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### Contrast as the essence of life: Exploring different women in Abanindranath Tagore's *Kheerer Putul*

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#### Abstract

*Contrasts play a significant role in grasping ideas pertaining to life, people and situations with a certain ease. Children are often given opposite words to learn so that they can be taught which values to imbibe and what ideas to discard. Such a pair of contrasting/opposite words enable an insight into what the society expects an individual to demonstrate and uphold so that they can be accepted.*

*In this paper, I shall endeavor to underscore certain qualities a woman is expected to possess in order to be rewarded generously and what set of qualities lead to irreversible punishment through a translated version of a popular children's book titled *Kheerer Putul*. This paper seeks to examine the intersecting space created by the crossing over of children literature and feminist studies as identified through ideas like reward and punishment (common in children literature) to establish the concept of an ideal woman.*

**Keywords:** Contrasts, reward, punishment, children literature, feminist studies, etc.

The early years of an individual's life play a gargantuan role in shaping their thoughts and perception of their immediate surroundings and gradually the world at large. The roadmap as to how their adult personalities and characters would turn out to be is charted to a great extent during childhood. Therefore, a lot of emphasis is laid upon exposing them to the right educational tools to instill an appropriate set of values which they're expected to carry into their adulthood.

Fairy tales and folktales prove to be of great aid in materializing these expectations that parents have from their children across a plethora of generations cutting through the barriers of culture. For this very reason fairy tales are "classed as cultural heritage and many people associate them with childhood memories. For centuries, they have grown, evolved, and reshaped. They have taken many different forms and projected many different messages across a vast number of cultures. It is because of their growth and adaptability that fairy tales has become one of the world's most important literary traditions (Lee 2013, p.2)".

*Kheerer Putul* (a condensed milk doll), which was published in the year 1896, by Abanindranath Tagore is one such colorful blend of fairy tale, rhymes read out to nursery

students and folktales rooted in the artistic terrain of Bengal. Tagore relies heavily upon the many unpublished works of his aunt, Mrinalani Devi, for the construction of its plot. The plot appears to be simple on the surface but upon closer inspection reveals hidden layers and can be interpreted in many different ways often eluding a child's underdeveloped sensibilities. One such module of understanding can be connected to the society's ever present urge to inculcate certain attributes in a young girl to bring her as close to the established understanding of an ideal woman as possible. It is further important to add how a wider appreciation of the book has been made possible through an English translation by Sudeshna Mukherjee.

To elaborate on this concept of an ideal woman more, the contrasting pair of Duorani-Shuorani is used. Duorani is the pious older queen who perpetually suffers. On the other hand, Shuorani is the scheming and manipulative younger queen who enjoys a life of luxury and grandeur all. As a matter of fact, women and fairy tales share the relationship of a mother and child as fairy tales are claimed to have originated out of a group of aristocratic female writers who would gather in salons sometime in the 17th Century in France.

The influence of women on shaping the narrative and plot of *Kheerer Putul* is double as not only Mrinalini Devi (as pointed out earlier) but also *vrata-katha* needs to be taken into consideration. Consciously or unconsciously the plot steers towards didacticism facilitating lessons to women-especially younger ones as this book is intended for children- to follow the path of righteousness and virtue no matter how difficult or challenging it might seem. The opening scene of a translated version of the story penned by Sudeshna Mukherjee reveals the treatment the suffering older queen, Duorani is subjected to:

“.... the elder queen was ill-treated and neglected. The king despised her. He had given her a ramshackle hut to live in and a deaf-and-dumb maid to wait upon her. Her clothes were threadbare and frayed and she spent her nights on mere threadbare *kaanthas*. The king visited her hut but once a year, sat there only for a minute, spoke merely a word or two and left.”

(15)

Despite this, Duorani doesn't stray from her wifely duties nor does she grow to despise her husband for his unjust behavior. Furthering the translation, Mukherjee writes how “the heartbroken elder queen cleaned the king's feet with the end of her shabby saree and asked him to sit on the tattered coverlets in her dismal cottage” when the king pays a perfunctorily visit (32). Such kind of behavior clearly glorifies “passivity, dependency, and self-sacrifice as a heroine's cardinal virtues suggest that culture's very survival depends upon a woman's acceptance of roles which relegates her to motherhood and domesticity” (Rowe, 348).

