

TEJIMOLA, CINDERELLA AND KATNISS:
THE CONTRAST IN THE SUBALTERN CHANGE OF STATUS

Deepshikha Mahanta Bortamuly*

A community treasures its values, beliefs, moral and ethical bindings and age old experiences in the folktales that are told and repeated in every household. Thus a tale is a community legacy, living a million lives through every retelling and every imaginative recreation of the child. This article focuses on a story – Tejimola – from Assamese, a rather strange but highly popular story where a lot of violence is embedded into the content as well as narration. Popularity is then dissected with various other stories from different locales. A comparison with the main protagonist of the *Hunger Games*, for instance, reveals a considerable number of significant issues.

Tejimola is the story of a teenager. After her mother's death, the father married again. Being a merchant, the father had to set sail on a long venture for business. In his absence, the stepmother set trap to prove Tejimola guilty and inflicted inscrutable punishment on her till she breathed her last. The stepmother then buried Tejimola stealthily in the backyard. There grew a gourd plant, laden with gourds. When a stranger tried plucking one, the plant addressed the stranger and started singing Tejimola's plight. Startled, the stranger informed the owner of the house, the stepmother. Irritated, frustrated and terrified, the stepmother got the plant cut and dumped it. While she tried to forget about it and spread the news that Tejimola had

gone to her maternal uncle's place, there grew an orange tree, where the gourd plant was dumped. The cowboys of the neighbourhood tried plucking an orange and immediately the tree addressed them, narrating Tejimola's story. This time, the stepmother got it cut again and threw it into the river. Tejimola there got metamorphosed to a lotus. While the father was returning home (some versions say with a prospective groom for Tejimola), the flower caught his attention and he tried picking it up for his beloved daughter. As in the previous cases, the lotus started addressing the father and singing Tejimola's predicament. Astonished, the father urged the lotus to change its shape and come to him as a bird. There appeared a beautiful bird. On reaching home, the father enquired after Tejimola. When he was convinced that the stepmother had killed his daughter, he punished her and broke all relationship with her. Urged again to change her form, Tejimola finally became a beautiful woman and lived happily ever after (with the husband).

Tejimola's story brings to foreground several important issues. Bezbaroa (2010, Vol. 6, p 127-29) is of the opinion that the trace of every type of people in a society, i.e., good-bad, educated-uneducated, wise-stupid and so on, leave their unmistakable marks in terms of behavior, rituals, thoughts and imaginations in the folktales. Therefore, according to him, folktales form an indispensable part of the oral history of a community and "research on philology and mythology needs to be complemented with that of folklore studies". Taking cue from Bopp, Grimm, Herder and others, he foregrounds the importance of folklore studies, and the necessity of an exegesis

highlighting the similarities and differences of folktales across culture and region. As far as Tejimola and Assamese folktales are concerned, this is not the only story about a mother's untimely death and the father's remarriage, though there is none about the opposite. This can be analyzed as a predictable situation in a patriarchal society. What is to be noticed is, though it is an extremely popular story, the metamorphosis of a woman several times till she is in the right hands is not to be found in any other story in Assamese. The third noticeable point lies in the fact that stories meant for babies and young children generally do not have this much of violence woven in the narrative. The repeated killings that could not stop the recurrence of births must have added to the enduring popularity of the tale.

What is crucial to understanding the main story line is that of the voice of Tejimola. The subaltern here does speak, assert, terrify the wrongdoer to frustration and repetition of the killing. Tejimola is throughout portrayed to be innocent : she does not retaliate, even when she's brutalized and torture is inflicted till death. It is interesting that as a human being she is shown to have company of friends but she does not go around, nor does she narrate her story to a friend, neighbor or savior. It is primordial Nature, carrying her metamorphosed soul in a beautiful bountiful form that narrates her story in a lyrical note, with an extremely touching and straightforward story line. Identification is another very prominent characteristic. The various forms of trees that she gets changed

into, always identified themselves as Tejimola, and that is how she reaches the right hands i.e., of the father.

The father can authenticate, he can go back home and verify, he can also redeem. He is the benevolent patriarchal authority who sets sail only to come back with wealth and a secure future in the form of a groom. He executes law and brings back order to the family circle, starting a surreal new phase of life.

