

‘Ethics of Care’ and Posthuman Intimacy: Tribal Eco Man in Select Folktales

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Abstract

This article intends to study the select tribal folktales of the two indigenous communities of the Northern part of West Bengal: Rabha and Lepcha. Treating folklores as people’s history of emotions, I have tried to illustrate how through their intimacies with the nonhuman elements of nature along with a preference for an ‘ethics of care’ and fostering, the heroes of some of the tribal folktales help to formulate a non-‘mainstream’ alternative ecomasculinity where the indigenous male heroes appear to be the an intimate caretaker of ecology as opposed to the image of the patriarchal ‘mainstream’ masculinity which is often insensible towards nature. The tribal tales as the sagas of the counter-culture of the tribal eco men, bring out the tribal men’s posthuman sense of belonging with nature, who on the basis of the ethnic knowledge can be seen as performing an endogenous alternative eco-friendly masculinity that is attentive and accountable towards human ecology.

Keywords: tribal ecology, eco man, folktale, eco-friendly, posthuman intimacy.

Introduction

Paul Pule has considered about a possible 'ecological masculinism', aimed at contributing to "a shift away from hegemonic masculinities and towards a long-term ecological sustainability" (Pule qtd in Gaard, 2014: 232) by substituting a macho 'ethic of daring' that celebrates violence, power, domination, consumption and competition with a concerned 'ethic of caring' the

surrounding, through inculcating the ethos of compassion, love, empathy, support and the like which have been conventionally projected as non-masculine. As opposed to the androcentric 'mainstream' masculinity, an alternative eco-friendly masculinity, that takes care and is concerned about the issues related to gender, societal power equations and the ecology, can be induced on the basis of a performative androgyny by "simply flowing between the opposites" (Singer, 1977: 332) of the compartmentalized gender categories. In a stereotyped manner, the ethnic people have always been considered as hunting population who can never be tender with nature. However, through their intimacies with the nonhuman elements of nature, by acknowledging the animal rights, along with a preference for caring and nurturing, the heroes of some of the tribal folktales help to formulate a non-mainstream alternative ecomasculinity as a counter-normative mode of resisting the patriarchal 'mainstream' masculinity.

North Bengal is the umbrella term that people use to refer to the northern part of West Bengal, a province within the Indian state. The six districts of Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar, Coochbehar, North Dinajpur, South Dinajpur and Malda constitute the area that is known as North Bengal. The tribal folktales that have been chosen for this study belong to the two ethnic communities of North Bengal: Rabha and Lepcha. Rabhas or the Koch-Rabhas are the tribal communities of Coochbehar and Jalpaiguri while Lepcha (as a misnomer for the 'Rong' community) people reside in Darjeeling district. Rabhas inhabit a wide region in the Brahmaputra valley besides North Bengal. The Lepchas also live in Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan and other regions of north-east India.

The Animal Right

The orphan-king of *The Orphan and the Birds* is the perfect exemplar of the care based ethics of tribal eco(alternative)masculinity where the image of a hunting man gets replaced by a nurturing man who is conscious of the ‘animal rights’.

The Orphan and the Birds (A Rabha Folktale)

Once upon a time there was a place called Swarnapur where an orphan used to live with his uncle. He was very fond of birds. While taking out the uncle’s cattle for grazing, the orphan boy used to sit under a tree and listen to the chirping of various kinds of birds. He was often ridiculed by the other kids who would enjoy killing the birds and eat their meat. The uncle also used to get annoyed because of the orphan’s inability in catching the birds. The king of Swarnapur was a great eater of birds’ meat. He used to often engage himself in hunting the birds along with his sepoy. One day, while the orphan was sitting under the tree and listening to the twittering birds, the king who was passing by the tree ordered his men to kill all the birds. The king was very pleased to find the birds all dead. The orphan started to cry. Moving towards the king’s men he started condemning them for killing the birds. The king got very angry and ordered his men to punish the orphan with ten lashes of whip. The orphan, who was hurt by the fact that the king had punished him without any offence committed by him, thought of leaving the place. He started walking and after two days he reached a place called Koshiapur. The king of Koshiapur was very worried about the marriage of his only daughter. The orphan who found a job in the king’s house, used to play his flute in his hours of repose and all the birds would come to him. The king’s daughter was very much impressed by him and showed eagerness to marry him. The king called the orphan and got him married with his daughter. After the death of the king, the orphan became the king of Koshiapur. In Swarnapur the situation

