

Homogenisation of Dualistic Pairs in Five Manipuri Folktales

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Abstract

Settling on the periphery of dualism, the area of interest of this paper centres on exertion of Val Plumwood's "homogenisation or stereotyping" theory on the folktales "Sandrembi and Cheishra", "Uchek Langmeidong" in Dr. Haobam Bilashini Devi's *Folktales of Manipur* and "Lai Khutshangbi" "Hingchabigi Wari" and "Haoshi Namoinu" from Huiem Behari Singh's *A Study of Manipuri Meitei Folklore*. The acquirement of dualistic pairs from the folktales, which is maintained in the study, facilitates a course of action for the application of "homogenisation or stereotyping" theory. The framework of this paper is to secure an interpretation of the acquired dualistic pairs in terms of the "homogenisation" theory. The interpretation is intended to assess relationships between females of different capacity, found in the narratives.

Keywords: homogenisation, dualism, folktale, Manipur.

Defining the Theory of Homogenisation

The aspects of classical negation exclusively engender hierarchical dualisms, which is the dichotomies prioritising dominant category while oppressing the underprivileged. (Ferguson,

2023). Plumwood appertains to promote her critique of classical negation as weapons to defend oppression. (Eckert, Donahue, 2020)

“Homogenisation” theory in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, refers to the western theory of dualism. Capitalising the theoretical use of “homogenisation”, Val Plumwood undertakes critical deconstruction of dualistic relationships maintained according to the theory of dualism. The construct of the theory of “homogenisation” is rendered, to assess the hierarchal set up in dualisms, in the interest of the inferiorised underside in dualistic pairs (Plumwood, 2003).

As maintained in the theory of dualism, the narratives are polarised in a binary fashion, constitutive of two terms of which the first term is superior to the second term. The configured hierarchy in dualism that categorically maintains the class of dominant or superiority over the other term generates a conflict between the two. Contriving theories like “homogenisation”, “backgrounding”, “radical exclusion”, Plumwood attempts to address the conflict in her *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (Plumwood, 2003).

“Homogenisation” theory is conceptualised with the understanding that the inferiorised in dualistic pairs are categorically classified as one; the difference among them in terms of diversity of culture and society is disregarded and “dismissed as ‘aliens’, ‘wogos’, or ‘reffos’ (refugees)” (Plumwood, 2003). The identity of the undersides, second terms is of little interest to the upperside first terms. Hence, the undersides are homogenised as one; the undersides are denied of identity on account of its serving as background to the uppersides first terms. In view of the prospect that the undersides are rendered diversely available in surplus to the uppersides, the undersides are denied recognition for its uniqueness. The dualistic pair “master/slave” fits the framework of dualism (Plumwood 2003, p. 53). Regardless of the fact that the upperside master lives entirely on the service of his slave, the slave in the second term is denied of being depended on and the narratives of the slave is backgrounded.

“To the master, all the rest are just that: ‘the rest’, the Others, the background of his achievements and the resources for his needs” (Plumwood 2003, p. 54). Given the approach of the “homogenisation” theory, it suggests that the “homogenisation is a feature of the master’s perspective.” The perspective of master occupies the central space, with no concern for the identity of the underside and difference among the inferiorised, rendering the “master” a space of superiority. Moreover, Plumwood extends the “homogenisation” theory to “gender stereotyping.”

Dualistic pairs in the five Manipuri folktales

The narrative “Sandrembi and cheishra” highlights unhealthy relationships maintained between step-mother/step-daughter, step-sister (Cheishra)/ step-sister (Sandrembi). The underlying cause of the conflict between the characters is deemed to be the husband who is the father to his two daughters from different mothers; with regards to the fact that he takes a woman in marriage while he is still married to his wife. As the second wife kills the first wife at the very outset of the narrative, Sandrembi is deprived of a mother. Consequently, she is abused, tortured physically and emotionally by her step-mother and her step-sister and further murdered by them so as to steal her identity and live the life of her step-sister. Though, Sandrembi effectively pursues revenge after getting reincarnated, the enduring tortures, abuse and murder occupy the central space of the narrative. It is imperative to note that Sandrembi has a biological brother which is not abused by their step-mother. (Bilashini, 2009)

The step-mother/Sandrembi and Cheishra/Sandembi are the dualistic pairs serving the plot structure of the narrative. Taking note of the nature of the characters in the first terms, with regards to the fact that Sandrembi in the second terms, who is a step-daughter and a step-sister, is ill-used, tortured and murdered by the step-mother and Cheishra in the first terms, the use of the power over Sandrembi by the step-mother and Cheishra render the placements of two terms.

In close proximity to the plot structure of “Sandrembi and Cheishra”, the folktale “Uchek langmeidong” is engaged with a toxic relationship between a step-mother and a step-daughter. As one would reasonably expect, a man marries twice after the demise of his wife. He has a daughter out of his first marriage and a son from the second marriage. The man who is a father to the daughter, leaves home for work. In his absence, the daughter is ill-used for house chores, to look after her step-brother, and physical and psychologically tortured at the same time by the step-mother. However, she transforms into Uchek Langmeidong (hornbill bird) and escapes from her tragic reality.

