romantic idea of 'naturpoesie' or natural poetry by which the romantics meant ancient, folk and oral literature was integral to the Grimm brothers' conceptualising of the *Kinder und Hausmarchen*. They wanted to gain respect for naturpoesie, the oral traditions of the common German people and this they asserted was done by allowing the tales to speak for themselves with minimal interference on their part. Moreover, in England as Jack Zipes notes, the first translation of the Grimm Brothers by Edgar Taylor, published in two volumes in 1823 and 1826 as *German Popular Stories* generated some major myths about the work of the Grimm Brothers. Most significant were the ideas that the "Grimms themselves collected the tales from peasants; represented by the image of the ideal peasant woman, whom Taylor called Grammer Grethel"⁵⁹ and that the tales were intended for children and that the tales were German. Thus I surmise, the legacy bequeathed by the Grimm brothers among the subjects of the British Empire, that is, England and its colonies included:

- i. The inspiration to would-be-collectors to actually go out among the masses and collect from the volkskund, that is, the repertoire of the common volk (folk).
- ii. The myth of the ideal teller of folktales and fairy tales as belonging simultaneously to the lower and the rural classes.

⁵⁸ Jack Zipes, *Grimm Legacies: The Magic Spell of Grimm's Folk and Fairy Tales* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 22

⁵⁹ Jack Zipes, *Grimm Legacies: The Magic Spell of Grimm's Folk and Fairy Tales* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), xi

- iii. The notion that the tales were to be presented just as they had heard, that is, in an unadorned language and with no interference as far as the stories were concerned.
- iv. The conception of a new tradition of folklore that had a nationalist tinge to it⁶⁰

The Grimm brothers wanted to collect tales from the masses and render them in print. By doing this, they wanted to create a common German heritage, a shared culture that could serve as a bond between the rising middle classes and the common man. The Brothers, somewhat romantically, believed that the tales told in the German fatherland were of ancient origin and carried essential messages that had been preserved and transmitted by the common *volk* over centuries. Germany as a sovereign state or a distinct geographical area within Europe had not yet come into existence. The region was under the rule of the Habsburg empire, which itself was a union of crowns and the land was thus balkanised and fragmented. Being under colonial rule, German culture was subordinated to Austria; Vienna was the centre of culture while Berlin was a provincial trade city. The ascendancy of Vienna over Germany was largely cultural. Austrians saw the Germans as a race of peasants and laborers, or at best merchants and artisans. Thus, before the unification of Germany, intellectuals like the Grimm Brothers promoted the romantic notion that the organic shared culture of the common people, the *volk*, was the true basis of a nation. Again, romanticism was key to their understanding of the *volk*, by which they referred to a wide range of people including old people, women and children who they believed were in their natural state and therefore proper bearers of *naturpoesie*. The *volk* also meant people inhabiting ‘the quiet and untouched woods and mountains’ which Jacob Grimm stated was ‘fruitful and blessed’ and was more ‘deserving’ of their attentions than the

⁶⁰ A number of scholars such as Jack Zipes, Donald Haase, and Sadhana Naithani have noted that it was the Grimm Brothers who started the practice of the collection of folktales and fairy tales within the context of the building of the modern nation states.

large cities and towns. Jacob Grimm wrote this in a “Circular-Letter Concerned with Collecting of Folk Poetry” published in 1815 which he began by declaring that “a society has been funded that is intended to spread throughout all of Germany and has its goal to save and collect all the existing songs and tales that can be found among the common German peasantry (Landvolk).” Their sense of urgency is made clear from the following statement that the work of collecting “cannot be postponed without great harm in view of the increasing and damaging decline and closure of folk customs.”⁶¹ The Brothers wanted to preserve as much as they could of German folk storytelling traditions and had enlisted the help of a number of friends and acquaintances for the purpose. A letter written to Brentano on January 22, 1811 by Jacob Grimm contained an appeal: ‘Appeal to all Friends of Old German Poetry and History’⁶² in which he spelled out the foundational ideas of their work. They (Grimms and their acquaintances) were to collect all oral tales found in their fatherland irrespective of the time of their composition. And not only that, they were also to collect the particular mannerisms, customs and mores of telling which too had been preserved within the *volk*. This task of collecting and method of collecting was going to inspire subsequent generations of folktale and fairy tale collectors.

The extent of the impact of their project gets registered in the acknowledgements/prefaces/introductions written by some of the native nineteenth century collectors in Bengal. One such example is Reverend Lal Behari Day whose collection of stories *Folktales of Bengal* came out in 1883, making him the first native collector of fairy tales in

⁶¹ Jacob Grimm ‘Circular-Letter Concerned with Collecting of Folk Poetry’ published in 1815 quoted in Jack Zipes, *Grimm Legacies: The Magic Spell of Grimm’s Folk and Fairy Tales* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 10

⁶² Quoted in Jack Zipes, *Grimm Legacies: The Magic Spell of Grimm’s Folk and Fairy Tales* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 9

Bengal. After acknowledging the immediate impulse behind his collection, a particular request sent by R. C. Temple⁶³, he went on to state that:

As I was no stranger to the Marchen of the Brothers Grimm, to the Norse Tales so admirably told by Dasent, to Arnason's Icelandic Stories translated by Powell, to the Highland Stories done into English by Campbell, and to the fairy stories collected by other writers, and as I believed that the collection suggested would be a contribution, however slight, to that daily increasing literature of folk-lore and comparative mythology which, like comparative philosophy, proves that the swarthy and half-naked peasant on the banks of the Ganges is a cousin, albeit of the hundredth remove, to the fair-skinned and well-dressed Englishman on the banks of the Thames, I readily caught up the idea and cast about for materials.⁶⁴

Timothy Baycroft and David Hopkin writes in *Folklore and Nationalism in Europe During the Long Nineteenth Century* that “the Europe-wide significance of the *Kinder und Hausmarchen* (first edition 1812) was the inspiration it provided to proto-folklorists to go out and collect ‘vom volkskund’, that is from the mouth of the people (whether or not this was the Grimms’ own practice.)”⁶⁵ This was evidently not the Grimms own practice as a number of contemporary scholars have conclusively argued. Jack Zipes observes that the “Grimms also began adapting tales from books published from the fifteenth and the eighteenth century.”⁶⁶ Heinz Rolleke notes that “many of the stories (of the Grimm Brothers) are French in origin,

⁶³ Reverend Lal Behari Day published his *Folktales of Bengal* in 1883 with a preface in which he stated the main inspirations behind his volume and the purpose of the collection.

⁶⁴ Lal Behari Day, “Preface” in *Folktales of Bengal* (Kolkata: Uccharan, 1993), i-ii

⁶⁵ Quoted in Jack Zipes, *Grimm Legacies: The Magic Spell of Grimm's Folk and Fairy Tales* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 1

⁶⁶ Jack Zipes, *Grimm Legacies: The Magic Spell of Grimm's Folk and Fairy Tales* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 9

and were told not by ordinary folk but by a handful of well-to-do descendants of Huguenots, Protestants who had fled to Germany to escape religious persecution in Roman Catholic France.”⁶⁷ Thus the list of informants from whom the Brothers collected tales included a large number of educated people belonging to the middle classes. Infact Wilhelm married one of their prime sources Dortchen Wild. Joseph Baumgartner notes that of the names acknowledged as sources in the prefaces to their various editions, the Brothers were ‘much less willing to reveal the names of their oral informants’. This was because the brothers wanted to preserve the myth that they had actually gone out extensively and collected material from the *volkskund*. Baumgartner further notes that “an exception to this practice was made only with the chief contributor to the second volume, Dorothea Viehmann. Her portrait forms the frontispiece of the second edition of the KHM (1819).”⁶⁸ This was primarily because the brothers sought to establish her as the mythic peasant woman who was the ideal teller of folk stories⁶⁹. The same Dorothea Viehmann, was turned into Grammer Grethel in Edgar Taylor’s *German Popular Stories*. It was this character who was referred to by Rev. Lal Behari Day in the preface to his collection of tales:

⁶⁷ David Crossland, “Germany celebrates 200 years of Grimm tales”, The National, December 23, 2012, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/uae/germany-celebrates-200-years-of-grimm-tales-1.608711>

⁶⁸ Baumgartner, Joseph. "The Grimm Brothers as Collectors and Editors of Fairytales," *Philippine Quarterly of Culture and Society* 7, no. 1/2 (1979): 93

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/297916273>

⁶⁹ Dorothea Viehman was also descended from French Huguenots as both Jack Zipes and Joseph Baumgartner has noted and grew up speaking French. Her stories owed more to the literary fairy tales of Perrault and Madame D’aulnoy than to Hessian folklore that the Brothers Grimm sought to collect. However, she was established as the very model of the romantic conception of the preserver and teller of folktales: the old woman peasant.

After a great deal of search I found my Gammer Grethel –though not half so old as the Frau Viehmannin(sic) of Hesse Cassel – in the person of a Bengali Christian woman, who, when a little girl and living in her heathen home, had heard many stories from her old grandmother⁷⁰

That Reverend Lal Behari Day compared his chief informant to Grimms' Viehmaennin or the old lady Viehmann goes to show that the work of the Grimm brothers had become a reference point in the later nineteenth century. As the first native collector of Bengali oral tales, he situated his own work especially with reference to that of the Grimm brothers among other European collectors. Apart from the Bengali Christian woman, the other informants that he mentioned were 'one old brahman', 'an old barber', 'an old servant' and 'another old brahman'. Rev. Day's constant reiteration of old is rather interesting. Even in case of the Bengali Christian woman he felt it necessary to inform the reader that she was an old woman though not quite as old as Frau Viehmaennin. This reiteration brings to mind the Grimm brothers' emphasis on the suitability of old people particularly old women as tellers. Apart from Dorothea Viehmann, some of the other celebrated contributory figures of *Kinder und Hausmarchen* were old ladies, particularly one 'alte Marie' (old Mary)⁷¹, a housekeeper in the Hassenpflug family⁷². These figures were all old, women and belonged to the lower classes. In Jacob Grimm's own words:

⁷⁰ Lal Behari Day, "Preface" in *Folktales of Bengal* (Kolkata: Uccharan, 1993), i-ii

⁷¹ Baumgartner states that the celebrated figure of alte Marie was also a myth invented by the son of Wilhelm, Hermann Grimm.

Baumgartner, Joseph. "The Grimm Brothers as Collectors and Editors of Fairytales," *Philippine Quarterly of Culture and Society* 7, no. 1/2 (1979): 95

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/297916273>

⁷² The Hassenpflug family was one of the urban middle-class families like the Wilds who contributed stories to *Kinder und Hausmarchen*. The Brothers also formed close ties with them in that their only sister married one of the sons of the Hassenpflug family.

The same is the case with certain classes of people such as the shepherds, fishermen, miners—they have a stronger attachment to these tales (*volkpoesie* or *naturpoesie*), and these people are to be preferred and asked as are in general old people, women and children, who keep the tales fresh in their memories.⁷³

The romantic appeal that old people, women and children had, applied to the colonial subject as well. But I shall return to this later. The Grimm Brothers, as Jack Zipes notes were “dependent on friends and colleagues for extending the corpus of the *Kinder und Hausmarchen*...people who had more intimate contact with lower-class people, considered by the Grimms to be the primary source of folk and fairy tales.”⁷⁴ The references to servants and peasants in the prefaces to a number of the fairy tale collections that were published in Bengal in the late nineteenth century is reminiscent of the enduring myths generated by the *Kinder und Hausmarchen*. Apart from the peasant woman (the Bengali Christian woman), Lal Behari Day declared he received two tales from an old servant. Maive Stokes’s entire collection of stories was received from three servants: two ayahs, Dukhni and Munia who were either born or brought up in Kolkata and Karim a *khitmadgar* (or table servant)⁷⁵ Even Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar, went around the villages of Mymensingha in order to collect his tales and both he and Rabindranath attributed the tales to Bengal’s peasant women.⁷⁶ The collection moreover

⁷³ Jacob Grimm's “Circular-Letter Concerned with Collecting of Folk Poetry” 1815. Quoted in Jack Zipes, *Grimm Legacies: The Magic Spell of Grimm’s Folk and Fairy Tales* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 10

⁷⁴ Jack Zipes, *Grimm Legacies: The Magic Spell of Grimm’s Folk and Fairy Tales* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 12

⁷⁵ Maive Stokes, “Introduction” in *Indian Fairy Tales* (Calcutta: Privately Printed, 1879), v

⁷⁶ Rabindranath Tagore in his preface to Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar’s volume calls these women *Snehomoyee* and *Deshlakshmi* which can be attributed to an additional layer of discourse creation which will be dealt with in detail in the following chapter.

was aimed at the classes who have been supplied with an English education but has lost touch with their native folkloric roots, that is, mostly the middle classes who were the main beneficiaries of the colonial education system. The volume thus was also an attempt at forging a common cultural heritage which would lead to the creation of a shared Bengali identity. William McCulloch's collection *Bengali Household Tales* which evoked the *Kinder und Hausmarchen* in its choice of title, was collected from a Brahmin who lived in an out of the way village and supposedly had very little contact with Europeans when the collector first became acquainted with him.⁷⁷ The romantic charm of the untouched native is evident immediately. Moreover, the fact that the village Brahmin was a colonised male (no matter a high caste man) already placed him in a servant-master relationship with the British collector. Colonialism and the discourses it generated added to the already circulating discourses surrounding the collection of oral tales in interesting ways. While I shall discuss this in greater detail later in this chapter, it must be noted here that it was the direct result of the British rule and the emphasis of the colonial administration on English that resulted in English being the choice of medium for all of the native collections (barring that of Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar) that appeared in Bengal.

The choice of English as the medium of writing had some repercussions. The foremost of them was that the writer had to translate into a foreign language the speech patterns and idiomatic expressions of colloquial Bengali. Collectors most often did not find that an easy task. It was for that matter a difficult job to transcribe the speech patterns of oral tales into

Rabindranath Tagore, "Preface" in *Thakurmar Jhuli* (Calcutta: Mitra and Ghosh, 1907), i

⁷⁷ William McCulloch, "Preface" in *Bengali Household Tales* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1912), v

Bengali literary language. Rabindranath Tagore praised Dakshinaranjan's efforts at producing the same in the preface Tagore wrote to *Thakurmar Jhuli*:

I was rather scared to open Dakshinaranjanbabu's book when I had received it. I was afraid that the tough Bengali of the modern pen would cut off the affectionate tone of the stories. It is extremely difficult to preserve that tone in modern literary language. I could not have gathered the guts to attempt such a task....

But praised be Dakshinaranjanbabu! He has translated the grandmothers' spoken words into printed letters but the pages of his book have remained green; the specific language of *rupkatha*, its particular style and the ancient simplicity of the genre has been largely preserved by him. (translated from original Bengali by me)

The point that he made was that Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar had performed that difficult task of transcribing the linguistic usages and mores of telling of oral tales into the printed word while preserving the fairy tale style. The many dialects of the Bengali language had been standardised and sanitised into one literary language during the course of the nineteenth century. Such a language was deemed fit for the purpose of writing. Thus, there remained a great difference between literary Bengali and the Bengali dialects spoken in various parts of the region. Mitra Majumdar, according to Tagore, while transcribing the oral narratives had actually been able to write down the colloquial oral Bengali. It is here that we have a reiteration of the idea that the collector of oral tales must be true to oral storytelling traditions and write the story exactly as they were told. Such an idea gained currency from the Grimm brothers who had stated time and again to have done exactly that: that is wrote their tales exactly as they had heard them from their oral sources. In the "Circular-Letter Concerned with Collecting of Folk Poetry" Jacob most clearly states that "it is extremely important that these items are to be recorded faithfully and truly, without embellishment and additions, when-ever

possible from the mouths of the tellers and with their very own words in the most exact and detailed way. It would be of double value if everything could be obtained in the local live dialect.”⁷⁸ Christa Kamenetsky quotes one of the popularly held perceptions about the Brothers’ work “they wrote the *marchen* exactly as they were rehearsed to them, without any preparation or adornment, by the ordinary peasants who had handed them down orally from generation to generation.”⁷⁹ With their conception of the organic origins of *naturpoesie* the Brothers refused to change the content or the style of the stories they collected. The first volume of *Kinder und Hausmarchen* had raised certain objections from parents regarding the unsuitability of some of the tales for children and Achim von Arnim, one of the Brothers’ close friend and associate had suggested that the brothers alter some of the more violent stories (such as The Almond Tree and The Jew in the Bush) to make the volume more appropriate for children. They refused Arnim saying that “to the pure everything is pure”⁸⁰ referring to their idea that children being in pure innocent state were able to draw the essential message from folktales. In the preface to their next volume published in 1815 they wrote referring to *naturpoesie* that ‘everything that is natural can also become beneficial. And that is what our aim should be.’ (Although the Brothers did bring out a smaller selection of stories as the Small Edition in 1825, that was intended to appeal to a larger reading audience of children from the middle classes without the extensive notes and annotations, and some amount of obscenities and violence removed.)

⁷⁸ Quoted in Jack Zipes, *Grimm Legacies: The Magic Spell of Grimm’s Folk and Fairy Tales* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 11

⁷⁹ F. J. Harvey Darton’s *Children’s Books in England* quoted in Christa Kamenetsky, "The Brothers Grimm: Folktale Style and Romantic Theories," *Elementary English* 51, no. 3 (1974): 379 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41387176>.

⁸⁰ Christa Kamenetsky, "The Brothers Grimm: Folktale Style and Romantic Theories," *Elementary English* 51, no. 3 (1974): 382 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41387176>.

In the “Appeal to all friends of Old German Poetry and History” Jacob Grimm had particularly identified “the many peculiarities and particular ways of conversing and telling stories, customs and manners (that) have continued to be maintained”⁸¹ as material for collection. These statements are in sync with the romantic eulogising of the language of the common people, the people living close to nature and ancient language as the proper medium of poetry (Grimms called oral tales poetry of the common people⁸²). The statements of the Brothers can also be traced to the more immediate need for conservation. They were seeking to preserve popular German storytelling traditions and that demanded that the tales as well as the ways of telling be preserved. Rabindranath Tagore, writing almost a century later, with the same conservationist aspirations once again stated that the particular mores of telling along with the stories must be preserved or else the tales would be rendered unrecognisable. Rabindranath’s emphasis on the unsuitability of literary language for the purpose of writing down oral tales was an echo of this statement taken from the first volume of the first edition of *Kinder-und Hausmarchen* published in 1812:

We have tried to grasp and interpret these tales as purely as possible...Here we have a case where all the accomplishments of education, refinement and artistic command of language ruin everything, and one feels that a purified literary language as elegant as it

⁸¹ Quoted in Jack Zipes, *Grimm Legacies: The Magic Spell of Grimm’s Folk and Fairy Tales* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 10

⁸² “Isn’t folk poetry (volks poesie) the vital lifeblood that is drawn from all the deeds (of the German people) and continues for itself?...We especially mean here the fairy tales, the evening conversations, and the stories from the spinning rooms” Jacob Grimm “Appeal to all Friends of old German Poetry and History” Quoted in Jack Zipes, *Grimm Legacies: The Magic Spell of Grimm’s Folk and Fairy Tales* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 10

Also Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm’s Preface to Vol 2 of *Kinder und Hausmarchen*: “Our collection was not merely intended to serve the history of poetry but also to bring out the poetry itself that lives in it and make it effective” quoted in Jack Zipes, *Grimm Legacies: The Magic Spell of Grimm’s Folk and Fairy Tales* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 3.

may be for everything else brighter and more transparent, has here however, become more tasteless and cannot get to the heart of the matter.”⁸³

The authors of the fairy tale collections published in Bengal during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century also repeatedly stressed that their volumes were straightforward transcriptions of oral storytelling traditions. Thus Rev. Lal Behari Day wrote:

None of my authorities knew English; they all told the stories in Bengali, and I translated them into English when I came home. I heard many more stories than those contained in the following pages; but I rejected a great many, as they appeared to me to contain spurious additions to the original stories which I had heard when a boy. I have reason to believe that the stories given in this book are a genuine sample of the old old stories told by old Bengali women from age to age through a hundred generations.

That he excluded from his volume spurious stories and published only the ‘genuine sample’ claims authenticity for his collection as an unadulterated rendition of oral tales. The judgment that separated the contaminated stories from the original emanated from cultural memory. For the English collectors who had no such source, the judgement of authenticity had to be made through other methods. William McCulloch who had claimed to have collected his tales from a native Brahmin goes on to state that:

I was able to ascertain that he did not improvise but narrated his tales in stereotyped form, by getting him to re-tell many of them in Sanskrit, which he spoke fluently, a considerable time after he had first told them in Bengali. The two versions, in every case, corresponded as closely as possible.

⁸³ Quoted in Jack Zipes, *Grimm Legacies: The Magic Spell of Grimm’s Folk and Fairy Tales* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 3

Asking the native informant to retell the stories in a different language and matching the two versions is a method that is adhoc at best and not necessarily fool proof. Neither does matching versions of stories with faded childhood memories⁸⁴ necessarily justify claims of authenticity. However, for Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar too, his childhood memories become the mark of all that is authentic and original.⁸⁵ Such a claim was fraught with fallacies. It is nearly impossible to determine one authentic narrative in the case of oral storytelling, where stories circulate in multiple versions.

Post the 1970s and the work of Heinz Rolleke, the claims of authenticity of the Grimm Brothers' stories have also come under scrutiny. Recent studies of the Brothers' works have forwarded this scrutiny. Jack Zipes writes that:

Although the Grimms maintained that they did not alter the words of the tales that they collected from the lips of their informants, and that all of their tales stemmed from oral tradition, none of this is true. A simple comparison of the tales in the Olenberg manuscript⁸⁶ of 1810 with the tales in the first edition of 1812/1815 reveals that the Grimms made or had to make substantial changes because it was difficult for them and their contributors to copy down on paper the exact words of the tales that they heard.

⁸⁴ Rev. Lal Behari Day in his Preface had already stated that he had nearly forgotten the thousands of tales he had heard as a child: "I had nearly forgotten those stories, at any rate they had all got confused in my head, the tail of one story being joined to the head of another, and the head of a third to the tail of a fourth."

Lal Behari Day, "Preface" in *Folktales of Bengal* (Kolkata: Uccharan, 1993), i-ii

⁸⁵ Note Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar's own introduction to *Thakurmar Jhuli*. This will be discussed in detail in the following chapter.

⁸⁶ The Olenberg manuscript was the original version of *Kinder-und Hausmarchen* that was written in 1810. The Brothers gave it to the German romantic poet Clemens Brentano for his perusal and it was never returned. While the Brothers destroyed all their manuscripts, this survived along with the other papers of the poet which were handed over to the Olenberg monastery in France.

Moreover, the Grimms also began adapting tales from books published from the 15th through the 18th century.⁸⁷

Christa Kamenetsky further notes that “in their effort to integrate the various folktales in their *Kinder und Hausmarchen*, the Brothers Grimm actually had to ‘translate’ them from more than twenty dialects into high German. In this process alone they were bound to take certain liberties, if only for the sake of clarity and smoothness in style.”⁸⁸ For those collectors of Bengali fairy tales who chose English as their medium the act of writing was a dual process of writing and translating. The reiteration of claims of authenticity was all the more necessary for them for they were trying to capture in a foreign tongue an ethos that was not entirely suited to it. They drew attention to their own act of translating and sought to gain legitimacy as authentic collections by claiming to have minimally interfered with the Bengali stories. Thus, Ram Satya Mukharji wrote in the Preface to his collection of stories *Indian Folklore* published in 1904:

I do not claim any originality or boast as an author; my humble object is to attempt at a wider circulation of these popular tales through the medium of the English language which is now understood in almost all the quarters of the globe. Of course, I felt some difficulty in places in rendering the translation into English. It is not a very easy task to make a true and idiomatic translation of the folklore of a country. In fact there are phrases in some of the stories such that their translation is simply impracticable. However, I have devoted my best care and attention to the book, and it is for the readers to judge how far I have been successful.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Jack Zipes, *Grimm Legacies: The Magic Spell of Grimm's Folk and Fairy Tales* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 8-9

⁸⁸ Christa Kamenetsky, "The Brothers Grimm: Folktale Style and Romantic Theories," *Elementary English* 51, no. 3 (1974): 380 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41387176>.

⁸⁹ Ram Satya Mukharji, "Preface" in *Indian Folklore* (Calcutta: Sanyal & Co., 1904), i.

And William McCulloch stated:

All the stories in my collection were written down in shorthand *verbatim* as narrated to me. In translating them, I have made no attempt to improve them into literature, but have tried simply to reproduce the sense of the originals in ordinary conversational English. In one or two instances, where Western taste necessitated some slight modification, literal renderings have been appended below in Latin.⁹⁰

The merit of the fairy tale collections published during this time as authentic retellings of oral tales lay entirely on the author's own understanding of the poetics of oral storytelling and the judgement of what changes were necessary in the printed versions. The Grimm Brothers had confidence in their own understanding of folk culture and their ability as writers to justify the changes they made.⁹¹ The Brothers' work had thus been praised over the course of the nineteenth century for their loyalty to oral storytelling and for the popularity of what came to be known as the folktale style of writing fairy tales or *Buchmarchenstil*.⁹² This style marked by the simplicity of its prose continued to exert a strong influence on later writers and critics. Rev. Lal Behari Day's biographer Gerardine MacPherson praised his *Folktales of Bengal* because of the simplicity of its narrative style that retained the flavour of the original Bengali stories. "The easy flow of simple expressive language, so thoroughly in keeping with the character of the stories themselves, makes them readily understood and appreciated by the meanest intelligence. In their pithy, idiomatic English they scarcely read like a translation. The narrative

⁹⁰ William McCulloch, "Preface" in *Bengali Household Tales* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1912), v

⁹¹ Quoted in Jack Zipes, *Grimm Legacies: The Magic Spell of Grimm's Folk and Fairy Tales* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 9

⁹² Christa Kamenetsky, "The Brothers Grimm: Folktale Style and Romantic Theories," *Elementary English* 51, no. 3 (1974): 379 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41387176>.

is never wearisome, because the sentences are short and clear and never involved, while the incidents crowd each other in quick succession, and do not allow it to drag.”⁹³

The widespread acknowledgement and acceptance of the Brothers’ methods gets registered in the introduction written by Shirish Chandra Basu to his *Folktales of Hindustan* which was published in 1908. He wrote:

It was not till after the beginning of the Nineteenth Century that the value of folklore for the elucidation of the social history of mankind became apparent to thinkers, and its systematic study seriously began. The brothers Grimm in Germany were the first to study folk-tales scientifically...

...However puerile or absurd a folk-tale may at first appear, it is really a fit subject for scientific investigation and capable of yielding scientific results. We in India, however, have left even the collection of folk-tales to be done by foreigners for the most part, considering these stories to be unworthy the attention of so metaphysical a race as ourselves. But we must, if we want to survive, take our place by the side of the progressive races of the world in all departments of scientific study and research...

...There may be others who may undertake the task of accumulating similar materials in different parts of India. These would-be collectors of folk-tales may take the Grimms' method of editing as their canon: 'Our first aim in collecting these stories has been exactness and truth. We have added nothing of our own, have embellished no incident or feature of the story, but have given its substance just as we ourselves received it. It will, of course, be understood that the mode of telling and carrying out of particular details is principally due to us, but we have striven to retain everything that we knew to

⁹³ Gerardine MacPherson, *Life of Lal Behari Day, Covert, Pastor, Professor and Author* (Eninburgh: T&T Clark, 1900), 127

be characteristic, that in this respect also we might leave the collection the many-sidedness of nature.'

Basu was echoing popular perceptions of the Brothers' work when he labels the Grimm Brothers' method 'scientific'. The Brothers' methodology within a century of the publication of their *Kinder und Hausmarchen* had become a sort of standard method for others to follow. It is precisely because of this that certain methods followed by subsequent folktale collectors had become acceptable. For example, notwithstanding the fact that the collected stories were bound to have changed shape through the processes of literary writing, translation and editing, as had happened with the Grimms, and as the variation in stories amongst writers who collected the same Bengali tales show⁹⁴, the claims of authenticity stood accepted in the reception of the stories. Jack Zipes makes this important observation that "incidentally, most collectors worked this way in the nineteenth century...In general the typical collection of tales in mid-nineteenth century Europe was usually published in the standard or "high" language of the country. Therefore, any story collected orally would be transcribed or translated into a literary language or dominant vernacular, and though most folklorists tried not to add phrases or hone their tales, they all more or less touched up the 'raw' language in which they heard the tale. Many of the tales were recited or read in one language and written down in another. For instance, this type of transcription/translation can be seen in the collecting practices throughout Europe during the nineteenth century."⁹⁵ European collecting practices had also spread to the colonial world through the spread of European imperialism. That writers like Shirish Chandra Basu was

⁹⁴ As the stories changed hands, they were affected by the sensibilities of each of its writers. I will elucidate this point in the following chapters.

⁹⁵ Jack Zipes, *Grimm Legacies: The Magic Spell of Grimm's Folk and Fairy Tales* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 9

quoting from one of the many prefaces of the *Kinder und Hausmarchen*, points at the wide availability of the book worldwide.

What also appears interesting in Basu's 'Introduction' is the same sense of urgency shown by the Grimm brothers for collecting folktales, but manifested in the different context of the colonised world. Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar's *Thakurmar Jhuli* and Shirish Chandra Basu's *Folktales of Hindustan* were published in two consecutive years, 1907 and 1908 respectively. This was the period of the partition of Bengal, in between 1905 when Curzon divided the Bengal province and 1911 when the decision was revoked. The political climate had led to a swadeshi awakening and one important method of protest was the boycott of British products and institutions in favour of Indian ones. "Although conceptualised in terms of political and economic opposition to British merchandise and institutions, the Swadeshi movement also sparked a cultural revival that celebrated all things Bengali. A countless number of songs, poems, plays, pamphlets and tracts were written from 1904 onward to mobilise public opinion and generate solidarity with the *swadeshi* cause."⁹⁶ Swadeshi sentiments appeared in both Rabindranath's preface to the *Thakurmar Jhuli* and Shirish Chandra Basu's 'Introduction' to the *Folktales of Hindustan*. Basu chastised his fellow natives for their neglect of indigenous storytelling traditions saying that India cannot leave the collecting of her folk material to foreigners but must actively take up the task herself. I have already talked about Tagore's conservationist aspirations. Tagore was urging the immediate need for preservation of indigenous storytelling traditions in the face of the cultural threat they faced from English fairy tales. The hegemonic power they enjoyed was the direct result of the colonial education system which focussed on all things British at the cost of Indian traditions.

⁹⁶ Supriya Goswami, *Colonial India in Children's Literature* (New York: Routledge 2012), 135

Is there anything more swadeshi than *Thakurmar Jhuli*? But nowadays even this wonderful repertoire is being sent to us manufactured from the factories in Manchester. The English 'Fairy Tales' are increasingly becoming the sole refuge for our children and our very own indigenous Grandmother & Co. is rendered totally bankrupt. If you shake the bags of today's grandmothers, Martin's Ethics and Burke's notebooks on the French Revolution might fall out but whatever happened to the royal prince and to the minister's son? Where have fled the *Bangoma* and *Bangomi*? Where is that precious jewel equalling the wealth of seven kings, that lies beyond seven seas and thirteen rivers? (translated from original Bengali)

Both the collections were thus being described as reactions to particular stimuli: the former to the abundance of collections of indigenous folktales and fairy tales by foreign others and the lack of work done by native men, and the latter to the hegemonic power enjoyed by English fairy tales in Bengal. The turn to folktales and fairy tales during a period of nationalistic cultural revival was a phenomenon that could be observed in other parts of the world. "Collecting folktales was a social and political act of some kind. Not only did educated middle class collectors give voice to lower classes but they also spoke out in defence of their native languages and in the interests of national and regional movements that sought more autonomy for groups with very particular interests"⁹⁷ Thus Jack Zipes states that "it is here that the tales must be understood as part of the nationalistic trends and the formation of new nation states in the later half of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth centuries."⁹⁸ The Grimm Brothers collection of folktales was also a political tool for their intellectual resistance to the Napoleonic

⁹⁷ Jack Zipes, *Grimm Legacies: The Magic Spell of Grimm's Folk and Fairy Tales* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 27

⁹⁸ Jack Zipes, *Grimm Legacies: The Magic Spell of Grimm's Folk and Fairy Tales* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 27

occupation of various German principalities at a time when Germany was far from being a unified state. Infact, Grimms' folktales had been called up for nationalistic service since their publication through the ensuing period of German unification down to the rise of the Nazis (when the tales were distorted to suit their propagandist purposes). "Any critical history of *Germanistik*⁹⁹ that wants to unearth its origins, especially its struggles for national identity, seems always to begin with the Grimm brothers."¹⁰⁰ Donald Haase writes that "for the Grimms ..., it was the so called common people who best embodied a nation's folk life. It was their lore—including their folktales—that was to become the reservoir and model of national character. As the product of German folk, the tales were thought to contain the scattered fragments of ancient Germanic myth, which when collected would provide the German people with a magic mirror in which they could discern and thus assert their national identity."¹⁰¹ A spirit of romantic nationalism can be linked to the idea of *volkspoesie* or poetry of the common people and *naturpoesie* or poetry which stemmed naturally from the people, because it could become a source for the organic unity of a nation. This spirit of romantic nationalism was common to almost all projects of collecting folktales undertaken by collectors in the nineteenth century. Rabindranath Tagore did not mention the Grimm brothers in his preface to *Dakhshinaranjan's* volume, but his romantic conception of folktales and fairy tales were much in sync with the Grimms' ideas of folktales and fairy tales as *naturpoesie* and *volkspoesie*. Rabindranath compared these stories with mother's milk and thereby asserted the natural organic nature of the narratives. The opposition between *naturpoesie* and *kuntspoesie* played

⁹⁹ The academic discipline of German studies

¹⁰⁰ Jack Zipes, *Grimm Legacies: The Magic Spell of Grimm's Folk and Fairy Tales* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 5

¹⁰¹ Donald Haase. "Yours, mine or ours? Perrault, the Brothers Grimm, and the ownership of fairy tales", *Merveilles & Contes* 7, no. 2 (1993): 385 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41390373>.

out in his preface in the opposition between the natural indigenous storytelling traditions versus the synthetic/artificial British books manufactured in the Manchester mills. He stated that indigenous folktales were as integral to the health and nourishment of the national child as mother's milk was to their bodies. Interestingly in an essay written in 1899 which was quoted by Louis Snyder in "Cultural Nationalism: The Grimm Brother's Fairy tales" (1978) while studying the link between the Grimm Brothers and nationalism, and was subsequently quoted by later critics, a certain Carl Franke wrote "To the spirit of German school children *the tales have become what mother's milk is for their bodies—the first nourishment for the spirit and imagination* (emphasis mine). How German are Snow White, Little Briar Rose, Little Red Cap, the seven dwarfs! Through such genuine diet must the language and spirit of the child gradually become more and more German."¹⁰² By 1871, after the unification of Germany, the *Kinder und Hausmarchen* had become a national primer. Was Tagore aware of this essay when he was writing in 1908? It is not improbable for a man of his erudition but even if not, the fact that he chooses the same metaphor to talk about Bengali fairy tales is remarkable. On a similar vein the mythic peasant woman of the blessed villages, woods and mountains to whom oral stories belong, for Rabindranath becomes the blessed women of the land (the *deshlakshmi*) and the affectionate mothers (the *snehomoyee*).¹⁰³

It was common practice among the European and North American collectors and writers of folk stories and fairy stories in the nineteenth century to be in touch with one another

¹⁰² Louis L. Snyder, "Cultural Nationalism: The Grimm Brothers' Fairy Tales" in *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism*: 077 ed. Suzanne Dewsbury (Detroit: Gale Group, 1999), 10

On a similar note, both Jack Zipes and Donal Haase observe that there was a greater sense of nationalism among the readers of the Grimm's tales in the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth century.

¹⁰³ Rabindranath's preface will come up for a more detailed discussion in the later chapters.

through private correspondence and letters. And they were mostly all familiar with the *Kinder und Hausmarchen* and the Grimm Brothers' scholarly work. However, as a study of the collections published in Bengal shows that the influence of the Grimm brothers work percolated beyond the borders of Europe and into the lands which were under colonial rule. The Grimm brothers works and methods were deeply ingrained in the field of folktale and fairy tale studies in Bengal and in the minds of the both collectors and critics. Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar was famously referred to as 'The Grimm of Bengal'. This goes on to show how established the name of the Brothers was in faraway Bengal in the nineteenth and early twentieth century and the legacy of their *Kinder und Hausmarchen* in the British colony.

2. The British collectors and their legacy

The British efforts at collecting Bengali folktales and fairy tales predated native attempts at writing down and publishing those stories. However, collections of fairy tales and folktales, collected and written down by Britishers continued to appear alongside indigenous publications of folktale and fairy tale volumes well into the first decades of the twentieth century. Hence, when colonial folktale and fairy tale scholarship in Bengal is divided into three phases, the imperial, the nationalist and the intermediate phase overlapping the two, as this thesis will do, it does not necessarily mean that these phases existed in neat divisions of time. The imperial phase, however commenced first, and introduced European folklore scholarship and European categorisation of oral stories into nineteenth century Bengal which had ramifications for the scholarship of the period in general, as this chapter has been and will be arguing.

British folklore scholarship was itself derived from European romanticism and its fascination with the culture of the common people living away and untouched from the corrupting influence of the city. The spatial dimension of this belief during the age of the Empire transformed into a fascination with the people living in the remote faraway lands that

the British had wrested control over. Linked with this was ofcourse the kind of gaze, Said has called orientalist. This gaze itself gave birth to literatures of all kinds which engaged with the colonies in imagined fictitious manners. But as imperial expansion began to be consolidated, the British administration sought to create an “archaeology of knowledge”¹⁰⁴ about the natives they had colonised. This enterprise was again driven from the romantic belief that folk culture being the natural organic sprouting of cultural artifacts from within the community, had the capacity to reveal all kinds of knowledge about the population in general¹⁰⁵. English imperialist impulses wanted to archive this knowledge and store it as cultural capital. Knowledge thus began to be gathered from the colonies and sent back to the capital city of London where it would be stored and studied. Sadhana Naithani observes: “for folklore studies, the Folk-lore Society, London, represented one such singular point: where folklore from the whole Empire could be put on the same table and discussed”¹⁰⁶; and that “British colonialism created a global cultural network”¹⁰⁷. This global cultural network worked alongside the global financial network created by the empire. Cultural knowledge was transferred from the colonies to the capital and this functioned alongside the unidirectional flow of capital from the colonies to England. Indigenous folktales and fairy tales travelled to London through this network, where discourses would be built about them and imposed on the Empire, thus creating epistemological hegemony that maintained itself overtime. The global network of culture also allowed for the

¹⁰⁴ Sadhana Naithani borrows from Foucault and uses this phrase in the context of British folktale scholarship.

¹⁰⁵ Refer to Grimm brother’s naturpoesie and also to the conception of romantic nationalism that believed in the unity of a people based upon the unity of its people’s folk culture.

¹⁰⁶ Sadhana Naithani, *The Story-Time of the British Empire: Colonial and Postcolonial Folkloristics* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 6

¹⁰⁷ Sadhana Naithani, *The Story-Time of the British Empire: Colonial and Postcolonial Folkloristics* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 7

reverse flow of British culture to the colonies for the education of natives. This created a cultural hegemony of its own and had implications for fairy tale scholarship in Bengal, as the Bengali nationalist fairy tale collectors and scholars sought to counter this hegemony through their activities. The next chapter will take this up for detailed discussion.

The collection of folktales and fairy tales in the colonies also had an immediate utilitarian function. Knowledge about the natives would allow for more effective administration of the people. The need for such knowledge gathering was felt more sharply after the Sepoy mutiny of 1857 which had taken the British in India somewhat by surprise. Ashraf Siddiqui writes:

As soon as the British East India Company became ruler of Bengal, it requested the British civil officers to learn about the people of the land through their traditions and customs. Consequently, under the directives of the Company, scholars like William Jones established the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal in the year 1784. This society promoted the study of the humanities, including materials later recognised as folklore, which were published in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*...after the Sepoy Revolution of 1857...the English officials, before leaving England, were instructed to mix with the Indian people, to try to gain their confidence, and also to respect their religion, culture and customs. The officers who came to India were clearly familiar with the importance of anthropology, ethnology and folklore. Such journals and serials were founded as: *Indian Antiquary* (Bombay, 1872-1933), the *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Bombay* (Calcutta, 1886-1936), *North Indian Notes and Queries* (1891-1896), *The Imperial Gazetteers* (26 vols., London, 1892, 1907-9), *The District Gazetteers*, and *Journal and Proceedings, Asiatic Society of Bengal* (Calcutta, 1915-) and *Man in India* (Ranchi, 1932). All of these publications recorded an enormous quantity of folkloristic, ethnological and anthropological material. Additional data on

Indian folklore also appeared in non-Indian journals such as Folk-Lore Record (London, 1878-1882), Folk-Lore Journal (London, 1883-1889), and Folklore (London, 1890-1964), Journal of the American Oriental Society (Baltimore, 1847-1964), American Journal of Philology (Baltimore, 1880) and the Journal of American Folklore (Boston, 1888).¹⁰⁸

The sheer number of journals is staggering and a testimony to the importance attached to the collection of native Indian cultural material. A number of these journals and (as well as other standalone volumes) published quite a number of fairy tales and folktales as part of the folklore material. However, interestingly none of the authors who contributed to these journals were folklorists, anthropologists or ethnologists by training. This was a peculiar characteristic of British colonial folklore collecting efforts that it was carried forward by men who were already serving in the colonies in various capacities and the women who accompanied them and not by specialists. Sadhana Naithani writes that “three types of folklore collectors who mapped the terrain of folklore across the Empire has been identified: women, officials and male missionaries...it is hard to find a ‘free’ collector, that is, someone who had only gone to collect folklore, whether for scholarly or any other purpose.”¹⁰⁹ This was possible because these men and women were simple data collectors for the global network, and never the processors. They sent back their collected data to London for processing. Additionally, all British officers serving in India underwent a period of formal training where they were taught some of the languages and introduced to whatever was understood of the culture and religious laws. This helped the officers in their scholarly pursuits no doubt.

¹⁰⁸ Ashraf Siddiqui and A. S. M. Zahurul Haque, "Folklore Research in East Pakistan," *Asian Folklore Studies* 23, no. 2 (1964): 2-3.

