

“I STARTED A JOKE”: WHAT DO HUMOROUS TALES TOLD BY FEMALE AND MALE UNDERGRADUATES TELL US ABOUT THEIR GENDERED WORLDVIEW/S?

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ABSTRACT

‘Funny stories’ or ‘jokes’ that people circulate among each other have been extensively studied by folklorists and they have been categorized under the term ‘folklore.’ Folkloric speech acts, according to folklorists, are not as dilettantish as scholars grant them to be—they carry, according to Dundes, biases, prejudices, beliefs and values through time and space, often “unconsciously or unselfconsciously” (Dundes 2007). Just as much as folklore reinforces the “value configurations” (Dundes 2007) of common people, folklore also offers “a sanctioned form of escape” (Dundes 2007) from those same values. Dundes’s notion of ‘escape’ motivates the present study which attempts to analyze the nature of the binaries ‘reinforce/escape’ as encapsulated in ‘funny stories’ or ‘jokes’—referred to as ‘humorous tales’ from here onwards for want of a collective term—that are in circulation among a selected group of female and male undergraduates. If humorous tales are a means of reinforcing and escaping social norms, what are those norms? Why do people need to reinforce/escape them? And how is gender inscribed into such norms? This study attempts to answer these questions by re-reading a sample of humorous tales collected from a specific group of undergraduates from OUSL.

Key words: *gender; value configurations; biases; humorous tales; folklore*

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1. INTRODUCTION

‘Funny stories’ or ‘jokes’ that people circulate among each other have been studied by folklorists (Psychologists too have studied and have written extensively on jokes, such research is beyond the scope of this paper) and have been categorized under the term ‘folklore.’ Folkloric speech acts, according to folklorists, are not as dilettantish as scholars grant them to be—they carry, according to Dundes, biases, prejudices, beliefs and values through time and space, often “unconsciously or unselfconsciously” (Dundes 2007). Just as much as folklore reinforces the “value configurations” (Dundes 2007) of common people, folklore also offers “a sanctioned form of escape” (Dundes 2007) from those same values. Dundes’s notion of ‘escape’ motivates the present study which attempts to analyze the nature of the binaries ‘reinforce/escape’ as encapsulated in ‘funny stories’ or ‘jokes’—referred to as ‘humorous tales’ from here onwards for want of a collective term—that are in circulation among a selected group of female and male undergraduates. If humorous tales are a means of reinforcing and escaping social norms, what are those norms? Why do people need to reinforce/escape

them? And how since there is likely to be no social norms without gender inscribed in—what is the nature of such gendered notions.

Folklorist Ramanujan argues that: “Genders are genres. The world of women is not the world of men” (Ramanujan 2005). His conclusion stems from a study of the protagonists of female narrated folktales in India, whereby the narrators reinforced their individual female-centered world order, rather than the already constituted one imposed them by patriarchy. This study draws from Ramanujan’s thinking and attempts to treat the stories told by male and female undergraduates as representing different ‘worlds.’ Thus, humorous tales narrated by both female and male undergraduates would be collected, coded and analyzed. The undergraduates of the BA in English and English Language Teaching program of The Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) are selected as for this task. The tales were collected according to the accepted mode of tale collection as suggested by the Sri Lankan folklorists Amaradasa Weerasinghe. The collected tales would be closely read for gendered configurations with the focus on the modalities by which gender is

constructed rather than the offered modes of 'female' and 'male.'

By locating the gendered construction of folkloric speech acts of male and female undergraduates this study attempts to understand how both female and male students reinforce/rewrite/rework gendered ideologies in their social spaces. Since humorous tales are narrated in relaxed settings among close acquaintances it is assumed that such tales would be inscribed with their gendered thinking that might have become fossilized over a lengthy period of time. The present study attempts to locate such ideas. Dundes argues that the study of folklore provides a teacher better understanding of her/his students since folklore is "autobiographical ethnography" (Dundes 2007) or a people's own description of themselves. Dundes's thinking will also motivate the present research.

My intention is to investigate and interrogate the dimensions and terms of these gendered spaces through a close reading of the tales. All speech, according to Macherey "envelopes in the unspoken in order to reach utterance" (Macherey 93), and this "silence" (Macherey93), informs us of the "precise conditions for the appearance of an utterance,...its limits...real

significance" (Macherey93). These silences that envelope the gender-specific engagements of the tales will be put under scrutiny in this study to understand what they say about the gendered imaginations of and gender dynamics between the tellers/creators and recipients of these tales.

The use of the terms 'masculine' and 'feminine' in this paper is inspired by the masculine scholar Connell's notion of the 'masculine' as "places in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture" (Connell 71). In this study I wish to extend Connell's 'place in gender relations' to 'femininity' as well.

