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Reading Subhadra Sen Gupta's The Teenage Diary of Jodh Bai as an Evolved Fairytale

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ABSTRACT: This paper endeavors to give credit to Subhadra Sen Gupta's work on Princess Jodh Bai. Where there are multiple examples of Eurocentric, patriarchal fairytales, this text is one rare example of a modern Indian fairytale. Most female characters are New Women, evolved women, and not submissive, docile playthings in the hands of patriarchy. Like a fairytale, there is an enchanting and gripping quality to the narrative, and the genre of diary lends it a kind of authenticity. Like a fairytale, the narrative ends on a note of positivity and happy life, but much like a Modern feminist text the notion of happy life is mutual respect and equality, and not superficial idea of fancy love story. The historicity of the text lends it credibility and assurance and also serves to initiate the reader to Indian history.

Keywords: beauty, equality, female, fairytale, patriarchy

Fairytales are a part of every individual's childhood. No sooner does one mention of a fairytale than flashes of Cinderella, Snow White, Beauty and the Beast, Sleeping Beauty, Little Mermaid, hound my mind. They not only are our memories, a part of our unconscious, but they have had an influence, have been a shaping force during our formative years. "Fairytales are being used as a source and a vehicle of powerful self-mirroring images affirming the existing value system" (Desczc 83). They have been a part of our socialization. What told us that a Prince Charming would come and take away all our sorrows? What engraved in us the image of a maiden as being beautiful, slender and white? What told us that step-mothers and less beautiful women are jealous and wicked? It is somewhere these stories that we have relished, that contributed to the perpetuation of the male-female binaries, strong-weak, intellectual-emotional, robust-beautiful, and many more. These binaries have incorporated within them various ideas, like beautiful has its definition, in color, shape and size. All these stereotypes make girls believe that "The good female is generally submissively accepting of her lot in life while waiting for the prince to appear and take control of her destiny" (Neikirk 38). The patriarchal discourse generated and assigned gender roles. With repetition these roles got embedded in our subconscious, and we started believing them as natural. These fairytales have contributed in impacting the "tabula rasa"(Locke 2) and leaving the early impressions of patriarchal discourse, which the ignorant little one does not decode, does not question, in most cases grows up with the same forming his/her rigid beliefs, and then plays his/her role in

passing them to the next generation. It is the feminist discourse, and the evolution of gender studies, with the contribution of critics like Judith Butler, who have tried to undo this internalization of the grand narrative of patriarchy. In this regard there have been attempts by writers to rewrite fairytales and write evolved fairytales, to reform the wrong which has been done since ages.

To reform society and propagate equality, it is important to socialize and nurture children on the notions of the same. Subhadra Sen Gupta deals with historic characters and has written fictional teenage diaries of Jodh Bai and Princess Jahanara. These solve dual purpose, one of presenting a fairytale, and second of lending it authenticity by dealing with historical characters. Also this stirs a child's interest in history, and gives voice to unsung narratives of Mughal women. Mariam-us-Zamani is the title how we know the Princess of Amber, who married Akbar and gave birth to Jahangir. Her name Jodh Bai, though not historically verified, but due to the cinematic and television adaptations is now a known historical personage, but from where these adaptations begin her story, it is somewhat there that this teenage diary ends. Thereby, despite our knowledge of the historically most significant event of her life- her marriage to Emperor Akbar, the book has much more to offer. Most cinematic renditions tell us of her life post marriage, while this is an account of her life before marriage. The book can be aptly classified as a fairytale, and that too an evolved one. It has a feminist touch to it and in no way dwells upon the classical motif of a damsel in distress. The diary culminates in the fairytale denouement of a happily ever after. It is on these lines that the text shall be discussed in this paper.

The diary is a creation of a fictional story around the historically accepted facts. Set in the latter half of sixteenth century, the story brings to us the conventions of those times, but not with a meek acceptance, rather with a rational approach where the protagonist knows of the pitfalls in the system, and tries to raise her voice, or rather hopes to change things in the future. The protagonist Jodh Bai is the eldest daughter of Rajput Raja Bihari Mal of Amber. Born and brought up in a patriarchal polygamous family, her mother is the third queen of Amber, Princess of Jaisalmer, more commonly called Bhattiyaniji. The elder two queens are Sisodianiji, Princess of Mewar and Rathorainiji, Princess of Marwar respectively are dynastically more powerful, and carry the lineage pride with them. Moreover the two queens had borne a son each for the King, thereby adding to their prestige. It is in the course of the narrative that we are introduced to the woman question, the awareness of the female to the injustice being done to her. Bhattiyaniji is emotionally and intellectually closest to the King, he seeks her advice in matters of the State, but since she had only begotten daughters, Jodh Bai and Radhika, patriarchy did not consider her a 'Patrani' or a chief Queen, and did not give her the right to sit beside the King during religious ceremonies. A polygamous set-up in itself has challenges of its own. Bhattiyaniji, is on cordial terms with the elder Queens, but we are told that initially Sisodianiji was quite cruel to her, and still keeps a distance. Since, Rathorainiji's son dies King marries Bhattiyaniji to bear him a son. When Bhattiyaniji fails to do so, the King decides to marry a Bundi Princess, almost equal in age to Man Singh, the King's grandson. The elder Queens are expected to comply with the situation as women have no other option in the patriarchal set-up. "I am a queen. I obey." (Gupta 76)

