

## ***Thakurmar Jhuli: Recasting the Grandmother's Bag of Tales***

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***Abstract:*** *The oldest children's literature worldwide was oral in origin. It has been a source of enjoyment to children for long. We were also no exception as kids. These stories started to take written shape in different languages of the world from the seventeenth century. It was from then to the eighteenth century that childhood came to be recognized as different from adulthood and the idea of the child as a separate entity slowly started to take shape. It is argued that child and childhood as distinct identities emerged sometime in the same period. It was obvious therefore that the concept of childhood surfaced only with the rise of the print culture, thereby substantiating the claim that the idea of child existed before children's literature. It is the adult who imposes on the child what it considers to be appropriate for it. One such means is 'children's literature'. Whatever way we may look at it, we have accepted that children's literature is a product of the culture and society like all other kinds of literature. Its producers and consumers are part of the same society, are culturally constructed occupying different positions of power. This paper will explore the immense possibilities of a world created by the adult through an acclaimed children's literary work by Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar's *Thakurmar Jhuli*. The paper will delve into the textual construction, a representation of the world in the book to see how the literature in question prepares the child for the future.*

***Keywords:*** Child, Children's literature, Fantasy, fantasy in children's literature, *Thakurmar Jhuli*.

### ***Introduction***

*Thakurmar Jhuli*, first published in 1907, celebrates a life of hundred and ten odd years. It is one of the most celebrated books in the history of children's literature that has acceptability among most of children and adults of different generations after its publication. It has been a favourite among children and adults and is perhaps the reason behind its popularity. Or it may also be true that its popularity as a book may have attracted people from generations of readers to have a copy of it in their collection. Whatever

be the reason, the book is a compilation of stories and poems. It is named after a grandparent, *Thakurma*, the name by which the paternal grandparent is identified, a woman, old, fragile and a reservoir of tradition and heritage. She is here not a namesake. She is the story-teller to her grandchildren emphasizing the fact that we live in patrilocal families where ordinarily she is the old woman to cares and nurtures the child. In the book therefore she is the relation that it emphasized.

The role of the grand mother is important in the socializing of the child and the management of the household. In *Ray bari* a novel written by Giribala Debi (Ray 1995; Debi Giribala 2011) the portrayal of the grandmother is that of the power-centre of the household. She is characteristically called *karta-ma* the mother of the present head of the household is widowed, is simultaneously marginalized and empowered (Bagchi 1993). She is marginalized because her husband who was the head of the household (*karta*) is dead, is fully socialized in the customs of the family and knows the nitty-gritty of directing the household chores as she was once the head of the household when her husband was at the helm of things. She is empowered to educate new brides in the family in the ways and customs of the household. She is the disciplining agent for her grandchildren. She has lost her position as the head of the household to her daughter-in-law but is the repository of ritual practice. She has the treasure of popular wisdom (Bagchi 1993).

It is in the home that a child finds his or her natural habitat, his or her mental universe. The girl child is mentally socialized to prepare herself as a mother and a wife. It is (was) in the ethos of the family socialization that girl and boy child is (was) socialized in different traditions of gender identity. It was the bride who was seen as responsible for keeping the family in order and in peace ("*Sansarsukher hoy romonirgune*" meaning it is by the virtues of a woman that a family attains bliss). The book published in 1907 was the product of the colonial times and is true to its character. The entire nineteenth century witnessed female infanticide, child marriage, sufferings of child widows, self-immolation of wives after husband's death, the emergence of elite indigenous reformers setting priority to save the child and the woman. The primary tenets of moral justification of the British rule in India were slowly put to question in the century before the publication of the book. So, the stories collected in the book contained seeds of nationalism woven through fantasy (Nandy 1983), imprints of the woman's position in family and the moral burden of carrying all towards peace through the quest.

