

Gender and Humour in Indian Folk Tales- The Pañcatantra

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines gender and humour in the context of Indian folktales, the Pañcatantra. Discussions on humour, satire and jokes are not new and have always been a part of societies. Humour is a powerful tool that strips away all illusions and subverts expectations and social expectations. It is a social commentary allowing individuals to critique societal norms, institutions and behaviour in a way that is engaging, accessible and sometimes subversive. It is often the satire in humorous anecdotes that we find funny. It is associated with power structures in society. The stories analysed have humour and laughter directed at women who transgress social norms. An alternative reading of the humour in the stories from the women's perspective shows us the power of women and the subversion of patriarchy. The laughter of the wife who cuckolds her husband is a part of the funny. Women may laugh self-mockingly or derisively. Laughter, depending on who laughs and at whom, can be disciplining, repressive, subversive, rebellious and self-mocking. The modalities of humour and laughter in the Pañcatantra even though rooted in classical Sanskrit texts are to be found in our day to day lives. Laughter is serious business.

Keywords: Gender, Humour, Laughter, Folktales, Pañcatantra

1. INTRODUCTION

“How do you know when a woman is about to say something smart?
 When she starts a sentence with “A man once told me.”

(Mumbai Mirror, 2024)

Some may find the above joke funny and others would not. Those who understand the underlying patriarchal structures in the joke would find it sexist and offensive. The joke is clearly based on the social perception and portrayal of women and punches down women.

We also have jokes that punch up, mocking men who are in a position of power in a patriarchal world. The satirical laughter in this case follows when women challenge the oppressive system and fool men. For instance, the pun, “People call me a feminist every time I refuse to be a doormat.” (Bhasin & Thapar, 2013, 13), punches up, targeting men and the patriarchal world.

Humour¹ is a social commentary allowing individuals to critique societal norms, institutions and behaviour in a way that is engaging, accessible and sometimes subversive. It is often the

¹ Humour is a broad category encompassing anything that elicits amusement or laughter. Satire is a specific form of humour that uses irony, sarcasm or ridicule to criticise or mock something often societal issues or individuals. Laughter is the physical response to humour or satire indicating amusement or enjoyment. Both humour and satire can provoke laughter although satire often does so with a critical or thought provoking edge (Stinson, 2019)

satire in humorous anecdotes that we find funny. Satire² is a literary technique that is used to criticise or ridicule human folly, vices or societal issues through humour, irony, exaggeration or ridicule. It frequently employs sarcasm or wit to expose and criticise shortcomings in individuals, institutions or society as a whole. Satire provides a moral commentary on the structures of society. It has elements of “attack or aggression, laughter or humour, play, and judgment” (Zekavat, 2017, 6). “[I]t is adopted by the marginalised to mock, resist and subvert the mainstream. This function renders satire as the subaltern’s expression. Second, satire is manipulated by the mainstream to vex and marginalise the other and further deprive the peripheral of their share of power” (Zekavat, 2017, 16).

Gendered satire is a powerful rhetorical tool that points out normative transgressions and reinforces the socially appropriate behaviour. It is influenced by social structures, power dynamics and is culturally nuanced. In both the anecdotes discussed in the preceding section, humour, in this case uses satire, to mock and ridicule women and men. Men mocking women and women mocking men reflects the shifting power dynamics in society even though the structures are dominantly patriarchal. The humour or the funny arises from the reinforcement or subversion of gender stereotypes and societal norms. Berger describes humour as “not so much a subject, as an attitude, a stance, a sense of things that we adopt, that colours the way we function in the universe.” (Berger, 1987, 14)

It is difficult to explain why something is considered to be funny. What is funny from one point of view may not be funny for another person. The funny in humour depends upon the social perspective and one’s spatial location. Humour allows us flexibility within social. In jokes which mock men, the humour often comes from highlighting the absurdity or hypocrisy of gender roles and societal expectations. These jokes by punching up, challenge stereotypes. The humour here or the element of the funny lies in the clever critique of societal norms and the empowerment of those challenging them.

