



**The Figure of the “Other” in Retellings of Indian Folk Tales:  
Children’s Book Trust in the Early 2000s**

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**Abstract**

Children’s Book Trust (CBT) is a major, though understudied, publisher of English-language children’s literature in contemporary India. This paper seeks to examine how the figure of the “other” is constructed in some of its collections of Indian folktales in English, such as *A Garland of Tales: Seventeen Folk Tales* (2008) and *Folk Tales of Himachal Pradesh* (2009). This paper examines the productive tension that ensues when rural folk tales, initially an alternate discourse against the dominant classes’ discursive hold, are repurposed or instrumentalised in the interest of securing the hegemony of the dominant social order in modern India. While there are few child protagonists in these stories—unsurprising, given the *ur* texts’ status as folk tales—the tales are replete with figures of marginality: the differently-abled (physical and mental), dwarfs and giants, foundlings, victims of colour and caste prejudice, the elderly, and women within patriarchal structures. By analysing the construction of the “other,” this paper aims to explore how the representation of these figures in the works of early 2000s is implicated in socialising and securing the child outside the book, at a pivotal moment in Indian history, when the secularist values of the Nehru-Gandhi vision of India are giving way to Hindutva.

**Keywords:** Disability, Folk Tales, Globalisation, Hindutva, ideology, Indian Children’s Literature

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## Introduction

Children's Book Trust (CBT) is a prominent publisher of children's literature established in 1957 by cartoonist K Shankar Pillai. It has marketed itself as progressive and trendsetting by publishing "well written, well illustrated and well designed books for children" (CBT "The Institution") mainly in English, but also in Hindi and regional languages. CBT has published both original stories of a secular nature and retellings of religious, mythological, and folk stories. The paper focuses on three volumes of the latter sort: *A Garland of Tales: Seventeen Folk Tales* (2008), *Folk Tales of Uttarakhand* (2008), and *Folk Tales of Himachal Pradesh* (2009).

The existing critical work on CBT is sparse, despite its eminence in the field of children's literature. The only chapter-length study of their short stories is by Citra Rahmatika. This essay takes a linguistic approach, using content analysis to discuss the quality, readability, and gender equality of a single collection of 17 stories. Besides this, CBT is mentioned in two survey essays that provide histories of Indian children's literature. CBT's importance in the field and excellent production quality are noted by both Manorama Jafa and S K Ghai. Given the reach and impact of CBT and the paucity of critical work, a need for close reading of their stories was felt. There is no extant work on the ideological leanings of their books or their intersection with Indian politics, and it is this research gap that this paper seeks to address.

In this paper, an attempt will be made to outline the contestation of ideological forces in these stories, as the secular, socialist values enshrined in the Indian Constitution vie with a nostalgic, revanchist Hindu nationalism idealising the mythic past, as well as Western liberal values brought in with globalisation, each attempting to instil its hegemonic values in the imagined child reader. The idea of the "other" becomes crucial in understanding the process of identity formation and power dynamics in these stories. With its roots in Hegelian philosophy, the "other" as used here implies the counter to the social "self" and indicates the marginalised people of different sections of society against whose alienation the normative Savarna middle-class man establishes his identity in these tales. The readings

undertaken seek to “unveil and critique the effort to establish a ‘sovereign Subject’ over and against a constitutive Other” (Felluga 202) that is evident in these retellings. It will be argued that CBT’s folktales tend to construct women, the socially ostracised, foundlings, elderly people, dwarfs and giants, differently-abled people, the mentally ill, victims of colour prejudice, animals, and supernatural beings as the “other” to the protagonists, the consolidation of whose normative identity reaffirms middle-class ideologies while denying various “others” adequate representation. In the following two sections, an attempt will be made to historicise this process of “othering,” relating it to the changing Indian economy at the turn of the twenty-first century.

