

CROSS-DRESSED HEROINES OF BENGALI FOLKTALES: THE TRANVESTITE AS THE TRANSGRESSOR?

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“The appeal of cross-dressing is clearly related to its status as a sign of the constructedness of gender categories.” - (Garber, 1992, p. 9)

“The deceptively simple act of wearing the clothes socially prescribed for the opposite sex has far-reaching implications for the ideological construction of gender.” - (Flanagan, 2008, p. 5-6)

Cross-dressing denotes putting on the garb of a sex one does not identify with or belongs to. Society has conveniently divided people into two opposite sexes to maintain heteronormativity as “persons” only become intelligible through becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility.” (Butler, 1990, p. 22) According to Sharma, the term heteronormativity refers to those norms related to gender and sexuality and compulsory heterosexuality as well and other systems and ideologies related to power such as religious fundamentalism, casteism, the class system and so on. (2009, p. 53)

And it marks as deviant and thus punishable everything that is radically different from it. Butler taking queue from Foucault (*History of Sexuality*) argues that “Compulsory heterosexuality and phallogocentrism are understood as regimes of power/discourse.” (1990, Preface)

It is only in the recent times that queer groups were socially recognized and, in some countries, legally accepted, in India same-sex marriage was legalized only in 2018. But the theme of cross-dressing in traditional literature like folktales, fairy tales and ballads, points to the possibility of transvestite behaviours in previous ages as Sharma

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points out that heteronormativity is a relatively recent phenomenon: "The good thing about the concept of heteronormativity is that it is new and therefore open to interpretation in a manner that many other concepts do not appear to be." (2009, p. 52) 'Cross-dressing' lacks the attitude of radical gender parody which is the central politics of *drag*. Cross-dressing most often have personal interests in its root. While female-to-male cross-dressers typically try to get access to the public sphere or an adventurous life, male-to-female cross-dressers try to gain entry in the woman's world, his desired sex (Garber, 1992, p. 7). But meanings of cross-dressing cannot be limited to such simple articulations, as a cross-dressed man or woman successfully performing the role of the opposite sex has deeper implications as Butler observes citing the case of the "hero/heroine of *Hairspray*" "whose impersonation of women implicitly suggests that gender is a kind of persistent impersonation that passes as the real. Her/his performance destabilizes the very distinctions between the natural and the artificial, depth and surface, inner and outer through which discourse about genders almost always operates." (1990, Preface)

The binary division of gender clearly demarcated two different spheres of society for men and women. The public world is for men, the breadwinners and protectors of a family and women belong to the home and hearth as the caregivers, the organizers of the household. Women need to take up the garb of men in order to gain access in the public sphere without being humiliated or punished. Folktales about cross-dressing can be divided in two categories- in the first group of folktales, cross-dressing results in the "shift of sex" (ATU 514¹) of the protagonist either by a curse or a boon, there are also references of magical sex operations. This first group of tales provides explicit possibilities for the discussion of the theme of transvestism. In the second group of 'cross-dressing' folktales, the female protagonists usually cross-dress to enter the public sphere. And these heroines traditionally ventured in the public world to help their male relatives. Amy Goldenberg rightly observes that "it is socially acceptable

¹ According to the Arne-Thompson-Uther Fairy tale motif index

for women to be equal to men on the condition that it benefits at least one male character.” (16) This tale type is identified as variation of ATU 519 or “the woman-helper”. These female protagonists are attributed with power and the cultural garb of a man to accomplish certain tasks, to help their male kin. But they are always punished for subverting gender boundaries once they complete their mission. Female cross-dressers in folktales and fairy tales are punished through discovery of their biological identity and public shaming, and in some cases, they also lose their warrior like strength which is considered magical. In the Chinese *Legend of Hua Mulan*, the female protagonist cross-dresses as a soldier and takes the place of her father in army. But she is humiliated and driven away from the army camp when her true identity is accidentally revealed. In fact, Jessica Hooker cites only one example where the female protagonist escapes punishment (for cross-dressing). But this singular instance is again rationalized by Hooker as being less radical (as the female protagonist though cross-dress as a man, took up a flute but not a sword) and thus being able to avoid social chastisement (1990, p.182). Interestingly the female protagonists of Bengali folktales who cross-dress and venture in the outer world (even with a sword) faces no humiliation or punishment as in “Pushpamala” and “Kironmala”. I propose to engage with these Bengali folktales critically to understand the deeper politics of gender in early Bengal.