had become worse. Since there were no birds left, the insects began to increase in large number resulting in the destruction of food and grains. Soon there was a terrible scarcity of food. The king too was starving by the want of food. He began to walk on bare foot in search of food almost like a beggar. After two days he reached Koshipur where he found lots of orange in the gardens. The moment Swarnapur's king tried to pluck an orange, the people of Koshipur got hold of him and took him to the orphan-king who would punish him for stealing the oranges. The orphan-king, however, having recognised the Swarnapur's king treated him with great hospitality. Thereafter, he pleaded the king not to stop hunting the birds. Swarnapur's king promised that he would no longer kill birds and would also not allow anyone to continue with the killing. The orphan-king happily helped the king of Swarnapur by offering him enough of seeds and hatchlings.

The king of Swarnapur demonstrates what Mary Midgley calls, 'human chauvinism': a "narrowness of sympathy, comparable to national, or race or gender-chauvinism. It could also be called exclusive humanism, as opposed to the hospitable, friendly, inclusive kind" (1996: 105). The orphan's suffering of the lashes of his king due to his empathy for the hunted birds marks the end of 'anthropolatry' which assumed the superiority of human over other species and forms of life. The orphan's neo-humanist petition for the equal right of birds paves the way for getting intimate with the daughter of the king. His posthuman intimacy with the birds thus makes him a green man who is capable enough to care for the woman. The trajectory of the orphan from a bird lover to the lover of the king's daughter and thereafter becoming the king, exposes the nature-culture continuum. The orphan-king finally becomes the prototype of a tribal eco(alternative)masculinity for the king of Swarnapur to follow by replacing his anthropocentrism with the alternative that "we are not self-contained and self-sufficient, either as

a species or as individuals, but live naturally in deep mutual dependence” (Midgley, 1996: 9–10). The orphan-king is an ideal geo-centred ethnic subject who takes care of birds only to care for the plants and crops. His eco(alternative)masculine subjectivity thus is that of trans-species where identity as posthumanism is viewed as an assemblage which does not exclude neither woman nor nonhumans for establishing an immanent relationship.

In *The Boy who Loved Trees* the hero is not the hero-proper. He does not have the heroic/masculine qualities/consciousness/attitudes and has to be aided by the feminine.

The Boy who Loved Trees(A Rabha Tale)

It is the account of a distant time when in a village there lived an orphan boy. The orphan boy was employed in the garden of the king. The king of that land had no other family members except a daughter. The king wanted her daughter to be married to some prince of great fame and reputed ancestry. But his daughter declined all such proposals that had come from wealthy kings. The princess was very friendly with the orphan boy. She didn't have any clue about the world outside her palace. The orphan boy use to give her information about the tress in the forest, the animals, birds and the fruits available there in different seasons of the year. The princess started liking the orphan boy. One day she told her father about her desire to marry the orphan boy. The king was astonished because he had different plans for her daughter. Incidentally there was a great turmoil in the garden. The king rushed into the garden. It so happened that some children of the nearby area had entered into the garden and were plucking the leaves and breaking the twigs. The orphan boy, who was addressing them, said, “You must know how much good all these plants do to us. During summer people sit under the shade of the leaves. Then the

birds come and build nest. The birds save the crop by eating all the insects. If you destroy the leaves and the trees then there will be less rain and more drought. Without plants human beings won't survive. We need to protect the plants and should never destroy them". Listening to the orphan boy the king became very happy about the decision of his daughter. He felt that her daughter has, after all, chosen a very wise and kind hearted person as her husband.

The story ending in marriage, bringing significant positive development in hero's life, shows the dependence or the fulfilment of the masculine principle over the femininity. His fulfilment is achieved only by his caring of the natural. Even the king [psychic representative of the race] without queen [feminine principle] is helpless and is dependent only on the daughter [anima] who would restore growth [to king by providing progenies] while bestowing power to another man who is also orphan [representing the lack of feminine principle] (Franz, 1986). The boy further confirms Firth's observation that among the so-called "primitive societies....there is the keenest discussion of alternatives in any proposal for the use of resources, of the relative economic advantages of exchange with one party as against another, and the closer scrutiny of the quality of goods which change hands....and taking a profit thereby" (Firth 1964: 22).

