



**FOLKTALES OF THE EAST AS CULTURAL SIGNIFIERS: A COMPARATIVE ESTIMATE OF
THE ARABIAN NIGHTS: TALES OF ONE THOUSAND AND ONE NIGHTS AND GRANDMOTHER'S
BAG: BENGAL'S RUPKATHA**

Dr. Arpita Dasgupta

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Parimal Mitra Smriti Mahavidyalaya, P. O. Malbazar, Dist.
Jalpaiguri, West Bengal, Pin: 735221

Introduction: The term 'folk' when appended to any form of cultural expression gives it an indigenous, ethnic dimension, characterizing the people, their clime and the soil out of which it has sprung over the ages. Harking back to a pre-literary era, the folktales, a significant part of which comprise the bedtime stories are the most popular examples of the same. *One Thousand and One Nights* is a rich and rather complex treasury of such tales compiled from varied sources ranging from an anonymous *Arabic text Alf Layla wa Layla* to which it owes its title, to 'orphan stories' (Marzolph 21) derived from oral renditions. Popularly known across the globe as *The Arabian Nights*, these tales have opened up an expansive terrain of the Middle East since the translations of Jean Antoine Galland appeared in twelve volumes between 1703 and 1714. This has unleashed various, often conflicting attempts to comprehend a distant culture, whose oriental quality assumes different proportions when viewed without the western lens. An undiluted access to the same is not possible when analysed in the context of a work mediated through European translations, the importance of whose original Arabic version in its native place remains question begging till date. With due allowance for simplification, this paper seeks to look at the East through its folklores. In so doing it engages in a comparative study of *The Arabian Nights*, with Bengal's version of wonder tales found in Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar's *Thakumar Jhuli: Banglar Rupkatha*, which has been a part of the upbringing of Bengal's children for ages.

Bengali Grandmother: *Thakurmar Jhuli* i.e., *Grandmother's Bag* indicates by its very title the target audience of these tales. Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar posing as the compiler of these tales brings them together as tales told since times immemorial by the elderly women of Bengal to their grandchildren. The subtitle reinforces this view. The very term rupkatha in Bengali amalgamating two words rup i.e., image and katha i.e., spoken words has orality ingrained in it. "Possibly derived from the words, 'aparup katha' (wonderful tales)" (Ray xx) it indicates a vivid form of storytelling compelling the child listener to wonder and imagine. Accordingly, the tales are classified under four headings each of which in its rhythmical pattern introduces the readers to the respective tales. These sections are named keeping in mind the different stages of feeding and lulling the child to sleep. The first section named 'Dudher Sagar' (Mitra Majumdar 25-26) i.e., sea of milk opens this series of wonder tales to facilitate the child's drinking milk. The stories concerning the supernatural beings 'rakshas' comprise the section known as 'Rup Tarashi' (138-139) which alludes to their fearful appearance. The third section 'Chang Bang' (210-211) like the chutney after the main course, contains the stories conceived in light humour to delight and entertain. The fourth stage is named 'Aam Sandesh' (270-272) which is the dessert. In this section there are no tales only rhymes which are lullabies by the end of which the child is expected to be



fast asleep. The free-flowing narrative of the stories where colloquial prose blends with rhymes captures to a great extent their oral origin, a commendable feat that even Tagore aspired for, but failed to achieve, as he himself admits in his preface to the collection.

Arabian Scheherazade: At a remove from the Bengali Grandmother, the tales from *The Arabian Nights* are told by a young bride Scheherazade to her husband, a Persian King Shahryar. The basic intention is to hold his attention and postpone her execution as the King deeming womankind as faithless on account of his experience with his first wife, marries a virgin every night only to execute her the next morning. To avert their fate, she tells a tale every night and withholds the ending when she stops at dawn compelling the curious King to enable Scheherazade to resume her narration the next evening when she concludes the earlier story and swiftly moves into another one. While the grandmother's presence is implied in *Thakurmar Jhuli*, Scheherazade in *The Arabian Nights* is visible as a character in the introductory part of this collection. She is the elder daughter of the grand vizier who is given a grand introduction: "Scheherazade had perused the books, annals and legends of preceding Kings, and the stories, examples and instances of by-gone men and things; indeed, it was said that she had collected a thousand books of histories relating to antique races and departed rulers. She had perused the works of the poets and knew them by heart; she had studied philosophy and the sciences, arts and accomplishments; and she was pleasant and polite, wise and witty, well read and well bred." (Burton 16) This account of fictional Scheherazade's knowledge is an easy explanation of the wide variety of these tales compiled as her narrative that continue to engage the attention of scholars across the globe. Interestingly, the Arabic title *Alf Laylah Wa Laylah* meaning *One thousand and One Nights* alludes to the sprawling dimension of the work whose tales have surfaced in different translations the basic unifying feature of which remains the frame story of Scheherazade. It sets the pattern of the work which not directed towards children intends nonetheless to engage the attention of the listeners with an urgency like never before. Conceived with a desperation to prolong Scheherazade's life, her tales flow from one to the other, one tale often includes other tales, a structure which is reminiscent of the collection of animal fables in Sanskrit, *Panchatantra*.