The theme of cross-dressing in folktales and fairy tales is more problematic as these oral narratives were traditionally used to teach gender norms to young children, but interestingly, it is a common motif in folktales and fairy tales, be it female-to-male or vice versa. European folktales have many male cross-dressers but such cases are few in Indian folktales. Very little critical discussions to be found till now about cross-dressing in Bengali folktales. Only the female protagonist of the story “Kironmala” got some critical attention as one of the popular Bengali folktales, for her so-called un-womanly courage when her brothers were in danger. The story is about two brothers-Arun, Barun, and their sister Kironmala-who were replaced at their birth with a

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puppy, a kitten and a wooden doll respectively by their wicked aunts. The siblings were then raised by a Brahmin who found them at a riverbank which he visits every day for bath. From childhood, the children were trained in their respective gender roles-

In time, the two brothers and the sister grew up. Kironmala was an excellent housekeeper: she kept their home spotless; not a speck of dust could be seen anywhere. Arun and Barun started taking lessons from the Brahman. In their free time, they would pick fruits and chase deer in the forest... (Ray, 2012, p. 20)

Though Kironmala was never trained in archery or swordsmanship like her brothers, she takes up a sword when her brothers were in danger to save them. She behaved in a manner categorically different from the prescribed and expected gender functions inscribed in Bengali society, as rightly pointed out by many Bengali folktale critics like Bansari Mitra². She does not “moan in grief, nor did she shed any tears” (Ray, 2012, p. 25) when she realizes that her brothers were in danger. She transforms herself to a prince and starts for the magic mountain to save her brothers. The magical elements of the mountain had entrapped many princes, including Arun and Barun. And in the end, it is a princess, Kironmala who rescues the princes from their plight. The trapped princes once rescued, start chanting praises for Kironmala, addressing her as the “greatest hero of all ages” (Ray, 2012, p. 27). Only the two brothers recognize their sister under the garb of a prince and they too are indeed proud of her ‘masculine’ feats. The three siblings then return home and after few episodes, they reunite with their parents and live happily ever after. Though the female protagonist is never punished for cross-dressing and breaking social norms, there is one commonality between Kironmala and her Central Asian sisters and that is their reason behind

² See Mitra, Bansari (2002). The Portrayal of Women characters in Bengali Folk and Fairy Tales. *The Renovation of Folktales by Five Modern Bengali Writers*. Anthropological Survey of India

dressing up as a man which in a way seek to explain and justify the action of cross-dressing heroines.

Another tale about sword-bearing, cross-dressed princess is 'Pushpamala' from Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar's another collection of Bengali folktales *Thakurdadar Jhuli*. For detailed textual analysis of the text F.B. Bradley-Brit's translation of *Thakurdadar Jhuli* in *Bengal Fairy Tales* (1920) is consulted here. The story of 'Pushpamala' also can be attributed to 'the woman-helper' tale type. The female protagonist is betrothed by her parents before her birth, showing how a woman's life is controlled by a patriarchal society and the process starts even before her birth. The story begins with the description of the circumstance in which Pushpa was betrothed, the King (Pushpa's father) of a certain country and his chief Executioner (mentioned as *Kotal* hereafter) had been childless for many years, one day the king dreamt that a boy is born to him and a girl to the *Kotal* and the *Kotal* dreamt the opposite. Angered by an opposite version of his dream, the king signs a contract with the *Kotal* stating that if the *Kotal's* dream comes true, he will give his daughter in marriage to the *Kotal's* son and his half kingdom but if his own dream materializes into reality, he will behead the *Kotal*. On the very same day, the queen and the *Kotal's* wife also visit a sacred pond to take bath (a ritual related to their *vrata* for fertility) and promise each other to marry off their future children if they are of the opposite sex or befriend them if they are of the same sex. But when finally, a girl child is born to the king and a boy to the *Kotal*, the king and the queen quickly discard the idea of marrying their daughter to a boy lower in social stature. Pushpamala comes to know about all this when she grows up and decides to marry the *Kotal's* son through elopement. The rationale behind her action is quite simple as stated in the tale that she was trying to save her parents from hell in their afterlife and uphold the dharma of an ideal daughter and a wife. Though Pushpamala was earlier betrothed to the *Brahmin's* son, later her elopement with him and decision of marriage is an act of defiance of her father's choice. In a way she chose her husband on her own, she cannot be equated with ideal heroines of folktales who

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are inactive and wholly dependent on their male counterparts. Pushpamala takes the charge of her own destiny, she defies her father, elopes with her lover and, she rescues her lover from danger many times in the course of their journey and marries him in the end. She did not just sit idly waiting for the prince to save her or some miracle to happen, but acted as an agent for her happy future. The tale thus challenges the usual gender roles as it is Pushpamala, a woman who protects her male consort throughout their journey and not the other way round.

