

SYNOPSIS

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

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.

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 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

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>

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 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

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

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 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.

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

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 Rolleke, 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 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

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

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

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 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.

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

¹¹ Bhattacharya, *Folklore of Bengal*, 32

¹² Bhattacharya, *Folklore of Bengal*, 14

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 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

¹³ Bhattacharya, *Folklore of Bengal*, 24

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

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 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, side lined 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 most significant of these myths was that the tales were intended for children which they were not despite the title of the volume¹⁷. Infact

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*.

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

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 ‘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 Haase, 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

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>

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 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.

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

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 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.

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?

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.