"THE MUSLIM GIANT": ANALYSIS OF THE WORLDVIEW REPRESENTED IN A SELECTION OF FOLKTALES ATTRIBTED TO THE MUSLIM ETHNIC COMMUNITY IN SRI LANKA

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INTRODUCTION

Though folktales in Sri Lanka have a history dating back to the 3rd Century ACE, and were introduced as part of the religious dissemination endeavors of the Asokan Buddhist mission (Ratnapala 1991), they have not been the subject of scholarly studies either for their achieved form or conditions of existence. This could be attributed to the uncritical view that folktales are the lot of ―Illiterate, Rural, Lower stratum‖ (Dundes 2007). However, folkloric texts, according to folklorists, are not as dilettantish as scholars grant them to be—they carry, according to Bronner (2009), biases, prejudices, belief and values through time and space, often ―unconsciously or unselfconsciously‖ (2009). At the same time, majority of the folktale collections published in Sri Lanka, since the appearance of the first collection by the British colonial officer Henry Parker in 1910, are folktales told by/of the major ethnic group, the Sinhalese. Gunasekera Gunasoma, a passionate folktale collector, in 2011 added an interesting dimension to the folktales of Sri Lanka by collecting and publishing a selection of 17 folktales attributed to the Muslim ethnic group living in the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka. This study is a close reading of those folktales for their ―world view,‖ which is defined by Bronner as the ―general outlook, values and belief that drive human action and inform ethical judgment‖ (Bronner 2009). At a time when the discourse of ethnic reconciliation has attracted the attention of both the bureaucrats, non-governmental participants and even the literary community of Sri Lanka (as apparent from at least two Write to Reconcile creative writing programs in operation at present) this study, which is a preliminary study of a larger study of folktales of the minority communities of Sri Lanka, intends to compliment and add to that discourse.

METHODOLOGY

Gunasoma's collection and classification of 17 folktales from the villages of Eastern province under the category ‖Muslim folktales‖ (*Muslim Janakatha*), lends itself for a parallel analysis of these folktales tale. Thus this study would engage these tales in a qualitative reading. In that reading it would use the literary critic Macherey's assumptions that all speech ―envelopes in the unspoken in order to reach utterance‖ (Macherey 2006) and this ‗unspoken,' which he also terms as ―silence‖ (Macherey 2006), informs us of the ―precise conditions for the appearance of an utterance,…its limits…real significance‖ (Macherey 2006). These silences that envelope the values and beliefs of the tales will be put under scrutiny in this study to understand what they say about the subjective world experience of the Muslim ethic community.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Spirituality is one of the most valorized traditions across the folktales. Like myths that resist rationale discourse (Coupe ….), spirituality--or ‗purity'--in the tales negates mundane material realities, including the (British) colonial authority. Thus, in one tale, the graveyard of a sacred religious figure disrupts the journey of a train built over it by the British colonials, thus derailing the colonial power discourse. Here the contending powers are the ‗sacred' and the ‗colonial.' The graveyard becomes a sacred space; and the train, a symbol of colonial economic power; one serving the needs of the body, the other, the soul. The body/soul dichotomy collides head on in this strange event of the mysteriously halted train. In another

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tale, a man who was robbed and critically wounded by a gang of thieves survives his ordeal by reciting religious stanzas—religion assumes the role of life-saving medication here. Just as much as thieves can harm one‘s body, the ‗sacred‘ can heal it. Two lamps lit alongside the grave of a sacred man burns all night in another tale, thus converting the idea of ‗scared‘ into a force that defies the laws of physics. One is discouraged from uttering untruths in a sacred space. An illegitimate love affair between a man and a woman is taken to the mosque for a settlement as a last resort--the ‗sacred‘ meets ‗desire.‘ The male vehemently denies his participation in this questionable alliance, whereby he is asked to swear his innocence. His eye balls pop out as he leaves this religious space owing to the fact that his act of swearing was false. This tale valorizes monogamy, suggests moderation of one‘s desires and promotes cultural ritual over uncontrolled desires. In another tale, a Sinhala man who disrupted the building of a mosque dies in an accident, thus converting the ‗sacred‘ into a force that (violently) exerts itself into the material sphere of mundane existence.