### **Retelling Myths and Folk Tales in Twenty-first Century India**

The market phenomenon of Chetan Bhagat in the early 2000s broadened the readership of Indian literature in English. The demographic shift from elite to popular influenced the market, generating a keen interest in the retellings of mythological or folk stories (Valančiūnas 193). The Indian book market was gradually dominated by mythological works “reinterpreted to suit contemporary needs” (Lutgendorf 366). This growing fascination with revisiting the tales of the “old times” is inextricably linked with the economic liberalisation of 1991 and the rising prominence of the Hindu nationalist sentiment. Analysing the association of economic growth and the notion of the Hindu, Aravind Rajagopal claims that prior to liberalisation, the idea of the “Hindu” was commonly marked as conservative, antiquated, and irrelevant, which was then equated with the sluggish economy of the country. The spirit of liberalisation marked the need for reimagining the figure of the Hindu, the “metonymic of India” (Rajagopal 35). Multiple retellings of the mythological tales attempted to historicise Hindu culture as timeless and relevant to modern times. Most of these retellings eulogise historical or mythological figures, reflecting the Hindutva ideology of reclaiming and popularising grand tales of valour and heroism omitted from the history textbooks—stories of patriotism that are the need of the hour, with “history becoming a contested site in the country” (Singh and Sharma 136). The re-imagined mythological or folk stories tend to bridge the gap between the past and contemporary

times, thereby forging a continuum and resolving the tensions between regional folk narratives and global, metropolitan values.

### **Narratives of Cohesion in Divisive Times**

While folk tales in their original forms are often associated with resistance, capturing the desires of the common man against the discursive hegemony of the ruling class (Ghazoul 128), we find that the *retellings* of these folk tales by CBT serve very different purposes. Close readings of these stories will outline how they attempt to forge a collective identity by moulding a communal past and, in the process, perpetuate dominant social ideologies. Thus, ironically, folk tales that were once sites of resistance are repurposed as a weapon to uphold the social structure.

The incendiary historical circumstances of the late twentieth and early twenty-first-century India provided the impetus for this essentially conservative attempt to shore up a collective cultural identity. At the time, Indian urban and semi-urban spaces were marked by rapidly changing social dynamics. The economic recession of the 80s and 90s gave way to liberalisation and resulted in an increase in class mobility. Child rights and education reforms (Right to Education Act of 2009, Bachpan Bachao Andolan led by Kailash Satyarthi), civil liberties and freedom of speech movements (increasing criticism against POTA, AFSPA in regions like Jammu and Kashmir and the Northeast), anti-discrimination campaigns by the LGBTQ+ community (2009 High court ruling), activism against religious violence and minority rights (Godhra Riots 2002), activism against gender-based violence and discrimination (Reproductive rights, Bilkis Bano case, Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act of 2005), and the growing momentum of Dalit movements destabilised the culturally-enshrined heteronormative values of the upper-caste male citizen of India. The reconstruction of the age-old tradition of folktales, then, catered to the upper-caste male anxieties and the middle class's desire for social stability by providing them a familiar stable space in the "simpler times" of the nostalgic past.

In the following section, a close reading of these retold folktales will be undertaken and the same will be organised according to the type of “othering” evidenced in the story. “Othering” takes place on at least three grounds—class and caste, the body, and gender.

### **Class and Caste Others**

A close reading of CBT’s folk tales, reveals how binary opposition involves positing a laudable middle-class, upper-caste subjectivity defined against other classes and castes. While middle-class values are celebrated, both upper and lower classes and castes are tacitly denigrated.

