



The Reptile Within: A Study of Three Odia Short Stories in Light of “The Story of the Monkey and the Crocodile” from the *Panchatantra*

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Abstract:

The paper focuses on the genre of the Odia short story and the ways in which it has been influenced by oral traditions of storytelling by studying three short stories by contemporary Odia writers. The impact of the oral tradition on the Odia short story genre will be evident from these stories as they are modelled upon the monkey and crocodile tale from Bishnu Sharma's *Panchatantra*. At the same time, these stories render the fable anew. Bibhuti Hota's story turns the hungry crocodile of the *Panchatantra* into a jilted lover while an interplay of desire, lust, and inhumanity is seen in the stories by Narmada Sahu and Dilip Behera selected for study in this paper. Just as Bishnu Sharma's fable was enacted in and around the river, so our storytellers today delve deep into the oceanic depths of the human psyche to bring to the fore the reptiles of love and desire within us.

Keywords: Fable, Odia, Desire, Remorse, Devoteeism

I. Introduction:

The genre of the short story in Odia literature has been greatly influenced by the oral tradition. The folk tales of Odisha followed a particular pattern of beginning and ending the story. The narrator (often a woman) would begin her story by narrating a song in the form of questions and answers:

My story ends here,
Here withers the flower plant.
O' flower plant, why did you die?
The cow ate me up.
O' cow why did you eat the plant?
The milkman did not keep a tab on me.
O' milkman why didn't you watch the cow?
The elder daughter-in-law did not give me rice to eat.
O' daughter-in-law why didn't you give rice to the boy?
My son did not let me go.
O' son why didn't you let your mother go?

A fire-ant bit me.

O' fire-ant why did you bite the boy?

Beneath the earth's surface I hide,

Where there is tender flesh I pinch it with all my might

(Praharaj 06; translation mine).

If not the entire song, the first two lines were certainly sung after the conclusion in the Odia story-telling tradition. The impact of the oral tradition on the contemporary Odia short story genre will be evident from the three short stories that I shall discuss in this paper. These short stories, published during the two decades of the twenty-first century, are modelled upon the monkey and crocodile tale from Bishnu Sharma's *Panchatantra*. At the same time, the stories deviate significantly from the fable. This paper will look at the stories in order to explore the ways in which the oral tradition gets incorporated into the genre of the short story and also how the short story transgresses the boundaries delineated by the genre of the fable.

Bibhuti Hota's Retelling of the Monkey and the Crocodile Tale:

The short story called “The Tale of the Monkey and the Crocodile”, written by the contemporary Odia writer Bibhuti Hota, incorporates the elements of the *Panchatantra* tale of the crocodile and the monkey to create a new fable. While it borrows from the *Panchatantra*, it also renders it anew. In this story as well, there is a monkey and a crocodile and the deep waters. The monkey perches on a lush blackberry tree. The crocodile watches the monkey as he chews those enticing blackberries. The monkey drops a few berries for the crocodile to eat but the crocodile awaits the day when the monkey would come down and offer the berries himself. Only then would the crocodile eat it. The crocodile asks for the monkey's *hridaya*, for his heart. Upon hearing the



crocodile's request, the monkey realises that the crocodile wants to eat his liver. He jumps from one branch to another, and moves away from the crocodile. The crocodile misunderstands the action of the monkey and assumes that the monkey is perhaps blushing at the crocodile's confession. The monkey returns seasons later and finds the crocodile in tears. The crocodile says to the monkey that she merely wanted his heart, his love and not his liver and that she is not the "crocodile from the old story" (Hota 96) which leaves the monkey remorseful. This short story is experimental in not only twisting the tale to accommodate feelings of love, rejection and remorse, it also experiments on the level of the text. The author, moved by the story that he is writing, weeps so much that the letters get erased from it. The last two lines read:

The line after this in the story has been erased by the author's tears, i.e., it has been written down but it can...not...be...read... (Hota 95; translation mine).

As is evident from this story, the narrative space in a short story provides the same opportunity for the author to intervene in his narration as that of an oral narrator. However, at the same time, the author becomes yet another character here with an omniscient narrator commenting on the author's state of mind.

Desire, Glances and Dilip Behera's "Jamukoli Gapa":

In Dilip Behera's story entitled "Jamukoli Gapa" (The Story of Blackberries), an omniscient narrator is replaced by one of the central characters. The central character is an unnamed narrator who is a doctor by profession, dealing with sexual illnesses. He is assisted by a nurse called Cherry, whom he addresses as Cherry Didi throughout the story. The narrator is drawn towards Cherry Didi who actively responds to his flirtations. The backdrop is a hospital room where patients with sexual ailments are treated. This provides the space for sexual desires and the tension that arises from such desires to develop. However, the doctor's love and his responsibilities towards his romantic partner and fellow doctor Madhabi prevent him from acting on his desires. The dilemma of having to choose between his desire for Cherry Didi and his duty towards Madhabi informs the plot of the story with the narrator ultimately resisting his temptations towards Cherry Didi. Cherry Didi is described as an enchantress, whose affair with another doctor resulted in her transfer to the narrator's department. At one point in the story, the

narrator looks at Cherry Didi and she reciprocates his glances. He gently places his hand upon hers as an act of caressing and remarks:

By that touch, I die. With me, dies the hot afternoon and upon my corpse, nerves take root (Behera 61; translation mine).

