

**RELATIONAL LIFE AND DISTRIBUTED AGENCY IN BENGALI FOLKTALES: A
POSTHUMANIST READING OF *FOLK-TALES OF BENGAL***

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Abstract

This paper discusses the folktales gathered in Folk-Tales of Bengal by Lal Behari Day in terms of posthumanism and affects theory. Going beyond the traditional approaches to reading folktales that consider them as repositories of moral teaching or historical memory, the analysis suggests that the stories constitute and articulate an ontology of relational life where the borders between human and nonhuman are subject to continual reconfiguration. Based on the writings of Rosi Braidotti, Jane Bennett, Bruno Latour, and Brian Massumi, the paper illustrates how agency in these stories is now extended across networks of humans, animals, objects, spirits, and ecological forces. Through in-depth and critical analyses of the selected stories like the 'Secret of Life', 'Phakir Chand', 'The Boy Whom Seven Mothers Suckled', and 'The Story of Prince Sobur', the study demonstrates that subjectivity is produced through assemblages and not individuality. These stories prepare us in advance that nonhuman forces determine human fate, and thus these tales challenge anthropocentric beliefs, which are firmly based on Enlightenment ideas. Simultaneously, the paper traces the circulation of affect through bodies and environments to create intensities of fear, desire, compassion, and attachment that form the pattern of the narrative. Aligning Bengali folktales with contemporary posthuman thought, this paper holds that the collection made by Dey provides an alternative critical model based on reciprocity, relationality and what Braidotti calls 'zoe-centred egalitarianism' (Braidotti 60), thus creating new interpretative opportunities in the study of folklore and literary criticism.

Keywords: Folk Tales, posthumanism, affect theory, relationality, and challenge, anthropocentric.

Introduction

William Bascom describes folktales as follows in *Folklore 101: An Accessible Introduction to Folklore Studies*: 'folktales are prose stories which are treated as fiction' (Jorgensen 164). It is a 'traditional oral narrative' (Thompson 21) that has developed over thousands of years for the entertainment of people during large meetings. According to Jan Harold Brunvand in his *The Study of American Folklore: An Introduction*, folktale has served as the storehouse of

social and cultural value, traditional teachings, and elements of entertainment, particularly in the works of non-Western literature. The folktales tradition in the context of Bengal tends to have been the creation of its complicated social system, rural life, and native mythological tradition. These stories often feature the relationships between people, animals, ghosts and nature, destabilising the strict divide between the human and non-human by giving agency and personality to animals, rivers, forests, enigmatic natural objects, ghosts, and supernatural energies.

The reciprocal existence and interdependence cause fear, wonder, desire, and affective intensities to flow through human and non-human bodies. These mediating emotional forces make it possible to read Bengali folk narratives using the theoretical framework of the affect theory, actor-network theory and the posthumanist concept of assemblages of human and nonhuman forces, which does not conceive the emotions as merely an internal psychological condition but as a relational energy passing through bodies and environments. Such a way of reading is a challenge to the anthropocentric suppositions that are grounded in the discourses of Enlightenment and modernity, which have historically dominated literary criticism. Rather, it suggests other ontologies where non-human and human agents are endowed with life and agency. When critically analysed, Bengali folktales seem to exist as a narrative space, where relational life surpasses the borders of human subjectivity. This mutual, relational symbiosis or interlinking is the critical framework that can be revisited by applying various theoretical concepts within posthumanism.

An example of this is the collection of 22 folktales by Lal Behari Dey in his *Folk -Tales of Bengal* (1883), a pioneer work, which maintains the oral culture of Bengali in a literary form. It is a series of imaginative spaces where animals talk, objects move and intervene, spirits intervene, landscapes control the fate of human beings, thus obscuring the division of the human subject and the material and the immaterial world. The translation and recording of the oral Bengali folk narratives by Dey was crucial in making the native tradition of storytelling available to the colonial and postcolonial audiences. The collection is filled with creatures with the capacity of feeling, magical objects, transforming creatures, and animated natural beings. These peculiarities of the characters provoke doubts about the primacy and centrality of the human subject and presuppose a world-view based on the mutuality of perception and affect between the human and non-human being.

