

Conforming the Folktale “Uchek Langmeidong” to Plumwood’s Idea of Dualism: Backgrounding the Foregrounded Term in the Dualism of the Narrative

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Abstract: A fair play of “backgrounding” theory from Val Plumwood’s *Feminism and the mastery of nature*, occupies the central space of the paper. The study conducted in this paper concerns a play of “backgrounding” theory in the folktale “Uchek Langmeidong” from Dr. Haobam Bilashini Devi’s *Folktales of Manipur*. The conventional western theory of dualism is the foundational base, which the “backgrounding” dwells on. The course of action initiated in the study involves backgrounding the perspective of the first term in the dualistic relationship maintained in the folktale.

A preface to Plumwood’s understanding of dualism

Dating back to the binary polarity theory of dualism in Saussure’s structuralism, the theory of dualism remains deep-set in the western theories. The theory of dualism imparts a concept of binary polarity consisting of two contrasting terms of superior and inferior. Generating a conflict amidst the binary polarity in terms of the status maintained, dualism is pursued on a striking note by countless writers, including Val Plumwood. The framework structured in *Feminism and the mastery of nature*, undertakes a proficient attempt to settle the conflict of hierarchy in binary polarity. Extending the “backgrounding” theory from *Feminism and the mastery of nature*, Plumwood offers a settlement to the hierarchical structure of binary polarity rendered in dualism.

In view of the principle exercised in the theory of dualism, the strife of hierarchy is marked a paramount concern of interest. Contemplating the state of affairs in the construct of binary polarity, dualism offers a frame, consisting two terms -the first term positioned superior to the second term as in the expressions- men/women, culture/nature, master/slave and so on. The first term placements of men, culture and master is referred to as superior to the second term placements of women, nature and slave.

“Denial can take many forms. Common ways to deny dependency are through making the other inessential, denying the importance of the other’s contribution or even his or her reality, and through mechanisms of focus and attention.”¹

Introducing “denial of dependency” theory, Plumwood delivers an account that construes the logic backing the configuration of the superior first term and its inferior counterpart. *Feminism and the mastery of nature* exerts a unique approach to “dualism” in her interpretation that the first term in dualism is shaped and structured to be the first term in its “denial of dependency” on the second term, with reference to the expression- men/women, “men”, here, have made the cut for the first term in their “denial of dependency” on “women.” Denial of depending on the second term draws an impact-considering women, entirely inessential and insignificant to the first term, rendering the element “women” to be placed in the second term. Plumwood’s “denial of dependency” substantiates the fact that the configuration of dualism in hierarchy is fostered entirely foregrounding the perspective of the first term while backgrounding the second term in its strategy of approach to the second term as “inessential” and insignificant.

Notwithstanding the hierarchical structure, *Feminism and the mastery of nature* stresses on deconstructing the foregrounded narrative of the first term, bringing resolution of the hierarchical conflict to the fore that renders the deconstruction of the hierarchical configuration of dualism. Deconstructing dualism, Plumwood backgrounds the foregrounded narrative of the first term in the fact that the narrative of the second term is taken into account instead of the first term. Concerning the expression- master/ slave, the perspective of the second term, slave entails certain details like- the master in the first term lives on the labour and toil of the slave in the second term. The consequential value of the toil and labour of the slave in the second term is inescapably manifested as the master in the first term lives entirely on the labour and toil of the slave. The value

¹Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the mastery of nature*, pp.48

conceivably extends to a great degree as it is observed that the placement of the first term man is rendered possible at the expense of the second term. Complying to the imposed narrative of the first term, the second term surrenders to the approach that they are “inessential” to the first term, rendering assent to its placement of second term as the inferior. However, the imposed supposition of a concept of inferiority stands quite contrast to the truth of the matter as the existence of the first term “master” depends on the second term extensively, far more so than the second term “slave” relying on the first term “master.” Thereby, the conditioned context provided exerts the act of deconstructing the typical mechanism of dualism. The outcome of the exertion made, exposes the failure of the mechanism structured in dualism; the hierarchical structure fails to function when the perception of the first term “master” is backgrounded and instead foregrounds the second term “slave.” Plumwood’s theory of “backgrounding” in fact issues a resolution to the conflict of hierarchy of dualism in deconstructing the narrative of the first term.

Correspondingly, the expressions- men/women and culture/nature share the principle with that of master/slave. Having applied dualism theory in man/woman, it is construed that the man in the first term stands for superiority to the second term woman. Pertaining to Plumwood’s understanding of dualism, it is interpreted that the “men” is placed in the first term owing to the fact that the perception of men is taken into account while the narrative of the second term is ignored- as to the fact that “women” are considered inessential, non-beneficial and insignificant to the first term, under the pretext that men exert significant effort in bringing income for the entire family and in terms of other factors associated with men which society assumed superior to women. Thereby, the given account displays the “denial of dependency” on “women” by “men” as the narrative of the second term is backgrounded and foregrounding the perspective of the first term, which in fact delivers the actual hierarchical placement in dualism. However, the hierarchy fails to operate when the perspective of “women” in the second term is foregrounded as to the fact that the very existence of a man is made possible because a woman who is a mother figure gave birth to him. It accounts to the fact that “women”, the only female gender, is positioned with the capacity to produce generations. Additionally, women nurture the family, emotionally and physically in terms of looking after their houses with care, taking care of the household chores that involve cooking, cleaning, feeding, nurturing in different ways of which a man’s emotional stability intensely depends on it far more than a woman depends on her man. In this context, the narrative of the first term “man” is backgrounded in foregrounding the perspective of a “woman” in the second term rendering a collapse of the mechanism of the dualism in the expression- man/woman.

