

‘FROM THE EARLIEST TIMES...THERE WERE NEITHER MEN, NOR LIVING BEINGS’: TRADITIONS OF MASCULINITY IN SINHALA AND TAMIL FOLKTALES

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INTRODUCTION:

“Brahmana, for thy assistance thou art to make for thyself a woman.” (*The Making of the Great Earth* – a Sinhala folk tale)

“Why, you are not wanted in this house anymore. You do not deserve to be my wife anymore.” (*The Clay-doll Mother-in-law* -- a Tamil folk tale)

Scholar Michael Roberts (2002) in his research on pre-modern Sinhala society has observed the vast potential of oral forms of communication in the formation of the consciousness of a nation. One such folkloric means is the folktale. Roberts states that, ‘...the vitality of storytelling...provide some measure of the degree to which Sinhalese people have placed emphasis on their culture heroes and past events. ...these were the modalities that enabled Sinhalese as well as Buddhistness to become embodied.’ (Roberts: 2002). Roberts issues a clarion call for disciplined analysis of the ideological content of folklore, and this present research (despite its insignificant scope and limitations), in one aspect, is a response to his call.

While acknowledging that there is a dearth of research in Sri Lanka on gender in folklore, this research intends to initiate a debate by analyzing a selected sample of both Sinhala and Tamil folktales from a gendered perspective.

Gendered readings of folklore (particularly in Anglo-American contexts) have revealed that orally transmitted folk tales are more than just mere narrations meant to entertain people. They carry ‘traditions’² (Bronner, 2005) which are gendered and which people inherit. Dundes (2002) and Brandes (1992) in their research position folklore as sites where gender prejudices and assumptions are nurtured and are later driven towards concrete reality in a society.

Feminist studies in women’s folklore (Jordan & Kalcik: 1985; Hollis & Young 1993) suggest that women’s culture emerges from ‘traditions’ shared and maintained by women and that these women’s traditions had their own role in countering the patriarchal traditions that have marginalized and silenced women.

The present research attempts to locate gendered traditions in a selected sample of Sinhala and Tamil folktales – in particular, this research will locate and analyze the traditions of masculinity in the suggested sample.

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² Bronner (2005) quoting two scholars -- Robert Georges and Michael Owen Jones -- refer to ‘traditions’ in folklore as implying ‘tendencies and continuities through time and space in human knowledge, thought, belief and feeling.’

LITERATURE SURVEY

In the introduction to his folklore research anthology *'Manly Traditions: The Folk Roots of American Masculinities'* Bronner proposes that 'the roots of being a man in America are in the traditions men inherit and often adapt for their own purposes in contemporary life.' (Bronner, 2005: P xi). He goes on to argue that these traditions are 'critical' in explaining socially particularized states of masculinities because by nature traditions are 'vessels for creating meaning, producing metaphors, reinforcing beliefs, and transmitting values through time.' (Bronner, 2005: pg xii). He also states that folklore is indispensable for the historical, social, psychological and cultural inquiry of a society because it presents the 'core values' of a society and also the metaphors by which people live. Gender in folklore he states, serves the purpose of making the 'unconscious or unselfconscious, conscious.'³ He goes on to posit folklore as a site where one could locate 'unrivalled evidence of gendered behavior due to the 'symbolic communication it encapsulates, the potential for structural, situational and comparative analysis it suggests...the values, metaphors and beliefs it embodies.' (Bronner 2005: 04).

In a survey of American folklore texts folklorist Alan Dundes⁴ hypothesized that the American culture exhibits a "male bias," even "male chauvinism." Dundes argues that the biases, prejudices, beliefs, and values found in the texts are actively transmitted through time and space, often 'unconsciously or unselfconsciously,' through folkloric means.

Brandes (1992) in his comprehensive research on masculinity of Andalusian folk tales argues that folklore essentially reflects assumptions about masculinity and gives such assumptions a concrete reality. 'They show men who they are and what they should be.' (Brandes 1992: 07). In addition, Brandes (1992) argues that folklore provides a culturally acceptable outlet to males for expressing frustrations, tensions, feelings that cannot be expressed directly. He says that men also use folklore to express and maximize their power hierarchies.

METHODOLOGY

This research will entail re-reading 25 Sinhala village folk tales and 25 Tamil Folk Tales from a masculine perspective. To analyze masculinity in a given narrative space this research will:

- ❖ Locate and interpret the 'traditions' of being a male as depicted in the stories. As suggested by Bronner this study will assume the folkloric implications of 'tradition' as 'tendencies and continuities through time and space in human knowledge, thought, belief and feeling.' Folklore researchers assume that 'tradition' carries connotations of cultural authority and hence tradition tends to form patterns that can be identified, compared and interpreted. This research will thus identify, compare and interpret those 'patterns' of tradition as well as the meanings, values and metaphors created by them.
- ❖ scrutinize the power hierarchies created between males in the texts
- ❖ locate the 'traditions' associated with females in the narrations in order to initiate an inquiry as to how the masculine 'traditions' are shaped by the 'traditions' of females.⁵

³ Bronner borrows those terms from the folklore scholar Alan Dundes who wrote the afterward for his book *'Manly Traditions: The Folk Roots of American Masculinities'*

⁴ Dundes's work is extensively quoted in the Bronner's folklore anthology *'Manly Traditions: The Folk Roots of American Masculinities'*

⁵ Folklorist Bronner (2005) proposes that 'traditions' men know are those they communicate to one another in their social interactions and are shaped by what women do and such traditions are often inherited from

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The masculine traditions identified in the narrations are similar in both the Sinhala and Tamil folktales. The 'male' is defined in a power dyad as a superior entity against the inferiority of the female. Labor is defined according to gender with the 'male' involved in tasks that are dynamic vs the female who is engaged in static tasks. Desire is male driven and follows the heterosexual normativity. However, the traditions of being a male in the texts promote a particular kind of 'maleness' which is valorized, thus creating a power struggle among males. At the same time, there are females who perform 'male' attributes to perfection and the narrative plots usually neutralize that power in the end. This research will engage in a lengthy discussion on the last two points.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The traditions of being a man in these tales suggest both a power dyad in gender as well as a vulnerable masculinity which can be undermined by other masculinities. These male vulnerabilities could be a research area that needs further attention. This study uses only a limited sample due to time as well as a means of testing the ground for a lengthy research based on a larger sample.

LIMITATIONS

Translation, according to Lawrence Venuti, is not a 'simple communicative act' but a 'domestication of a foreign text.' This research acknowledges that there could have been problematic issues in the act of 'transliteration' by the translators of the both volumes of folk tales despite their best intentions.

This research does not attempt to discover masculinity as a subjective or lived experience. Rather it analyses cultural ideas, symbols and narratives that could have evolved as a consequence of a male subjectivity.

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