Middle-Eastern Colours: King Shahriyar, the proposed listener of the tales of *The Arabian Nights* is projected as belonging to the house of the Sasans, a Persian dynasty which occupied significant portions of the Eastern part of the globe around 7th century AD. The islands of India and China mentioned as his territory further reinforces the range and variety of the domain under his control and thereby of the tales compiled as *One Thousand and One Nights*. *Alf Layla wa Layla* begins with a prayer: "PRAISE BE TO ALLAH...THE CREATOR OF THE UNIVERSE...BLESSING BE UPON OUR LORD MOHAMMAD – LORD OF APOSTOLIC MEN...PRAYER AND BLESSINGS ENDURING AND GRACE WHICH UNTO THE DAY OF DOOM SHALL REMAIN – AMEN! – O THOU OF THE THREE WORLDS SOVEREIGN!" (Burton 3) These lines highlight a predominantly Muslim society but not necessarily limited to the same. Accordingly, the tales bring us in communion with Muslim characters, the Caliph, the Sultan as well as Alexander the Great, the pious Israelite and the Christian princess. There is reference to different festivals like sacrificing a cow during Id al-Adha (e.g. 'The story of the First Old Man') or the gathering in the Church on one Easter Day described as "a Christian feast day" (e.g. 'Adi ibn Zaid and the Princess Hind') The Muslim God is projected as the real God



Almighty who turns an entire kingdom of fire-worshipping Magians into stones for their “unbelief and presumptuous error” (Lyons vol.1 190) sparing the young prince who has imbibed the tenets of Muslim faith of fasting, praying and reciting the Holy Quran. Again, inter-religious marriage is also admitted as the culmination of love (e.g. ‘The Muslim Hero and the Christian Girl’) and vindicated as ordained by God. (e.g. ‘The Christian Princess and the Muslim’) In both the cases it is the Christian girl who willingly embraces Islam as she marries her Muslim husband. Overall, the stories bring to fore a world governed by a faith in the supreme power holding sway over human lives.

An Arabian society in its multifarious perspectives crystallizes through these tales of *One Thousand and One Nights*. Alluding to the entrepreneurial skills of the Arabs the characters undertake business voyages and trade vigorously in dinars and dirhams. Places like Basra, Cairo and Alexandria feature in these stories as the hub of such commercial ventures in which even women are found participating. (e.g. ‘The Eldest Sister’s Tale’) Marriage customs are mentioned in finer details. “Islam only allows marriage in the presence of two competent witnesses and a sponsor, together with the provision of a dowry”. (Lyons vol.2 347) The woman has right to the wealth of her father as well as her husband and widow remarriage is permissible. (e.g. ‘The Tale of the Portress’) But infidelity of a married woman is an unpardonable offence. The King is entitled to practice polygamy; his queen lives in a harem, which again is guarded by eunuchs, his concubines have chambers of their own with regular allowances and slave girls as attendants. Washing hands before and after meals is a characteristic of this culture which becomes prominent in view of the experience of a man who wipes his hand and angers his wife as she detects in his hands the smell of a special delicacy served to him. (e.g. ‘The Inspector’s Tale’) Women’s artistic craftsmanship is sufficiently displayed: they sing, recite, play the lute, embroider which even helps to sustain them in times of crisis (e.g. ‘Ali Shar and Zumurrud’) Baghdad is highlighted as a place inhabited by “the men of learning and the faqihs” (Lyons vol.1 191) The intellectuals in these stories range from young scholar (e.g. ‘The Caliph Al-Ma’mun and the Scholar’), elderly physician acknowledged as a sage, (e.g. ‘The tale of King Yunan and Duban the Sage’), female preacher (e.g. ‘The Dispute about the Merits of Men and Women’), even slave-girl adjudged a remarkable poetess by the Sultan himself. (e.g. ‘Ali Ibn Muhammad and the Slave Girl, Munis’) Conceived in the light of Scheherazade herself is the character of Al-Ward Fi’l-Akman, daughter of a vizier who is described as “outstandingly cultured and of great intelligence.” She was the favourite of the king because of “her mastery of literature”. (Lyons vol.2 149). Her love affair with Uns al-Wujud blossoms through exchange of verses and when battling all odds, they are finally united they spend their private moments “continuing to entertain each other with poems, witty stories and anecdotes”. (Lyons vol.2 175) The prose tales freely give way to poetry where some of the noble ideals and deep philosophies crystallize. A dying merchant advises his son on the ways of the world: “Preserve your wealth and don’t be extravagant...consult your elders...never act hastily”(Lyons vol.2 35) quoting simultaneously from different unnamed poets to validate his statements. Several stories feature Abu Nuwas, a luminary in classical Arabic poetry, but fictionalize the historical personage as the character quotes fictitious lines as his own. These rhymes contribute to the oral flavour and also help to slow down the progress of the story so that it remains incomplete at dawn and prolongs Scheherazade’s life.



