

Deconstructive-Ecofeminist Reading of “Uchek Langmeidong”: Conditioning of the Folktale by Val Plumwood’s “Denial of Dependency”

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Abstract: Casting highlights of this study, the cardinal construction of the paper stands on the pragmatic application of Plumwood’s theory of “denial of dependency” in the folktale, “Uchek Langmeidong” from Dr. Haobam Bilashini Devi’s *Folktales of Manipur*. The paper offers a deeper treatment of the “denial of dependency” in the affairs of the characters in the folktale; which entails the position of polarity in the theory of dualism. Extending deeper understanding of the theories in the context of the interrelationship between the characters in the folktale, this paper entertains a critical speculation on the nature of the characters, maintaining an alignment with the grounds of the first and second terms facilitated in Plumwood’s “denial of dependency.” The focal point of the paper lies in rendering the less known regional folktales like “Uchek Langmeidong” acquainted with latest literary theories like ecofeminism.

Configuration of dualism in the theory of deconstruction

The framework of a deconstruction primarily attends to a procedure of subversion of the logocentric theory of language in Western philosophies prevalent in Saussure’s structuralism. Derrida’s deconstruction undertakes an approach of “decentering” Saussure’s theory of structuralism, with reference to the self-sufficient and self-certifying grounds “serving to “center” the structure of linguistic system,” with regards to the concept that the self-sufficient elements in the structure are bound to deconstruct itself, owing to the conflicting forces that dissipate the definiteness of the structure into indefinite possibilities.

The cardinal course of action serving the theory of deconstruction covers inversion of the hierarchy in the binary oppositions as in speech/writing, nature/culture, male/female. The position of the binary oppositions is apprehended to be structured in a hierarchy; the first term placed in a binary pair plays a superior and a privileged role while the second term operates as an inferior one. However, the fundamental interest of Derrida’s deconstruction lies in the cardinal procedure of inverting the hierarchy processed in the dualism, as in speech/writing, overthrowing “speech”, it renders a binary pair- writing/speech. However, the inversion contrived in the dualism, continues unending subversion of the hierarchy, leaving in a condition of undecidability, which is termed, “aporia.” The layout of the theory of deconstruction is intended not as an approach maintained in literary criticism but rather to execute the act of close readings of particular passages in order to subvert the implicit suppositions of Western thought.

Paul de Man is considered to be influential and innovative to an extended degree who applies deconstruction in the reading of literary text. In the course of his close reading, Paul de Man contrives an alignment between “grammar”, versus “rhetoric” with the distinction made by John Austin, the force that is opposite- “constative” versus “performative.” Barbara Johnson, a student of Paul de Man is regarded as another important exponent of the theory of deconstruction. His deconstructive readings are extended from literary texts to the writings of other critics.

“Deconstruction is not synonymous with destruction.... The deconstruction of a text does not proceed by random doubt or arbitrary subversion, but by the careful teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text itself. If anything is destroyed in a deconstructive reading, it is not the text, but the claim to unequivocal domination of one mode of signifying over another.”¹

Philosophy entitled to the theory of Ecofeminism

Ecofeminism is a theory that is based on the philosophy of ecocriticism- an abbreviated form of “ecology”, the scientific investigations on the relationships between plants and animals. The constitution of

¹Barbara Johnson, *The Critical Difference*, 1980, pp. 5

ecocriticism is formulated to examine the link between the physical environment and literature, with a concerning consciousness of the destruction caused by human activities.

Characterisation of the natural environment in literary forms is substantiated to be traceable in the portrayal of the Garden of Eden in the Hebrew Bible and in Theocritus's pastoral form in the third century BC. The term, "ecofeminism" was coined in the 1970s. The term was a combination of the compressed form of "criticism" and "ecology," which refers to the science that studies the interrelations between plants, animals and physical habitats. The constitution of ecofeminism is to associate the study of men dominance on women with men dominance on nature. Ecofeminist reading acknowledges the merit values of women and nature in questioning the social system of patriarchy that appreciates the value of masculinity, which comes at the cost of exploiting women in the society.