The reading of gender in this study is further informed by the thinking of Judith Butler as disseminated in her text, *Gender Trouble*. She argues that "Gender ought not to be conceived merely as the cultural inscription of meaning on a pre-given sex" (Butler 10) and encourages us to locate gender along the "apparatus of production" (Butler 07) whereby the sexes are established. Gender, Butler suggests, could be identified as "discursive/cultural means by which

the “sexed nature” or “natural sex” of ‘males’ and ‘females’ is produced and established as “prediscursive,” prior to culture, a politically neutral surface on *which* culture acts” (Butler 06). This study is inspired by both Connell and Butler’s thinking as it attempts to locate and analyze the modalities by which the Lankan story tellers/creators conceive and sustain male/masculine and female/feminine subjects in the tales, which could grant us fairly accurate notions as to how the ‘gender.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

While focused scholarly interventions on gender in Sri Lankan folklore (The term ‘Sri Lankan folklore’ encapsulates the folklore of all ethnic groups of Sri Lanka) —and in humorous tales—is sparse, there have been similar studies conducted by scholars elsewhere. Dundes (2007) in his study on humorous tales woven around viola players in orchestras—popularly known as ‘Viola Jokes’—suggests that the fundamental concerns of musicians, such as “anxiety connected with performing in a musical group” (Dundes 2007), are inscribed in such humorous speech. Yet, his study does not focus on the gendered notions of such

tales. Mark (1993) has scrutinized the tales narrated at the Moncrabeau Liars’ Festival in southwestern France by female winners of the contest in 1979 and 1984, and by their male counterparts, for the representations of male and female sexuality. Her study revealed that the female contestants frequently brought to surface the power inequities of gender in their social settings. Mitchell (1996) who studied the differences in the jokes told by males and females university students in the Colorado State University Fort Collins over a period of three years beginning from 1972 argues that joke-telling is a reflection of the institutional structures of gender that the subjects have been exposed to. The socially sanctified ideas of being masculine and feminine, she argues, are inscribed into these jokes. At the same time, her study points to different intentions of humorous story telling between males and females. For the males, jokes were a mode of satisfying their ego as well as competing with other males. Females, on the other hand, used the notion of humorous tales to come to terms with their lives and as a means of bonding: thus, they related more personal anecdotes to each other more than imaginative humorous

tales. The present study would attempt to locate of the findings in a Sri Lankan university are similar to those found in the USA.

3. METHODOLOGY

The undergraduate group in focus here are students of The Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) who are reading for their BA in English and English Language Teaching program, a four year degree offered by the OUSL. Both male and female students from each year were invited to participate in the collection process. Attempts were made to collect the tales in their natural settings as much as possible. For that task, selected students representatives were deployed.

The humorous tales narrated by students were coded according to the plot structure. For instance, some jokes could be shorter and some longer; some jokes could be in the form of a song or a poem; some would be limericks and etc. All these were carefully coded along with biographical details of the tellers.

The collection process would be carried out according to the scientific modes of tale collection as suggested by the Sri Lankan folklorist Amaradasa Weerasinghe. In keeping with the thinking of

feminist folklorists there equal representations would be offered to females and males in the task of collecting tales.

This process of collecting tales is an on-going process and would be continued for the entire period of 2018. What is presented here is a preliminary study of the tales that have been collected at the time of the present conference.

4. FINDINGS

The findings of the tales would be presented under the primary headings *Constructions of the Feminine and the Masculine* as well as appropriate discussion subheadings under each category.

Construction of the 'Feminine'

In the imaginative spheres of the OUSL male and female student under focus in this study, the idea of 'feminine' has a far greater presence, (and therefore significance?), than the 'masculine.' The gendered construction of the 'feminine' and 'masculine' in these tales/proverbs could be discussed under the following topics.

a) Tradition bearer: In tales told by both sexes, the feminine is located as the receptacle as well as the sustainer for/of cultural norms

associated with the genders—these cultural norms are not necessarily gender transcendental. This justifies Kiribamune’s (1990) argument that “tradition and cultural constraints militate against women’s rights.” Females are seen balancing their desires against such cultural norms when they negotiate hetero-normative relationships, when compared to males who resort or are expected to quixotic acts under the same circumstances. Take the case of this tale, (narrated by a female student), where a male and female teacher are forced to share a room and a bed while on a visit to Sigiriya with a group of school students. The female’s—not the male’s—primary concern is to ensure that her male colleague maintains decorum in the night. She places a pillow on the middle of the bed as a marker of their personal space and extracts a vow from the male that he would not violate the spaces. She follows this deliberate and culturally coded behavior despite her own feelings towards the male teacher. In another female-narrated personal anecdote, when a young female gets into a bus in a short and tight skirt, that image arrests the attention of both males and females: males because they see an object to lust after and females because she had violated a cultural

code and is courting danger. The proverbs narrated by female students admit that the feminine is bound by/forced to uphold cultural traditions: thus one proverb warns females against engaging in cycling or high jump; and another, warns a females who had attained puberty and those who have married recently against citing either an unmarried female or widow. Both these proverbs place restrictions on the choice of athletics and even sight of the feminine, reminding us of Foucault’s notion of culture as the principle of thrift in the proliferation of meaning.

