
Panchatantra: Critical Analysis from Feminist Perspective

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Abstract:

Children's literature is one of the major areas of literature in India. A lot of research work has been done in western countries on the feminist approach to children's literature, but unfortunately, in India, children's literature has not been researched adequately. The present research paper will review Panchatantra stories through feminist perspective, with application of socialist feminist theory which focuses on traditional gender roles in the family structure and the patriarchal social system in which we live, as key to women's inferior positions. These stories will be analyzed considering the themes of gender inequality, stereotyping of women, objectification and oppression of women, male-superiority against women, male-dominance in patriarchal society etc.. This paper will try to re-interpret the Panchatantra stories examining depiction of women in them, following Lisa Tuttle's definition of feminist theory as 'asking new questions to old text'.

Key words: Children's literature in India, Panchatantra, feminist perspective, stereotyping of women

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These stories will be analyzed considering the themes of gender inequality, stereotyping of women, objectification and oppression of women, male-superiority against women, male-dominance in patriarchal society etc. For the present research I have referred to few of the English translations of Panchatantra like Patrick H. Olivelle's; Arthur W. Ryder's as well as G.L.Chandiramani's translations of Panchatantra, Anant Pai's Amar Chitra katha, Articles by Anuradha Sharma, Suniti Namjoshi etc. This paper will try to re-interpret the Panchatantra stories examining depiction of women in them, following Lisa Tuttle's definition of feminist theory as 'asking new questions to old text'.

The fables of Panchatantra composed in Sanskrit by Pandit Vishnusharma about 2200 years ago, was not written for children but its stories are widely translated and read to the children all over the world. Panchatantra is known as 'Nitishastra' means 'a book of wise conduct in life'. It consists of five books including various stories placed within stories. Most of the characters are animals. Human characteristics, behavior patterns and even ethical values are ascribed to these animals. However, one can observe that the conversations between these animals make unnecessary comments on women. Also, no conversation ever takes place among female characters to demonstrate their knowledge. Only male characters are made to converse about all the wisdom and lessons of morality. In an article 'A *Critical Interpretation of Panchatantra*' Prof. Anuradha Sharma criticizes how the stories of Panchatantra socialize women to dance to the tune of male dictate.

The world of Panchatantra is predominantly a male domain. The Prelude itself starts with homage to Manu and the narration starts with an expression that King Amarsakti rules

Mahilaropya. The king's request to Vishnusharma to teach his three dull sons is the catalyst for the composition of Panchatantra. The King's name and that of his three sons end in shakti-meaning might (which is always associated with male domination). Amarshakti means 'a man as mighty as gods/eternal power'; Vasushakti means 'a man as mighty as vasus-a group of eight gods'; Ugrashakti means 'a man of fierce might' and Anekshakti means 'a man of enormous might/Infinite power'. King Amarshakti, who is described as – like a celestial tree, granting the wishes of all supplicants- rules Mahilaropya(literally means as beautiful as a maiden)

There are very few stories where women characters have some role to play. For example, in the frame story of Book IV, 'Monkey and Crocodile', the wife of crocodile and her female friends are presented as evil and crafty, who plot to kill her husband's friend, the monkey. In the next story in the same chapter, 'An Ass Without Ears and Heart' where King Lion orders his minister Jackal to get an ass for him, Jackal goes to a village, finds a distraught ass, lures him of female asses in jungle and brings him to the lion. In this story female asses are presented as mere sexual objects.

Vishnu Sharma comments,

“The things that claw, and the things that gore
Are unreliable things;
And so is a man with sword in his hand,
And rivers, and women, and kings”. (Ryder, 34)

In few of the stories female birds are shown as mothers concerned for the welfare of their brood, which is the rare instance where they are portrayed positively. A pattern emerges from these animal stories: where mother is the only positive role for a female, while other females, even wives, who do not play maternal roles, always pose a threat to males either as sexual objects or by their wicked activities.

This pattern is even more prominent when we look at the stories with human characters. In one story from Book I

Story 3.2, 'A Weaver Cuts the Nose of a Bawd', we have two wives; the one is an adulteress, running to her lover the moment her husband leaves the house, and the other is the Bawd (Barber's wife) who acts as their go-between. The weaver's wife manages to trick her husband into believing that she is a saintly wife; and the Bawd fools the judges into believing her false story and nearly gets her husband executed. The same theme of adultery and cunningness of women runs through the story of the carpenter and his adulterous wife in Book III, Story VI: How the Unfaithful Wife Tricked Her Husband. Vishnu Sharma comments,

"Behold the faults with woman born:
Impurity, and heartless scorn,
Untruth, and folly, reckless heat,
Excessive greediness, deceit." (Ryder, 68)

Not only in narration but in verses also women are portrayed as adulteress, for example, in Book I Verse 113 he says-

"Kings most often turn away
Completely from virtuous men,
Women through greed show their love
Mostly to scoundrels and fools."

In Book V, on the other hand, we have quite a different situation. The frame story presents the kind and wise wife of a Brahmin- a stereotypical patriarchal husband. When she is expecting, her husband says to her, "You have attained your purpose. You will give birth to a son; he will be the one who will continue my lineage". But the wife replied, "Who knows it will be a son or not?"

In a highly patriarchal culture in India, the most desired virtue in a woman in general and a wife in particular is obedience. Vishnu Sharma supports this tradition when he says in Book I Verse 82-

"This is what good people say-
"That is a true deed, which is free from stains,
She is true wife, who does as she is told".

The Panchatantra is a book by and for men, especially men of the court. It was written to instruct the future kings about the governance as well as duties and challenges of the kings. Kings are compared to women in their capriciousness that is showing sudden changes in their attitudes and behavior. Vishnu Sharma could have voiced his views about the unreliability of kings without mentioning women's infidelity in general but purposely his lessons embedded women and his ideas are told in Book I Verse 20-

“Kings, women, and vines do, for the most part,
Cling to whatever they find close at hand.”

Vishnu Sharma warns the princes against the evils such as gambling, drinking and women.

Further, he treats woman as mere an object when he says in Book I verse 44-

“Be it a horse, a science, or a sword,
A lute, a voice, a woman, or a man-
Whether they become capable or not
Depends on the competence of the man
To whom they belong”

Vishnu Sharma personifies royal fortune as Sri, a woman and warns the kings to be on guard, because, he comments, being a woman, fortune is fickle and will run away with the next handsome and rich prince who happens to come along. There are many more instances of his derogatory comments on women.

Modern feminist Suniti Namjoshi has rewritten some of the Panchatantra fables as *Feminist Fables* published in 1981. In one of the story she has introduced the Blue Donkey, replacing the Blue Jackal in original Panchatantra. Suniti's female Blue Donkey, whose colour sets her apart as a strange creature, can stand for many things—the figure of the female writer, or of those discriminated against for their sexual choices or the colour of their skin, a creature who makes those around her uneasy because they don't know where to place her.

Stories may be simply told but their themes are deep. Considering the impact that gender representation in children's literature has on the self-esteem of children, as well as the role it plays in indicating the status of women in society, it is essential that these ancient stories should be retold for the equal representation of female and male characters.

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