Folk tales from ancient Greece, Rome and even India have mocking and disparaging humour. This can be seen with characters like Scheherazade³ who kept the king amused with her witty tales; or in the stories from the Pañcatantra with witty women and mocking laughter. Cixous (Cixous et al., 1976) writes about the derisive *Laugh of the Medusa* in the Greek tradition which mocks men. In India you have the laughter of Goddess *Kali*, which is menacing, wild and strikes terror in the hearts of Gods and men alike. Satire in ancient India was often used to expose those in power to public scrutiny. Indian folk tales often depict a king’s court with a jester (*vidushak*), mocking and making fun of the king (Pattanaik & Jajodia, 2014). Humour or *hasya ras* is also one of the nine *rasas*⁴ or emotions in the ancient Sanskrit literature. It has been used to critique the social and the political (Bharata, M. & Iyengar, 1977).

This paper explores humour in the Pañcatantra, from a gendered perspective. The Pañcatantra, is a collection of Indian folktales set in 300 CE. In this paper we analyse stories from the Pañcatantra to understand the ways in which satire has been used to mock women and men. The stories use wit, exaggeration, irony, parody and burlesque to poke fun at women who

² Satire has been classified as Juvenalian, Menippean and Horatian. Juvenalian satire attacks a single target like a politician in an aggressive and abrasive way. Menippean satire is directed towards a more general target like a religious group or feminists. Horatian satire is mild and light hearted and is gentle (Stinson, 2019).

³ *Tales from the Thousand and one nights* (Haddawy, H. (Trans.). (2008).

⁴ The nine rasas or emotions in Indian performing arts and poetry and prose include *Sringara* (erotic), *Hasya* (comic), *Karuna* (pathetic), *Raudra* (furious), *Vira* (heroic), *Bhayanaka* (terrible), *Bibhatsa* (odious) and *Adbhuta* (marvellous) and *Santa* (peace) (Bharata, M. & Iyengar, 1977).

transgress social norms, and also at men who are cuckolded and fooled by women. Humour is a part of the social life in which these stories are set.

Section I will give a brief overview on the ways in which humour has been analysed and studied by scholars.

Section II will acquaint the reader with the Pañcatantra and its narrative structure.

Section III will analyse some stories from the Pañcatantra from the perspective of gendered humour. The analysis will also focus on popular tropes like the unfaithful and treacherous wife and the foolish husband.

The last and final section will conclude and link the analysis in the preceding sections to a larger gendered context.

2. METHOD

Using a qualitative methodology the paper is based on a close reading of the Pañcatantra from the perspective of gender and humour. The paper through a textual analysis and deep reading identifies and analyses stories with a gendered dimension of humour. There are five stories which have been identified and analysed for the portrayal of gendered identities using humour and satire. We identify the ways in which satire functions in these stories. Thematically the analysis of the stories focuses on specific instances in the stories that use humour as a rhetorical strategy to denigrate and/ or subvert gender appropriate behaviour. The semantic contexts and the ways in which the play with words reflect the social structures will also be explored.

2.1. Section I: Understanding Humour

Humour was not considered a serious topic for consideration by philosophers from the earliest times to the twentieth century. Generally humour was mentioned only in a paragraph or so in the main text. Henri Bergson in 1900 (Bergson, 1900/1911) was the first to write on laughter in his book *Laughter*⁵. Humour in the Western tradition was for the longest time considered to be scornful, mocking and negative. Philosophers like Plato and Aristotle believed that people who laughed lacked dignity and self-control and that it was malicious and insolent. The Bible too deemed laughter to be mocking and scornful. It was linked to negative emotions like sloth, idleness, lust and lack of self-control. As late as the seventeenth century Thomas Hobbes and Rene Descartes viewed laughter as negative (Morreall 2023).

The earliest theories on humour by the classical philosophers in the West theorised on humour on the basis of - the Superiority theory, the Relief Theory and the Incongruity theory. The superiority theory, dating back to the ancient Greek philosophers, like Plato, and Aristotle suggests that humour arises from a sense of superiority. According to this view, we laugh at the misfortunes or shortcomings of others, because it makes us feel superior and better about ourselves in comparison. The relief theory in the late 19th century posits that laughter serves as a release. According to Freud (1905), humour allows us to express thoughts and feelings