Although such tales and their translations have been approached through the lens of folklore studies, ethnographic research, didactic moral discourse, and cultural and historical importance, a re-reading of them destabilises the ontological superiority of humans over other species. Posthumanism and affect theory fall within the theoretical framework of such scholarly investigations that challenge the primacy of the superiority of the Anthropocene. Rather than depicting human beings as sovereign, singular agents, such stories

presuppose subjectivity as interrelated and implicated, through affective interactions between human and non-human actors. According to this view, the translation of Bengali folk tales by Dey is long overdue in the modern criticism of human exceptionalism and superiority, which provides us with an alternative way of thinking about radical interdependence and the ethics of reciprocity.

However, as of now, the scholarly analysis of folk studies in Bengal, at least as seen in Dey's *Folk-Tales of Bengal*, has not shifted its focus towards these post-humanistic possibilities, which can offer new and fruitful ways of interpretation. This is why the present research aims to fill this gap in critical discourse and implement the post-humanistic prism in the *Folk-Tales of Bengal*. This paper, based on the post-humanistic writings of Braidotti, Bennet, Latour and Massumi, argues that these stories are proactively opposing the concept of anthropocentric hierarchy. These stories are then substituting the conventional model of human beings as self-sufficient, independent and powerful subjects, with that sense of subjectivity which is interrelational and networked, produced through affective relations between human and non-human actors. This view of Dey's translation of Bengali folk stories, which actively addresses the contemporary criticism of human exceptionalism, provides us with an alternative mode of thinking about radical interdependence and the ethics of reciprocity, previously an uncharted area of literary studies.

Lal Behari Dey and his works

Among the most outstanding literary and cultural personalities of Colonial Bengal was Lal Behari Dey, who was born in 1824 in a poor family close to the town of Bardhaman in the undivided Bengal. His erudite father took Lalbihari to Calcutta in his childhood days to have an education in English. In 1834, Lalbihari was admitted to the General Assembly's Institution, a missionary educational institution (রায়, বিধান). The death of his father and the economic crisis that followed it did not stop him in continuing with further education, and his mastery of the English language slowly made him a famous teacher and author. His published works include the sacred and the entertainment literature, including *Bengali Festival and Holiday*, *Sports and Games of Bengal*, *Chaitanya and Vaishnavs of Bengal*, among others. Much of his works focus on Bengali folk (oral) stories. His most valuable work of literature is the *Bengal Peasant Life*. His *Folk -Tales of Bengal* (1881) gave him a reputation as one of the best writers on folklore.

The book compiled by Dey has a complicated colonial history. The collection tends to preserve cultural history and knowledge systems of colonial Bengal and introduce the same to the dominating colonial epistemic order to establish the richness of Bengali cultural tradition. In this context, it should be noted that Folk tales, similar to fairy tales, legends, and

fables, are not the creation of a particular author, but rather of the tradition. The colonial folkloristics tended to interpret folk stories as remnants from a "childhood" phase of civilisation, a tendency that prioritises colonial values of rationality, realism and individualism over oral narratives as irrational and imaginative. Yet, this simplification does not seem to apply to the collection by Dey, who implores the readers to its vistas of reading as a form of relational sentiment, shared emotion, and group agency.

Such a novel way of reading Dey's translations aligns with the perspectives of affect theory. This theory contradicts and challenges Enlightenment notions such as an autonomous, rational self, which is self-contained, by directing its attention to the relations between beings, the way that affective and emotional feelings are created through the interaction of human and non-human bodies, environments, and material forces. By doing so, Bengali folk tales, based on oral traditions, function in accordance with a worldview that views affect as being circulating in people, places, and non-human objects. The work of Dey is therefore a space where the modernity of colonialism is encountered with various perceptions of feelings.