Duorani's identity is tied to the dual concepts of “domesticity” and “motherhood” outside which there's little to no life (Rowe, 348). When devoid from the role of a wife and replaced by the much younger and pretty Shuorani, she endures agony in isolation. Turning a blind eye towards all, she chooses to remain a devoted wife to her neglectful husband. It

matters very little to her that her husband has forsaken all his duties towards her. In her translation of Tagore's *Kheerer Putul*, Sudeshna Mukherjee describes both her position as well as her situation in one of the dialogic exchanges between Duorani and her husband:

“ My lord, you must sit on these threadbare coverlets in this shabby cottage. What else do I have to offer you to sit? Alas, my lord, after many days did you come, and unfortunate that I am, I have nothing to offer you to sit on save a threadbare coverlet.” (32)

This exchange takes place right before the king is about to set out on a long voyage to distant lands. He comes to meet the elder queen to ask what she'd like for herself that he should bring on his way back home. Unlike the younger queen she doesn't ask for exquisite jewelry or the finest of garbs but a black faced monkey. Her unusual request bears an uncanny resemblance to the request made by Beauty who wishes for only a rose. In terms of symbol, a rose could convey a wide array of meanings:

- (a) A desire to feel pleasure in simpler things of life
- (b) A desire to feel admired and loved
- (c) A desire for beauty and charm

A host of literary critics including Frye, Barthes, etc. have stressed upon the necessity of understanding a close link that symbols and stories share for a better appreciation of any literary creation under consideration. For Frye, symbols hold a power that is “potentially unlimited” and hence enables multiple layers of interpretation (118). Such a characteristic trait of symbols generates a plurality of meanings of such a seemingly ordinary object like rose. Beauty's story is worth mentioning here for for three primary reasons:

- a) To understand the multi-varied nature of symbols in storytellings.
- b) To draw parallelisms between Beauty and Duorani for both stories involve a similar pattern- a complete reversal of fortune owing to a singular expression of desire.
- c) To focus upon the element of neglect and abuse that both Beauty and Duorani are subjected to by their primary caregivers.

Frye further states the verbal language is highly inadequate to convey literary ideas and, therefore, symbols are used by poets to communicate better to their readers. These symbols also act as a “communication from past to present” (Frye, 24). The black-faced monkey in *Kheerer Putul* is one such symbol that demonstrates Frye's idea of the “present” reflecting traces of the “past” through the usage of symbols becomes evident as Tagore's writing makes a judicious use of mythology to drive home central ideas related to the plot (24). Monkey is considered holy as per the Hindu religion for lord Hanuman-known for his unfaltering loyalty towards Rama alongside exceptional display of courage and bravery-is believed to have a face resembling a monkey.

There are many myths/narratives surrounding Hanuman. As per one of such widely circulated narratives, Hanuman's face transformed into that of a monkey owing to a curse.

Some also claim his jaw was injured by Indra owing to some reckless act committed on his part. When Hanuman attempts to deliver a message to Sita on behalf of Rama, he suffers a burnt tail as a form of punishment. Under the light of all such myths, it can be deduced that a religious symbolic deduction of an animal like a monkey is connected with both punishment as well as reward. Hanuman forms a great ally to Rama in the epic battle of “Ramayana” but his own life is plagued and marred by curses and punishments.

Hanuman’s presence in Rama’s life assures his victory as he is not only a fearless warrior but also an equally great communicator. As a matter of fact, Hanuman acts as a diplomat in the epic “Ramayana” enabling communication between the rivals- Rama and Ravana. It is this proficiency in communication that secures the first meeting between Hanuman and Rama when an agitated Sugriv asks Hanuman to enquire Rama and his companion/brother Lakshmana about their intentions. Before obliging, Hanuman doesn’t forget to reason with his friend. He reminds Sugriva how unbecoming it is of a king to surrender to fears and anxieties when challenged with challenges.

