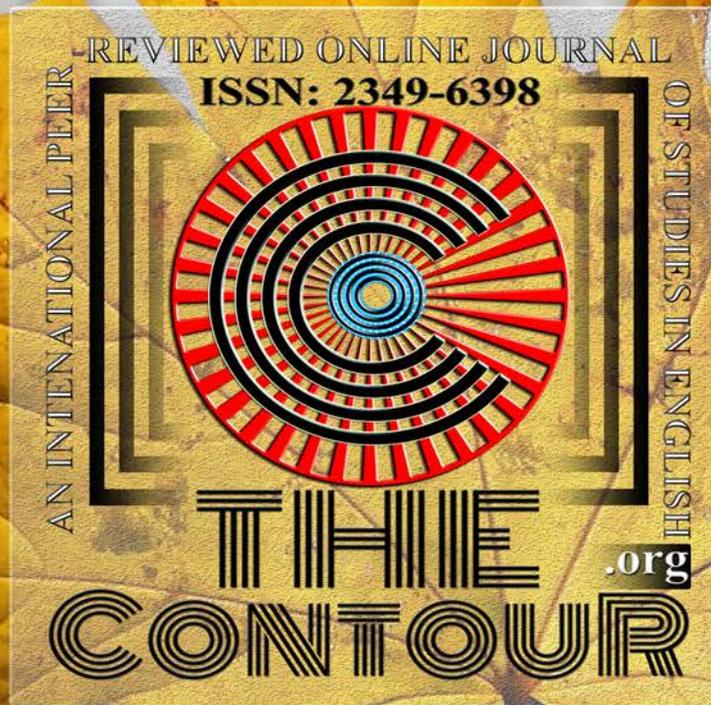


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Caligynephobia in Folktales of India

Madhumita Bose

Abstract

This piece of writing deals with the complexities existing in women's psyche that give way to bitter hostility and rivalry among womenfolk in the game of power. This paper also tries to explore how men intensify this rift by giving much importance to outward beauty of women with a view to reinforcing patriarchal ideologies. Through different examples from Indian folktales, an attempt has been made to show how "ugly" women consider "beautiful" women to be an obstacle in their path of securing a room in the hearts of men, and how they end up targeting these "beautiful" faces. By surviving on beauty and fear factors of women how men retain their own supremacy is also dealt with, in this paper.

Key words: caligynephobia, ugly faces, beautiful faces, jealousy, hostility.

According to the general opinion of common masses, high entertainment value of folk tales and fairy tales always counts more than their literary value, and therefore these people have naturally developed a tendency to classify these tales under the category of children's narrative. They believe that fun and magical elements, inherent in the tales, are the focal points, and with the help of these elements alone the stories have successfully managed to retain the interest and curiosity of the readers over ages. Most of the time, they fail to recognize the covert ideologies that fervently operate behind the screen and therefore, believe these narratives to be absolutely innocent and over-simplified in nature. Psychologists, sociologists and anthropologists, however cannot overlook the veiled ideologies and philosophies that run parallel along with the superficial plot of good conquering the evil, and eventually these concealed complexities of the tales turn out to be their point of attraction. To the eminent scholars and researchers, folk and fairy tales are much more than mere children's tales. In their viewpoint, the tales can no longer be treated as "humble sisters of writing art" (qtd. in Bhattacharya 25), because of their innate dynamism and intricacy. Furthermore, these tales grab the attention of men of academics because they are now regarded as the storehouse of multifaceted and complex human psyche and human behavior. And this has been possible, principally because of its diverse female characters.

Sutapa Chaudhuri opines, "Women are always portrayed in relation to men" (Chaudhuri par. 4). The roles that these women play in the narratives are absolutely unambiguous and are accurately defined by men. If we call the tales to mind, we will notice that female characters are portrayed in the perspective of men and their fates are trapped in epithets like "good" and "bad", "beautiful" and "ugly". If they comply with the conventions set by men, these women are deemed "good" and therefore "beautiful", and if they fall short, these women characters become "bad" and therefore "ugly". This classification of women under two broad heads is not only a premeditated act but is also an indispensable one. According to the psychoanalytic theory proposed by Sigmund Freud, men's psyche has an innate propensity to "split women symbolically into mothers (or



sisters) and prostitutes” (Nayar 70). In the fairy and folk tales these symbolic “mothers” and “prostitutes” take the respective shapes of beautiful heroines on one hand, and ugly witches and ogresses and stepmothers on the other. As this segregation is clearly founded on women’s outward appearance, a rift is automatically created in the world of women and animosity among them is deviously built up. Men actually survive on this hostility of women, as it smoothens out their way to have dominance over women which ultimately gives way to subjugation of women. While a woman engages herself in these unproductive fights with another woman, men hardly face any competition in the game of power and successfully hold the reign of authority in their tight fists. In the opinion of Nivedita Menon, a man does not fight with another man. Because the power game between them is not such that increased power for one means reduced power for the other. But women in virilocal households derive their power solely from men – . . . Power struggles between women are inbuilt in this kind of structure and are inevitable. This is not because they are ‘women’, but because they are put into positions that are pitted against one another. (44)

