

The Material Manifested: Lacanian Reading of Dissent in Folktales

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Abstract

In “Freud and Lacan”, Althusser enunciates that the Symbolic and the Imaginary “are dominated, governed and marked by a single law, the Law of the symbolic. . . . even the Imaginary . . . is marked and substituted in its dialectic by the dialectic of the *Symbolic* order itself, i.e. by the dialectic of human order, of the human norm . . . in the order of the signifier itself” (143-144). Lacan’s Symbolic does not comprise a law in the positive sense; it bears all the differentiating features of social existence; a law that generates the feasibility of “acceptance, rejection, yes or no,” (Althusser “Freud” 143). The pliable desire is channelized through linguistic substitutions to maintain the basic instinct in to the developed stages of life. The Oedipal prohibition converts into more localized rules and laws – the “Law of Human Order” (Althusser *Writings* 28). The personation of the desire coheres with the established norms.

Most of the folktales are grounded on the common people’s drive for a rich, lavish life and to counter their oppressors: the desire “to move up in the world” and to “seize the power,” “not necessarily the desire to alter social relation,” but a change is realized in them; “they glimpse the need and possibility for limited change,” “the limits of social mobility and the confines of the imagination” (Zipes 33). The Law (for Lacan, Law of the father and for Althusser, Law of Culture) puts a class of people into labour class and their desire, the fundamental lack, is being explicated as the repercussion of the social grid. “Two lacks overlap here” (Lacan *Four* 204). The magic and fantasies in these tales help them to fulfill this desire to be the desire of the Other, to be identified by and to possess the Other; in short, the desire for the Other and to protest against the Law. The paper analyses the subtexts of protest against the prohibition of social norms/system – prohibition of class and gender by

taking A. K. Ramanujan's collection of folktales entitled *Folktales from India* as the primary text for analysis.

The tales *The Magic Bowls*, *Bopoluchi*, *The Clay Mother-in-Law* and *The Clever Daughter-in-Law*, in the collection demonstrate how the fundamental lack, the desire, regulates as per the social strata. The tales depict the desire of lower classes to earn and have an aristocratic life and punish their exploiters. The tales of this kind (tales of lower strata) can be categorized into male centred and women centred tales in accordance with the play of desire in the stories. In the woman centred tales, young women earn money by their luck, special powers or by wisdom which provides them a better and stable future. But in the male centred tales, the protagonists desire for a lavish life than a stable future. The social system, the Other, with which the stories engage is also different in either cases. The male centred stories are located in a public setting; the principal characters fail those belonging to the patriarchal social system like kings, high class lords. In the women centred tales, however, this social system changes into a more domestic one, consisting of a cruel mother-in law, cruel husband, jealous co-wives or sisters-in-law.

In the Tamil story, *The Magic Bowls*, a lazy man got four magic bowls as a gift from the goddess of forest and became rich. The rich neighbor who found the secret of the magic bowls did all to get magic bowls from the goddess. He got magic bowls, but instead of food dozens of big wrestlers came out and seized the host and guests. This story develops on the desire to have a sumptuous life at the same time, mocks the greedy rich, revealing the desire to revolt against their exploiters. The story expresses the desire for what is Forbidden ('the first of the forces which establish culture or symbolic order' (Lemaire 62)) to the lower class in the society.

The Law of the father, which brings all norms through language, constitutes classes in the society. It generates the Law of Culture. The society which the lazy man represents is a castrated one which is identified by this Law. This identification resembles Lacan's third stage of the jubilant – identification with the father. When the Law comes, a group of people, before their birth itself, fall into the lower class.

Lacan demonstrates effectiveness of the Order, the Law, that has been lying in wait for each infant born since before his birth. And seizes him before his first cry, assigning to him his place and role and hence his fixed destination. (Althusser "Freud" 144)

When they identify with the society, the culture and its rules, the lack which is formed already with the denial of being mother's phallus, reshapes into a lack out of the denial of an equal life status with the high class. The Law of Culture institutes the high class and the low class in the society. One becomes the Other for each one. Thus the desire of the lower class, that of the mother for the child, remoulds into desire for the life of the Other – the high class. The Oedipal prohibition converts to cultural norms. Through such stories the low class desire to live the life of the Other and to exploit and penalize their exploiters and thus to go against the Law. They desire what they had to Sacrifice (symbolic castration in Lacanian concepts).

Albeit the desire works the same as the former tales in the women centred tales like *Bopoluchi* and *The Clever Daughter in Law*, the ways of desire vary. Though the desire for wealth is there in these tales the wealth helps the women characters to have a better life, as a tool against the patriarchal society and in some stories it saves the women protagonists from the cruelty of the mother-in-laws. The women in the tales never wish the life of a loiter as the male characters do in the above mentioned male centred tales. Rather, they wish for a firm future.