Longing for a woman, belonging with the birds

In the Lepcha folktale *Khocheelepa and his Bird-sisters*, Khocheelepa's intimacy with the bird-sisters as well as with the pig, rooster and cicada, contradicts with the accusations often made by the feminists that as opposed to a woman's interconnected notion of the self, a man's sensing of self is more detached¹. Although detachment might assure a fair and just reasoning but it does not promote intimacy². Most often the male 'mainstream' environmentalists find themselves

confined within integrity's agreement to rules, whereas, intimacy calls for a spontaneous response to the immediate situation out of closeness and concern. As per the integrity orientation, ethics becomes primarily a standardized principle; according to the intimacy code, ethics is nurtured by a morality of love. Integrity's moral request is to be responsibly rational to the other, whereas, intimacy's mandate is to be affectively responsive along with the other³.

Khocheelepa and his Bird-sisters(A Lepcha Tale)

Once upon a time, an old childless, couple had adopted three children, out of which the two daughters were birds. Dhanese (a hombill) and Halaeso (a wood pigeon), were the daughters and Khocheelepa (the Little One) was the name of the son. One day when the old couples died all of a sudden, Dhanese found it very difficult to stay in the same place haunted by the memories of the parents. So she asked Halaeso and Khocheelepa to come with her to a distant place. The sister and the brother got all their belongings packed and were prepared to follow their sister. Before leaving the old house, Dhanase buried the dead bodies of the old couple and also built a Kaapoor (memorial) which she carried on her head. The two sisters carried the little boy and soon they were in a new place. The birds used to go early in the morning in search of grains and would come back to feed the brother. The little boy Khocheelepa started growing up into a strong youth. After a few years the place was struck by famine. Hardly there was any food anywhere. The sisters began to fly far and wide to collect some food particles for the brother but even then could not manage to get any. Khocheelepa started weeping out of hunger. Feeling pity for the brother the two sisters again started flying afar in search of food. After a thorough search finally they managed to get some. The sisters, after putting the grain into a small pot, gathered dried up branches. With their wings they fanned the fire. Khocheelepa was

very happy to see the sisters cooking for him. Out of excitement he came too close to the pot and the moment he touched the pot, the pot fell down breaking itself into pieces and the entire food got spoilt since it got mixed up with the ashes. Khocheelepa started to cry louder and the sisters assured him to come back with some food. Desperately they flew again and after a long time they gathered some food. When they came back they found that Khocheelepa was lying on the ground. Actually the boy became unconscious out of starvation. But the birds thought that he was dead. They wept and mourned for a while. After that, covering his body with leaves, they flew away to another remote place. After a long time the brother regained his consciousness only to find himself all alone. He called out to his two sisters but there was no one to reply him back. He started to walk out of sadness and frustration. Soon he entered into a forest. He was happy to find some fruits hanging on the trees. He ate the fruits as many as he could and felt asleep. Next day a woodcutter found the boy and took him to his house. Many years passed and Khocheelepa soon grew up into a strong young man. The villagers started sending marriage proposals to the woodcutter. Eventually he gave his consent to marry one of the daughters of a neighbouring elderly villager. But before getting married he wished to look for his sisters. He asked the pig to check if the sisters could be traced somewhere in the nearby places. The pig after a long search finally managed to locate the sisters. He told them, “Your brother Khocheelepa is getting married. He wants you two to attend his wedding ceremony.” Dhanase thought that the pig was making fun. She rebuked the pig, “Our brother is long dead. We still cry for his death.” The pig came back to Khocheelepa and informed him about the reaction of his sister. Then Khocheelepa sent a rooster who got also chased away by his sisters. Then Khocheelepa told how he got detached from his

sisters during the time of the famine to a cicada who started to sing about it in front of his sisters. The sisters after listening to the song began to follow the cicada. Soon the sisters found that their brother Khocheelepa was standing below on the ground. He was all prepared to get married. He pleaded his sisters to come down and join the wedding feast. But the birds of ashamed of their foolishness to think that the brother was dead. Khocheelepa then asked his friends to bring a long bamboo pole. Placing some fruits on it he raised the pole up above his head. The two sisters ate the fruits from the pole and said, “Thank you dear brother for inviting us. We have taken part in your wedding feast. May you now live happily with your wife.” Saying this the two sisters flew away to a distant land.