With reference to the mentioned procedure, the expression- culture/nature is construed as culture holding the power over nature in the context that nature is effortlessly accessible and manipulated by the culture of men. The perception of nature is backgrounded as it is considered inessential and insignificant by the culture of men. However, foregrounding the narrative of “nature” in the second term, unveils the failure of configuration of dualism, in consideration of the fact that the entire living beings on earth including human live on nature in terms of food, shelter, medication, and so on, of which the existence of any living beings would render impossible if there exists no nature. Hence, in foregrounding “nature” in the second term, “culture” is no longer positioned in the first term, which deconstructs the hierarchical structure of dualism.

Backgrounding the first terms in “Uchek Langmeidong”

“Once upon a time, there lived a little girl whose name was Heiyainu. Her mother died when she was very young. Her father married another woman who gave birth to a son. One day, her father had gone to a hilly area for trading with a Haokot (a big basket made of cane and bamboo) for carrying back commodities. Before leaving home, he told his wife to look after the girl. Everyday, Heiyainu used to collect vegetables, such as Komprek and Yellang, from the nearby paddy fields. She also used to go for fishing in the lakes.”²

The crux of the narrative line in “Uchek Langmeidong” in Dr. Haobam Bilashini Devi’s *Folktales of Manipur* is established on the archetypal step-mother/step-daughter relationship. Maintaining a frame of reference to the relationship, the plot structure is predictable. In close approximated terms, a victim character- the step-daughter is abused mentally and physically as much as it is observed in *Cinderella*. Having lost her birth mother to death early in life, she is brought up by her step-mother. In requirement of income, the father goes to work, leaving his daughter under the care of his second wife. The father has not the faintest idea of how his daughter is treated in his absence. Letting herself endure no more of the torture of her step-mother, she turns into a bird called Langmeidong which stands for a hornbill bird. However, the guilt of the father is encountered at the end of the story as he begs her daughter to come back to him yet the daughter refuses to do so as it appears to be impossible to return to her father on account of her being already transformed to a bird.

Contriving the “backgrounding” theory of Plumwood in the folktale “Uchek Langmeidong”, a binary polarity of dualism is identified in the narrative with reference to step-mother/step-daughter. Bearing a certain

²Dr. Haobam Bilashini, *Folktales of Manipur*, pp. 14

daily conduct of behaviour of the characters in the narrative renders the step-mother the place of the first term and the step-daughter a second term. Delivering Plumwood's theory of "denial of dependency", this placement of the first term and the second term is devised with a context that the first term is superior to the second term and it substantiates the strategy that led to the construction of the first term and the second term. As to the fact that the first term is superior to the second term in dualism, Plumwood's stand point extends that the "denial of dependency" on the second term by the first term holds accountable in rendering the placement as the first term superior and the second term inferior. Assessing the worth and value of the second term as "inessential" and insignificant by the first term, gives the effect of "denial of dependency" concerning the frame of mind of the first term with regards to its second term. That being the case, the expression- step-mother/ step-daughter in "Uchek Langmeidong" is construed that the step-mother in the first term is superior to that of the step-daughter in the second term.

The identification of the expression of binary polarity of dualism- step-mother/step-daughter in "Uchek Langmeidong" is rendered so, owing to the fact that the perception of the first term step-mother is foregrounded in the folktale while backgrounding the step-daughter in the second term. With reference to the foregrounded narrative of the first term "step-mother" in the dualistic expression "step-mother/step-daughter", it is encountered that the step-daughter generates no income or produces anything beneficial to the step-mother. Rendering Plumwood's "denial of dependency," the binary polarity- step-mother/step-daughter emphasised, is expressed in the fact that the step-daughter is being denied of being depended on, by the step-mother, regarding the step-daughter inessential and insignificant. In consideration of the physical and intellectual capacity of the two and the "denial of dependency" on the second term implies the fact that the "step-mother" holds a dominant power over the "step-daughter" in the second term which is infact interpreted as being superior to the second term. However, applying Plumwood's exposition of settlement to the conflict of hierarchy in the binary polarity in dualism extends that the mechanism of dualism fails to function when the perspective of the second term is taken into account.

Appropriating the foregrounded narrative of the first term, the step-mother in exertion of the "backgrounding" theory, the narrative and perception of the second term is taken into account instead of the first. Taking the dimension of the second term, the step-daughter, the content of the narrative suggests that the second wife who is the step-mother to the step-daughter is taken in as a second wife by the father, to play the role of a good mother to his daughter and to look after the house. Had not the birth mother died, there would have been no second wife in the first place. Contrary to the perspective of the "step-mother" regarding her "step-daughter" in the second term, the step-daughter stands beneficial and essential to the assumed role of the step-mother. Backgrounding the narrative of the first term, the second term is foregrounded in the process.

Conclusion

A proficient attempt of imposing Plumwood's "backgrounding" theory is experimented in the folktale "Uchek Langmeidong".. The force of "backgrounding" theory delivers an impact that incapacitates the mechanism maintained in the binary polarity of dualism as to the fact that the first term placement with superior power dissolves and the second term is rendered a break-free from being placed a second term inferior in the binary polarity. The paper offers a comprehensive structure of Val Plumwood's understanding of dualism. The experimentation of the "backgrounding" executed on the narrative is encountered effective, which establishes the fact that Plumwood's "backgrounding" theory is accountable to a great extent.

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