The Punjabi tale *Bopoluchi* deals with the life of the orphan girl, Bopoluchi, who dreamt of a prosperous life and a rich husband. A thief who wished to marry her came disguised as her uncle and took her to his home. When they reached home he revealed his true identity and went out for the preparation of marriage feast leaving Bopoluchi with his old mother. She tricked the old lady, killed her and escaped from the place. She was sure that the robber would come after her and find her out if she returned home. So she begged her neighbours to let her sleep in their houses. But after a few days she decided to be brave and started sleeping at her own house. One day four robbers crept in and took her each seizing a leg of her bed. She was wide awake but pretended asleep till they came to a deserted place. Then with the billhook which she kept next to her on bed, cutoff the head of three robbers. Though the forth one escaped by climbing a tree, she set fire to that tree. Then she went to the robber's house, collected all the wealth and went back to her home. Thereafter, she lived lavishly and could marry anyone she was pleased of.

The tale narrates the triumph of a brave girl going against patriarchy though it sets the goal and dreams of a girl as marriage. With bravery and wisdom the poor girl acquires wealth and lives lavishly as she desired. When she escapes from the cruel thief, the escape becomes a wish fulfillment of the desire of women folk to escape from their cruel husbands. Here, the wealth paves the way for the girl to her dream world. It is interesting to note that she is an

orphan and what protects and fulfills her dream is money. The desire for wealth in the story depicts the desire of women, the woman storyteller's and the desire of the women audience to escape from the cruel patriarchal society and money gives them the economic support to live a life without the assistance of the patriarchal society.

It should be noted that as the girl is an orphan, she is free from the patriarchal system of the family when the story starts. When the robber wishes to marry her and tricks her, she is trapped into the patriarchal world. When she cuts off the heads of the robber and his friends, symbolically she escapes from the Law of the society and with the wealth of the robber, she leads a luxurious, happy life. The story recounts the desire of the women folk to break free from the oppressive men folk, especially their husbands and to exploit their oppressors; the girl collects the robber's wealth and lives her later life copiously. The patriarchal society acts the Name-of-the-Father role for the girls and they are prohibited to live a free life, the life of boys. When she escapes from the clutches of the Law of the father in the story, the Forbidden is being satisfied for her. The money gets a role in this tale because the girl belongs to lower class. Wealth along with a masculine life is desirable for the preliterate women.

The tales *The Clay Mother-in-Law* and *The Clever Daughter-in-Law* too have the same pattern. In the Tamil tale *The Clay Mother-in-Law*, the docile daughter-in-law follows the advices of the clay statue of her mother-in-law, which her husband has made for her after his mother's death because his wife was disturbing him asking silly questions regarding the measure of rice every day. She mistook then opened fingers of the clay figure as her measure. This made the rice-bags emptied so early and the husband became furious to her that he threw her out of house with the clay mother-in-law. At night the frightened daughter-in-law climbed a tree in the forest with the clay statue. Then a group of thieves came with their loot under the tree and she mistook them for devils and the clay statuette fell down from her hand. The sound made robbers panicked and they fled from there. At morning she saw the pieces of her clay mother-in-law and the loot. She collected the broken pieces of the clay figure and some of the loot and went back to her husband. Though he scolded her for coming back, when he came to know about the wealth, he collected all the loot from the forest with the help of his wife. Then he sent his wife to the next home to lend a big measuring vessel, warning her not to tell a word about the acquired treasure. But the neighbour lady became suspicious and pasted a tamarind at the bottom of the vessel. The neighbour woman and her husband were astonished to see a rare gem stuck on the tamarind when the vessel was returned. The woman questioned the daughter-in-law and she told the whole story to her. After hearing the story,

the neighbour woman's husband urged her to do the same. He made a clay figure and sent her to forest with that. She climbed the tree and put the clay figure when the thieves came to share their loot. Although they were frightened at first, they hid behind the trees to find out the source of the clash. When they discovered her collecting their loot, she was beaten up and tied to the tree. The next morning, her husband found her nearly gone mad with fear but not a penny richer.

In this tale, even if not of bravery, by luck she acquires wealth and this wealth fetches her back the place in her husband's house, a standing better than the previous. It's only because of the riches, her husband accepts her back. Wealth works as an instrument to access the Other. In this tale too the wealth is of thieves, a part of the patriarchal society. The concluding part of the tale ridicules the greedy rich. The story can easily stand alone without this second half. But the desire of lower class to punish their exploiters adjoins the second half to the tale. This part reveals their desire to punish the greedy rich women, who are most probably their exploiters. The docile daughter-in-law can be a symbol of the societal notions of a woman as passive obedient one. Though not directly, she manages to escape this notion, or in a sense, the Law by acquiring wealth.