In the first edition of the book, in its Preface Rabindranath Tagore echoes a concern for the long-lost paternal grandparent, the *Thakurma* who is no more the story-teller. Rabindranath's concern does not only portray the lost tradition but also conveys the fact that even in Brahma families the upbringing of the child tended to rely on ritually knowledgeable grandmother (Bagchi 1993). The book according to the Preface by Tagore is a good and able replacement to the order. It definitely renders an edge over other compilers through this comment. But the point that Tagore had not delved into was that Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar, the compiler of the book is a male. The paradox of the compilation is this: that it is written by a male but is popularized in the name of a social role played by a woman. Perhaps such works were taken up by males during that period and Tagore himself was no exception to the rule. He had compiled poems for children (*Chelebhulonochhora*) and also written poems for children (*Shishu* and *ShishuBholanath*). Perhaps recasting of the compilation before critical eyes is because of this paradox of looking it at from the maleness (*purushali* as opposed the feminine, *meyeli*) of the voice of the compiler and the femininity of the role contextualized in the title. It is important here to note that the meaning of woman's tale is two: one is tales told by women and second is tales that are centred on women (Ramanujan in Dharwadekar 1999). It is in both senses that the compilation is taken up for interpretation in this paper. Much before this compilation was published, it was Reverend Rajsekhar Roy who had published a compilation of folktales from Bengal (*Banglar Upokothaor: Folktales of Bengal*) for children (1883). He too echoes the same lament as Tagore on the loss of story-telling grandmothers.

...I readily caught up the idea and cast about for materials. But where was an old story-telling woman to be got? I had myself when a little boy, heard hundreds it would be no exaggeration to say thousands of fairy tales from the same old woman, Sambhu's mother...I have reasons to believe that the stories given in this book are genuine sample of the old stories told by old Bengali women from age to age through hundred generations...(Dey, Preface, *Folktales of Bengal*, 1893)

Amrita Dasgupta (2017) writes that there was a tradition of storytelling by women in India in pre-colonial times which lost its eminence with the advent of print media and story writing became more emphasized than orality. Women as were not educated enough to write and publish books it was men who eventually became writers and story-tellers in print. In the colonial times it was men who dominated the literary scene while women writers were exceptions in Bengal. But she also posits that men were also the

collectors of stories in pre-colonial period. Therefore, we can find a connection to the woman's voice that is linked to the role of story-telling and also connect why it is the male who is the compiler of such stories. But we would like to concentrate on how the maleness of the voice of the story-teller overpowers the women's position in the stories that are told.

The compilation in question was not the first ever compilation of stories for children in Bengali language. But it is undoubtedly the first compilation that had been so popular with children and their parents throughout many generations in Bengal and among Bengalis (Maitra 2007). It was after the book celebrated a centenary of its publication in 2007 that soft copies of the book, translations in English from reputed publishers and internet/digitized versions with images were published which reinforce the idea of the range of popularity of the book. This article will analyse the content of the book in order to understand how and to what extent the book is appropriate for children.

### ***The Book, the Reader: References to a context***

*Thakurmar Jhuli* is a compilation of four categories of stories: tales of adventure, tales of demons, tales of animals and humorous tales. It also contains poems signifying the importance of lullabies for children. The author of the book collected these stories from rural folk narrators, lending the compilation a character of an original rendition of the cultural tradition of Bengal hundred years back. In a Preface to the book, famous poet Rabindranath Tagore echoes this story-telling by grandmothers as a dying tradition in Bengal. The stories in the context of a storytelling grandmother are then a reflection of the narrator's (in this case, women) thoughts, their dilemmas, inconsistencies and the like. The interpretation or *storying* is a reflection but should not be considered a reality per se. It is woven through a fantasy make-belief world, a reflection of the real, not the real per se. The stories in the book are *Dudher Sagar* (The Sea of Milk), *Kalabati Rajkanya* (Princess Kalabati), *Ghumonto Puri* (The Sleeping Palace), *Kakonmala Kanchanmala*, *Saat Bhai Champa* (The Seven Brothers and Champa), *Sheet Basanta* (Winter and Spring), *Kiranmala*, *Rooptarashi*, *Neelkamalaar Lalkamal*, *Dalim Kumar*, *Patalkanya Manimala* (Manimala the Daughter of Hell), *Sonar Kathi Rugar Kathi* (The Gold and Silver sticks), *Chang Bang*, *Shiyal Pandit* (The Knowledgeable Fox), *Sukhuaar Dukhu*, *Brahman Brahmani*, *Der Angule*, *Am Sandesh*, and *Phuralo*.