¹⁰⁹ Sadhana Naithani, *The Story-Time of the British Empire: Colonial and Postcolonial Folkloristics* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 9

Now, Bengal being the administrative centre of the British Indian empire became the seat of widespread British scholarly activities of various kinds. Of the four British collector-writers who published stories from Bengali oral traditions in the period that the thesis is studying, two, Guyborn Henry Damant and Francis-Bradley Bradley Birt were administrative officers, Maive Stokes was the daughter of an administrative officer, and William Mcculloch a male Christian missionary. G.H. Damant was the first major collector of folktales and fairy tales in Bengal who contributed twenty tales to the journal *The Indian Antiquary*, between 1872 and 1880. He had been posted in Dinajpur between 1869 and 1873 as Magistrate and Collector and evidently had collected oral folk stories and fairy stories which he subsequently published under the title “Bengali Folklore- Legends from Dinajpur” in volumes one, two, three and four of the journal¹¹⁰. Damant is recorded in Indian history as the Political Agent of Northeast India killed in action. He was killed by the Nagas in front of the Khonoma village gate where he had gone to confiscate arms that had been stockpiled inside the village. In the subsequent raid of the British post, Naga fighters burned the place down which destroyed among other things, the

¹¹⁰ Damant, GH. “Bengali Folklore-Legends from Dinajpur.” *The Indian Antiquary, A Journal of Oriental Research in Archaeology, History, Literature, Languages, Philosophy, Religion, Folklore, &c.* 1 (1872): 115 170, 218, 285, 344.
<https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.44339/page/n5/mode/2up>

Damant, GH. “Bengali Folklore-Legends from Dinajpur.” *The Indian Antiquary, A Journal of Oriental Research in Archaeology, History, Literature, Languages, Philosophy, Religion, Folklore, &c.* 2 (1873): 271, 257.
<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.32044025682105&view=1up&seq=3>

Damant, GH. “Bengali Folklore-Legends from Dinajpur.” *The Indian Antiquary, A Journal of Oriental Research in Archaeology, History, Literature, Languages, Philosophy, Religion, Folklore, &c.* 3 (1874): 320, 342
<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=coo.31924079325761&view=1up&seq=8>

Damant, GH. “Bengali Folklore-Legends from Dinajpur.” *The Indian Antiquary, A Journal of Oriental Research in Archaeology, History, Literature, Languages, Philosophy, Religion, Folklore, &c.* 4 (1875): 54, 260 <https://archive.org/details/indianantiquarya014355mbp>

manuscript of a Manipuri dictionary that Damant was working on. Maive Stokes was the daughter of Whitley Stokes, lawyer by training but also a celebrated Celtic scholar who knew Sanskrit. She collected stories from her ayahs Dukhni and Munia, and her table servant Karim while her father was serving in India and was posted in Shimla. These were privately printed in 1879, after her mother, Mary Stokes had helped her recheck and revise the writing of the stories. This volume was enthusiastically received by established folklore scholars like A Campbell. Stokes' servants and oral informants hailed from Bengal and Bihar. William McCulloch had collected stories from a young brahmin man in the 1880s while he was in Bengal as a missionary but published these in a book *Bengal Household Tales* in London only after he had retired in 1912. Francis Bradley Bradley-Birt wrote a series of books on Bengali history, culture and its important people, as well, a book on Chota Nagpur and two travelogues. Among these books published in 1916 was *Bengal Fairy Tales*.¹¹¹ The painter, writer and another illustrious member of the Tagore family, Abanindranath Tagore, collaborated with Bradley in the book and supplied some fine coloured illustrations of the stories. Bradley's collection is by far the largest and contains within it most of the stories published by Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar in his two volumes *Thakurmar Jhuli* (1907) and *Thakurdadar Jhuli* (1909). In contrast to the other collectors, Bradley-Birt does not reveal his oral sources or provide any sociological data about them.

One issue that emerges from these brief histories of the collector-writer's volumes is that the process from hearing of the stories to the publication of the book required work. This is evident from the time gap between the period of collection of stories and their publication as in the case of Damant and McCulloch. Some of this work was mentioned in Maive Stokes' Preface where she mentioned the labours put in by her mother Mary Bazley Stokes, and her

¹¹¹ Frances Bradley Bradley-Birt, *Bengal Fairy Tales* (London: Willian Clowes and Sons, 1916)

father in making the volume ready for publication. “The notes to this book were written by Mother, and Father helped her to spell the Native names and words. He also made the Index.”¹¹² Hence the published volumes were not as organic as the writer-collectors would have wanted their readers to believe. Further, the methodology for ensuring authenticity as disclosed by Stokes and McCulloch was based on making their oral informant repeat the tales as told by them after a gap in time. The notes written by Maive’s mother declares that to ensure “authenticity” she had reheard the stories from the servants and asked for clarifications as needed. McCulloch’s further made his oral informant retell the stories in a different language. McCulloch writes in his Preface “I was able to ascertain that he did not improve but narrated his tales in stereotyped form, by getting him to re-tell many of them in Sanskrit, which he spoke fluently, a considerable time after he had told them in Bengali.”¹¹³ This methodology, no way fool proof, undermines both the collector-writers’ belief in and their claim that these volumes were “authentic” renditions of a cultural tradition. McCulloch might have also made the assumption that the brahmin male was a source of authentic knowledge about native culture. These collector-writers displayed naïve faith on their oral informants’ intentions and on their own authority to command these informants to do their bidding. They for example, do not consider the possibility that the oral informants might be self-censoring based on their belief of what cultural knowledge was fit to be shared or could be shared with an outsider.

All of the collector-writers were amateurs and the male collector-writers were furthermore collecting on the side of their regular professions. Their regular professions placed them in such positions of power that it should have had an implication on the process of collection. Both Damant and Bradley-Birt held positions of tremendous authority in the

¹¹² Maive Stokes, *Indian Fairy Tales* (Calcutta: Privately Printed, 1879), 1

¹¹³ William McCulloch, “Preface” in *Bengali Household Tales* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1912), vi

colonial British administration. While they could have used their positions of authority to exercise control over their oral informants, it also made it impossible for them to create an easy atmosphere for their informant to tell their stories. Sadhana Naithani identifies this as the problem of power in her book *The Storytime of the Empire*. While the “difference of class between folklore collectors and narrators is a universal feature of folkloristics...colonial privileges of power are not (only) of class...the colonial collector’s position was above the highest bracket of native hierarchies.”¹¹⁴ This privilege of power though unacknowledged presented itself as a problem as a frank relationship of confidence between the teller and collector would have been impossible to establish. While the privilege of power was still a factor, the circumstances of collection of stories by Maive Stokes allowed her to overcome this problem. Stokes was collecting from members of her immediate household with whom she was in regular communication and were her subordinates. Thus, the relationship between collector and teller was pre-existing and well established. Sadhana Naithani writes that the easy personal atmosphere between ayah and ward, narrator and collector essentially meant that the collector could ask for the stories to be repeated and could easily cross check the details because of the intimate nature of their relationship. This was a method that did not have to deal with the problem of the different speeds of telling tales and the writing of them, which necessarily must have been an issue when British collectors went collecting in the field from native storytellers. Mary Frere followed this method in her collection *Old Deccan Days* which was published in 1868 and inspired other Englishwomen like Stokes to follow the same method.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ Sadhana Naithani, *The Story-Time of the British Empire: Colonial and Postcolonial Folkloristics* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 26

¹¹⁵ Sadhana Naithani, *The Story-Time of the British Empire: Colonial and Postcolonial Folkloristics* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 29

Now, the British collectors lacked knowledge of colloquialisms and dialectical Bengali linguistic usages even if they knew the Bengali language. Such understanding was central to the meaning making process. The lack of understanding thereof lead to use of generic nouns like “suo” and “duo”, which meant fortunate and unfortunate and appeared in Bengali fairy tales as the two kinds of queens, as proper names by Damant or the translation of proper names (Dalim Kumar) into English (Pomegranate Raja) by Maive Stokes. The issue of translation of a foreign signifying system into for an Anglophone readership based in England also cropped up for the collector-writers. The creation of literal English transcriptions of oral Bengali stories necessitated literal translation of the material gathered by them. Literal translation was impossible in the colonial context, where the attempt was to mould a foreign language and thereby a cultural ethos, to suit the tastes and demands of a readership firmly rooted in a different culture. McCulloch directly addresses the issue in his Preface, “All the stories in my collection were written down in shorthand verbatim as narrated to me. In translating them, I have made no attempt to improve them into literature, but have tried simply to reproduce the sense of the originals in ordinary conversational English. In one or two instances where western taste necessitated some slight modification, literal renderings have been appended below in Latin.”¹¹⁶ McCulloch thus points to the impossibility of literal translations in the colonial context, given the vast cultural divide between the teller and the recipient of the stories. However, the faith that he puts in his methodology which involved hearing the stories in two different languages and writing/translation them into two different language registers and still preserving the exact sense of the oral tale, is the typical of the faith of the colonial collector-writer in his work. The fact that colonial collector-writers believed that they were engaging in

¹¹⁶ William McCulloch, “Preface” in *Bengali Household Tales* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1912), vi

scientific study contributed to this faith in their ability to perform the role of the transparent writer/translator. The process of collection of oral folk stories attempted to replicate the scientific methodology of specimen collection. The nature of their enterprise was such that they believed they were collecting data about the native population with a high degree of objectivity and not producing a story collection through a highly subjective process of writing and translation. McCulloch and Stokes included the scientific names of Indian plants and flowers that featured in their stories in their elaborate notes. Stokes who had multiple oral informants took care to mention the name of the particular informant at the end of each story, along with the year of collection and the place, much like a specimen collection. There was little recognition that they were attempting to fossilise living performance traditions. The various Bengali *katha* traditions, *rupkatha*, *bratakatha*, *geetikatha* and others existed through fluid interdependencies that is the hallmark of orality. They were also located within the context of community life such as childrearing, worship, labour, teaching etc. The British collector-writer was taking these live traditions out of their context and fixing them within literary structures imported from their own milieus. They were ignorant of the functioning and nuances of the indigenous Bengali storytelling systems and instead attempted to impose western categories on an alien cultural system. Moreover, as Sadhana Naithani writes: “The demands of the science as articulated from London were more concerned with acquiring folklore collected on the same principles across the Empire. It was based on the assumption that folklore everywhere will emerge in categories identified in Europe.”¹¹⁷ Hence what was identified as folktale or fairy tale from the colony of Bengal was not necessarily identified as such by the Bengali community among whom the story originated and circulated, that is within its living context. The most

¹¹⁷ Sadhana Naithani, *The Story-Time of the British Empire: Colonial and Postcolonial Folkloristics* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 36

glaring example of such a misidentification emerges from McCulloch's volume where "The Tale of Itu", a narrative that featured as part of the worship of the sun god Itu, was featured as a folktale, completely cut off from its cultural context and performance practices within popular Hindu religious tradition.

Sadhana Naithani provides an illustrative example of a British collector-writers' method of collecting in the field through Richard Carnac Temple's own documentation of his on-field activities which he included in a section in his *Legends of Punjab*. The British officer was able to summon a narrator in return for a "chit". This chit which could be a letter of introduction, a note of acknowledgement or some other item from a British officer that was deemed valuable and the narrator usually made himself available with the objective of gaining a chit. Temple, displaying an attitude typical of most Britishers towards native storytellers, believed that bards were people of ill repute but despite that agreed to supply the teller with food and opium as per his demands. Problems cropped up as the storytelling began, Temple's munshi, China Mull, who Temple declared was trained for the purpose of story collection while writing down the story had trouble keeping up with the speed of the oral telling. The narrator was thus frequently interrupted with demands for repetition or clarification and unused to such interruption, his interest in the storytelling waned. Furthermore, since Temple did not know the local language the munshi translated the stories to Persian from which Temple translated the stories to English.¹¹⁸ This while highlighting the various struggles of the British collector-writer also highlights among them the problem of access to oral informants that plagued and frustrated

¹¹⁸ Sadhana Naithani, *The Story-Time of the British Empire: Colonial and Postcolonial Folkloristics* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010),

the entire project. It was this problem that required British collectors to employ native assistants. Furthermore, these British men could have only accessed male tellers, very little chance that women could be dragged by force or enticed with bribes to come out in public in front of a British man, administrator or missionary, and sit and narrate stories. Even if such a woman were to be found there was very little chance that she would be comfortable telling “authentic” stories. Richard Carnac Temple’s contribution to the indigenous fairy tale and folktale tradition of Bengal was the inspiration he provided to Rev Lal Behari Day to publish a volume of stories based on the folk story telling traditions of Bengali women. It was also for this reason that British women received hearty encouragement if they could gather stories from native women and prepare them for publication. It was fascinating that Mary Frere, the first British woman collector-writer in India and Maive Stokes enthusiastically published under their own names when most nineteenth century women writers preferred anonymity or pseudonyms while publishing. In the case of Maive Stokes a project that was essentially a very casual enterprise undertaken in the privacy of the drawing room and created through the interpersonal relationship between a young school girl and her caregivers was celebrated by established scholars like A Campbell. Underlying this acceptance and praise of a collection made by a twelve-year old and corrected by her mother was the serious dearth of published volumes with stories collected from indigenous female oral informants. The universe of stories written by Maive Stokes was inhabited by characters both from the world of Indian folk tales but also by characters from the everyday lived world of the British empire. Here the Pomegranate Raja existed in the same story with sepoys and ayahs. Her stories constituted a hybrid world reflecting the hybridity of colonial lived realities where native ayahs, caregivers to an english child, could be telling her stories drawn from their native culture but interspersed with characters familiar to the British child which the child could relate to.

Each of these issues thus, whether recognised by the British collector-writer or not, stood as an impediment in their attempt to create literal transcriptions of Bengali oral stories. However, the scholarship tradition they established in Bengal was built on the premise that literary transcriptions of oral stories were possible. Additionally, their works gave currency to the belief that narratives could be translated from one language register to another without any loss. That a language constituted a whole other cultural system and that linguistic translation necessarily implied cultural translation went unrecognised. Thus, English became the medium of choice for indigenous collectors before the Swadeshi Cultural Resistance and its emphasis on the mother tongue. Furthermore, British categorisation of the oral tales became the reference point for later scholarship and the literary fairy tale tradition of Bengal came into existence mediated through the British genre of fairy tale and folktale. Indigenous collectors who were inspired by British collector-writers were *contrasting* with the genre of western fairy tales, since they were aiming to present “Indian” stories that belonged to the same category of tales as those collected by western writers and thus add to international scholarly activities. On the other hand, during the Swadeshi phase, *rupkatha* as a literary genre was *competing* with English fairy tales in an effort to counter their hegemonic dominance over the English educated Bengali upper and middle classes. Now this had some interesting ramifications for the story collections. Writers such as Lal Behari Day who were directly inspired by colonial indologists concentrated on stories that would correspond to the western marchen tales and fairy tales. Therefore, when Day published a collection of stories called *Folktales of Bengal*, it was mostly a certain kind of stories, oral wonder tales or *rupkatha* narratives that found place in the volume. Whereas folktales, as a category, whose Bengali translation would be *lok katha* included within it an array of narratives such as the *upakatha* or animal tales/fables, *bratakatha* or ritual tales and *rupkatha* or oral wonder tales. Day excluded both *bratakatha* narratives as well as animal tales from his stories collection of “folktales”. Western categorisations remained an important

reference point for him and hence he associated the “folktales” that he was writing with fairy tales and marchen. A couple of decades later when Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar was publishing a volume of tales that attempted to counter the widespread popularity that western fairy tales had gained in colonial Bengal, he in turn concentrated on stories which he felt were equivalent to the western tales. He identified these stories as *rupkatha* and the genre of *rupkatha* was defined as the indigenous equivalent of the western fairy tale. Longer narratives that were also *rupkatha* stories because they too were oral wonder tales were published in a separate volume by Mitra Majumdar titled *Thakurdadar Jhuli* and described as Bengali oral novels *bongoupanyashkatha*. The stories of *Thakurdadar Jhuli* were propped up as indigenous oral novels, a *Swadeshi* challenge no doubt to the foreign genre of the novel that too had found ready acceptance in late nineteenth century Bengal. However, *upanyashkatha* was a synthetic term that has subsequently not remained in common or scholarly usage. The novel originated in Europe as a literary genre and the stories of *Thakurdadar Jhuli* were based on oral *rupkatha* tales. Finally, it was the profile of British collectors who were collecting and publishing folktales and fairy tales in Bengal (and other colonies) that lead to the conception of folktale collection being an amateur activity. Most of the indigenous collectors who were engaged in the writing of fairy tales and folktales based on oral stories had various day professions. Lal Behari Day was a missionary and teacher, Ramsatya Mukherjee was a native civil servant of the British administration. Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar was the first dedicated litterateur among the pantheon of the Bengali fairy tale writers but untrained for the field activities he undertook. He introduced newer methods in the collection of stories by using a phonograph on field and deviated from the rest by publishing the stories in Bengali.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, while the influence of the Grimm Brothers’ scholarship reached Bengal through the spread of British folkloristics across the British empire, the Grimms’ legacy in turn

left a lasting impression on the indigenous collector-writers who took up writing literary fairy tales based upon oral folktales from the last decades of the nineteenth century. Alongside this, the British collector-writers who were engaged in archiving native oral storytelling traditions from the middle half of the nineteenth century in an attempt to learn more about their subjects, themselves left an enduring legacy that shaped the indigenous literary fairy tale tradition. While the Grimm brothers had left a conception of the ideal oral storyteller, the old village woman, British writers in Bengal left a conception of the profile of the folktale and fairy tale writer. They introduced the medium of writing, the “official” language of communication and imposed a method of categorisation of oral stories that endured. The indigenous Bengali fairy tale tradition emerged through the influence of British colonial literary activities and was the product of the hybrid cultural world of the colonial *bhadrolok*.

CHAPTER 2

The Indigenous Fairy Tale Collections: An Overview

The last decades of the nineteenth century saw the beginning of indigenous efforts at collecting Bengali folktales and fairy tales. The work of British writers such as G.H. Damant and Maive Stokes had paved the way for the collection and publication of Bengali folk tales and fairy tales. Indigenous efforts at collecting stories from the Bengali oral tradition gained steam in the last two decades of the nineteenth century and showed a remarkable variety in scope, purpose and execution. Reverend Lal Behari Day, the first native Bengali collector to publish a volume of folk and fairy tales, published in response to a request by the noted British folklorist Richard Carnac Temple and dedicated his volume to Temple. This collection *Folktales of Bengal* (1883) appeared in English and was followed by a number of other collectors who duplicated Day's style. The end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth also saw the growth of an intellectual discourse around these storytelling traditions which were actively thrust to the forefront by the rise of Indian nationalism and the Swadeshi movement in Bengal. This phase witnessed the pioneering work of Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar who published in colloquial Bengali two collections containing fairy tales drawn from oral sources, *Thakurmar Jhuli* (1907) and *Thakurdadar Jhuli* (1909). Both the volumes have remained landmark texts in the history of Bengali print publication. A number of issues cropped up in the contemporary discussion of Majumdar's work by members of the Bengali intelligentsia such as Rabindranath Tagore and Dinesh Chandra Sen. Among these issues were questions of ownership of the oral tradition, negotiation of the relationship of folk with the national and the role of women. Hence, a particularly important moment in the Bengali fairy tale tradition occurred when native women took up the pen to collect Bengali fairy tales. The women collectors of Bengali fairy tales have not received much popular or scholarly attention. This thesis will study two women collectors Maharani Suniti Devi, who published *Indian Fairytales*

in 1923, and Sovana Sundari Devi, who published a volume *The Orient Pearls* in 1915. They belonged to two of the most reputed Brahmo families of the time and were the quintessential new women of the early twentieth century. I will begin with the hypothesis that the writing down of oral stories is not a simple and transparent act. The production of the written text is a process that, in itself, requires critical attention. This is a point that has also been reiterated by fairy tale scholars like Jack Zipes. Zipes observes that one can see a single fairy tale text as a “symbolic act” infused with the ideological viewpoint of the author¹¹⁹. Modern fairy tale studies have evolved to focus attention not just on the text and the representation of various issues within it but also at the process of production of texts and issues in the formation of the canon. These issues have been deemed integral to the study and thereby the understanding of the fairy tale genre.

It is not my intention to form a canon of late nineteenth and early twentieth century indigenous fairy tale collectors because such an enterprise would be at best fraught and at the worst exclusionary. Instead in this chapter I want to focus on the intellectual, social and political history of the period as broader frames of reference from which the literary fairy tale texts had emerged and study the way these shaped the volumes. I will study the ways in which the ideological slant of the collectors informed their appropriation of the oral tales into literary texts. A major challenge is the absence of any kind of manuscripts of the published texts that could throw light into the process of authorial intervention in the stories. The critical study of the *Kinder und Hausmärchen* was greatly benefitted by the discovery of the Olenberg manuscripts which allowed scholars to track the stages of the Grimm Brother’s editing of their

¹¹⁹ Jack Zipes, *Fairytales and the Art of Subversion: The Classical Genre for Children and the Process of Civilization* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 3

material. Keeping in mind this lack, this chapter will critically study versions of the same stories which were collected by different authors in order to note the authorial interventions. It will investigate the major influences on their work and study whether they were creating literary discourses of their own.

1. The first indigenous collection: Reverend Lal Behari Day's *Folktales of Bengal*

Reverend Lal Behari Day has occupied a peculiar position as an indigenous collector because although he was a native-born Bengali/Indian, his conversion to Christianity at an early age and subsequent taking of the orders to become an Anglican clergyman, placed him in a fraught relationship with the stories he was collecting. The stories for him were “heathen” while at the same time he also recalled being part of the storytelling community as a boy, and hearing “thousands” of such stories. Sadhana Naithani, who has a few paragraphs reserved for him in her *Storytime of the Empire* categorises him as a “native folklorist of the colonial archive”¹²⁰; however, his role as a collector was more complicated than that. Being a native Bengali, he claimed respect for ‘his’ people, the half-naked Indian peasant on the bank of the Ganges and hoped that the collection of stories would bring that respect to the community. However, his Anglican identity also marked a rupture in seamless cultural continuity, aligning him with the British and creating a distance between him and the same Bengali Hindu community. For him, the Indian is the cousin of the “well-dressed” Englishman, however, only at “the hundredth remove”.¹²¹

¹²⁰ Sadhana Naithani, *The Story-Time of the British Empire: Colonial and Postcolonial Folkloristics* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 64

¹²¹ Lal Behari Day, “Preface” in *Folktales of Bengal* (Kolkata: Uccharan, 1993), i-ii

The circumstances surrounding Lal Behari Day's venture of collecting Bengali folktales and fairy tales is rather well known. Richard Carnac Temple, a British colonial administrator, who was also an established folklorist in India, on reading Day's novel *Peasant Life in Bengal*¹²² (first published in 1874 as *Gobinda Samanta* or the *History of a Bengal Raiyat* and then as *Bengal Peasant Life* in 1878) had been struck by a scene where an old woman was telling stories to little peasant children. Temple had thus asked Day to collect such stories which were told by women in Bengali households. The request had deeper significance since British folklorists in India (such as Richard Carnac Temple and William Crook) rued their lack of access to native women storytellers which Day, Temple believed, as a native, would have access to.¹²³ Thus, it was his hyphenated identity—a son of the soil emerging from within the community whose stories were sought to be collected, and also a devout Christian priest and supporter of the British Raj (whose grasp of the English language was extensive)—lead him to be recruited by Temple. Day's situation also led him to be better placed than most British collectors for the job at hand. He had greater access to the field from which the raw material was to be gathered and did not require an intermediary¹²⁴ to write down the texts and translate colloquial Bengali into English, as was common practise among the British collectors.

¹²² It is not clear whether Day is referring to the first version of the novel *Gobinda Samanta* or the *History of a Bengal Raiyat* or its revised version *Bengal Peasant Life*, when he mentions the title *Peasant Life in Bengal*. The novel was an exploration of the life of the ordinary peasant and the working classes in fiction, based primarily on the district of Burdwan, where Day was born and had spent his childhood.

¹²³ Sadhana Naithani, *The Story-Time of the British Empire: Colonial and Postcolonial Folkloristics* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 71

¹²⁴ Most British collectors in the colonies employed native men (*munshis*) to act as intermediaries between them and the native populations whose stories were collected by them. The contribution of these intermediaries were often extensive but usually went unacknowledged.

Lal Behari Day introduced his volume of stories, the *Folktales of Bengal*, by establishing the link with colonial folklore scholarship through the reference to “Captain R. C. Temple, of the Bengal Staff Corps, son of the distinguished Indian administrator Sir Richard Temple”. This he did by, firstly, stating Temple as the inspiration behind the volume and, secondly, by establishing his own knowledge of European folktale collections.

As I was no stranger to the *Mährchen* of the Brothers Grimm, to the *Norse Tales* so admirably told by Dasent, to Arnason’s *Icelandic Stories* translated by Powell, to the *Highland Stories* done into English by Campbell, and to the fairy stories collected by other writers, and as I believed that the collection suggested would be a contribution, however slight, to that daily increasing literature of folk-lore [sic] and comparative mythology.¹²⁵

That Day deemed it necessary to establish the link with European folktale scholarship shows the extent of the influence of European folktale collections on early native Bengali collectors. As already discussed in the previous chapter, the Grimm Brothers were the most recognisable name in European folktale/fairy tale scholarship at the time, and their method had so much become the norm that it was rather impossible to be taken seriously as a folktale collector for a Western readership without referring to them. Day also referred to the works of others in an attempt to show off his erudition. Interestingly, his list of works did not include any volume of European colonial collection of Indian stories, although by 1883 there were quite a few¹²⁶. It becomes clear that he saw his own volume as a continuation of that scholarship when he wrote

¹²⁵ Lal Behari Day, “Preface” in *Folktales of Bengal* (Kolkata: Uccharan, 1993), i-ii

¹²⁶ Mary Frere Old Deccan Days (1868), G H Damant’s “Tales from Dinajpur” in *The Indian Antiquary* (1872-1880), Maive Stokes’ *Indian Fairytales* (1879)

that he took up the task of collecting Bengali folktales and fairy tales on the insistence of R. C. Temple because he believed that the volume would be a contribution to the already increasing folk and fairy literature from India. Sadhana Naithani reads Day's deliberate display of his knowledge of European folktale scholarship as a claim for being taken seriously as a scholar.¹²⁷ Naithani's reading is based upon the premise that all of the works of colonial folkloristics, of which she saw Day as simply a native contributor, was intended for the metropolis, that is, London. And to the London audience which comprised of both British scholars and ordinary readers, the native collector's knowledge of European folkloric activities was key to the acceptance of his volume as a significant work and his scholarship as methodologically sound. However, if one reads Day's introductory essay closely, it becomes clear that the claim for authenticity for the stories that he collected and thereby the methodology he followed laid elsewhere, in his cultural memory:

I heard many more stories than those contained in the following pages; but I rejected a great many, as they appeared to me to contain spurious additions to the original stories which I had heard when a boy. I have reason to believe that the stories given in this book are a genuine sample of the old old stories told by old Bengali women from age to age through a hundred generations.¹²⁸

Thus, according to him, the point of importance that made his volume a serious work of folktale and fairy tale scholarship was not his knowledge of European folkloristics but rather the fact that he once belonged to the community whose stories he was collecting and that he had a living memory (albeit flawed, as per his own claims) of the collected stories which he had heard

¹²⁷ Sadhana Naithani, *The Story-Time of the British Empire: Colonial and Postcolonial Folkloristics* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 70

¹²⁸ Lal Behari Day, "Preface" in *Folktales of Bengal* (Kolkata: Uccharan, 1993), ii

as a child and could compare the collected versions with the stories he remembered. His listing of European collections stating his familiarity with them was merely an attempt at showing off his erudition to the metropolitan reader. When Naithani states that “ironically, Temple had suggested the collection of stories told by ‘old women’ to Day because he was a ‘native’”¹²⁹, there is really nothing ironical about this fact. Rather, Temple’s suggestion is consistent with Day’s own purpose for his work and the claims to seriousness of scholarship that he made based on his position as a native gentleman. The basis of Reverend Lal Behari Day’s claim to authenticity and thereby the rigorous nature of his scholarship was his first-hand knowledge of the material he was collecting. This claim became a defining feature of indigenous story collectors after him, since unlike the British, they were holding up their own oral cultural traditions to literary light and were first hand receivers of that tradition at some point in their lives. Memory became an important tool of scholarship.

The other important issue that comes up from Day’s essay was his method of collecting. Day wrote:

I had heard ten from her...An old Brahman told me two stories; an old barber, three; an old servant of mine told me two; and the rest I heard from another Brahman. None of my authorities knew English; they all told the stories in Bengali, and I translated them into English when I came home.¹³⁰

¹²⁹ Sadhana Naithani, *The Story-Time of the British Empire: Colonial and Postcolonial Folkloristics* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 70

¹³⁰ Lal Behari Day, “Preface” in *Folktales of Bengal* (Kolkata: Uccharan, 1993), ii

The method he used thus involved listening to the stories from the various sources he had chosen, whether he wrote them down or took notes, he doesn't mention but one can presume. He then went home and translated the stories either from his field notes or from his recollections. It has already been discussed that he then claimed to have compared these versions with the stories that he remembered, and thus his memory acted as a sieve which filtered the "genuine" stories from "spurious" additions. His memory becomes the stamp of authenticity and the readers are invited to accept this at face value. The idea of authenticity when applied to oral traditions is rather incongruous because oral traditions are ontologically fluid. They change from one telling to another and exist in multiple versions. This makes Day's claims about the genuineness of his stories rather problematic. Furthermore, his methodology of listening, going home and translating, and producing at the end of the process genuine samples of oral tales told by old Bengali women, assumed that both the processes of writing down and translating are simple transparent processes where nothing is lost in between and nothing added. However, the act of translation of colloquial Bengali into literary English was not a simple act of literary translation alone. It was simultaneously an act of cultural translation whereby Lal Behari Day was interpreting a distinct cultural ethos in a foreign language for a foreign reader. The stories in the *Folktales of Bengal* contained footnotes that sought to explain cultural specificities and popular figures particular to Bengal/India. For example, the "sankchinni" who appeared in the story "A Ghostly Wife" was explained in a footnote: "Sankchinnis or Sankhachurnis are female ghosts of white complexion. They usually stand at the dead of the night at the foot of trees and look like sheets of white cloth."¹³¹ Day mentioned both the colloquial name *sankchinni* and the Sanskrit name *sankhachurni*, but he did not mention that the name was derived from the fact that these were the ghosts of married women,

¹³¹ Lal Behari Day, *Folktales of Bengal* (Kolkata: Uccharan, 1993), 172

who wore *sankhas* or conch shell bangles worn by the married Bengali Hindu women. Similarly the “*ojha*”, was noted as “an exorcist, one who drives away ghosts from possessed person”¹³² and the “*brahmaditya*” was explained as “the ghost of a Brahman who dies unmarried”¹³³. He also provided explanatory notes for popular characters/motifs which appeared in the universe of Bengali fairy tales and folktales, such as the “*pakshiraj*” horse: “literally the *king of birds*[sic], a fabulous species of horse remarkable for their swiftness.”¹³⁴ (he does not mention that the *pakshiraj* horse could fly), the “*sannyasi*”: “a religious mendicant”¹³⁵ and the “*pushpaka* chariot”: “the chariot of Kuvera” who was the “Hindu god of riches”¹³⁶. Day also provided notes for things such as measurements in local use, like the “*bigha*”, explained as “about the third part of an acre”¹³⁷, household spaces such as the “*zenana*”: “zenana is not the name of a province in India, as the good people of Scotland the other day took it to be”, he wrote, “but the innermost department of a Hindu or Mohammedan house which the women occupy”¹³⁸, articles of everyday use such as the “*gamchha*”, explained as: “a towel used in bathing”¹³⁹, “*charpoy*”, explained as: “a sort of bed made of rope, supported by posts of wood”¹⁴⁰, “*handi*” as “an earthen pot, generally used in cooking food”¹⁴¹, food

¹³² Day, *Folktales of Bengal*, 173

¹³³ Day, *Folktales of Bengal*, 175

¹³⁴ Day, *Folktales of Bengal*, 215

¹³⁵ Day, *Folktales of Bengal*, 156

¹³⁶ Day, *Folktales of Bengal*, 181

¹³⁷ Day, *Folktales of Bengal*, 175

¹³⁸ Day, *Folktales of Bengal*, 152

¹³⁹ Day, *Folktales of Bengal*, 140

¹⁴⁰ Day, *Folktales of Bengal*, 141

¹⁴¹ Day, *Folktales of Bengal*, 48

items such as “*khai*”, “fried paddy”¹⁴², and “*mudki*”, “fried paddy boiled dry in treacle or sugar”¹⁴³. Bengali flora and fauna were also annotated, often with scientific names. The “*hiraman*” is explained as “Hiraman (from harit, green, and mani, a gem) the name of a beautiful species of parrot, a native of the Molucca Island (*Psittacus sinensis*)”. The source for this was cited as “Carey’s Dictionary of the Bangalee Language, vol ii. part iii. p. 1537.”¹⁴⁴ There were also other instances where Day inserted the scientific name of animals and flowers which Britishers were likely to be unfamiliar with. The “*kataki*” flower was referenced as “*calortopis gigantean*”¹⁴⁵.

Alongside these references and footnotes, Day’s position as a native gentleman publishing a story collection for the metropolitan readership had affected the stories that he produced. Day introduced references to contemporary Bengali cultural life and practises into the stories. The prince’s bed in the story of “Phakir Chand” had “mosquito curtains” and there was a “*ghatak*” (professional matchmakers) in “Swet Basanta”. In the story of the “Indigent Brahman”, the *sandesh* of the divinely gifted *handi* was compared to the sweet meats made by the confectioners of Burra Bazar. “No confectioner of Burra Bazar ever made its like”, wrote Day. Burra Bazar grew as a market along with the city of Calcutta only in the colonial period. Contemporary currency both British and Indian was mentioned in “The Story of Rakshasas”: “hillocks of cowries, of pice, of eight-anna pieces, of rupees...”¹⁴⁶ This tale bore a close

¹⁴² Day, *Folktales of Bengal*, 114

¹⁴³ Day, *Folktales of Bengal*, 48

¹⁴⁴ Day, *Folktales of Bengal*, 182

¹⁴⁵ Day, *Folktales of Bengal*, 214

¹⁴⁶ Day, *Folktales of Bengal*, 60

resemblance to “Lal Kamol Nil Kamal” from *Thakurmar Jhuli*, however the father of the heroes in Day was a Brahmin and not a King. His being a “Kulin” Brahmin was mentioned as the reason he easily believed the *rakshasi*’s claim that she was his wife as he thought he must have married her when she was young and never visited her again. The practise of Kulin polygamy which had received much attention from social reformers (most importantly Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar) and the colonial government in the nineteenth century was thus woven into the story. Such details were unique to Lal Behari Day as he was not just collecting stories but also presenting a culture for the consumption of an imperial readership.

Sadhana Naithani has pointed out that collections like Day’s were required not for the colonies but for the metropolis.¹⁴⁷ European scholars, based in the metropolis, saw the folktale collections emerging from the colonies as a source of cross-cultural data. This was an attitude that marked colonial folktale scholarship, according to Donald Haase¹⁴⁸ and still held sway in the field of folktale and fairy tale studies with some white scholars continuing to treat stories from various folktale collections as easily available cultural data. Day’s collection appeared to have fulfilled its purpose and had gained acclaim in both London and Calcutta. *The Folktales of Bengal* saw a reprint published from London in 1912 with illustrations by Warwick Goble.

Day’s position as an Anglican priest and his internalised Anglican value system also manifested itself in the main body of story texts that he published. For example, Day’s narration greatly engaged itself with the issue of marriage. Great stress was laid on how the marital rites were performed within the narratives, whether there was an officiating priest and what constituted a valid marriage. Day felt the need to add references and notes to show how the

¹⁴⁷ Sadhana Naithani, *The Story-Time of the British Empire: Colonial and Postcolonial Folkloristics* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 70

¹⁴⁸ Haase, Donald. "Decolonizing Fairy-Tale Studies." *Marvels & Tales* 24, no. 1 (2010): 19. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41389024>.

marriages were valid even in the absence of officiating priests which betrayed his own discomfort with the practise. The marriage between Dalim Kumar and his wife in the close confines of his sealed quarters happened “a la Gandharav”. Day wrote: “As a priest were[sic] out of the question, the hymeneal rites were performed a la Gandharav”¹⁴⁹ He then went on to explain in a footnote that “there are eight forms of marriage spoken of in the Hindu Shastras, of which the Gandharava is one, consisting in the exchange of garlands”, thus establishing that the marriage of the prince and the princess was valid as per the religious Hindu law. In the story “Phakir Chand”, Day once again described the Prince’s wedding rites with only his best friend, the minister’s son, as witness with the sentence: “there was no priest there, the hymeneal knot was tied by a simple exchange of garlands of flower”.¹⁵⁰ This kind of marriage, where the young prince or princess chose their partners and married by mutual consent in the presence of no one or just a close friend, occurred regularly within Bengali fairy stories. This was indeed close to what is referred to as the *gandharva bibaha* or a form of marriage where the only witness of the marriage is nature. Examples of such marriages can also be found in the Mahabharata. These moments pass in the stories written by other writers like Daksinaranjan Mitra Majumdar or Shovana Devi or Suniti Devi without any additional comments from the narrator. For Day, the way the marital rites were performed was important, particularly the presence of the priest which determined the validity of the rite.

Secondly, the sources of magic in Day’s stories are religious. Day’s fairy tales refer to gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon who appeared in both roles, as magic helpers¹⁵¹ and

¹⁴⁹ Day, *Folktales of Bengal*, 10

¹⁵⁰ Day, *Folktales of Bengal*, 19

¹⁵¹ A term used by the formalist scholar of fairy tales Vladimir Propp, who refers to characters who appear to help a protagonist onward in his/her quest and often provides them with a source of magic as “magic helpers”.

as original prescribers of the protagonists' fate. In "Life's Secret", Prince Dalim's "deliverance" (a term itself significant within the Christian spiritual journey of sin, grace and deliverance) was brought about by "Bidhata-Purusha" who Day footnoted as "the deity that predetermines all the events of the life of man or woman and writes on the forehead of the child, on the sixth day of its birth, a brief précis of them"¹⁵² and not random fate. In the "Indigent Brahmin" it was the sacred trefoil of Siva's temple that provided a hiding place to Champa Dal by rendering him invisible to the *rakshasis*. Similarly, it was the goddess Kali whose final intervention brought the story of "Phakir Chand" to closure. Kali in the end brought the sacrificed babe to life and thus ensured the life of both the minister's son and the royal baby. Day's stories stand out because they did not have secular sources of magic as stories written by other writers had. For example, Suniti Devi introduced fairies and Sovana Sundari had *peris*. Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar brought in hermits who appeared at random or happened to pass by the kingdoms during a time of crisis as sources of magic but never divine intervention. The need to identify magic within the universe of fairy tales as religious magic may be symptomatic of the Christian discomfort with secular sources of magic. The folk belief in fairies, goblins and witchcraft had through history run foul with the Christian church. The belief in fairies had come down from a pre-Christian past and was very real in the medieval world as well as among the greater rural masses for the next few centuries. Fairies also began appearing in literature from the sixteenth century onwards. The writers included seventeenth century French fairy tale writers like Perrault, Madame Beaumont and others, but also writers like Shakespeare, Spenser and Drayton. Keith Thomas notes that 'so far as literary references are concerned, the peak age of fairy allusions appears to be the end of the sixteenth century and the beginning of the seventeenth' which he suggests 'indicates the growth of a literature with

popular roots’¹⁵³ The church was well aware and hugely disapproving of the folk practices surrounding fairies such as leaving out food and water for them. These spirits were seen as non-Christian threat to the Church’s authority but that could do little to prevent common people from believing in them. With the Reformation, the clergy condemned all forms of fairy beliefs along with belief of ghosts and attributed their propagation to papal mischief makers, not taking into account the deep discomfort the Catholic Church had with these spirits in the first place. Alongside this was the need for the church, both Catholic and Protestant, to establish their authority over the masses as the only legitimate source of magic.¹⁵⁴ Day’s internalised Anglican perspective thus manifests itself in his attempt to censor non-religious magic from his fairy stories.

This perspective can also be traced in the representation of certain cultural issues. He called Sahasra Dal and Champa Dal from “The Story of Rakhshasas”, “friends”, despite the dictate of the kinship ties of the Indian subcontinent (both Hindu and Muslim) that treated step-brothers with the father as the common parent, as brothers. A number of stories from *Thakurmar Jhuli* provided examples of such brothers, this included “Lal Komol Nil Komol”, which is a story that bore resemblance to “The Story of Rakhshasas”, and had a set of step-brothers, Ajit-Kusum, as the central protagonist. Ajit, like Sahasra Dal, was the son of a *rakshasi* and Kusum, like Champa Dal, had a human mother. Both the pairs had a common father, who is the king in “Lal Komol Nil Komol” and a Kulin Brahmin in Day’s story. Day’s calling them as “friends” is more reflective of British Christian cultural ethos that did not recognise polygynous marriages and such ensuing kinship ties. Day also wove European orientalist historiography of India into the text which propounded the view that the Indian

¹⁵³ Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London: Penguin, 1971), 726

¹⁵⁴ Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London: Penguin, 1971)

subcontinent was settled on by fair skinned “Aryans” who came from outside and conquered and subjugated the original dark-skinned inhabitants of the land. Day wrote of this as an established fact when he annotated the figure of the *rakshasi* with the note: “chief of the aborigines whom the Aryans overthrew on their first settlement in the country—found in Hindu mythology as huge giants and giantesses or rather demons”¹⁵⁵.

However, ironically, Reverend Lal Behari Day despite the popular Victorian discomfort with the obscene and sexual elements in folktales and fairy tales, chose to retain certain such elements in the stories that he published. The popular moralistic attitude of Victorian England towards folklore is noted by Guissepe Flora. He quotes the observation of Verrier Elwin, an anthropologist who exclaimed: “It is remarkable that the collection of folktales should have been regarded in India as a suitable pastime for the clergy and for the English ladies.”¹⁵⁶ Day’s stories contained instances of incest such as the oedipal attraction of Swet’s son for his mother. In the story the boy was unaware of his identity having been separated from his mother when he was just a babe and then adopted by a kotwal. He mistook his own mother, for an unusually beautiful brahmin’s daughter and wanted to marry her. When he was denied her hand in marriage, he decided to rape her. He only abandoned his decided course of action when he came to know about the circumstances of his birth through the intervention of two magic helpers (talking cows). Instances of threatened rape were also present in other stories. For example, in the “Evil Eye of Sani”, a group of boatmen kidnaped Sribatsa’s wife Chintamani with the intention of raping her. She was saved by the magical intervention of goddess Lakshmi who made her ugly and thereby Chintamani saved her chastity by losing her beauty. An evil

¹⁵⁵ Lal Behari Day, *Folktales of Bengal*, 59

¹⁵⁶ Giuseppe Flora, "On Fairy Tales, Intellectuals and Nationalism in Bengal (1880-1920)," *Rivista Degli Studi Orientali* 75 (2002): 25 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41913063>.

rakshasi in “The Story of Rakshasas” accused Champa Dal of having sexual designs upon her and thereby managed to have him exiled from Sahasra Dal’s palace. This calumny was believed by all. An instance of cannibalism was present in “The Boy Whom Seven Mothers Suckled”, where the seven queens after being incarcerated with their seven babes ate the babes one by one in order to survive with the exception of the seventh queen, who did not want to kill and share the meat of her baby. As she saved the child, all of the seven queens decided to raise him together. From these examples it becomes obvious that Day chose not to sanitise his stories extensively. A reason for this can be found in the purpose of the collector while writing down these stories. Day wanted to present a “genuine” sample of old stories told by the folk. The Indian/Bengali folk was not just the colonised other but also the marginalised other among the colonised. The distance of the native folk was thus at twice remove from the English imperialist gaze and Day wanted to (and was encouraged to) to act as intermediary in order to provide a direct glimpse of the folk through this volume, provide a “genuine sample”. His book was thus titled “Folktales of Bengal” which referred directly to his subject matter.

