

Nullification of Dualisms in “Lai Khutsangbi” in Dr. Haobam Bilashini Devi’s Folktales of Manipur: Exploring Plumwood’s “Backgrounding” Theory

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Abstract: Reflecting upon the conventional western thought of dualism, this study attends to the Val Plumwood’s understanding of dualism. The framework of this paper is contrived with the intent to score the consequence for the experimentation of Plumwood’s “backgrounding” in “Lai Khutsangbi” in Dr. Haobam Bilashini Devi’s *Folktales of Manipur*. Casting importance on the climax of the conflict in the hierarchy of dualism, Plumwood’s “backgrounding” theory is conceived with the target to challenge the configuration of dualism.

Keywords: dualism, folktale, Manipur, backgrounding.

What is Val Plumwood’s “backgrounding” theory about?

In depreciation of the western theory of dualism, Val Plumwood in her *Feminism and the mastery of nature* brings to the fore considerable theories that invalidates the structure of dualism itself. Her “backgrounding” is predominantly emphasized as one of those theories in *Feminism and the mastery of nature*.

The theory of dualism rests as the base, foundation of *Feminism and the mastery of nature*. The constitutional motif of *Feminism and the mastery of nature* is conditioned on the elimination of dualism itself in challenging the hierarchy in dualism. Primarily, Ferdinand de Saussure is one of the exponents to contribute the psychological dualism. The theory of dualism involves two binary oppositions, that is of two terms of which the first term is perceived superior and the second term inferior. The expression of dualism- male/female pair serves to be the ultimate conventional exemplar. The element “male” in the first term is conceived superior while its counterpart element “female” in the second term the inferior. As a consequence, conflicts take shape in every configuration of dualisms in terms of the hierarchy between the two terms. Be that as it may, Jacques Derrida develops a theory of “aporia” that invalidates the hierarchy in dualism. Derrida’s “aporia” is a cardinal procedure that brings a reverse to the placement of binary oppositions in dualism, as in “literature/ criticism” the placements of the “literature” in the first term and “criticism” in the second term are exchanged, providing the fact that “criticism is a species of literature and that literature is a species of criticism”¹ The inversion of the terms implies reconsidering the priority of a term over the other in dualism and in the act of effective subversion of a term over the other, the state of hierarchy lacks accountability as it destabilizes the status of both the terms, of which procedure is known as “aporia.”

Feminism and the mastery of nature materialises a parallel nature of destabilization of hierarchy, yet, exercising different procedure- the “backgrounding.” A deep delve into the “backgrounding” unfolds that the first placement in dualism stands vulnerable when it is backgrounded. The feature of “backgrounding” is deep-seated in the hierarchy maintained in dualism, conveying a consequential conflict from the “superior” and “inferior” position. A discernible effect is evident in the master/slave dualism, concerning the fact that the “slave” in the second term extends services benefiting the “master” in the first term and the “slave” is being relied on, yet, they are denied of the fact that they are depended on, in the way that they are considered inessential by the “master” in the first term, which consequently, outlines the dualism- “master/slave.” It is entirely to the advantage of the “master” that the “slave” delivers its service with no gain in return. Yet, they are considered “inessential” and hence, conflicts take shape to the hierarchy. Addressing the issue of conflict, Plumwood contrives the “backgrounding” theory with an intent to overthrow the first term by the second term which consequently, invalidates the configuration of dualism.

¹ M.H Abrams, Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 11th edition, pg. no. 82

“Backgrounding is a complex feature which results from the irresolvable conflicts the relationship of domination creates for the master, for he attempts both to make use of the other, organising, relying on and benefiting from the other’s services, and to deny the dependency which this creates.”²

The “master” in “master/slave” is backgrounded in view of the fact that the “master” lives entirely on the services provided by the “slave”; the “master” depends on the “slave” much more than the “slave” depends on the “master.” The “inessentialness” designed upon the “slave,” despite being used, renders the placement of the “slave” superior while the “master” holds the position of the superior first term. However, bringing the “backgrounding” into effect, reflecting the reality of the relative value, weighing the value of a term to the other in terms of the usefulness and dependency of a term on the other, the “master” is backgrounded. It brings a consequential impact to the configuration of dualism in view of the fact that the exertion of Plumwood’s “backgrounding” incapacitates the configuration of dualism.

Framing dualisms in “Lai Khutsangbi” in Dr. Haobam Bilashini’s Folktales of Manipur

The folktale entitled “Lai Khutsangbi (Long Armed Witch)” in Dr. Haobam Bilashini’s *Folktales of Manipur* dwells on the act of horrifying murders rendered by a long-armed witch (Lai Khutsangbi).