A parallel account may be drawn concerning the folktale, Hari Nongnang (Haoshi Namoinu); the narrative undertakes a corresponding course with regards to the theme which involves a step-mother of a malicious nature and an innocent and naive step-daughter. The step-daughter is abused and tortured by her step-mother mentally and physically. Haoshi Namoinu, the step-daughter is over-exploited concerning the house chores like fetching paddy, husking the paddy. She is expected to husk the paddy with no rest in between after having fetched the paddy. Over a trivial complain by the step-daughter of the situation imposed, the step-mother verbally slanders her step-daughter and beats her “on the crown of her head with the bamboo ladle.” Devastated with the torture, she makes a break free from her disastrous life by transforming into Hari Nongnang (cicada). (Singh, 1985)

Unexceptional to the typical relationship of a malicious step-mother and a step-daughter, “Hingchabigi Wari (The Story of Demoness)” unfolds a catastrophic relationship between the two. The theme of the narrative materialises a detrimental relationship between a step-mother and a step-daughter; engaged with characters- a step-mother (Wasareima), her mother demoness (Hingchabi), a step-daughter and a father figure to the daughter and a husband to the step-mother. Having fixed on the idea of killing her step-daughter without getting her hands

dirty, she sends her step-daughter to her demoness mother maintaining the pretext that she sends her hand-written letter to her demoness mother through her step-daughter. The content of the letter in fact refers to her sinister intent of permanent annihilation of her step-daughter. However, while she sleeps on the way, the content of the letter is altered contradictorily by a stranger: requesting her demoness mother to “treat her with warm affection and love” and not “to eat her up” as she does to other children. The narrative progresses to a paradoxical end in view of the situation that unfolds: the demoness gets killed by the step-daughter, making use of the magical instruments of the demoness, having learned about the instruments from the introduction initiated by the demoness beforehand, and thereafter, the father kills Wasareima, the step-mother, bearing the fact that the situation is revealed to the father by the step-daughter (Singh, 1985).

In spite of the fact that the theme involved in “Lai Khutsangbi” from Dr. Haobam Bilashini Devi’s *Folktales of Manipur* centralises the torture and abuse of weaker women by the long-armed witch which is portrayed a stronger figure; it marks a departure from the aforementioned narratives in terms of the characters structured. The long-armed witch occupies the central space of the folktale; she lives on the flesh of human, vulnerable children and women without their male counterparts are her targets. The women characters like Chaobi and Tombi are characterised as preys of the witch; with regards to the fact that Tombi is a widow, who lives alone and Chaobi is a married woman who is sometimes unaccompanied by her husband as he leaves his wife at home, on a business trip. The target on Tombi is obtained; she is consumed by the witch. However, the attempts on Chaobi occasion a destructive outcome to the witch with regards to the fact that the long-arm of the witch is chopped off by the husband of Chaobi; Chaobi tricked the witch in making her believe that she is unattended by her husband at home at the moment when she is asked to open the door, being aware of the fact that the

witch is in guise of the dead “Tombi”, the witch is asked to insert her hand through the hole of the wall to open it and when she does, her hand is chopped by the husband of Chaobi.

Taking the narratives into account, the dualistic expressions may be drawn- (Step-mother/Sandrembi) and (Cheishra/Sandrembi) from “Sandrembi and Cheishra” and with regards to the folktale “ Uchek Langmeidong”, it is - (step-mother/step-daughter). In “Hingchabigi Wari,” the chief dualistic relationship is occupied by (Wasareima/step-daughter), in “Haoshi Namoinu” it is – (step-mother/step-daughter) and in “Lai Khutsangbi”, it is (witch/Chaobi) and (witch/Tombi). Laying a common ground on the dualistic expression drawn, the first terms in the expressed dualisms of the five narratives align each other and the same is encountered in the second terms, as to the fact that the first term figures refer to the dominant, oppressor and the privileged over their second term figures in the narratives. Making approach to the dualistic expression- (Step-mother/Sandrembi), here, the step-mother occupies the first term, owing to the fact that the step-mother stands privileged and she holds the power over her step-daughter, which is proven by her extensive use of her step-daughter, Sandrembi at her own disposal in the narrative. Under the stated circumstances, the dualistic relationship maintained in- step-mother/Sandrembi, corresponds to the dualistic relationships in the rest of the four narratives. It is encountered that the step-mother in “Sandrembi and Cheishra”, the step-mother in “Uchek Langmeidong”, the step-mother, Wasareima in “Hingchabigi Wari”, the step-mother in “Haoshi Namoinu” and the witch in “Lai Khutsangbi” occupy first terms, executing the same role that is to abuse and torture their vulnerable second term counterparts.