2. The aftermath of the *Folktales of Bengal*.

The titles of the early folktale and fairy tale collections are important for discerning the purpose of the collectors. Lalbehari Day’s work was followed by a few other Bengali folktale and fairy tale collections published in English by native Bengali men such as Ramsatya Mukharji who published *Indian Folklore* in 1904 and Srishchandra Basu who published *Folktales of Hindustan* in 1908 (and an illustrated edition in 1913 which was illustrated by Upendrakishore Ray Chaudhuri). There was also a Kashindranath Bandopadhyay who published a collection of jest-tales and not fairy tales in the volume *Popular Tales of Bengal* in 1905. These men were targeting Anglophone Bengal and beyond. The Anglophone reader within India consisted of both the educated native elite and the white colonialists. But the men were also publishing with the European reader in mind and believed that they were contributing

to the colonial folkloristic efforts. Shrish Chandra Basu who published under the pen name of Shaikh Chilli¹⁵⁷ explicitly declared his purpose in the introduction where he states that “the writer of the Folk-Tales of Hindustan is simply contributing materials for the folklorist. Their study must be left to other hands.”¹⁵⁸ Ramsatya Mukharji, for his part wrote that “it struck me some time ago that the little amusing folklore stories current in India should be put together and published in a book form” and that it was his “humble object to attempt at a wider circulation of these popular tales through the medium of the English language which is now understood in almost all the quarters of the globe.”¹⁵⁹ These collectors espouse views of the colonial folklorist which Donald Haase notes believed in “the idea that folktale collections contain simple narratives serving as essentially direct expressions of ‘traditional societies’”¹⁶⁰. Shrish Chandra Basu wrote that it was in the nineteenth century that “the value of folklore for the elucidation of the social history of mankind became apparent to thinkers, and its systematic study seriously began.”¹⁶¹ He then delivered a eulogy to the Grimm Brothers’ methods and scholarship and then stressed on the need for Indians to collect their own folklore. I would like to point out this statement made by Basu to suggest that these works overlap two phases of Bengali folktale and fairy tale scholarship: the native extension of colonial folkloric activities and the folkloric activities resulting from the rise of Indian nationalism. Basu dedicated his volume to James Scorgie Meston, who was the Governor of the United Provinces of Agra and

¹⁵⁷ Shaikh Chilli was a popular folktale character, a simpleton, also reputed originally to be the spiritual master of Dara Shikoh who appeared in many folktales.

¹⁵⁸ Shrish Chandra Basu, *Folktales of Hindustan* (Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press, 1913), ii

¹⁵⁹ Ram Satya Mukharji, *Indian Folklore* (Calcutta: Sarkar & Co., 1904), 6

¹⁶⁰ Haase, Donald. "Decolonizing Fairy-Tale Studies." *Marvels & Tales* 24, no. 1 (2010): 20. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41389024>.

¹⁶¹ Shrish Chandra Basu, *Folktales of Hindustan* (Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press, 1913), 5

Oudh and stated that he was contributing material for the study of folklorists. However, he was also taking a nationalist standpoint in arguing that Indians must take up the task of collecting their own folk material. In his introduction he wrote: “we in India, however, have left even the collection of folk-tales to be done by foreigners for the most part, considering these stories to be unworthy the attention of so metaphysical a race as ourselves. But we must, if we want to survive, take our place by the side of the progressive races of the world in all departments of scientific study and research.”¹⁶² This is especially significant because Basu’s stories along with the introduction were initially published in the *Modern Review* in 1907, which was the English magazine founded by Ramananda Chatterjee in the same year and with the aim of providing an important platform to the nationalist intelligentsia. The *Modern Review* published many important nationalist tracts of the period including the demands for home rule or “Swaraj”. The other collector-writer of this phase, Ramsatya Mukharji, was a magistrate of the independent bench at Tamluk, Midnapore but he dedicated his work to the Maharaja Bahadur of Darbhanga, Rameshwar Singh, “for his kind interest manifested in the author’s humble literary effort”. The Maharaja of Darbhanga was a regular contributor to the Congress party after it was founded in 1885 and took an active interest in the cow protection activities that the early Congress undertook.¹⁶³ Indian nationalism rediscovered in the folk the centre of “national culture”. This was a slight modification of the colonialist attitude towards folklore. Folklore in general and folktale and fairy tale in particular, were now seen as simple narratives revealing the essential and unchanging values of traditional India.

3. Bengali fairy tales and the swadeshi cultural revival:

¹⁶² Shrish Chandra Basu, *Folktales of Hindustan* (Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press, 1913), 6

¹⁶³ For more see John R. McLane, *Indian Nationalism and the Early Congress*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1977)

The nationalist phase marked a sharp change in the attitudes of the educated native elite, “the *bhadroks*” towards folk culture. Long seen as “*chotolok*” culture, that is low and ill bread and the binary opposite of *bhadrolok* culture which was viewed as cultivated and refined, the folk and the popular cultural forms derived from the folk¹⁶⁴ were the very antithesis of the culture on which *bhadrolok* self-identity was built. One can go as far as to say that it was the very rejection of folk/popular cultural forms as *chotolok* culture, in the early to middle nineteenth century, that had helped construct a differential selfhood for the *bhadrolok* as distinct from and therefore not the *chotolok*. This also extended into the purview of language, with the *bhadrolok* creation of a Bengali language suited for purposes of official communication and education out of the vast number of dialects in use, through a process of refinement and synthesis. Sumanta Banerjee has provided insight into how around this time *bhadrolok* efforts were directed at purging these folk/popular cultural forms (and linguistic usages I add) from their homes and from the lives of their women.¹⁶⁵ However, by the end of the same century when Bengal was seeped into a fast emerging nationalist consciousness, this

¹⁶⁴ Sumanta Banerjee explains the connection of the folk and the popular culture in nineteenth century Bengal saying: “with the decline of the village economy and the beginnings of industry in nineteenth century Bengal, there was a regular exodus of poorer men and women from the countryside to Calcutta...these Bengali villagers brought with them into Calcutta the songs they inherited from rural folk culture (and)...they not only kept alive the old folk culture in the squalor of the growing metropolis of Calcutta, but enriched it with new motifs borrowed from surrounding urban scenes.”

Sumanta Banerjee, “Marginalisation of Women’s Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Bengal” in *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, ed. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (New Delhi: Kali for women, 1989), 123-130

Giuseppe Flora identifies this culture as the “chotalok’s culture” “the culture of the folk migrated from nearby or far off villages, who formed the mass of the city’s lower orders”

¹⁶⁴ Giuseppe Flora, “On Fairy Tales, Intellectuals and Nationalism in Bengal (1880-1920),” *Rivista Degli Studi Orientali* 75 (2002): 07 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41913063>.

¹⁶⁵ Sumanta Banerjee, “Marginalisation of Women’s Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Bengal” in *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, ed. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (New Delhi: Kali for women, 1989), 123-130

rejection changed into an engagement with the folk and finally into an active association and enquiry into the folk as the uncontaminated heart of national culture. These cultural forms now became something to be studied and collected, and used in the cultural resistance to the British rule alongside the political resistance. An important moment for the *bhadrolok* reengagement with the folk was Tagore's Swadeshi Swamaj address of 1904. To understand the context, it is necessary to remember that these were the tumultuous years leading to the first partition of Bengal by Lord Curzon in 1905. And this had evoked a new wave of nationalistic feeling among the Bengali intelligentsia who were opposed to such a move. Guiseppe Flora who has studied the Bengali nationalist intellectual history of the four decades spanning from 1880 to 1920 and its association with the major fairy tale collectors of the period makes this observation:

The new wave of nationalism in Bengal brought about a reorientation of the *bhadralok* intellectuals' relations with folk culture. A powerful drive came from Rabindranath's address "Svadesī Samāḥ" (national society), a sort of manifesto of the swadeshi movement in Bengal. Tagore delivered his speech at the Minerva and Curzon theatres on 7 and 18 Sravana 1311 B.S. (July- August 1904). Written in a transitional phase characterised by a certain leaning towards revivalism, with all its emphasis on the unity of Hinduism and the village as a repository of tradition, "Svadesī Samāḥ" showed how Rabindranath's political ideas had by then attained the clarity of a programme. Volunteers were urged to leave the city and go to the villages spreading social and political enlightenment in the *melās* and through magic-lantern lectures. Volunteers were above all asked to revive folk traditions and ancient village institutions. In this unconditional faith on the potentialities of popular Hinduism, it is visible an important shift of emphasis from a folk-culture mainly considered for its 'objects' (rhymes, stories, or crafts whatever), as though crystallised in a late Victorian museum, to a folk-culture

considered for its live 'activities' (melās, fātrās, story-telling). The melā (fair) and the fātrā (performance) soon became important vehicles of the swadeshi propaganda.¹⁶⁶

I shall return to the issue of the Swadeshi emphasis on popular Hinduism later in this chapter. For now, I want to emphasise on the importance of Tagore within the Swadeshi efforts at a Bengali cultural revival in general, and in reviving the Bengali folk storytelling traditions among the educated upper and middle classes in particular. Tagore's important work in the field is noted by Supriya Goswami in her study of colonial India in children's literature. She writes:

Rabindanath Tagore's validation of folklore—echoing the romantic nationalism of the British Romantic poets who glorified children and the common folk as embodiments of purity and innocence—ignited an interest in compiling Bengali folktales and rhymes. Tagore began collecting folklore from around 1883 (Mukhopadhyay 40), and the establishment of Bangiya Shahitya Parishat (Bengali Literary Council) in 1894(sic) gave him a forum from which to encourage others to do the same...Tagore's initiatives resulted in a spurt of activity in the editing and publishing of folk songs, folktales and nursery rhymes during this period.”¹⁶⁷

In the Swadeshi Samaj address Tagore had declared that it was farcical if in order to be equal to the British, Indians went begging to them with clasped hands. Indians had to become equal through their own influence, increase the prestige of their race through their own actions and

¹⁶⁶ Giuseppe Flora, "On Fairy Tales, Intellectuals and Nationalism in Bengal (1880-1920)," *Rivista Degli Studi Orientali* 75 (2002): 37 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41913063>.

¹⁶⁷ Supriya Goswami, *Colonial India in Children's Literature* (New York: Routledge 2012), 138

through spreading their own indigenous modes of education.¹⁶⁸ This address ultimately became a clarion call for the project of retrieving and preserving fast eroding indigenous cultural forms. The *rupkatha* tradition was among those cultural forms.

This association was made by Tagore himself in the celebrated preface that he wrote for Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar's *Thakurmar Jhuli* (1907) where he began with the rhetorical question whether there was anything more swadeshi than Majumdar's published volume? He then went on to place the *rupkatha* tradition in binary opposition to foreign education. The English school curriculum consisting of Martin's Ethics and Burke's works was called out for its didacticism and denounced for its role in malnourishing the Bengali child. Tagore instead recommended giving the child indigenous stories which in a romantic manner he called natural and beneficial. Tagore had been arguing for a swadeshi mode of education in the Swadeshi Samaj address. He had said that Indians would only rise to their full potential when they started establishing their own schools and sending their children to such swadeshi run schools. He declared: "We do not need a great number of courses only that whatever we eat, no matter how small the meal, we must be able to collect it ourselves. We do not require fancy dresses, rather the cloth on our bodies, no matter how coarse, must be our own and that the education system through which our country will be educated must be governed completely by ourselves"¹⁶⁹ (translated from original Bengali). The metaphor of food in the context of education also appeared in the preface to *Thakurmar Jhuli* where the foreign curriculum was likened to *cholar chatu* or powdered gram, which could never nourish the child like mother's milk. Bengal's indigenous story tradition was likened to that mother's milk. Tagore lamented

¹⁶⁸ Rabindranath Tagore, "Swadeshi Samaj," in *Rabindra Rachanabali Janma Shatabarsha Shongshkoron* Vol XII (Kolkata: Sri Swaraswati Press Limited, 1961), 784

¹⁶⁹ Tagore, "Swadeshi Samaj," 786

the fact that the national child was being starved and deprived by being fed a foreign diet. In the nineteenth century physical health had already emerged in public discourse as a metaphor for the larger condition of the nation. Tanika Sarkar writes, “degeneration of the body of the Hindu male babu...became the most significant sign of the times.”¹⁷⁰ The child that Rabindranath was constructing in the preface was also necessarily class and gender bound, as English education was available to mostly male children within the limits of the upper and the middle classes. Sarkar says that the “Bengali middle class sought to express its hegemonic aspirations not by attributing to itself political or economic roles, not through claims to power, but through ascribing to itself all the ills and deprivations that marked Bengali society as a whole”. Tagore was drawing from those public discourses in the preface. In it, he treated the subjection of the national child to an exclusive English curriculum (he uses the word *kebol* or only) as intellectual and spiritual deprivation and articulated that through the metaphor of bodily deprivation. Partha Chatterjee has observed that in the early phases of Indian nationalism, it was the middle class that formed the idea of the nation and hence it was the middle class child which became the national child. The nineteenth century had also seen the emergence of children as a special category of readers in England and then in Bengal. This led to the emergence of children’s literature as a genre and fairy tales were placed within that genre. Victorian fairy tales consisted of wide spectrum of texts. There were specialised fairy tales written and published for children often with didactic morals, there were also the wildly imaginative topsy turvy fictional worlds created by the likes of Lewis Carroll. *Thakurmar Jhuli* was being presented both by Tagore and by Mitra Majumdar as one such text that would nurture

¹⁷⁰ Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife Hindu Nation: Community, Religion and Cultural Nationalism* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001), 30

the child's imagination. However, as both intertwined Swadeshi politics into the introductory pieces written for the volume, the publication of the text had an additional dimension.

Tagore presented a series of binary oppositions to value judge the difference between the east and the west: mother's milk standing for life/health/nourishment versus *cholar chatu* standing for life devoid of vitality, *rupkatha* versus Martin's *Ethics* and Burke's *Reflections*, Didima company versus Manchester mills, *rasa*/enjoyment versus cold and dry reason, folk stories versus English grammar and importantly Bengali/Indian orality versus Western literacy. Entrenched within these binary oppositions was the binary created and sustained by the nationalist discourse between the spiritual East and the material West. The West was superior in material methods to the east and this had helped in the European supremacy over the rest of the world and allowed it to subjugate non-European people. However, Indian nationalists in the nineteenth century declared the supremacy of the East in the spiritual realm. This dichotomy was powerfully present in public discourses and even appeared in Rabindranath Tagore's lectures on Nationalism. Tagore placed the folktale within this dichotomy of the material/spiritual. Western knowledge systems were linked to its material culture, Western fairy tales were described as synthetic creations of the Manchester mills which have been gaining hegemonic dominance over the spiritual core of the nation as embodied in its tradition of stories. These stories belonged to the land and its grassroots and thus were natural and organic. Partha Chatterjee, in his history of nineteenth century colonial Bengal has shown how "nationalism separated the domain of culture into two spheres – the material and the spiritual. This became analogous to an ideologically far more powerful dichotomy: that between the outer and the inner."¹⁷¹ This outer material domain was marked as a space of subjugation to

¹⁷¹ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), 120

the colonial masters and their rules. It was a place of “oppression and daily humiliation”, writes Chatterjee. By contrast, the inner spiritual domain was marked as the “true self...that which was genuinely essential” and “the crucial need was to protect, preserve, and strengthen the inner core of this national culture”. Moreover, “applying the inner/outer distinction to the matter of concrete day to day living separates the social space into *ghar* and *bahir*, the home and the world.”¹⁷² The logical extension of this dichotomy was that the world as public space was associated with men and the home, as private space, found association with women. Thus, women became the bearers of tradition and self-identity which was to be kept pure and untainted from foreign influences. Partha Chatterjee quotes Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay from his *Paribarik Prabandha* which was published in 1882: “protected to a certain extent from the purely material pursuits of securing a livelihood in the external world, women express in their appearance and behaviour the spiritual qualities that are characteristic of civilised and refined human society.” Furthermore, “the home was the principal site for expressing the spiritual quality of the national culture, and women must take the main responsibility for protecting and nurturing this quality...they must not lose their essential spiritual virtues; they must not in other words, become essentially westernised...between the social roles of men and women essential distinction in terms of material and spiritual virtues must be at all times be maintained.”¹⁷³ Chatterjee remarks that this conceptualisation of the spheres of culture in gendered terms had led to a vast degree of difference in the manner and degree of the acceptance of western values or westernization, as it were, of the Indian man as compared to the Indian woman in the “modern world of the nation”¹⁷⁴. The reason for my recapitulation of these dichotomies and

¹⁷² Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, 120

¹⁷³ Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, 126

¹⁷⁴ Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, 126

their gendered divisions from the nineteenth century nationalist discourse is because these become relevant in the discourse woven around the *rupkatha* tradition in the early twentieth century by thinkers like Tagore and Dinesh Chandra Sen and even by the collector Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar himself.

Dinesh Chandra Sen had extensively discussed Mitra Majumdar's scholarship in his seminal book on Bengali oral story traditions titled *The Folklore of Bengal* published in 1920. Sen stands out prominently among the intellectuals who were enthusiastic about Mitra Majumdar's work as he had played a pivotal role in the publication of the volume *Thakurmar Jhuli* (along with Swarnakumari Devi, the poet and social worker, sister to Rabindranath). Indian tradition, as we have seen, was placed in the inner spiritual realm and linked with women. The *rupkatha* tradition, as an indigenous storytelling tradition, was proclaimed to be organically linked to the soil and hundreds of years old. Tagore claimed that the tradition had continued through countless wars and revolutions while Dinesh Chandra Sen stated that the *rupkatha* tradition had "been told...from an immemorial age, before any door was opened in them for receiving rays of European or even Moslem culture."¹⁷⁵ This immemorial age was identified as Buddhist Bengal that pre-dated Hindu revival. The tracing of Bengali folk culture as having roots in the Buddhist period was popular within Swadeshi thought. Dinesh Chandra Sen also subscribed to that thought.

The *rupkatha* tradition was also explicitly identified as a woman's tradition. Women were recognised as the traditional bearers of the tradition and placed at the centre of the discourse being woven around *rupkatha*. Here it is necessary to point out that Guiseppe Flora who writes that "the Bengali women's special role in the oral transmission was discarded or

¹⁷⁵ Lal Behari Day, *Folktales of Bengal* (Kolkata: Uccharan, 1993), 24

belittled”¹⁷⁶ (by contemporary intellectuals) was mistaken in his belief. His misreading, I believe, arises from his lack of access to the Prefaces to *Thakurmar Jhuli* written by Tagore and Mitra Majumdar which were in Bengali. This can be concluded from the fact that Flora does not refer to both of these pieces even once in his essay although both the prose pieces are seminal for understanding the intellectual tradition that grew around *rupkatha*. Mitra Majumdar’s choice of title for his 1907 volume *Thakurmar Jhuli* evoked the image of a grandmother telling tales from her repertoire, the symbolic *jhuli* or sack and thus made the connection between women and *rupkatha*. This association was reiterated by Mitra Majumdar in his own introduction to the volume and emphasised by Tagore in his preface. The transmission of these stories by women, they claimed, had remained unchanged for hundreds of years till colonialism threatened to disrupt the continuity of the tradition. The inner spiritual core had been corrupted. The very need to put the stories in print in order to serve the pressing necessity of conserving the oral stories exposed this fear. Tagore further made clear his concern when he proclaimed that he had earlier attempted to conserve the tales by making educated women who were also proficient in telling the stories write them down. However, he had found their linguistic style unsuitable for the purpose because formal education had altered their storytelling style from the natural easy-going diction of the oral stories. This, he said, was despite the fact that the writing was being done by a feminine hand. One of these educated women might have been his own wife Mrinalini Devi herself. Abanindranath Tagore notes that his aunt Mrinalini Devi had a notebook full of oral stories told among women and children from which he had found the story of *Khiner Putul* which he later extended with nationalist undertones. This notebook was lost and he very much lamented its loss saying it was a valuable

¹⁷⁶ Giuseppe Flora, "On Fairy Tales, Intellectuals and Nationalism in Bengal (1880-1920)," *Rivista Degli Studi Orientali* 75 (2002): 42 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41913063>.

source of stories¹⁷⁷. On one hand while the binary between education and orality made a reappearance, Tagore was also essentially stating that women could no longer be trusted with carrying on the *rupkatha* tradition.

Dinesh Chandra Sen also repeated time and again that the *rupkatha* stories belonged to women. He used this as a fact to argue that any allusion to sexuality and especially sexuality outside of marriage was corruption brought in by writers because that the *rupkatha* stories were told by women to women and children and hence must be “pure”. Mitra Majumdar’s introduction to *Thakurmar Jhuli*, stated that he had published this volume with the hope that Bengali women would once again take up the task that was theirs and weave the stories in their homes. Hence, Mitra Majumdar was occupying a peculiar status as a man stepping into a women’s space. He was also lauded for his ability to preserve the idiomatic usage of oral language in his written presentation by both Tagore and Sen. Rabindranath Tagore labelled this language as feminine language, since the original tellers of *rupkatha* were women, it necessarily meant that the natural language of the stories was untutored female language with its colloquialisms. Tagore praised Mitra Majumdar for being able to write in the feminine tongue when educated Bengali women were unable to do so. Dinesh Chandra Sen had written: “Babu Dakshina Ranjan Mitramajumdar has done yeoman’s service to the cause of Bengali literature by collecting some of these (rupkatha). The first edition of *Thakurdadar Jhuli* reproduces the stories almost as he heard them from old women of the rural villages of Eastern Bengal. Their very language is preserved in this edition, as it was in some cases by means of phonograph.”¹⁷⁸ Sen also stressed that Mitra Majumdar had without adding anything himself

¹⁷⁷ Gargi Bandopadhyay, “Kheerer Putul (The Cheese Doll)”, *Children’s Books from Bengal: A Documentation*, accessed May 5, 2016, http://bengalichildrensbooks.in/Ksheerer_Putul.php

¹⁷⁸ Lal Behari Day, *Folktales of Bengal* (Kolkata: Uccharan, 1993), 156

tried to preserve the very language in which these stories were traditionally told. There are two issues in all of this: one, that Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar was essentially trespassing into the inner spiritual feminine realm and second, that he was also bringing out the spiritual into the material realm by transcribing the oral into literary form, the feminine storytelling to masculine literary narration, and the community bound intimacy of shared oral performance to the large arena of print circulation. And all this he had managed to do according to his contemporary Bengali intellectuals such as Tagore and Dinesh Chandra Sen, keeping the *rasa* and diction of the original tradition intact. Second, that these statements assumed that the process of transcribing the written from the oral was a completely transparent process. Now, Majumdar was the first collector in Bengal, native or British, who had used a phonograph on field while collecting stories and this had allowed him to capture the earthy rural colloquial diction and narrative style of oral storytelling and transcribe the same in his literary rendition. However, that the process of transcribing is never transparent but rather a process that requires active participation of the writer is a fact that was conveniently overlooked by the contemporary intellectuals in the enthusiastic discussion his work. This omission was partly a result of the immediate necessity of presenting Majumdar's volumes as the counter to British literature and bringing his work within the folds of the ongoing swadeshi cause with its focus on indigenous culture. His stories were sought to be presented as authentic examples of traditional oral storytelling and therefore it was necessary to completely equate the literary texts with oral narratives. Moreover, Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar himself sought to retain features of oral storytelling within his works. This led him to keep claiming in his introductions that he was not really the author of the stories but merely repeating the tales as he had heard them in his childhood. These enunciations do not take into account that a literary text and an oral performance are never the same thing because of the difference between the fixed nature of the literary text which requires a definite author (even if he draws his materials from a

community pool of shared oral material) and the fluidity of oral stories which exist for the duration of performance and necessarily change from one performance to the other.

While it is difficult to discern the extent to which Mitra Majumdar changed or intervened in the stories that he collected, it is almost certain that Mitra Majumdar actively intervened in the process of selecting the tales for publication, editing them and choosing the language in which to write. A close reading of the two volumes of *Thakurmar Jhuli* and *Thakurdadar Jhuli* reveals his ideological leanings towards certain swadeshi cultural ideas which also worked their way into his presentation of the stories. These cultural ideas were current among swadeshi intellectuals and scholars at the turn of the twentieth century. Giuseppe Flora notes that Binoy Kumar Sarkar, an illustrious member of the Calcutta swadeshi circle, effectively summarised some of the main points of these cultural ideas in his 1917 book *The Folk-Element in Hindu Culture* which was published from London. Flora writes:

The most remarkable fact about Benoy Sarkar's book is that, although it reflects certain constructions peculiar to his sociology of culture, it seems to have summed up the Bengali nationalists' attitude towards Bengal's folklore. There we find views and interpretations which circulated among the 'swadeshi' intellectuals - notably that: i) Bengal's folklore bore witness to a long lost Buddhist influence; ii) Bengal's old traditions had spread throughout nearby and far off regions; iii) Bengal's folklore bore witness to the vitality of popular Hinduism, whose assimilative character had prevailed through ages. The idea of a popular Hinduism, in which caste distinctions play a secondary role, had made its way in the nationalist sociological literature of the 1910s. The projection of popular Hinduism as the true dimension of Bengal's folklore lay at the very core of Benoy Sarkar's book.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁹ Giuseppe Flora, "On Fairy Tales, Intellectuals and Nationalism in Bengal (1880-1920)," *Rivista Degli Studi Orientali* 75 (2002): 43-44 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41913063>.

When one identifies the manifestations of Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar's ideological leanings in his writing, it is not very difficult to see why his works had been received with so much enthusiasm by the contemporary nationalist intellectuals of Calcutta. Dakshinaranjan's collections had an enduring focus on women. Many of his stories in *Thakurmar Jhuli* (some of which can be found in the volumes of other collectors) were named after their women characters by him, an authorial act which sought to retain focus on them: for example "*Kalabati Rajkanya*" or "*Patalkanya Manimala*" are stories which were named after their heroines and not the Prince protagonist (the story of *Kalabati Rajkanya* whenever written by other writers was always called *Budhu-Bhutum*). The focus on women characters was more singularly retained in *Thakurdadar Jhuli* which while seeking to present indigenous equivalents to the Western novel, the "*upanyash-katha*" or orally composed Bengali "novels", presented stories focussed centrally on women protagonists. *Manimala*, *Malanchamala*, *Pushpamala*, *Kanchanmala*, story after story paraded series of remarkable heroic women who nonetheless submitted to the hierarchies of the indigenous patriarchal social structures unquestioningly. These stories provided examples of the "ideal" Indian woman from folk literature and were enthusiastically read as such by people like Dinesh Chandra Sen.

The construction and representation of Indian womanhood in these volumes will be taken up for detailed study in the later chapters. Here, I will draw attention to the already discussed point that both women and the folk were central to the construction of the core indigenous culture by nationalist intellectuals. The figure of the Indian woman with all her moral and spiritual loftiness because of her ability for self-sacrifice and surrender to harsh social and *shastric* laws was presented as the spiritual core of the nation and this was the same figure that Dinesh Chandra Sen read into the figures of *Thakurdadar Jhuli*. Kanchanmala who

was attached and dedicated to her husband despite the fact that he treated her outrageously under the machinations of an evil woman, and Malanchamala in whom Sen found all the glory of tantric self-sacrifice for the attainment of truth, were examples of such figures. Furthermore, Mitra Majumdar's works also emphasised on popular Hinduism as the truly indigenous folk culture. Within the swadeshi cultural fold this was a form of Hinduism that was a syncretic mixture of Puranic Hinduism mixed with remnants of Buddhism. To explain this point, I will draw attention to how Mitra Majumdar rarely made direct references to Hindu gods, or rituals of Puranic worship. While figures from popular Hinduism such as hermits regularly appear, as do the Hindu cultural markers of vermillion and conch shell bangles, there was a scarcity of Vedic or Puranic gods and goddesses, as well as mentions of mainstream Hindu religious rites. Whether he deliberately removed them from the stories he collected is a question that cannot be answered in the absence of his working manuscripts, notes and records. He chose to present stories without direct intervention of gods from the Hindu pantheon or rites performed for them. There were fleeting mentions of Puranic gods in one or two occasions in *Thakurdadar Jhuli*, but they did not have any large role to play in the stories which were mostly dependent on the caprice of fate. This remains in stark contrast to the stories collected by other collectors, be it the native collector Lal Behari Day, or the Englishman William McCulloch, where there was regular presence of such gods, and divine interventions in the stories. Instead the rites and rituals presented in *Thakurmar Jhuli* and *Thakurdadar Jhuli*: for example Buddhu and Bhutum's mothers' performance of a small rite for their safe voyage in *Kalabati Rajkanya* or Pushpamala's mother and Chandan Kumar's mother's worship in the village pond in the story of *Pushpamala* was mostly similar to non-Vedic, non-Puranic worship of folk deities or to the rites involved in the purely women's folk rituals of the *meyeli bratas* that did not require a Brahmin priest intermediary.

This allowed contemporary nationalist intellectuals like Dinesh Chandra Sen to find evidence of their belief in the special character of Bengali folk Hinduism that was derived from its Buddhist past and preserved Buddhist elements from Mitra Majumdar's stories. For example, the women characters' self-sacrifice was equated by Sen with Buddhist renunciation of the world, and both together in his mind compounded to form the values of traditional Bengali society which he wrote was embedded in Dakshinaranjan's *Thakurdadar Jhuli*. He also drew attention to the fact that Hindus and Buddhists often worshipped the same gods and goddesses. So, the mere mention of a deity did not indicate which of the two religious pantheons the deity belonged.¹⁸⁰ Sen simultaneously labelled the works of other collectors as spurious. He wrote of Lal Behari Day, that being a Christian, the most beautiful Bengali folk stories were not available to him as "he could not have the full command of the resources of the Hindu home"¹⁸¹ and that "his accounts is not always an accurate one"¹⁸² because his chief source was Christian. Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar's work was, on the other hand, eulogised as having presented a picture of authentic Bengal and demonstrating that special nature of Bengali Hindu folk culture (built upon its connections with the Buddhist period) without elements of Islamic corruption or attempts at Sanskritization. That authentic Bengali folk culture was devoid of Islamic elements was a view built upon the idea that this culture predated the arrival of Islam in India. Furthermore, Islamic influence was seen as being corruptive on Indian culture. Dinesh Chandra Sen was of the opinion that "muhammadan" versions of stories that written by writers before Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar showed

¹⁸⁰ Dinesh Chandra Sen, *The Folk Literature of Bengal* (Kolkata: Aparna Book Distributors, 2007), 93

¹⁸¹ Sen, *The Folk Literature of Bengal*, 43

¹⁸² Sen, *The Folk Literature of Bengal*, 115

“deterioration in the standard of sexual morality”.¹⁸³ He gave examples from these older writings, from Munshi Mohammad’s *Kanchanmala* and Golam Kader’s *Shit Basanta* to illustrate his point. Sen wrote:

The folk-tales which used to be narrated to women, were generally composed with a far greater caution and sense of appropriateness than the ordinary written literature. In the Muhammadan version we are shocked to find in the story of Kanchanmala, descriptions of sexual vice that prevailed in the harem of the six brothers of Ruplal. This youth revelled in unrestrained and gross incest with his sister-in-law. In the story of Golam Kader, we are again shocked by the intriguing queen’s throwing the two princes into the meshes of her abominable design. With what a sense of relief does the reader turn over the pages of a Hindu version of the stories.¹⁸⁴

And also:

The way in which the stepmother shamelessly offered love to the two princes has not been mentioned in my summary for the sake of decency.¹⁸⁵

This criticism of Islamic versions of the stories can be linked to the cultural ideas of Hindu purity versus Islamic sexual depravity, that was current in the early twentieth century. Moreover, the criticism of the representation of female sexual desire was entrenched within Sen’s conception of Indian womanhood with all its linkages to Indian tradition, as well as,

¹⁸³ Sen, *The Folk Literature of Bengal*, 97-98

¹⁸⁴ Sen, *The Folk Literature of Bengal*, 112

¹⁸⁵ Sen, *The Folk Literature of Bengal*, 112

within his patronising and infantilising attitude towards women in general which stood out glaringly amidst the clear construction of the “us” as different from “them”. He wrote:

The whole story in the Muhammadan version has thus been worked up to pander to a vulgar taste which repels us...but let us very clearly state here that in their homes in the shape in which it has come down to us in its printed form. The version current in Mohammadan homes may be truer to the original...The Muhammadan writer, whose readers are no doubt a few rustic men who have just learnt to read the Bengali alphabets¹⁸⁶...has introduced these incongruous elements into the original Hindu story which is so rigidly pure.¹⁸⁷

Sen censured such inclusion saying that when women could not read or write then men could afford to print such things as they would elude women’s eyes but with the spread of female education and a literate female readership, men could no longer write such things. He was subscribing to the romantic conception of women and children as being in a state of innocence which was prevalent in Victorian worldviews and thereby the need to shelter and protect them from exposure to morally corrupting things.

Ironically, Dinesh Chandra Sen might very well have been praising Mitra Majumdar’s attempts at sanitising the stories he was publishing as presentation of the “authentic”. Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar, as is evident from his texts, consciously avoided the use of words that were directly loaned from Arabic and Persian such as *zenana* for the inner quarters of the house occupied by women, although it was in common use, and constantly used *andar*

¹⁸⁶ It is also important to remember that a vast majority of the converts to Islam in Bengal throughout history were people from the lower castes and had lower literacy rates.

¹⁸⁷ Dinesh Chandra Sen, *The Folk Literature of Bengal* (Kolkata: Aparna Book Distributors, 2007), 132

mahal instead. Again, figures derived from Islamic story traditions were absent. For example, *jinns*, *pirs* or *sultans* never appeared in either *Thakurmar Jhuli* or *Thakurdadar Jhuli* although the large-scale presence of Islam in Bengal right from the medieval ages had resulted in the introduction and accumulation of these figures in Bengali folk stories (and found mention in the works of other collectors) and in Bengali cultural life. *Peris* too were mostly absent except in one story of *Thakurdadar Jhuli*, “Madhumala”, where they were called *peris* but were cast as attendants in the court of the Hindu god Indra. Dinesh Chandra Sen praised him for publishing such true rendering of the stories free from Islamic corruptions and also for not giving into the literary trend of unnecessarily classicising or sanskritising the stories (which Sen also discussed with examples). Sen emphatically stated that Dakshinaranjan’s renditions were the most accurate versions of the stories as they were also the oldest versions.¹⁸⁸ Giuseppe Flora notes that D.C. Sen highly praised Daksinaranjan's work as a “yeoman's service to the cause of Bengali literature”, of higher importance compared with that of other Bengali folklorists, such as Harinath Majumdar, Lal Behari Day and Fakir Ram Kavibhusana.¹⁸⁹ In Dinesh Sen’s own words, Mitra Majumdar had “simply acted as a medium in bringing down to us a treasure that lay hidden in the rustic villages of Bengal. Mitra Majumdar had not, like Harinath Majumdar (whose sanskritised version of Shit-Basanta Sen discussed) built a new tale out of materials of the past, nor did he, like Lal Behari Day, give a gist of the stories in another tongue, nor like the Muhammadan writers did he introduce into the stories foreign elements divesting them of their original elegance, and neither did he like Fakir Ram Kabibhhushan try to invest the old stories with a classical dignity and adorn them with

¹⁸⁸ Sen, *The Folk Literature of Bengal*, 124

¹⁸⁹ Giuseppe Flora, "On Fairy Tales, Intellectuals and Nationalism in Bengal (1880-1920)," *Rivista Degli Studi Orientali* 75 (2002): 17 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41913063>.

borrowed metaphors from Sanskrit.”¹⁹⁰ Guiseppe Flora makes an important point about the reason for Dinesh Chandra Sen's enthusiastic interest in Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar's collections. The reason “lay in a general assumption brought out by the dominant positivist outlook of the late nineteenth century. Folk tales, fables, ballads, etc. were seen as the repositories of popular mind and psychology from the days of old.”¹⁹¹ This kind of outlook also necessarily required the figure of the folklorist to be restricted to the role of a medium whose work was to bring the folk material to the reader without interfering in the stories at all though out the processes of collection, writing, editing and publishing. Sen's praise for Mitra Majumdar was seeped in such a belief that as a folklorist, Mitra Majumdar through his love for Bengali folk culture had managed to negate the self to the extent that he had almost performed the part of an “automated machine”¹⁹², simply retelling each of the stories just as he has heard them from Bengali women. This was despite the fact that Sen in the same discussion of Mitra Majumdar's works had lamented the fact that Majumdar had meddled with the language he had originally used in *Thakurdadar Jhuli* and changed some of it under pressure from his publishers who were concerned that the obscurity of such usages would put off readers.

Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar had collected his material for the volumes of *Thakurmar Jhuli* and *Thakurdadar Jhuli* from the rural areas of the Mymensingh district. Mymensingh had a rich tradition of oral literature which had also drawn the attention of some of the other notable folklorists of the early twentieth century including the scholar and then

¹⁹⁰ Dinesh Chandra Sen, *The Folk Literature of Bengal* (Kolkata: Aparna Book Distributors, 2007), 159

¹⁹¹ Giuseppe Flora, "On Fairy Tales, Intellectuals and Nationalism in Bengal (1880-1920)," *Rivista Degli Studi Orientali* 75 (2002): 19 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41913063>.

¹⁹² Dinesh Chandra Sen, *The Folk Literature of Bengal* (Kolkata: Aparna Book Distributors, 2007), 158

vice-chancellor of the University of Calcutta, Asutosh Mookherjee. The landmark text of folklore scholarship sponsored by the Government of West Bengal, *Mymensingh Gitikatha* was published under his tutelage in 1919, with the folk songs and folk narratives from the district. Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar, had a widowed aunt, his father's sister, who hailed from Mymensingh, more particularly, from the village of Dighapatia in the Tangail sub-division of the district. Her name was Rajalakshmi Chaudhurani and Mitra Majumdar had lived with her for a long time. Between 1896 and 1902 Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar had collected stories from the various villages from the mouths of old women, one of whom was also a Buddhist nun.¹⁹³ And as already stated, he was the first to use a phonograph and record the voices of the storytellers. He came to Calcutta with a bundle of manuscripts and did not have much difficulty in finding a publisher. Giuseppe Flora is of the opinion that "undoubtedly he was favoured by the swadeshi agitation in Bengal and its new emphasis on national culture and cultural roots." Dinesh Chandra Sen and Swarnakumari Devi both of whom read his manuscript were impressed with the work. Swarnakumari Devi was instrumental in drawing Rabindranath Tagore's attention to the collection and soliciting him to write a foreword for the published volume. The preface that Tagore wrote to *Thakurmar Jhuli*, is of seminal importance. This preface, alongside the other introductory poems and cover page texts that were published alongside the main texts in both *Thakurmar Jhuli* and *Thakurdadar Jhuli* acted as "paratexts". I am using the term from Zipes' use of the concept. However, I propose that rather than take away from the integral meaning of the texts as Zipes believed paratexts did, they imposed certain meanings on the story collections and plugged the stories to a network of discourses. To illustrate this point, I will delve into Zipes' theorising of paratexts in the context of media

¹⁹³ Giuseppe Flora, "On Fairy Tales, Intellectuals and Nationalism in Bengal (1880-1920)," *Rivista Degli Studi Orientali* 75 (2002): 34 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41913063>.

hyping of fairytales. Jack Zipes refers to Jonathan Gray who in his book *Show sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers and Other Media Paratexts* suggests that media hype is created through paratexts which he defines as “all the peripheral products and things that surround or are connected to the texts.”¹⁹⁴ Gray opines that “the meanings of primary texts or source texts are now determined by paratexts.” Zipes while commenting on Gray’s use of the concept notes that Gray is using the idea of paratexts as earlier proposed by Gerard Genette who Zipes says conceptualised the term and said that “paratexts prepare us for other texts, they are gateways to assessing a product or artefact.” Zipes builds on both Genette and Gray to propose that “in case of literature or a book, the paratexts consists of the cover, the frontpiece, the title page, the format, the type, the bibliography, the index, the blurbs on the back page, the pre-publication advertising, the web pages on the Internet, reviews, blogs, interviews, talks delivered by the author on tour and so on.” Now when one looks at the first published edition of *Thakurmar Jhuli*, the entire get up of the book, along with the promotional statements printed on the book itself before and after the title page and then the preface written by Tagore along with his signature all act as paratexts. The book was hardbound and was covered with a khadi cloth jacket which highlighted the claim that it was a swadeshi product. The cover was followed by statements that proclaimed the importance of the book printed both before and after the title page. Tagore’s signature and name carried a brand that extended its value to the book by its simple presence in the opening pages. His preface raised a number of issues, while delivering effusive praise for the author, Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar, for the work that he had done. *Thakurdadar Jhuli* also retained the promotional statements before the title page and the hardbound format. The volumes also printed small poems before the main texts which tried to

¹⁹⁴ Jack Zipes, “Media-Hyping of Fairy Tales”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Fairy Tales*, ed. Maria Tatar (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 209

emulate the folkloric style of storytelling while also identifying children as their target reader. These paratexts like paratexts in general, to quote from Zipes were not “simply add-ons, spin-offs and also-rans” but rather they “create(d) texts, they manage(d) them (these texts) and they fill(ed) them with many of the meanings that we associate with them.” These paratexts then affected “the running of the text.”¹⁹⁵ For *Thakurmar Jhuli* and *Thakurdadar Jhuli* these paratexts enforced a layer of rich symbolism on the loose collection of stories, plugged a work of folkloric/literary scholarship into the network of swadeshi productions, organisations and enterprises. *Thakurmar Jhuli* and *Thakurdadar Jhuli* became landmark texts that found place alongside Khadi, Hindu Mela and Sadhana Aushadhalaya as both agents and symbols of swadeshi revival. Furthermore, the published paratexts, particularly the added small poems and Tagore’s Preface, effectively turned the fairy tales into children’s literature (under the influence of Victorian linkages between fairy tales and children’s literature no doubt) tearing them from their natural life within community and from their close ties with women’s popular culture.¹⁹⁶

4. Women writers of Bengali fairy tales

The natural culmination of *bhadrolok* efforts at a revival of Bengali storytelling traditions originating from women were the Bengali fairy tale collections published by their women, the *bhadromahila*¹⁹⁷ of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. They, however,

¹⁹⁵ Zipes, “Media-Hyping of Fairy Tales”, 209

¹⁹⁶ This association between Bengali fairy tales and Bengali women’s popular culture will come in for detailed discussion in the following chapters.