The introduction of the monkey in Kheerer *Putul* brings with itself a voice of reason; making the king realize the many fallacies of which his favorite queen- Shuorani- is guilty of. Mukherjee writes- making the monkey her mouthpiece- in her translation:

“Unless one is very fortunate and sinless, one cannot put on a magic saree woven by a nymph or a magic necklace made by a serpent-princess. Your Majesty, you must keep these safely in your royal treasury to be given to your future daughter-in-law.” (30)

The objects that he mentions in his speech are what the younger and favored queen, Shuorani, had demanded from the king. However, none of these finery could adorn her for she declares all of them to be worthless after failing to fit into any. The monkey renders absolute justice to Hanuman with whom the species is believed to share an intimate bond as per the Hindu religion through the virtue of his discerning abilities that he exhibits fearlessly before a court full of people. What is even more interesting is the second part of his declaration- the mention of a future daughter-in-law- that takes the king by great surprise. The king couldn’t enjoy the luxury of being a father as both Duorani as well as Shuorani bore him no children. Not only was he without a child but the kingdom was without an heir too. And this predicament was banked upon by the intelligent monkey to restore Duorani’s position in the palace.

The monkey combines admirable intelligence with harmless trickery to fetch a boy for his childless and perpetually suffering mother, Duorani. First, he instructs his mother to lie to the king about her pregnancy and then he makes the king wait for several years. At the right hour, he instructs Duorani to carve a beautiful doll-resembling a healthy, young boy-out of *kheer*. And then he tricks goddess Shasti to eat the doll that he later claims was his brother. A guilt-ridden Shashti who couldn’t resist devouring the *kheer* doll promises to compensate the monkey with one of her many boys- a living one. The happy monkey rides

away with his brother and weds him off to a beautiful princess of a bountiful kingdom making his prophecy of a future daughter-in-law come true. The fortune of the wretched yet virtuous is also restored to generosity and prosperity. From ramshackles, she is transported to the palace a second time. From barren, she turns a happy and proud mother of two wonderful children. From being devoid of her husband's care and affection, she becomes the sole contender of her husband's love and devotion.

On the other hand, Shuorani loses all she had once snatched away from the elder queen. And it is through this intricately woven motif of deceit the role of contrast and how it affects an overall understanding of the characters in the story emerges to the surface. Her circumstances are the exact opposite to that of Duorani as captured in the translation of Mukherjee right at the beginning of the novel.

“Shourani was a much pampered queen. She had a seven-mahal palace to herself. Seven hundred maids waited upon her—cleaned her feet, decorated them with *aaltaa*, did her hair.” (15)

Unlike Duorani, she lived a life of luxury and grandeur. She lacked nothing in her life. As a matter of fact, things were in excess. But she never bothered much about expressing gratitude for all that the king chose to bestow upon her at the drop of a hat. She never seemed pleased with any of his efforts. On the contrary, her demands were never ending and the task of appeasing her almost impossible. This becomes evident when the king returns from his travel overseas bearing with him all that the queen had demanded for—the finest of jewelry and the richest of apparels. Despite this, Shuorani is anything but sated. She breaks the heart of the king who had gone to great measures to be a source of delight for his favorite wife by stating how worthless all of it was. She sums up wearing such pathetic jewelry and clothes to nothing but sheer embarrassment and further locks herself up inside the **Chamber of Wrath**.

This is not the only incident where Shuorani projects herself as a difficult woman having little to no consideration for the feelings and sentiments of others. The first half of the story establishes her status as an extremely vain and superficial woman who has no other work besides adorning herself with splendid jewelry and equally striking clothes. There is not a single sequence or instance in the novel that shows her being remotely interested in the affairs unfolding inside the castle. She never shows any desire in communicating with the king besides demanding what her heart seeks. Even after having a chest full of jewelry that would be a source of envy to most, she complains of the size of her pearls. She is a woman of trivial and inconsequential concerns and comes across as being unworthy of a queen.

Standing before a golden mirror, she bears an uncanny resemblance to the Evil Queen who had sent a poisonous apple to Snow White for she couldn't bear anyone being more beautiful than herself. The Evil Queen is an important femme fatale **archetype** that explores rivalry and jealousy existing among women. It is apt to draw parallelisms between Evil Queen and Shuorani because both are ambitious, power driven and extremely manipulative. Beyond that, they use their physical appearance to the most of their advantage. The Evil

Queen camouflages her identity as an old grandmother to entice Snow White and Shuorani uses all the *shringar* and *alankar* to keep the king under her spell. Similarly, both women feel an overwhelming urge to eradicate all sorts of possible threats that they detect the other two women in their lives to be posing- viz Duorani in Shuorani's life as well as Snow White in The Evil Queen's life.

