

The Gendered Life of the Fairy Tale Tradition in Bengal: 1870-1925

This thesis will study the fairy tale texts derived from folk narratives which were published in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century Bengal, as literary texts that were influenced by social and historical processes of the time and in turn contributed to cultural constructions of gender. 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 different class and cultural backgrounds. The majority of these writers were middle class men, but two women authors of Bengali fairy tales who have been overlooked in literary history, are among the writers studied. The thesis will investigate the early influences that generated the contemporary interest in fairy tales: the international legacy of the Grimm Brothers that had been carried into colonial Bengal by British folktale scholars and the importance of folk narratives within British imperialist efforts at producing knowledge about the natives. It will then study the development of the literary tradition in the hands of the various indigenous writers who published fairytale texts, mapping out their historical, cultural and political contexts and investigating the ways these contexts shaped and influenced their adaptations of oral tales into literary texts. Since the thesis will study the stories published in these volumes as "inter-texts", which embed within their body the amalgamated influence of both folk narratives as well as *bhadrolok* literary undertakings, it will study the interaction of the literary tradition with the social debates on women that dominated public discourses in the end of the nineteenth century through social reform movements, the rise of a Hindu nationalist consciousness and the Swadeshi cultural revival. The aim will be to investigate the influence of these discourses on the representation of gender in the texts, as well as, on the construction of gender identities, gender roles, and the attempts to engender cultural traditions in the contemporary intellectual discussions on this literary genre. For this purpose, the various essays, prose pieces-- the "paratexts"—that accompanied the story texts in the published volumes will also be studied. Simultaneously, the thesis will also study the stories themselves for the social structures they reproduce and the space they provide for (at times subversive) women's voices. While attempting to recover these voices, the thesis will take into account allied Bengali women's oral narrative traditions such as the *bratakatha*.