Local Flavour: In his prefatory note to the first edition of *Thakurmar Jhuli*, Rabindranath Tagore hails this collection of Bengali tales as ‘quintessentially indigenous’, (Ray xi) distinguishing them categorically from the fairy tales of the west. The pairs of speaking birds Byangoma-Byangomi, and Suka-Sari, the golden and silver wand for putting human beings in and out of sleep, all emanating out of the grandmother’s bag of tales have been the bedtime accompaniments of children of Bengal from generation to generation. Tagore compares this home-grown, natural product with ‘mother’s milk’ (Ray xii) that is always the best food for children. Compiled from different parts of undivided Bengal and published in 1907 in the midst of severe agitations against its proposed partition by the colonial government, the tales from *Thakumar Jhuli* unfold an Indian society with its customs, traditions and values. Here a king suffers from the guilt of not keeping his promise to his cowherd friend, the gentle, polite manners of a well-bred queen serve to expose an imposter (e.g. ‘Kanchanmala, Kankanmala’), while an idle prince and his cronies are served ash instead of rice to make them earn their meal through hard work (e.g. ‘Sonar Kati Rupar Kati’). There are subtle allusions to different Bengali festivals like the Harvest day when women prepare sweets like ‘pithey’ (Mitra Majumdar 74) and ‘taler bora’ (Majumdar 239) and decorate the front yard with ‘alpana’ (Mitra Majumdar 74) a mixture of rice powder and water. There is no direct mention of any deity but the women are depicted as following prescribed diet and observing rituals for the sake of conceiving a successor. (Kolaboti Rajkanya, Der Angule). Men on their part are credited with heroic expeditions in faraway lands and rewarded by their marriage to beautiful princesses who bring with them significant share of their paternal kingdom (‘Ghumonto Puri’). Women too are capable of spectacular achievement as depicted in ‘Kiranmala’ which is basically a retelling of ‘The Story of Two Sisters Jealous of Their Younger Sister’ that Galland is believed to have heard from a Syrian storyteller Hannâ Diyâb, as he compiled the tales of *One Thousand and One Nights*. A close reading of these two narratives is pertinent to substantiate this comparative study.

Parizade vis-à-vis Kiranmala: As a story emanating out of the *Grandmother’s Bag* for children, ‘Kiranmala’ has an apparently naïve simplicity of its own. The fairy tale pattern of the narrative is typically ahistorical as it unfolds in an unnamed kingdom where “One day, a long, long time ago, a King was talking to his minister.”(Ray 15) On the other hand, the Arabian tale meant for mature listener signified by Sultan Shahriyar, shows a greater commitment to verisimilitude by identifying the King as Sultan Kosrouschah of Persia. While surveying the condition of his subjects in disguise at night, the king overhears a conversation between three sisters about their dream husbands which he decides to fulfil. Accordingly, the eldest sister gets married to the groom of the king’s horses, mentioned as the sultan’s baker in *The Arabian Nights*, the second to his cook and the youngest becomes his queen. However, consumed with jealousy at the superior status of the queen, her elder sisters take away her babies, two boys and a girl, after their birth in three consecutive years, and float them down the river. As for the king, he is informed that the queen has given birth to a puppy, a kitten and a wooden doll respectively. Furious at such reports of abnormal delivery, the king disowns the queen. In ‘Kiranmala’ the queen’s head is shaved, face smeared with ink and she is taken on a donkey out of the kingdom that reflects a form of social ostracization practised by the upper castes in the stratified, orthodox Indian society. A religious form of governance in a Muslim state makes the Persian Sultan of *The Arabian Nights* confine the queen in a