b) Feminine desires: Though the masculine is often portrayed as the agent of desire, the feminine desire is not entirely passive, inert and unreceptive in the tales/proverbs. In one male narrated story, a female’s desire to sexually bond with her husband is impeded by the presence of her younger brother on bed. This makes the female “impatient and angry”—yet she is unable to give voice to those emotions. Another male narrated story locates the feminine desires in specific articulations. Here we find a mother eavesdropping on her three daughters’ honey moon spaces and reading the nature of their felt

physical desires through the sounds emanating from the rooms. The success of the sexual bonding between male and female is coded in the language of sounds. Feminine desires are also communicated in coded language: a female teacher, who shares a bed with a male teacher, keeps a pillow on the middle of the bed to mark their personal space. Yet, that act itself is only mimicry of existing patriarchal cultural codes—in reality she wants the male to violate that space, take the initiative and fulfill her desires. The male fails to read this and is chided by her the next day.

c) Feminine and virginity:

The feminine comes into sharper focus in the tales through the notion of virginity. “A poor woman losing her virginity is akin to breaking the only pot of water in her house” goes one proverb narrated by a female. “Men can have sex with many women like dogs pissing on trees; yet, you could wash them and they are clean—but for a woman such acts are black marks” goes another. The feminine constructed around the notion of virginity is a cautious entity that is duty bound to be submissive to the discourse already imposed upon her. The interesting aspect of this construction is the

connection between virginity, poverty and opportunity. A woman, in one tale, who had lost her virginity, lives a miserable life because she is unable to find a partner for marriage. To add insult to injury she is manipulated by another woman, who tricks her into marrying both her “foolish and lousy” sons. The mother communicates the idea of the bride-minus-virginity and that she is the property of her both sons by leaving a water-less coconut in the bedroom where she spends the first night with one of the sons. Though her son does read the idea suggested by the absence of water he does understand when his mother tells him that “you have to share the flesh in peace.” There is a powerful suggestion here that a female who had lost her culturally imposed notion of virginity is simply “flesh”.

d) Feminine identity is space

specific: The feminine can be independent and violate the patriarchal social traditions in certain spaces. Wearing clothes that displays her body is possible if one uses a vehicle. Construction sites are not safe for any females. Though more evidence is needed to construct this idea fully, there is a suggestion that certain spaces are hygienic for the feminine to be natural.

Construction of the ‘Masculine’

The idea of the masculine comes into construction around the penis—just as much as the feminine is constructed around the vagina. The notions of size and weight surround the idea of a penis. Thus male narrated proverbs gauge the size of a man’s penis by his foot—bigger the foot, bigger the penis, and bigger the penis better the pleasure. The penis is the lightest object in the universe that could be lifted by a thought, goes another male-narrated proverb. The existence of a discourse around the penis on the motifs of size, weight and pleasure could be interpreted as: a) collapsing of a gender into the symbolic, where size, weight and pleasure combine to construct a stereotypical version, image of the masculine that could be the ideal.

The penis is also placed alongside a vagina in one male-narrated tale where a female who is unable to prove her virginity accidentally cuts off a penis of her newly married husband. She actually meant to cut a red-ink soaked areca nut though the nut-cutter accidentally gets entangled in the penis. The man tells her in language couched on a pun that his penis is more important to him that “your mother’s virginity.” Here the

connotation is that the penis is a far more important an implement to the male than virginity. Penis is a practical implement where as virginity is there to prove a point only. They both belong to masculinity. Penis is also closely related to the idea of sexual recklessness of the masculinity and such recklessness is accepted as the norm by the feminine.

In female narrated stories the penis is identified in euphemistic terms. “Wood pecker” is one such term where the bird is represented as restless, and goes pecking from one tree to the other until it pecks a Banana trunk and gets ‘entangled.’ The connotation here is that of the masculine committing acts whose deep connotations he does not understand. For him pecking is a signal-response activity that does not include knowledge of the surface into which the pecking takes place. In other words in his reckless sexual activity there is the notion of his fall from grace as well.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This is an on-going research with more humorous tales coming in from the collectors at the time of writing this paper. Thus there is a risk of coming to general

conclusions from the exiting collection. Yet, from what the tales collected so far it is apparent that the idea of the feminine is constructed around value configurations such as caution and vigilance. There is tacit acceptance of the threatening presence of patriarchy that defines the notion of the feminine. Just as much as the feminine was seemingly built without violating the invisible values of patriarchy, there were instances when the feminine contested the power configurations imaginatively. The masculine on the other hand was constructed around the symbolic power of the phallus so much so that this symbol kept appearing too often in male-generated tales. For the masculine, phallus was the all-encompassing essence of being masculine and it was infused with value configurations such as assertiveness and aggression. Despite the presence of this power of the phallus, there was one female-generated tale where this power was contested using the object of a pillow, suggesting that there could be more such tales out there waiting to be collected. Anuradha Roy in her novel *The Atlas of Impossible Longings* says that “when the silent begins to speak, mangoes will fruit in winter.” It is this feminine ‘silence’ that this

research will attempt to locate and understand as more tales keep coming in from the students.

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