Jodh's tale is an evolved one. She is the eldest daughter in the family. She is fond of composing poetry, but has no other exceptional talent. She is empathetic towards her mother. She risks to secretly enter the male side of the palace to meet her nephew Man Singh, to get information about her mother's plight. Jodh admits that she is not very beautiful, and the reader is

reminded of Jane Eyre, “Plain” (Bronte 150) Jane, and yet she is the protagonist of this fairytale. Her prince charming, like the classic heroes, is an able horseman, but he is also like her, mediocre in looks. So she is neither a damsel nor in distress. She has a beautiful life, where she was loved by her parents and had made truce with patriarchy, by accepting its norms. She knew that like the Bundi princess, women had no choice in matters of matrimony; she would have to marry as per her father’s wishes. “No one will ask me anything...One day I’ll be told, ‘You are to be married to such and such prince’ and I’ll have to smile and go along with that”(Gupta 13). Likewise, the climax comes when her father’s letter informs them that she is to be married to Akbar. This unusual match, of a Hindu Princess to a Muslim ruler causes great anxiety and uproar throughout the zenana. One positive side of the ruckus is the sorority that we witness. Even Sisodianiji, who maintained distance from all, comes to Bhattiyaniji’s aid and the women decide to confront Rajaji and make him cancel the alliance. These women who had silently borne injustices of patriarchy throughout their lives were united for the cause of their daughter. This conflict is resolved when the Raja conveys them Akbar’s assurance that Jodh Bai will not have to convert, will get her separate kitchen and apartments, and will be allowed to practice all her religious ceremonies. Akbar who initially enters their lives as a neighboring powerful ruler, who could be imminent threat to their Kingdom, soon transforms to an ally and then becomes their son-in-law. His secularism, inclusiveness, broad-mindedness dispels all the fears that the Rajputs had. He agreed for Hindu nuptials, and soon after marriage made Jodh Bai comfortable enough to trust him. The alliance that stemmed out of a political strategy, took the shape of a novel marriage rooted in mutual trust and respect for ideologies.

Now moving on to comparing it to a traditional fairytale, so as to establish it as an evolved fairytale. Most importantly, there is no villainous character in the tale unlike the fairytales we know. The only villain here is patriarchy, to which most of them have adjusted with substantial awareness of it being unfair. Even when women did not know of feminist theories, they were aware of their abilities, and had sufficient pride in their worth and even knew of the wrongs being done to them. All characters are relatable and one almost feels being somewhere around them witnessing every episode. All characters are humanly, with shades of grey, neither completely perfect, nor completely remote. The fairytale like most fairytales is female-centric, the adornments and ornamentation here too is one of the most important things for women, but there is much more to them than just that. This fairytale has women of intellect. Jodh Bai and Radhika get preliminary education, and are even given opportunity to learn further. Their father is quite happy with Jodh Bai’s interest in poetry. Phul Kunwar is interested in painting and paints beautifully. Sisodianiji is a powerful Queen, and so is Bhattiyaniji, and they both are women with agency. As Jodh Bai mentions for her mother, “...Mother is different. She keeps her face open and looks at father straight in the eye, she argues with him quite often and listens to him with a critical frown” (Gupta 33). The text in a way problematizes the stereotype fairytale notion, where beauty, submissiveness, emotional sensitivity are the prime features of the female characters. Another difference is the female bond and empathy that we witness. Rathorainiji is on most cordial terms with her husband’s other wife Bhattiyaniji, and while the Raja’s decision to marry again for a male heir initially perturbs the youngest Queen, Bhattiyaniji, she rather empathizes with the fifteen year old Bundi Princess, and offers compassion and kindness to her when she comes to the zenana after marriage. Power as always is the driving force in most scenes. Power governs authority in the zenana, and thereby Sisodianiji reigns supreme. Having power over Rajaji gives Bhattiyaniji the needed prestige. It is because of this power that Rukminibai approaches her to

convince the Emperor for Man Singh's adoption. Rukminibai, desperately wanted her son Man Singh to be adopted by the heir to the throne Bhagwan Das, so as to bring her child the assurance of future power in the Kingdom. Lack of power makes Phul Kunwarji a non-entity in the zenana. Threat to power leads Raja Bihari Mal to propose a political alliance with Emperor Akbar, and later to a matrimonial alliance. Most importantly, the major difference from a traditional fairytale lies in the fact that the Akbar and Jodh's love story begins on their mutual love for pigeons, and not from some bewitching caused by the girl's beauty. Jodh's knowledge of the varieties of pigeon, and her genuine love and ease around pigeons appease Akbar. The text does not dwell further on her marital life; the initial pigeon episode is enough to assure Jodh of Akbar's sincerity. Salima Sultan and Ruqaiyya Begun's arrogance causes little worry due to the presence of Jodh's friends like Phul Kunwarji in her entourage, the presence of Man Singh at the Mughal court, the love that Gulbadan Begum offers, and most importantly because of the bond that is to flourish between Jodh and Akbar.

Hence this fairytale has an Indian heroine, with wheat-ish complexion and ordinary beauty. The fairytale is assuring, and relatable. It is less fantasy and more real, thereby gives hope for such fairytale lives, where one can live happily-ever-after by confronting the struggle that life presents. Even if it is a figment of the writer's imagination, there is no tampering with historical facts, thereby if not this, life and episodes must have been somewhere similar to the ones presented in the text. The most beautiful scene in the diary is when the entire zenana stands with Jodh, then listens to Rajaji and Jodh's doubts are alleviated, and she trusts her father's decision. There are no supernatural interventions, only prayers to their respective deities. The narrative pin-points wherever patriarchy plays its hand, thereby creating hope that an ill recognized is an ill which will be redeemed sometime in future.

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