¹⁹⁷ “The term *bhadramahila* gained currency once it became identified with a distinct group. In the public mind, certain features of the Brahmo lifestyle became part of the composite image of the *bhadramahila*. She wore a sari with blouse and petticoat, shoes, and little heavy jewelry. She appeared in mixed social gatherings, and was a member of various philanthropic and social women’s organizations; she had received a basic education and read improving literature—domestic instruction manuals and ‘refined’ fiction. A *bhadramahila* was capable and competent in the running of a household, as well as able to provide support and understanding for her husband in his career. As a

unlike the native male collectors remain little known in India outside the scholarly circles and very little discussed even among Indian scholars of Bengali fairy tales and folktales. Two women who collected fairy tales in the early twentieth century were Sovana Sundari Devi of the Tagore household who published a collection called *The Orient Pearls* in 1915 and Suniti Devi, the Maharani of Coochbehar who published *Indian Fairytales* in 1923. Interestingly, both of these collections were in English which allowed colonial British folklorists access to their work. Furthermore Sovana Sundari's volume was published from the metropolis of London while Suniti's came out from colonial Calcutta. As women collectors their work would thus be seen as following in the footsteps of English women who had published books on Indian folktales and fairy tales in the nineteenth century such as Maive Stokes and Mary Frere. However, their works also marked the fruition of indigenous social reform movements and the churning of Bengali society in the late nineteenth century, particularly those processes that lead to widespread dissemination and acceptance of female education. Partha Chatterjee notes that female education was a "contentious subject" that occupied the minds of nineteenth century social reformers. One of the causes for anxiety was that many of the early schools for women (and men) were opened and run by Christian missionaries. There was the palpable fear of proselytising activities but also the fear of women being greatly influenced by Western culture. This fear was somewhat alleviated after the 1850s when indigenous schools were opened for girls which were run by Indians.¹⁹⁸ Middle class women were the beneficiaries of this project

mother, she educated her children in 'enlightened' ways." --- Meredith Borthwick, "The "Condition of Women" Issue: The Impetus for Reform," in *The Changing Role of Women in Bengal, 1849-1905* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984): 55

¹⁹⁸ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), 128

and education spread rapidly among them. The important issue after this was the female curriculum. There were lengthy public debates on the content to be delivered and the medium of instruction. Bengali was seen as the more suitable medium for delivering the female curriculum. Chatterjee writes:

The development of an educative literature and teaching materials in the Bengali language undoubtedly made possible the quite general acceptance of formal education among the middle class women...Much of the content of the modern school education was seen as important for the new woman, but to administer it in the English language was difficult in practical terms, irrelevant because the central place of the educated woman was still at home, and threatening because it might devalue and displace that central site where the social position of women was located. The problem was resolved through the efforts of the intelligentsia, which made it a fundamental task of the national project to create a modern language and literature suitable for a widening readership that would include newly educated women.¹⁹⁹

Training women in this modern vernacular language and educative literature had caused them to lose a lot of colloquial linguistic inflections and diction. Sumanta Banerjee notes that while formal education helped women gain access to sophisticated literature both national and international, it also caused her to lose “the potent and vigorous language of women’s popular and folk cultural forms” in the process.²⁰⁰ Popular women’s cultural forms drawn from the folk and folk cultures were also removed from what was seen as acceptable women’s culture and

¹⁹⁹ Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, 128

²⁰⁰ Sumanta Banerjee, “Marginalisation of Women’s Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Bengal” in *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, ed. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (New Delhi: Kali for women, 1989), 168

as a result the continuity of these traditions within *bhadrolok* homes suffered. When the rise of the swadeshi ethos changed *bhadrolok* attitudes towards these cultures, much of them, they felt, was irrevocably lost within their own homes. This is the context within which one can read Tagore's emphasis on the specifically feminine linguistic flavour of the original oral tales collected in *Thakurmar Jhuli*, and also his dismay on finding the educated woman of his acquaintance who he had entrusted with the task of writing down such stories could not reproduce in words the feminine language of the oral.

Keeping all of this in mind, that fact that Suniti Devi and Sovana Devi chose English, and not Bengali, as the language of the folktales and fairy tales they published is interesting. While Bengali was the language of educational instruction for women, these women did not belong to any ordinary family. Both hailed from the social and intellectual elite of the time. Sovana Sundari Devi was the daughter of Hemendranath Tagore, Rabindranath's elder brother. The women of the Tagore household were provided with education comparable to men as has been well documented by the historians of the period. Sovana's cousins Sarala and Indira had received the Padmavati Gold Medal in 1890 and 1892 respectively, for standing first in the B.A examinations. Hemendranath Tagore, particularly insisted on a formal education for all his daughters. He even sent some of his daughters to Loreto Convent, which at the time was a school meant for European girls. Sovana's sisters grew up to be illustrious in their own right. Pragnasundari Devi's cookbook *Amish O Niramish Ranna* has remained a household regular a century after its publication, while their youngest sister, Sudakshina (later known as Purnima Devi) was awarded the Kaiser-i-Hind medal and is remembered for her humanitarian work especially for the upliftment of women. Sovana apart from publishing the collection of stories *The Orient Pearls* also translated a volume of Swarnakumari Devi's poetry *Kaahake* into

English which was published as *To Whom* in 1910.²⁰¹ Similarly, Suniti Devi was the daughter of the progressive Keshab Chandra Sen. For instance, at a time when “it was considered a great offence for a young husband to go out openly with his wife in the street...Keshab Chandra Sen, who belonged to an old Brahmo family, defied this convention as a mark of protest against injustice to women. On 13th April, 1862, Keshab along with his wife in palki, went down from Kolutola to Jorashanko, an act that can be regarded as a significant step towards the women’s liberation movement.”²⁰² Women were generally treated with due respect and formally educated within the Brahmo Samaj. Monomoyee Basu is of the opinion that they were also “treated more or less on an equal footing with boys”²⁰³ within the Samaj. The Tagore family and the Sen family were the old guard and the new guard of the Brahmos. Sovana Sundari’s grandfather Devendranath was among the original twenty nine people who had signed the First Brahmo Covenant that established the Brahmo Samaj and Keshab Chandra Sen was the leader of the newer generation of Brahmos after the schism in the Samaj. Keshab Chandra Sen from the 1860s had campaigned for marriage reforms which among other things included the proposal to replace the *sampradan* or the gift of the bride to the groom by a male family member with a mutual exchange of vows and to raise the age of consent of the bride to fourteen. These reforms were deemed too radical even by the Adi Brahmo Samaj, but sustained campaign on Sen’s part led to the passing of the Special Marriage Bill (Act III of 1872). It was because of Sen’s extensive advocacy of marriage reforms that his decision to marry off Suniti

²⁰¹ Chitra Deb, “Women of the Tagore Household”, trans. Smita Chowdhry and Sona Ray (London: Penguin, 2010), 68, https://books.google.co.in/books?id=HvU6CwAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false.

²⁰² Monmoyee Basu, “Hindu Women and Marriage Law”, in *Women and Law in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), 8-9

²⁰³ Monmoyee Basu, “Hindu Women and Marriage Law”, in *Women and Law in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), 12

Devi when she was only fourteen to the royal house of Coochbehar was met with criticism. Suniti Devi became the Maharani of Coochbehar, a princely state within British India and spent extensive time in England and some as a courtier in the English Court. She also championed the cause of women's education throughout her life through a variety of means and is remembered for this work. It had also become fashionable among the elite to publish in English (both original material and in translation) in the late nineteenth century as noted by Chitra Deb. Deb writes "in every aristocratic family, children were taught English from childhood. Not only were the textbooks in English but the governesses and teachers were also Englishwomen. For such people, proficiency in the language was natural. Thus, even ladies wrote novels in English. It has been possible to record the names of 194 such ladies between 1850 and 1910. There may have been about fifty others who used pseudonyms rather than publish their names."²⁰⁴ Both Sovana and Suniti were members of the Anglophone world and proficient in the language. Thus, English became the language of choice when publishing their story collections. Their sources of inspiration were personal, coming from familial connections. Sovana mentioned her uncle Rabindranath and the inspiration that his literary genius cast on her. She must have been intimately acquainted with his writings and aware that by collecting Bengali fairy tales and publishing them in English she was able to bypass the difficulty of making an educated female hand reflect the diction and nuance of oral speech in the same language. On the other hand, Suniti Devi's connection with the British royal family due to her status as a member of a minor Indian royal family lead her to dedicate her work to the Princess of Wales, Victoria, daughter of Edward VII and granddaughter of Queen Victoria. One can

²⁰⁴ Chitra Deb, "Women of the Tagore Household", trans. Smita Chowdhry and Sona Ray (London: Penguin, 2010), 65, https://books.google.co.in/books?id=HvU6CwAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false.

presume that a personal acquaintance or even friendship might have existed between these two women. Suniti was a fashionable woman who attended court (she was photographed in western attire) and Victoria was an unmarried daughter in the Royal Court of England who lost her title “Princess of Wales” to her brother, the future king George V upon the death of Queen Victoria and the accession of her father Edward VII to the throne in 1901. Suniti Devi’s dedication in 1923 still referred to her as “Her Royal Highness Princess Victoria of Wales”.

The two women writers did not mention their sources. This silence stands out in sharp contrast to every other collection by male collectors, native Bengali or otherwise, who mention sources (some form of the folk) in a bid to prove the “authenticity” of their collections. Maive Stokes, too had mentioned her sources as her two servants. Suniti Devi did not even add a preface or an introduction to her volume and Sovana Sundari Devi simply mentioned the inspiration that her uncle Rabindranath had exerted on her and her purpose in taking up the task of collecting the stories. Was this silence deliberate? On one hand, they were engaging with the culture that the Bengali *bhadromahila* even a few decades earlier was sheltered from. The purging of popular cultural forms or *chotolok* culture from the homes of the *bhadrolok* ran parallel to efforts taken for female education. Infact, Sumanta Banerjee notes the warning issued by women’s self-help books about the danger posed by the woman who still read Vidya Sundar (a popular Battala literature) and the *Panchalis* in the *andar mahal*. Although the attitude of the *bhadrolok* towards Bengali folk culture had changed, the acceptance of the idea of a Bengali woman travelling around villages and collecting stories remains questionable. Thereby the need felt for silence; or it is entirely possible that these women did not have the first hand opportunity of doing field work and thereby felt that their claim to authenticity would come under question and hence chose not to disclose their methods and not to make any claim for authenticity for the stories at all. In this case the question remains as to the source of the stories. Did they access them through servants like the memsahibs? The source and

methodology of these women collectors thus remain shrouded. However, interestingly the stories collected by these women presented some perspectives that were different from their male counterparts. For example, wit was referred to as “mother wit” in a story from Sovana’s *The Orient Pearls* and the collection featured a number of stories where women used their wit to buy themselves out of situations. In “The Wooden Maid” a married girl whose husband had not come to claim her changed her lot through her own wit. This was very different from Lal Behari Day’s representation of women’s curiosity as the root of trouble.²⁰⁵ Again, a childless queen in “The Wax Prince” insecure about her own position in court due to her inability to produce an heir used her wit to deceive the king. In a situation that is unique to this collection the story treated her with sympathy and ended with her triumph. This was very different from the stories of *Thakurmar Jhuli* where such childless women who desired security were presented as villains with regularity. Both *The Orient Pearls* and Suniti’s *Indian Fairytales* included some women’s tales proper, which AK Ramanujan had observed begin with marriage and then complications ensue as opposed to men’s stories that end in marriage. Furthermore, Suniti Devi’s volume contained retellings of stories told by male collectors from the point of view of the woman characters. For example, the story of Dalim Kumar was told from the perspective of Dalim’s wife. Suniti’s tale was closer to Lal Behari Day’s version rather than Dakshinaranjan’s but in her story the central protagonist was Dalim’s wife, a girl who was destined to marry a dead man, rather than the other way around. Dalim entered the story at a later point in her life when she fulfilled her destiny and following this she used her wit to save Dalim. These perspectives suggest that they had collected their stories from women storytellers and being women could actually gather women’s stories that female storytellers would not have

²⁰⁵ Note the story of Phakir Chand from *The Folktales of Bengal*.
Lal Behari Day, *Folktales of Bengal* (Kolkata: Uccharan, 1993), 15-46

felt comfortable telling men. Thus, they had accessed some of those stories told by women storytellers in the pursuit of which the early Englishmen folktale collectors had encouraged Englishwomen and then native gentlemen to take up the task of collecting folk tales. Both Sovana Devi's and Suniti Devi's volumes were aimed at an Anglophone readership as was evident from their titles. They were holding up the stories to a western gaze and hence were also attempting at some cultural translation to make the stories more relatable for western readers. The *rakshasi* of Indian folklore was turned into giant and giantess, queens in the stories had ladies-in-waiting, and Suniti introduced diminutive fairies closer to western traditions in the Bengali *rupkatha* stories.

Thus, the *bhadrolok* engagement with folk culture in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century had resulted in a series of folktale and fairy tale publications which can be said to have constituted the early Bengali literary fairy tale tradition drawn from oral tales. There were however certain problems with this *bhadrolok* engagement with folk culture. Shibaji Bandopadhyay has pointed out how the inquiry into folk culture was seeped in the *bhadrolok*'s own conceptions of the folk and never gave the folk the standpoint of the subject but rather always turned them into the object of enquiry. This was despite the fact that with the turn of the nineteenth century, the folk/popular was recasted as the national and linked to the other essential heart of the nation: its women. While this marked a change from the earlier rejection of the folk and the bracketing of it under the opposite binary category of the *chotolok*, both the folk and the woman (as I will discuss in the later chapters) remained as the other within the self and were mostly spoken about instead of being allowed to speak for themselves. Guiseppe Flora's observation that Tagore, "reflected the dilemma of the modern 'socially conscious Bengali intellectual', whose style of communication was far removed from that of the masses and suffered, therefore, from the very dichotomy that had afflicted his nineteenth

century predecessors” must be placed in this context.²⁰⁶ On a similar note the concept of originality and authenticity in regards to oral traditions was problematic since this tradition by virtue of being transmitted orally was necessarily fluid. Yet an elusive concept of authentic was central to the nineteenth century intellectual engagement with folk culture. The collectors sought to present their version of stories as authentic and used various means and methodologies to stake their claim. The women story collectors by not making such claims remained the exception to the rule.

5. Conclusion

In concluding this chapter, I argue, that the process of transition of the stories from oral culture to the literary texts was a loaded process in more ways than one. Not only where the shape of the final published stories affected by the ideological leanings of the particular collector but their ideological leanings also affected the process of selection of stories which found place in their volumes and the editing of the texts. The various introductions, prefaces and promotional texts published alongside the volumes also affected the meaning of the texts by influencing the way the texts were received. They marked out the intended reader of the texts and also framed the texts in terms of the claimed ownership and origin of the stories. Lal Behari Day, Ramsatya Mukharji, Shrishchandra Basu, Sovana Sundari Devi and Suniti Devi were targeting an anglophone readership that extended beyond Bengal into the metropolis of London. Lal Behari Day’s, Suniti and Sovana Devi’s texts were particularly trans-cultural in nature and as they sought to present the cultural material of Bengal to the international reader. They were acting as cultural intermediaries mediating between the two. This cultural mediation also affected the way that their collections were received, because to the Victorian reader, fairy

²⁰⁶ Giuseppe Flora, "On Fairy Tales, Intellectuals and Nationalism in Bengal (1880-1920)," *Rivista Degli Studi Orientali* 75 (2002): 37 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41913063>.

tales were necessarily associated with children. Hence, even though these collections were works of folktale scholarship, they were necessarily viewed through the lens of children's literature. Furthermore, this association between children and fairy tales had also spilled over into the sphere of English cultural influence that is into the colonies. In Bengal, Dakshinaranjan's collections, especially *Thakurmar Jhuli* was since the moment of its publication regarded as children's literature. Guiseppe Flora laments this association saying that it stood in the way of a proper evaluation of Mitra Majumdar as a folktale scholar. Tagore, on his part, while trying to present Bengali *rupkatha* as counter to English fairy tales, also accepted many of the Victorian linkages between the child and the fairy tale, and also subscribed to the contemporary romantic notions of the child's innocence and simplicity. These notions had in the first place provided the lens through which fairy tales were viewed. Much of the sanitisation of fairy stories had also resulted from the internalisation of these notions. Mitra Majumdar's work much like the work of Day and others all underwent the same process of bourgeoification as the Grimms' *Kinder und Hausmarchen*. Dinesh Chandra Sen had lamented the editing out of archaic diction in subsequent editions of *Thakurmar Jhuli* and *Thakurdadar Jhuli*. However, these revisions were made to make the volumes more accessible to children under the advice of Dakshinaranjan's Mitra Majumdar's publishers. Guiseppe Flora comments on this episode saying: "It was but natural for a refined philologist like D.C. Sen to criticise the alterations in Dakshinaranjan's collections on aesthetic grounds: as a loss of authentic flavour and a surrender to conventions. The episode is interesting as it reveals the subordination of the Bengali folkloric research of the time to the bhadralok cultural slant and culture-industry."²⁰⁷ This episode is also extremely important because it is a documented instance of direct intervention on part of Mitra Majumdar in the stories that he had collected

²⁰⁷ Flora, "On Fairy Tales, Intellectuals and Nationalism in Bengal (1880-1920)," 15-16

and transcribed. In the case of Suniti Devi she was very much writing with the conventions of Victorian fairy tales in mind and wove elements (such as fairies) borrowed from them into the *rupkatha* stories. This chapter has studied the introductions and prefaces published along with the main texts also for discerning the motivations and methodologies of the collectors. The difficulty of finding good storytellers was a problem that cropped up in many of these introductory pieces and it did correspond to social reality and particularly to the loss of old ways of life that was the inevitable product of the fast spread to colonial education system and the social churning it caused. The fairy tale collections that appeared in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were not simple written transcriptions of oral stories. Infact, far from it, the process of transcribing was always loaded and never transparent. The writing of each of the authors was shaped by their ideological leanings and the location of the author in their historical time and space. Ultimately in the attempt to preserve the past, the work of collecting and printing of the oral stories as written texts brought out the inner core traditions into materiality and the stories became part of Bengal literary modernity.

CHAPTER 3

Gendered Contexts to the *Rupkatha* Tradition

That “the role of gender in cultural expression...is basic and pervasive” was a thesis put forth by Arjun Appadurai, Frank J. Korom, and Margaret Mills in their seminal work *Gender, Genre and Power in South Asian Expressive Traditions*²⁰⁸ highlighting the centrality of gender as a parameter for the study of cultural traditions. The Bengali fairy tale tradition was already gendered by the indigenous Bengali collectors and their fellow intellectuals, who specifically called it a women’s tradition and linked it to the unlettered Indian woman who was untouched and thereby untainted by the colonial encounter. Thus, it becomes imperative to study this tradition placing gender at the centre because gender was always present in the way the collectors contextualised the stories. The gendered nature of the Grimm Brothers’ own conceptualising of German folklore must also be remembered here. The Brothers had repeatedly stressed that the lore belonged to the old women of the Hessian peasant classes. In this study, my focus will be both on the Bengali fairy tale stories, as well as, on the discourses that was woven around the stories. In the west, there have been gender-based studies of the fairy tale starting from the 70’s which has studied the psycho-social reception of the tales, their in-text representation of gender, as well as the editorial history of the volumes with a primary focus on the European fairy tale collections. Gender-based fairy tale studies have concentrated on Western traditions, and not much work has been done on other traditions despite them being

²⁰⁸ Arjun Appadurai, Frank J. Korom and Margaret A. Mills, *Gender, Genre, and Power in South Asian Expressive Traditions* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 23

a rich ground for study.²⁰⁹ I will begin my investigation into aspects of gender as embodied in the Bengali storytelling tradition by studying the ways in which the *rupkatha* tradition interacts with other Bengali women's culture and the social debates on women that dominated much of nineteenth century public discourses. The social roles of women in Bengali society and Bengali cultural imagination as they appeared in this literary tradition will be studied. The aim will be to investigate the influence of these discourses on the construction of gender identities, gender roles, and the attempts to engender cultural traditions in the contemporary intellectual discussions on this literary genre. In the following chapter, the thesis will study the stories themselves for their representation of gender, especially the social structures they reproduce and the space they provide for (at times subversive) women's voices. The focus will also be on whether the representation of gender in volumes written by women collectors can be studied for counterpoints to texts written by male collectors.

In this chapter, my primary focus will be on the relations between the Bengali *rupkatha* tradition and Bengali women's culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. I will study the social discourses on women, with a specific focus on the ways in which it interacted with the discourses created by the writers of the *rupkatha* stories which appeared in print. I will then turn my attention to the stories themselves and study their voicing of the social concerns of women. This section will address why *rupkatha* was seen as an endangered women's cultural tradition at the end of the nineteenth century by the predominantly male Bengali intelligentsia of the time and why they found Bengali women unfit for transmitting the stories?

²⁰⁹ Donald Haase provides a thorough overview of feminist scholarship of fairy tales in the introductory essay to his edited book *Fairytales and Feminism: New Approaches* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), as well as in the essay "Feminist Fairy-Tale Scholarship: A Critical Survey and Bibliography," *Marvels & Tales* 14, no. 1 (2000): 15-63. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41380741>.

This question requires a study of the rise of the figure of the *bhadramahila* in nineteenth century Bengal as the companion of the educated urban *bhadrolok* and what her rise meant for the continuity of the *rupkatha* tradition. Subsequently, it will look at the discourses created around the stories through the various paratexts²¹⁰ published alongside the main texts to look at their emphasis and erasure of gender identities and gender roles especially in the identification of their intended reader and the ownership of the tradition. Between the figure of a woman as a mother and the male child, I will study the presence/absence of the figure of the girl child and investigate whether a concept of the Bengali woman's girlhood existed at all in the male collector's imagination. I will study this in the context of the social roles accorded to the girl child in the nineteenth century Bengali culture and the political issues surrounding her, such as marriage and consent. In what way did these gendered social attitudes inform the writing of the Bhadrolok collectors? For my investigation, I will look closely at the Age of Consent Debates and the debates surrounding the "Women's Question" that dominated public discourse throughout much of the nineteenth century where native Bengali men from both the conservationist as well as the reformist camps, as well as British men from the colonial administration and colonial medical authorities sought to speak for Bengali women. In the final part of the section, I will study the various internal evidence to show why the *rupkatha* tradition can be called a woman's tradition. The published volumes of *rupkatha* stories, particularly Mitra Majumdar's and Day's have conventionally been regarded as children's literature and

²¹⁰ By paratexts I mean the introductory prefaces and verses of the fairy tale writers as well as invited scholars (such as Rabindranath Tagore) that were published alongside the stories in the volumes. I am borrowing the use from Jack Zipes. Please refer to the discussion on paratexts in Chapter 2.

Jack Zipes. "Media-Hyping of Fairy Tales," in *The Cambridge Companion to Fairy Tales*, ed. Maria Tatar, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 211

not as women's popular culture. I will investigate the *rupkatha* texts' own voicing of the social issues affecting women. This must especially be considered as there was otherwise a lack of women's own voices in the public space regarding these issues. For the purpose of looking at women's voices, I will draw references from some of the other cultural traditions prevalent during the nineteenth century, which were associated with women as well as some of the early autobiographies written by women.

1. An Endangered Tradition?

The *rupkatha* tradition was specifically designated as a storytelling tradition belonging to women by Rabindranath Tagore. Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar seemed to concur with this view, as did Reverend Lal Behari Day, who writing a decade earlier, mostly chose women as the source for his stories. Rev Lal Behari Day, although he had also gathered some of his stories from men, deemed it necessary to write that his collection of stories were "a genuine sample of the old, old stories told by old Bengali women from age to age through a hundred generations." On a similar note, Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar wrote in his introduction to *Thakurmar Jhuli*:

On this autumn morning, I am bringing forth this bag in the middle of the golden market.

Let mothers like my mother be born in every Bengali household. Let those to whom this work really belongs take up the task one again.²¹¹ (translated from original Bengali)

Thus, he stated that the work of telling stories really belonged to Bengali mothers, a work that he had been forced to take up because Bengali mothers had forgotten this task, and his purpose in publishing this volume was to become of use to these mothers and revive the forgotten tradition among them. While *rupkatha* was not always told only by women, the association of

²¹¹ Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar, *Thakurmar Jhuli* (Kolkata: Mitra and Ghosh, 1907), 16

these stories with women, children, and childrearing activities was clearly established within Bengali culture, making it quite conceivable that the majority of tellers of these tales in the nineteenth century would have been women, since women played the role of primary caregiver. One need look no further than some of the women's autobiographies which were being written in the nineteenth century to see how childrearing was exclusively kept within the domain of women. Rasasundari Devi recorded that it was her duty to keep the children in order because the husband was never under any circumstances to be disturbed. A.K. Ramanujan, while discussing stories from the south of India, writes in his essay "Towards a Counter-system: Women's Tales":

Sometimes the tales that are told by women are also told by men, but a single inquiry makes it clear that, invariably the men had heard them first from a woman in a domestic setting, usually in childhood. Young boys and girls are told such tales by older women who also feed them in the evening, in the kitchen—which is exclusively the realm of women. Boys as they grow older...may drop out of these tale-telling sessions, while girls continue until adolescence. Thus these nonprofessional tellers of tales tend to be predominantly women.²¹²

The few constants that emerge from here are: children as the audience and recipient of the stories, women as the primary teller, and the inevitable location of the tales within the realm of domesticity. This helps these stories as those told by nonprofessional tellers to a private audience consisting primarily of children, as was the case with *rupkatha*. Of course there were also the other kind of tales, long romantic narratives detailing the worldly trials of women

²¹² A. K. Ramanujan, "Towards a Counter system: women's tales", in *The Collected Essays of A. K. Ramanujan*, ed Vinay Dharwadkar (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 429-430.

protagonists, that was also collected by Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar in *Thakurdadar Jhuli*. They were told at various family and public gatherings that mark weddings, births, and deaths but also by professional village tellers who were both men and women. In fact, Dakshinaranjan, in his introduction to *Thakurdadar Jhuli* justified his choice of the title by saying that he had heard these stories from the mouth of men. However, it is important to remember that in Bengal, professional storytelling was under no circumstances the realm only of men. Nineteenth Century Bengal had a vast number of women ‘artistes specialising in certain forms of cultural performance — both religious and secular’²¹³. Well documented were the Boshtomis or Vaishnavite women singers popularly referred to as *nyeris* who sang *kirtans* and told mythological stories, the *panchali* readers, the *kathakata* tellers, and the *kheur* singers. These women not only roamed the streets and performed in public gatherings but also had access to the andarmahals of large Bengali families where they performed among gatherings exclusively of women. Many of the Dakshinaranjan’s *Thakurdadar Jhuli* stories can be traced back to such gatherings and are stories that are centred around women.

Now, Day, Tagore and Mitra Majumdar writing at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century were convinced that the continuity of this tradition was at threat. They could not find Bengali women who were fit for carrying on the storytelling traditions and lamented their forgetting of both the language and the tradition. They stated the need for written conservatory interventions by the educated native Bengali men. All of these collectors wrote of the tradition of *rupkatha* as a living tradition that was associated with their childhood, and as I have already discussed in the previous chapter, cultural memory had become the stamp of authenticity for them. Thus, they recounted this experience of hearing

²¹³ Sumanta Banerjee, “Marginalisation of Women’s Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Bengal” in *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, ed. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989), 150

stories from women as children labelling it as the authentic Bengali cultural experience. They lamented the dearth of such women who could pass on the same experience to contemporary children. Naturally, the question that needs to be asked is why? Was there a reason for the *bhadrolok* anxiety about the continuity of the tradition that leads them to take up the task of collecting fairy tales at the turn of the century?

Native Bengali culture became the object of British derision and mockery because of the treatment of their women, who, according to British accounts, were subjected to harsh social laws and mostly denied all kinds of formal education, which had left them bereft of refinement. Sumanta Banerjee mentions Captain Willard, who was commenting on the “ignorant” state of Indian women. Banerjee observes, “one sign of such ignorance, which shocked Willard and his contemporaries was that these women were fond of singing songs that ‘mostly appear to be licentious and voluptuous’”²¹⁴. Willard, like many others both before and after him, was stressing the need to uplift these women from their state of ignorance. These ideas often referred to as “the white man’s burden” were internalised by the fast emerging *bhadroloks* of the colonies who also turned their gaze to their own women, the internal other, the non-self within their own communities. Banerjee points out that these *bhadroloks* were instrumental in fashioning “certain common standards of behaviour and cultural norms” and that “they played a leading role in implementing a model of female education in Bengal that was primarily fashioned by contemporary English missionaries, educationists and administrators”, and somewhat modified by the patriarchal norms of traditional society.²¹⁵

²¹⁴ Sumanta Banerjee, “Marginalisation of Women’s Popular culture in nineteenth century Bengal” in *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, ed. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989), 127

²¹⁵ Sumanta Banerjee, “Marginalisation of Women’s Popular culture in nineteenth century Bengal” in *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, ed. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989), 127

These concepts would later be imbibed by the women of their households. Furthermore, the newly acquired sense of morality imbibed from Victorian attitudes lead to the new need to ‘refine, reorganise, recast and regenerate’²¹⁶ Bengali women. Women across class and caste distinctions had shared a common interest in certain types of literature and culture, much of which was based on traditional folklore and folk customs. These made use of dialects and idiomatic language usages that was common to women of all classes. The creation of the *bhadromahila* under the new system of education was marked by a purging of her language and her cultural interests and that drove a schism into what Sumanta Banerjee notes was the otherwise “homogenous cultural world of the women of nineteenth century Bengal”. Women professional storytellers had also played a huge role in keeping women’s storytelling traditions based on old folk culture alive within the homes of people cutting across economic divisions. These storytellers exited from the *bhadrolok* houses for good and this also led to the demise of living traditions from the cities. The storytellers were women who, along with men, had migrated into nineteenth century urban spaces from the villages. Certain internalised colonialist viewpoints, for example, that bards were people of ill-repute, became doubly true for women storytellers, and they too became the subject of *bhadrolok* onslaught. *Bhadroloks* objected both to the content and the form of the performances as well as to their women’s continued participation in them. On examining the soft, sentimental writing of the newly constituted *bhadromahilas* it becomes clear as Banerjee notes: “the new style and content (of

²¹⁶ A young Bengal radical speaking in 1856 said, the Bengali woman must be ‘refined, reorganised, recast and regenerated’. This explained very well the *bhadrolok* project. Noted in Sumanta Banerjee, “Marginalisation of Women’s Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Bengal” in *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, ed. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989), 162

bhadromahila writing)²¹⁷ set them apart from women's popular cultural forms. The style of their composition —poems, stories, novels, articles—showed signs of the training they had undergone. The earthy dialect, the witty, homely idioms that marked the sayings of their predecessors were replaced by chaste Sanskrit derived compound Bengali words and expressions.”²¹⁸ Inevitably then *rupkatha* stories, which were of folkloric origins and required idiomatic use of language was slowly lost to the women of the *bhadrolok* households. It was the result of the colonial and the *bhadrolok* project of “emancipating” women, particularly the women in their own homes. Hence Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar chose to name his 1907 collection of *rupkatha* stories as *Thakurmar Jhuli*, the reference being to the grandmother figure—symbolic of an older womanhood who served as the repository of the stories—since the new woman was already alienated from such culture.

Rabindranath's lament in the beginning of the twentieth century of the lack of softness in the hand of the educated *Bhadromahila* in the Preface to *Thakurmar Jhuli* has to be placed in this context. Rabindranath wrote:

Earlier I have tried to have *rupkatha* written down by some women who were educated but nonetheless skilled in storytelling—but despite their feminine hand, the magic of their foreign pens might have preserved the words but changed the stories beyond recognition; that eternal thing also looked modern.

²¹⁷ The bulk of literature produced by the newly educated women at the end of the nineteenth century, consisted of poems and prose pieces which expressed in refined, chaste Bengali a wide range of private sentiments—often in a didactic tone—the need to educate their sisters who were still awaiting emancipation” Sumanta Banerjee, “Marginalisation of Women's Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Bengal” in *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, ed. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (New Delhi: Kali for women, 1989), 168

²¹⁸ Sumanta Banerjee, “Marginalisation of Women's Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Bengal” in *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, ed. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989), 161

While Rabindranath's romantic conceptualisation of *rupkatha* as ancient and eternal is evident and reminiscent of the general ideas about folktales that had become popular in the colonial world with the Grimm brothers. What is of relevance here is his placing of women's education in opposition to their storytelling tradition. He used the word *othocho* or yet/nonetheless to link the two qualifiers, educated and skilled in storytelling, suggesting that the two did not usually go hand in hand. For Tagore, like the Brothers Grimm and most collectors inspired by them, to be a skilled storyteller meant that you could preserve in your telling the earthy dialects and idiomatic expression that was inherent to folk stories. And evidently, the educated Bengali women he had encountered were incapable of doing that. Rabindranath here was voicing his anxiety over the precarious nature of the contradictory pulls that was exerted on the woman as well as the girl child from the latter half of the nineteenth century. On the one hand, there was the "newly derived world of knowledge imparted in new style schools," as Jasodhara Bagchi notes; on the other was the pull "of domesticity and the so called 'feminine' rituals...learning the art of cuisine and daily religious rituals...much of which have pre-colonial roots...Even the Brahmo or reformed Hindu upbringing of the girl child emphasised '*desaja*' (literally home grown) ritual practices".²¹⁹ Most of these ritual practices centred around *bratas* and involved the telling of narratives called *bratakathas*. The *bratakatha* was a storytelling tradition that ran parallel to the *rupkatha* tradition and served certain similar functions which will be discussed later in this chapter. When Rabindranath asked the rhetorical question: "Is there anything more *swadeshi* than the Thakurmar Jhuli?" he was including *rupkatha* into the list of things *desaja* or homegrown. The new learning systems brought on by the colonial encounter had affected

²¹⁹ Jasodhara Bagchi, "Socialising the Girl Child in Colonial Bengal," *Economic and Political Weekly* 28, no. 41 (1993): 2215 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4400259>.

desaja knowledge systems. He covertly blamed this new learning for the fact that educated Bengali women could no longer tell/write *rupkathas* properly. Interestingly when the educated women of the elite Bengali households did take up the pen to collect fairy tales, they chose to do so in the English language with an international readership in mind. The fairy tale collections published by two women at the beginning of the twentieth century, *The Orient Pearls* of Sovana Sundari Tagore and *Indian Fairytales* of Suniti Devi, reflected their changed and somewhat anglicised tastes. However, they at the same time were presenting women-centric tales and women's perspectives that stand in sharp contrast to some of the perspectives presented in the stories of the male collectors.

Rabindranath was continuously pitting the indigenous in opposition with the colonial in the Preface that he wrote in his *swadeshi* phase. He had placed “foreign pens” in opposition to indigenous storytelling. However, the point to remember is that it was not just the colonial project of imposing British knowledge systems but also the indigenous *Bhadrolok* project of reforming their own homes and their women that had led to the untimely demise of certain living traditions. A large number of schools where formal education was imparted to girls were run by Indians themselves. Such schools had actually aided, in however limited a manner, to the spread of women's education because they had removed the fear “of both proselytization and exposure of women to harmful Western influences,”²²⁰ which was associated with the early missionary schools. As Partha Chatterjee notes, there had been long debates about “feminine curriculum,” and much of the content was delivered in the newly created modern Bengali language suitable for literary writing.²²¹ Alongside formal curricula, the nineteenth century also

²²⁰ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), 128

²²¹ Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, 128

abounded with periodicals and literature on women's education and self-development. Sumanta Banerjee notes: "the lessons indicated for *andarmahal* women in these (women's self-help books') suggestions were clear. The coarse, 'untutored' expletives and expressions that they shared with the women of the streets had to be expurgated from their vocabulary...*Bamabodhini Patrika* warned against the tendency to subvert the objective of female education by some women who still read *Vidya-Sundar* (a widely popular but equally infamous novel) and *panchalis* in the *andarmahal*."²²² Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar's *Shushilar Upakhyān* shows the *bhadromahila* Shushila, the chaste, obedient and ideal young wife scolding the lower caste and lower class barber's wife for criticising her husband and for the language she uses while doing so, calling both the behaviour and the language inappropriate and wrong. The mythological stories of women storytellers and their *kirtans* and *kheur* songs often provided a dissenting space for women by mocking male depravity through their songs, and there was a fear of their potential to encourage disobedience among the women within their homes, which also led to the campaign against such popular forms. The assertive Vidya, who enters into an all-consuming romance, was also seen as a dangerous model of female behaviour. As the *Bhadrolok* embarked upon the process of sanitising such culture from their homes, the earthy and idiomatic language was lost to their women along with the coarse and untutored expressions. Similarly, along with the *panchalis* and mythologies also demised the *rupkatha* form. Collectors by the end of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century were lamenting that loss. The other important point that emerges from here is that the purview of the collectors was limited within the comparatively small world of the literate populace. It was

²²² Sumanta Banerjee, "Marginalisation of Women's Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Bengal" in *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, ed. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989), 161

only the new *bhadromahilas* of the urban households of the time who would have lost the earthy language of the “*prachina*” or the older women. Chitra Deb, a historian of the Tagore household, notes how many of the Tagore women and their contemporaries from Brahmo households were more anglicised in their tastes and lifestyles. Thus little would have remained of their sense of cultural continuity with the homogenous women’s culture of old, which had contained *rupkatha* as a living tradition.²²³ However, many of these traditions (both professional and otherwise) had sought and found refuge in villages where they remained a living tradition well into the twentieth century till the advent of cable television, and finally, the digital revolution swept through the Indian countryside and spelled the death knell for such cultural forms.

2. The recipient and bearer of the stories

2.1 The case of the visibility and invisibility of the girl child

If one evaluates Mitra Majumdar’s statement of wanting to be useful to Bengali mothers, one has to be aware of the limited nature of such a claim since the target audience of the volumes were necessarily those within the purview of print/literate culture, which effectively left a majority of the women out. The literacy rate of women even at the time of independence stood at 7-8%.²²⁴ This was despite the steady growth of women’s education in Bengal and other parts of India since the time of Vidyasagar. (Literacy rates of women show a

²²³ Chitra Deb, “Women of the Tagore Household”, trans. Smita Chowdhry and Sona Ray (London: Penguin, 2010), 68, https://books.google.co.in/books?id=HvU6CwAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false

²²⁴ Hemant Singh, “Census 2011: Literacy Rate and Sex Ratio in India Since 1901 to 2011”, Jagran Josh, accessed on July 20, 2016, <https://www.jagranjosh.com/general-knowledge/census-2011-literacy-rate-and-sex-ratio-in-india-since-1901-to-2011-1476359944-1>

sharp jump between 1931 and 1941, growing from 2.9 to 7.3) There were still many widespread notions that proved as impediments to female literacy, such as the idea that “education induced early widowhood” and also that “education was supposed to encourage women in becoming immodest, indisciplined and uncontrollable”²²⁵ Thus the Martin and Burke reading *chele*, who Tagore identified as the class of readers to whom Majumdar’s book should appeal, was more likely to be the male child, even if one is inclined to take the more general meaning of *chele* as child and not in the constricted sense of boy. This is especially true since women’s educational curriculum of the time rarely included Martin and Burke. Hence, the girl child who should have been the primary reader/listener, considering the fact that the continuity of the oral tradition whose progenitors were women was under serious threat and because she should have been the future bearer of the storytelling tradition, was glaringly absent from the discourse that was being woven around the stories. This discourse instead appeared to be centrally focused on the mother and the male child. The figure of the girl child in the context of the fairy tale collections thus emerges as a concern needing further discussion.

In a poem which follows this introductory prose piece to *Thakurmar Jhuli* and serves as a verse introduction to the volume, Dakshinaranjan once again referred to the *boro bou* and the *chotto bou*, the elder wife and the younger wife, and dedicated the work to them. He also reiterated the association of these stories with the sleep times of children.

Oh! elder wife, younger wife, they have come back again

Those fairystories, of ancient times, for your tutelage!

As the wind blows through flower fields, sleep draws on the eyes

²²⁵ Jasodhara Bagchi, "Socialising the Girl Child in Colonial Bengal," *Economic and Political Weekly* 28, no. 41 (1993), 2214. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4400259>.

Works remain scattered and undone under the spell of your words!

(translated from original Bengali)

I have already discussed in the previous chapter how Mitra Majumdar's characterisation of these wives fits into the contemporary nationalist ideal of womanhood. What is of relevance here is that this poem provided the only one instance where the girl child '*khuki*' was mentioned along with the boy child in the context of the stories. Dakshinaranjan opened the poem with "Oh Grandmother's dear ones, darling little boys and girls". All of the other poems, on the other hand, placed both at the beginning and the end of the volume, variously mentioned the *khokhon* or *khoka*, (terms of endearment for little boys) as the recipient of the stories. To provide an example, the boy child was mentioned time and again in the poem that followed the first poem: "My little boy giggles", "my little boy's aunt has come", "my little boy will dance, he will eat the lord's offerings", "my little boy is in the lord's image" and again "the mother of the moon has come down to the courtyard, my boy come and see" and finally "my little boy's smile is precious, who has blest the grandmother's lap?"