Posthumanism and Its Scope in Folktales

To deconstruct the idea of anthropocentrism that aims to prioritise the ontological superiority of humans over other forms of life is the core of posthumanism. It also seeks to rewrite subjectivity, agency and existence as something connected, shared, and interwoven between human and non-human beings (animals), technologies, environments and matter itself. Ultimately, posthumanism promotes the wider ontology in which life is seen as interrelated rather than organised in hierarchical order. Several posthumanist thinkers have expanded on this relational ontology and have offered a valuable conceptual framework on how interactions between bodies and environments produce shared intensities and capacities.

Massumi makes use of the works of Baruch Spinoza and Gilles Deleuze to analyse affect as a potential of bodies to affect and be affected. Affect, according to this perspective, is relational and circulatory as it arises in relation to bodies, environments, and events, and not within an individual subject. Defining 'affect' in *Parables for the Virtual*, Massumi explains, "an affect is a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another," suggesting that an emotion is produced through encounters or relationships with others and not confined within an individual subject. Posthumanist philosophers also focus on agency, subjectivity and existence as emerging from a network of relations between human beings, animals, technologies, environments and material objects. A very popular posthumanist thinker, Rosi Braidotti, suggests that the posthuman condition necessitates a reassessment of the human as a part of ecological and technological assemblages and not as a single, rational entity (Braidotti 65). In the same manner, Jane Bennett, a renowned scholar

of environmental humanities and political philosophy, emphasises the importance of matter that possesses some forms of agency by which it predetermines human activity and social life processes (Bennett xii). Here, agency is decentralised and distributed, emerging out of the interactions between heterogeneous actors. Another insight allied to this one is given by Bruno Latour in his theory of actor-network relations. Latour states that networks bring about social realities where humans and nonhumans are involved as actors. Objects, technologies, animals and environments, thus, actively contribute to the creation of social outcomes instead of being mere backgrounds to human action (Latour 72).

Once such theoretical knowledge is applied to the Bengali folk narratives, one will find a resonant conceptual thread. Human survival and success, in most of the tales, is based on their alliances with animals, magical objects or supernatural powers. Birds or serpents tend to rescue the life of the prince, magic objects save it, and forests or rivers determine the fate of humanity. These narrative formulas indicate a vision of the world based on interdependence as opposed to human dominance.

In this way, Bengali folktales provide a fertile ground to have a posthumanist reading in which agency is perceived as being dispersed in relationships of human beings, animals, spirits and material things. These stories are not confined to strict ontological distinctions between nature and culture, human and animal, or body and spirit. They instead envision life as a web whereby existence emerges through relationships and cooperation in addition to affective interactions.

Posthumanistic Reading of Folk Tales of Bengal

The folk narratives gathered by Lal Behari Day in *Folk Tales of Bengal* offer a self-contained narrative world where there are no definite boundaries between human and nonhuman life. The stories undermine anthropocentric beliefs and predict a networked sense of being where the concepts of relationality and affective intensities are significant.

The story that has one of the most powerful illustrations of such relationality and affective intensities is "Life's Secret" (The Story of Dalim Kumar). The story undermines the usual belief that life is held in the human body. Rather, the life of the prince is externalised and hidden behind a series of nonhuman objects: a *boal* fish, a wooden box, and a gold necklace. Life is therefore scattered over a thread of things and creatures to form an intricate composition that defines the survival of the prince. This plot structure is echoed by the posthumanist concept of subjectivity being created via relational networks. In *The Posthuman*, Rosi Braidotti states that "the posthuman subject is a relational subject constituted in and by multiplicity." The fish that carries life-force and the necklace that eventually protects life demonstrate the vitality and agency of material objects. This indicates that existence is maintained through networks rather than individual bodies in isolation.

affective terms, the plot of the story is structured by intense emotional impulses: the maternal anxiety of the Suo queen towards her son, the jealousy of the Duo queen, the sorrow of the king at the seeming death of Dalim, and the faithful love of the wife of the prince, who keeps the object containing his life in it. These effects flow through the characters and objects, creating a cyclical pattern of loss and restoration that moves the story through.