The brother—just before getting married with a woman—the moment that demands an intimate sense of belonging that he needs to establish with the female, wishes to meet the bird sisters. His eagerness to reunify himself with the intimate belonging that he used to cherish with the sisters just before his longing to get married is significant. It seems that Khocheelepa, by his eagerness to restore his nonhuman belonging is suggesting that in order to be intimate with the woman, the conventional masculinity needs to be surpassed by the man with an eco(alternative)masculinity that would empower the man to move beyond the man/woman dichotomy towards the creation of a ‘thirdness’. Love, born out of intimacy, then assists in the politics of belonging in the form of a ‘thirdness’ that sanctions one with the capability of listening to the multiple voices of others, inviting for a collaborative, intersubjective intimacy. This thirdness as “not to be understood primarily as the intervention of an other, but, rather, requires the “one in the third,” the attunement and empathy that make it possible to bridge difference with identification, to infuse

observation with compassion” (Benjamin, 2002:50) is also helpful in overcoming the binary between the ‘doer’ and the ‘done to’. The birds’ nurturing of Khocheelepa which the brother remembers despite the years of separation represents what Mockus has called, ‘an amphibian intersectionality’. The family of Khocheelepa comprising of the Dhanese and the Halaeso embodies, “the borderzone between identity-as-essence and identity-as-conjuncture” (Lavie and Swedenburg, 1996:13) that an eco-man has to seek for the sake of acquiring ‘soft boundaries’ through which the ‘amphibian borders’ of the diverse identities would crisscross and “obey partially divergent systems of rules without a loss of intellectual and moral integrity” (Mockus, 1994:39). Moreover, this ‘borderzone’ as a ‘third time-space’ moves beyond the older notions of identity without instituting a new fixity of identity by being “too heterogeneous, mobile, and discontinuous for fixity” (Lavie and Swedenburg, 1996:14).

Perceiving themselves as ‘organism-persons’ (Ingold, 2011:47), the tribal men “do not inscribe into the nature of things a division between the natural agencies and themselves, as we [mainstream] do with our “nature:culture” dichotomy. They view their world as an integrated entity.” (Bird-David 1992a: 29-30). Thus even with the nonhuman environment, symbolized by the Indian mynah, the tribal king in *The King and his Shalik* does ‘keep in touch’ “intimately, in the way one “knows” close relatives with whom one shares intimate day-to-day life” (Bird-David 1992: 39).

***The King and his Shalik*[the Indian mynah] (A Rabha Folktale)**

Once there as a king whose friend was a Shalik. In the matter of administration the king would listen to his bird friend than taking advices from his ministers. This made his prime minister feel very jealous of the Shalik. One day the king had to go to some other

place. Before leaving his kingdom he handed over all the kingly responsibilities to his bird friend. This made the prime minister more upset. Next day the Shalik ordered all the sepoys to follow him for cultivating land. They reached a forest and thought of clearing the place by cutting down the trees in order to start cultivation. Since it was already dark, the Shalik asked his men to eat and sleep well so that they could begin the work early in the morning. While everyone slept the Indian mynah was still awake. Suddenly there were some chirping of birds. The Shalik heard that a mother bird sitting on the branch of a tree was anxiously saying, “What will happen to us now? Where shall we go? They are going to cut down the trees!” But the father bird answered, “Don’t worry! We will find some other place to stay. But let me tell you one thing for sure. This is a very bad place for farming. If these men cut these trees and start cultivation there will be hardly any harvest. But if they walk two miles northward from this place they would have come across an open land which is the most fertile land for farming.” The Shalik listened to their conversation. Next morning when the men got ready to cut down the trees the king’s friend asked them to move northwards. Soon then found an open land. They were very happy to find such a fertile land. They started farming with great enthusiasm. After a few months the prime minister sent some men to that land to check if the harvest was ready to be reaped. The men came back saying that the paddy field was all golden and ready to be procured. The Shalik ordered the men to set the entire crop on fire. The prime minister and others all protested. But the Shalik said, “I am supposed to be the one whose order has to be carried out. Do what I have ordered. Set the field on fire. After that collect the entire ash and bring it to me”. The men came back with the ash. The Shalik opened a room where he stocked the ash and hanged a big lock on the door from outside so that

nobody could open it. After a few days the king came back to the palace. The prime minister then and there told him about how the Shalik has ruined the crop. The king became so angry that he struck the bird with his rod and the bird was dead. He ordered the soldiers to break the lock. The moment he entered the room to his utter surprise he found that there was no ash but it was all full of gold. The king began to cry for his Shalik and ordered his soldiers to put his prime minister into the prison.