⁵ Henri Bergson, a French philosopher, explores the nature of laughter and comedy in his work 'Laughter: an essay on the meaning of the comic'. According to Bergson, the essence of comedy lies in the contrast between mechanical or inflexible aspects of human behaviour and the flexibility and spontaneity of life itself. He believed that laughter serves as a corrective force, breaking down rigid social conventions and bringing individuals back to a more natural state. He argued that comedy often arises from situations where individuals adhere closely to societal norms, or become overly self-absorbed, resulting in a loss of vitality and spontaneity.

that might otherwise be depressed or socially unacceptable. Laughter provides a way to release emotions and relieve psychological discomfort (Morreall, 2012). The incongruity theory popularised by philosophers like Immanuel, Kant (1790 (1911)), and later influenced by scholars such as Arthur Schopenhauer (1818/1844 (1907)) and Max Eastman (1936), suggest that humour arises from a violation of expectations or incongruity between what is expected, and what actually occurs. According to this view, we find something funny when it defies expectations in a surprising or unexpected way. Incongruity theory emphasises the element of surprise and the sudden shift in perspective that leads to laughter. Each of these theories offer a different perspective on the psychological and social mechanisms underlying humour and laughter (Morreall, 2012).

Over the next two centuries scholars writing on laughter included Herbert Spencer, John Dewey, Kant, Beattie, Schopenhauer and Søren Kierkegaard (Morreall, 2012). Philosophers Max Eastman (1936), Ted Cohen (1999) and later Morreall (2023) were amongst those who linked laughter and humour to play and joy.

For the feminists, freedom from social strictures, framed the way that they analysed and wrote on humour. Feminist scholarship on the intersections of gender and humour links it to misogyny and patriarchy. Feminists also use humour and satire for cracking jokes at the expense of men. Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (2011[1949]) and Helene Cixous in her essay *The Laugh of the Medusa* (Cixous et al., 1976) were amongst the earliest feminists to write on satire. Beauvoir writing on the battle between men and women states that, women have a “double and deceptive image” (Beauvoir, 2011 [1949], 250) since on the one hand she is vital for man’s existence but on the other hand women oppose man through “indifference, even with her mockery and her laughter” (Beauvoir, 2011 [1949], 25). Cixous (1976) tracing laughter and humour to classical Greek literature, argues that on the one hand women are portrayed as apotropaic, with the power to avert evil and on the other hand they are castaway from civic life. Cixous urges women to assert their power and break away from this phallogocentric control. Laughter for her becomes a symbol of defiance by women. This is also seen in Butler’s ‘Gender Trouble’ (Butler, 1990) and ‘Bodies that matter’ (1993). Butler analyses the mocking of the gender binary by the drag queens through their carnivalesque performances which are a parody of the feminine and the masculine. Laughter is the first form of liberation for Luce Irigaray (1985). While discussing sexist humour Shifman and Lemish (2010) posit that sexist humour attacks women either explicitly or implicitly, who are perceived as inferior, representations of women are stereotypical and men are portrayed as superior to women. Feminist humour for them opposes such sexist depictions and is liberating and empowering. Willett and Willett (2019) critique the three theories of superiority, relief and incongruity (discussed in the preceding section), argue that these theories have not taken into account the multiple layers that power that frame discourses of comic voices. While not rejecting the theories they suggest that multiple discourses of humour need to be considered. Humour from the margins and subversive voices should also be included in any analysis. Further any understanding of humour for them cannot be complete without taking into account the impact of affects and “laughter and humour originate in social play” (Willett and Willett, 2019, 15). They challenge the binary of humour as serious and playful since it can be in between as well.

For Umberto Eco (1984) humour is to be understood within a larger discursive framework and context. Bakhtin (1984), like Eco, contends that humour allows us freedom and equality and it is akin to a carnivalesque space. Humour creates a space for interaction in which everyday order and hierarchy are suspended. It is the laughter of all people. Tragedy and comedy are close cousins and Eco while writing on this connection writes that tragedy is when a transgression is committed by someone who is a likable character and we identify

with the hero who is full of remorse. For him comedy is when there is a transgression by someone who has violated the social norms and deserves to be chastised by those who are morally upright.