The witchy stepmother of Tejimola and her devilish behavior is sharply contrasted with another story, again very popular – that is of a kite that plays a mother to a child. “Chilanir Jiyekar Sadhu” is a story of a girl child who was set adrift by the mother since the father was frustrated with the repeated births of daughters. A washer man caught hold of the pot from the river; and from him a kite picked up the baby and took her to her nest in a forest, bringing her up till the girl grew up to be a beautiful woman. A wealthy merchant passed by the forest and was attracted by the long hair looming down the tree top. He asked the girl regarding her whereabouts and proposed to marry her. The daughter calls the mother for a decision and obviously the mother had no other option but to give a consent. The young girl goes off with him, only to face the harsh reality of existence of jealous previous wives, waiting and prying on her. Every time they set a trap for her, she realizes to her utter dismay that she has not learnt anything about human beings and the human world. Helpless, she calls for her mother kite and she comes to her rescue several times till the other wives get to know about it and

kill the mother. Moreover, they sell her to a businessman who took her off and made her watch over the dried fish on the river bank. At this point the merchant gets to see, hear and know everything and takes law in his hands to set things at home right.

In a recent remolding of Tejimola into the contemporary world, Ashok Kumar Nath, in his short story Tejimola (2013) recreates a protagonist who does not have any faith in the father figure nor does she narrate her plight to anyone for survival. Instead, in utter frustration and depression, she jumps in front of a moving car, falling down not dead but hurt. The car driver, a young man on his way to pay the first installment of his car loan, somehow gets saved of a mob lynching for rash driving and he takes her to the hospital. After two days, while he decides to marry her and reveals his decision to his relatives as well as to hers, she cuts her vein in the hospital bed itself in a second attempt at committing suicide. Utter hopelessness is the marked characteristic of this new Tejimola that contrasts sharply with the buoyancy of the previous soul. Both of them are silenced by dominating agencies of power represented in the contemporary short story again with a stepmother and thereafter, the wife of the maternal uncle. Both the father figures – her own father and then the uncle – are shown to be powerless shadows of the father of the folktale. As the family males have not been her saviour, she has no interest nor hope from a stranger. That's why whether he is a young marriageable bachelor or old father figure does not matter to her.

The Western/English popular story of Cinderella contrasts sharply with the initial sufferings and humiliations of Cinderella in the hands of the stepmother and her daughters as against the topsy-turvy nature of the fortune change in the later part of the story. Cinderella is equally innocent and endures agony with equal silence. However, she plays an active agent of the change in her life, along with luck and chance. The latter was equally important for the everlasting popularity of the story with the common, average, suffering mute mass. The gist of the story had to be digested like a bitter sleeping pill that the miserable plight of anyone of their stature might change, but the charming prince would come only when luck and chance would favour.

In her seminal essay, "Can the subaltern speak ?", while discussing the issue of Sati, Spivak says: " Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject constitution and object formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the 'third world woman'..." Stories such as "Tejimola" and "Chilanir Jiyekar Sadhu" would act like a lullaby to the working class where pristine beauty used to wither away if not noticed by the powerful ones. Similarly, innocence and other character attributes also remained suppressed and silenced until and unless by luck and chance they ever got attention. With attention would come recognition, change of status, upliftment, idealization and immortalization. Therefore, before disastrous invasions of television, internet and cartoon 24X7, these stories served as bedtime-tales for every Assamese household.

Most of the Disney stories have a similar structure – a damsel in distress with predictable jealousy of nearby ones, and unpredictable danger of the outside world to which she is pushed out. Something miraculous, marvelous, sudden and lifesaving happens at the moment of crisis and thereafter the damsel lives happily in the company of a handsome lad forever.

An eco-critical perspective, particularly that of the American Transcendentalists (cf. Barry 2010, p255), of the Tejimola story would highlight nature as the active and supreme agent that can even acquire the logos in seeking justice for Tejimola. Traditional African stories also describe waiting for the divine voice for the implementation of justice. However, this divine voice comes through a human being. For instance, in *Things Fall Apart*, in a very carefully depicted pre-colonial remarkably patriarchal society, the divine order is shown to be voiced through Chielo, the Priestess, who is otherwise a normal, average village woman. In the restricted circle of activities that are allowed to women, it is strange that a Priestess shouts in the middle of the night and the addressee needs to follow her words. Richard J. Lane is of the opinion that “While Achebe’s novel appears phallogocentric, there are moments of contradiction that enable the emergence of feminist counter discourses...” (Lane 2006, p 46).