The first question that comes up is who can be called a child? What is children's literature and how is it described in the book? A child experiences childhood and it is the adult who idealizes childhood by the 'best time in life' and also deciding on what is 'good' for a child. A child develops into a man or a woman in different phases such as infancy, childhood, adolescence and adulthood. Childhood is the phase of development of human existence on earth as the one that begins from infancy and is extended till the puberty (marking the beginning of adolescence and ultimately the gateway to adulthood). Puberty is seen as a decisive stage and widely believed to mark the end of childhood on both the physical and psychological level. As body and mind develop, the young person undergoes visible changes in this phase of gradual transition from childhood to adulthood. During this phase, the state of relative psychological virtuousness, simplicity and inexperience ascribed to childhood is slowly replaced by a self-conscious state of experience, yet to be refined in the years leading up to adulthood. A child in this sense is between birth and puberty. To answer the second question, children's literature is often not written by a child. It is the adult who pens down stories that s/he thinks appropriate for the development of the mind of a child. So, it is worthy to state here that it is better to identify children's literature as 'literature for children' and *Thakurmar Jhuli* is one of these genres. Traditional children's literature, above all the classics, is frequently set in the countryside or in similarly secluded places. Famous representatives of this kind are for example *The Secret Garden*, *Alice in Wonderland*; *The Wind in the Willows*, *Winnie-the-Pooh* or *Tom's Midnight Garden*. It is believed that in these manageable, closed miniature worlds of imagination and fantasy the child can gradually come to terms with itself and its immediate surroundings such as friends or animals. By contrast, young adults are mostly shown in close contact with society. More and more frequently, the town replaces rural landscapes, with the scene of action shifting from the idyllic arcadia of childhood into the modern, anonymous bustling city life (Saxby 1997: 354-56). The features of children's literature are socialization and education of the child, learning the traditions of society, where the child is the protagonist, the story is embedded in a moral code, positive outlook towards life, structure and language are adapted to oblige the child's requirements and abilities (Saxby 1997: 20; Nodelman 2008: 76-81).

Fantasy is related to imagination, fancy, marvel and wonder, magic, adventures and impossibilities are inevitable to a fantasists' imagination. But it is not direct opposite to life. The use of fantasy in literature is divided into different sub-genres: animal fantasy, historical fantasy, heroic fantasy,

religious fantasy, gothic fantasy, humorous fantasy, ironic fantasy, time fantasy and toy fantasy. Animal fantasy can be traced to Aesop's fables (International Companion Encyclopedia: 282-294) where animals are fitted out with human traits such as distinctive characteristic behaviour, foibles and outward appearance telling a story in the form of allegory which can easily be transferable to human society. Such fantasies help children to identify the real, understand the crookedness of the real world not directly but through a make-belief world. The compilation in question also makes use of fantasy and it and how it is dealt with will be analyzed in details in later sections.