Discussions on laughter and women are also to be found in the work of Lee Siegel (1987) in the Indian classical mythology and Sanskrit texts. The modalities of comedy even though they are rooted in classical Sanskrit texts are to be found in our day to day lives. Satirical laughter strips away all illusions and masks behind which people hide. Satire involves an exaggerated portrayal of various social characters and roles i.e. *the dramatis personae* (Siegel 1987, xiv). The *dramatis personae* through satirical comedy lays bare the facades behind which people hide. This is much like Eco's (1984) and Bakhtin's (1984) discussions on the carnivalesque space and the performances by drag queens by Butler (1993). The depictions are generally exaggerated portrayals of everyday roles highlights the shortcomings of people.

Discussions on humour and wit in mythology and folktales are also to be found in Greek, Roman and Islamic literature amongst others. The portrayal of humour in these is generally negative and women are portrayed in negative roles as scheming and manipulative. Konstan (Konstan, 2015) on writing on gendered humour in classical Greece literature contends that there isn't any overt humorous hostility towards women, rather men laugh at themselves and at the ways in which women fool them. The tales have adulterous wives who deceive their husbands- much like in the Pañcatantra.

Martha Bayless (Bayless, 2015) writing on medieval comic genres discusses the ways in which comic tales, and jest books tales, creates a world of gender equality much like a 'mini-or pocket Utopia.' (Bayless, 2015, 31) She investigates whether women in this utopia have an equal status and privilege as men. Though women do manage to hoodwink men but when analysed in the larger semantics of the social world these women are morally culpable. The morals of these stories are misogynistic set in a patriarchal world. The comic and the jest books create a world in which women are prized and disparaged in the same breath much like Simone de Beauvoir's analysis.

Didem Havlioğlu (2015) discusses humour in the context of the Islamic classical and folk artistic and literary forms. She discusses the didactic ways in which humour is freeing yet imprisoning. Sexual innuendo and double meaning words and phrases illustrate ways in which humour allows you freedom of expression without outwardly violating social conventions.

In the world of Pañcatantra much like the Greek, medieval and Islamic tales women are free, for example, to explore their sexuality but are bound by social norms. There has been no attempt to analyse the Pañcatantra from the perspective of humour and gender⁶. An analysis of humour in Indian folktales and also the Pañcatantra has yet to be explored. This paper seeks to address this gap.

Humour can best be understood and analysed from different theoretical vantage points. Following the analysis by Eco, Bakhtin, Cixous, Siegel, Butler and Irigaray- the focus here is on understanding the ways in which humour acts as a liberating force for all. The stories are set in a social world in which humour is freeing and the rules of the carnival apply in the everyday. There is a suspension of everyday rules in the Pañcatantra with exaggerated depictions for example of sexually liberated women caught in-flagrante like the characters of Havlioğlu's tales. The analysis is also based on Konstan's and Cixous' portrayal of women

⁶ Shinde (2015) has analysed the Pañcatantra from a feminist perspective with a focus on patriarchy and subordination of women.

who laugh mockingly at men, subverting patriarchy. There is also the tragic laughter of the heroic men who laugh at themselves and at whom the audience laughs out of sympathy since they have fallen short on socially approved gendered performativity (Butler, 1990). The humour exists as a playful fluid phenomenon with sometimes men mocking women and at other times women mock men.

2.2. Section II: The Pañcatantra: Narrative Structure

Franklin Edgerton wrote in 1924, that the “Pañcatantra has played an important role in the development of literature the world over. It is in fact widely read and translated in several languages” (in Olivelle, 1997, ix). It has been a part of rich oral tradition in India with grandparents and parents often narrating these stories to reinforce good morals. The tales centre around themes like good overpowering evil, the pitfalls of lying and deceit, loyalty, friendship, greed etc.

Some regard the Pañcatantra as a *śāstra* i.e. a technical scientific treatise and more specifically as a *niti śāstra* that is a treatise on government for kings and statesmen. It is written originally in Sanskrit by Viṣṇuśarman⁷. The stories are a collection of animal fables where the animals are presented as anthropomorphised beings that behave and conduct themselves like human beings imbued with cultural perceptions. Some stories also have human characters. The semantic and the generic context appear to be that of children’s fables. But a deeper reading of the text reveals that it is not just about good and moral behaviour nor is it merely about good governance. Using humour the stories lampoon those who are perceived to be social deviants.