Rabindranath Tagore's Preface famously presented his Martin and Burke reading *chele* on the one hand and the *snehomoyee* and *deshlakshmi* on the other as the receiver and the teller of the stories. Lal Behari Day, who was writing on the behest of his colonial masters and was presenting his volume primarily to them, simply mentioned his own boyhood and the fact of his hearing these stories from a woman called Shambhu's mother. The figure of the girl child was thus conspicuous because of her absence from these discussions. Naturally, the question that comes to mind is why? She seems lost between the twin figures of the mother and the boy child. That the mother emerges as a central figure in all kinds of Bengali cultural imaginings is a fact that I shall take up for discussion later. What we see in these *bhadrolok* texts surrounding the *rupkatha* stories is the figure of the mother and her male child looming large and engulfing the frail frame of the girl child. This seems strange considering that Jasodhara Bagchi, in her

seminal work on Bengali women's lives in the nineteenth century, claims that the 'shishukanya' or the 'girl child' "has occupied a major space in the emerging middle class consciousness of Bengal"²²⁶. She backs this up with the statement that "the social reform movement that characterised the first half of the 19th century addressed itself predominantly to the Woman Question". When one looks at the various debates and discourses that surrounded the passing of the act banning sati in 1829 and the initiatives taken by Vidyasagar for women's education and widow remarriage leading to the passing of the widow remarriage act of 1853, never does the arguments feature the idea of these social practices as being harmful to the girl as a *child*. Although the official British discourse against the practice of sati described the widow as "tender child", both the Hindu orthodoxy and the reformers deployed the *Shastras* to their benefits in their arguments and debated over the well-being of the social order in the context of these practices. In the same article, Bagchi points out that "Vidyasagar shared with the Hindu orthodoxy the conviction that the purity of the social order is closely tied up with the right channelling of female sexuality through marriage."²²⁷

This lack of focus on the girl child becomes all the more shocking when one looks at the public debates on child marriage, a practice which directly affected girl children in equal measure if not in larger numbers than boys. The focus of the arguments, however, remained on boys and on the health of society in general. Monomoyee Basu, in her monograph *Hindu Women and Marriage Law: From Sacrament to Contract* discusses how Vidyasagar, in his treatise against child marriage, talked about conjugal immaturity that resulted from immature

²²⁶ Bagchi, "Socialising the Girl Child in Colonial Bengal", 2214

²²⁷ Jasodhara Bagchi, "Socialising the Girl Child in Colonial Bengal," *Economic and Political Weekly* 28, no. 41 (1993), 2215. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4400259>.

spouses entering into a marriage and the detrimental effect of that on the health of children that resulted from such a union.²²⁸ An article published in July 1847 in the *Samvad Paravakar* argued that early marriage was detrimental to the education of young boys as “likely to distract their attention, hamper their studies and spoil their future”.²²⁹ Similarly, an article published in the *Bamabodhini Patrika* in November 1864 denounced child marriage by “pointing out many abuses caused by it, such as early death, ill health, lack of education, poverty etc. It burdened growing young men, hampered their studies and led them to the horror of poverty”. While *Somprakash*, a weekly paper, declared in June 1868 that early marriage was “the root of numerous evils and the main cause of the gradual decay of the human race”.²³⁰ What is implied in these arguments is that the absent girl child was being visualised in terms of wife and mother of the community and the country, and never *on her own*. She could not be imagined outside of her sexual function, even at the stage where the sexual awakening had not taken place. In her socialisation what she should be and should do was determined by the need for preparation for her future domestic role as the good wife and the good mother. Bagchi states that ‘her upbringing was that of a good, well protected, *proto-bhadramahila* (emphasis added), encouraged to play feminine games of doll’s house, read books ‘suitable’ for girls, discouraged

²²⁸ Monmoyee Basu, “Hindu Women and Marriage Law”, in *Women and Law in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), 40

²²⁹ Monmoyee Basu, “Hindu Women and Marriage Law”, in *Women and Law in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), 39

²³⁰ Monmoyee Basu, “Hindu Women and Marriage Law”, in *Women and Law in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), 40

from physical activity”²³¹ The doll’s house games usually mimicked adult domestic life and hence as such served a purpose in initiating the girl child into her domestic roles. The existence of the precocious child, who had more knowledge of worldly affairs than she should, often endearingly referred to as ‘*ginni*’, a word which was otherwise used for the wife or the homemaker, appeared abundantly in Bengali literature.

What emerges from here is the hyphenated figure of the child-woman. In most discussions of the period, she appeared as the child-bride, as the child-wife, and as the child-widow but somehow never as only a child. Some of the ‘suitable’ books that were popular reading material for girl children are listed by Shibaji Bandopadhyay in his book *Gopal Rakhal Dondoshomash*.²³² Some of these books were: *Kathamala*, *Bastubichar*, *Sitar banabas*, *Naranari*, *Barnabodh*, *Nitibodh*, *Charitabali*, *Akhyan Manjari* and *Shushilar Upakhyan*. The titles themselves give hints to their possible content. *Sushilar Upakhyan*, which documented the life of Sushila, the ideal child-woman, was one book that was widely popular. Bandopadhyay observes that just as the children’s primers, Madanmohan Tarkalankar’s *Shishushikhya* and Vidyasagar’s *Barnaparichay* had constructed the idea of the good boy Gopal and the bad boy Rakhal, *Shushilar Upakhyan* had constructed the idea of their wives and mothers.²³³ To say “children’s” primers is misleading because it was only boys who found representation as children in these books. The dialectics was between the *Gopals*, who were the obedient and social boys, and *Rakhals*, who were troublesome. The girl child stood outside

²³¹ Jasodhara Bagchi, "Socialising the Girl Child in Colonial Bengal," *Economic and Political Weekly* 28, no. 41 (1993): 2218. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4400259>.

²³² Shibaji Bandopadhyay, *Gopal Rakhal Dondoshomash: Uponibeshbad O Bangla Shisusahitya* (Kolkata: Papyrus, 1991), 163.

²³³ Bandopadhyay, *Gopal Rakhal Dondoshomash*, 213.

this dialectic and was thus never seen in their pages. There was no need for a good girl who did her lessons on time and did not fight with her friends, even in educational primers where she would have been represented prior to her role as wife and mother. She, however, was rarely, if ever, seen detached from those roles. Thus, the books which specifically targeted the girl child were interested in presenting role models like *Shushila*, who was the ideal, self-sacrificing, loving, righteous, and efficient wife to her (also idealised) husband. The girl child as a category was subsumed within the general conception of womanhood as attached to her reproductive function. This, however, is not a cultural fact that is peculiar to Bengal. Mary Jane Kehily notes in her introductory discussion of childhood that “the concept of childhood remains imbued with significance that encode what children mean to adults.”²³⁴ As the girl child in colonial Bengali households was burdened with the responsibility of “keeping the patriarchal structure of the...family in place”²³⁵ she was from her infancy seen as a proto-woman. Boys, on the other hand were the “first specialised children”²³⁶. Kehily writes that from sixteenth century onwards, Western Europe saw an increasing differentiation in the way adults and children were represented. As childhood came to be seen as a new concept, “boys were singled out as a distinct and different category. The historical development of childhood in Western Europe was articulated through boyhood” and very importantly, through middle class boyhood. The idea of childhood was both gender specific and class specific. However, they “at the same time (were) disguising both gender and class differences...the way these changes were

²³⁴ Mary Jane Kehily, *An Introduction to Childhood Studies* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2009), 45

²³⁵ Jasodhara, Bagchi. "Socialising the Girl Child in Colonial Bengal," *Economic and Political Weekly* 28, no. 41 (1993): 2214. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4400259>.

²³⁶ Kehily, *An Introduction to Childhood Studies*, 44

constructed through discourse suggested that they were effectively universal: they were presented and represented not as ‘middle class boyhood’ but as childhood”²³⁷. The development of the concept of childhood was also marked by a simultaneous growth in specialised literature aimed exclusively at children. Nineteenth century colonial Bengal too had seen the growth of the publishing market under the category of children’s literature in the nineteenth century. Some of the Bengali fairy tale collections were also part of that growing corpus of literature. This had developed under the influence of the cultural exchange that marked the heyday of British colonialist rule over the region. In Bengali children’s literature, too, the signifiers ‘*chele*’ and ‘*chelebela*’ (boy and boyhood) came to be the universalised markers of child and childhood which seeped into and stayed in Bengali linguistic usage. The representation of this childhood was very much that of the class that had benefited from colonial education and business opportunities and had grown under colonial rule, that is, “the middle class”. Whether the idea of Gopal and Rakhal was relevant at all to the child of the landless labourer who had little or no access to formal schooling is an interesting question which I have no opportunity of dealing with here.

It is only with the debates surrounding the age of consent bill (which was passed in 1891) that the recognition of a time when the female body is not yet a sexual body or a maternal body enters into public discourse. In the aftermath of the much publicised death of the 11 year old Phulmoni due to marital rape and the acquittal of her thirty year old husband Hari Maity, the “women’s question” which had disappeared from public discourse re-entered into it. The emerging nationalist movement had ‘resolved’ the women’s question, to borrow Partha Chatterjee’s terms, by placing it in the domain of home where interference on the part of the

²³⁷

Kehily, *An Introduction to Childhood Studies*, 44-45

colonial masters was not to be tolerated. To quote from Tanika Sarkar's "A Prehistory of Rights: The Age of Consent Debate in Colonial Bengal": "cultural nationalists used a contrast between the loving heart of the Hindu home with the loveless, coercive nature of the colonial rule. They saw all domestic arrangements (no matter how hurtful to the woman) as a matter of willed love and surrender on the part of the woman, in contrast to the forced submission of the Indian man to the colonial order."²³⁸ However, this violent death and the ensuing figures revealed by investigations by colonial administrators of a large number of deaths of pubescent wives forced both the reformist and the revivalist-nationalists to cast an anxious gaze onto the body of the child-woman. "A new possibility also forced itself, adding to the discomfort", writes Sarkar, "Were they talking of the woman or about a mere child yoked to untimely marriage? Was there a separate stage in the woman's life as childhood, and if so, was it compatible with marriage?"²³⁹ In the reformist discourse particularly, "they read her wan face, her premature aging, and her fatigue and early death as something induced by premature sexual contact and childbearing."²⁴⁰ One can see that an idea of maturity was slowly being conceived, which was trying to conceptualise a notion of girlhood that is to be seen as coming before and predating her existence as a sexual being, as a wife/mother/woman. The conservative position articulated through a newspaper opposing the bill argued "that the Hindu girl's biological development should be differently assessed: 'According to the Hindu law, the childhood of a girl is to be determined by reference to her first menses and not to her age.'"²⁴¹ It was this "Hindu law" that was used to argue that if the Hindu girl did not come into sexual contact with

²³⁸ Tanika Sarkar. "A Prehistory of Rights: The Age of Consent Debate in Colonial Bengal," *Feminist Studies* 26, no. 3 (2000): 613 doi:10.2307/3178642

²³⁹ Sarkar, "A Prehistory of Rights", 613

²⁴⁰ Sarkar, "A Prehistory of Rights", 612

²⁴¹ Sarkar, "A Prehistory of Rights", 613

her husband immediately after the onset of menarche, this would ensure the pollution of her womb and by extension of the entire Hindu community. Reformers, on the other hand, “linked childhood to a stage anterior to the full maturation of all the sexual, procreative organs. A minimum age, they said, would be a safer index”²⁴².

The gravity of the issue is evident from the fact that the two sections were warring over raising the minimum age by only two years, from the statutory age of ten to twelve. The Hindu orthodoxy’s claiming of the right to continue with the tradition of “*garvadan*” (or giving of the womb immediately after the onset of menarche) was supported by the revivalist-nationalists because they were resisting the colonial legislative intervention into what they claimed was a private religious issue. However, the passing of the bill did mark a moment of recognition for the physical state of girlhood, when the female body is neither a sexual body nor a maternal body. A wide range of medical opinions had been sought both by the English administrators as well as by social reformers like Keshab Chandra Sen, who had addressed a circular letter to medical practitioners while advocating marriage reforms as early as 1871. The medical authorities of Calcutta were consulted in relation to the early versions of the draft Native Marriage Bill, and they had initially prescribed the age of fourteen. So an idea of immaturity in regard to the girl child and a conception of juvenility surrounding the child bride was being recognised by the colonial administrators as well as liberal reformers. She was somewhat being seen as a sub-adult. However, the idea of “consent” that was being debated was restricted to her body and the physical readiness of her body for sexual relations. Consent was defined as the capability of the physical body to bear sexual penetration without serious harm or injury. Phulmoni Dasi, the child-wife whose death had started the debate, was aged eleven and

²⁴² Sarkar, “A Prehistory of Rights”, 613

therefore above the age of ten, however, her death after thirteen hours of pain and profuse bleeding had proven that her battered body was not ready for a sexual relationship. It was the unpreparedness of the body that would gain the woman the right to a semblance of a childhood and a certain amount of legal immunity. Sarkar writes that liberal reformers argued that a “lot of girls menstruated after twelve, and in any case, menarche did not mark full puberty and physical, mental maturity necessary for safe intercourse”²⁴³. There was still no discussion of emotional and mental immaturity or ideas of innocence associated with girlhood. And on the whole, although the number of issues that were classified under the “women’s” question were debates that also affected girl children (for example education, marriage, and widowhood), they were nonetheless regarded as *women’s* questions affecting Indian womanhood in general. Ruby Lal notes this when she says, “Most of the literary and reformist discourses of the nineteenth century deluge us with a luminal figure, which I shall call girl-child/woman.”²⁴⁴ The universalised notion of *chelebela* (boyhood) as childhood held ground, and Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar and Rabindranath Tagore writing in the decade immediately following the passage of the age of consent bill continued to use such signifiers. The emphasis still remained on the girl-woman as the mother and as wife. She appeared variably as ‘*snehomoyee*’, “*deshlakshmi*”, as “*boro bou*” and “*choto bou*” but only once as “*khuki*”. Tagore and Mitra Majumdar, by specifically placing the tradition of storytelling on the mother’s shoulders and in the grandmother’s repertoire, and identifying the colonial educated male child as the receiver (as Tagore and Mitra Majumdar themselves had been) erased the girl child as either listener or teller.

²⁴³ Sarkar, “A Prehistory of Rights”, 607

²⁴⁴ Ruby Lal, *Coming of Age in Nineteenth Century India, The Girlchild and the Art of Playfulness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 33

2.2 The focus on motherhood

The emphasis on the woman as a mother within the prose and verse pieces that accompanied the *rupkatha* stories can be located within the discourses of the early nationalist period when motherhood was constructed as a metaphor for the nation. The icon of the mother became the rallying point around which nationalist ideology sought to construct itself. The nation, an abstract idea, simultaneously went through the process of being visually represented as a cartographic space and at the same time began to find emotional expression in the idea of the motherland where the nation was embodied as the body of a woman, the mother. The brand of nationalism that became dominant in India at this time was distinctly Hindu in character. This iconography found its most complete expression in the idea of Bharat Mata, painted in 1922 by Abanindranath Thakur as a four-armed goddess in ascetic robes. The transformation from woman to the nation to the goddess was completed within the public psyche. Temples dedicated to Bharat Mata opened in Benaras and elsewhere. The deities worshipped in some of these temples were represented by the map of undivided India.²⁴⁵

The worship of Bharat Mata by the nationalist ideology was made acceptable to the people because of the widespread worship of mother goddesses throughout India. Worship of the mother goddess belonged to both the “great” and the “little” traditions in India, that is, both the Arya-Vedic religious tradition as well as the worship of local deities that owed their origin to indigenous religious cults. And it was the prevalence of goddess worship, Jashodhara Bagchi points out in her essay ‘Representing nationalism’ that facilitated the empowering of the mother

²⁴⁵ Davis, Richard. *Picturing the Nation: Iconographies of Modern India*. Orient Longman: New Delhi (2007)

image paving the way for nationalist uses of the image.²⁴⁶ In Bengal, worship of the goddess as the mother was not just restricted to the *Shakta* tradition. The other important religious cult, *Vaishnavism*, with its stories of child Krishna, also highlighted a mother-child relationship, that of Yashoda and Krishna. In fact, Bengali culture was permeated by the psychology of “*vatshalya sneha*”, that is, the affection for one’s offspring that was also at the heart of the framing of both the *Shakta* and the *Vaishnavite* tradition.²⁴⁷ Representation of Yashoda’s loving indulgence of Krishna’s escapades and the devotee’s (be it Ramaprasad, *Bamakhyapa*, or Ramakrishna) loving appeals to mother Kali were an intrinsic part of these devotional cults. It is to be noted that it was once again a relationship between that mother and her male child, which is highlighted in both of these devotional cults. Since religious imagination has been central to Indian culture, religious iconography was extensively used by the nationalists for raising support for their political causes.²⁴⁸ The mother-child relationship found within devotional cults was framed within the emerging nationalist discourses as the relationship between the nation as the mother and the citizen as child. The claim for sovereignty was framed as the child’s quest to win honour for the battered mother. The *Shakta* tradition in particular, became a rallying point for the nationalist imagination. Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, presented the country as a mother when he published his song “*Vande Mataram*” in the

²⁴⁶ Jasodhara Bagchi, "Representing Nationalism: Ideology of Motherhood in Colonial Bengal," *Economic and Political Weekly* 25, no. 42/43 (1990), 69 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4396894>.

²⁴⁷ Jasodhara, Bagchi. "Socialising the Girl Child in Colonial Bengal," *Economic and Political Weekly* 28, no. 41 (1993): 2215. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4400259>.

²⁴⁸ Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura* also shows how Gandhian nationalism made forays into the consciousness of the common people by molding religious cultures such as the *harikatha* traditions, the epic storytelling traditions to suit their political narratives. Raja Rao, *Kanthapura* (New Delhi, OUP, 2001)

Bangadarshan Patrika. This song became widely influential within the nationalist cause, and “Vande Mataram” became the expression of devotion to the nation as the “worshipped motherland”. In the following year in his novel *Anandamath*, he also took the next step of placing the figure of the mother as the mother goddess in the distinctly political context of the nation. He used a series of mother images in the novel to present the condition of India throughout the succeeding ages and thereby referring to the past, the present, and the future states of the Indian society. The use of the images of the mother goddesses in the first section of the novel as the mother that was, the mother that is, and the mother to be, was a call to action. India’s golden past was represented by “the image of the great mother, upholder of the world, and adorned with all ornaments. She was an astounding embodiment of perfection...Wild animals lions and elephants- have covered at her feet. She has made a lotus garden of their verdurous gloom. Resplendent with smiles, bedecked with all ornaments, the mother shone forth with the brilliance of the rising sun. And there was no wealth that was not hers.” The present state of India was represented by an image of Kali, “Do you see? Mother. As she is...Kali. The deity of darkness and vile insights. Dispossessed of all she had; therefore naked. Our land is nothing but a graveyard now. And so she has that garland of skulls around her neck. She tramples on her consort, her own Shiva, who is bliss and benediction. Oh mother! She holds the skull and the scimitar, which are weapons that her children have given her.” And finally, the future vision of India was represented by a mother who was: “a golden deity with ten arms smiling forth in the gold of the rising sun...Ten arms stretching out in ten directions, each holding up a weapon that declares her power; the enemy of man lies vanquished at her

feet, and the ferocious lion is subjugated and turned against all those who dare to oppose her.”²⁴⁹

Bankim in the novel presented three particular forms of *Shakti* as representative of the country that was, the country that is and the country that will be, which could be identified with the iconography of Annapurna, the goddess of fertility and plenitude, Kali, the dark and angry goddess wandering in graveyards, and Durga, the ten-armed goddess of power presented at the moment when she has vanquished the enemy. Bagchi points out how nationalists read deep political messages in Bankim's crisis-ridden images of Durga and Kali. The distinction that he made between the symbolism of the two deities, however, was not found in later nationalist uses of the goddesses, where both Kali and Durga were of synonymous usage, both representing power as it were along with a certain kind of maternal tenderness. This was evident in Vivekananda in his work “Kali the Mother” when he wrote the lines ‘Dancing made with joy, Come, mother come, For Terror is thy name, Death is in thy breasts Thou 'Time' the All-Destroyer! Come, Mother, come! Who dares misery Love and hug the form of death dance in destructions dance. To him the mother comes.’²⁵⁰ He combined both the conceptions of the nurturing and the avenging mother in the image of Kali and vocalised through it a call for nationalism. He linked the goddess with the motherland, where the need of the hour was for the son (citizen) to bear the destructive force represented by the mother goddess. When placed in this context, Rabindranath's *snehomoyee* and *deshlakshmi* attain special significance. The affectionate mother, the *snehomoyee*, was the nurturer of the nation as she was also the *deshlakshmi*. *Lakshmi*, originally the goddess of wealth and prosperity, was also an ideal for

²⁴⁹ Jasodhara Bagchi, "Representing Nationalism: Ideology of Motherhood in Colonial Bengal," *Economic and Political Weekly* 25, no. 42/43 (1990), 69 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4396894>.

²⁵⁰ Bagchi, “Representing Nationalism”, 69

women to emulate in everyday life, and *lakshmi* in popular parlance was widely used as an adjective for the good wife/woman/girl. The *deshlakshmi*, then, was the woman who, like the goddess, protected the wealth and prosperity of the land. The wealth being the repertoire of indigenous culture and traditions. As stated earlier, woman, nation, and goddess were inextricably linked within the Indian imagination of the time. A manifestation of such linkage can be found even in the arguments placed against the Age of Consent Bill. Partha Chatterjee notes that the nationalists had argued that the wife in the west was the companion, whereas in the east, she was the goddess, and therefore the structure of conjugality was inherently different²⁵¹. The manifestation of such linkage can also be found in many of the ideas presented by Tagore and Mitra Majumdar in their Prefaces, as these writings also drew from the cultural, social and political frameworks of the time.

3. *Rupkatha* as a women's tradition

Now, the *rupkatha* stories themselves reveal internal evidence that suggests that this was indeed a body of stories composed by women. The first such evidence lies in the framing of the *rupkatha* stories. A K Ramanujan makes this observation from his study of Kannada folklore, that in animal tales and in tales where men are the protagonist, the story usually *ends* with the marriage of the main male protagonist, whereas women's stories *begin* with marriage and then goes on to document her trials and tribulations. Ramanujan writes:

Whereas men are protagonists, especially in tales of quest, women are secondary: they are usually part of the prize, along with half a kingdom; sometimes they help the hero in his quest for the magic flower or do his derring-do (get the milk of a tigress, or

²⁵¹ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), 121

whatever) and to slay the ogre, qualifying him to marry her and receive his half of the kingdom. These stories end in marriage—for they speak of the emancipation of the hero from the parental yoke and the setting up of a new family, as he comes on into his own. But in women's stories, "the heroine is either already married or she is married early in the tale, and then the women's troubles begin."²⁵² The interesting thing in *rupkatha* stories is that it usually always opens either with a marriage or in the *andarmahal* of married women. Even the stories which contain a quest tale featuring a male protagonist opens with the marriage/domestic life of the mother of the protagonist and her troubles. However, it can be observed from fairy stories or folk wonder tales in general is that it is not mandatory that the protagonists of the tales of the quest must be male. Quest tales also often feature women protagonists. And this is true for *rupkatha* stories as well. Now, the motivation for the quests in fairy stories is usually derived from two situations: one, where the hero or protagonist is displaced from his/her family due to some villainy, or two, where there is some lack that has been identified. A thorough discussion of such actions in the fairy tale can be found Vladimir Propp's 1928 study *A Morphology of the Folktale*. When the reason for the quest is villainy, the villain causes some kind of harm like kidnapping, theft, or murder, and the hero is then forced to set out on a quest. The quest ends with the villainy remedied and the villain punished. On the other hand, when the reason for undertaking a quest is a lack, the lack can be something that the hero or his family or immediate community has lost or something that they desire. In *rupkatha* the quest stories are framed within the fortunes of their protagonists' mothers. The main reason for quests was villainy, and this villainy was perpetrated by a cruel and wicked

²⁵² A. K. Ramanujan, "A Flowering Tree: A Woman's Tale", in *The Collected Essays of A. K. Ramanujan*, ed Vinay Dharwadkar (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 413

stepmother/co-wife. They plotted the removal of the protagonist and their mothers through various means, murder included. Stories such as Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar's and Lal Behari Day's "Shit Basanta", Mitra Majumdar's "Lal Komol Nil Komol" and Day's "Story of Rakhshasas" (which have parallel plots) fall in this category. Mitra Majumdar's "Kiranmala" and Day's "Life's Secret" are also examples of such tales. The hero's quest usually ended with the wrong done to their mother reversed, the villain punished, and the hero's rightful status restored.

Secondly, not only did the stories open in a domestic setting, in the course of the narratives, it was the domestic realm that spilled on to the public, and never the other way. To explain, the conflicts that occurred at the start of the stories were conflicts that occurred within domestic spaces. The domestic space in *rupkatha* narratives, like in the real world, was a space that was exclusively the realm of women and could be identified with the *andarmahal* or the inner sanctum of traditional Bengali households. Within the *andarmahal*, women lived their lives in the company of other women: mothers, sisters or mothers-in-laws, grandmothers-in-law, and sisters-in law, and very often, they also shared this space with one or many of their husband's other wives, that is, the *shotins* or co-wives. Children were brought up within this space, and while male relatives had access to this space, they came and went but were never permanent residents. The main act of villainy occurred here, and the perpetrator was usually a co-wife or the stepmother, but the consequence of those actions spilled beyond the walls of the *andarmahal* into the public realm of the king husband's administration. Kings lost their kingdoms because of wrongs done in the *andarmahal*. This occurred in both the stories of "Kiranmala" as well as "Shit Basanta". In the story "Lal Komol Nil Komol" where a *rakshasi* (in *rupkatha* the non-human evil women possessing magical powers) managed to enter the *andarmahal* in disguise and was able to seize power in the *andarmahal*, the entire kingdom was lost to the *rakshas*. The act of villainy in the *andarmahal* most often occurred outside the

knowledge of the male patriarch (For example, in “Kiranmala”, “Dalim Kumar”, “Shit Basanta”, “Life’s Secret”). In situations where the king, both as a husband or a father, knew about the wrong that had been done or about the villain, for example in “Kalabati Rajkanya” he was powerless to do anything about it. For order to be restored in the public realm, the domestic space had to be ordered first and the wrong done there recognised and reversed.

Women, thus, held tremendous power in the universe of the *rupkatha*, although most of this power was also used for harming other women. Magic, guile, treachery, or downright cruelty, were methods that were effectively used. This can be read as an imaginative reworking of the various conflicts experienced by women in the *andarmahal*. The totality of their lived realities was constituted by the space of the inner quarters since women were entirely socialised by that space, as well as restricted within it. These conflicts between women were characteristic of patriarchal polygynous family structures where most of the resources were controlled by men, and women competed with each other for access to those resources. Other women’s cultural forms in Bengal also talk about such conflicts, often in a much more direct manner. The *bratakatha*, for example which contained rituals performed specifically by women aimed at the fulfilment of desires that were mostly secular in nature also referred to these conflicts. In the ritual part of the *bratakatha*, the *brata* was accompanied by a narrative, the *katha*, telling the story of why the *bratha* should be performed. These also included a number of rhymes/mantras, which are chanted while performing the *brata*. Alongside the desire for a son, desire for a rich husband, the safe return of husbands, brothers, and fathers, these very often desired the removal/death of the *shotin*. For example, “*Bonti bonti bonti/ Shotin r matha kuti.*” A *bonti* being the instrument to chop vegetables and fish, the *bratee* or devotee expressed the desire to chop the head of the *shotin* on the *bonti*. This mantra was collected by Abanindranath

Tagore²⁵³, who also noted a variant rhyme: “*Bonti bonti bonti/Shotin r sradye kutno kuti*” (Knife knife knife/I dice vegetables at my co-wife’s funeral). Some others were equally telling: “*Ashath kete boshot kori/Shotin kete alta pori*” Let me make a house by cutting the sacred fig tree/Let me put red dye on my feet by cutting the co-wife, “*Hatha hatha hatha/Kha shotin r matha*” Ladle, ladle, ladle/Eat the co-wife’s head, “*Beri beri beri/Shotin magi teri*” Fetter fetter fetter/ The co-wife wench has a squint, “*Pakhi pakhi pakhi/Shotin magi morte jache/Chade uthe Dekhi*”, Bird bird bird/The co-wife wench is off to die/I stand on the terrace and watch, and “*Mayna Mayna Mayna/Shotin jeno hoy na*”, the mayna being a common Bengali bird, the bratee prayed that might she never have a *shotin*. These mantras were part of the elaborate *Shenjuti Brata*, which required the bratee to hold flowers over forty different *alponas* (sacred drawings) and chant a different mantra each time. How effective they were in fulfilling the bratee’s wishes one can only wonder, but similar sentiments can be found in *rupkatha* stories where the conniving co-wife (both human and *rakshasi*) emerged as the main force of disorder.

Thirdly, fate played a dominating role in the stories. This is a feature noted by A K Ramanujan, who points out that while the idea of karma or consequence of one’s actions dominated the great Indian *itihasa* texts, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana and the Puranas, the so called “Great tradition”, women’s tales provided a counter-system because a general theme of fate ran through their stories. Ramanujan provides examples of stories with the theme of separation and suffering, which “ascribes the heroine’s suffering not to character or karma but to Mother fate.” The stories then recounted the “untangling of a fated life”²⁵⁴. In *rupkatha* stories, although there were villains who received their just punishments at the end in

²⁵³ Abanindranath Tagore, *Banglar Brata* (Kolkata: Biswabharati, 1976), 47

²⁵⁴ Ramanujan, “A Flowering Tree: A Woman’s Tale”, 413

accordance with the causality of *karma*, the expulsion of the protagonists and the suffering of their mothers were entirely arbitrary and not the result of their own actions or characters. The initial misfortune that befell the women could not be explained by anything she did. She did not do anything to bait her sisters or her co-wives or the *rakshasi* and there was never her active engagement on her part in rousing their jealousy. The *rakshasi* just happened to live in a nearby tree (for example, in “Dalim Kumar”) or took up a fascination with being a queen/wife (for example, “Lal Komol Nil Komol, “The Story of Rakhshasas”). The *shotin* or jealous sisters wanted to harm the good woman even as she remained trusting and loving towards them (for example, “Kiranmala”, “Shit Basanta”). This was also why her misfortune appeared to be wrong and unjust and established her opponent as the villain. Furthermore, stories such as *Pushpamala*, from *Thakurdadar Jhuli* were tales of the untangling of fated lives. Also, as A. K. Ramanujan observes in Kannada folktales, *rupkatha* stories too restricted themselves to a single lifespan, and there was no mention of rebirth, unlike the great tradition where karma and rebirth were both tied to each other. Ramanujan writes that “instead of past karma as an explanation of present action exemplified in both the epic story and philosophical debate, folktales seem to depend on another set of explanatory notions”.²⁵⁵ These explanatory notions include “arbitrary *vidhi* or fate” and also “an offended deity who wants a defiant person to toe the line”. For example, the story of Sribasta collected by Rev. Day. This second example is also found in narratives accompanying the aforementioned *bratakathas*. In *Jom pukur brata* for example, Yama was the offended deity whose own mother-in-law was punished by hellfire for not allowing her daughter-in-law to perform the *brata* and was only released when the

²⁵⁵ A. K. Ramanujan, “Towards a Counter system: women’s tales”, in *The Collected Essays of A. K. Ramanujan*, ed Vinay Dharwadkar (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 436

daughter-in-law performed the *brata* for three consecutive years on Yama's instructions. Thus, women's folk forms work on a "theory of action rather different from the karmic theory"²⁵⁶ and *rupkatha* also somewhat conforms to this sequence of the narrative.

4. Bengali culture and the praxis of storytelling

Bengali *rupkatha* stories are comparable to the western fairy tale in their form and content. Fairy stories are generally among the earliest kinds of literature that are told to children. They negotiate the child's entry into the adult world and contribute to the process through which the child learns to make meanings. It is here that they become instrumental in enforcing ideas of gender and gender roles that remain inscribed in the mind of the child. Fairy tales have increasingly been studied as sites that display social attitudes towards gender, while they also in turn intervene and help to create and perpetuate certain normative cultural constructions of gender. In the hands of *bhadralok* collectors, as was the case with literary writers of western fairy stories, such as Straparola, Basile, Perrault, D'Aulnoy, Grimm, and others, the discursive organization of the texts remain predominantly patriarchal since these writers were not without patriarchal biases of their own. However, despite the fact that the literary *rupkatha* stories came mediated through literary narration, the texts still kept their focus on female points of view. Thus, these stories can still be studied as part of women's oral culture, which served the purpose of passing off mother's advice to the child. Traditionally most fairy stories also perform the dual function of entertainment and learning, creating tension so as to induce the child to eat or sleep and pass off advice through simple plotlines that were acceptable to children. They, in this way, acted as warnings and as healing stories telling the child what to do in order to survive in such a world. Fairy stories from across cultures have been critically

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Ramanujan, "Towards a Counter system: women's tales", 436

studied for their ability to plot adult issues into simple templates that can be available to the child and, in this way, deal with a number of adult social, ethical concerns under primitive plot structures.²⁵⁷

To begin with, *rupkatha*, with the continuous presence of adults malicious towards children, could have aimed at inoculating children against the evil that exists in the adult world. Such an exercise gained special significance within the tense environment of the *andarmahal* where various conflicts occur with children, often as pawns in the game. Secondly, these stories should have also served as a means of socialisation of children. In the case of the girl child, in particular, *rupkatha* must be counted among the other tools of socialisation that has already been commented upon by feminist historians: namely, the *bratakatha* narratives, the various feminine proverbs and adages, the *panchali* songs etc. Jasodhara Bagchi writes in the context of the nineteenth century girl child that “proverbs and *bratakathas* are major sources of personality formation.”²⁵⁸ On the one hand, the world views presented in these cultural forms would have had a formative influence on the ideas of gender roles and gender behaviour. On the other hand, the participation within these cultural forms also allowed women/girls space for articulating their own hopes, fears, and desires. Bagchi notes that “these practices (*bratas*) mark the social spaces occupied by women and therefore may be seen to lend a certain amount

²⁵⁷ Note scholars like Maria Tartar and Clarissa Pinkola Estes.

Tatar, Maria. *Off With their Heads: Fairytales and the Culture of Childhood*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.

Tatar, Maria. *Enchanted Hunters: The Power of stories in Childhood*. New York: WW Norton & Company, 2009.

Clarissa Pinkola Estes, *Women Who Run with the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996).

²⁵⁸ Jasodhara Bagchi, "Socialising the Girl Child in Colonial Bengal," *Economic and Political Weekly* 28, no. 41 (1993), 2216. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4400259>.

of autonomy to women's lives. But...these rituals operate within the overarching governance of Brahmanism with its need to maintain the purity of patrilineal descent"²⁵⁹ While she defines *bratas* as "ritual penance", the discussion of *bratas* in the section above have suggested that the *bratakathas* within women's culture served a much greater role than simple penance.

A large number of these *bratas* were purely '*meyeli bratas*' or feminine *bratas*, they did not require the mediation of Brahmin priests and were performed by women amongst themselves. They were more about invoking religio- magical powers into intervening beneficially into their material conditions of living: bringing the husband/father/son safely home, gaining of an affluent marital home/ protecting the wealth of her family, being blessed with good luck, being blessed with sons and removing the competing co-wife. This domain belonged solely to women and as such, provided a space for women's autonomy even within the overarching patriarchal structures. Similarly, *rupkatha* narratives, apart from serving in the purpose of socialisation also provide a space where women can imaginatively talk about the wrongs inflicted upon them as well as about their wishes and longings. Since *rupkatha* narratives are not fixed and allow a certain degree of flexibility²⁶⁰, *rupkatha* throws up possibilities for the authorial play, which entered into the stories as moments that subvert overarching patriarchal structures. By authorial play, I mean instances where fantasy can be weaved as per the desires and longings of the individual teller. These are instances where women's concerns can be articulated imaginatively as the story is told and moments when the woman teller can return to the playfulness that marks childhood and savour her own enjoyment of the story. Ruby Lal foregrounds "the idea of playfulness in thinking about the girl

²⁵⁹ Bagchi, "Socialising the Girl Child in Colonial Bengal," 2216.

²⁶⁰ Vladimir Propp notes in the *Morphology of the Folktale* that all fairy tales/ folktales have fixed beginning and endings but the middle part allows for endless possibilities of plots and motifs. Shibaji Bandopadhyay also makes the same point in *Gopal Rakhal Dondo Shomash*

child/woman, since, in arguments about women as silenced and long-suffering victims, the individual subjects, child, girl, woman, and their varied capabilities and inclinations disappear in the rhetoric of recovery, civilisation, and progress. Playfulness is in keeping with the feminist position of rethinking selves that implies social and sexual interaction without asserting authority²⁶¹, and allowing forms of self-expression and literary creativity that are not dependent on masculinist definitions of fulfilment. In emphasising play, I also wish to focus on authorial playfulness, the room for manoeuvre, innovation, and creativity even where the constraints appear overwhelming, for such literary undecidability critically affects the production of the figure of the girl and woman in nineteenth century India as anywhere else.”²⁶² Such manoeuvre, innovation, and creativity can be found in certain instances that appear in the stories written by the indigenous collectors, and that too despite the fact that the stories come to us mediated by a male hand. Princess Kalabati in an episode in the story “Kalabati Rajkanya” from *Thakurmar Jhuli* makes a linguistic assertion of her own authority over herself: “*ami amar*” (I am mine) she says, thereby claiming her right over herself as a legal person. Whereas, until the end of the nineteenth century, as Tanika Sarkar observes while commenting on the age of consent debates, there was great doubt whether the girl child/woman was a legal person at all. “The real issue was whether the woman, as a person enjoyed protection from violent death when the community laws allow such a death to occur. The question was also whether she was, in fact,

²⁶¹ Such as the new materialist feminist position of Elizabeth Grosz, who conceptualises freedom in the positive sense as freedom to instead of the traditional and negative implications of freedom from. This has been discussed in detail in the subsequent chapters.

²⁶² Ruby Lal, *Coming of Age in Nineteenth Century India, The Girlchild and the Art of Playfulness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 39

legally and politically, a person at all whose claim to life would be self-authenticating because of her personhood, or was she politically and socially a dead person.”²⁶³

Much of these deliberations were out in public consciousness through the means of various print articles and materials. The conservative argument placed the well-being of the community over that of an individual woman. For example, the tragic death of the eleven year old Phulmoni Dasi from marital rape, although accepted as tragic, was justified as a one-off incident which may be treated as collateral damage of a law that served a much bigger purpose by ensuring the purity of the community as a whole. This law dictated ‘*garbhadan*’ and required that a young girl must be married before the onset of puberty if her womb is to remain pure. The reformers argued that a girl/woman had a right to life which could be ensured by raising the minimum statutory age of marriage from ten to twelve. Both groups sought to speak for the actual desire of the Indian woman, the conservatives suggesting that her sacrifice was a willed one and in that lay her spiritual strength and reformers proclaiming to give her long-suffering agony a voice. The gap in both the arguments was that no one actually claimed to have consulted the girls/women in question or sought their opinions. Moreover, as Tanika Sarkar further notes, the idea of ‘consent’ was defined purely in terms of the physical readiness of the child/woman’s body for sexual penetration and not in terms of her “informed assent”²⁶⁴. She writes:

At this point, the question of self-choice or of compatibility did not seem to inflect the notion of consent anywhere. The immunity that the woman’s person would enjoy would

²⁶³ Tanika Sarkar. "A Prehistory of Rights: The Age of Consent Debate in Colonial Bengal," *Feminist Studies* 26, no. 3 (2000): 606 doi:10.2307/3178642

²⁶⁴ Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife Hindu Nation: Community, Religion and Cultural Nationalism* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001), 244

depend on when her body signified a certain readiness. So it was her body that signified consent and it was her body that would enjoy legal immunity till then.²⁶⁵

Rupkatha stories, on the other hand, show consensual marriage with all its implication of an informed assent of both the parties as desirable. And this was despite the social norm of arranged marriages. Some of the arranged marriages are even presented as forcible, and stories like *Kalabati Rajkanya* and *Patalkanya Manimala* have women characters actively working so as to overthrow attempts at marrying them off to men, not of their choices. No doubt this would have resonated with the feelings of many women of the time when the stories were collected. The usual social practise of arranged marriage provided no scope for women to exert their choice and usually had young girls married off to men they had never seen before in their lives. Women's own dissatisfaction with the institution of arranged marriages can be discerned from women's autobiographies, which Tanika Sarkar notes "portray(s) the initiation into married life as a time of great fear"²⁶⁶. The large scale depiction of consensual marriage in *rupkatha* stories was so remarkable that it even drew a comment from the nationalist critic Dinesh Chandra Sen who wrote that consensual marriage derived from pre-marital love was not the norm in Indian society, but it appeared in Indian folktales.

Equally remarkable was that women, no matter whether good or evil, tended to dominate the universe of the *rupkatha* stories, which was a complete inversion of the real world. While the representation of women and gender will be discussed in detail in the next chapter, the point to note here is that *rupkatha* articulates longings impossible to articulate otherwise and provides a space for their fulfilment in an imaginary plane. In doing this, they

²⁶⁵ Tanika Sarkar. "A Prehistory of Rights: The Age of Consent Debate in Colonial Bengal," *Feminist Studies* 26, no. 3 (2000): 615 doi:10.2307/3178642

²⁶⁶ Sarkar, "A Prehistory of Rights", 609

serve the purpose of emotional release in a manner similar to some other popular women's cultural forms, such as the *Kheur* songs. Sumanta Banerjee discusses the purpose of the popular cultural forms that were purged from the *bhadrolok* homes by the end of the nineteenth century:

Such songs (kheurs) afforded a dissenting space for women...The mockery of male depravity (as in the barbed shaft aimed at Krishna's promiscuity, or in the more openly bawdy description of Vyasa, based on a common recognition of tyrannical husbands or unfaithful lovers, was no doubt popular with female listeners, who found in the songs a symbolic solace or perhaps even a revenge.

Such symbolic inversions or reversions have often been explained by anthropologists as a means of emotional release, as symbolic expressions of underlying and normally suppressed conflicts within society, as a mechanism by which the pressures engendered by social conflict may be vented without allowing the conflict to become fully overt and threaten the survival of the social system.²⁶⁷

In a similar manner *rupkatha* stories by imaginatively reworking the defeat of the conniving *shotin* in the end and the restoration of the wronged or ill-fated woman to her rights momentarily fulfilled a longing for justice that was denied in the real world. The same can be said of the stories' assertion of female authority. These linguistic acts symbolically stood in for the actual act impossible or left undone in the real world.