### ***Recasting the Book under a critical eye***

The book is written from a male perspective through a supposedly woman's voice. But the voice is unreal because it is the male author/compiler who speaks. The use of the name of a relation (paternal grandparent) is brought up to focus on the child protagonist (Kironmala in *Kironmala*, Lalkomal, Neelkomal, Champa and the like) and her/his relation with the women who is either a mother or a villain. The women in the different stories are in fact the central figures and are portrayed as mostly passive characters. The woman characters are mostly central to many stories in the book. They are torn between a binary: the good or the evil. Either she is beautiful and fit to be a princess or a queen or ugly as a demoness (*rakshashi*). The good woman is a wife, a mother, a good-natured village house-wife or an unmarried village girl who is always in distress not for any of her faults. She is always the receptor, the victim. On the other, the wicked woman is mostly a *rakshashi* (demoness) either trying to spread her evil rage or is at war with the 'other' characters in the story. She is active but is a perpetrator of evil deeds. The evil woman seeks change things for her own sake. So, agency of the woman to change and goodness per se does not go hand in hand. It cannot be a part of one self. It is torn apart to present to the reader an idea that good women should accept everything in life without questioning. She may give birth to a dog and an owl (*Budhhu Bhotoom*) which is impossible in reality (this is how fantasy is woven into the stories), should not question any such suspicions as the good will prevails for her at the end. There is this hope that everything will turn to her favour stacked for her at the closing stages of the story. She needs not panic or struggle for it. Her goodness will prove someday. The woman characters central to most of the stories are divided into a binary opposite giving prominence on the good over the evil. The stories preach docility and submission in women.

The author/compiler presents women as workers in everyday life rich or poor. The queen also performs cooking or acts out her own everyday work herself (In *Kalabati Rajkanya* the seven queens eat the sacred root by crushing it on the grinding stone themselves). Her duty as a “homemaker” comes first. The demoness may adapt to trouble the good-natured wife (*Kakonmala Kanchanmala*) stop the progress of a determined prince (*Kalabati Rajkanya*) but she is a woman first. Their desires conflict and are posed against each other in a binary opposition.

Another set of binary present in the stories is that between men and women. It is always the women who plot tricks against one another. Perhaps the household, the private sphere is more emphasized in the stories than the public, which the King or a man dominates. At several instances the beauty of the women in the stories are praised (*Kuch boron kanya* and *megh boron kesh* meaning the fair woman with her wavy hair), besides the heroism of men. We find two kinds of binaries in the stories: one of a good woman who is a mother and weak and the plotter, wicked, trickster woman usually the demoness and the other the home-bound dependent woman as opposed to the heroic man who fight, explore new lands, discover people, is brave and valorous. In each of these descriptions, a fantasy is woven into the reality of experiences, leading the mind to form its own frame of reference. The men are depicted as the defenders of the country (*desh*), are the ultimate judges of deeds (because it is the King who punishes the evil-doer at the end). Fantasy is important in the way the stories are told. In *Budhu Bhutum* the owl and the monkey are actually sons of a queen who was tricked. Their wives burn their animal skins so that they could have them as humans in the day-time. The *Bangoma and Bangomi*, the legendary birds of wisdom always help the deserving. The heroes in *Lalkamal Neelkamal* donate drops of blood to the blind young siblings to activate their sights. In *Saat Bhai Champa* the dead boys bloom to become seven flowers in the garden.

The book acts as an important code of message for the virtuous, innocent womanliness who has a complete devotion to family and community (the *rakhashi* or the demoness acts as a member of her community even if she is married into a human family). Rightfully culture specific embedded codes and symbols are constructed into the mosaic of the female characters. There are no male demons (*rakhash*) in contrast to the over presence of the woman version of the *rakhash*.

Let me take you to through the world represented in *Thakurmar Jhuli*, a world that a child as a reader comprehends: the story of *Sheyal Pandit* for