In “The Heavenly Kheer,” a heavenly elephant becomes an agent of chaos in a small village, stealing bananas, but also enabling villagers to enter heaven by holding on to its tail. Identified as Eravat, the elephant mount of Indra—King of the Gods—and thus, placed within a Brahminical discourse, it helps the protagonist taste heavenly kheer and is not a negative figure entirely. In the climactic action of the story, villagers hold hands and attempt to hitchhike to heaven, holding on to the elephant’s tail. However, when their leader (holding the tail) is asked to indicate the exact quantity of heavenly kheer the villagers will eat, and he gestures with his hands to describe the quantity, he loses hold of Eravat’s tail, and the whole chain of villagers fall to the ground. The moral seems to be that the logic of measurement—characteristic of merchant and trading castes—is incommensurate with heavenly rewards. The animal “other” in this story is, thus, implicated in a critique of middle and lower-caste values and the enshrining of upper-caste hegemony. Furthermore, if we focus on the illustration accompanying the story, we may note the visual similarity between the white elephant on a blue background and the symbol of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP)—a Dalit and lower caste political movement resurgent in the decade the book was published.



Fig. 1. Illustration to “The Heavenly Kheer” by Neeta Gangopadhy (Jain 9)

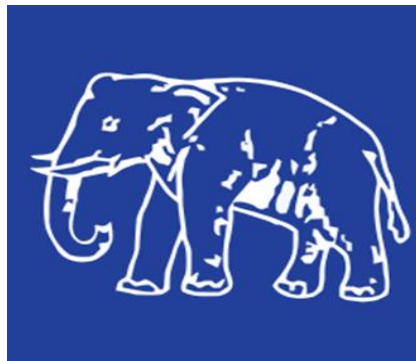


Fig. 2. Bahujan Samaj Party Elephant Symbol (Wikipedia “File: Elephant Bahujan Samaj Party.svg”)

The image thus vividly suggests the chaos and disruption of the social order caused by the ascendancy of this political force. The

story seems to cast a humorous glance on the misguided masses of India, desperately attempting to climb beyond their station via the agency of the elephant (BSP).

Another folk tale critiquing the yoking of mercantile values and religiosity is, “The Real Service.” In this story, greedy merchant Jaswant Singh’s attempts to bribe his way into heaven by constructing a lavish temple (using a small percentage of his wealth) are critiqued, and he is the foil to the selfless social service of the protagonist, middle-class Sukhi. Sukhi looks after plague-riddled villages and spends his life serving god through action. It is only when Jaswant Singh distributes his wealth amongst the poor, the story suggests, that Yama Raja will guide him to heaven. This is a story underpinned by the socialist, welfarist ideals enshrined in India’s constitution, and seems critical of bourgeoisie values.

The traditional folk-tale ruling class—the rajah and his court—are not spared in these stories either. In “The Land of the Lazy,” one of the most disturbing stories in these collections, King Sombalraj is a lazy king whose lethargy is so extreme that he stops rising from his bed and attending court. He is also an obese glutton, eating many large meals a day, and is so indolent that he cannot bother to chew—having liquified food poured down his throat instead—or talk, communicating by winking. He builds a palace for other lazy people like him, and his friends Sombalnaathan, Sombaldas, and Somberi—three of the most slothful people in the kingdom—live there in bliss, too lethargic to move from bed or bathe, taking liquified meals poured down their throats. When there is a fire in the palace one day, all three friends are too lazy to move, even to save their lives, and burn alive out of their disinclination to exert themselves. Their deaths serve as a lesson to King Sombalraj, who eventually mends his ways.

The story is a satire that most likely originates in legends of the supposed hedonism and vice of Mughal nawabs. One is reminded of apocryphal tales of the invention of Galouti Kebab and the *aaloo* (potato) in biryani by gluttonous rulers such as Nawab Wajid Ali Shah. It is tempting to interpret this tacit denigration of India’s Muslim rulers as relatable to Hindutva’s “current attempts to obliterate Mughal rule in official history” (Thapar 141). Though

NCERT's deletion of the Mughals from school textbooks has happened only recently, the BJP's earliest attempts to do so can be dated to the early 2000s (Thapar 137).