It is believed that a thin line exists between folktales and real world, and both continually influence and enrich each other. Complex family structures and relationships are an integral part of Indian social system. In an Indian family system, it is women members who apparently control the internal matters of every household. By making women characters and their hostility predominate the hearths, Indian folk and fairy tales mirror the reality. Furthermore, existence of polygamy in Indian folk tales aggravates this sour animosity among women members. On the surface, women characters compete with one another in a struggling game of beauty. But, in fact, game of beauty takes the shape of ugliest kind of “power game” (Menon 44), which is ultimately resolved in the end through proper intervention and involvement of male characters. Almost all folk tales project male characters as either exceptionally good, or moderately good, or not-so-good. They are supposed to be the saviours of innocent ladies and rescuers of disordered lands, and therefore are never bad. Even when the male characters do something appalling or terrible, it is for the ultimate welfare of mankind and also womankind, and so their wrongdoings often obtain social consent, and if in any case, punishment of men becomes absolutely necessary, the sentence or penalty is almost always paltry. In the hearts of women these saviours occupy lofty positions and so are allowed to be the designers of women’s fate. And, when these men intervene in the women’s world, it is accepted by women as divine intervention. In the tales, these divine beings thus obtain full freedom to reward and punish women, who are much inferior in the eyes of men. Consequently, when these men accept any woman character, it is treated as the grandest incentive, and when they desert her, it is taken as the worst penalty. In fear of “physical abandonment” (Tyson 16) or “emotional abandonment” (Tyson 16), female characters, both “good” and “bad”, incessantly continue to work on the beauty factor because they are fully aware that it is the outward beauty by which their standards are measured and judged. Naturally, beautiful female protagonists try hard not to be active and spoil their beauty, while female antagonists put on masquerade of a beautiful woman to captivate the attention of men. They, in fact, know that beauty is the only means by which they can gain recognition and can secure one of the limited seats available in the world of patriarchy. So, beautiful faces invite unwholesome competitions among women characters resulting into “caligynephobia” (Parker 253) or “venustraphobia” (Parker 253).



“Caligynophobia” is an indescribable fear that a good-looking woman provokes in the minds of others. Dr. Prince Maurice Parker has explained that this phobia is not restricted to the world of men. “Caligynophobia” is a psychological term with which both the sexes are familiar (Parker 261). Parker further elucidates,

Although the external manifestations are different between the two sexes, it is possible for women to also have caligynophobia. Women might exhibit symptoms of jealousy or envy, while men might show signs of aversion or aggression. Oddly enough, this phobia is far more prone to manifest itself earlier in women than in men. . . . This rivalry is often born from the fear of being found less attractive than others who they secretly believe to be more beautiful than they see themselves as being. (Parker 261-69)

Snow White is perhaps the best example. Every day the queen has a single question to ask the magic mirror, and the question is – who the most beautiful woman among them is. Till the moment the magic mirror names the queen, the queen remains “contented” (Grimm213). But, the day it mentions the name of Snow-white and regards her to be the most beautiful woman, the queen receives “a great shock, and she became yellow and green with envy, and from that hour her heart turned against Snow-white, and she hated her” (Grimm 214). This instant transformation in the queen and her open reaction of jealousy is a clear evidence of caligynophobia. Naming Snow-white as the most beautiful woman is the turning point of the tale, because from that very moment the queen becomes resentful towards Snow-white. *Snow White* is not the only story that displays detestation of one woman towards the other. Rather it has successfully become the ideal model based on which the story-lines of other tales are developed. “*Snow White* offers strong messages concerning competition among women and the importance of beauty for women. The murderous actions taken by the stepmother remind readers of the symbolic lengths some women go to maintain or acquire beauty” (Baker-Sperry, and Grauarholz719).

