

reflection

The Wedding of The Fox and Issues on Fairy Tales

By Shamsad Mortuza

IF it rains and shines together, then it must be the wedding of the fox somewhere. Thus goes a popular Bengali proverb. A reminiscence of the proverb came from an unexpected corner of the world. I read a Hopi coyote story from the American Southwest. Coyote is a kind of a prairie dog that looks and acts much like his canine counterpart, the fox. According to one Hopi story, coyote was making love to his wife in a sunny day when it started to rain just on the couple. The story tells how that rain helped his enemies to find out where the coyote was lying, and thereby got him killed. The rest of the story may even be considered scatological in terms of our so-called standard of morality as it involves the masturbation of coyote's wife and adolescent sex fantasy of coyote's children when they saw their mother in the sexual act.

A remote resemblance all right. In both these cultures we see that simultaneous rain and sunshine are attributed with a similar incident. In case of the Hopi story, we know the detail as it has been passed down through generations. In the Bengali proverb, only the adage is with what we are left. Quite likely there were stories even in our Bengali culture that preceded common saying like the one mentioned here. The proverb is probably a fossil of a larger story. Our history of acculturation is so wide that it would be really difficult to track down the source of such a proverb. May be the story was part of a grand narrative with mythic elements in it. May be the proverb survives as the skeleton of a story — just like the one of the Hopi's. The onslaught of acculturation has its tolls on its flesh. These are mere speculations but not without any basis.

In Europe, for instance, we have seen how mythical tales have lost their religious essence and took the form of fairytales with a different purpose. The process, however, works both ways. We have also seen secular tales getting religious flavour in the hands of the ecclesiastical men. The Christianization of the Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf* is a case in point.

In fact, Mircea Eliade subscribed to this belief in his argument that oral folk tales and fairy tales are not neces-

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sarily desacralized narratives. Rather, they contain mythic notions and motifs in a camouflaged form. It is further observed that many literary fairy tales have evolved from oral folk tales with certain "mythical" qualities intact in them.

Meletinsky, on the other hand, studies the Australian aborigines to suggest that the transformation of myths into fairy tales involves secularization and de-ritualization, loss of faith in mythical events and cosmogenic events, change of focus from a communal to individual perspective, substitution of the mythical hero by common man, the triumph of social sensibility over the cosmogenic aspect. This idea can be substantiated through a close look at Europe where a similar process of secularization is associated with the transformation of fairy tales into an institution.

Zipes looked at the social history of Europe to suggest that "the evolution of the fairy tale as a literary genre is marked by a process of dialectical appropriation involving duplication and revision that set the cultural conditions for its mythicization, institutionalization, and expansion as a mass-mediated form through radio, film, and television."

I find Zipes has come close to cutting across the polarity between Mircea Eliade and Meletinsky. Thus, the Bengali proverb can be explained as a residue of a larger narrative as an example of "dialectical appropriation." The following is a brief survey of the literature on the genesis of fairy tales.

The concept of fairy tales in Europe dates back to Plato who mentioned in his writings about old women telling symbolic stories (*mythoi*) to their children. However, there are certain themes like the beauty and the beast (a woman redeeming an animal lover) that scholars argue can be traced back in different European and Egyptian version of stories anywhere between 2000 to 25,000

years.

The variants of a single theme, which, folklorists call "tale types," simply reminds us of the mechanics of oral transmission that involves hundreds, in some cases, thousands of individual narrators who adapted these stories, and added their own voices in different historical periods and social settings. There is no single narrator who can be credited with a story of oral tradition; a story is the sum of all other stories that were told before it. This idea is found in the Spanish word *Historia* that carries the essence of both story and history.

Folklorists have analyzed different versions of these oral stories across cultures to pinpoint their corresponding fundamental "tale type." For example, there are over four hundred collected versions of the "Snow White" story that spans over a period of five hundred years. The central theme in these stories recounts of a girl who suffers the jealousy of her family, is expelled from her home, finds shelter among strangers, is killed and brought back to life, and gets married to her rescuer. Jones (1995) argued that "despite superficial variations, we can discern significant formal continuities that suggest these texts do belong to a shared genre." For some scholars, the basic type of story had a single origin that is equivalent to our present concept of an individual author. At the same time, these scholars admit the impossibility of identifying the single author or the birthplace of the original source.

Fairy tales were primarily told by orators gifted with the oratory skills to explain the natural occurrences or seasonal changes or to relate significance of rituals, harvesting, ceremonies, and warfare. These tales were communally authored and sought communal harmony. These stories were expected to bring the members of the community together by transporting the audience to an unidentified narrative past where

they could trace a shared experience. It depended much on the ingenuity of the teller to understand the sentiment of the audience and change the stories accordingly to make that shared experience possible.

