

Modern Indian Writing in Translation
Professor Dr. Divya A
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology, Madras
Week 1 Lecture 2: Hunger of Stones-Continued
Length: 25:06

The title of the paper is 'Fractured Narratives of Power and Gender in Tagore's the Hunger of Stones'.

'The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements, narrative, but also denotative, prescriptive, descriptive and so on. Conveyed within each cloud are pragmatic valences specific to its kind. Each of us lives at the intersection of many of these.

There are many different language games, a heterogeneity of elements. They only give rise to institutions in patches, local determinism. This excerpt from Lyotard in his work, *The Postmodern Condition* published in 1979, is significant to a reading of the narrative of Rabindranath Tagore's 'The Hunger of Stones'.

First written in 1895, in Bengali, under the title 'Kshudhita Pashan', the story was translated into English, first by C. F. Andrews with the assistance of Tagore and others, and was published in 1916, when the concerted postmodern theoretical revolution was still far off in the distance. In fact, the story of 'Hunger of Stones' illustrates brilliantly a disruption of the grand narratives of various ideological discourses, such as the realist narrative and history.'

Suvadip Sinha argues that the story, this I quote 'space of Literature, challenges the realist bias of public history. And that Tagore refuses to render the past visible or audible", end of quote.

The great failure of narrative function, which like Lyotard declares to be the loss of its great hero, its greatest dangers, its great voyages, its great goal, is the Gothic narrative of 'The Hunger of Stones', in the sense that the central protagonist has lost his coordinates in the story world.

I argue that there is no hero in the traditional sense of the word, he undertakes no great voyages, symbolic, or literal, and his great dangers are those that undercut his heroic sensibility in the story. This postmodern narrative function, I argue in Tagore's story, captures

in brilliant snapshots, the dysfunctional nature of political and gender trajectories in an Indian landscape that has witnessed waves of colonial ingressions for centuries.

The Hunger of Stones is presented through a framework of a story within a story. An eccentric but apparently knowledgeable male storyteller regales to men while they are doing a bit of holiday travelling across the country by train. The storyteller relates the experiences of a tax collector in the town of Barich. Though caution against spending his nights at the haunted marble palace set in a desolate part of the town, the tax collector is lured to the delights of the palace in the form of enjoying the shadowy presence of long dead exotic woman from the zenana of a past ruler and builder of the palace of pleasure, Shah Mohammad the second. A mad man wanders around the palace routinely warning men to keep away from the palace. The story captures the intoxication of the tax collector by fleeting illusions of eroticism associated with the women and the gradual surrender to the world of sexual fantasy that is tinged with danger and dark exoticism.

The crisis of the story is in the poignant pleas for succour and release from the prison walls of the palace on the part of the female slave. The revenue collector, who is from another time and world, grieves helplessly. The tax collector is forced to seek advice on freeing himself from the clutch of the beautiful enchantress from his colleague who offers to tell a story in order to show him salvation. And at that point, the travellers on the train part ways abruptly putting an end to the story.

The listeners who are cousins end up squabbling about the veracity of the tale told by the strange storyteller whom we can assume to be the tax collector. I call this section, 'The hero who has lost his plot'.

'The Hunger of Stones' offers its central male protagonist as a man who quickly loses his stakes in the battle for heroism in the struggle between the powers of the male and the haunted powers of pleasure. His loss is described as submission.

I quote "It is hard to describe the state I was in and just as hard to make it sound credible. The palace was like a living thing, slowly ingesting me in its entrails," end of quote. Clearly the battle is not between two equal beings or entities. He calls the house a living thing and the perceptible metaphor is that of a creature from the wild digesting its prey, the tax collector, by gradually in waiting his powers of reason.

The metaphor becomes more identifiable when the narrator more drugged by his sensual sights of the Persian woman of the palace, describes her intoxicating effects on him. "It was as though a bewitching she-serpent was binding me in her intoxicating coils with deep sighs, my benumbed body would sink into a heavy sleep," end of quote. While it is quite apparent that in the first reference to the living thing, the tax collector is alluding to the insidious impact of the marble palace on him, in the second case, he is alluding to the female figure of eroticism as a she-serpent, who is living within the palace in a kind of an alternate virtual world. The crucial point here is the collapse of the spirit of the architecture of the palace with the spirit of the enticing Arabian woman. The palace is the embodiment of the female slave of pleasure, and the eroticism embedded in the woman suffuses the stones of the palace.