What is most troubling is the story's depiction of eating disorders and depression as moral vices. Although the 'ur-story's presumed antiquity, as well as its satirical, deliberately hyperbolic nature might obviate or render presentist a critique of the story based on twenty-first-century expectations of political correctness, mental health awareness and body-positivity, passages of the retelling seem like textbook descriptions of the onset of depression:

After a while the king's laziness worsened. The king never left his bed unless it was absolutely essential like for taking a bath or going to the toilet.

Then came the worst stage. The king felt it was unnecessary to take a bath and refused to get out of the bed... Earlier the king felt brisk enough to ask questions and answer to queries. Now he didn't even want to open his mouth to speak. (Madhavan 19)

Rather than feeling any sympathy for such depressed victims of eating disorders, the implied child reader is insidiously oriented towards the middle-class norm of hard work, as these "lazy" characters are literally burnt alive in their own fat. The story exemplifies Terry Eagleton's suggestion that ideology is "action-oriented"—"capable of furnishing their adherents with goals, motivations, prescriptions, imperatives, and so on" (47).

The subaltern classes and castes are equally subject to critique in these stories. In "Honey Seeds," the dacoit Lakhia—a representative of the so-called "criminal tribes" such as the *Thuggees*—is demonised, while the shrewdness of middle-class protagonist Dhondu is celebrated. Lakhia has attempted to steal baskets of *laddoos* from a lavish wedding, and Dhondu—a trickster figure—is able to outwit and humiliate him. Lakhia is eventually thrashed by a mob and booed offstage, so to speak. The story presents Lakhia as an egoistic dacoit representative of a kind of gauche machismo

condemned by these stories—his hyper masculine physique, unseemly ambition, and egotism are characteristics condemned by the normative middle-class ideology.

### **The Body**

In this section, it will be argued that although these retold folktales are clearly shaped by the influx of political correctness brought in with globalisation, ostensibly critiquing forms of body-oriented discrimination, they tacitly uphold the normative (male, able) body while requiring extraordinary feats of deviant bodies in order to *earn* human dignity.

Since the unkind take on obesity in “Land of the Lazy” has already been discussed, another story, “Gentle Giant,” retold by Ramendra Kumar will be taken up. “The Gentle Giant” *seems* to make a case against body-shaming and stature-based discrimination in redeeming a misunderstood giant. Binda is a gentle giant living on the outskirts of a village that has discriminated against his family of giants for generations. He earns the friendship and trust of a little girl named Tuk-Tuk, who is open-minded and does not judge him based on his appearance. The end of the story sees the giant performing a rescue of the entire village during a flood, and thereby proving his benevolence. While the overt moral seems kind to Binda, it is noteworthy that he has to ingratiate himself and perform exceptional feats in order to deserve basic human dignity. The story upholds the exceptionality of gigantism even while condemning discrimination against the condition. The illustration accompanying the story is interesting in that it displaces Binda from the mythic tradition of giants, typically either *rakshases* (monsters) or *asuras* (demons)—beings of immense strength and supernatural abilities, such as Kumbhakarna, Bakasura, and Ghatotkacha, and inserts him into the fabric of the everyday.

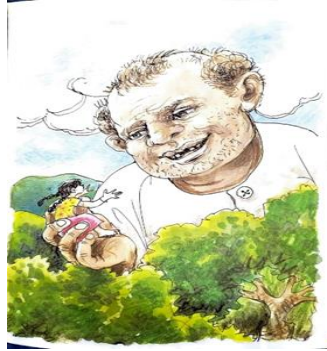


Fig. 3. Illustration to “The Gentle Giant” by Neeta Gangopadhy (Kumar 49)

Clad in dhoti and kurta and looking unkempt but essentially like a harmless middle-aged man next door, Binda is a figure on the borderlines between myth and modernity. Arguably, the giant represents the milling masses of rural India, and the little girl’s embrace of this figure represents the story’s socialist injunction to the elite English-speaking reader to open her heart to the lower orders.