Competitiveness among women is not entirely unheard of and has been explored in many movies and books alike. Toni Morrison's *Sula* marks the end of a remarkable friendship between the eponymous heroine and Nel when the former sleeps with the husband (Jude) of the latter. Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* explores similar themes of female insecurities and jealousy. Recently, a term has been coined in honor of the novel called the "Rebecca syndrome" to explain a certain pattern of behavior exhibited by women where they obsessively mull over the past partner(s) of their boyfriend/husband. As a result of which their relationship collapses within a short span of time. The 1987 movie "Ijaazat" (transl. permission) starring Naseeruddin Shah and Rekha revolves around this aforementioned syndrome showing how an excessive adherence to the past sabotages the present beyond repair.

Under the light of all such observations, it is fair to conclude women have never shown forgiveness or acceptance to the presence of other women in their men's lives. The competitiveness between two women goes so far in certain communities that a lot of occult science/necromancy/witchcraft is made use of. Elaborating further on this, Peter J. Wilson writes:

"The constant structural situations which generate tensions in male dominated societies are not ones in which members of both sexes find themselves opposed to one another but ones which oppose members of the same sex. Since spirit possession appears mostly among females, and especially among married females, the relevant structural context, the epidemiology, to use Lewis's term, will concern the status of married women in any particular society. Nevertheless, as spirit possession also occurs among males, though much less often, it is necessary to extend the hypothesis of tension between same sex members to males and their relevant structural situation." (368)

The tension, as pointed out by Wilson, exists not between members of the opposite but rather members of the same sex. Especially in a strictly patriarchal set-up the institution of marriage often becomes a preferable tool to cause segregation among women by classifying them into different categories such as eligible bachelorettes/ ugly spinsters, etc. Jane Austen has dexterously explored such themes in novels such as *Emma*, *Pride and Prejudice*, etc. However, Tagore's *Kheerer Putul* delves into much darker aspects connected with female rivalry and competitiveness. As the novel is set around a time where concepts such as law courts, police stations, etc. were alien, there was no any space as such nor any provision that

had the potential of enabling security- primarily financial- outside the institution of marriage. Marriages were the only medium through which a woman could secure her future and there was no existence or identity outside the institution of marriage for women belonging to those times.

Under such circumstances, Shuorani could never afford to lose her position in both the king's castle (as everything belonged to the man and woman had no rights over property or land) as well his heart. To retain the integrity of her position, she was willing to go to any means however inhumane the course might seem to the onlooker. The king shows awareness of this and decides to keep Duorani out of the castle so his other queen could never poison her food on learning of Duorani's miraculous pregnancy. Poisoning was very common in the medieval times. Through spies and hidden moles rivals would often use poison contaminated food to eliminate competition. Kings and emperors and even young princes constantly faced the threat of poisoning. Some speculate that Chanakya would administer small doses of poison to the great emperor Asoka to make him immune to all possible poison attacks.

Shuorani's anxiety rises beyond control upon hearing the older queen whom she had driven out of the castle is now pregnant with a child. She takes it upon herself to eradicate all possible threats to her position that now suffers great peril amidst the miraculous pregnancy of the previously barren queen. She summons a ***Daakini Braahmani*** to aid in her pursuits of destroying both the baby growing inside the womb of the elder queen-Duorani- as well as the queen herself. One more time attention needs to be drawn towards the obvious parallelisms emerging in connection to the Evil Queen's story who had disguised herself as an old woman to give Snow White the poisonous apple. Both of them choose to kill their rivals to retain position and the power that comes with that position. While the Evil Queen couldn't stand Snow White because of the declaration made by the mirror as to how the latter was the prettiest, Duorani was despised by Shuorani for she didn't want to lose favors with the king nor share an iota of it with another woman.