“At the northern side of her house, there was a dense forest. In the forest, there lived a witch which had very long arms. Because of her long arms, the witch was known as *Lai Khutsangbi*. The witch came to the nearby villages in search of her prey. She killed people who lived alone. Mostly, the victims were lonely women and children, poor and weak persons. Thus, she spent her days very happily with easy preys.”³

Respectively, the creation of a character of the long-armed witch necessitates victims like the woman character, Chaobi, and her neighbouring woman, Tombi. The two characters, Chaobi and Tombi are made available to the disposal of the long-armed witch, considering the circumstances that Chaobi, the beautiful wife of a merchant is at times left alone at home as her husband leaves home for “business trips” and Tombi is a character of a widow, who lives alone at home and she hardly has time to spare to socialise with her neighbours. Serving the circumstances laid bare before the witch, the life of Tombi is put to an end as the witch consumed Tombi. The witch makes attempts to attack Chaobi as well. Nonetheless, the attempts are ineffective. The presence of the husband of Chaobi at a critical time, renders a converse situation as Chaobi invites the witch (disguised as the dead Tombi) inside the house, under the condition that she opens the door on her own by pushing her hand through the hole of the wall. The husband “standing behind the door, chopped her long arm with a sharp sword.”⁴ It brings the end of her venture to hunt lonely women and children for her food.

Provided the storyline, the dualisms- witch/Chaobi, witch/ Tombi and husband/witch are discovered. Dwelling on the plot structure of the narrative, the “long-armed witch” is conditioned as a character, who lives on human flesh and her power is limited to women and child who live alone. Contemplating the situation, Chaobi and Tombi are normal women who live alone and live not on human flesh like the witch. The circumstances offer the witch the position of the superior first term while the two women occupy the inferior second term. Hence, the conditioned factor in the story draws expressions of dualism- witch/Chaobi and witch/Tombi. Yet, conversely, the dualism “husband/witch” is occasioned in the context of the husband not being a woman, but armed at the time the long arm of the witch is to be chopped off.

Backgrounding the dualisms in “Lai Khutsangbi”

Drawing dualisms from “Lai Khutsangbi,”- witch/Chaobi, witch/Tombi and husband/witch, the narrative projects the second terms “Chaobi” in “witch/Chaobi,” “Tombi” in “witch/Tombi” and “witch” in “husband/witch” inferior to the first terms. Nevertheless, the placements of the first terms require a stronghold of its first placement that stands for superiority. Backgrounding the first placements, the position of the first terms are laid off course. Applying the “backgrounding,” it is imperative to note that the “witch” though not successful in her attempts to consume Chaobi, the witch takes her as a prey for her to live on and failing to find a human flesh to consume, she is bound to die. Relatively, the second terms “Chaobi” and “Tombi” are depended on by the witch in the dualism “witch/Chaobi” and “witch/ Tombi.” The condition is paradoxical that Chaobi and Tombi depend not on the witch for anything, and it invalidates Chaobi and Tombi the placement of second terms. Correspondingly, in the dualism- “husband/witch,” the witch is backgrounded in the narrative regarding the fact that the capacity of the witch is overthrown by the husband, conveying the witch a position of the second term which stands inferior to the first term the “husband.” However, accommodating the “backgrounding” theory, the “husband” fails to sustain the placement of the first term; in the context of the

² Val Plumwood, “Dualism: the logic of colonisation” in *Feminism and the mastery of nature*. pg. no. 48

³ Dr. Haobam Bilashini Devi, “Lai Khutsangbi” in *Folktales of Manipur*, pg. no. 72-73

⁴ Dr. Haobam Bilashini Devi, “Lai Khutsangbi” in *Folktales of Manipur* pg. 74

condition laid out in the story, that the act of chopping off the long arm of the witch is not executed in a confrontational nature but it is acted upon in a cowardly manner. The first placement taken by the husband (husband/ witch) in the narrative depends on the situation that the witch is made availed to, as she pushes her arm through the hole of the wall. Should the witch confront the husband in a confrontational nature before losing her long arm, the superior first term placement of the husband lacks guarantee.

Conclusion

The theoretical framework of “backgrounding” explored in the narrative incapacitates the mechanism of dualisms detected in the narrative. Having applied the “backgrounding,” the first terms fail to play superiors, altering and elevating the position of the second terms. The experimentation of the “backgrounding” in this paper deconstructs the configuration of dualism. Countering a marked impact to the conventional theory of dualism, the use of Plumwood’s “backgrounding” in “Lai Khutsangbi” effects the constitution of this paper on account of the destabilisation of the first and second terms; that in fact engenders nullification of dualisms in the narrative.

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