The speaking Shalik thus is not only the symbolic of the intersubjectivity of the tribal king with nature but also a recognition of ‘*inter-agentivity*’ which denotes that “the constitutive quality of intimate relations with non-human and human components of the environment is one and the same” (Ingold, 2011:47). The offering of personhood indicates the tribal notion that “human persons are not set over and against a material context of inert nature, but rather are one species of person in a network of reciprocating persons” (Scott 1989: 195). Resisting the ‘culturalisation of space’, these ethnic communities by an ontology of dissolubility transform their ethnic space as a domain of egalitarian intimacy of sharing belongingness even with nonhuman beings. Although it is a known fact that most of the tribal societies have been dependent for their survival on hunting, fishing and fruit gathering in the initial stages, yet as Winterhalder has rightly observed, “Hunter-gatherers, or foragers, live in environments characterized by diverse and heterogeneously distributed resources. From the array of potential food species, foraging locations and pathways, the forager can choose combinations which more or less effectively and efficiently procure subsistence. The forager’s choices make up a strategy of adjustments to ecological conditions, an adaptive pattern resulting from evolutionary processes and the constraints of situation, time, and chance” (Winterhalder 1981: 66). The lesson that the king

learns at the end is that in order to be prosperous, a person needs to be more intimate with nonhuman beings since such “vital social relations transcend those which are maintained with human beings” (Hallowell, 1960: 43).

Conclusion

Humanism by its human-centric approach has given rise to the otherization of all that is different from the ‘Enlightenment’ notion of development and progress. Tony Davies has aptly stated, “All Humanisms, until now, have been imperial. They speak of the human in the accents and the interests of a class, a sex, a race, a genome. Their embrace suffocates those whom it does not ignore. [. . .] It is almost impossible to think of a crime that has not been committed in the name of humanity” (Davies, 1997: 141). As a critique of the universalized humanism⁴, there emerged anti-humanism: “Anti-humanism consists in de-linking the human agent from this universalistic posture, calling him to task, so to speak, on the concrete actions he is enacting. Different and sharper power relations emerge, once this formerly dominant subject is freed from his delusions of grandeur and is no longer allegedly in charge of historical progress.” (Braidotti,2013:23). Anti-humanism has provoked in rethinking about the humanism’s schema that had portrayed difference on the mode of binary, like the woman as the sexualized substandard-other of man, or animals/environment as his naturalized inferior-other. Posthumanism is the non-polemical response to anti-humanism which further attempts to provide a sense of equivalence to the notion of recognized differences In this context, the notion of ‘panhumanity’ (Franklin, Lury and Stacey, 2000: 26) that upholds a sense of inter-connected interdependencies not only among all human beings but also between human and the non-human ambience, is significant. Peter-Paul Verbeek’s (2011) post-anthropological shift to connect human with non-human is also another substantial contribution to posthumanism. The exploration for a transversal inter-relation through

the ‘assemblage’ of human and non-human beings via intimacy seems to be central to the domain of indigenous culture, where eco men, unlike the ‘mainstream’ exploiter of women and ecology, seems to have intimate relationship with both the non human nature and women.

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¹See Nancy Chodorow(1978); Carol Gilligan (1982)

²"Although detachment connotes the dispassion which signifies fairness in justice reasoning, the ability to stand back from oneself and from others and to weigh conflicting claims even-handedly in the abstract, detachment also connotes the absence of connection and has the potential to create the conditions for carelessness or violation, for violence toward others or toward oneself."(Gilligan et al., 1988:xxviii).

³For a detailed discussion on intimacy and integrity see Kasulis (2002)

⁴ Critique of humanism and the development of anti-humanism has been encouraged mainly through the help of the thinkers like Derrida by the deconstruction of Eurocentrism, Deleuze in his rejection of the notion of a transcendental subject, Foucault by his critique of Humanism and Irigaray in her de-centering of phallogocentrism.