example. The crocodile brings his children to school. The school is a residential one where the crocodile leaves his all seven children under the tutelage of the teacher a fox. The fox eats all the children, one by one. Troubled by the thought that the crocodile might come asking for his children, the fox flees to the jungle. The reader might quite understand the kind of fear a child may have of a school! The question is what kind of idea the child frames of a teacher! Or let's take the story of *Kalabati Rajkanya* where the helpless mother and the demoness step-mother are posed against each other: one prays for her son the prince and the other stalls his voyage. The step-mother never works for the good of her step son. She throws a shawl over the prince from which innumerable soldiers emerge (*Kakanmala Kanchanmala*), mix magical concoction of hair oil seeking to change the physical form of the rival-wife (*satin*). In this way motherhood is not only eulogized but the importance of blood-tie gets emphasized. The *Duorani* (the wife of a king who is loved by him but is the evil) is embodied as selfish conspirator and the *Suorani* (the "good" wife of a king but not loved by him) the victim always deserves the happy ending. Every woman who acts a villain in the story blames the other. For example, in *Saat bhai Champa* the wives who had conspired against the mother of seven sons and a daughter blame each other before the king when caught of their misdeed. The women who act a victim are passive and quiet accepting that it is their fate to suffer. The women who are the villains and who acts the trajectory of the stories are bold in their misdeed but meek in accepting their faults. Their characters have different shades and are the main attraction in the stories. The moral of each story is the victory of the good and the valiant over the evil. But it also has an encoded message that being a woman is vulnerable but at the same time being an evil woman is even worse. Perhaps here at the end of each story we find the woman storyteller's sigh for relief in the happiness stored in the unseen future. Their life as experienced is full of sorrow and so they look forward to the future and wait for the unseen happiness accepting the fact that all ends well. Dey (1893) in the preface to the compilation called *Folktales of Bengal* says the story-teller woman of his childhood Sambhu's mother '...used always to end every one of her stories— and every orthodox Bengali story teller does the same...

"*Aamaar kothati furolo,*

*Note gachhti murolo*".

"*Keno re note muroli?*"

{ "My story ends,

With the decay of the spinach"

"Why did you spinach decay?"



<i>"Goru keno khay?"</i>	"Why does the cow eat (me)?"
<i>"Keno re goru khas?"</i>	"Why you cow eat (spinach)?"
<i>"Rakhal keno charayna?"</i>	"Why doesn't the shepherd take us to graze?"
<i>"Keno re rakhal charasna?"</i>	"Why doesn't the shepherd take the cow to graze?"
<i>"Bou keno bhaat deyna?"</i>	"Why does not the wife give meals?"
<i>"Keno re bou bhaat dis na?"</i>	"Why you wife do not give meals?"
<i>"Chhele keno kadey"</i>	"Why does the son cry?"
<i>"Keno re chhele kadis?"</i>	"Why do you cry son?"
<i>"Pipre keno khay"</i>	"Why does the ant eats me?"
<i>"keno re pipre khas"</i>	"Why you ant eat the son?"
<i>"Khabar jinish khaboi to!"</i>	"It is a piece to consume so shall eat!"
<i>Kut! Kut! Kut!</i> (In Original)	Eating sounds of the ant goes on}(Translation author)

The preface in question refers to the short poetry that every woman story-teller would end her stories. The poetry in fact describes the name blaming sequence that is operative in society. It is the ant at last that takes up the blame and with pride declares that a child's sweetness is the cause of its attraction and continues to poke the child. This again is woven in fantasy to portray that it is an over-arching shelter under which every adult can take refuge and demonstrate the truth about life. The child is the listener and the woman story-teller at the end to portray her journey as a woman finds refuge in the happiness that future beholds focusing on the fact that it is the child listener.

All the stories in the compilation weave power-struggles and violence in different forms. The rivalry of women for the attention of the King, their husband (Maitra 2007) looms large among them. It above everything else does not enhance the status of the women who fight among themselves for a man. The struggle of the mother to prove herself through her children

(*Kiranmala*) shows vengeance of rival wives and the mother over their infertility or impotency. Here the king is silent after receiving the news that one of his wives has produced a dead cat and dog which shows either his ignorance about human reproduction or his acceptance of the supremacy of women's judgement in this regard. Perhaps the author emphasizes on the division of judgments of two kinds: one that the King asserts and the other that the women folk presents bound within the boundary of their homes. The king does not interfere with the household judgments. In *Nilkamal Lalkamal* and *Dalimkumar* we find a message to support the good against the evil, in *Kiranmala*, we find the importance to bravery to defend one's loved ones, in *Kalabati Rajkanya* importance is on allegiance towards parents, *Kakanmala Kanchanmala* shows one should be true to one's promise, *Sheyal Pandit* articulates how one needs to be clever enough to survive in a world of tricksters.