In contrast, the history of literary fairy tale is fairly recent and somewhat documented. The invention of printing press in the fifteenth century and rise of literacy gave a new dimension for traditional storytelling. Von Franz identified fairy tale as a chief wintertime entertainment before it went through the changes. However, with the changes, traditional stories found a new class of audience. Ben Jonson's comedy *Volpone* makes intensive use of several Reynard the Fox stories, providing us with examples of transformation of oral literature.

The present form of fairy tale has its roots in *Zaubermarchen* or the magic tale, and has many subgenres. The French writers of the seventeenth century distinguished the fairy tales from popular tales. Writers like Charles Perrault, Madame D'Aulnoy, Mademoiselle de la Force were influenced by a style developed by two Italian writers, and gave the oral stories a written form that would suit the taste of aristocrats and bourgeoisie at courts, salons, and parlors. According to Zipes, "the French writers created an institution; that is the genre of the fairy tale was institutionalized as an aesthetic and social means through which questions of *civilité*, proper behavior, and demeanor in all types of situations, were mapped out as narrative strategies for literary socialization, and in many cases, as symbolical gestures of subversion to question the ruling standards of taste and behavior."

Scholarly interests in the fairy tale began in the eighteenth century Europe when philosophers like Herder, Hamann, Winckelmann took a renewed interest in the tales of antiquity and vernacular languages. Disenchanted with

Christianity, the Romantics in Germany, and later elsewhere in Europe, pursued Herder's philosophy to seek alternatives to Christian beliefs in an instinctual and secular ideas found in the folk tales.

Marie-Luise von Franz considered the effort of the Grimm brothers to write down the folk tales as a counter-reaction to this Romantic urge. "It is religious search for something which seemed lacking in Official Christian teaching that first induced the famous brothers Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm to collect folktales." Grimm Brothers gathered the stories to recuperate the German heritage and enlighten the German children about their past glory. This, according to Zipes, was designed to inculcate a sense of nationalism in the German children.

The literary fairy tale turns out to be a "borderline" genre that celebrates folkloric features with literary appropriation. It carries elements of orality, folkloric tradition, and socio-cultural performance even though it is primarily designed for children. According to Bacchilega (1997), the transitional nature of this literary form allows the producers of fairy tales to edit it as literature for children or market it with little respect for its history and materiality. "And conversely, when it claims to be folklore, the fairy tale is shaped by literary traditions with different social uses and users."

Writers of literary fairy tales in Europe consciously chose to appropriate the oral folk tale and convert it into a type of literary discourse with a *civilizing* agenda. A fictive garb was provided to the morals, values, and manners that the writers wanted the children to learn in order to become civilized according to the social code of that time. Zipes, in his extensive study on European Fairytales argued that fairy tales were "used consciously or unconsciously during the rise of the bourgeoisie to indicate socially acceptable roles for chil-

dren and to provide them with culture, the German version of *civilité*."

Zipes considered the birth of literary fairy tale as a "symbolic act" to transform specific oral folk tale and to rearrange the motifs, characters, themes, functions, and configurations in such a way that they would address the concerns of the educated and ruling classes of late feudal and early capitalist societies." In America, a classic example of literary fairy tale is Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* in which the author incorporated several European fairy tale motifs to assist the American girl Dorothy to find what is absent in the New World.

What is interesting about the shift from oral to literary tradition is that instead of a communal group of listeners the literary stories demanded a literate audience. Further, reading is more a private act than a communal participation in a social gathering where stories were shared. With the birth of the literary tradition, we see a process of "privatization" and "standardization." The fancy use of High and Low German, the High and Low French began to denote a hierarchy even within the audience themselves. In addition, these stories started sharing particular perspective of an individual author. Furthermore, these stories were sanitized in their written forms.

I cannot agree more with Zipes who has shown that such shift occurs with a "violence." Zipes maintains that "such violation was crucial and necessary for the establishment of the bourgeoisie because it concerned the control of desire and imagination within the symbolical order of western culture."

I draw upon the history of fairy story to suggest a simple fact: many of our stories have lost their histories. We see and read our fairy tales in a vacuum and almost out of context. The resemblance between the Hopi story and the Bengali proverb can be coincidental. But it is a reminder of the possibility; the possibility that has been noted by different scholars, that this proverb can be affected by different cultural agents. For a serious reader, is it too difficult to assume that a reversed reading of the proverb is also possible? May be not.