I quote "every block of stone within it is still hungry, still athirst from the curse of that anguished and frustrated longing," end of quote. Thus in the battle of the senses, it is the hero who is hunted by the spirit of the Persian woman of pleasure in a now-defunct palace. The significance of such a tussle lies in the realization that the grand narratives of heroism along with unities of time and place and the attendant congruence of experiences are splintered by the ethos of the white marble palace.

Within the story world, the narrative of the tax collector's life is broken up by the incongruity of his experiences. He feels that, I quote, "A strange feud now arose between my days and nights. By day, I would take my weary body off to work heaping curses upon my beguiling nights full of empty dreams. But once evening had set in, it was my workday daytime existence that seemed trivial, false and absurd", end of quote. The erotic and exotic world is assailing the practical, everyday world of professions and politics.

The domain of professionalism, entailing stringent record keeping and regularity and the domain of sensuality, which involves an immersion to the world of physical delights, oblivious to the rules of the workday world, clash with the latter, clash with the latter gaining control over the tax collector. Though of course the tax collector desires to be quit of the power towards the end of the tale.

However, at the same time, the legitimacy and authority of both narratives, the professional and sensual, are attacked using the logic of reason and reality at regular intervals in the story, with the last extended questioning of the narrative, the deadly innervating fantasy appearing at the end of the tale. "There was no one anywhere, no one to whom I could offer solace," says the tax collector.

What we perceive in Tagore's enclosed story is a central male character who is not only fighting to retain his cushy professional position in the world, but also his sanity, which is the greatest of all grand narratives for a human being, the ability to perceive and process the realities of the world experientially. The story clearly offers another male, Meher Ali, the crazy Meher Ali who has gone insane due to his experiences in the palace of pleasure, and his repetitions about staying away from the palace indicates the ruptured rational mind that has lost the capacity to narrativize experiences logically and variedly in language.

What is further crucially illustrated in the story is the fact that the role of the rescuer is snatched from the hands of the tax collector. In fact, the men represented in the story within the story are either oppressors or victims or wary of the concept of the female, represented as disembodied ideas of pleasures, commodities of eroticism.

While the tax collector is helpless as he cannot reach out to rescue the spirit of the female Persian slave, I quote "Neither the storm nor the weeping stopped that night, I spent hours wandering in the dark from room to room grieving helplessly. There was no one anywhere, no one to whom I could offer solace, whose was this wreckful sorrow. What was it that lay behind such a perturbation?" end of quote.

However, only a few paragraphs earlier he had fantasized her to be a lovely damsel whom a Bedouin raider plucked from her mother's arms and carried her off on his lightning-swift horse across the searing sands to a slave market before some royal palace. His exciting imagination is most coherent as he further visualizes for himself and his auditors, "a servant of an Emperor who buys her with gold upon first seeing her bashful bloom of youth, transported her across the seas, and then carried her on a litter of gold as a gift for his master's Harem".

What is also apparent quite simply is the lack of coherent narrative for the ghostly presence of the female slave in 'The Hunger of Stones'. The unreliability of narratives surrounding the figure of the Persian woman, the male protagonist at one point then wonders whether she has been kidnapped and sold into slavery, and at another moment is completely at a loss to her reality, identity and cause of her cry of distress.

Her fleeting evocations and vanishing acts questions both her existence as well as the sanity of the tax collector. If we characterize the relation between the revenue collector and the Persian woman who is reflected alongside him in the mirror, "glancing passionately,

painfully, sensually out of her great dark eyes, hinting with full red eyes at some unspoken utterance, pirouetting with her slim youthful figure in a shower of incandescence from a pain, desire and rapture, laughter and sidelong glances and shimmering jewellery”, as a kind of a surreal romantic plot, then it is also quite apparent that the relationship is always already doomed and dysfunctional because of the ghostly identity of the female. In fact, I would like to reiterate that all male figures of import in the story within the story are either oppressors or apparent victims of sensuality of the female spirits. Men, buy, sell and use the slave women kidnapped from a foreign land.