“The Rat Prince” is another tale undermining its own attempted political correctness. Here, a king attempting to ensure male heirs offers his five wives magical apples. Since one of the apples was nibbled on by a rat, one of the queens gives birth to a rat while the others bear human sons. Unable to disown the child, the king accepts the rat prince, who is subjected to contempt from his brothers. Growing up, the rat prince models himself as kind, honourable, and intelligent. One day, when the siblings skip school to seek adventure, they get lost in a jungle and, despite their rat brother’s warnings, visit the hut of a mysterious old lady. It is later revealed that the old lady is a witch who wishes to kill the brothers. They are ultimately saved by the rat brother’s ingenious trickery. Grateful, the human brothers and the king decide to accept him and offer him a section of the kingdom. The story reflects the oversimplification and sentimentalisation of the issue of discrimination. While discrimination against deviant bodies is ostensibly criticised, it is noteworthy that the “othered” character’s ingratiating behaviours are

normalised, their bodily “otherness” only tolerated when their moral probity is proven through exceptional acts, and their inclusion is premised on the exclusion of a gendered “other”—the witch.

King Vikramaditya is the subject of many folk tales, and it was not surprising to find a story centred on him in these collections. “Deeds, Action, Fate, And Hope” tells us about a poor Brahmin seeking alms from the pious king Vikramaditya. The king donates generously to the Brahmin, but on the way home from court, the Brahmin is robbed of his possessions by the god Shani. When King Vikramaditya later questions Shani, he is cursed to lose all his limbs and is left in the form of a limbless stump. A kind peasant discovers the king in stump form, lying abandoned in a forest, and adopts him. One day, the peasant visits another king’s court, attending the *swayamvar* of this king’s daughter. Worried that the king would be outraged by the presence of a disabled person at the court, the peasant places Stump-Vikramaditya outside the castle. At the *swayamvar*, a garland-throwing elephant is to decide who the ideal husband is. When the garland thrown by the court elephant falls on Vikramaditya repeatedly, the princess accepts the disabled man as her husband, unaware of his true identity as a king.

Later, Deeds, Action, Fate, and Hope (personified) appear at the court to determine their relative superiority over each other. Stump-Vikramaditya is called upon to offer his insight. As the first three personifications return the “stump” his three limbs, he claims that none of them is the greatest. After all, Vikramaditya became a stump despite his good deeds, selfless actions, and royal birth (his fate). As Hope forms his final limb, he declares Hope as the greatest, for without hope, he would not have survived this long. The narrative is a harrowing tale of normalised ableism that not only avoids addressing the discrimination faced by differently-abled people but also normalises their mistreatment through a sentimentalised tone. The deformed king is dehumanised as a “stump”—the word “stump” is repeatedly used—and cannot return to his kingdom as a ruler before surviving the acid test of establishing his moral credibility. This captures the process of “othering,” where losing one’s social position is presented as a natural consequence of the loss of the “apex” male body. Neither Shani nor the prejudice of the court is ever

questioned, but Vikramaditya is celebrated for his hope, stoicism in the face of difficulty, and perseverance, further glorifying the idea that so long as a man acts per the dominant value structure, he can climb his way to the top, negating his status as the social “other.” Thus, we find that through their representation of differently-bodied “others,” the narratives prescribe and naturalise moral codes that ultimately decide whether the marginalised person shall be rewarded or punished while never questioning the politics of “othering” itself.

### **Women as the Gendered Other**

This section will discuss how women are portrayed in select stories, arguing that by and large, CBT’s folktales uphold traditional gender norms. Patriarchy is usually normalised, and women “otherised” as the second sex—their traditional roles as wives, cooks, and domestic goddesses, upheld as norms.