The caress, in this case, becomes the cause of his existence as well as his metaphorical death. The nerves that take root in his body are the nerves of desire. The narrator is thus aroused and is brought back to life only when an attendant enters the office with the details of a patient. According to Roger Scruton, desire can be understood when one first understands that "passive state of mind" (Scruton 16), i.e., arousal. Arousal is the state in which a person becomes corporeally aware of/awakened to the other (Scruton 16). This other could be virtually present or could be just a thought but what is essential is the awareness. Arousal culminates in or ought to culminate in sexual intercourse, thereby "release[ing] the tensions of arousal..." (Scruton 16). It is a move towards sexual activity and is characterized by "intentionality" (Scruton 22) as it is directed towards a conscious other, in the form of a "response to the thought of the other" (Scruton 23). The glance and the caress are ways in which sexual interest is expressed that lead to this "thought of the other" (Scruton 22-23) and thus to arousal. The caress is not merely about the skin of two individuals coming into contact. It means a "set of rituals that incarnates the Other" (Sartre 564). It is an act of "modelling" (Sartre 564) by virtue of which the other comes into existence in flesh, bone and consciousness. Caressing brings about the incarnation of two bodies for each other and an awareness of this incarnation. This caress can also be seen as a metaphor for the meeting point of the two genres – the oral narrative/*Panchatantra* and the short story. They legitimize the existence of each other by being different in myriad ways and yet arising from the same desire – the desire to tell a story.

According to Sartre, the glance is also an act of caressing and therefore in unison with desire (564). The glance, like the caress, "projects the being of one person into the consciousness of another" (Scruton 62). However, it also expects a response from the other. The other can respond to it in the affirmative or in the negative but what it means for the individual is making himself vulnerable to the other. The individual reveals himself to the other (Scruton 67) and reciprocity becomes essential in the case of the glance. Eyes



become the vehicle for sexual expression in this story. On several occasions, the narrator and Cherry Didi look intensely into each other's eyes, and very early in the story, he says to her in a flirtatious tone - "The kohl under your eyes, like dark clouds, and the depth in..." (Behera 65; translation mine) when he is interrupted by Cherry Didi who states that one must dive into these eyes to measure their depth. Sometimes the narrator himself initiates the glances towards Cherry Didi and at times he responds to her glances directed at him. However, towards the end of the story, he rejects her glance. When the narrator is writing prescriptions for a patient, Cherry Didi looks at him as if surprised. He does not look at her and says to himself - "I was neither eager nor did I have the sincere wish to look into her eyes" (Behera 70; translation mine). Instead, as he holds the paper containing the details of a patient's illness which was given to him by the patient himself, he sees Madhabi's face in the paper. He is reminded of her and eagerly waits for her calls. As he chooses love over desire, the depth in Cherry Didi's eyes turns from alluring to fearsome. The narrator likens her to the crocodile from the fable while he sees himself as the "foolish monkey" (Behera 68; translation mine). Here too, the crocodile "gazes" (Behera 68; translation mine) at him from the river while he perches on the blackberry tree. Sexual desire is symbolized by the monkey's liver and the narrator describes himself as the monkey who wishes to carve out his liver for the crocodile and "beats his chest and declares that [his] liver is sweet like the blackberry" (Behera 71; translation mine). The story ends with Madhabi inviting the narrator to her place for the evening. She sends him a text message, asking him to choose the colour of her dress. He thinks of asking her to wear a blackberry-colored dress but decides against it. The narrator specifically asks her to wear a dress of any colour but blackberry.

Devoteeism in Narmada Sahu's "Sweet Blackberries and the Monkey's Liver":