The female protagonist's journey with her lover should be discussed in detail for an understanding of the theme of cross-dressing and implicit possibility of transvestism. Pushpamala elopes with her lover in the guise of a soldier. In their journey, they come across a band of seven dacoits, where Pushpamala fights with the dacoits single-handedly rather than her male counterpart, keeping at bay traditional gender norms. Her actions are more calculative and practical in the face of danger rather than emotional which is stereotypically considered to be an essence of womanhood- "...such was the princess' dexterity in using the sword that she cut off the heads of six of them." (Brit, 1920, p. 92). The *Kotal's* son seems more emotional as he quickly forgives the seventh dacoit and asks Pushpamala to do the same but here again Pushpamala's suggestion to her lover proves her to be intellectually superior to him-

My dear, remember that the sages have said that to...not to extinguish the last spark of a fire, to spare an inveterate enemy even when he is at his last gasp, are as foolish as for a person to approach blindfolded a yawning abyss. Do no tell me to spare the fellow. (Brit, 1920, p. 92)

Soon after this, the remaining dacoit finding a chance to take revenge murders the *Kotal's* son by abruptly attacking them and asks Pushpamala to surrender to him. In such a dreadful situation Pushpamala does not cry or behave helplessly but uses her courage and presence of mind-

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The girl, knowing her danger, controlled her grief, and pretended to be glad at the request...But she said it did not look well for her to be on the horse that her new lover rode, and therefore she would ride her own horse, with her own sword in her hand, to resist any unforeseen attack. The fellow, too foolish to see through the pretence, agreed to the arrangement, and by the time he had gone a few yards, his head fell dissevered from his body. (Brit, 1920, p. 93)

Such Amazonian action of Pushpamala clearly can prove wrong the popular generalization that most heroines of Bengali folktales are inactive creatures like 'sleeping beauty' (a motif which have numerous variations in Bengali folktales) and the tale of 'powerful princess' like Kironmala stands as singular and rare exception.

The tale of "Pushpamala" is one of female transgression on multiple levels. Firstly, the act of elopement itself has an element of social scandal about it, but she still she chooses to defy her father and elopes with her lover. She protects her lover all through their journey much like a prince. Her decision to marry *Brahmin's* son is an independent choice though in the name of correcting the wrong did by her parents, which is a kind of justification of her action to the patriarchal society and a stated necessity for her adventure. Secondly, the tale has the motif 'hero's adventure'-disobeying the father figure, embarking on an adventurous journey and getting a princess in marriage as a reward in the end, but here the hero is not a male figure but a female figure who in the end marries the suitor she liked herself.

The two sword-bearing princess Kironmala and Pushpamala not only transgress gender expectations and assumptions by cross-dressing and getting involved in militant activities, their actions bring into question the very constructedness of gender. Butler argues that gender is 'performative' and this "performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body..." (1990, Preface) The more perfect the performance, the

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more solid and unchallenged the binarity of gender identity becomes, but these heroines' pro-militant actions when they cross-dress and go out into the outer world raises the question that can really repetitive performance since childhood ensure the solidity of the binary opposition of gender. Both Kironmala and Pushpamala were trained in their gender roles since childhood but behaved in a diametrically opposite way when they cross-dress. Cross-dressing in both cases highlighted gender fluidity and possibility of transvestism. Garber very rightly observes that cross-dressing creates "category crisis" as-

...the most important aspects of cross-dressing is the way in which it offers challenge to easy notions of binarity, putting into questions the categories of "female" and "male", whether they are considered essential or constructed, biological or cultural. (1992, p. 10)

These cross-dressed and sword-bearing heroines of Bengali folktales and their Western and Asian sisters like Mulan successfully undo the fixity of gendered identity. They question traditional notions about gendered body, and its certain weaknesses and limitations based on some so-called 'essence' (which is again proved as an 'artifice' by Butler).

These cross-dressing heroines suggest the presence of female transgressive behaviour in Bengali folktales which becomes explicit in the cross-dressing tales but can be quite subtle in other tales where the motif of female crossdressing is not involved. It is also suggestive of the fact that Bengali society, in the early days of its civilization was not unfamiliar with the notion of cross-dressing and its potency to unmask the 'artificiality' of gender binarity through its transvestite elements. The return of these cross-dressing heroines to their innocent, and docile roles in the end of the tales do not erase their experience, rather this is perhaps a façade which tricks patriarchy in believing that these women can never be a threat to the heteronormative society. In a rigid patriarchal society outright rebellion would only result in violent mutilation of

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the diffident voice, the fate of the *rakshashis*³ in Bengali folktales are bright examples of this. The politics of transgression of the heroines in Bengali folktales is always implicit, they try to sustain the image of passive, and fragile creatures, while also trying to find a way to control their lives. Sharma observes that challenging heteronormativity is a complicated task as “(i) We subscribe and challenge norms simultaneously. (ii) We perform norms- what appears to be complete compliance with norms could in fact be at some level strategic. (iii) Performance of norms cannot be neatly separated from internalization of the norms.” (2009, p. 53) These observances enable us to understand the above-mentioned folktales in new light.

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³ Female ogresses in Bengali folktales originated in Hindu Mythology. Lal Behari Day informs in *Folktales of Bengal* that they are the 'raw-meat eaters', Aborigines who were driven away by Aryans.