Lyotard argues that, I quote, "Narrative is the quintessential form of customary knowledge in more ways than one", end of quote, I repeat "narrative is the quintessential form of customary knowledge in more ways than one".

So what is significant is the narrative itself, rather than its function for the hero in positive or negative terms. Thus ‘The Hunger of Stones’ is crucial not because of its truth value, or its correspondence to reality or to some history. It is scientific narratives that are usually assessed in relation to its assertion of truth. The fictional world of Tagore's story, regardless of its realistic or unrealistic elements, has other ideological functions to perform.

When referring to popular stories, Lyotard suggests that they narrate, I quote, "positive or negative apprenticeships, in other words, the successes or failures greeting the heroes undertakings. These successes or failures either bestow legitimacy upon social institutions, the function of myths, or represent positive or negative models. the successful or unsuccessful hero of integration into established institutions, legends and tales.

Thus, the narratives allow the society in which they are told, on the one hand to define its criteria of competence, and on the other to evaluate according to those criteria, what is performed or can be performed within it", end of quote.

In ‘The Hunger of Stones’, the narrative offers fractured glimpses of hegemonic structures that underpin the society. In fact, it can be argued that there is largely an absence of a clear critique, representation, or affirmation of any political framework within the story world.

Instead, I suggest that Tagore seeks to probe the nature of power structures by setting up the male protagonist, the tax collector, not in relation to the British administration or to the Nizam's government, but in relation to a Persian female slave apparition from the past. The battle is between these two, the male and the female. All references in the story to

contemporary power structures of British India is represented through sparse references to specific rulers such as the Nizam of Hyderabad and to indirect details of the British government such as the tendency of the tax collector to don a sola topi like an Englishman.

The Islamic rule of the past is signified in the white marble palace of pleasure of Shah Mohammad, the second, some 250 years ago and to references such as Mughlai food and clothing. So these are all the sparse references that we get to political structures and administration.

‘The Hunger of Stones’ is a story that offers an escapist fantasy for the central character. It is a hallucinatory narrative, rich in drugging sensuality that creates an alternative world for the single revenue collector who finds his present profession of collection and record keeping for lucrative pay, stifling and meaningless. The only resistance of any kind to authority comes in fact, through the indirect acts that arise from the spatiality of the story world.

The revenue collector gradually loses his professional outfit of the short English jacket and tight pantaloons as he begins to be drawn into the ritual of some extraordinary night time tryst with illusions from a world of silk brocade, Kafir Eunuch, erotic Arabian woman.

His choice of an outfit is also forcibly removed by the elements of nature in Barich. Just as the revenue collector is about to change into a sola topi and a short jacket, I quote, "A sudden whirlwind swept down, carrying the sound of Shishta and dead leaves from the Aravallis like a pennant, and bore away the jacket and hat. They went cartwheeling through the air, a sweet chorus of laughter swirled along with them, rising through several octaves sounding every note on the scale of derision until finally it dissolve into the sunset", end of quote.

It is significant that the solo Topi and jacket are snatched off from the Indian revenue collected by the sands of the native river and the leaves of the native mountains whose leaves are like a pennant, a symbolic flag, used by indigenous nature in the battle march against the invading troops symbolized in the English outfit.

The mocking laughter assumed to be from the female spirits of the palace could be interpreted as the past regime mocking the present administration. Thus the two crucial moments of protest are carried out, not by the central male protagonist, but are evoked through aspects of the local nature, scenery, and from the spirits of slaves caught in the palace. They’re ethereal, symbolic, from nature, not from not arising from this male protagonist of the tax collector.

The spirit of the palace and the spirit of, the spirit of the palace and spirit of the nature which are non participants in the political domains are the agents of rebellion in the story world of 'The Hunger of Stones'. In terms of the conception of the narrative represented by Lyotard, the hero is neither successful nor unsuccessful in 'The Hunger of Stones'. He is not successful in any of the plots of the story, be it the colonial plot, or the strange, dysfunctional romantic plot. He is an employee of the British administration and he is not consciously fighting any battle with any political ideologies, be it in the context of the Nizam of Hyderabad or the British Empire. The narrative of 'The Hunger of Stones' further in staccato fashion legitimizes no political institution, the Islamic past or the British present.