Sight of beautiful women, in Indian folktales, generates strange feelings of jealousy and hatred in the hearts of bad-looking women which sometimes direct them to become misogynistic. Dictionary defines the term “misogyny” as “hatred of women” (Elliott, Knight, and Cowley478). But, “misogyny” has wider connotation than what is defined. Nowhere does “misogyny” mention that men alone exhibit such abhorrence towards women. Women, in reality, are doubly oppressed as they are subjected to the hatred of both men and women. In Indian folk and fairy tales we have often found that a group of ambitious and strongwomen prove more malicious than men, while conducting the acts of misogyny. Now, what is the need of ambitious women to fight another group of women, who are actually vulnerable? In Indian tales, strength of women is greatly condemned and is mostly viewed in negative perspective. Rather, appearance of a woman gets all the importance in our society. Naturally, beauty turns out to be the basic ground that generates misogynistic activities. Beautiful faces create excessive fear in bad-looking women because men give excessive preference to beautiful faces and acknowledge only beautiful faces in their lives. In “The Love of Mahi” (Bansal *Folk Tales of Gujarat* 7-11), Mahi gets rejected by the Sea Lord because she is dark complexioned. When Mahi professes her love for the Sea Lord, the latter justifies himself by saying, “I do not see any beauty in you . . . I am the mighty Sea, I cannot wed someone as dark and plain as you.’ . . . ‘I can only marry a princess, not someone as ugly as you”



(8). So, describing all the female protagonists as “beautiful” has become a kind of mandatory act in almost all Indian tales, and literally it has become the only criterion which secures marital bliss for women. She may be extremely talented but the epithet “beautiful” is always attached to her description. “In the land of Utkal lived a powerful king. He had a daughter named Aishwarya. She was beautiful, intelligent and talented. She was an exquisite dancer, a melodious singer and knew the scriptures well” (Kumar “A Swayamvar with a Difference” 37). This outlook compels women to develop a false approach towards life. Misconception about life often threatens the individuality of a woman. When a woman character starts equating her uniqueness with her outward appearance, her fate is inevitably doomed and she becomes a real waste. Women, who are supposedly authoritative but “ugly”, are probably more affected by this beauty myth. They utilize their talents not in any creative work but waste their potentiality and creativity in spiteful works which only harm and humiliate the species of their own kind. They are aware of their ugly appearances, and this particular knowledge about their appearances makes them unnerved and vicious. Since marriage is the ultimate destination of the Indian girls, and in Indian marriages beautiful faces get all the priority, ugly or ordinary looking women dreads rejection. This is also reflected in the tales. Extreme fear of failure to secure any man in their lives engulfs their minds and they channelize their entire potentiality and energy towards the obliteration of beautiful faces. Although, in many cases, these women deceive men with their disguised appearance, but this fake facade does not last long, and ultimately gets exposed before everyone. These “ugly” faces conceal their resentment and spiteful thoughts in the darkest corner of their hearts and these thoughts are finally manifested through malevolent actions. These women also fear beautiful faces of men in the lives of other women because for them a beautiful face of a man guarantees happiness to their opponent, and therefore they attempt to transform this happiness into misery as is evident in the story “Sobur Kor” (Das 26).

Not only “ugly” faces but women who have plain faces also become victims of caliginophobia and this fear is so intense that it gets exposed, the moment they notice beautiful faces. This fear ultimately takes the shape of “core issues” (Tyson 17). Lois Tyson explains that these “core issues” (17) perpetually stay with us throughout our lives and drive our lives towards destruction. Anxiety has much to do with core issues, which “determine our behaviour in destructive ways of which we are usually unaware” (17). This fear and jealousy make women “unaware” (Tyson 17) of what destruction they are causing to other women. Whatever harm they do, they do it impulsively. Instead of establishing a unity or behaving amicably with other women, they unknowingly become malicious and play havoc in the lives of beautiful faces. Occasionally, this acrimonious emotion is so dominant that they even go to the extent of destructing their closed ones. In “Princess Aubergine” (Steel 32-5), “the Queen, who was of a very jealous disposition, could not bear the idea of any one being more beautiful than she was herself, so she cast about in her mind how she could destroy the lovely Aubergine” (32). But in an attempt to be the most beautiful, she eventually ends up killing her three sons (33).