Thus, at the heart of imaginative cultural forms and storytelling traditions, there were certain lived realities. While the storyteller reworked these lived experiences into abstract

²⁶⁷ Sumanta Banerjee, "Marginalisation of women's popular culture in nineteenth century Bengal", in *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, ed. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (New Delhi: Kali for women, 1989), 140.

articulations at the individual level, these realities were common to the social groups which constituted the community of the storytellers and hence resonated within the community among whom the stories circulated. The kind of social realities articulated by *rupkatha* stories: the power struggle among co-wives, the desire for a male heir, the inability to produce to the same, the threat to children from immediate family members in polygamous families, the husband's neglect of a certain wife in favour of another, the woman's gaining and losing status in the family depending upon her children, were all realities that would have been experienced by women in Bengali families no matter the social class or the caste to which they belonged. It must be mentioned that both the *rupkatha* and the *bratakatha* as cultural practices cut across caste and class barriers. The fact that *rupkatha* was told in an intimate domestic setting to a private audience and that it referred to reality only in an oblique manner allowed a space where women's every day realities/problems could be talked about without the fear of exposure or repercussion. The veil of fantasy further added artistic distance between the experience and its representation in the story. Thus, the enduring appeal of *rupkatha* laid in its ability to present fantasy that was relatable to everyday life while providing an escape from the same. While the act of storytelling was often aimed at specific childrearing activity such as putting the child to sleep or inducing it to eat, the story also allowed scope for providing momentary solace to the storyteller who could articulate her own troubles while weaving the story and also enjoy the playful aspects of the fantasy. Such use of fantasy was rather common in women's culture where open discussion of social problems in public was not possible. For example, in many of the songs that were sung on religious occasions, notably, the *agamani* and *bijaya* songs that marked the arrival and departure of the Goddess Durga in the yearly festival very often turned the "devotees longing for an audience with the goddess" into the "palpable craving of a lonely

mother for the company of her long lost daughter”.²⁶⁸ In these songs, Goddess Durga was addressed as her counterpart Uma and was imagined as a young bride visiting her loving natal home. Folk belief also dictated that the devotee ate on each day of the five-day festivity dishes that were the favourite of the darling young daughter and would be served to her. This was a practice that continued in rural Bengal to this day. In the *agamani* and *bijaya* songs “the contemporary social problems of a poor Bengali home — the poverty of Uma’s husband, the sufferings of the young bride, the few fleeting days of reunion between mother and daughter, the distance between the natal home of the bride, and the home of her husband that makes such reunions difficult— are pushed into the foreground, relegating religious devotion to the background.”²⁶⁹ The longing of the girl/woman for her mother, a relationship that was abruptly severed on her marriage, was a palpable social reality that also makes its way into the pages of Rasasundari Devi’s autobiography *Amar Jibon*, where one of the most enduring attachments that mark her life was her love for her mother. The autobiography details her longing for her mother, her sadness at only being allowed to visit her natal home only during major family gatherings, and her lament at not being able to visit her mother one last time while she was on her deathbed. Interestingly, the devotee-Uma relationship within the *Shakti* worship tradition is one of the few instances where the mother-child relationship central to Bengali cultural imaginings, discussed in this chapter, is embodied in the figure of mother and daughter instead of the more common mother and son. Moreover, the figure of Uma herself is both a beloved daughter as well as a mother who visits her natal home with her children. *Rupkatha* stories, too, as I have argued, were also located within the culture of *vatshalya sneha* and retained the focus on the figure of the mother.

²⁶⁸ Banerjee, “Marginalisation of women’s popular culture in nineteenth century Bengal”, 133

²⁶⁹ Banerjee, “Marginalisation of women’s popular culture in nineteenth century Bengal”, 134

5. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have tried to contextualise the intellectual tradition that grew around the *rupkatha* stories by locating them in the context of the Bengali woman's cultural life and imagination in the nineteenth century. The new models of female education introduced by the newly emerged *bhadroloks*, borrowed from western models and modified to suit the needs of traditional patriarchal attitudes of Bengali society, had created a rift in the otherwise homogenous traditional cultural world of Bengali women and carved a distinction between the high and low culture and chaste appropriate language and vulgar, inappropriate linguistic usages. The cultural tastes of the new *bhadromahila* was sought to be purged, and unexpected collateral damage was the sudden threat to the continuity of the *rupkatha* tradition, which was also related to the other witty idiomatic and lively popular cultural forms that were the subject of *bhadrolok* critique. Rabindranath Tagore, Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar, and Lal Behari Day, all in different manners, lamented the loss of women who could tell stories like old. Their discussion of the *rupkatha* tradition also very importantly was marked by the absence of the figure of the girl child who otherwise should have been the primary receiver of the tradition as the *rupkatha* was indeed, as many internal shreds of evidence from the stories show, a women's cultural form. This I have tried to argue, was symptomatic of the contemporary social attitudes where the figure of the girl child was missing even from the discussions of the social practices that directly affected her, and a question of juvenility in the context of the girl child was framed only as physical immaturity. She remained as a proto-woman, seen only in relation to her role as wife and mother, in Bengali cultural life, as well as, in the debates surrounding the nineteenth century "women's questions". The girl child is by and large absent from the discourses woven around the *rupkatha* tradition with its central focus on the twin figures of the mother and the male child. This focus on the mother-child relationship appears in other dominant religious and cultural traditions of Bengal, notably both the *Shakti* and the *Vaishnavite* cults. Similarly, many

of the sentiments and attitudes put forward within the *rupkatha* stories find resonance in other Bengali women's cultural forms such as the *bratakatha* and the *agamani* songs and serve purposes of wish fulfilment by expressing unfulfilled longings, criticising social practices, and sometimes overturning the established social norms and hierarchies within the boundaries of the text. These have been some of my major findings in this chapter. In the next chapter, I will explore the layered and complex representation of female figures and gender roles in these stories.

CHAPTER 4

Representation of Gender in the Bengali Fairy Tale Texts

This chapter will focus on the fairy tales themselves. I will attempt a close reading of the texts as literary fairy tales in order to study their representation of gender. This obviously needs to be done keeping in mind their socio-historical and socio-political contexts. The tales that were published in the volumes that this thesis is studying did not just contain the individual voice of their authors but also the historical voice of the cultures from which the stories had originated. Thus, the gender roles and relations that emerge from these texts were not just the result of the discursive organisations of the texts in the hands of their collector-authors, but also of the gendered structure of the society within which the stories circulated. Equally important for a critical study of these stories is the acknowledgement of the complex relationship between the oral tale (from which the written tales are derived) and the literary tale. An added layer of complexity is derived from the fact that these collections contained stories told by women to male collectors, who subsequently transcribed them. Two women collector-writers of Bengali fairy tales, who occupied the intersectional position of being Bengali women writing down from an oral tradition that was carried forward by Bengali women, but with *bhadrolok* class affiliations, will come into special focus here for comparative study. The questions that I will be dealing with in this chapter are: In what ways does the universe of fantasy built in the stories correspond to their social milieu, particularly in relation to their representation of gender? And on the other side, what are the myths that the literary *rupkatha* had generated that influenced the way Bengali culture practised gender? What are the models of gendered behaviour emerging from the texts and their relation to socio-cultural patriarchal power structures? Subsequently, I will investigate whether the stories resist authorial interventions and throw up moments where the narratorial voice breaks and subversive voices emerge. The fairy tale in feminist fairy tale scholarship has been critically

evaluated for both its misogynist as well as its liberating aspects. These studies have predominantly focussed on Western fairy tales and not much work has been done with fairy tales from other traditions despite them being ripe fields of study. I will attempt a feminist reading of the Bengali *rupkatha*, with emphasis on the socio-historical contexts of the collections. Specifically, I will be looking at the presentation of the fairy tale trope of female rivalry; the representation of female figures from the margins; the girl/woman as hero; and modes of female heroism. I will also study the stories for possibilities of women's counter voices. The aim of this investigation is to understand how these stories were embedded within the gendered structures of the folk communities from which they emerged and the literary communities within which they circulated. The aim is also to understand how the stories in turn influenced the gender constructions of the same communities of readers and listeners.

1. Female rivalry in Bengali *rupkatha* texts

Any gender-based evaluation of fairy tales must begin with the often-quoted binary of the good woman and the bad woman. The fairy tale in every tradition has been studied for its presentation of the conflict between these two figures: the usually young, angelic, docile and innocent good woman versus the usually older, villainous, conniving and untamed evil woman. Gilbert and Gubar's celebrated thesis on (western) literature's treatment of women also began by citing an example of this dichotomy from the fairy tale of Snow White, where this binary was between the passive Snow White and the assertive step-mother. Gilbert and Gubar's important observation regarding this binary was that it was the patriarchal voice of society symbolically represented as the voice within the magic mirror that was the progenitor of this rivalry. Patriarchy, they stated, had induced women to objectify themselves and compete with one another. Although this observation has largely been agreed with, contemporary fairy tale scholars such as Donald Haase, point towards a major flaw in Gilbert and Gubar's study in that it does not take into account the socio-political economic contexts of the story as well as the

editorial history of the story collections. I am inclined to agree with Haase in that this rootedness in socio-history both in terms of the study of the historical location of the authors and the milieu of its creators is necessary for a comprehensive critical evaluation of the stories. My analysis of the Bengali fairy tale necessarily begins with the hypothesis that the roots of fantasy lie in social reality and issues of gender are intricately tied with the circumstances of the appearance of the collections and ideological standpoint of the collectors. Female rivalry was in the centre stage in the fairy tale which were collected by the *bhadrolok* both in the nationalist period and earlier. The conflicts in these stories were usually between the co-wives within the families. It was unimportant whether they were older or younger, but important to the story was the relationship they shared between themselves. The fact that they were “*shotin*”, that is, women married to the same men, was the usual point of contention. I have already discussed in the previous chapter how polygynous family structures set women up for this kind of conflict, with multiple women being married to the same man who controlled all the family resources. This also led to the prevalence of the common cultural trope of the evil *shotin* or co-wife in popular cultural forms including popular women’s cultural forms. One of the unique things about female rivalry in the *rupkatha* written by Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar was that the rivalry was not between an older evil woman and a good young woman, where the older woman resented the younger woman’s beauty or popularity; the conflict instead was between the self-sacrificing, good, obedient “*lakshmi*” bou (as one who brought peace and prosperity to the family) and the evil, power-hungry, jealous “*alakshmi*” or “*rakshasi*” bou (as one who destroyed the family). The *lakshmi* bou, named after the Hindu goddess of prosperity both displayed and possessed the nature of the goddess within the bounds of the family structure. She nurtured and protected the family and was instrumental in holding it together. The *alakshmi* did the exact opposite, she destroyed the family and tore it apart. Of course, central to the conceptualisation of such a dichotomy was the importance placed on the woman

as the central figure maintaining South Asian family structures. The association of women with the home and the family was the gendered division of sphere of work that was typical of patriarchal social structures and values. The early Indian nationalist consciousness was no exception to this and had employed this dichotomy in its political resistance to the empire. Parallels and contrasts were drawn between the relationship of the British colonial administration and the indigenous colonised population through the metaphor of household relations as Tanika Sarkar has observed.²⁷⁰ Whereas the indigenous household relations and more specifically conjugality was presented as a loving apolitical relationship based on the surrender and submission of wife to the husband, the colonial—colonised relationship was presented as a political relationship where one party was forced into submission to the other. In the previous chapter, I have discussed these discourses that had become part of the women's questions as discussed by Bengali/Indian nationalists and social reformers and their association with the *rupkatha* tradition. Here, I want to address the popular and the folk belief of *lakshmi* and *alakshmi* as categories of womanhood and its appearance in the *rupkatha* stories. Jasodhara Bagchi notes that historically in colonial Bengal, the purpose of a girl/woman's life was to appease *lakshmi* and thwart the machinations of *alakshmi* and she was socialised to believe the same through an elaborate network of rituals, stories and religious myths.²⁷¹ The binary of good woman versus the bad woman, was also the binary between the *lakshmi* and the *alakshmi* in *rupkatha* stories. Furthermore, within the universe of these stories, the *alakshmi* was synonymous with the mythological as well as folkloric monster figure of the *rakshasi*. The

²⁷⁰ Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife Hindu Nation: Community, Religion and Cultural Nationalism* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001), 39

²⁷¹ Jasodhara Bagchi, "Socialising the Girl Child in Colonial Bengal," *Economic and Political Weekly* 28, no. 41 (1993), 2214. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4400259>.

association of the *alakshmi* with the *rakshasi* necessarily painted such a form of womanhood as monstrous. Nurture and care were presented as natural to women and *alakshmi* was metaphorically a *rakshasi*, displaying the same evil and destructive nature of the actual *rakshasi*. She destroyed not just her rival but also the family that she sought control over. The act of villainy through which she tried to oust the good woman and prey on her children also led to the total devastation of the entire polygynous family often including her own children. One can provide many such examples from the *rupkatha* stories. In Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar's story of "Sheet-Basanta", the evil human queen used a magic pill to turn her co-wife into a bird and oust her from the family. This left the children of the ousted queen at her mercy, so she then plotted to get rid of them. However, with the exit of the good queen and her children, the king also lost his kingdom and the children of the evil queen drowned.²⁷² In "Lal Komol Nil Komol" similarly, when the *rakshasi* queen plotted to eat the son of the good queen, she also ate up her own son in the process, as he came to the defence of his step-brother and the king was ruined as other *rakshasa* came and took over the kingdom.²⁷³ The *rakshasi/alakshmi* queen was thus a threat to the stability of the family through her capability for undermining patriarchal authority from within. However, while both were equally destructive, the actual physical *rakshasi* was in some ways conceptualised differently from the human evil queen. The human evil queen, the *alakshmi*, was already an insider, while the *rakshasi* was an outsider who had to gain access into the inner quarters of the family. The *rakshasi's* monstrous non-human form disqualified her from a position inside the family

²⁷² From Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar, *Thakurmar Jhuli* (Kolkata: Mitra and Ghosh, 1907), 85-110

²⁷³ From Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar, *Thakurmar Jhuli* (Kolkata: Mitra and Ghosh, 1907), 141-163

structure. She was aware of it and used deceit in order to make her way into the *andarmahal*. In most of the stories she became the king's consort by hiding her true nature and successfully enticing the king or the prince. For example, in Dakshinaranjan's "Dalim Kumar", the *rakshasi* tricked the young prince into giving away the die that contained the life of her mother so that she could enter and animate the lifeless corpse of the queen. Thereby, the queen was replaced by the *rakshasi* and she then tried to take the life of the prince.²⁷⁴ In "Sonar Kathi Rupar Kathi", the *rakshasi* disguised herself as a beautiful woman in order to lure the king into marrying her. From this position as queen, she was able to charge the prince with a task that she believed would lead to his destruction.²⁷⁵ This characterisation of the *rakshasi* as the other woman, the woman of the street who gained entry into the home through deceit was not just seen in the stories collected/written by Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar but was also seen in Lal Behari Day's depiction of the *rakshasi*. In the story "The Boy Whom Seven Mothers Suckled", the king, while out hunting, met a woman of peerless beauty whom he fell in love with and married. This turned out to be a *rakhsasi* who subsequently instigated the king to murder his seven pregnant wives thereby destroying the royal family. She then devoured the people and animals of the kingdom.²⁷⁶ Similarly, in "The Story of the Rakshasas", the *rakshasi* disguised herself as a beautiful, rich woman in order to deceive the Kulin Brahmin into believing that she was

²⁷⁴ From Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar, *Thakurmar Jhuli* (Kolkata: Mitra and Ghosh, 1907), 164-177

²⁷⁵ From Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar, *Thakurmar Jhuli* (Kolkata: Mitra and Ghosh, 1907), 191-210

²⁷⁶ Lal Behari Day, *Folktales of Bengal* (Kolkata: Uccharan, 1993), 113-118

his long wedded wife. The Kulin Brahmin readily believed in this deceit and was trapped as he accepted her as his second wife.²⁷⁷

Now, this conceptualisation of the *rakshasi* drew from the general idea of the *rakshasi* figure perpetuated within multiple Indian traditions. The Rig Veda mentioned the *rakshasa* as a flesh-seeking, flesh-eating enemy of man. In Hymn 87, dedicated to Agni of Mandala 10, Agni was called upon to destroy these creatures and was thus addressed as “*rakshasa-slayer*”. These creatures were presented as insatiable monsters who attacked pious men and smeared themselves with the flesh of cattle, horses and human bodies. Their strength and vigour were mentioned and Agni was invoked to destroy them.²⁷⁸ The *Puranas* and the two great Indian epics provide various origin stories for the *rakshasas*. Each of these stories trace the lineage of *Rakshasas* to Brahma himself and classify them as beings belonging to the class of *upadevatas* or lesser deities. In one such story the *rakshasa* and the *yaksha* were born when Brahma was sleeping in a hungry state, therefore their propensity for eating too much. In the *Adi Parva* of the *Mahabharata*, on the other hand, these beings were declared to have come into existence through Brahma’s son Pulatsya. It was Vishrava, Pulatsya’s son, who through his two wives, Ilavida and Kaikesi, sired the *yakshas* and *rakshasas*. The *rakshasas* fought both the *yakshas* (the Ravana and the Kubera story) as well as human beings. They could change appearance at will as they possessed the power of *maya* (illusion). They also possessed unusual strength and used that against their enemies. The *rakshasi*, the female form of the *rakshasa*, was attributed with the same qualities. These figures have remained in popular imagination as they have occupied central roles in the epics as villains (Ravana, Surpanakha and Viradha in the

²⁷⁷ Lal Behari Day, *Folktales of Bengal* (Kolkata: Uccharan, 1993), 61-88

²⁷⁸ *The Hymns of Rig Veda*, trans. Ralph T Griffith (Nilgiri: n.p., 1986), 466. <http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/rigveda/index.htm>

Ramayana; Jatasura in the *Mahabharata*), opponents (Kumbhakarna, Kabandha in the *Ramayana*; Kirmira and Hidimba in *Mahabharata*), and as allies (Vibhisana in the *Ramayana*; Hidimbi and Ghatotkacha in *Mahabharata*). In Sheldon Pollock's essay "Raksasas and Others", these figures have often been identified with "cannibals, primitive cave dwellers, theriomorphic shamans, masked dancers in totemic rites of a sort..." or as "actual historical ethnic groups whose descendants yet bear cognate names, as do various sub-tribes and sub-castes". Such historicising is tempting as the location of the *rakshasas* and the *rakshasis* in the epics (as well as in *rupkatha*) in places such as forests and kingdoms situated in remote lands seem to hint at their geographical and social marginalisation. There is also reason to agree with Pollocks's statement that "such historicization is not in itself unreasonable (,) after all people do make their fictions out of facts"²⁷⁹. However, such historicising does not take into account the status of *rakshasas* as *upadevatas* or demi-gods within Indian tradition which meant that they had a place within the Vedic and Puranic pantheon. Such attempts at historicization can also only be speculative at best and is based on the work of white colonial indologists who often wrote their histories with improper understanding (and without visiting) the subcontinent. It is important, when commenting on a particular figure derived from a cultural tradition, to study the significance of the figure within the particular tradition without resorting to generalisations. As Pollock himself points out, what these figures represent within particular texts are ideational. The texts ascribe significance to the characters they present within their universe. For example, in *Ramayana*, the *rakshasas* Kabandha and Viradha who lived isolated in forests unlike the *rakshasas* of Lanka who lived in a prosperous, organised society, were trapped in their terrifying forms because of *karma* and its playing out in the cycle of birth and

²⁷⁹ Sheldon Pollock, "Raksasas and Others", *Indologica Taurinensia* 13, no. 1 (1985): 265

rebirth. The struggle between Ravana, (presented as a devotee of Shiva) with Rama (who was upholding his Kshatriya dharma) was also the result of past deeds and the workings of *karma*. However, the viewpoint perpetuated by white colonial indologists was well established by the time Lal Behari Day was writing and he annotated the *rakshasi* as “chief of the aborigines whom the Aryan overthrew on their first settlement in this country”.²⁸⁰ In contrast to the *rakshasas* in the epics, the figure of the *rakshasi* within Bengali *rupkatha* was presented as a different kind of being and her being born in the blood-thirsty form had nothing to do with the laws of *karma*. There were simply no *rakshasis* who were not evil in the universe of the *rupkatha*. In contrast, the depictions of *rakshasas* and *rakshasis* in the epics were far more complicated. There was a difference between the *rakshasas* who lived in Lanka in a civilised society and worried about moral complexities, and solitary *rakshasas* like Kabandha and Viradha who lived in forests and attacked humans. There were *rakshasa* characters who possessed and displayed the capacity for compassion (like the *rakshasis* Sarama and Trijata, who befriended and protected Sita in Lanka) and characters like Vibhishana and Kumbhakarna who had moral qualms about the right course of action and the workings of justice. The *rakshasi* in Bengali *rupkatha* was depicted as exclusively driven by lust and blind hatred. Whenever she appeared in a story, the narrative required her death in order to reach closure. She inhabited both the forests as well as the *rakshasa* kingdom. When she was introduced as a solitary figure, the story also went on to tell the reader about the kingdoms which exclusively belonged to her kind. The heroes in tales like “Lal Komol Nil Komol” and “Sonar Kathi Rupa Kathi”, travelled to these kingdoms. One of the most interesting features that set the *rakshasi* figure of the *rupkatha* apart from the *rakshasa* of the epics is that these stories did not have

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Reverend Lal Behari Day, *Folktales of Bengal*, 64

male *rakshasas* in central roles. Even when the plotlines shifted to kingdoms of *rakshasas* and *rakshasis*, the central figure was a matriarch, usually the mother of the original villainous *rakshasi*. This was consistent with the exclusive presentation of women in villainous roles in these stories.

The way the epics and the Puranas influence folkloric belief is commented upon by AK Ramanujan in his essay “Telling Tales”. He writes: “...even Sanskrit mythologies have to be studied not only from texts, as they have been, but on the ground—as they are selectively remembered and told in context. For they are not only in written texts; they also have a parallel life in oral traditions... We need to work at Indian mythologies as if they were folklore in order to get a nuanced and true sense of what they are about. By doing so, we could also hear the dialogue between the Puranic mythologies and non-literate creations like those carried and polished and renewed by nameless and subtly powerful grandmothers.”²⁸¹ In the folkloric world where oral *rupkatha* stories circulated, the *rakshasi* was remembered as purely evil and was a supernatural being with the power to change physical form at will. She could use her eyes to suck blood out of her victims and was driven by hate and desire for flesh. In her original physical form, like the mythological *rakshasi*, she was terrifying to look at. She became a part of the rich world of supernatural beings, ghosts, demons and spirits that inhabited the cultural space of rural Bengal. *Thakurmar Jhuli* thus opened the section called “*Rup Tarasi*” (literally meaning of terrifying visage) which contained all the *rakshasi* stories with the rhyme “those whose looks frighten, however who remain disguised as human beings” (translated from original Bengali).²⁸² That the *rakshasi* figure was associated with lustfulness and sexual excess

²⁸¹ A. K Ramanujan, “Telling Tales”, in *The Collected Essays of A. K. Ramanujan*, ed Vinay Dharwadkar (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 456

²⁸² Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar, *Thakurmar Jhuli* (Kolkata: Mitra and Ghosh, 1907), 140

was seen in the epics, however there, she was not always punished for it. Surpanakha and Hidimbi both propositioned the male heroes, Ram and Bhim respectively. While Surpanakha was punished for refusing to acknowledge the ties of marriage, Bhim and Hidimbi marry and have a son Ghatotkacha, who was dedicated to his father. In the literary *rupkatha* text, this traditional feature of the *rakhsasi* interplayed with the association of sexual immorality that was ingrained with the idea of the woman outside the family structure, the woman of the street. However, there remained a point of distinction between Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar and Lal Behari Day's treatment of the *rakshasi* figure with regard to her overt sexuality. Sexuality remained subterranean in Mitra Majumdar but came to the surface in Lal Behari Day's presentation of the *rakshasi*. A close reading of the stories mentioned above (both Day's and Mitra Majumdar's where a *rakshasi* entered a human household from outside) always revealed an implied desire on part of the *rakshasi* for initiation into a sexual/conjugal relation with a man. This desire was not only economic, in that it was not just a desire for the position of queen consort and all the wealth and security it brought, but also sexual. The *rakshasi* desired flesh, both literal in that she wanted to eat up people and animals, and metaphorical, in that she wanted relations with male characters. In Day's "Story of the Rakshasas", the *rakshasi* could not have had any economic motivation for marrying a poor Brahmin. She desired to be his wife and then she desired his flesh. She devoured him and his human wife when they discovered her true self. In the same story, Day also presented another *rakshasi* making false accusation of sexual assault against the protagonist, the son of the *rakshasi* wife and the Brahmin, Sahasra Dal. He encountered this *rakshasi* who was disguised as a maid servant in the palace of Champa Dal, Sahasra's human half-brother. This woman was clever, resourceful, tremendously useful, and indispensable to the mother-in-law of Champa Dal. She was placed outside the dichotomy of female rivalry but she was nevertheless a villainous figure who attempted to deceitfully get rid of Sahasra Dal by maligning him. Her qualm with Sahasra Dal was that he prevented her

from her nightly hunts for live meat. Day, writing two decades earlier, did not edit out all references to sexuality like Mitra Majumdar, who was writing in the heyday of the swadeshi cultural revivalist movement. Mitra Majumdar had a juvenile readership in mind and was censoring his stories accordingly. But such censoring was also important to the swadeshi cultural project because of their romantic infantilisation of women and children. It was also for this reason that Mitra Majumdar's *rupkatha* collections had received effusive praise from nationalist scholars such as Dinesh Chandra Sen. Sen believed that the absence of references to sexuality and particularly representations of female sexual desire in Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar's volumes proved the authenticity of his version of the stories. Since these stories were composed and told by women, Sen argued, they must be "pure" and devoid of "vulgar(ities)"²⁸³ such as women propositioning men, their attempted incest and extramarital sexual relations. He had compared Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar's stories with their earlier versions told through court romances by Muslim writers and by Lal Behari Day and had proclaimed Mitra Majumdar's versions of the tales as authentic. Dakshinaranjan, according to him, had recorded the exact versions of the stories as told by Hindu women in their homes. However, Sen might very well have been praising Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar's censoring of the stories as the mark of their authenticity. There was one incident in *ThakurmarJhuli* which could be identified as an instance where Mitra Majumdar had censored reference to sexual desire. In the story "Sonar Kathi Rupa Kathi", the grudge of the *rakshasi* on the young prince remained somewhat unexplained. She seemed to want the prince's destruction because she was unable to devour him like his three friends when she had chanced upon them in the forest. The

²⁸³ Dinesh Chandra Sen, *The Folk Literature of Bengal* (Kolkata: Aparna Book Distributors, 2007), 132

rakshasi followed him till the end of the forest and then enticed the king of the kingdom the prince took shelter in, to marry her so that she could have the prince in her power. One has to read between the lines here because what the prince had actually done to anger the *rakshasi*, is never explained in the story.

That the *rakshasi's* existence largely revolved around taking what she desired both through trickery and through force, with little regard for the laws of organised society, was a feature that can be seen in traditional Indian literature. Added to this, the villainization of the desiring, assertive woman who originated from the street but gained access to the *anadarmahal* and was the enemy within can also be traced to the nineteenth century *bhadrolok* fear of any model of female behaviour that was deviant from the prescribed model of submissive domesticity. Sumanta Banerjee has discussed this in his essay “Marginalisation of Women’s Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Bengal”, where he states that it was also fear of rebellion alongside the newer cultural values derived from the colonial encounter that had prompted the *bhadrolok* classes to launch a campaign against women’s popular cultural forms that often gave space for voicing dissent and presented assertive women as heroines. Banerjee writes, “the coarse untutored expletives and expressions that they shared with the women of the street had to be expunged from their vocabulary. Any sign of assertiveness or the departure from their domestic roles that might be inspired by stories about the adulterous Radha or the assertive Vidya had to be suppressed.”²⁸⁴ There were essays published in periodicals like the *Bamabodhini Patrika*, which warned of the dangers of women in *bhadrolok andarmahals* reading *Vidya-Sundar* in secret. Thus, it is not surprising that the assertive woman as the villain

²⁸⁴ Sumanta Banerjee, “Marginalisation of Women’s Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Bengal” in *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, ed. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (New Delhi: Kali for women, 1989), 163

was a regular pattern that emerges from the collections authored by male *bhadrolok* writers. Fear of the flesh-eating monster and the fear of the untamed undomesticated woman came together in the depiction of the *rakshasi* in *rupkatha* who becomes a threat to the stability and continued existence of the patrilineal society. When seen in the context of the history of the sexual exploitation of women by the dominant upper caste men in most parts of the subcontinent, this representation can be read as patriarchal myth-making where the burden of the illegitimate desire for the *pariah* woman is transferred on to the woman herself and thereby any guilt that must remain in the social consciousness is erased.

1.1 Situating Bengali *rupkatha*'s presentation of female rivalry within the nationalist discourses on womanhood

Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar's treatment of female rivalry and Dinesh Sen's evaluation of Mitra Majumdar's stories, can both be linked to a specific conception of Indian womanhood within the nationalist discourses. This conception of the Indian woman was based upon the idea of the Indian woman's willed surrender to the harsh demands of indigenous patriarchy. Such an idea was central to the nationalist distinction between the nature of Indian tradition and nature of British Colonialism. The Indian woman, 'the other' within the self (the nation), became the central site for emphasis of this distinction. She, nationalists were forced to admit during the very public debates surrounding the raising of the age of consent, was subject to social laws and cultural dictums that were detrimental towards her. The reformist camp and the conservative camps raging these public debates over the change in personal law had been forced to confront statistical reports of large-scale deaths of pre-pubescent and pubescent wives. The revivalist-nationalists had argued that no matter how ruthless, the Indian woman followed socio-religious laws voluntarily, unlike the relationship between the Indian man and the British colonial master, where humiliating laws were forcefully imposed by the colonial master upon the former. Women thus became the site on which nationalist resistance

to colonialist discourses were staged. This site itself was established by colonialist discourse when it identified the condition of Indian women as the marker of the inferiority of Indian tradition. In the last decades of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, with the growth of Indian nationalism, the Indian woman as the embodiment of Indian tradition and culture, was projected as a marker of the superiority of Indian tradition because of her ability to sacrifice her own interests, her body and even her life for the well-being of her people. The East was identified with spiritualism as opposed to western materialism, and women were burdened with representing the spiritual core of the nation. This discourse also stressed on the essential difference in the social spaces occupied by women in the East and the West. The wife in the West was the companion whereas in the East, within Indian tradition, the wife was goddess. The spiritual superiority of the East was established by the eastern woman's moral triumph through her ability for self-sacrifice. Such linkages ultimately lead to the birth of the figure of Mother India as a Hindu ascetic, painted by Abanindranath Tagore in 1922 as a four armed goddess in the saffron robes, embodying qualities of self-renunciation or *tyag*. The concept of *tyag* as renunciation was also central to both Hindu and Buddhist religious traditions. Woman, tradition and religion were linked to form a co-ordinated concept of nationhood. Self-abnegation became the hallmark of the national woman. This general perception of Indian womanhood led to the valorisation of the goddess-like, self-sacrificing heroic women in the literature produced during this time. I have mentioned *Sushilar Upakhayn* in the preceding chapter. The character of the ideal child-wife, Sushila, fitted this model of Indian womanhood. The pervasiveness of such ideas is also evident from Dinesh Chandra Sen's introduction to the edition of Rassundari Devi's *Amar Jiban*, where he tried to construct her story as the parable of the ideal, self-sacrificing, Indian woman. He deliberately highlighted

such instances from her autobiography that fit this narrative.²⁸⁵ For example, he mentioned her tireless work in maintaining the household, and how she often went without food for great lengths of time. He quotes sections from her writing which stated that such abstinence from eating was not forced upon her due to scarcity but was deliberately practised by her because she felt she had other uses of her time. Sections that showed Rassundari's internalisation of patriarchal norms were highlighted by Sen, instead of the moments which displayed her tremendous willpower and exercise of agency in actually learning the letters despite the great odds that stood in her way. He valorised her as embodying those ideals of womanly virtue: self-sacrifice and unquestioning submission to social laws that demanded she hide her face, remain silent and eat last. The figure of the *prachina* or the old woman in all her self-willed self-sacrificing glory was romanticised and valorised by him and this was the same figure he read in the women characters of *Thakurmar Jhuli* and *Thakurdadar Jhuli*.

Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar's *Thakurmar Jhuli*, written during the phase of the Bengali nationalist cultural awakening, focus on conflicts which have the self-sacrificing good women on the moral side and the desiring, self-serving evil woman on the other side. His *Thakurdadar Jhuli* also paraded a series of heroic good women who displayed remarkable agency but nonetheless submitted to the hierarchies of the indigenous patriarchal social structure unquestioningly. They remained loyal to their husbands even when they were treated outrageously by them, as in the case of Kanchanmala²⁸⁶. They obeyed social laws despite the

²⁸⁵ Dinesh Chandra Sen, "Introduction", *Amar Jiban*, Rassundari Devi (Kolkata: Associated Publishing House, 1897), 17

²⁸⁶ From Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar, *Thakurdadar Jhuli* (Kolkata: Mitra and Ghosh, 1909), 113-238

fact that it caused them suffering as in the case of Pushpamala²⁸⁷. And remained deferential to villainous elders as in the case of Malanchamala²⁸⁸. Malanchamala was the epitome of the *tyagi*, self-sacrificing woman who willingly married a babe who had but twelve days to live and then even after being assaulted and abandoned by her in-laws, she remained in the cremation ground with her dead baby husband protecting his corpse from the spirits who came to feed on him. The story traced her struggles as she raised him and finally married him off to another princess. And after enduring tremendous hardships, when she was finally accepted by her father-in-law, she delayed her return to court, choosing to remain in the forest. Dinesh Chandra Sen praised her as symbolising “all the virtues of Indian womanhood, whose ideals were still alive in India”²⁸⁹. Furthermore, since all of the stories were centred on romantic love, self-sacrifice was also presented as central to the ideal woman’s practice of love. *Tyag* was at the very foundation of femininity and female love. The story of “Pushpamala”, which was a retelling of an earlier romance *Sakhi Sona*, (written by the 16th century poets, Fakir Ram Kabibhushan and Mohammad Korban Ali)²⁹⁰ can be used to show instances of Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar’s interventions into an older story, drawing from the nationalist discourses on womanhood. The heroine of Dakshinaranjan’s story eloped with the hero, not because they

²⁸⁷ From Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar, *Thakurdadar Jhuli* (Kolkata: Mitra and Ghosh, 1909), 89-138

²⁸⁸ From Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar, *Thakurdadar Jhuli* (Kolkata: Mitra and Ghosh, 1909), 135-192

²⁸⁹ Giuseppe Flora, "On Fairy Tales, Intellectuals and Nationalism in Bengal (1880-1920)," *Rivista Degli Studi Orientali* 75 (2002): 44 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41913063>.

²⁹⁰ Both of these stories are described in detail in Dinesh Chandra Sen’s *Folktales of Bengal*. Dinesh Chandra Sen, *The Folk Literature of Bengal* (Kolkata: Aparna Book Distributors, 2007), 116-124

were in love but out of a sense of duty because she felt that she must honour the promise her father made to the hero's father that he would give her in marriage to him, especially when her father had gone back on his word. This episode was presented in a manner which suggested that Pushpamala was actually sacrificing herself at the altar of the truth. Needless to say, the section from *Sakhi Sona* where the heroine and the hero met in secret in the palace at night was not there in Dakshinaranjan's story. Again, just before the elopement, Dakshinaranjan's heroine prepared a meal to serve to her *parents* and relations thinking that this would be the last time that she would be able to serve them, whereas in both Kabibhusan and Korban Ali's versions, the heroine kept regretting having to leave her luxurious life as a princess as she was used to the comforts of the palace. Furthermore, being a young girl, she was also reluctant to leave the tender, loving care of her queen mothers in those versions.²⁹¹ Naturally, the difficulty she faced in adjusting to the new life with her young husband also made its way into the story. In contrast, Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar's heroine was the idealised portrait of woman as dutiful daughter and wife. Her childhood was but wiped away. The antithesis of the qualities that constituted this rigid idea of the Indian woman, was found embodied in the figure of the evil woman. All of the *rakshasis* who appeared in the section "*Rup Tarasi*" of *Thakurmar Jhuli* were desirous instead of being sacrificing, and had voracious appetites. This section derived its name from the terrifying visage of the *rakshasi*. The other evil women, the various *shotins* and the evil sisters were always jealous of the good women. Their jealousy resulted from their inability to sacrifice self-interest and thus marked the absence of qualities which constituted the ideal Indian woman. This also marked them as unnatural women and as monstrous. The

²⁹¹ Dinesh Chandra Sen, *The Folk Literature of Bengal* (Kolkata: Aparna Book Distributors, 2007), 126

valorisation of self-abnegation led to the vilification of desire in women. When self-abnegation was constructed as central to womanhood itself, it rendered female desire itself as monstrous. Hence, all women who acted from motives of self-aggrandisement in Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar's stories were villains and metaphorical monsters. This distinction between the good, *lakshmi* bou and the evil, *alakshmi/rakshasi* bou held neatly across the entire body of Mitra Majumdar's works. This also clearly demonstrated how effectively human evil women also became, in effect, *rakshasis*. The list included women outside of the female rivalry dichotomy such as Penchor *ma* who was acting for furthering the interests of her son and the *masi* (aunt) in "Kanchanmala" who wanted to advance the interests of her niece, and ofcourse all the *alakshmi* queens who acted to secure their own positions in court. However, through deft craftsmanship, their actions were also rendered problematic within the logic of the fairy tale as these were presented as going against the moral order of the story since the acts of self-aggrandisement came at the cost of the innocents. These evil women usurped power at an early point in the story, either through villainy or through cunning manipulation/displacement of male authority figures. However, the story could end only with the re-establishment of the patriarch. In "Lal Komol Nil Komol"²⁹², when the *rakshasi rani* emerged in her true form and attempted to eat Kusum, she stupefied the king and subsequently imprisoned him. In "Kalabati Rajkanya",²⁹³ the five queens who had not shared the fertility medicine with the two younger queens shamed the king and kept him from allowing the monkey prince and the owl prince in court. In "Sonar Kathi Rupar Kathi", the *rakshasi* first enticed the king and then pretended to

²⁹² From Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar, *Thakurmar Jhuli* (Kolkata: Mitra and Ghosh, 1907), 141-163

²⁹³ From Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar, *Thakurmar Jhuli* (Kolkata: Mitra and Ghosh, 1907), 29-58

be ill in order to make the king do her bidding.²⁹⁴ The *malini masi* in “Kanchanmala” altered the *pata* painting of the heroine in order to convince the prince that the bride to be was ugly and inauspicious and he should under no circumstance look upon her face.²⁹⁵ However, this goes against the morality of the fairy tale order and the story ends with the righting of the wrong and re-establishment of the morally right male authority. These are a few instances that can be cited from *Thakurmar Jhuli* and *Thakurdadar Jhuli*; there are others as well.

1.2 Female rivalry and the Victorian worldview

The rivalry between the good woman and the evil woman in Lal Behari Day’s stories, as has been pointed out, was also between the woman who was without desire and the desiring woman. Day vilified female desire through perspectives outside of the nationalist constructions and derived from the patriarchal attitudes of the Victorian Protestant world view. While male desire was marked as commonplace in the spectrum of human emotions and desiring men were heroes in Day’s stories, the figure of the desiring woman, however, was rarely positive. A few examples from Day’s stories can substantiate this observation. The merchant’s son in “The Story of Swet Basanta” who would father the two boy protagonists later in the story, fell in love with the beautiful stranger who lived in his closet. He desired her and married her and they become the parents of the heroes.²⁹⁶ In “The Story of a Hiranman”, the king desired the lady of peerless beauty who had been described to him by his pet *hiraman* parrot and together they effectively kidnapped the lady before she could reciprocate. The story ended with the king

²⁹⁴ From Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar, *Thakurmar Jhuli* (Kolkata: Mitra and Ghosh, 1907), 191-210

²⁹⁵ From Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar, *Thakurdadar Jhuli* (Kolkata: Mitra and Ghosh, 1909) 193-238

²⁹⁶ Lal Behari Day, *Folktales of Bengal* (Kolkata: Uccharan, 1993), 82-95

and the lady happily married with the *hiraman* as a friend and advisor. On the other hand, whenever a desiring woman appeared in the stories of the *Folktales of Bengal* she was usually a *rakshasi*. In “The Story of the Rakshasas”, as mentioned before, the *rakshasi* desired the Brahmin and disguising herself as a beautiful woman, she tricked him into thinking she was his long-married but neglected wife.²⁹⁷ She is killed in the story by her own son. Similarly, the *rakshasi* in the story “The Boy Whom Seven Mothers Suckled”, disguised as a beautiful woman, enticed the king and became his queen. Following this, she manipulated him into abiding by her wishes and ordering the execution of his seven older queens. The story ended with the prince who was raised by these seven queens in secret, killing the *rakshasi* and restoring his mothers to their rightful place.²⁹⁸ Apart from the discomfort with the idea of female sexual desire, Day’s treatment of female rivalry in his stories was also built upon misogynist conceptions about women’s natures. Female rivalry in the stories from Day’s volume emerged between a number of relations: between *shotins* (co-wives), between step-mother and stepdaughter, between sisters, between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, but also between un-related women. Quite like Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar’s stories, the evil women were characterised by the jealousy they bore towards the unsuspecting good women. However, in Day, jealousy stemmed not from absence of idealised female qualities like self-control and ability to sacrifice the self for the good of others but from inherent problems in women’s nature. Women were depicted as weak, prone to jealousy, unnecessarily curious and inherently hateful. Female rivalry was thus only the “natural” outcome of women’s nature. The various narratorial interventions made by Day in his stories also made this point clear. In “The

²⁹⁷ Lal Behari Day, *Folktales of Bengal* (Kolkata: Uccharan, 1993), 57-81

²⁹⁸ Lal Behari Day, *Folktales of Bengal* (Kolkata: Uccharan, 1993), 104-110

Story of Swet Basanta”, the rivalry between Swet’s wife and Swet’s step-mother resulted from the latter’s jealousy of her daughter-in-law. Day wrote: “the stepmother, like all stepmothers, hated Swet and Basanta with a perfect hatred; and the two ladies (Swet’s wife and Swet’s step-mother) were naturally often at loggerheads with each other.”²⁹⁹ This was at least partially based on the fact that Swet’s wife, being older than his stepmother, had become the mistress of the house. The rivalry between the women stemming from their difference in age was a reworking of a trope often seen in western fairy tales, such as “Snow White”, “Cinderella” or “Rapunzel”. Here, the younger woman was placed in a position within the family that actually made her superior to the older woman but she was denied that position because of her age. The rivalry which was actually the result of a social structure that forced women to take up mismatched social positions was naturalised and essentialised as inherent female nature through the second qualifying statement that Swet’s stepmother “like all step-mothers” hated him with a “perfect hatred”. So women were marked as essentially capable of great hatred and thus, that fact that there existed a conflict between the two ladies was “natural”.

Similar ideas cropped up in the story “The Evil Eye of Sani”. Here the protagonists, Sribatsa and his wife, Chintamani, were hounded by Sani even though they were under the patronage of Goddess Lakshmi. In the middle section of the story when they had lost their material wealth and were trying to build a life as simple rural folk, Chintamani unintentionally raised the envy and the jealousy of her female neighbours because of her superior skill at weaving and cooking. And although the women were shown to be prone to hatred and jealousy, this was not true for the men, because Sribatsa also excelled at his work in comparison to his

²⁹⁹ Lal Behari Day, *Folktales of Bengal* (Kolkata: Uccharan, 1993), 85

compatriots³⁰⁰ This kind of narratorial implication about women's natures repeated itself throughout the book. In "The Story of a Hiranman", the six queens became jealous of a small bird simply because the king preferred its company over theirs. They start treating the bird as a competitor: "the queens felt that they were neglected by the king, became jealous of the bird, and determined to kill it."³⁰¹ Day at one point wrote that they had "evil genius" and this manifested in their attempts at murder.³⁰² That women worked with malicious motives because of some inherent flaw was presented in the story "Strike but Hear", where the narrator informs the readers that the young stepmother hated her stepson and wanted to ruin him. The stepson on the other hand was presented as deferential to the step-mother and attempted to save her life by licking poisoned blood that had fallen on his stepmother's breast. He was caught in the act, which in itself was sufficient for the woman to raise an alarm. However, the step-mother was presented as having additional motivation for shouting out to the king: the hatred she bore towards the step-son. This mean depiction of women's nature further emphasised by the contrasting behaviour of men in similar situations, became the inherent reason for rivalry between women. The most shocking manifestation of this occurred in the aforementioned story, "The Evil Eye of Sani", where the women of the village offered no resistance to the boatmen who kidnapped Chintamani, despite being present at the river-side when this incident was happening because, the narrator informs the reader, they hated her. This particular episode was interesting because the women had no other motivation for acting this way, other than petty jealousy and envy.