box kept at the entrance of the principal mosque to be spitted on by every Muslim who comes to pray there. In the Bengali story the three children are named Arun, Barun and Kiranmala by a Brahmin who rescues them and brings them up as his own. A vivid picture of a traditional upper-caste Hindu family is palpable as the Brahmin endows his entire knowledge to his two sons Arun and Barun who are looked upon as his academic descendants while his daughter Kiranmala carries out all household duties. She keeps the house spick and span, looks after the cow, assists the Brahman in his puja while her two brothers, study and spend their leisure time running after the deer in the forest. However, these gender stereotypes that, to quote Partha Chatterjee, separate “the social space into ghar and bahir” (Chatterjee 624) are not visible in the house of a high official in Persia who suspects correctly the origin of the three children but embraces them as his own. He names them “Bahman and Perviz, after two of the ancient kings of Persia, while the princess was called Parizade, or the child of the genii.” (Lang 251) This association of the princess with a genie separates her from her siblings and prepares us for a tale which will highlight her extraordinary achievement as unmatched in the human plane. The princess gets equal opportunity to study with her brothers; the three children master every branch of academic discipline while Parizade’s expertise in fine arts and adventure sports even surpasses that of her brothers. Parizade lives with her brothers in a spacious mansion bequeathed to them by their foster father, while after the death of the Brahmin, Kiranmala’s brothers build a palace of their own through rigorous hard work over a span of twelve months and thirty-six days. This palace is projected in a series of hyperboles to awe-struck and amaze the child listener. “At the sight of the marvel that the two brothers had built, Moidanav, the architect of the gods, lost his taste for food, and Vishwakarma, the engineer of the gods, fled his home in shame. So tall was the mansion that it almost scraped the sun and nearly dislodged the moon.” (Ray 22-23) But the real test for them begins when in an attempt to enhance the beauty of their house they set out to get the rare elements from a distant place fantasized as magic mountain in ‘Kiranmala’ while the devout Muslim lady in the Arabian story is more specific with regard to the whereabouts of the exotic elements: “The three things of which I have spoken are all to be found in one place, on the borders of this kingdom, towards India. Your messenger has only to follow the road that passes by your house, for twenty days, and at the end of that time, he is to ask the first person he meets for the Talking Bird, the Singing Tree, and the Golden Water.” (Lang 253) The two princes set out in this quest one after another and when they don’t return, the princess decides to go in search of her brothers.

From here the gender stereotypes, so long asserted in ‘Kiranmala’ are problematized. The young girl tends to her homely duties of watering the trees, giving fodder to the cow, and then ventures into the ‘bahir’ (Chatterjee 624) significantly cross-dressing in the attire of a prince with a coronet on her head and a sword in her hand. Her journey to the faraway magic mountain is glamorised heightening the element of wonder of this rupkatha. “Like a flame of fire and with the speed of the wind” (Ray 25) Kiranmala crosses several mountains and jungles walking continuously through thirteen nights and thirty-three days to arrive at her destination. At the magic mountain several wild animals and evil spirits attempt to distract and block her advancing steps. Ignoring all Kiranmala steadily approaches her goal. As per the instructions of the golden bird she finds on the diamond tree she sprinkles water from the stream of pearls to rescue several princes including her two brothers who have been turned into stone. The Persian princess Parizade’s journey on the other hand though no less successful is