***Daakini Braahmani*** brings a poisonous ***nadu*** for Duorani and stealthily delivers the same. The queen falls lifeless, like a statue, and is rescued by her monkey son. The king also comes to know about the attempts that have been made to kill both his wife as well as the scion to his kingdom growing inside her womb. He gets the ***nadu*** checked by a royal physician who confirms the contamination of the sweet eatery with poison. The monkey, on the other hand, saves the life of his human mother and informs the king of the blessings he has received in the form of a ***raj-chakravarty*** son. Both the younger queen alongside the ***daakini brahmini*** are punished adequately. While the former is made to suffer inside prison, the latter is banished from the kingdom having all her hair chopped off.

However, the king is instructed not to see the face of his newly born son till the time is deemed right by the monkey. Or else the king will lose his eyesight. Ten long years pass in celebrations without the king seeing the face of his son. At the end of the tenth year, the king expresses the desire of seeing his son- the prince- for he has waited upon the moment

for a decade. The monkey displays wit by asking the king to search for a suitable bride for his son and arrange for his wedding. He does so to buy more time to resolve the issue of not having a royal prince for his human mother-Duorani- never gave birth to one. This time too, the king takes appropriate steps Towards the attainment of the monkey's bidding. He acts as if he were under some sort of a trance set into motion by the monkey. As a matter of fact, he never questions the monkey or probes an enquiry into the truthfulness of all his claims. He believes whatever the monkey tells him readily; the words of the monkey are nothing less than the gospel truth to him. It is interesting to note even the elder queen-Duorani- plays along to the monkey's tune and goes as far as lying to the king about her pregnancy knowing fully well the dire consequences of betraying the king.

The monkey, in this story, acts as a positive contrast to the *daakini brahmini*. They act as character foil to one another in a fashion similar to Duorani and Shuorani. The monkey is the positive force/spirit that must collide with the *daakini brahmini* symbolizing an evil energy so that the "purpose of myth" can be served- that is "to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction" (Strauss 443). This specific "contradiction" that Strauss mentions is the struggle between good and bad that forms the crux of any story which is to be resolved by its end (Strauss 443). When Shuorani dies at the end because of how well things turn out for her arch rival-Duorani- one is to understand that evil must always lose to what is good,noble and virtuous irrespective of how powerful it might seem.

The drastic reversal in fortunes of both the queens reveal how the concept of **binary opposites** is employed judiciously by writers to fulfill moral obligations that an artist might have towards the society.

### Glossary:

1. **Kheer:** Indian dessert made out of rice and milk. In the novel, *kheer* is used as an important symbol of birth and regeneration.
2. **Vrata-kathas:** stories women share among each other during specific occasions catering specifically towards their interests and concerns.
3. **Kaanthas:** the Bengali equivalent of a bedspread used generally for children. Some have colorful embroidery stitched onto their edges while others are plain. The threadbare *kaanthas* in the story act as a symbol of the barren state of Duorani.
4. **Aalta:** a dark red coloured liquid used by women to color their hands and feet.
5. **Chamber of Wrath:** a specific room constructed inside the palaces of kings and queens in ancient times for people to release anger and vent out frustration inside the comfort and safety of seclusion.
6. **Archetype:** The concept of archetype has been attributed to Carl Jung-known for his psychoanalytical theories. Archetypes are patterns or structures repeating over a period of time either In written or verbal discourse that has constructed our understanding of various concepts and ideas.
7. **Shringar:** a term referring to the various assortments of substances that a woman uses to adorn her face.



8. **Alankar:** this term suggests all the ornaments and embellishments that a woman might use to enhance her beauty further.
9. **Daakini Braahmani:** a “brahmini” refers to a high caste woman belonging to the Hindu religion. On the other hand, “daakini” is a witch. In this story, the younger queen summons a high caste witch to kill the older queen. The caste is appropriate to the stature of the queen.
10. **Nadu:** a sweet dish that is round in shape and made out of jaggery, coconut, etc. and served mostly during festivals or pujas.
11. **Raj-chakravarty:** a child who has the destiny of becoming a king with unmatched or unrivaled power.
12. **Binary opposites:** a term attributed to Claude Levi-Strauss that explains the dual aspects of all known phenomenon and established concepts such as fair/dark, good/bad, rich/poor, etc.

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