³⁰⁰ Lal Behari Day, *Folktales of Bengal* (Kolkata: Uccharan, 1993), 98-99

³⁰¹ Lal Behari Day, *Folktales of Bengal* (Kolkata: Uccharan, 1993), 183

³⁰² Lal Behari Day, *Folktales of Bengal* (Kolkata: Uccharan, 1993), 184

However, female rivalry was not as integral to the stories in Day's *Folktales of Bengal* as they were in the stories of Dakshinaranjan's *Thakurmar Jhuli*, where stories often commenced with female rivalry which then became the most important driving force that led the narratives. As Day essentialised women's natures, the two issues central to female rivalry in the western canon of fairy tales as pointed out by Gilber and Gubar—age and beauty—made an appearance as points of contention in his stories. This “natural” rivalry was an established construct in the Victorian fairy tales that Day no doubt was familiar with. This too was in contrast to Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar's stories where female beauty and age did not appear as issues relevant to female rivalry.

Suniti Devi whose collection, *Indian Fairytales*, heavily borrowed from Victorian fairy tale tropes, characters and ethos also had instances of female rivalry where age and beauty appeared as contentious issues. In “The Needle Prince”,³⁰³ the rivalry was between the beautiful young princess and her much older, ugly maid servant. The maid was the usurper who claimed to have removed the needles from the prince's body while it was in reality the princess's painstaking labour. The servant kept the prince in her power till the truth was established through the intervention of benevolent, airy, diminutive fairies who came to visit the princess. Age difference and beauty, though not central to the rivalry, were additional details woven into the story by Suniti. Incidentally, AK Ramanujan recorded a version of this story from South of India in his essay “Telling Tales”³⁰⁴, called “The Dead Prince and the Talking Doll” where the two female figures, the young princess and the usurping servant, neither had a difference of

³⁰³ Suniti Devi, *Indian Fairy Tales* (Calcutta: The Art Press, 1923), 1-12

³⁰⁴ A. K. Ramanujan, “Towards a Counter system: women's tales”, in *The Collected Essays of A. K. Ramanujan*, ed Vinay Dharwadkar (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 452

age, nor was there the intervention of fairies to help the story with its resolution. Suniti's use of these borrowed constructs served to establish her collection as belonging to the world of Victorian English fairy tale publishing.

1.3 Escaping the binary of good woman and bad woman

Female rivalry no doubt emerged from the field of power relations as constructed by patrilineal, heteronormative, social structures. However, this rivalry was presented either as the absence of higher qualities in the evil women or as essential flaws in the nature of women by male *bhadrolok* narrators. However, in some of the stories published by the women writer-collectors, women characters were allowed to break away from the restrictive roles of good woman/bad woman and provided space for varied behaviour. Women, in such stories, act in their self-interest without necessarily being identified as evil. For example, in "The Wax Prince", a story from Sovana Sundari Devi's *The Orient Pearls*, a king was worried about his childlessness. Although he was monogamous, the queen upon learning of his sadness realised that: "she was herself the cause of all his unhappiness for she had not yet borne him any heir." The story then delved in a psychological exploration of the queen's thoughts where she contemplated the possibility of the king taking another consort: "This was not, however, the worst thing she had to fear. Should he have a son by his new wife, the boy would, of course, succeed to the throne, and his mother would be supreme in the palace, while she would be nobody at all."³⁰⁵ The story provided a woman's point of view that was missing in the stories written by the male collectors. With the queen's inner musings opened up to the reader, one could see the real, palpable fear within a childless woman of being replaced by a rival. But even more remarkable was that this fear was treated with sympathy and not presented as

³⁰⁵ Shovona Devi, *The Orient Pearls* (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd, 1915), 21

motivation for villainy. The queen was anxious of her own childlessness and not jealous of her rival or her rival's children³⁰⁶. When she came up with a plan to deceive the king and secure her own position in the court, the end results of her deception, after many trials and tribulations, were favourable. She was not punished for it but rather received her happy ending. The story thus presented her as a good woman who tried and successfully moulded male authority for her own benefit. This model of female behaviour was a markedly different from the good women of Mitra Majumdar and Day who never attempted to displace or subvert male authority, no matter how unjust. The women remained ever silent in the stories of the male collectors, quietly accepting their fates, when the kings sent them away from the court, and quietly re-entering the palace when they were reinstated. On the other end of the spectrum, the women who did attempt to subvert male authority, the villainous women characters of fairy tales, find no redemption, be they human or *rakshasi*. Strangely, their sons were often redeemed: Ajit, Sahasra Dal and the sons of the *Suo rani* of "Sheet-Basanta" being examples. No *alakshmi/rakshasi* survived the end of the stories. In an aberration from the general characterisation of the *rakhasa/rakshasi* as an unredeemable depraved rival of the good woman and her children, the story "The Sand-river and the Stone-boat" from Sovana Sundari's *The Orient Pearls* presented an episode where the prince protagonist stumbled upon, liberated and married a princess who had been held captive by a *rakhasa*. The *rakhasa*, who had eaten up the rest of her family, had kept her alive as he had taken a fancy to her and treated her like a daughter. This narrative trope can be found repeated in other stories in the pantheon of Bengali *rupkatha*, for example, in Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar's "Sonar Kathi Rupa

³⁰⁶ Jealousy of the rival queen/other sister because of their children is a common trope in the fairytale collected by Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar and Lal Behari Day. Note for example, Majumdar's "Sat Bhai Champa", "Sheet Basanta" or Lal Behari Day's "Life's Secret".

Kathi” and Day’s “The Story of the Rakshasas”. Sovana’s story featured a *rakhasa* instead of a *rakhasi* and he was addressed as a “giant” in the story (an attempt at cultural translation).³⁰⁷ What was interesting in the narrative was that the *rakhasa*, though initially an aggressor, later became a surrogate paternal figure with no desire to continue keeping the princess imprisoned. He willingly and readily married her to the prince and even helped the prince with magic gifts. Although he had killed her family, he was redeemed by these late actions whereas both the *rakhasis* in “The Story of the Rakshasas” and in “Sonar Kathi Rupa Kathi” died painful deaths at the hands of the princes, after their prisoners tricked them into revealing their weaknesses. Similarly, another of Sovana’s stories “The Monkey Giant Killer” also featured a giantess holding a princess captive. But there was no prince in this story; rather a monkey, who outwitted the giantess and secured the princess as his travelling companion. The giantess did not die at the end of the story but ran away, thinking that the monkey was bigger than she was.

2. *Rupkatha*’s representation of marginal female figures

The representation of women and women’s natures in the Bengali *rupkatha* texts was not just the creation of *bhadrolok* cultural and political discourses but also reproduced the amalgamated influence of traditional and prevalent social conceptions. Thus, the story texts reproduced certain social practises such as the taboos associated with the childless couple, especially the childless woman, and the popular social conceptions of the widow and the *aiburo* or the unmarried woman. Many of these cultural ideas stemmed from hetero-patriarchal belief systems and functioned to marginalise women in general, and certain sections of the demographic in particular, such as the widow or the *aiburo*. That these find their way into the

³⁰⁷ One must remember that Sovana Sundari’s *The Orient Pearls* was an English language text published from London and aimed at an international anglophone readership. She turned the *rakhasa* and *rakhasi* into giant and giantess in an attempt to make these characters more culturally relatable.

stories is no surprise because, as fairy tale scholars, like Donald Haase, point out, the fairy tale “constitutes one of these sanctuaries of cultural myths the space where gender(ed) identities are constituted”³⁰⁸. Since stories emerge from particular cultural milieus and storytelling is located in particular socio-historical cultural contexts, the cultural constructs of these milieus and contexts seep into the stories. Thus, the childless woman was usually cast as the antagonist of the good woman and emerged as an important villainous figure in the stories published by Lal Behari Day and Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar. The good woman never remained childless and while not all evil women were childless, ones that remained childless till the end were always the evil ones. Moreover, children, or their lack thereof, became a pivotal issue in the rivalry between them. Numerous examples can be cited from Day and Mitra Majumdar which can substantiate the above observation. In “Life’s Secret”, Day’s story which has Dalim Kumar as the central protagonist, the Duo queen was childless while the Suo queen gave birth to Dalim Kumar. “She naturally hated the child,” wrote Day “as the king, since his birth, neglected her more than ever, and idolised the fortunate mother of Dalim.”³⁰⁹ The capability to provide a male heir was directly related to the position of the woman within the family. This was true not just for royal families but for any common household, because of religious dictates which mandated the need of a male heir to perform the necessary religious rites to help the soul pass on to the afterlife. A male heir was also important for material reasons such as inheritance of property and the family name in a patrilineal line of succession. Thus, the ability to provide heirs lead to intense rivalry between women within a polygynous family structure. However, in Day and Mitra Majumdar’s volumes, no childless woman was treated with sympathy.

³⁰⁸ Donald Haase, *Fairy Tales and Feminism: New Approaches* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), 33

³⁰⁹ Lal Behari Day, *Folktales of Bengal* (Kolkata: Uccharan, 1993), 2

Dalim's stepmother, wrote Day, "on learning the secret of Dalim Kumar's life, lost no time in using it for the prosecution of her *malicious* design" and "wished to take advantage of it for the furtherance of her own *selfish* views."³¹⁰ While her hatred was natural, her views were selfish and her designs malicious. In *Thakurmar Jhuli*, the *Suo rani* in the story of "Sheet Basanta" despised the *Duo rani* because she had two sons whereas the *Suo rani* has none. The story began with the narrator informing the reader that the *Suo rani's* jealousy had caused her to divide up the royal household and push the younger queen into a corner. But as the story proceeded, she was not satisfied with simply ousting the queen but also plotted murder. Although she later produced sons of her own, she became the main villain of the story who found no redemption in the end.³¹¹ The jealous aunts of Arun, Barun and Kiranmala who threw them into the river and replaced them with puppies, kittens and a wooden doll were also childless³¹². So was the *malini* (gardener), who tricked Ruplal into believing that the princess he was marrying was ugly and cursed, thus creating havoc in his marital life³¹³. Now, barrenness and the desire for children remained one of the most enduring tropes in *rupkatha* stories with a large number of them opening with the king and queens' lack of heirs and their desperation for the same. Tanika Sarkar has noted in her discussion of nineteenth century women's history, how the desire for early children was one of the pressures acting upon the young child bride. Very often, the older women of the family would employ herbs and physical

³¹⁰ Day, *Folktales of Bengal*, 2

³¹¹ From Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar, *Thakurmar Jhuli* (Kolkata: Mitra and Ghosh, 1907), 85-110

³¹² Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar, *Thakurmar Jhuli* (Kolkata: Mitra and Ghosh, 1907), 111-140

³¹³ Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar, *Thakurdadar Jhuli* (Kolkata: Mitra and Ghosh, 1909), 193-234

methods to ready the young wife's body for child bearing.³¹⁴ Children and their lack thereof was a persistent issue in women's lived realities and the socio-cultural space they inhabited. These realities were reflected in the stories which also voiced the cultural taboos and superstitions associated with barrenness. In Day's "Life's Secret", a mendicant who approached the Suo queen begging for alms, refused to accept the same on learning she was childless "as the hands of a woman unblessed with child are regarded as ceremonially unclean."³¹⁵ In "Madhumala" from Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar's *Thakurdadar Jhuli*, a menial servant of the palace upon seeing the childless king's face early in the morning was presented as exclaiming that since he had seen a barren man's face early in the morning, the day would bring him little comfort and much grief.³¹⁶ While these superstitions were inherent to the oral tales and the folk cultures from which the tales emanated, it was interesting that while writing the stories, the two educated *bhadroloks*, who were writing decades into the *bhadrolok*-driven attempts at social reform and spread of education, chose to depict such attitudes in the published versions of the stories.

These attitudes inherent in Bengali folk culture have also been fairly consistent in their treatment of women who could not be linked to their reproductive function. I have already discussed in the previous chapter how the figure of the mother and the idea of motherhood have been central to Bengali cultural imaginings. These ideas have been so pervasive that nationalist discourses in the early twentieth century drew inspiration from and built on these cultural models. The other side of this emphasis on motherhood was that women who were not mothers

³¹⁴ Tanika Sarkar. "A Prehistory of Rights: The Age of Consent Debate in Colonial Bengal," *Feminist Studies* 26, no. 3 (2000): 612 doi:10.2307/3178642

³¹⁵ Lal Behari Day, *Folktales of Bengal* (Kolkata: Uccharan, 1993), 1

³¹⁶ Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar, *Thakurdadar Jhuli* (Kolkata: Mitra and Ghosh, 1909), 29-88

or potential mothers-to-be (that is, young wives/brides-to-be) were marginalised. Like the childless woman who was at the receiving end of derogatory cultural attitudes, the widow and *aiburo* (the matured but unmarried woman) were the subjects of social attitudes and practices that were malicious and derogatory. These women much like the childless women also appeared in villainous roles in the stories. Furthermore, since woman as wife and mother remained in central focus in these stories, these characters, who were widows or *aiburos*, occupied marginal spaces in the universe of the tales. I refer specifically to characters referred to as '*buris*' who appeared sporadically in *Thakurmar Jhuli*, whose major function was to further the plot by appearing as impediments in front of the main characters. They were however never part of the main crises.

Shibaji Bandopadhyay notes in his book, *Gopal Rakhal Dando Shomash*, that most of the stories in *Thakurmar Jhuli* have a definite structure with a determined end. This structure can clearly be divided into three parts: the beginning, the middle and the end. These parts though clearly defined were connected with each other through an internal logic which they never violate. The beginning provided limited scope for experimentation while the end was always fixed and therefore binding on the teller, who could not take liberties with it.³¹⁷ It was the middle which allowed space for the teller's own imagination. Here, the teller could add many and diverse kinds of adventures for the purpose here was to defer closure. The sub-plots involving the *buris* always appeared in the middle. The three *buris* who swallowed the brothers of Budhu and Bhutum in "*Kalabati Rajkanya*" or Penchor ma *buri* who kidnapped Manimala or the Chander ma *buri* in "*Sukhu Dukhu*" were all examples of such appearances. The five

³¹⁷ Shibaji Bandopadhyay, *Gopal Rakhal Dondoshomash: Uponibeshbad O Bangla Shisusahitya* (Kolkata: Papyrus, 1991), 43-44

human princes who were the elder brothers of Budhu-Bhutum, the monkey prince and owl prince, arrived in the kingdom of the ‘teen *buri*’ while on the way to claim Kalabati Rajkanya as their wife. They (three old women) without any provocation on the princes’ part swallowed them alive along with their *mayurpankhi* boats. These *buris* then fell asleep and the princes were rescued by Budhu who advised them to cut off the neck of these three women after they have climbed out from their stomachs with the help of Budhu’s tail. This is just one of the many misadventures that the princes needed rescuing from on their way to the palace of the Kalabati Rajkanya.³¹⁸ The other character, Penchor *ma buri* was better fleshed out and occupied more space in the story “*Patal Kanya Manimala*”. Manimala who was already married to the main hero of the story, stole away from her underwater castle to see the surface world. There she was seen by another prince who fell in love with her but unable to attain her, went mad. The King, his father, wanting to cure his only son officially pledged half his kingdom and the princess’ hand to whoever could cure the Prince. Now, the *buri*, who was the mother of the madman Pencho, had witnessed Manimala’s soiree and knew the source of the prince’s malady. She took up this opportunity of securing her son’s future, although he was mad and missing. She declared her ability to cure the prince if Pencho could be married to the princess and when the king agreed, she kidnapped Manimala and sent her as a captive to the palace. Penchor *ma* was shown as able to operate a magical boat called *paboner nao*, which a *rakshasi* could be seen operating in one of Day’s stories. Ofcourse the events ended badly for Penchor *ma*, as Manimala was rescued by her husband’s friend, the minister’s son, who also tricked Penchor *ma buri*. By the end of the story, Penchor *ma* dumbfounded by all that had happened committed suicide. Throughout the narrative, there was no mention of Pencho’s father and the reader could

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Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar, *Thakurmar Jhuli* (Kolkata: Mitra and Ghosh, 1907), 29-58

assume that he was dead. Dakshinaranjan's accompanying sketch which show her wearing white and no ornaments gave enough visual clues that she was a widow.³¹⁹ The same character appeared in Lal Behari Day's "Phakir Chand" as Phakre's mother although her final fate was not revealed in the story as the focus of the story shifted after the Princess was rescued by the minister's son³²⁰.

These women formed a separate class of villains apart from the usual *alakshmis* and the *rakshasis*. The *alakshmi* was always a legitimate member of the household while the *rakshasi* became a part of it through deceit but these women, the *buris*, had no husbands and hence, had no direct access to patriarchal power structures. They were isolated figures whose primary motivation for acting as they do seemed to be self-gratification. Penchor *ma* wants to secure her son's future although the son had abandoned her. This would simultaneously also bring her social and financial security. The *rakshasis* had demonic powers to aid in their designs while the *alakshmi* being human used trickery and other mortal means. These women when human, like Penchor *ma*, were conversant in the use of sorcery. Penchor *ma* could reach the underworld using her *paboner nao* (boat made of air) which she operated through the means of a spinning wheel. The three *buris* of "Kalabati Rajkanya" were monsters who could swallow the five princes whole. Penchor *ma* was presented as without any qualms about using unscrupulous means in order to fulfil her purpose. This referred back to popular stereotypes about the widow's selfishness.

The other widespread idea was that a widow devoured her husband and the household, found metaphorical expression in the actual physical act of devouring performed by the three

³¹⁹ Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar, *Thakurmar Jhuli* (Kolkata: Mitra and Ghosh, 1907), 178-190

³²⁰ Lal Behari Day, *Folktales of Bengal* (Kolkata: Uccharan, 1993), 15-46

buris. Why the old women eat up the five princes was a pertinent question which the story does not answer. It can be assumed that the answer lay in the sweeping negative perception of widows and the unmarried *aiburo* as beings who were a threat to the stability and security of the family structure. In a social situation where women's place was solely within the family, with their identities closely tied to their reproductive function, a woman with no husband and no children had no particular function. To quote an adage collected by Dinesh Chandra Sen in his book *Folk Literature of Bengal*: “*dhanratna kori, na biyolei buri*”. Sen translates this as “money and women, if they do not breed, are worse than useless”, and it elucidates the point and reveals, how in popular perception, the worth of a woman was tied to her ability to produce heirs. The widow was therefore expected to live life as an ascetic, renouncing all temporal associations and awaiting spiritual reunion with her dead husband. These social ideas remained despite the efforts from the middle of the nineteenth century to re-integrate widows into society. Monomoyee Basu writes that “with a view to improving the lot of widows, the Hindu Widow Remarriage Act (Act XV) was passed on 26th July, 1856, through the untiring efforts of Vidyasagar. The Act, however, failed to serve its purpose and the attempt to encourage remarriage of Hindu widows did not make substantial progress.”³²¹ Self-renunciation, while being expected of the Hindu woman in general, was particularly demanded of the Hindu widow. There was a shastric mandate that instructed the exclusion of the widow from all auspicious social gatherings. At the same time, within the common masses, there was a recognition that the widow was also a living, thinking, desiring being and this was also evident from the representation of her in the *rupkatha* stories. This caused a palpable psychosocial fear

³²¹ Monmoyee Basu, “Hindu Women and Marriage Law”, in *Women and Law in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), 7

that she was ever prone to harming others, having lived a life of forced deprivation herself. Most of the popular negative stereotypes about the widow could be traced back to such fears. Furthermore, the young widow's sexuality because it was not bound within a socially and legally sanctioned heterosexual bond, was viewed as a threat. In popular parlance "*rar*" became a word which referred to both the widow and the prostitute.³²² As the widow was socially a dead person, not integrated properly within familial structures, and by extension, social structures, she was thus dispensable. She had no social purpose to serve and so the desire for self-gratification within her was not granted legitimacy. Therefore, when such desire was expressed, its illegitimate nature painted her as monstrous.

Penchor *ma*/Phakre's mother were considered monsters because they act out of selfish desires. Such representations should be seen as presenting misogynist aspects of the native culture itself, not just the bias of the tellers. That the characters who resembled the widow and the *aiburo* occupied marginal spaces within the narratives, and were portrayed in a negative light, was informed by the popular social attitudes towards such figures in the nineteenth century. While these attitudes were derived from the oral tales themselves, Mitra Majumdar and Day chose to include such beliefs and portrayals in the final versions of the stories they published and coloured them in accordance to their own ideological viewpoints. Interestingly Penchor *ma* also committed a sin against social class structures in her desire to transcend class.

³²² The conflation of young widows with prostitutes was not just because of the fear of her unregulated sexuality. Monomoyee Basu quotes from an article published in the *Amritabazar Patrika* of 11 March 1896 where it was found that ninety percent of the prostitutes at the time were widows.

Cited from: Basu, "Hindu Women and Marriage Law", 7

Also Indira Chowdhury, "Constructing Chastity: The Sati and the Widow in Nineteenth Century Bengal", in *Women in History*, ed. Anuradha Chanda, Mahua Sarkar & Kunal Chattopadhyay (Kolkata: Progressive Publishers, 2003), 135

Another character from *Thakurmar Jhuli*, Kakanmala from “Kakanmala Kanchanmala” who too was an *aiburo*/widow (status not made clear) sought to do the same, as did the *malini* of *Thakurmar Jhuli*’s “Kanchanmala”. Their designs were thwarted and they were punished for it. They too exhibited the desire for furthering their own self-interests at the cost of the social order and tried to break down family structures. These characteristics marked them out as villains.

3. *Rupkatha* and female agency

Bakhtin’s idea of heteroglossia has been used by western folklorists like Frank J Korom³²³, cultural critics like Arjun Appadurai³²⁴ and fairy tale scholars such as Donald Haase to analyse the multiplicity of gender discourses that emerge from folktales/fairy tales. Haase, while tracing the feminist scholarship on fairy tales comments that there is “no ideologically coherent treatment of fairy tale themes and structures...that bear on questions of gender and female identity”³²⁵. Heteroglossia has been used as a theoretical tool to explain the existence of subversive moments that dislodge and even subvert dominant models of gender and gender discourses within literary fairy tales. However, such a theoretical tool cannot be applied to Bengali fairy tales. The key reason for my disagreement is the issue of authorial intention. Heteroglossia is heterogeneous speech that is deliberately used by the author for an intended purpose. However, the counter/subversive voices in the texts of Bengali folktales written by the male *bhadrolok* writers which deviate from the dominant narratorial voice, exist *inspite of*

³²³ Arjun Appadurai, Frank J. Korom and Margaret A. Mills, *Gender, Genre, and Power in South Asian Expressive Traditions* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 50

³²⁴ Appadurai et al, *Gender, Genre, and Power in South Asian Expressive Traditions*, 50

³²⁵ Donald Haase, *Fairy Tales and Feminism: New Approaches* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), 32

authorial intention. The authors did not deliberately include them for some intended purpose. Rather, these moments in the narrative are contradictory to the dominant discursive thrust of the story. An incident from Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar's "Kalabati Rajkanya" elucidates this. This occurs in the middle of the story, long after Budhu and Bhutum's mother had given birth to them—a monkey and an owl respectively—and had been banished from the palace as a result. The foreign princess, Kalabati, had appeared in a magnificent sailing boat and asked for the princes to seek out her hand. In the story, it is this act that marked the beginning of a chain of events that ultimately led to the restoring of the rights of the younger queens and the transformation of their sons. All of the seven sons of the king including the two animal princes, went out to win her hand in marriage but it is only the monkey, Buddhu, who was able to reach her and complete all of the tasks that she set for him. Upon successful completion of the tasks, Princess Kalabati, although a little shocked by her suitor's appearance kept her word and married him. She subsequently saved his life repeatedly as the five human brothers plotted to kill the monkey (despite his clearly generous nature and willingness to help his brothers in their time of need). However, she was not outside the patriarchal power structures that imposed restrictions on women: her choice of marital partner was not respected in the king's court and she was pressured to choose a husband from among the five human princes. Upon refusal, she was imprisoned but she used her wit to buy herself time and await her husband's return before exposing all to the king. In her ability to use her intelligence and find her way out of the problem, she exercised agency and demonstrated her capacity for action and her *freedom to*³²⁶

³²⁶ Elizabeth Grosz defines a concept of "freedom to" as "a positive understanding of freedom as the capacity for action...freedom as the ability to act and in acting to make oneself even as one is made by external forces", differentiating it from "the question of freedom" as "the concept of emancipation" or as "some understanding of liberation from, or removal of, an oppressive or unfair form of constraint or limitation" which she calls "freedom from".

perform them even within the limitations imposed upon her. In the story, is the striking line, where the Princess, just when she decided to marry Budhu, claimed that in the past, she belonged to her father, and in the future she would belong to her husband but for the moment (in the timeframe in which the conversation was taking place) “I am mine”; “*Ami amar*” she said. It is very interesting that Mitra Majumdar included this while writing down the story. In late nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengal, the right of a woman to legal personhood was contested. Kalabati’s proclamation was not merely a linguistic act, reclaiming her personhood but it was a discursive act which has material repercussions in that by speaking these words, she was simultaneously reserving her body for consensual activity. Kalabati’s claiming of personhood was actually a refusal to submit to enforced compulsions. However, by the end of the story, Kalabati was reduced to being a silent spouse in a household of ruling male elite. In the final illustration from the story, Majumdar portrayed the king on his throne flanked by the now transformed monkey and owl princes. The royal umbrella which was symbolic of the king’s royal status was extended to include them. However, Princess Kalabati was absent from the frame although it was she, who brought about the transformation of the princes and the restoration of their political rights in court. Once she brought about the transformation of the king’s sons, she was excluded from the trio of the male ruling elite. She now used the formal pronoun for her husband “*uni*” and not the personal “*o*”, a practise common in nineteenth century Bengal, which enforced the unequal power relations between the husband and wife.

Elizabeth Grosz, “Feminism, Materialism and Freedom”, in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency and Politics*, ed by Samantha Frost and Diane Coole (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 141-143

Thus, the discursive thrust of the narrative continually led towards the establishment of patriarchal authority over women, and these small moments within it which overturn established gender hierarchies existed despite the narrative thrust. In these moments, the narrative seemed to be speaking in a feminine register, in contrast with the overall male narratorial voice. It is highly questionable that these moments were deliberately introduced into the stories; rather, the presence of these moments suggested an act of omission on part of the author. These conversations/incidents were already part of the oral story and were not censored out. Such narratives were presenting male renditions of women's stories and hence ended up imposing patriarchal socio-cultural values on stories that voiced female experiences, struggles and triumphs. While a story from *Thakurmar Jhuli* has been used as an example here, the fact that male writers impose contemporary patriarchal social values on the oral stories they transcribe is an observation that has been made about Grimms' work as well. Haase writes: "Bottigheimer demonstrated how the Grimms' editorial interventions—including their apparently simple lexical revisions—weakened once strong female characters, demonised female power, imposed a male perspective on stories voicing women's discontents, and rendered heroines powerless by depriving them of speech, all in accord with the social values of their time"³²⁷ The story of "Kalabati Rajkanya", it must additionally be observed, falls into the group of fairy tales called the animal bridegroom group of tales. These stories featured a human bride in a conjugal relationship with a male animal. Jack Zipes refers to the work of Heide Göttner-Abendroth who had argued that oral stories about the animal bridegroom stemmed from matriarchal societies. Göttner-Abendroth says that the animal bridegroom

³²⁷ Donald Haase, *Fairy Tales and Feminism: New Approaches* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), 24-25

stories were actually about a cultivated female taking in a man “who in her eyes is still in the state akin to that of a roaming animal”. Instead of the man-animal being in a position of power and demanding female obedience, it is a case where “the male has not yet reached the cultural level of the human (= woman). It is up to the woman to bring him “salvation” by making human clothes for him and accepting him into her house as a domesticated inhabitant.”³²⁸ The discursive organisation of the texts changed in the hands of the writers of the literary fairy tale and the matriarchal values were written over.

However, such impositions and authorial interventions were not seamless and there were cracks within the written narratives from which subversive moments and contesting ideological viewpoints emerge. Such subversions, both at the level of language registers as well as discourses, remained as part of the written texts. However, it is not enough to label the texts as heteroglossic. Mitra Majumdar’s version of “Pushpamala” was constructed overall as the story of a brave, virtuous and self-sacrificing Bengali girl. In earlier versions of the story, written by Fakir Ram Kabibhushan and Mohammad Korban Ali, the heroine Sakhi Sona, a princess, exercised autonomy by entering into a romantic relationship with a man of her own choosing, who was also socially her inferior. Dakshinaranjan’s Pushpamala, instead, as has been observed earlier, entered into the romantic relationship with the hero, the Kotwal’s son, out of a dutiful desire to protect her parents’ morality since they had promised her to him but had gone back on their promise. She then spent the rest of the narrative trying to protect her loved ones. However, in the composition of the tale of an ideal Hindu woman, there existed episodes where Pushpamala showed great agential action while attempting to protect the

³²⁸ Jack Zipes, *Fairytales and the Art of Subversion: The Classical Genre for Children and the Process of Civilization* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 49

romantic relationship. She decided on her own course of action, planned her elopement, fought with bandits, disguised herself while in search of her husband in a strange kingdom and asserted her autonomy when she decided to take her own life even when her husband argued otherwise. Similarly, Malanchamala, who was valorised as the ideal self-sacrificing Hindu woman by commentators like Dinesh Chandra Sen, at one point in the story, exercised agency when she demanded respect from her in-laws and asked them to keep their word and perform their duty towards her.

These moments remain testimony to the fact that male writers like Dakshinarnajan Mitra Majumdar were retelling stories that originated from women and stemmed from women's experiences, while appropriating a female tradition of telling stories. Karen E Rowe, a feminist scholar of fairy tales, had argued in her 1986 work "To Spin a Yarn", that storytelling is semiotically a female art and thus "the history of the male appropriation of folktales is the history of the male's attempt to control this female power, to co-opt the female art of storytelling."³²⁹ However, she believed since it was really women who wove the thread, the stories, while reshaped in the hands of the writers, could not be completely co-opted. Although she bases her observations on the work of Ovid, Perrault, Basile and the Grimm brothers, her viewpoints resonate with my observations of Bengali fairy tale texts, that "the fairy tale becomes a coded text in which the female voice, despite the attempt to control it, not only continues to speak, but speaks in a secret, subversive language."³³⁰

3.1 Representation of female heroism in the texts

³²⁹ Donald Haase, *Fairy Tales and Feminism: New Approaches* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), 29

³³⁰ Haase, *Fairy Tales and Feminism: New Approaches*, 29

Bengali fairy tale texts thus provide scope for female autonomous and agential action. This was especially true in its presentation of female heroism. The idea of the female hero of the fairy tale needs to be studied distinctly from the male hero because female modes of heroism have been distinct from masculine heroism. My use of the term female hero is deliberate as I also want to assert a distinction between this figure and the heroine, who was not the protagonist of the tales and was placed in a more passive role at the receiving end of the hero's overtures. However, female modes of heroism as presented in stories were not homogenous. The fairy tales present a wide spectrum of female heroism that makes for fascinating study.

The distinction between masculine and feminine heroism is nowhere more apparent than in *Thakurmar Jhuli* where many of the stories named after the princesses actually had princes/related male characters as the heroes. They went on quests, killed *rakshasis*, rescued/won over princess (the heroines) and were generally presented in active agential roles. By contrast only two stories had female heroes: "Kiranmala" and "Sukhu Dukhu". Even the story "Kalabati Rajkanya", where the Princess Kalabati commands some degree of agency, had Buddhu and Bhutum, the monkey prince and the owl prince, as protagonists and heroes. The female heroes, Kiranmala and Dukhu are placed in agential roles and through their own actions influenced their own fates and the fates of their loved ones. Kiranmala was able to rescue her brothers from *Maya Pahar* or the Mountain of Illusions, while Dukhu was able to receive gifts from the awe-inspiring Chander *burī* or the Old Woman of the Moon, which alleviated her family's poverty and secured her future.

While both of these girl-women went on quests, the crux of their heroism lay on traditionally feminine qualities such as their ability to resist temptation and their capability to sacrifice self-interest. Kiranmala was able to resist the charms of the *Maya Pahar* and desist from looking back. By doing that, she was able to break the charm of the place and free all of the trapped princes and warriors who had attempted to seek the wealth of the *Maya Pahar*, but

inevitably had looked back when called by the magic of the place and had been turned to stone. Her own brothers, Arun and Barun, who had gone before her had been unable to do what she managed to complete, all because she was able to resist the charms of the mountain. Dukhu's victory also came from her ability to sacrifice self-interest. She took the smallest portion of the things laid out by the Chander *huri* for her bath; partook of the simplest of meals from all that was available; and then chose the smallest of boxes when the *huri* asked her to choose a box of cotton. This exercise that the *huri* made her complete was ultimately a moral test that she triumphed at, because of the modest nature of her desires. At the same time, the magic helpers she met on her quest rewarded her, because she took time out from chasing the wind that had blown away her cotton, in order to help them. Her rival in the story, Sukhu, because she displayed arrogance and selfishness was punished by the same beings who had rewarded Dukhu. The female hero, thus, while displaying agency was ultimately dependant on more traditionally female attributes for her heroism. This distinguished female heroism from male heroism which was based on physical abilities, valour, and aggression. Among the women of *Thakurdadar Jhuli*, Malanchamala was the epitome of the self-sacrificing female hero. Her heroism, through which she was able to bring back her dead husband to life and then raise him and return him to his kingdom, was based on her ability to sacrifice her own self-interest as well as her selfhood and her body.

There were however, other kinds of female heroism in the fairy tales. A second kind of female hero were quick thinking and showed great initiative. Such girl-women characters acted as saviours in their stories. Examples of such stories were Lal Behari Day's "Life's Secret" and "Prince Sobur", and Suniti Devi's "The Dead Prince" and "Sabar Karo" where girl-women's wits were at the centre of their heroic activities. The Prince Dalim was saved from his cruel fate by his wife. This girl-woman, who was the daughter of Bidhata Purusha's sister, fulfilled the prophecy that she would marry a dead man, as Dalim was dead during the day and alive

during the night. This peculiar fate was because Dalim's life was in a necklace that his evil stepmother (the Duo queen) had managed to obtain. He died when she wore it and came alive when she removed it from her neck. Dalim's wife used her wit to retrieve the necklace from the Duo queen by disguising herself as a barber and offering her services to the queen. Day's narrator actually credited her as the person who conceived the plan that saved Dalim³³¹. In Suniti Devi's version of the same story, titled "The Dead Prince", from her *Indian Fairy Tales*, Dalim's wife was made the central protagonist, who saved Prince Dalim in the same way.

The merchant's daughter of "Prince Sobur"³³² and the princess of "Sabar Karo"³³³ were turned out of their fathers' homes because one claimed to live by her own fortune and not the fortune of her father, and the other claimed that she would love her husband more than her parents when married.³³⁴ The stories traced their adventures in the forest where they not only survived but became rich and self-sufficient, thereby proving that they indeed lived by their own fortunes. They also found royal husbands for themselves through the workings of their own fates. When tragedy struck, in the form of their husbands' sudden illnesses and their subsequent departures, the merchant's youngest daughter and the Princess both decided to take matters into their own hands and taking the disguise of hermits, they both travelled to foreign lands in search of their husbands. These tragedies, it must be noted, were the results of the villainies of their own older sisters. They found the cure for their husbands' maladies through

³³¹ Lal Behari Day, *Folktales of Bengal* (Kolkata: Uccharan, 1993), 1-14

³³² Lal Behari Day, *Folktales of Bengal* (Kolkata: Uccharan, 1993), 111-121

³³³ Suniti Devi, *Indian Fairy Tales* (Calcutta: The Art Press, 1923), 33-49

³³⁴ Both these stories present the folktale trope of a father testing his three daughters on which *King Lear* is based. Similarly, in Sovana Sundari Devi's "The Hireling Husband", the father tests his sons. The youngest prince, like the youngest daughter in Day's "Prince Sobur", answers that he lives by his own good fortune.

acts of heroic kindness which earned them the loyalty of two talking birds. These creatures provided them with the cures. They subsequently travelled to their husbands' kingdoms, gained entry to the palaces and cured their husbands all under disguise. They even tricked their husbands into parting with the rings gifted to them for their weddings and later showed them as proofs of their actual identities to their wonderstruck spouses. These girl-women thus performed heroic feats through sheer dependence on their own wits and courage.

This kind of female hero was also present in Sovana Sundari's *The Orient Pearls* where in the story "The Wooden Maid", a young girl who had been married but not claimed by her husband was kidnapped by a bunch of robbers. She first escaped from the criminals and then found her way to her husband's home where she put on barks from trees and entered into his service as a wooden maid. The narrative traced her subsequent clever actions as she managed to stall her husband's second attempt at marriage. She was thus shown as using her own wits to save herself and secure her future.

Finally, there were instances of female heroism in the texts where girl-women characters performed acts of heroism that were traditionally masculine. However, there was a caveat under which these acts were performed: female characters were only able to perform them when they were cross-dressed. Cross-dressing allowed the female hero to transgress the boundaries of gender norms. The character of Pushpamala from *Thakurdadar Jhuli*, once she slipped into the clothes of men, performed tasks that were performed by male characters. She rode on horseback, took up the sword and fought against bandits and brigands; she even killed a man who tried to murder her husband.³³⁵ In Sovana Sundari's "The Hireling Husband", a princess dressed as a prince led an army, defeated her father-in-law and took his kingdom. The

³³⁵ Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar, *Thakurdadar Jhuli* (Kolkata: Mitra and Ghosh, 1909), 89-133

masculine clothes that these girl-women put on become the external reflection of their internal gender performance at those particular points in the story and this allows for possibilities of active, physical heroism. Such instances also occurred within other stories where the central characteristic of the female hero was her wit or her ability for self-control. I am referring to the episodes within “Kiranmala” and “Prince Sobur”, where, respectively, Kiranmala disguised herself as a prince and the merchant’s daughter wore the garb of a hermit on the quest to save their loved ones’ life. During the time when they had cross-dressed, they performed physically heroic feats. Dakshinarnajan Mitra Majumdar’s illustrations showed Kiranmala with a drawn sword, traversing the mountain of illusions and taking on the supernatural powers³³⁶. Similarly, the merchant’s daughter traversed unknown territory all alone and fought and killed a huge snake to protect the lives of the chicks she found on a tree under which she had taken shelter. However, importantly, these interchanged gender performances were framed within heterosexual relationships. The girl-women take up “male” roles in order to protect the men they love: husbands in the case of Pushpamala, the merchant’s daughter of “Prince Sobur”, and the princess of “The Hireling Husband”; and brothers in the case of Kiranmala.

While I have argued earlier that self-sacrifice was central to the Bengali cultural construction of women’s love, in certain limited moments, women performed more active action with love as the motivation. Such actions were otherwise restricted to male characters and women’s performance of them was allowed only because of the actions’ role in preserving heterosexual relationships and ultimately the lives their men. The universe of Bengali fairy tales thus allowed a degree of fluidity in the presentation of gender roles. This fluidity

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Dakshinarnajan Mitra Majumdar, *Thakurmar Jhuli* (Kolkata: Mitra and Ghosh, 1907), 129

constituted a break from the hegemonic social constructions of gender that existed in the point of history and the social space where the stories were collected

3.2 *Rupkatha* texts providing space for articulations of female life concerns

When one reads Bengali *rupkatha* stories as coded texts that embed female voices (because it was derived from a female storytelling tradition) despite the fact that most of them entered into print circulation mediated by male authors, one can draw out the narratives' articulation of female life concerns. Concerns such as the pressure to conceive, due to the hope for early children in the marital home to bear the patrilineal name, were represented in the stories where a large number of the plots began with the king's desire for children and the inability of the queens to provide him with heirs. Similarly, fear of the *shotin* (co-wife), which I have discussed in the previous chapter, regularly found its way into the stories. The stories also voiced issues such as women's lack of autonomy in the choice of partners. This issue came to the forefront in "Kalabati Rajkanya", "Patal Kanya Manimala", "Pushpamala", and "Malanchalama", where women were forced to choose partners they did not want (though they eventually found their way out of the quandary). Common grievances against husbands which were regularly found in other popular women's cultural forms, as noted by Sumanta Banerjee³³⁷. This came to the forefront in Lal Behari Day's "Life's Secret" where Dalim Kumar's wife, disguised as a barber, complained about her husband to his step-mother, who listened with a patient ear. Again, despite the overt attempts to present the assertive woman who undermined patriarchal authority as the villain, there also ran a counter-narrative underneath the stories which pitted strong women characters against weak men. These women

³³⁷ Sumanta Banerjee, "Marginalisation of Women's Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Bengal" in *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, ed. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989), 134-137

hatched ingenious plans to get their way, while the men, especially those occupying positions of authority were gullible and could not see through the designs of their women.

There are numerous instances from the stories where kings could understand the real intentions of their queens but one such instance deserves particular attention: the evil human queen/*rakshasi* queen of a gullible king feigning an illness. This made-up illness, a cracking of the joints and bones, appeared both in Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar's "Sonar Kathi Rupar Kathi" and in Lal Behari Day's "Life's Secret" where the queens placed dried stalks of plants under their mattresses and rolled over them thus creating the crackling sound which they claimed were from their bones and joints. The purpose of the display was to manipulate the king into commissioning an act which, while said to be the remedy for the disease, would actually help the queens get rid of the prince protagonists who were their enemies. That the king would believe this "*harmurmure rog*" or bone-crackling disease displayed their gullibility to the extent that Day introduced a physician who was in collusion with the queen in order to make the entire scenario plausible. These situations were actual reflections of the way women wielded some degree of autonomy and power over their lives and that of their families. Since power was overtly a male bastion, women had to devise clear means to covertly gain control over the men of their family. Food, sexuality and ingeniousness were used as means to that end.