less astonishing in view of the fact that she has received a gender-neutral training with her brothers from a young age. “As she had been accustomed to riding from her childhood, she managed to travel as many miles daily as her brothers had done”. (Lang 259) Mamluks and slaves feature abundantly in the tales from *The Arabian Nights* reflecting the socio-political condition of the times. In this story, the men Parizade rescues besides her brothers from their stoned condition are identified as knights who gratefully pledge lifelong slavery to the princess which she politely declines and sets them free. The bondage alluded to in ‘Kiranmala’ is connected in the literal plane to slavery in the Arabian story. Parizade’s getting hold of the caged talking bird, fantastically depicted as golden in ‘Kiranmala’, is also projected as the bird’s enslavement which it has tried so long to avoid. ““Brave lady," answered the bird, "do not blame me for having joined my voice to those who did their best to preserve my freedom. Although confined in a cage, I was content with my lot, but if I must become a slave...I swear to serve you faithfully.” (Lang 261) True to its words, this talking bird reconciles the three children to their parents by making the King realize his naiveté at believing the fake stories contrived by his queen’s sisters about her abnormal delivery. In its climactic point this story underlines the modernity of folklores as it critiques the irrational, superstitious beliefs about sorcery and witchcraft which are basically contrivances of evil minds with vested interests. The intelligent, talking bird disillusioning the king and engineering the happy ending, serves as a metaphorical projection of the inner voice which needs to be heard in order to pave the way for a conscientious and committed human society.

Contemporary Dialectics: Gathering the loose threads it might be said that *Thakumar Jhuli: Banglar Rupkatha* and *One Thousand and One Nights* popularly known as *The Arabian Nights* give us the flavour of oral narratives, replete with regional overtones, which finds greater space in the sprawling canvas of the latter meant for a mature listener. The tales of *One Thousand and One Nights* do not always end happily (e.g. ‘Judar and His Brothers’) unlike those of *Thakumar Jhuli* but they derive their ultimate happiness from the happy ending of the frame story of Scheherazade. Having exhausted her narratorial capacity she, by then a mother of three, is forgiven by the king who expresses his love for her. A relation which was initiated to be destroyed, creates and blossoms as a family with Shahriyar outgrowing his prejudice against womankind. This message of inclusion is the hallmark of these tales. In *Thakumar Jhuli* the adventures of the prince take him to distant kingdoms which often lie underwater. (e.g. ‘Ghumonto Puri’, ‘Monimala’) Similarly in the tales ‘Abdallah of the Land and Abdallah of the Sea’ and ‘Julnar the Sea-Born and Her Son King Badr Basim of Persia’ from *One Thousand and One Nights* we find the people living on land coming in contact with those of the sea. Their interactions display a dialectic exchange between two different worlds which differ in almost every aspect: language, manners, hospitality, food habits, customs and rituals. This leads to initial misgivings owing to culture shock followed by gradual understanding and appreciation of each other. In these tales there is awareness that there is a world beyond, a tolerance and an openness to reach out and understand other cultures. “Know also that there be many peoples in the main and various forms and creatures of all kinds that are on the land and that all that are on the land compared with that which in the main is but a very small matter.” (Burton 561) In this sense, Arabian Scheherazade and Bengali Grandmother ultimately blend into one as epitomizing a culture that is varied and appreciates the variety of others, a much-needed relief in an era characterized by impatience, intolerance and callous indifference.



Works Cited

- 1) Burton, Sir Richard F. (trans.) *The Arabian Nights: Tales from a Thousand and One Nights*. New York: The Modern Library, 2004
- 2) Chatterjee, Partha. "Colonialism, Nationalism and Colonized Women: the Conquest of India." *American Ethnologist*, vol. 16, no. 4, Nov. 1989, pp. 622-633. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/645113. Accessed 18 Feb. 2020.
- 3) Lang, Andrew (ed.) *The Arabian Nights* *Entertainmentsguttenberg.org* June 9, 2008. Accessed 22 Feb. 2021.
- 4) Lyons, C. Malcolm and Ursula Lyons (trans.) *The Arabian Nights: Tales of 1001 Nights* vol. 1-3 New Delhi: Penguin, 2010
- 5) Marzolph, Ulrich and Richard van Leewen. *The Arabian Nights Encyclopedia* vol.1 California: ABC-CLIO, 2004.
- 6) Mitra Majumdar, Dakshinaranjan. *Thakurmar Jhuli: Banglar Rupkatha*. Kolkata: Mitra & Ghosh, 1395 (Beng.)
- 7) Ray, Sukhendu (trans.) *Tales from Thakurmar Jhuli: Twelve Stories from Bengal* By Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar, New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2012.