These jealous women, for some reason or the other, do neither have the mind to consider men to be the genesis of their trouble nor do anything productive or constructive to safeguard themselves from this abnormal fear. They only target beautiful faces and attempt hard to wipe them out,



sometimes in the hope of getting little room in the hearts of men of their desire, and sometimes with an intention to deprive these pretty faces of all types of love and comfort. But they miserably fail because factor of beauty comes in-between them and the beautiful faces. They become unsuccessful because their opponents are none but beautiful faces. And, for beautiful faces men can go to any extent. The trouble that the beautiful faces confront is temporary because men ultimately come to the rescue of beautiful faces, and to everyone's relief, "A large hole, as deep as the height of a man, was dug in the ground; the [ugly face] was put into it in a standing posture; prickly thorn was heaped around her up to the crown of her head; in this wise was the [ugly face] buried alive" (Day 97).

Vernon Lee in *The Beautiful* suggests that "beautiful implies satisfaction and preference" (18). It is this "satisfaction and preference" (Lee 18) that the ugly faces cannot shower upon the lives of their men. Since men are the activating force, to gratify them is thought to be the chief job of Indian women. This approach is reflected in Indian folk and fairy tales, too. When ugly-faced women characters view that the beautiful-faced women successfully satisfy men, and get love and admiration in return, their sense of insecurity gets stirred up, and they become vulnerable. They get furious and agitated and become malicious. Deprived of love, they do not want anyone to get love either. This feeling of antipathy becomes so strong, that they take no relationship under serious consideration. Only their hatred prevails. Therefore, bitterness in the relationship is not confined to that of co-wives only, but jealousy spreads its wings in other relationships, too. In the narrative, "The Golden Moon" (Bansal *Folk Tales of South India* 69-74) for example, Padma is the favourite little sister of seven brothers and is always loved and cared by her brothers. When Padma's brothers go out of the town, she is kept in the custody of her sisters-in-law. Hatred and insecurity must have been stored in the subconscious of her six sisters-in-law, and this is perhaps why they come easily under the spell of the evil words of the female beggar. "Poor Padma was treated differently now. She was given all kinds of work and was kept hungry" (71) by her six sisters-in-law. In "The Able Children" (Bansal *Folk Tales of Maharashtra* 63-8) also, we find elder sisters are plotting against their youngest sibling, who eventually has become the Queen. The Queen invites her elder sisters at the time of her pregnancy. "She was a little nervous so asked her elder sisters to be by her side. Now, the Queen gave birth to a baby boy. The jealous sisters placed the baby in a basket and threw it into the river" (64). Now, these jealous hearts very well know that if they can somehow prove the barrenness of the beautiful hearts, they will be successful in their mission. This thought occurs for a good reason. In India, giving birth to baby boy is more important than having a beautiful face. Men prioritize beautiful faces for a reason. "Men place great value on female physical attractiveness because it is a trustworthy indicator of relative fertility" (Gottschallet al.). And, when these physically attractive women fail to prove fertile, men cannot bear the "high costs of rearing human young women" (Gottschallet al.) and throw them out of their hearts and hearths. The Little Queen in "Princess Kolaboti" (Mitra Majumdar *Tales from Thakurmar Jhuli* 94-113) is deprived of her "share of the root" (96). This root has extreme significance in her life because it can impregnate her. When the Fourth Queen sympathetically offers her the "washing water" (97) of "the grinding stone" (97), five other queens approve the decision but are malicious in their thoughts. "The other queens exclaimed in chorus, 'Yes, yes,



give her the washing water. Good idea!’ But they whispered to each other, ‘Ho, ho, some hope, all she will have is a monkey for a son’” (97). Sometimes, these women extend their hatred and jealousy towards their stepsons also because these stepsons shove them away from their men of desire. This is evident in “Life’s Secret” (Day 13-27). The Duo-Queen “naturally hated the child, as the king, since his birth, neglected her more than ever, and idolised the fortunate mother of Dalim” (15).

Silima Nanda feels that Disney movies like *Mulan*, *Moana* and *Shrek* are attempting to “portray females in a more positive light” (249), but in India women’s identity is still connected with her outward appearance. She is “good” only if she is “beautiful”. In Indian tales, “beautiful” symbolizes passivity and submissiveness. Indian patriarchal system wants women to be docile and those who refuse to be passive are termed as “ugly”. “Good” and “ugly” are pitted against one another to serve the greater purpose of establishing male sovereignty. Men feed on the resentment and jealousy of women and by making beauty as the prime factor in the lives of women, they let one faction of women fight with another faction. Women are too susceptible to see through this scheme. They need to understand that their potentiality transcends their physical attractiveness. Unless they understand their true potentiality and get united, men will continue to make them dance to their tunes. Unless women stop giving supreme importance to their facial beauty and overcome caliginophobia, men will continue to remain unblemished in the eyes of women, and women will continue to be marginalized in the eyes of men.

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