The third story called "Sweet Blackberries and the Monkey's Liver" is written by Narmada Sahu and coincidentally, also takes place inside a hospital. The central character of the story is a helpless woman who remains unnamed. She can neither move nor speak in a loud voice; she can only weep. Forever in a state of paralysis, the woman lies in a corner on the hospital's verandah. A doctor approaches the woman and asks her about her illness. When she does not reply, he gently removes her clothes. While her illness is not stated

in clear terms, it is mentioned that the woman has only one breast. Her other breast, it is speculated, might have been cut off from her body. It is the part that has been wounded and begun to decay, giving off a terrible stench. As the flesh decays further and further, the woman would eventually die. In this moment in the short story, though, she lives and becomes food for the crocodile's desires. The doctor manifests some features of what is known as devoteeism. Defined as the "heterosexual desire that issues from staring at the disabled female body..." (Thomson 34), devoteeism is a kind of sexual fetish often spoken of in the context of the able-bodied heterosexual man's attraction towards a female amputee. However, devotees can also be "sexually turned on by a person's ... paralysis, muscle weakness, muscle spasms, limb difference, etc." (Wright). While the woman hadn't had her limbs amputated, the cutting off of her breast can be seen as an amputation. Her disability, then, lies not in her paralysed body but in being a body that deviates from the normal by virtue of the absence of a breast. Upon seeing her body, the doctor remarks:

The other [breast] is fine. That'll suffice. Besides, for this long night, the woman's other part is good enough... (Sahu 15; translation mine).

The 'other part' that is being referred to here is the woman's genitals. They represent the liver of the monkey from the *Panchatantra* tale. From the very outset, this short story establishes its connection with the tale. The monkey and the blackberry are not disparate entities here. They are fused into the woman. The woman herself becomes the monkey (albeit foolish), with her breasts symbolizing the blackberries. Every man desiring those blackberries and the liver represents the crocodile. While the doctor's desires may not have been aroused due to the woman's lack of a breast, he becomes a devotee in failing to be disgusted by disabled bodies. In other words, "devotees bestow attractiveness and desirability upon..." (Kafer 336) that which is disgusting to others. He acts like a devotee in that the stench emanating from her disabled body is not a concern for him anymore. A worker at the hospital, Madan, witnesses the entire incident. The doctor looks at him and immediately leaves. Madan comes up to the woman and sees her lying naked. Filled with hatred and dismay at mankind's cruelties towards women, Madan makes the only possible attempt at preserving her modesty. He covers her naked body. With her body rotting to such an extent and being brutally violated thus, the woman passes away. Her passing away is also symbolically described by the omniscient



narrator as the death of the monkey at the hands of the crocodile who eats his liver. On the other hand, the woman's death becomes crucial in order to depict how almost every man is a "pishach" (Sahu 15) a flesh-eater like the doctor. The next morning, Madan sees a crowd of journalists, television reporters and cameramen gathered around. He pushes through the crowd to find that the woman is dead and that her clothes have been removed again. This removal of the clothes can be seen as a metaphor for the unveiling of the reality of humankind, the true nature of man peeping from the ruptures in the façade of civility. Photographs of the woman's naked body are being taken. The image of the ripe blackberries is evoked here, thereby labelling all the men gathered (except for Madan) crocodiles. In a sense, these men are also devotees as their interests lie not in the corpse, but in the corpse that was rotting away when alive, a corpse with only one breast. It is this disabled/paralysed body of the woman that eventually becomes the source of the people's desires and the only respite that comes to her, comes in the form of death. As a final commentary on the disgusting nature of human desire, the narrator says:

After the postmortem, the blackberry tree would burn. Eat, keep eating... blackberries...keep eating the monkey's liver (Sahu 16; translation mine).

II. Conclusion:

As long as the human race exists on Earth, there will be tales to be told. Inexhaustible as human emotions are, each tale will entail myriad other tales to soothe or shock the human mind for generations to come. The three stories, taken in the order in which they have been dealt with in the paper, push at the seams of the fable as a genre. They trace the evolution of the short story genre with respect to the fable. The genre of the short story itself is a flexible one, allowing one to move beyond the shortcomings of the fable. These stories, although deriving their essence from the *Panchatantra*, are not limited by the genre of the fable. They are short enough to be finished in one sitting and do not present a moral message. The first story includes animal characters just like the fable but discards a moral ending to depict human emotions in their simplicity. The crocodile here is a ferocious one, whose unrequited love for the other consumes its own self. The eternal longing for something unattainable is reinforced in the tears shed by the crocodile. The other two short stories turn towards the grim realities of human life

instead. In the second story, the complexities of human emotions are delineated by the introduction of desire, with the narrator's struggle between his wants and his responsibilities being realistically portrayed. Here, the narrator/monkey prevents himself from becoming the crocodile desiring the blackberries by means of reason and love which is expressed when he forbids his lover from wearing a blackberry-coloured dress. The third story, by using human characters to commit inhumane actions, depicts how there is a devolution in mankind to the extent that they have become not animals but demons. Unlike the other stories, in this story the crocodile gets to taste the liver of the monkey. In Bishnu Sharma's tale, the evil was external. The crocodile's wife had asked him to bring her the monkey's liver. In this story, it comes from within. Just as Bishnu Sharma's fable was enacted in and around the river, so our storytellers today delve deep into the oceanic depths of the human psyche to bring to the fore the reptiles of love and desire within us.

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