A similar entanglement of human and nonhuman forces has been portrayed in '*Phakir Chand*'. It is the tale of a prince and the son of the faithful minister. They encounter numerous hazards on their way and manage to rise above the challenges with the aid of intelligence, disguise, and magical objects such as the serpent jewel and serpents to save a water princess. The magical components like the serpent jewel (*naga-mani*) and the water princess represent nonhuman agency. The jewel is the symbol of intelligence, which is contained in matter, and the serpent is a mediator between different realms of existence. Human characters rely on these nonhuman powers in order to be defended, reconstructed, and move around. Therefore, this story can be compared to the knowledge presented in '*Reassembling the Social*' by Bruno Latour, who presumes that "the social is not a special domain but a movement of associations between heterogeneous elements" (Latour 7). In this case, the agency is shared between human and nonhuman actors, according to Latour, "an actor is anything that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference" (Latour 71). This understanding is apparent in '*Phakir Chand*' as manifested through the serpent jewel, serpents and the water princess, who are actors in the network of the story.

The jewel is not just an inert object but a dynamic power that can change and protect, which helps to describe the idea that even objects can act and shape the development of events. The folktale is therefore a creation of a world where princes, ministers, serpents, jewels, and magical creatures make up an active assemblage, thereby embedding human fate in a network of relations.

'*The Boy Whom Seven Mothers Suckled*' is a story of a miraculous boy who is raised and fed by seven mothers. Due to this abnormal upbringing, he develops unusual strength and courage. He later on overcomes numerous obstacles and risks of life with courage and will. The story promotes the idea of kinship with non-biological determinism. The child is raised by seven women who have shared the role of motherhood instead of having one mother. This structure of the plot breaks the concept of unique maternal ownership and substitutes it with a network of care. Identity and survival depend on the collective relationality as opposed to lineage or inheritance. From an affective perspective, the narration is kept alive by intersecting emotional flows: increased maternal love, rivalry between the mothers, and a mutual fondness towards the child. The motherhood in the story is not vested in a single biological mother, but it is shared by seven women. It is not a particular lineage that defines the identity of the child, but rather a shared web of nurturing relationships that establishes the

identity. This is indicative of the posthuman concept theorised by Bruno Latour as he formulates his Actor-Network Theory, where agency is not located in a single person but is spread among a number of actors.

'*The Story of Prince Sobur*' revolves around interdependence between human beings and nonhuman supporters. It is a narrative of a young daughter of a merchant and Prince Sobur. The young girl is driven away in a palanquin with her old nurse only. They are abandoned in a forest with no help as the night comes. Suspecting their danger, a kind tree shelters them by opening its trunk and hiding them inside. At night, the wild animals raid the tree, but unsuccessfully attempt to reach the humans inside. In the morning, the tree sets them free, but it is much mutilated by the onslaught of the wild creatures. To show thankfulness, the girl tries to heal the wounds of the tree with mud and soothes it. With the assistance of the benevolent tree, the girl, over time, manages to get wealth, her family reunites, and she marries Prince Sobur. But during their wedding night, the couple is separated once again due to the jealousy of the older sisters, who plot against the prince, and he becomes severely ill. She makes a second expedition to the ailing Prince Sobur to heal him. Through the collaboration of the divine birds *Bihangama* and *Bihangami*, she receives the remedy and restores the ailing prince without anyone realising the fact. In the end, with the help of a magical box, she receives the prince and reunites with him.