Polygamy is a standard marriage practice throughout the stories, reflecting anxiety, apprehension of the woman characters of sharing one roof and a common husband. The stories express jealousy, submission, tricks, hatred, valour, pride and violence as remedy from all kinds of situation. Motherhood is emphasized in every story. The longing for a child, the childlessness of a wife, deep and earnest wait for a child to be born are very recurrent motive behind the turns that come up in the stories. Motherhood was important feature of the stories. Perhaps it may have been the source of predicaments and struggle for women too. The stories are never simply laid out. They are woven into sub-plots sometimes multiple plots and are expressed in chaste language (*sadhu bhasa* or the written language as opposed to *chalitbhasa*, the spoken language). If we accept that the compiler had collected folk stories told by grandmothers then we cannot accept the fact that they were told in chaste language! The compiler has imposed the language marking the standard way of story-telling of the time and therefore uplifts his status from a compiler to an author.

*Thakurmar Jhuli* was a product of and for the modern educated Bengali society. If modernism means emancipation, democracy, rationality, scientism then in what ways this book attains the standard is really doubtful. With stories based on restraint or passivity, authoritativeness, irrational behaviour and traditionalism it raises doubt over its presentation of the virtues of a "modern" world. Moreover, the over presence of passive women and their irrational behaviour in depiction of characters in the stories it also raises questions over the popularity of the book over generations of readers too. Is it noteworthy to say that it is the "normal" way a patriarchal society

would treat a gender biased presentation? The third important question is the way in which the stories have been portrayed and presented for a child who is naïve about the world around her/him. The complex way, in which the stories are plotted, the plots within plots are far than simple for a child to comprehend. If we accept the fact that the stories were collected (compiled/written) at a time when there were extended families where polygamous marriage ties, family feuds, jealousies were rampant still is it worthy to uphold the same in stories for the child? Can literature for children pass off with high appreciation for generations only with presence of animals in the name of it in the form of fantasy? Can we call such renditions adequate and appropriate enough to enrich (block?) the minds of the children? Isn't it time enough to rethink if the stories are healthy enough for the development of the mind of a child?

There is a gap between how children see the world and the adult likes him/her to see the world. Moreover, there is also a gap between the situation in which the child lives now and how s/he perceives it through the stories. Here the adult male author visualizes the world for him or her. Does he create a world for the child in what he believes? The adult might play a pivotal role by imposing upon the child what he considers appropriate for him or her. When we read literature for children it is a potent way to make sense for the child. Constructing the stories in the mind of the child is one of the fundamental means of making sense and a significant activity in the process of learning. Through these stories the child maps the possible roles s/he will like to play as an adult. The children discover the world in an imaginative engagement with the stories. Children's literature is a product of the culture and society. The author and the child-reader are both the producer and the consumer of the stories. They are part of the same society where these stories are culturally constructed but they occupy different power-positions in it. The nineteenth century colonial Bengal saw the rise of the educated middle class (*bhadralok*) where the family was prioritized lending importance to the child. This necessitated the understanding of the location of the child and therefore saw a proliferation of children's literature. But the doubt remains which section of the gentry at present may or likes to uphold the popularity of the book?

Story-telling has been a long tradition to engage children. Through *storying* or telling of stories to the child it is a tradition that has been in practice much before the start of writing stories for children. The publication of books as compilations of stories of folk tales already in the tradition or cultural practice of a society is evidence to it. The child may be a listener

or a reader, whatever position the child is in the society the emphasis is always on the growth of the child and its development into an adult who subscribes to the norms of society. The literature of any society therefore should be conscious of how adult's ideas seep into these stories so that the child does not imbibe an adult's world from the outset. Considering the popularity of this particular compilation throughout generations of readers young and old is it not appropriate time to reconsider the recreation of such literature for the child?

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