“The Best Bridegroom” tells the story of a competition between rival princes for the hand of an unnamed princess, overseen by the princess’ father. Only ostensibly the protagonist, the princess functions more as a conduit through which male relationships and male power dynamics are negotiated, exemplifying Eve Sedgwick’s theory of homosocial desire in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985). As Sedgwick notes, “in the presence of a woman who can be seen as pitiable or contemptible, men are able to exchange power and to confirm each other’s value” (160). The “delicate doe-eyed” (23) princess, a somewhat pitiable and indecisive figure, cannot choose between three suitable, princely bridegrooms, and her father decides to test the men in order to arrive at a decision. They are asked to travel for a week and come back with gifts for the princess. The first and the second princes return with a bag of precious stones and a sword, respectively. This gift exchange is underpinned by a logic of equivalence that reinforces in the child reader’s mind the reification or objectification of women as commodities amongst other commodities in a network of economic exchanges between powerful men. The third prince, who is ultimately gifted the princess’s hand, returns from his travels with nothing. He has, he explains, been unable to bring any gift because his time was taken up in tirelessly serving ailing and embattled citizens who came

to him for help. The princess's father sees his concern "about the welfare of the people" (27) as the correct value in a son-in-law. With not even a token to give to his to-be wife, this work-obsessed man's prioritising of public duty over private matters is celebrated. The story normalises the patriarchal, capitalist work ethic that subordinates domesticity to public duty, enshrining the labour that preserves the existing dominant culture. Furthermore, while it seems to place the price of a good wife above the price of jewels or swords, it does seem to suggest that labour can be substituted for a woman, thereby tacitly positing an equivalence between selfless service and womanhood.

"Kali Charan's Kitchen" is another story that normalises traditional gender roles, as it tells the tale of the family of patriarch Kali Charan. Kali, a happy and successful widower, has seven sons and runs a business. However, after he has "found suitable brides" for his sons and "married them off" (39), he finds that the joint family's kitchen is not what it used to be. Now that there are seven women in the household, the male cook can retire (the story presents this as a given). But "too many cooks spoil the broth" (41), and the quality of service declines. The story normalises Kali's dependence on women to serve him food, and when they are late, it presents his outrage as justified. Kali finds that his guests are dissatisfied with the food the new wives serve, some finding stones in their food and others finding the meat raw: "Unless things ran smoothly on the domestic front, his business, he knew, would soon crumble and be ruined" (41).

What is troubling is the story's mingling of traditional gender norms with the language of business management. While the author claims to be drawing on a folk tale, Kali's business operations are discussed in distinctly modern, corporate terminology. For example, the phrases "business dinner," "important client," "bargain," "the deal he was trying to swing," and "Kali Charan's firm" (40-41) all suggest that this "traditional tale" allegorises modern, bourgeois realities. Later, the discourse of 'Organisational Behaviour' is used to outline the flaws in the seven wives' managerial and leadership styles.

Read against the grain, in a deconstructive mode, the story seems to think through and tacitly acknowledge the gendered tensions in many “modern” Indian households, where corporate lives are upheld by women’s domestic labour. The story is rife with unacknowledged patriarchal fears: when Kali attempts to diagnose why his kitchen is failing, his catalogue reads like an exhaustive list of misogynistic fears about uncooperative, independent, desirous, and financially empowered women:

They had become lazy and irresponsible, preferring to while away the time watching the wandering entertainers who came to their door with performing monkeys, bears, and so on. A couple of them spent most of their time in bed, while others preferred to gab about the town, visiting friends and frequenting shops selling the latest merchandise brought in from across the country. (41)

Attempting to resolve the situation, Kali comes up with a test. When Kali attempts to distract the wives away from the kitchen and into the garden, only one wife (the youngest) refuses the temptation and remains in the kitchen, playing the idealised role of dutiful cook. Her foregrounding and idealisation are clear in the illustration to the story:

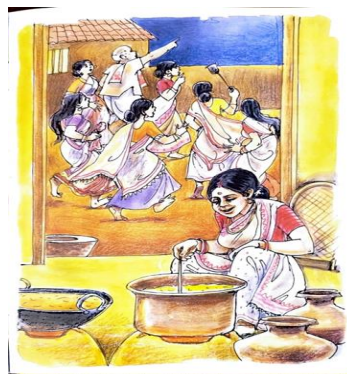


Fig. 4. Illustration to “Kali Charan's Kitchen” by Neeta Gangopadhy (Phukan 43)

The subtle message—catch them young and indoctrinate—exemplifies what Terry Eagleton calls the “action-oriented” nature of ideology (47). The youngest wife, having proven herself to be the most dutiful, is now put in charge of the kitchen, with the other wives serving under her. While the last passage of the story seems to imagine the now-ideal kitchen, its hyperbolic register seems to acknowledge the fantastic expectations placed on women:

If one was in charge of the shopping, *another* was to look after the cleaning. If one was to supervise the serving, *another* was to see that there was a constant supply of firewood. *Yet another* [italics mine] was in charge of personnel, that is, she was to see to it that the servants had all they needed and worked efficiently. (44)

The rhetorical use of repeated “one...another” and finally, “yet another,” lends the passage a sense of hyperbole. The unlikeliness of this magical seven-wife kitchen solution when juxtaposed to modern, monogamous realities would remind the reader that, in fact, the usual custom is to coerce one woman to play all seven roles. The story’s embattled, insecure patriarchy surfaces in the tensions it elides, in the impossible conjurings it demands in a fantastic register.

The patriarchal idea of an “ideal wife” is further consolidated in the story “The Topsy-Turvy Wife.” Nek Ram, a kind man of docile nature, wishes for a simple, homely wife but is married to Madhu, a rebel who refuses to accept his commands. While beautiful and otherwise fitting as perfect “wife material,” Madhu behaves in direct contradiction to instructions. She refuses to sit on a palanquin and chooses to ride on a pony on the day of her marriage, against the wishes of Nek Ram. Later, she refuses to cook, dress, or act according to her husband’s wishes. A frustrated Nek Ram asks her to go to her parents for a few days, and on the way, Madhu falls into a river. She would have drowned due to her rebellious nature, but Nek Ram appears just in time to save her. This tames Madhu, who decides to become more agreeable to Nek Ram. The story depicts how women who do not fit into prescribed roles and social codes are “othered.” Madhu appears as a caricature of the feminist idea of a woman with

agency who challenges patriarchal norms. The new bride refusing to use the palanquin and instead opting to ride the pony, a practice followed by the grooms, is presented as humiliating and emasculating for her husband. The firm will of the woman is represented as her being headstrong and insensible. As the illustration reveals, Madhu is wilful, likes to take charge, and occupies male-dominated spaces, much to the chagrin of male onlookers:

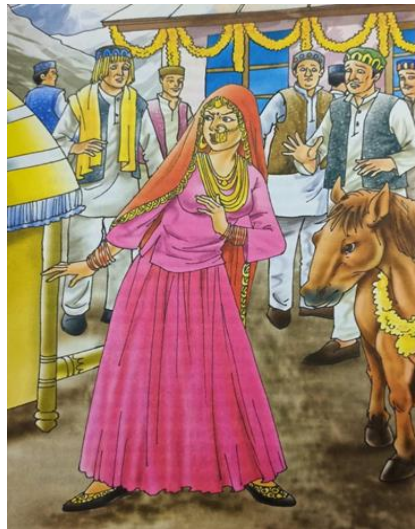


Fig. 5. Illustration to “Topsy-Turvy Wife” by Amit John (Nath 100)

While her expression reflects her determination and rejection of gendered roles, the baffled expressions of the surrounding men point to their fear and confusion about the unusual acts of a newlywed bride. However, Madhu is inevitably punished by the immanent laws of the universe for demeaning the gendered social structure that the elite middle-class patriarchy naturalises. The story shows that even such “topsy turvy” wives can be “tamed,” and it is only once Madhu succumbs to the value system and sacrifices her agency that she is celebrated as a “good wife.”