The focal point of ecofeminism is stressed on the connection between the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature by men, seeking justice. The theory confronts the social system of patriarchy in the fact that it holds male masculinity in high estimation at the expense of women and nature exploitation. It in fact, redefines the values of women and nature in the context that the serving role of nature to the entire mankind aligns with the feminine values that serve man in various forms. The framework of ecofeminism maintains a high point of consequences for the isolation of the human realm from nature- the destruction imposed failing to appreciate the roles of women and nature to the sustenance of the entire mankind. It challenges the Western traditional dualistic framework that maintains the structure of hierarchy under the expressions like- man/women, man/nature, culture/nature, where the first terms- man, man, culture in the expressions are regarded to be relatively superior to that of the inferior second terms- women, nature, nature.

Concisely, ecofeminism is in fact an intellectual and political movement with an approach towards the justification of women and nature with the combination of the frameworks of feminism and ecocriticism to serve the purpose of addressing the issues of women and nature with a stronger intensity in the force of the movement.

The conventional culture of telling Manipuri folktales

Under the pretext that the stories are told and narrated near the kitchen furnace, the Manipuri folktales are generally known as the "stories of kitchen furnace or stove." Moreover, the folktales of Manipuri are referred to as the folktales of Meitei. The substantial fact to be noted is that the folktales are narrated by the elders to children around the kitchen furnace.

The reflection of culture of the Meitei community of antique Manipur is undeniably manifested in the narratives. The fundamental essence of the Meitei folktales is substantiated by the fact that the narratives accommodate the values in terms of culture and traditions of Meitei. The cultural identity of the Meitei community is harboured in the crux of the folktales, facilitating an act of support to the generations of today in establishing a bond with the cultures, customs, and traditions of the past. The folktales in fact, serves to be the heritage of the structuralised culture that foster an apprehension of the beliefs, customs and culture sustained since time immemorial.

The oral delivery of the Meitei folktales fostered as a culture in ancient times, ascertains the historical timeframe of the existence of the narratives; reflecting the pre-literate era. Additionally, it entertains the imagination of children and it shapes the cultural identity of the Meitei community.

It extends the marked impact on the customs, cultural values and traditions of today. The fundamental role of the Meitei folktales is positioned in the state of serving the purpose of being a powerful tool in the provision of cultural identity, moral values, societal norms and critiques on societal issues. The Meitei folktales cover genres of fairy tales, tricksters, fables and other stories of "why" that expound the existence and practice of certain norms, customs and culture of the society. Owing to the monumental importance to generate the past cultural values and traditions in the society, the Manipuri folktales are cast to be relevant to contemporary Manipur, exerting the force of impact on the social beliefs, traditions and culture of today.

As culture and tradition play a huge role in the course of the creation of folktales, an analysis on folklore indeed gains insight into the culture which it mirrors. Exploring into the folds of the folklores, for a deeper understanding, it is quite a well-known fact that it is exceptionally imperative for the readers of folklores to bring our human faculties of intelligence to spot the social, cultural, economic and performance context.

The denial of dependency in "Uchek Langmeidong"

"Uchek Langmeidong" in *Folktales of Manipur* embarks on a framework of narrative that renders a configuration of a typical relation between a step-mother and a step-daughter, Heiyainu. The step-mother character fits the stereotypical feminine image of diabolical, concerning the situation that she tortures her step daughter persistently. Contradictorily, the step-daughter stays obedient, consequently bearing the brunt of her step-mother's fit of anger. The narrative hits the climax when the step-daughter transforms to a hornbill (uchek

langmeidong), breaking free from the tortures of her step-mother in her domestic life, of which is inflicted upon unbearably, in the absence of her father.

“She not only scolded Heiyainu, but she also pulled out the name of her dead mother. She was humiliated before her friends. Heiyainu requested her stepmother, “Mother, if you want, beat me until you satisfy yourself. But please do not pull out my mother’s name.” Angered by Heiyainu’s confrontation, the step mother dashed her face and broke her mouth.”²

Bringing the “denial of dependency” into play, the undertaking of an examination of the narrative takes a political turn. Making advances on the theory of dualism that is prevalent in Derrida’s deconstruction, Plumwood unfolds her understanding of dualism in her *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*.