In fact, the world of the palace if it is to be judged from the present ghostly presence, is characterized as a world of hedonism and intrigue, I quote "the sound of Sarangi, the tingling of ankle bells, the golden wine of Shiraz, and in dispersed among them the glint of a dagger, the sting of poison, the wounding glands, limitless wealth, perpetual imprisonment", end of quote.

The last mentioned characteristics could be suggested as the highlight of the Mughal rule of India, figured through the marble palace of pleasure and pain in terms of its immense riches and its oppressive attitude towards the people. Apart from the reference to the suspicion towards the hidden designs of the British, pointed out by the storyteller at the beginning of 'The Hunger of Stones' and a momentary and symbolic resistance to the British Empire in the snatching away of English outfit from the revenue collector, there is no grand narrative of protest. There is no grand narrative of protest against political regimes, be it British or the princely state. Instead, what is affirmed by the narrative is the cultural function of the female subject as an object of erotic pleasure for the male.

What is more disturbing in 'The Hunger of Stones' is the perpetuating narrative of the female body, especially an oriental female body as an object of the sensual for the delight of the male, not only within the story but for generations to come. In the past, the male consumer is an Emperor for whose pleasure the slave is bought and gifted. In the present of the story within the story, the male who enjoys the sensuality of the female is a revenue collector who loses his professional bearings as he indulges himself in the pleasures of the palace.

So just as the Emperor, the contemporary professional, record keeper or tax collector also enjoys the female, the erotic exotic Persian woman. So, with men ranging from the powerful like the Emperor to the professional, such as the revenue collector, the apparently ordinary

Meher Ali, consumed the women of the palace, as sensual objects who continue to be trapped, and fruitlessly used their enticements and hysterical weeping to escape.

The fractured narratives of male hegemony continues, with the clerk Karim Khan, emphasizing that, I quote, "Every block of stone within is still hungry, still athirst, devouring a victim like ravening demons", end of quote. The dual narrative of custom, the dual narrative of custom about the female as an object of lust on the one hand, and as ravenous demon of lust, on the other hand, consumed men, consume the imaginations of men, and is continuing to be perpetuated in 'The Hunger of Stones'.

So the second section, the last section is titled 'It's the telling of the tale that is important'. In Tagore's story, what is of utmost significance is the act of storytelling. Therefore, our probing as to whether the revenue collector was hallucinating or indulging in erotic sexual fantasy or did indeed see visions of a past world of sensuality and intrigues is beside the point. Or, we can sense its significance only in the ideological choice and Tagore's decision to capture them as fleeting illusory and fractured glimpses.

The authenticity of the tale, the reality or the unreality of the ghost of the Persian woman of the palace, I reiterate, is less important than the story itself. Lyotard writing about the **Kashechewan** storyteller in the postmodern condition states that I quote, "The narrator's only claim to competence for telling the story is the fact that he has heard it himself. The current narratee, the current storyteller gains potential access to the same authority simply by listening. It is claimed that the narrative is a faithful transmission even if the narrative performance is highly inventive and that it has been told forever.

Therefore, the hero, a **Kashechewan** was himself once a narratee and perhaps a narrator of the very same story. This similarity of condition allows the possibility that the current narrator could be the hero of a narrative, just as the ancestor was," end of quote. In the case of Tagore's story, the tax collector accrues legitimacy, both because he has apparently experienced the story, as well as because he has heard it from others such as Meher Ali and Karim Khan, in their stories of the palace.

The narrative of the tax collector has been passed on to the listeners who travel with him on the train. One of them, one of the two travellers narrates it to us, the readers, via the story that he writes and the story continues to be told in varying versions. Look at the perpetuation that happens. The story is constantly in circulation from generation to generation, for times to

come. The tale of the Persian slave world, this tale of the Persian slave world of women, becomes the customary knowledge about the narrative of women in the Hunger for Stones, who are either victims or demons and their particular dominion is that of sensuality.

Thank you for listening.