The fact that the heroine manages to live through the period of exile and heal the prince requires the help of trees, animals and magical companions that help her and keep her safe. This is how the story anticipates a posthuman ethic of collaboration but not subjugation. Man does not seem to be an independent ruler of the natural world, but he is a component of a broader ecological system. This perspective reminds us of the idea of 'zoe-centred egalitarianism' (Braidotti 60), which Braidotti advocates, that requires an ethical acknowledgement of the vitality of all life forms. The story also has a very important emotional structure. Even the name of the protagonist, Sobur, which translates to patience, indicates that virtue helps the protagonist to survive the ordeal. The support of the nonhuman aids, as well as the emotional suffering of the heroine, forms a story of endurance, expressing how the powers of emotion are transformed into a survival tool in the hostile environment.

In '*The Ghost-Brahman*', the borderline between life and death is equally unstable. The ghost figure takes part in the social life, and he interacts with the living community even though he is above biological mortality. Such a person makes the anthropocentric definition of personhood challenging because it implies that agency and presence may exist even after physical death. The tone of the story is pervaded by a sense of fear, but this fear is mixed with curiosity, admiration, and ethical anxiety. These emotional reactions allow the community to interact with the unseen world, and as such, affect structures cultural attitudes to death and the supernatural.

Collectively, these stories indicate an imaginary world that is very close to the posthumanist insights. The life of humans in such tales never exists as independent; instead, it is integrated into the web of animals, objects, spirits, and ecological forces. Meanwhile, the stories are filled with such strong emotional fervours- jealousy, sorrow, sympathy, fear, desire, and awe- that move through human and nonhuman subjects. Latour reminds us that “an actor is what is made to act by many others (Latour 46), insofar as agency is distributed within networks of relations. It is these combined processes of relationality and emotion that give voice to the worldview in which life is distributed, agency shared, and identity constructed through a web of interdependence, which are articulated in the tales. *Folk- Tales of Bengal* is the folk imagination that provides a rich repository of information on how relational life and affective exchange are made to carve out the boundaries of the human.

Conclusion

The above discussion suggests that the folktales collected by Lal Behari Dey in *Folk- Tales of Bengal* provide the narrative universe where the agency of animals, objects, spirits, and natural forces always govern the life of the human being. These stories can be seen through the theoretical framework of Posthumanism and Affect Theory, which provides a complex web of relational life where agency is not limited to the autonomous human subject but spread across several different entities. This kind of view disrupts the anthropocentric presuppositions by providing an interpretation of literature that emphasises the ontology of interdependence and shared being. The stories under discussion in this work, namely, ‘*Life Secret*’, ‘*Phakir Chand*’, ‘*The Boy Whom Seven Mothers Suckled*’, ‘*Prince Sobur*’, and ‘*The Ghost-Brahman*’, depict how life and subjectivity are formed by relationships. In both stories, things save lives, animals dictate human fate, ghosts intervene in social relationships, and societies function when they take care of one another. These aspects are echoed in the posthumanist sense of distributed agency, relational networks developed by theorists like Bruno Latour and Jane Bennett, who suggest that agency is created through assemblages of human and nonhuman to the exclusion of individuals (Bennett xii). Simultaneously, the affectivity of such stories shows the way affect is moving between bodies and spaces. Fear, grief, compassion, jealousy, longing, and wonder pass through human beings, animals, objects, and supernatural beings, constructing the narrative world in terms of the intensity of feeling instead of entirely rational motivations. Such circulation of affect mirrors the theoretical convictions of such scholars as Brian Massumi and Rosi Braidotti, who stress that affect is prior and is beyond the subjectivity of individuals, connecting heterogeneous entities into active networks of relationships (Massumi 27). As a result, Bengali folkloric stories found in *Folk- Tales of Bengal* could be interpreted in terms of anticipatory statements of posthuman relationality. They envision a world in which the distribution of life is spread

among species and material bodies, and affective relationships establish ethical relations between human and nonhuman communities. The act of reading these stories based on affect and posthuman theory thus not only increases the interpretative resources of folk literature, but it also emphasises indigenous narrative cultures as crucial points of rethinking relational life, ecological interdependence, and the limits of exceptional human exceptionalism.

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