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essay

India, West Bengal and East Bengal

By Nirad C. Chaudhuri

Continued from last week

AS soon as the West Pakistan army went into action the duty of the outside world, and more especially of West Bengal, became plain. It was to do nothing to aggravate the suffering of the Bengalis of East Bengal by encouraging the hopeless resistance and provoking the Central Government of Pakistan. Today the duty of relieving the suffering of those unfortunate people is equally evident. But, in actual fact, what was done was the opposite of what should have been done and what is begin done is the reverse of what it should be.

Let me first of all take the attitude of the Government of India, noting only the most formal expression of its views. On March, 30, the India parliament passed a resolution unanimously on the proposal of the Prime Minister herself that "the historic upsurge of the 75 million people of East Bengal will triumph," and went on to call upon peoples and governments throughout the world to take urgent and constructive steps to prevail upon Pakistan to end immediately the systematic decimation of people which amounts to genocide. Mrs Gandhi said to the cheers of her hearers that Indians could not remain indifferent to the macabre tragedy being enacted close to their border.

Today there seems to be a complete retreat from both the ideas — that of a triumphant (or, for that matter, any) resistance on the part of the Bengalis of East Bengal, and of the sympathetic involvement of India in the fate of those people. On May 3 both the Times and the Daily Telegraph published a summary of an editorial in the Hindsutani Times in which the paper criticized the India Press for lack of realism in giving an idea that there had been extensive and serious fighting in East Bengal. Some passages from it were quoted verbatim, and I reproduce one: "Credibility is vital. It is this that has been damaged by the unfortunate lack of professionalism displayed by the Indian print and sound media in their coverage of the fighting in Bangladesh." I must say that though the editorial appeared to be sensible I was very much surprised by its publication at this particular juncture. I can

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hardly help feeling that there was inspirations behind it. I wonder what the paper's own record in reporting those events was.

Next, there is the news that India has asked the UN to take over the financial responsibility for the relief of the refugees from East Bengal. On April 4 Mrs Gandhi told the All India Congress Committee that India could not remain a silent spectator of the events in East Pakistan, but it would appear that India would not mind remaining a financially uncommitted spectator of the sufferings of the Bengali Muslims. There was no obligation to proclaim any solidarity with the Muslims of East Bengal at any time, but once recognised it should have been shown in word and deed all through.

No wonder then that even the British newspaper correspondents who during the troubles took up an extremely partisan attitude against Pakistan are now turning equally against India. For instance, Mr Davi Loshak, the representative of the Daily Telegraph in New Delhi, made the following remark about the Indian attitude:

India can see only good in the dismemberment or permanent enfeeblement of its chief antagonist. It is this, rather than concern for the fate of innocent people, that lies behind India's propaganda war on behalf of Bangladesh."

Mr Loshak wrote with a more decidedly cynical air of superiority of the diplomatic wrangles between the two countries:

"I regularly saw spokesmen on both sides. One of the most striking thing about them was the inordinate amount of simple glee they got out of revelling in some petty discomfiture of the other side... The 'clever-clever' officials of India and Pakistan, basking in their own ingenuity, would have been stunned if they knew what diplomats of other countries had to say privately about them."

I only wish that the foreign correspondents when they were reporting the actual events were as realistic and cynical.

The attitude of the Government of India over this colossal tragedy was and remains opportunistic, and a pettifogging exercise of realpolitik. But not to the attitude of the Hindu Bengalis of West Bengal. There can be no question that there was, and is, both sincerity and depth in their feelings, but these feelings in themselves were so wrong and their expression so misguided that everything done, said, or believed under their influence has amounted to a cruel mockery of the sufferings of the Bengali Muslims, and provided disquieting portents for their own future.

In all this behaviour I see another and the latest expression of the defeatism of the Bengali Hindu both at its most generous and most repulsive. The generous aspect was that the Bengali Hindu who had lost all hopes of doing anything for himself, felt elated that Muslim fellow-Bengalis were asserting their nationalism with such strength and courage. To illustrate this mood, I quote in translation, of course from three letters I received last month. The first, written on April 1, was from a young and unmarried Bengali girl. She wrote:

"I am pained to see how misled the youth of West Bengal are because I am also one of them. If only we had a leader like Mujibur Rahman, perhaps we, too should have been capable of crying out 'Jay Bangla' in one voice. It will do us good if from the unconquerable and heroic young people of East Bengal we learn what patriotism is. How many on this side of Bengal have felt for the Bengali language and Bengal in that way? All of us here tune in to their Radio and listen eagerly. If they win we also shall recover."