The Kannada tale *The Clever Daughter-in-Law* tells the story of a young clever daughter-in-law who managed by threatening the goddess Kali to take hand from her mouth which she put by seeing the speed and quality of food the daughter-in-law took, tricking her tyrant mother-in-law. She wielded to escape from the artifices of her cruel mother-in-law and husband. Like the former tales, the daughter-in-law tricked the robbers and accumulated wealth. She went back to her husband's home and lived happily afterwards with that fortune. In the story we see that there was a terrible tyrant mother-in-law who gave no freedom and only a little food to her daughter-in-law. She never allowed her daughter-in-law to complain or weep over this. In the season of snake-gourds the mother-in-law used to make delicious snake-gourd *talada*. She and her son would eat most of it and the daughter-in-law got only the leftovers. One day the daughter-in-law gulled her tyrant mother-in-law by saying that the mother-in-law's sister was not well and wanted to see her. When she left home, she cooked more *talada* and went to the nearby Kali temple. She sat there and ate all *talada* in such a speed that the goddess became astonished on the speed and quantity she consumed. In her amazement she covered her mouth with her right hand. When the daughter-in-law came back home her mother-in-law had returned and she rained blows on the young daughter-in-law for lying to her. Meanwhile the whole town was confused on the image of Kali with her hand on

mouth. They took it as an ill omen and did all they could, but the effigy remained the same. The young daughter-in-law took the challenge and went to the temple. By threatening the goddess, she managed to remove the image's hand from the mouth. The daughter-in-law was praised by all and the mother-in-law became terrified of some magical powers in her daughter-in-law. She and her son planned to kill her and set fire to her after taking her to the forest at night. She managed to escape and hid in the branches of a tree where after some time four robbers came to share the loot. With her shrewdness and presence of mind, she eluded the thieves and gathered all the loot. With it she returned to her in-laws and informed her mother-in-law that she was blessed by the god of death, Yama and He is raged on her for trying to kill her daughter-in-law. She added that the god will be watching on her. This frightened the mother-in-law. After that the daughter-in-law lived in peace, "her mother-in-law and her husband followed her wishes, and everyone was happy" (Ramanujan *Folktales* 38).

The story differs from the former tales when it narrates the women's desire to trick and succeed their tyrant mother-in-laws and cruel husbands. In the former stories the tyrant mother-in-law was not present physically. Here the life of a young daughter-in-law is threatened by the mother-in-law and she tricks her. In this story the mother-in-law gets the status of the Name-of-the-father. The daughter-in-law is in the castrated position; the life of her is in danger because of the cruel mother-in-law. To go beyond the clutches of the mother-in-law becomes the desire here because it is the mother-in-law who implements the norms for the daughter-in-law. Mothers-in-law are the law makers in the life of most of the married women. By evading them in the tales, they fulfill their desire to elude them in real life. The end of the story supports this where the daughter-in-law becomes the boss in the house and her mother-in-law and husband obeys her. This expresses the desire for power in their houses which mostly rests with the in-laws and husbands. It should be noted that she not only fails the intent of her mother-in-law, but acquires wealth too; same as the former story, the wealth of robbers, symbolically representing the wealth of her exploiters – the men folk. The young daughter-in-law in this story is a perfect example for the desire in the women centred tales. She portrays the desires of a lower class woman, the desire to dodge her opponents or oppressors and the desire for money. Though she is brave, clever and adventurous, it is money which gives her a better fearless future. The desire of the poor of the Other – the richest, attaches the part of cozening the thieves in the story.

Being brave, adventurous and by acquiring money, the women desire to go beyond the Law of the father or the Law of Culture. The social norms confine women into domestic works and their work is not considered as productive labour. Whatever the protagonists in these tales endeavour, is sacrificed by or understood as Forbidden to women by the Law of the father or the Law of Culture. The masculinity or the phallus is the Other for women. Failing this Other, adventurously, is to fulfill this desire. Adventure and financial supports are supposed to be undertaken by men only. By being adventurous and getting financial support themselves, they try to be this Other.

Both the male and woman centred tales narrate the demands of the men and women who belong to the lower strata of the society; through which they express their desire. They demand their Other through these tales, to fill the lack. "Demand functions in the register of the impossible, for it is basically a demand to annihilate the distinction between self and other, the demand that the 'lack' constituting the ego be filled by the other" (Grosz 133). These tales depict the fantasies of the lower class and help them to deny the social norms, restrictions and constraints of family which are the results of the Law that gives them a secondary position. These tales help them to go beyond their marginalized status, and for women, their doubly marginalized status, through imagination.

To Zizek, the Lacanian subject is the site of potential political resistance to the predominating social and ideological order, and disruptions in that order. If so, these tales are artilleries for his/her resistance. The desires in these tales are their ideologies: the expressions of the "overdetermined unity of the real relation and the imaginary relation between [men] and their real conditions" (Althusser *For Marx* 233-234). When no direct ideological resistance was possible, the tales helped them to fulfill the desire for the rebellion, a silent one. These tales are the aberrant forms which aspire to counter the very Law of the Symbolic by accessing the Law of Culture.

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