

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 folktales and fairy tales are not necessarily

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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 mythic 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.

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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 *Zaubermaischen* 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 civility, proper behavior, and demeure in all types of situations, were mapped out as narrative strategies for literary socialization, and in many cases, as symbolic 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 a 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 children."

and to provide them with culture, the German version of *civility*.

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 perspectives 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 symbolic 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 being 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.

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Hardly help feeling that there was inspiration 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.

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 their influence has amounted to a cruel mockery of the sufferings of the Bengali Muslims, and provided disquieting portents for their own future.

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