The second letter was from an elderly friend who, like me, comes from My-

mensingh. He wrote on April 12:

"I shall never again see the land which exists in our dreams as the daughter of the rivers. But praised be the Muslim Bengali brothers. Once they gave their lives for the Bengali language now they are sacrificing themselves in thousands for their country. This inexhaustible mental strength will not be crushed by guns." The third letter was from a married woman in Calcutta, and written on April 18. She wrote:

"My mind is so distracted that I cannot sit down to write calmly to you. Our foreign friends cannot understand why we are so moved about East Bengal; why listening to the radio and reading the news in the security of Calcutta, we cannot check our tears, or swallow our food, or attend to business. I have just returned from the house of the Deputy High Commissioner of Pakistan. The raised the flag of Bengal on the High Commission building today, and as soon as we heard of it my husband and I went to see Hossain Ali. I handed him a bouquet and said that it was no time for offering congratulations, these flowers were only in remembrance of the martyrs of his country."

My feeling at reading these letters was one of pained astonishment at the ignorance and capacity of nursing illusions. I replied to all three telling them that their idea of what had happened was not true. Even here in a quiet Oxfordshire village a more horrifyingly correct idea of the reality came to me through the TV.

Thinking of the kind of emotional reaction typified by these letters I could only say to myself that Hindu Bengalis have read their Ananda Math all wrong, and utterly failed to grasp its moral. In the last scene, standing on the battlefield among the dead of his defeated army lie all around, Satyananda cries out to the Physician: "I do not seek knowledge. I shall continue the task to which I have set myself. I shall make the motherland put

forth corn by drenching it with the blood of the enemy. If I fall in strength, I shall at least die fighting." The Physician replies: "Die? In ignorance?" and leads him away. But the defeat irredeemable, and so Bankim Chandra wrote: "Farewell led away inauguration." The supreme tragedy of Bengali life seems to be that there will be no beginning which will not be belighted untimely by our pitiful weakness.

This however, is putting the Hindu Bengal's reaction to the tragedy in East Bengal at its best. Of its rancorous aspect, it is impossible to write or speak with patience. It is repulsive and frightening in every way. First, it is an expression of hatred for Pakistan, not love for the Bengali Muslim. I know the history of the relations between the Bengali Hindus and Muslims from 1905 to today fairly well and until their opposition to West Pakistan brought about a revision of attitude, never did I see any disposition on the part of the Bengali Hindu to look upon Muslim Bengalis as brothers. It is necessary to point out that the partition of Bengal was made possible by the vote of the Hindu Bengalis, and not by any action on the part of the British Government of the day, the Congress leaders, or the Muslims. The express condition for partition was that the Bengal legislature should accept it by a majority, and that a majority was provided by a solid vote of the caste Hindu members and a majority of the Schedule caste members. Sarat Chandra Bose who opposed the partition was slandered in the most shameful manner. Even after the partition the animosity continued in both Bengals.

Next, the whole reaction is vicarious. One may regret hatred as a motive power in politics. Nazism in Germany, for instance was a product of many hatreds. But at all events it showed itself capable of efficient and even demonic action. By that positive action it burnt

itself out, and thought it inflicted immense harm for the time being on the Germans, it also left them free for their subsequent effort at recovery, which they have achieved in a spectacular manner. But a hatred which is only viciously indulged, enfeebles the will, and makes a nation incapable of positive effort. It becomes cruel and sadistic as well when it seeks to slake its thirst by gloating on the suffering of others.

I am shocked to see this egoistic reaction even in the Bengali Muslim in England. Among other things, I have seen them demonstrating with excited gestures and cries against the Pakistan cricket team on the TV. I have all the time asked myself how they were able to behave in this manner. Did they not have relatives in Bengal, who had perhaps died or at all events were in distress, and did not that thought weigh them down with grief? I would say that had I been in their position I should have left England and gone to East Bengal to do any good I could and in any case, to share their suffering and risk. I would not have indulged my hatred in safety.

Lastly, I would say that the reaction of the Hindu Bengali is frightening in its demonstration of his capacity for self-deception. It should have been obvious to all outsiders that no organized resistance, not to speak of success, was possible against the military forces of Pakistan. The only rational argument the believers in resistance could produce was based on the number of Muslim Bengalis. This rather reminded me of what Attila the Hun said when he was threatened with desperation of the whole starving population of Rome at the time he was besieging the city. The thicker the hay, the easier to mow," he said derisively. And numbers have become even more insignificant in the face of modern arms and armies.

But the real point is that a people who can fail to see realities and the Bengali Hindu did in the case of the events in East Bengal, will not even see that own predicament for what it is. Action for them will always be an escape from the problems set by life, and never result in their solution. This terrible failing I have seen in my fellow-Bengalis all my life, and I am seeing it continuing in everything.