“The key exclusions and denials of dependency for dominant conceptions of reason in western culture includes not only the feminine and nature, but all those human orders treated as nature and subject to denied dependency. Thus, it is the identity of the master (rather than a masculine identity pure and simple) defined by these multiple exclusions which lies at the heart of western culture. This identity is expressed most strongly in the dominant conception of reason and gives rise to a dualized structure of otherness and negation which I argue corresponds to that of classical propositional logic.”³

The understanding of the dualism theory sustained in *Feminism and the mastery of nature*, is extended with the conceptualised framework that the position of polarity casts in the dualism is settled rather on the structure of hierarchy of superior and inferior besides being in the state of dichotomy and different. The “denial of dependency” in the context of dualism in Plumwood’s *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, extends that the state of superiority of the first term is acquired from the first term’s denial of dependency on the second term, irrespective of the exploitation of the second term.

Imposing the theory of dualism on “Uchek Langmeidong” in Dr. Haobam Bilashini Devi’s *Folktales of Manipur*, the step-mother is identified to be in the first term and the step-daughter in the second term of the dualism, given the state of abuse the step-mother initiates and the step-daughter endures. Making a venture on the affairs of the narrative, the story line casts a background of the source of capacity the step-mother has in her power to abuse her step-daughter, as to the fact that the character, the maiden (the step-daughter) is placed in a vulnerable position, bearing the consequence of an early departure of the birth mother from life. Exposure to the state of vulnerability hits the pinnacle that is perspicuous at the point, when the father fails to contemplate on the supposed future for her daughter as he remarries. Granted the situation, he makes a bold move regarding his decision to remarry. The driven force to command absolute authority over the resource of the household, the step-mother pulls strings to get rid of what’s not her blood; making incessant suppression of her step-daughter with abuse and physical torture. The deprivation of a birth mother, renders a construct of a shape of weak, delicate and vulnerable disposition out of the character of the step-daughter, under the pretext that she is juvenile and lacks guardian support. Having drawn her power from the deprivation of the birth mother, the character of the step-mother is positioned at the favourable place, forming grounds that render the step-daughter available at the disposal of the step-mother. The additional factor that capacitates the step-mother to abuse her step-daughter is prevalent in the fact that the step daughter, as still being juvenile, is void of the position that makes consequential produce of material value, of which the step-mother may rely on as she does to the father. That being the case, the capacity of the step-mother to abuse her step-daughter is manifested from her denial of dependency on her step-daughter, concerning the circumstances that the step-daughter generates nothing of a material value that she can depend on.

Drawing polarity in the dualism (step-mother/ step-daughter), the abuse on the second term (step daughter) is exerted with the command of authority to the highest state with no imposition of resistance from the step-daughter. The state of not imposing any resistance by the step-daughter to the act of abuse by the step mother offers an effortless rise of the character step-mother to the first term in dualism, that inevitably renders the character step-daughter to reduce to the second term. The implicit acknowledgement of the step-daughter of her situation of running out of alternatives but “to bear with her step-mother,” contributes to the independent exercise of authority towards the step-daughter by the step-mother. The prevailing condition substantiates a confirmation that the character, step-daughter in the second term, implicitly accepts the fact that she depends on her step-mother, while the act of torture initiated by the step-mother proves the “denial of dependency” on the second term, that issues an impact to the dualism in terms of the hierarchy- superior and inferior.

Conclusion

A marked effect of interpreting the folktale “Uchek Langmeidong” in contextualisation of Plumwood’s “denial of dependency”, is the prime concern of this paper. Proficient execution of critical analysis of the

²Dr. Haobam Bilashini Devi, *Folktales of Manipur*. pp. 15

³Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the mastery of nature*, pp. 42

folktale in terms of Plumwood's understanding of the polarity of dualism, is drawn on the politics between the characters of the folktale rendering the first and second term placement in the polarity of dualism. The framework of this paper offers identification of the less known regional folktale in terms of literary theories; delivering a contribution of a fund of knowledge, concerning the factors as to how the placement of the first and second terms are structured. The paper strikes the chord with the heightened importance of ecofeminism prevailing in the global atmosphere today. Given the supply of ideas exerted, the paper makes a proficient attempt in execution of the theories in the folktale, marking a contribution of the stark importance of the concept of ecofeminism in the society, by conveying it through the folktale.

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