Finally, “Brother Went Hungry, I Slept” glorifies ambitionless hard work and selfless acts by women. Bhaguli is a married woman

infamous for her deep sleep, as even natural disasters cannot wake her when she sleeps. After learning that her brother will visit her, she decides to finish all the household chores before his arrival. However, tired from the housework, she falls asleep. When her brother visits her, he discovers his sleeping sister, waits for a long time, and departs, leaving gifts that he had brought. Finding the gifts after finally waking up, Bhaguli is mortified that her brother was left hungry. She was so ashamed and grief-stricken that she ultimately turned into the local bird that, to date, cries, “*Bhai bhukho, maisoyi*” (“brother went hungry, I slept”). Bhaguli’s story highlights the duties of a woman and how failing to perform those duties affects the self-worth of women who have internalised the patriarchal gender roles. The narrative presents Bhaguli’s agony at failing to feed her brother as the ultimate tragedy since this is equivalent to her failing as a woman. Her transformation into a bird is an act of dehumanisation for failing to follow the social structure. Her fate—to repeat her sin in the form of a verbal confession—serves as a cautionary tale to other women.

## Conclusion

As noted by Ferial Ghazoul, post-colonial narratives often reshape cultural patrimony received through folk heritage to render it compatible with the contemporary values of the dominant class (Ghazoul 127-128). Close readings suggest that this process of remoulding and reshaping ancient stories in the interest of the cultural hegemony of the elite is very much at work in CBT’s retold folktales. English-language children’s literature in India primarily caters to urban elite or aspirational classes privileged enough to provide their children with primary education in English (Superle 26). On the other hand, the vernacular folk tales date back to a pre-industrial society and embody pre-modern, largely rural and majoritarian cultural values. What happens, then, in the process of repurposing the latter for an elite readership? Interestingly—and somewhat ironically—stories that in their original form belong to the subaltern majority and often inscribe their discursive resistance to various forms of class and caste oppression are here appropriated to secure the rule of the bourgeoisie by normalising and universalising its values.

However, the process of securing this cultural hegemony through retellings is by no means simplistic or monolithic, attesting to the complex political and economic history of India in the first decade of the twentieth century. The three ideological forces which were outlined in the ‘Introduction’ are often mutually incompatible and exert varied pressures on the ur-tales, making these collections heterogeneous and internally fissured. The Nehruvian values enshrined in our Constitution remain tangible in many tales, with stories such as “The Real Service” and “The Gentle Giant” enshrining egalitarian, socially just morals. Meanwhile, the Hindu nationalist impulse of forging a cohesive national identity by revisiting the ancient past, rediscovering there a golden age of traditional gender roles and social hierarchies, is also amply evident, particularly in the stories comprising *Folk Tales of Uttarakhand* and *Folk Tales of Himachal Pradesh*. Finally, a push towards the political correctness characteristic of contemporary Western liberal discourse, significantly impacting the upwardly mobile classes of a globalised India, particularly in their corporate culture, is also weakly present. Stories such as “Rat Prince”, “The Gentle Giant”, as well as other stories which could not be discussed at length here—such as “The Dark Born” by Manoj Thomas,<sup>xii</sup> criticising colour prejudice—evinces a struggle between overt political correctness and source material incompatible with Western liberalism. Each of these contending forces is didactic; each is, in its own way, framing an ideal child in a manner typical of children’s literature, attempting to “secure the child who is outside the book” (Rose 2). There is no ideological uniformity here. As Terry Eagleton reminds us, “the advanced capitalist order is in no sense a successfully achieved unity, riven as it is by major conflicts and contradictions.” CBT’s retold folktales reflect the complex political realities of the turn of the twenty-first century, and succinctly illustrate Eagleton’s suggestion that “the dominant ideology in advanced capitalist societies is internally fissured and contradictory, offering no kind of seamless unity for the masses to internalize” (35).

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