The stories also presented certain strong matriarchal figures who represented the pre-colonial women healers and wise women who wielded some degree of direct power within the rural social structures. These women were bearers of traditional knowledge systems and often, venerated figures. The character of Phakir Chand's mother in *Folktales of Bengal* who also appeared as Penchor *ma* in *Thakurmar Jhuli*, claimed to know the cure to the prince's madness. When the king asked her how she was in possession of such knowledge when all the physicians he had summoned had failed to cure the prince, she simply answered "many an old woman

knows secrets with which wise men are unacquainted”.³³⁸ This answer was perfectly acceptable to the king, who did not challenge her authority and allowed her to see the prince. Similarly, the *malini* in “Kanchanmala” seemed to know folk magic, popularly referred to as *tuktak* in rural Bengal which she used to further the interests of her own niece. Both women were placed in villainous roles but they corresponded with the historical reality of women bearing medicinal, magical and utilitarian knowledge. Such women were very much a part of rural Bengali society and often became figures of worship both within folk Hinduism and syncretic Islamic cults. Chander *ma buri*, who appeared in “Sukhu Dukhu” was closer to such female folk deities.

The most obvious example of such deities would be the goddesses Shitala and Olaichandi or Olabibi. Shitala the goddess of smallpox and Olaichandi/Olabibi the goddess of cholera are worshipped by both Bengali Hindus and Bengali Muslims as a means of protection from these diseases. But apart from these, rural Bengal to this day continues to have folk deities with localised influence who are venerated by the common people.³³⁹ They are also feared in that they can harm those who do not suitably gratify them. Ghagar Buri worshipped near the Nunia river bank in Asansol, Bonbibi, worshipped in the Sundarbans or Jota Buri³⁴⁰

³³⁸ Lal Behari Day, *Folktales of Bengal* (Kolkata: Uccharan, 1993), 22

³³⁹ For a detailed study of such deities refer to Gopendra Krishna Basu’s *Banglar Loukik Debata* (Kolkata: Dey’s Publishing, 1987)

³⁴⁰ The lesser known Jota Buri is believed to be a figure who has a subterranean existence in lakes. She gives things to people who call upon her from the banks and ask for the particular things. She is believed to come to the aid of the poor who need material things for such situations as a daughter’s marriage or the like. She emerges only at night away from prying eyes and people have to pray to her the day before. However, whether she will grant the gift depends upon whether she deems the worshiper worthy and truly in need. Stories abound of people who have been left gold or have found pots and pans in her water. From personal interview of Binapani Halder, Porabazar, Hooghly. 18/02/2019

worshipped in rural Hooghly are among countless such examples. However, these folk deities were historically marginalised by mainstream Brahminical Hinduism and conservative Islam. There have been thrusts to identify Olaichandi/Olabibi with the Vedic Hindu goddess Chandi while Bonbibbi has been recasted as Bagra Devi with an iconography closely resembling the Hindu goddess Bhagabati or Durga. In a similar strain, women with mastery over traditional knowledge systems have been historically marginalised by indigenous Bengali bourgeois patriarchy and by English colonial masters who were uncomfortable with both the knowledge they practised as well as with women as figures of authority.

Women's writing of *rupkatha* and the reclaiming of the storytelling tradition? The contrasts in the presentation of female rivalry between stories written by the male collectors and the stories written by women collectors also hold true in their overall representation of women's natures and behaviours. Lal Behari Day's misogynist assumption about women's natures went beyond the depiction of female rivalry as the natural consequence of inherent problems in women's natures. His assumptions about female nature compelled him to make narratorial interventions that held women up to patriarchal standards of behaviour and found them wanting. He portrayed women as prone to fits of irrational impulses that ultimately landed them in trouble. For example, in "Phakir Chand", the princess, living in the subterranean palace felt the urge to explore the world above the waters of the lake beneath which she and her prince lived (much like Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar's *Manimala*). While she was able to do this uneventfully twice, on her third visit, she was observed by another prince who fell in love with her and wanted to have her for himself. She was kidnapped and separated from her husband on her fourth visit because she could not get the better of her impulses. Day's story included this comment: "women generally have greater curiosity than men; and the princess of the underground palace was no exception to the general rule." It was because of this that she had decided to make a fourth visit despite "the mishap which had occurred on her last visit to the

upper world” and even after she “had given up the idea of a fourth visit.”³⁴¹ After being kidnapped, the princess regretted that her misfortune was of her own doing: “She lamented that idle curiosity which had led her to come to the upper world, leaving her husband below. O fate! It is by my own fault that I am reduced to this wretched state.”³⁴²

Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar’s narratorial interventions though not so overt also made subtle patriarchal assumptions about female behaviour. For example, in *Thakurdadar Jhuli*’s “Madhumala”, that the two *paris*, Kal Pari and Nidra Pari (Time Fairy and Sleep Fairy), carried the sleeping prince, Madan Kumar, from his jungle camp to Princess Madhumala’s room in her distant kingdom, was simply out of an impulse. Their motivation for the act was a feeling that the two beautiful people would look good together and they executed this mischief by choosing to override their better judgement which was telling them to go on with their own business of waiting on Lord Indra and leave the sleeping prince alone. This ultimately sent Madan Kumar out on his quest and caused great grief to his doting parents.

In contrast, Suniti Devi and Sobhana Sundari Devi presented fairies as responsible, benevolent figures and sources of good magic. In the story “The Sand-river and the Stone-boat”, from Sovana’s *The Orient Pearls*, it was fairies who revived the dead man and not any god/goddess as was common with Day, or a religious figure like a hermit as was common with Mitra Majumdar. Similarly, in Suniti Devi’s story “The Needle Prince”, it was fairies whose intervention revealed the truth about the princess’s identity to the prince. Jack Zipes has observed how fairies had grown as secular sources of magic in the genre identified as “fairy tales” particularly in the hands of the eighteenth century French women fairy tale writers.

³⁴¹ Lal Behari Day, *Folktales of Bengal* (Kolkata: Uccharan, 1993), 24

³⁴² Lal Behari Day, *Folktales of Bengal* (Kolkata: Uccharan, 1993), 25

Although initially not integral to the genre, fairies in western literary fairy tales became an important aspect of the stories, as secular sources of good magic and as powerful omnipotent and omnipresent figures.³⁴³ Suniti and Sovana's use of the fairy figure was influenced from the large scale presence of fairies in Victorian fairy tales. On the other hand, fairies were originally introduced in Bengali folklore with the advent of Islam and Islamic tales. The Bengali word for fairies "*pari*" is of Persian descent. Sovana's stories refer to them with the anglicised version of the Bengali word "*peri*". Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar's and Lal Behari Day's reluctance to depend upon fairies as the source of good magic stemmed from their discomfort with the figures as I have already discussed in the second chapter.

Sovana Sundari Devi and Suniti Devi's portrayal of women was also very different from the generalised picture of women that can be observed in Day's and Mitra Majumdar's volumes. Far from being capricious or irrationally curious, women were presented as intelligent beings who use their own intelligence to create favourable circumstances. This chapter has already discussed Sovana Sundari Devi's childless queen from "The Wax Prince", who when at risk of being replaced by another, used her own wits to find solutions to her problems and ultimately reached a happy ending³⁴⁴, as well as the young "wooden" maid, who not only escaped her kidnappers but also used her brains innovatively to ultimately pave way for a reunion with her husband³⁴⁵. Most of the stories in Suniti Devi's collection were told from the perspective of women and thus presented tales of trials and tribulation from which women

³⁴³ Jack Zipes, *Fairytales and the Art of Subversion: The Classical Genre for Children and the Process of Civilization* (New York: Routledge, 2006)

Jack Zipes, *The Irresistible Fairy Tale* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012)

³⁴⁴ Shovona Devi, *The Orient Pearls* (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd, 1915), 20-28

³⁴⁵ Shovona Devi, *The Orient Pearls* (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd, 1915), 57-62

came out victorious. Their own luck, wits and certain supernatural machineries aided them in their journeys. Examples of such stories were “The Needle Prince”,³⁴⁶ “The Snake Prince”,³⁴⁷, “The Monkey”,³⁴⁸, “Sabar Karo”,³⁴⁹ and “The Dead Prince”,³⁵⁰. The last story, “The Dead Prince” was a retelling of the story of Dalim Kumar, published by Lal Behari Day in *Folktales of Bengal* as “Life’s Secret”, told from the perspective of the princess who becomes Dalim’s wife.

Again, most strikingly, Sovana Sundari Devi personifies wit as a woman. She referred to wit as “mother-wit”,³⁵¹ which was a novel figure, since wit is traditionally classified as a masculine quality. In her writing, wit was invoked as a maternal figure and called upon to come to the rescue of the woman protagonist.

Thus, when women writers wrote down *rupkatha* stories, their portrayals of women and women’s roles were much less restrictive. The works of the women writers also brought female subjectivity to the forefront through their storytelling. One such instance from Sovana Sundari stands out uniquely from all other such episodes in the stories of the other writers. This instance demonstrated a particularly female subjectivity at work and must be mentioned here. A prince travelling to foreign lands on a difficult errand; falling in love with a princess; winning her hand in marriage and subsequently marrying her was a fairy tale action that can be found in

³⁴⁶ Suniti Devi, *Indian Fairy Tales* (Calcutta: The Art Press, 1923), 1-12

³⁴⁷ Suniti Devi, *Indian Fairy Tales* (Calcutta: The Art Press, 1923), 13-20

³⁴⁸ Suniti Devi, *Indian Fairy Tales* (Calcutta: The Art Press, 1923), 21-32

³⁴⁹ Suniti Devi, *Indian Fairy Tales* (Calcutta: The Art Press, 1923), 33-49

³⁵⁰ Suniti Devi, *Indian Fairy Tales* (Calcutta: The Art Press, 1923), 70-84

³⁵¹ Shovona Devi, *The Orient Pearls* (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd, 1915), 21

many *rupkatha* stories. However, the prince in Sovana's "The Sand-river, the Stone-boat and the Monkey-ferryman" after completing the tasks required for winning the hand of the princess showed great consideration for the princess by traversing round the fire only six times during the wedding ceremony and refusing to complete the seventh and final step of the marriage saying that if his perilous adventure resulted in his death the princess should remain free to marry anyone else³⁵². Attention to such minute details were missing elsewhere. In other stories, princes marry foreign princesses with regularity and go on adventures without thinking of the consequences it might have had on their wives. A woman writer wrote from a woman's point of view.

However, while these differences in approach were evident and can be contrasted with the attempts by male writers at the appropriation of the female storytelling tradition, Sovana and Suniti were still removed from the oral female tradition. There existed a cultural as well as a class gap between these women writers who belonged to elite, urban families and the progenitors of the oral tradition. This cultural difference influenced their linguistic styles, motifs and even their portrayal of gender. For example, Suniti Devi in the story "Sabar Karo", which told the same story as Lal Behari Day's "Prince Sobur", turned an answer that established the autonomy of the central female character into a contest between the conflicting claims of filial love versus conjugal love. This no doubt was drawn from discussions of Victorian domestic morality and its ideas of conjugal felicity. The merchant's daughter in "Prince Sobur" enraged her father by claiming to live not on her father's but on her own fortune whereas in "Sabar Karo", the princess enraged her father by saying that she loved her parents the most now but would love her husband the best after she is married. Episodes like this showed anglicised, bourgeois values at work in the published texts.

³⁵² Shovona Devi, *The Orient Pearls* (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd, 1915), 74

5. Conclusion

Rupkatha narratives then present both strong female characters with the capacity for agential action but also reproduce patriarchal social structures and heteronormative gender roles. The representation of gender in the stories was informed both by the dominant social views of women and the gender roles present in the communities among which the stories circulated. The gender attitudes represented in the texts was thus inherent in the sources from whom the writers collected the stories, as well as emanating from the ideological standpoints of the authors. This created complex layers of discursive viewpoints that interacted with each other in a multitude of ways, causing patriarchal models of gender to exist side by side with moments that subverted such established dominant gender models. At the level of literary narration, writers like Lal Behari Day represented women coloured with the subtle misogyny of Protestant Victorian gender norms. Sovana Sundari undermined those same constructions in her stories by feminising values like wit which were traditionally seen as male in Western social and philosophical constructs. The Bengali literary *rupkatha* pantheon thus amalgamated Western and Indian social values and presented both: liberating gender models as well as enforced dominant gender stereotypes.

Furthermore, because of the centrality of the family in the political discourse of the early Indian nationalists, when the family structure and the nature of the relationships within it was projected on and compared with the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised, women and gender relationships had gained a central position within the political discourse of the time. Mitra Majumdar's representation of women had thus contributed to the development of the swadeshi cultural ideals. The self-sacrificing and obedient woman was valorised, as was the woman who placed the interests of the family and by extension the social order before her own interests and well-being. The models for female heroism were also linked to these

characteristics and presented as distinct from male heroism. The antithesis of the qualities that constituted this rigid idea of the Indian woman, was embodied in the figure of the evil woman.

However, as this chapter has tried to show, the impact of male appropriation of a female storytelling tradition and the tensions that ensued from such an appropriation also led to diversity in the construction of women characters and gendered behaviour. Women, no matter good or bad, remained the central figures in the universe of these tales. Wise old women appeared who were empowered to change fortunes at will and women, when cross-dressed, had access to more masculine behavioural traits. They turned into traditional heroes who came to the rescue of their men. Bengali women authors despite being removed from the bearers of the oral stories because of the difference of class and education were able to reclaim the position of women as storytellers to a certain extent by placing women centre stage in their stories and giving them the liberty to act with far more freedom than male writers before them. When the stories of the women writers are read side by side with the stories of male writers, conservative gender representation breaks down and narratorial interventions of male writers come out in sharper contrast. However, these women writers and their works have largely been erased from Bengali literary history. Thus, much of the enduring cultural and literary influence of the *rupkatha* texts has been derived from the works of Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar and Lal Behari Day. Because of the tremendous success of *Thakurmar Jhuli* and *Thakurdadar Jhuli* and the central position it has enjoyed in the canon of Bengali literature, gender constructions from the text have entered into later popular cultural texts. For example, ideas of sacrificing *lakshmi bou*, who holds up the family integrity, and devouring *rakshasi bou*, who destroys the family, though derived from the specific constructions of Indian (Hindu) womanhood during the nationalist period of the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century, have remained pervasive in Bengali popular culture which has consistently idealised self-sacrificing women, be it in films made for mass consumption or in television soaps.

CONCLUSION

The Bengali fairy tale collections that appeared in print circulation between 1870 and 1925, were not a regional phenomenon that played out within the circumscribed world of a province within British India. The texts produced in Bengal were part of an international intellectual network, that saw the exchange of data and influences across the British Empire, and the anglophone world. This network was created by the British empire alongside other trade and monetary networks. This network dealt with data, mostly anthropological, but also otherwise. Stories, songs, ritual practices and other cultural material was fed into this network by British scholars and carried to the center of the Empire for the benefit of the Western episteme. This episteme was in turn exported to the colonies where it was used to create generations of native scholars who imbibed this processed data. Bengal, which was the political center of the British Empire in India, had a long cultural engagement with the England and as a result, was at the direct crosswinds of cultural exchange. It was in the context of this British intellectual network and the Indian nationalist intelligentsia's response to it, that the literary genre of *rupkatha* or Bengali fairy tales took shape in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The cultural exchange between Britain and Bengal in the nineteenth century, brought the Grimm Brothers, the behemoth of European folktale/fairy tale scholarship, into the region. English Victorian publications had wide circulation in Calcutta and thus many of the English translations of the Grimm Brothers works were easily available in Bengal. Their popularity in turn had led to the publication of multiple Bengali translations of their stories. More importantly, English folktale/fairy tale scholars who were deeply influenced by the them popularised their scholarship among the indigenous intelligentsia. Thus, many of the Grimm Brothers ideas, such as, folktales/ fairy tales as natural poetry, the ideal storyteller as the old peasant woman, the folk as the repertoire of indigenous culture and the intimate relationship of

the folk and folk traditions with the nation, circulated among indigenous Bengali fairy tale scholars and helped shape the conception of their work. The idea that fairy tale and folktale collections provide a direct voice to the common people, an idea that caused collector-writers to stress on “authenticity” as the hallmark of a successful collection of stories, can also be traced back to the Grimm Brothers. As can the idea that the work of the author of the fairy tale/folktale collections is to be a facilitator for the channeling of the voice of the folk, and that this can be achieved by collecting stories from the common rustic people and rendering them in print, with minimum intervention on part of the author. These ideas already in wide circulation across Europe and in some of its colonies came to Bengal in the late Victorian period and found largescale acceptance for reasons more than one. Firstly, the idea that the folklore of a people could reveal the people’s direct voice, and thereby, provide a multitude of anthropological and cultural data about the people, titillated imperialist fantasies. The possibility of gathering such knowledge and employing it for consolidating the empire was exciting. Knowledge about the natives was the key to better administration. Accordingly, Britishers who worked in the capacity of administrative officers were encouraged to collect and publish folk literature of all kinds. Secondly, the growing Indian nationalism and particularly the Swadeshi movement after the first Partition of Bengal in 1905, also found cultural nationalism instrumental in building a nationalistic feeling among the people. The Grimm Brothers, were proponents of the romantic idea of shared common culture of the common people as the true basis of a nation. They also believed that they were contributing to the cause of German unification through their work *Kinder und Hausmarchen*, at a time when Germany was divided into many smaller independent states. As folktales and fairy tales were used for the purpose of a nationalist cultural renewal, the parallels between the rhetoric used by the Brothers and Bengali intellectuals commenting on fairy tales/folk tales during the

Swadeshi phase, was symptomatic of the shared philosophy employed in two different spaces but to similar political causes.

However, as the Grimm Brothers came to Bengal through the British as intermediary, many of the British myths about the Brothers work, such as their collection of stories being meant for children, also influenced the Bengali view of fairy tales and folktales. This myth had been generated by early English translations of the *Kinder und Hausmarchen* and had contributed to the large-scale Victorian association of children and fairy stories. Nineteenth century England had seen the rise of a dedicated children's literature segment within the print market and many of these texts were also in circulation in the colonies. The presence of dedicated fairy tale books for children in turn led to the association between Bengali fairy tales (*rupkatha*) and children. This was particularly true of the indigenous collections that appeared in the Swadeshi phase. As the Bengali stories derived from oral narratives negotiated the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century colonial print market, they found their place within the genre of *sishu sahitya*, the Bengali equivalent of children's literature. This nomenclature was coined in 1899 by Ramendrasundar Tribedi in his introduction to the *Khukumonir Chora*, a collection of rhymes by Jogindranath Sarkar. The irony that the genre itself had been shaped under the influence of the British literary genre of children's literature, and that situating fairy tale texts derived from oral narratives within the genre of *sishu sahitya* was made possible as a result of the Victorian linkages between fairy tales and children, was lost on swadeshi intelligentsia.

While the Grimm Brothers' work was an important influence on the collector-writers working in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the immediate interest in Bengali folktales and fairy tales in this period was the by-product of the imperial efforts at collecting anthropological data about the native population. Indigenous folklore was identified as one such data pool. A number of narratives derived from oral tradition thus appeared in print from

the middle of the nineteenth century. Such stories were published both in independent volumes as well as in journals dedicated to the study of the folklore emerging from the colonies. *The Indian Antiquary* which published the stories authored by GH Damant, the first writer of Bengali fairy tales, was one among dozens of such journals that were published in this period. Three phases of fairy tale collection in Bengal can be identified during the period between 1870-1925. The first phase consisted of activities by British administrators, missionaries and the women who accompanied them. The second phase saw the work of indigenous collectors who were inspired by British scholarship, and believed that they were also contributing to the efforts of collecting oral material from India for the benefit of academic study by circles situated in London. The third and final phase witnessed works by indigenous writers as part of the attempt at a swadeshi cultural revival during the years leading to and following the first partition of Bengal in 1905. The initial period was a pan-Empire phenomenon. Folk narratives were collected from across the colonies that the British controlled in the nineteenth century, which included Bengal and other parts of India. This imperial quest for knowledge about the natives effectively showed that attempts were made by the British during the colonial period to control not only a people and their natural resources, but also their culture. The culture of the colonised was exploited, much like their natural resources and this culture was fed into the western episteme and treated as ahistorical data. This gathered knowledge was used in the study of the native populace and in all kinds of narrative building about the native. It was because of this that the British attempts at producing authentic collections of oral Bengali tales were seeped in the discourse of scientific study. In fact, such attempts can be included among the plethora of pseudosciences that grew in the nineteenth century and attempted to study the racial other.

In the years following the rise of an early nationalist consciousness, particularly during the period of the swadeshi movement, there were attempts at reviving indigenous Bengali

cultural practices which predated the colonisation of India. *Jatras*, *melas*, oral storytelling and other folkloric traditions, were chosen for the project of revival and recirculation. Many of these traditions had been left to ossify away from the cultural milieu of the colonial *bhadrolok*. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the hybrid sensibility of the Bengali *bhadrolok*, derived from their education in the British colonial education system, was often embarrassed with the perceived coarseness of these traditions. At the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, these traditions were re-established as the repository of national culture. Bengali fairy tales and folk tales were the beneficiary of this renewed interest and were repackaged for a modern literate audience. However, the viewpoints which organised these texts was determinedly located within the *bhadrolok* worldview and the folk tradition became a site for their projections and constructions. The prerogatives of these *bhadrolok* writers, that led to the projects which resulted in their volume of stories, can be traced in the introductions and prefaces that accompanied their collections. These essays also register their influences and some of their ideological systems. These thus have been of seminal importance in the study of the Bengali fairy tale as a literary genre of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. These essays and commentaries built the discourses around the genre and shaped the readers expectations of the stories. They added newer meanings, told the reader how to read the stories, and how to use them for what end. These prose pieces thus created the genre and set the genre expectations in the mind of the contemporary reader.

British scholarship in Bengal also left an important legacy in setting the template for the profile of the fairy tale writer-collector. The indigenous male fairy tale collector-writer was usually a professional man who was collecting on the side of his profession. This was in continuation of the general profile of the British male collector-writer of fairy tales in Bengal who was either an officer of the imperial administration or a missionary. Lal Behari Day was a priest and a teacher, while Ramsatya Mukherjee was a native civil servant. It was only

Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar who was a professional litterateur and a prolific writer. On the other hand, the British women collectors were usually women who had accompanied British men on their duty to India. Their sheltered life and circumstances were replicated by the life of the two Bengali women collectors of fairy tales that this thesis has studied, Sovana Sundari Devi and Suniti Devi, both of whom were both born into elite families of the time. The British women who collected and wrote fairy tales were encouraged to do so by their immediate family members or friends. The Bengali women too were inspired through personal connections. However, all of the indigenous collectors, male or female, had one thing in common: they were necessarily members of the *bhadrolok* classes, the class that constituted the native intelligentsia of colonial Bengal.

The writers that this thesis has studied were effectively writing literary fairy tales while extracting narratives from an oral folk tradition. Thus, the Bengali literary fairy tale grew out of the folktale and was removed from it by difference of class between the teller and writer, medium of transcription, and the circle of circulation. These differences were not trivial but were integral to the extent that it affected the process of signification of the stories. The literary tradition was distinguished from the oral tradition in the discursive organization of the texts, as they bore the imprint of the values and ideological viewpoints of the collector-writers. The British viewpoints were orientalist, as they were engaging with a foreign culture, attempting to gain enough understanding to be able to translate it for an audience almost completely unacquainted with the culture. They were, however, at the same time evaluating the foreign cultural productions on the basis of conceptions and categories lodged staunchly within western epistemologies and value systems. The *bhadrolok* writers too were molding the stories according to value systems of their own. Hence, the attempt by each of these writers to claim that their volumes contained “authentic” literal transcriptions of oral stories, were attempts at myth making. Such a claim was definitely undermined by the multi layered process of

collecting, editing, translating and type setting that the stories underwent, before the oral could reach the print. A critical evaluation of their works, as this thesis has done, furthermore, reveals that there were deliberate omissions, additions and other interventions on part of the authors based on their ideological standpoints. These question their claim that the written texts and the oral narratives were mirror images of each other. These interventions, though deliberate on part of the author, often fell into the purview of accepted methodology as had been established by colonial folktale and fairy tale scholarship. The British collector-writer's process of publishing stories was even more layered as they used a native intermediary who knew both the local language and English to help in the collection of stories. This issue went unrecognised alongside other issues that the collector-writers failed to address, such as loss of meanings through translation and the possibility of self-censorship on part of the oral informants who might not have been comfortable speaking to colonialists or *bhadroloks* who were culturally far removed from them.

Most of the texts that were written in English by the collector-writers in this period were transnational in nature. They were interpreting a Bengali cultural tradition for an anglophone readership situated in colonial India, in England and the rest of the Empire. These texts focussed on an indigenous Bengali tradition but were presenting it for a readership beyond the cultural community of its origin. This required the collector-writer to serve as cultural intermediary between the teller of the stories and the reader, both of whom were located at a spatial and cultural distance. Meaning making was not possible without such bridging. Yet, at the same time the translation, both linguistic and cultural, that this process entailed, also ensured that a whole plethora of things were lost and gained in the middle. The final printed text could in no way be transparent transcriptions of a culturally specific oral tradition as the collector-writers claimed. Sadhana Naithani has argued that the nationalist scholarship of

folklore by natives themselves in the colonies were not as “voluminous or expansive”³⁵³ as that done by the colonialists. This does not hold true in the case of Bengal, where the swadeshi cultural revival project resulted in a flurry of indigenous scholarly activity based on folklore both in terms of their collection and study. For most of the period that this thesis has studied, Bengali nationalism was in effect Indian nationalism, as Bengal being the centre of British India was in contact with the colonisers for the longest time and early nationalist efforts were also concentrated in the region. The swadeshi phase of folktale and fairy tale collection essentially broke the unidirectional chain of flow of knowledge from the colony to the heart of the empire, that is London, as the cultural material was both collected and studied by the Bengali intelligentsia. Archiving activity and discourse building occurred within the colony itself, and parallels could be drawn with European folklore scholarship aimed at nation building, such as, that of the Grimm Brothers. Certain ideas that were part of the Brothers’ conception of fairy tales made an appearance within the swadeshi discourse that grew around *rupkatha*: the idea of the folk repertoire as national tradition, the peasant woman, now recast as the national mother, as its bearer, and the important role of the stories in nourishing the body of the national child.

Now, the community based oral tradition from which the Bengali fairy tale evolved was predominantly carried forward by women storytellers. British collectors had in the initial phase identified women as the better source of oral narratives and had encouraged British women in India to collect narratives as it was easier for them to access native women. This was despite the discomfort that many Britishers felt about the content of the narratives. British women received encouragement for this task as gaining access to Indian women had proved to be a

³⁵³ Sadhana Naithani, *The Story-Time of the British Empire: Colonial and Postcolonial Folkloristics* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 4

notoriously difficult task for British men. This difficulty had also led them to solicit help from native Indian men. The Bengali intelligentsia in their own discussions of the Bengali fairy tale also identified women as the primary bearer of the oral storytelling tradition. Now, enough doubts can be cast on such associations. Both British and Bengali intelligentsia during this period earnestly subscribed to the romanticization of the folktale and fairy tale as ancient narratives from time immemorial, stemming from a folk who were simple, uncorrupted and therefore infantile. The natural culmination of such romanticization was the association of these narratives with women and children. Infact, this myth making can be consistently traced in Western cultural history. This has been commented upon by Angela Carter in her discussion of fairy tales. She states that the usage “old wives’ tales” was a sly misogynist trope that labelled fairy tales as “worthless stories, untruths, trivial gossip, a derisive label that allot(ed) the art of storytelling to women at the exact same time as it...(took) all value from it”³⁵⁴. However, it was an undeniable fact that till the nineteenth century, Bengali women’s culture was predominantly oral. Literacy rates were dismally low, and women’s cultural lives were dominated by proverbs, adages and stories. Women storytellers abounded the Bengali country side, as well as the streets of Calcutta, and had unrestricted to the houses of the land-based gentry as well as the newly created urban *bhadrolok*.

Bengal’s religious and thereby, cultural past contributed to this. The Buddhist *Jatakas* and the *Panchatantra* had entered into oral storytelling traditions as they were recited by monks who were both men and women. Later, through the fluidity that marked oral traditions, these stories changed form over time. This legacy remained till the colonial period as a number of storytellers were Buddhists. One of Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar’s oral informants was a

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Angela Carter, *Angela Carter’s Book of Fairy Tales* (London: Virago, 1990), xi

woman who was a Buddhist nun.³⁵⁵ Under the circumstances, it was not improbable that much of the narratives that found their way into the published volumes of fairy tales between 1870-1925 were heard from women. However, that none of these women were from the *bhadrolok* homes was because the creation of the *bhadromahila* through the nineteenth century, occurred through a process of education that purged from her cultural world these folk derived popular traditions. Furthermore, the association between women and the indigenous Bengali fairy tale tradition had an extra dimension in the context of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This association gained significance during the spread of the early nationalist social consciousness. Contemporary discourses about Bengali/Indian culture under imperial rule, had divided culture into two spheres and ascribed a gender to each. In this gender binary, as tradition itself was placed on women, this link between women and an oral cultural tradition was not exclusive to the discussion around the Bengali fairy tales. Indigenous cultural tradition and women, both belonging to the internal realm, was sought to be kept sacrosanct and away from external state politics. However, in truth they had become intensely political sites for cultural nationalist politics and the foundation from which the campaign for reclaiming the people and the land could be launched. As the result of renewed focus on them, as the bearer and the centre of national tradition and the spiritual core, both women and indigenous tradition became the early sites for decolonisation of Bengali culture, even as this decolonisation process entailed the subjection of both to a new patriarchy and to projections by the *bhadrolok*.

Now, while popular culture and folk culture had been marginalised through the course of the nineteenth century, women's folk and folk derived popular cultural traditions had faced double marginalisation. The swadeshi cultural consciousness somewhat managed to stem the erosion of these cultural forms (the natural result of such marginalisation). However, the cross-

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Sankar Sen Gupta, *Folklorists of Bengal* (Kolkata: Indian Publications, 1965), 116

class popularity of women's oral forms was no longer possible. Instead, these oral cultures, now became material for literary cultures. Therefore, not just *rupkatha*, but other women's traditions also found their way into print publications, for example, the *bratakathas*. Male literary intervention with the aim of revival and recirculation among the *bhadrolok* literary classes, received great praise from contemporary cultural critics and these literary volumes included prose manifestoes that declared their purpose and explained the need for their literary productions. The *bhadromahila* writers arrived late in the scene, almost a decade after Rabindranath Tagore's Preface to *Thakurmar Jhuli*, where he lamented the unsuitability of *bhadromahila* literary language for the purpose of writing down the stories. Whether their choice of English as a medium of writing over Bengali, was a choice affected by such a damning judgement is an interesting question. Sovana Devi, one of the next generation of the Tagore household, named her famous uncle as a source of personal inspiration in her brief preface which did not attempt at any lofty declaration of purpose. Suniti Devi's volume of stories did not carry an introductory essay at all. This silence and brevity was representative of the spirit of humility which was necessary when a woman entered the public sphere of publishing. As indigenous women writer-collectors of Bengali fairy tales, they were breaking into a male bastion of scholarship and literary activity. However, their brevity and silence also meant that critical information about their motivations and methodologies remain missing, even as they reclaimed the storytelling tradition for women. Their writing by focussing on women's perspectives staged a recoup despite the schism in class affiliation between them and their oral material.

The male *bhadrolok* writers with their focus on presenting an old women's cultural tradition, to a newer generation of women and children chose to focus on particular images of women while wiping out others. The image and role of woman as mother came to be exalted while female childhood was glossed over. This erasure was typical of heteropatriarchy's

reduction of women exclusively to their reproductive value. Furthermore, it was also representative of the covert control of patriarchy over Bengali culture. Within this cultural domain, the major religious cults centrally focussed on female deities or the loving relationship of a child-god with his mother, seemingly provided central place to women within the community culture and thereby contributed to empowering representation of women, but actually continued to enforce motherhood as the only model of womanhood. This focus on the figure of the mother was true for Bengali culture in general and seeped into its cultural productions. The Bengali fairy tale was no exception and woman as mother dominated the universe of the stories. Therefore, the representation of marginal women such as the widow or the *aiburo*, rarely focussed upon in the context of the Bengali fairy tale has been studied in this thesis to show the exciting ways social reality entrenched itself into the fantasy universe. The same can be traced in the representation of undesirable women such as the *rakshasi* and the *alakshmi*. Myth, folklore, and Puranic ideas combined with nineteenth century ideas about the woman of the street and the disobedient woman inside the house, the enemy within, (characters condemned time and again in contemporary women's self-help magazines and periodicals) in the casting of these figures in the stories. Furthermore, the late nineteenth and early twentieth century discourses about the purity and the spiritual capacity for self-sacrifice in the Indian (Hindu) woman were also projected upon the good women in the texts published during the swadeshi cultural resistance. Parallels could be drawn between the *deshlakshmi* or the blessed women of the land that Tagore referred to and the *lakshmi bou* or good women of the stories. On the other hand, the Victorian discomfort with female sexuality manifested itself in the treatment of female characters in the writing of the *bhadrolok* writers. What is evident from here is that the fairy tale texts published in the period between 1870 and 1925 were well rooted in its historical time and space. Its discursive organisation was drawn from the late nineteenth century but also displayed the cultural values and attitudes of the communities from which they

originated. Thus, popular cultural conceptions of the childless woman, or the distinction of female heroism from male heroism, or the linking of gendered behaviour to external attire can be deconstructed from the narratives.

The *rupkatha* stories as derived from the oral tradition, although not studied as such by feminist historians, should be placed alongside other women's popular cultural forms such as *bratakathas*, *panchali* narratives, proverbs, celebration specific songs such as *basar* songs, *agamani* and *bijaya* songs and vast number of other daily cultural practises as a means of socialisation of the girl child. On one hand, the *rupkatha* can be seen articulating the same sociocultural historical realities from women's perspectives as these other cultural forms. On the other hand, they set up expectations of conjugality, notions of ideal womanhood, while also imparting advice from an older generation to the next. *Rupkatha's* central focus on family and the household, where even the external administration of kingdoms was dependent upon the politics inside the *andarmahal*, and the fact that the conflict between the good woman who brought prosperity and the bad woman who devoured and destroyed, did not just have ramifications for the family unit, but spilled over into the public realm, showed how the narrative perspective was entrenched within women's point of view. This establishes the inferences made in this thesis that that *rupkatha* was part of a women's tradition. A critical reading of these cultural productions provides important insights into the historical lives and concerns of women within Bengali society, especially as women's voices did not find an outlet either in the social reform debates or within the nationalist discourses on women. Women remained restricted to being sites of public debates and discourses but never the author of them. In contrast, women's voices can be traced within the culture forms whose chief bearers were women. The fluidity that marked oral transmission provided considerable scope for authorial playfulness and were used as such by female tellers for weaving in the common issues. In the case of *rupkatha*, as these issues were resolved and moral justice established at the end, the

chief function of the stories was imaginative wish fulfilment. In the lived lives of women, it allowed space for autonomous expression and emotional release, thus allowing moments of break from social structures that enforced submission. Elizabeth Grosz provides an interesting lens for viewing such moments of agency exercised by women while located within heteropatriarchal structures, without the complete dismantling of those said structures. Grosz looks at a materially grounded understanding of female agency. She proposes that the idea of agency should be visualised as the capacity for individual action, and this she does through a concept of “freedom to” as the exploration of what the female or feminist subject “is capable of making and doing.” Grosz states that, in order to understand agency and autonomy, “instead of linking the question of freedom to the concept of emancipation or to some understanding of liberation from, or removal of, an oppressive or unfair form of constraint or limitation, as is most common in feminist and other anti-oppressive struggles and discourses”, she wants to “develop a concept of life, bare life, where freedom is conceived not only or primarily as the elimination of constraint or coercion but more positively as the condition of, or capacity for, action in life”³⁵⁶. Such an idea of freedom does not assume a passive subject (a simple receptor of the pressures and forces acting upon her), but recognises the subject’s autonomy and agentive capacity, even as social constraints and pressures act upon her. This idea helps in the study of the position of women as tellers, hearers and subjects in relation to the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century Bengali fairy tale. They emerged from a time and place when the more conventional understanding of freedom as *freedom from* all forms of constraints and gender discrimination could not apply. The female bearers of this tradition despite not

³⁵⁶ Elizabeth Grosz, “Feminism, Materialism and Freedom”, in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency and Politics*, ed by Samantha Frost and Diane Coole (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 139-157

having attained what we would see as crucial rights and privileges, still had the “ability to act and in acting to make oneself even as one is made by external forces [social pressures]”³⁵⁷. In other words, oral cultural traditions like the *rupkatha* were a means of socialisation, that incorporated its listeners/bearers into conventional social structures. However, they never foreclosed the possibility for subversion as the individual teller was afforded the possibility for autonomous expression (longings, critiques, fears, rebellions etc) through the fluidity of the story telling tradition. These autonomous expressions can still be traced within *bhadrolok* narratives despite their authorial interventions, omissions and additions. Women claimed selfhood, married consensually, manipulated men into doing their bidding and generally remained the most dominating presence within the universe of the *rupkatha* narratives.

These texts that this thesis has studied came through the mediation of the writer-collector. The oral narratives were uprooted from its cultural locale within its community of tellers and listeners and introduced into the world of print circulation. The language of the stories, its tone and purpose all went through a process of bourgeoisification. The colonial-educated, middle-class, male child (identified as the national child) was marked as the target reader for the stories³⁵⁸ or the stories were compiled for study in the imperial academe. However, the gender discourses that can be traced in the narratives remained heterogenous. The stories expressed heteropatriarchal worldviews and in the course of the same narration

³⁵⁷ Elizabeth Grosz, “Feminism, Materialism and Freedom”, in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency and Politics*, ed by Samantha Frost and Diane Coole (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 142

³⁵⁸ His mother was also mentioned (by Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar, Dinesh Chandra Sen and Rabindranath Tagore) as a possible reader but her primary role was to pass on the stories to her children. It was because she could no longer tell the stories from her own repertoire that she needed to read the published volumes.

threw up voices of female subversion that challenged contemporary gender conventions. Matriarchal figures, though at times written over, featured in some of the stories, and presented models of female power. However, the Bengali fairy tale texts of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, were not a simple case of female subversive oral narratives disciplined by *bhadrolok* (mostly male) writers. While this disciplining of errant views that did not conform to *bhadrolok* straightjacketing of Bengali culture, and to acceptable modes of female behaviour, can be traced in some of the stories, there were also patriarchal values inherent in the oral narratives as well. The communities that the stories stemmed from were themselves entrenched in heteropatriarchy and these were bound to be reflected in their cultural productions. The fairy tale texts that were published were the result of a complex dialogue between *bhadrolok* writing and the oral narratives. The discursive organisation of *bhadrolok* texts were also derived from the hybrid values of the colonial gentleman class and where not in complete agreement with the oral narratives. They, however, did not also completely reject the discursive voices of the oral narratives and transform the stories. A close reading of the texts thus reveals multiple gender discourses existing side by side, some counter-pointed to each other and subversive moments existing despite the narrative thrust towards a resolution based on dominant gender conventions and structures. This thesis has attempted to trace these, despite the handicap of the lack of availability of the raw material the collector-writers worked with, such as phonograph records, fieldnotes or earlier versions of the manuscripts.

The late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century marked the entry of a pre-colonial oral narrative tradition into postcolonial modernity. This narrative tradition, though called *rupkatha*, was identified by the writers and critics of the period as a regional tradition

that was different from the *katha* genre of Sanskrit derived Indian narrative traditions.³⁵⁹ The *katha* of Indian narrative literature denoted the entire spectrum of fictional prose narratives that included both short pieces as well as longer complex works, and was distinct from the other prose narrative form, the *akhyayika* which referred to those narratives which had their basis in history and social reality. These definitions would be difficult to apply to the *rupkatha* as a Bengali folk tradition, as it contained fantasy narratives that had their roots in social reality (as this thesis has argued). The regional Bengali storytelling traditions, in late nineteenth and early twentieth century scholarship, were instead divided into four genres, the *rupkatha* or the fairy tale, the *upakatha* or the fable (and distinct from the Sanskrit derived *upakatha* which referred to all short prose fictional narratives), the *bratakatha* or the ritual tales (primarily belonging to women) and the *geetikatha* or narratives sung as part of folk songs³⁶⁰.

These genre divisions came into existence in the colonial period under the influence of British literary genres as native scholars searched indigenous storytelling traditions for forms that were equivalent to English literary genres. One important reason for this was that the nineteenth century print market of Calcutta was filled with Bengali translations of English books especially those that were aimed at children. A great number of these were fairy tales and fables. Ofcourse, the association between fairy tales/fables and children was not organic

³⁵⁹ The assertion of this difference was also made possible by the general belief in the distinctness of regional Bengali culture due to its Buddhist past. Buddhism itself had a robust storytelling tradition based on its scriptures that had entered into folklore over the years.

³⁶⁰ Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar, Asutosh Bhattacharya and Dinesh Chandra Sen all divided Bengali folk narratives in the same four genres. Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar, "Preface", in *Thakurdadar Jhuli* (Kolkata: Mitra and Ghosh, 1909) Dinesh Chandra Sen, *The Folk Literature of Bengal* (Kolkata: Aparna Book Distributors, 2007) Asutosh Bhattacharya, *Folklore of Bengal* (Kolkata: National Book Trust of India, 1978)

but the accumulated result of British influence and contemporary cultural politics. Volumes of literary tales based on indigenous oral narratives was the acceptable counter/companion to British books. It was this period of print publications based on Bengali folklore that opened the flood gates for the development of the literary Bengali tales for children. The *rupkatha* became synonymous with the fairy tale and lost its close connection with women's cultural forms. However, the texts of this period retained bits and traces of its past associations for the perceptive reader to see.

These volumes contrary to their contemporary presentation were not folktale anthologies. This presentation shaped decades of reader reception and academic scholarship, but this thesis has argued that far from being direct literal transcriptions of oral narratives, these were literary tales in their own right. These literary tales were the product of their time and place and took their form and shape through the cultural intersection of Victorian Britain and colonial Bengal. They present the amalgamated influence of the oral cultures from which they originated and the hybrid cultural world of its *bhadrolok* writers. These texts despite the dearth of feminist scholarship on them are important for the study of the historical lives of Bengali women and the practise of gender in Bengali society. This thesis hopes to contribute towards the establishment of such a body of feminist scholarship of the Bengali fairy tale.

The myths about gender roles and identities that the literary *rupkatha* tradition has generated is ripe field for further study. The influence of this on Bengali culture's practise of gender requires larger sociological study. This is especially since *rupkatha* narratives have entered cultural forms transmitted through mass media and the internet, such as the television serials and animated skits available over YouTube and thereby, a newer generation of popular culture. Simultaneously, twentieth century Bengali culture industry's adaptation of *rupkatha* stories and tropes need to be evaluated. However, the immediate need of the hour is for fieldwork that will collect and archive whatever oral narratives remain in rural Bengal in their

performance contexts. The availability of contemporary technology makes such a project viable. These storytelling traditions are disappearing at a faster rate now than in the period which this thesis has studied and such a project will preserve Bengal's cultural specificities for future generations of scholars.

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