The world of the female, as shown in two tales told by females, is different to that of males. She seemingly exercise agency and valorizes her daughters over sons. Thus, in one tale, an angry mother poisons her son who had allegedly slapped his sister. Though the claimed attack never took place, the mother is quick to accept the word of her daughter over her son‘s. This tale suggests females as sacrosanct subjects whose bodies should be respected by males. In another tale, a greedy son-in-law‘s nocturnal foray into the kitchen to lick the left-over meat-curry-spice-mixture off a *wangediya* becomes a tragedy as his head gets stuck in that container. The mother-in-law demands that the *wangediya*, which comes to her from her family, be saved at any cost. Thus, the males in the house end up beheading the hapless son-in-law. This tale offers, while offering the implication of feminine agency (she had the final say in this issue), also suggests that females‘ sphere of influence was largely the space called the kitchen.

There are stories that recount the heroic acts of men with powerful physical attributes. Adam Lebbe, is capable of outrunning elephants, slapping a Leopard, and overcoming a Bear with his bare hands. There is also a ‗Muslim Giant‘ who is capable of Herculean tasks like carrying two large tree trucks a long distance to build a well. He eats four-five measures of rice per meal and his venerated grave yard is 60 feet long. Tales with similar episodics are also found among the Sinhala ethnic group; the exaggerations are possibly a narrative strategy to communicate the intensity of the strength of the hero. The presence of the giants is a suggestion of the valorizing of masculine valor and strength within the community, which could be extended to suggest that the community under focus here is patriarchal.

The relationship with the Sinhala ethnic community is captured in at least two tales. In one, a romantic alliance between the two communities is explored. An attractive Sinhala female from a land-owning cultivating family runs away with a handsome Muslim male of equal wealth and means. The villagers‘ agitation over this issue is amicably settled by the intervention of the eloping partners who express their lifelong commitment to each other. The class attributes of the couple is equal—they are both wealthy; but their ethnicity is not, which is settled through discussion. The Sinhala folk act of soothsaying (*pena balanawa*) is ridiculed by a Muslim man who becomes a successful soothsayer in a Sinhala village by a shrewd method: he uses informants to find out details about the individual prior to the act of soothsaying. This tale rather than an act of ridicule, seems to be a warning to the listeners who might subscribe to the ‗pleasures‘ of clairvoyance owing to the popularity of the concept.

The relationship between the Muslim ethnic community and the nation is also explored in two tales where the Sinhala kings (two are not identified by name, one identified as the *King Senarath*) are projected as having cordial relationship with this community. The kings have regular contact with the people and one king is particularly touched by the gesture of a *Lebbe* of a mosque, who presented the king with a king coconut while he was on his way to worship the *Dighavapiya*. The tales are not islands, they align themselves to national politics, where diplomatic and friendly relations with the political centre are encouraged.

Dreams have a special place in the stories in the sense that they are interpreted literally. Thus, a man whose fishing boat was destroyed in the sea responds to a dream which asks him to swim, and he ends up being carried home by a large wave. Another man initiates the building of a mosque at a location which was pinpointed by a dream. It is possible to assume that the tale creators/tellers/listeners believed that dreams are part of the ‗sacred' and its dictums are to be carried out literally.

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

A close reading of these tales demonstrates the beliefs that inspire ethical judgments of the characters of the tales, which could have been a reflection of the affairs in the material sphere. The ‗sacred,' which can be interpreted as ‗pure,'–and since anything considered ‗pure' resists questioning they are robed as ‗myth'[*] according to the literary critic Barthes (2009)—is the most significant value that drives the tale episodics. The ‗sacred' occupies an overwhelming and inescapable ‗presence' in the tales trampling and transcending objects or concerns in the material sphere. Thus the ‗sacred' is valorized over worldliness. By invoking other ethnic groups into the tales, they tell us more about the subjectivity of the Muslim ethnic group: that they prefer to retain their independence, or core values, in their dealings with other ethnic groups. In the sphere of politics, the Muslim ethnic group was largely supportive of the powers that be; this connection to the centre was looked upon with much pride and joy. The attention of the king, or the political centre, was seriously appreciated by this community. Females enjoy agency and autonomy, with a hierarchy of values in their world, and in this ordering they have located the male gender below the *wangediya*. At the same time, this could also indicate that the females were static in their worlds, with the kitchen and household duties being their primary responsibilities. The ‗world view' espoused in these tales show a community who are attempting to come to terms with their material surroundings while adhering to their individuality. Their identity hinges on the ‗sacred' and strict adherence to its tenants, with tales disempowering people who defy and negate this idea of the sacred. The community found in the tales is not claustrophobic—they explore the world outside, they engage with other ethnic groups. Such engagements necessarily require maintaining a core identity, or a subjectivity, that they define as ‗Muslim.'

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[*]The word ‗myth' is used here according to the concepts of Barthes who posits it as a semiological system involving interplay between the signifier, signified and the sign. See Barthes's *Mythologies* (2009) for more