Chielo is in Spivak’s category “poor, Black and female”, the “most problematic” because she is a subaltern in three ways. She suddenly acquires voice and power

overnight, to be revered and obeyed by the man folk also, only to be the average, insignificant middle aged woman the next morning. In the Tejimola story, nature cannot be countered or defeated, the voice reverberates till justice is mitigated.

In Marquez's *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, the voice is given to the victim, a woman, who, with one single stroke of words springs up to the position of the victimizer. Yet, the agents of punishment for the 'named' Santiago Nasar, are the brothers of this woman. The brothers go round the town, retelling everyone the story, along with their intention to kill Santiago. Nevertheless, the whole town remains embalmed with inertia, that itself becomes the most striking, loud, forceful trigger of action. Nobody stands up for Santiago, nor even for the normal, 'civilized' procedures of information, cross examination, verification and then judgment.

From the Disney land to a story like the *Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins is a great shift. The young woman protagonist here is very passionate, extremely intelligent, active, restless and occupies the centre of the story, molding the storyline as the character gets molded. The *Hunger Games* mixes fantasy, desperation, and commercialization to the optimum point. The world created here is controlled by civilians as in Rome during the days of the Gladiators. Nevertheless, the zealous consumerist enterprises come glaringly out with television cameras covering every angle, every emotion, every statement, and every step of the game in which boys and girls from twelve districts that are forever starving are set against one another to kill

and win food. Katniss Everdeen, the protagonist, is the elder daughter of a miner who “was blown into bits” in a mine explosion. There was nothing even to bury.”

The authorities are extremely strict with the civilized, liberal government policies, so trespassing the woods, poaching, hunting carry the severest of penalties. Katniss is forced to hunt, to save her mother and her sister off starvation. They are from District Twelve “where you can starve to death in safety.”

A deep, stark, shuddering irony plays through words, action, emotions, making everything unreal and dangerous. So, ‘reaping’ here means keeping up names of a boy and a girl from every district for the deadly fight for food and survival. Katniss volunteers for her sister. She is passionate, alert, smart and fresh. However, she is also loaded with lots of emotions and here she is placed in front of cameras for sponsors, ratings as well as for real survival skills.

Thus, an innocent, young soul is pitted against all the ruthlessness of the ‘Capitol’ist commercialism. Her counterpart from the same district professes love to her in his interview before the match, thus winning audience’s applaud as well as sponsors. Is this love real? Even after he professes it repeatedly, dating it back to her first day in school, linking it with his father’s love for her mother, it could not stick to Katniss’s heart because of the highly propagandist world where they have been placed.

As the game progresses, emotions galore and subside, proximities lead to inscrutable pain, from any unpredictable angle. Finally, only the two from District Twelve remain alive, against the necessity of one victor. They together plan public suicide, with berries in hand. However, once the berries are put to their mouths in public in broad daylight, they both are declared victors. Their basic instincts make them survive this too. However, the final agony strikes when they go back to their district loaded with tones of experience, losing the blissful innocence that is every child's birthright.

Why should this story be set in "future North America", as the summary provided suffice? This postcolonial commercial exploitation of the 'feeling like the aboriginal', this mixing of Twenty-first century techno-commercial obsession for daredevilry, as against the experience of the people who hunt and poach for the desperate needs of their survival, makes the book and its consequent movie version hugely popular.

As against a Tejimola or a Cinderella, Katniss wants to be independent, and not be forced to be grateful to someone for any sort of help. Obviously, she cannot accept the hand of the most charming prince, nor that of her fellow hunter, though she is jealous when other girls eye him. She thus turns out to be a truly fragmented lonely soul that suffers intensely to retain her independence. She has been forced to be brutal, and inversely, to use her normal humanistic emotions and bonding with Rue, another tribute, for the savage cheering of countless unnamed 'civilians':

"Numerous animals have lost their lives at my hands, but only one human. I hear Gale saying, "How different can it be, really?"

Amazingly similar in execution. A bow pulled, arrow shot. Entirely different in the aftermath. I killed a boy whose name I don't even know. Somewhere his family is weeping for him. His friends call for my blood. May be he had a girlfriend who really believed he would come back...

But then I think of Rue's still body and I'm able to banish the boy from my mind."(p 243)

This is almost like the stories that hold good for battleground plots. One can also be reminded of movies like *All Quiet on the Western Front*(1930) or numerous Bollywood movies that revolve around desperate killings for survival by the protagonist who thus turns out to be both a victim and a victimizer, and a chain of events leading to deaths as well as tragic disheveling of emotional bonding.

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