Homogenising the five Manipuri folktales

On bearing the grounds that the genre like folktale stands to be the first genre that a human learns language, cultural and traditional values and cultural identity from (Suryakant, 2024), attempts are made in this study for valuable interpretations of the five folktales. Expressing the

narrative in the form of dualism, the step-mother/step-daughter, it is the dualistic pair predominant in the narrative. On having the power exercised upon the step-daughter by the step-mother with no physical retaliation, the positions of the step-mother in the first term and the step-daughter in the second term are manifested. The manifestation of power regarding the space of the first term in the dualistic relationship configured in the frame of this narrative speaks volumes about the narrative, unfolding from the perspective of the first term occupied by the step-mother; given the fact that the step-mother holds absolute power to use at her own disposal over her step-daughter.

The afore-mentioned narratives under observation maintain the paradigm in the functions and roles of the characters in the folktales common in the fact that the functions are stable regardless how independent the characters are and under what circumstances the relevant functions are fulfilled. The pattern in the functions maintained by the characters is a “fixed sequence”, “rather than themes or plot details.” (Propp, 1968)

Conveying Plumwood’s theory of homogenisation in the dualistic relationship between step-mother/step-daughter in the folktales “Sandrembi and Cheishra”, “Uchek Langmeidong,” “Haoshi Namoinu” and “Hingchabigi Wari,” the fact that the step-daughters in the second terms are exceedingly made use of, around the house by the step-mothers, yet denying being depended on, lays the base foundation for the theory of homogenisation. It is to the advantage of the step-mothers that the step-daughters initiate assistance in the house chores under compulsion. Yet, the step-mothers in the first terms, fails to identify the character step-daughters as individuals with kind hearts. The perspective of the step-mother appertains to the fact that the act of assisting the step-mothers is regarded a labour in exchange of the protection and food provided to the step-daughters by the step-mothers. The labour extended by Sandrembi in the narrative is under no circumstances referred to as a kind gesture of a daughter

to a mother but it is in fact, associated with a stereotyped personality of a step-daughter developed in the society, who is imposed by a step-mother to do chores under compulsion with torture and abuse.

However, the folktale “Lai Khutsangbi” departs from the duality of step-mother/step-daughter, as the narrative focuses on a story of a long-armed witch, living on the flesh of the ordinary weaker women, who are not attended or rarely attended by their male counterparts as it can be pictured in the case of a widow with no husband or a son to accompany with, or having a very limited circle of friends. And as a matter of fact, a question arises here- as to why not a target on a man or a boy? The question in fact takes the variable to the point that- a woman as in the witch in the narrative, rather intends to make attempts, imposing threats to her own sex of weaker kinds. It is fundamental to note that the step-mothers in Sandrembi and Cheishra targets the step-daughter but not the step-son, which is almost out of the picture in the narratives, apart from an introduction of its existence at the very expositional part of the narrative, way before the climax, falling action and denouement hit the narrative. Having assessed the analysis in the narratives, the structure of this analysis shapes up to form the bottom-line that the entire nature of female and male is operated in terms of a food-chain, a hierarchical chain; where the stronger sex treats the weaker sex with discrimination and in contextualising the folktales, that is to conclude that women have the potential to abuse her own sex of the vulnerable kinds like female kids and young step-daughters. In “Lai Khutsangbi”, psychologically stronger witch/ physically weak women victims is the dualistic pair maintained. And in critically homogenising the pair, it is found that the ordinary victims are homogenised by the long-armed witch in the tale and in not making attempts to identify the victims in terms of its mental and physical strengths, the witch meets her own doom.

Even though, the folktale, “Lai Khutsangbi” is considerably different from the rest of the four, in the sense that it is based not on the duality step-mother/step-daughter duality, all the five folktales form one common duality- psychologically and physically stronger female/psychologically and physically weaker female. Psychologically stronger in the sense that the psychological consciousness of possessing power over the another- the consciousness that certain elements are intimidated by the power, in fact, makes one psychologically stronger and the other weaker psychologically. With reference to these five narratives, the comparative psychological process of being conscious of the strength of their own is derived from their being aware of their own physical strengths in comparison to their predators or preys. Moreover, the questions like- why does the study execute an-in-depth study of gender dynamics in the folktales in particular? and how the gender dynamics rendered in the folktales relevant to the real-life scenario? are the chief interest of this research. A comprehensive answer directs to the fact that any sort of fiction is a construct of art, which projects a possible existence of it in real settings (Vischer, 18 Feb, 2024).

Conclusion

As much as the theory of homogenisation is delivered on account of the dualistic relationship between the coloniser/the colonised and the male/female in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, the study effectively extends the theory of homogenisation concerning the dualism psychologically and physically strong female/psychologically and physically weak female. The fact that the colonisers are unconcerned to learn the entity of their colonised counterpart categorically, corresponds to the step-mothers in all the four narratives paying no heed to understand the labour extended by the step-daughters as the kind gestures of an individual; yet the gestures initiated are in fact acquainted with the stereo-typed labour of the step-daughters prevalent in the society. Additionally, the long-armed witch’s understanding of the physical

and psychological strengths of her female preys is rather homogenised; making no attempts to identify the victims before making attacks.

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