The world of animals appears as a metaphor for the world of humans. Their names have to be understood semantically. For instance *Madonomatta*, the lion intoxicated with pride; *Damanka*, the wily jackal. As the stories progress we begin to develop an intuitive understanding of what the name implies and the names and the characters become synecdochic⁸. We begin to expect the evil and crafty behaviour of the crocodile, the foolishness and oversexed behaviour of the ass, the egoistic dumb lion king, the clever and quick witted monkey, the noble elephant, the charming feminine deer and so on.

The stories whether of animals or people are set in a caste based Indian society with the brahmins at the top of the hierarchy. The caste name also becomes synecdochic with each caste having some characteristics associated with it for both humans and the anthropomorphised animals. In the world of these fables, carpenters and washermen are low castes and are also foolish, often duped and cuckolded by their wives; the brahmins are holy on the face of it but greedy and wicked behind the everyday masks. Synecdoche is also seen in the gendered aspects of all stories. Synecdochic depictions of ‘good’ women are as women who are married with children and such women are depicted as moral and upright and one does not make fun of them or mock them. Alternative synecdochic depictions are of married women without children who are morally suspect or of single women beyond the socially appropriate marriageable age. It appears that women are generally mocked and are depicted as dim-witted and always suspected of treachery as opposed to the more morally upright male animal or human. However, a feminist reading of the stories show us a world in which women are not powerless and there are instances when they outwit men and laugh at them. They challenge their synecdochic depictions and subvert them.

⁷ Some attribute the Pañcatantra to Vasubhaga (Olivelle, 1997).

⁸ A figure of speech where the part stands for the whole.

2.3. Section III: The Stories

The world of the Pañcatantra resembles the real world in which these stories are situated.

Satire is visible in the stories with the theme of adulterous, lecherous, and treacherous women. The wives in the fables fool their ‘faithful, honest, and hardworking’ husbands and cuckold them. The laughter is based on wit and humour where the funny is found in the fooling and the mockery of the husband. Following Willett and Willett (2019) the humour here is analysed as a fluid and dynamic category. The women are not without agency and they outwit the men and they try to hold their own against them though not always successfully. There are instances when they punch up. In this section we will discuss three stories with humans as the characters and two stories with anthropomorphised animal characters.

In the story ‘A Weaver Cuts the Nose of a Bawd’⁹, the weaver suspects his wife of adultery and in cahoots with a bawd. To catch her red handed he sets a trap. However the clever women outwit him. In a drunken rage, the weaver believing the bawd to be his wife cuts off her nose and mocks her “see how beautiful you look! Let’s see who’ll ask for you now “ (Olivelle, 1997, 24). The misogynistic moral of the story is that the bawd is punished for her evil ways and her injuries are a punishment for her immoral and loose behaviour. The heroes of the story, the cuckolded husbands- the weaver and the barber, who is the husband of the bawd, become the butt of mocking laughter.

The funny is in the fooling of the men and the punishments meted out to the women for their transgressions- the beating of the wife and the cutting of the nose. These are acts of grotesque violence, but they find their place in the everyday. The men become tragic comic characters who evoke sympathetic laughter for being fooled. There is satire, irony, and dark humour in this tale.

Themes of unfaithfulness and of fooling the husband are also to be found in ‘How the Unfaithful Wife Tricks her Foolish Husband’.¹⁰ The story has a theme of the adulterous wife and the suspecting husband. In this story too the suspecting husband tries to catch his wife with her paramour but is instead fooled by her. The woman in order to avoid being caught in flagrante says, “What a stupid question! Women, after all, have loose morals and do all sorts of reckless things. Why say more- if they didn't have noses they would doubtless even eat shit. That's the long in the short of it. But if I was to hear that even the slightest harm comes to my husband, I would end my life then and there.” (Olivelle, 1997, 129) The wife is

⁹ Book 1 sub story 3.2. Bawd means a woman in charge of a brothel and a prostitute. The story is about a weaver whose wife fools him. The weaver suspects his wife of immoral sexual behaviour and sets a trap for her. The clever wife outwits him and is not caught. But the suspicious husband beats her up and ties her. He drowns his sorrows in drink and falls asleep. In the meantime the bawd who was facilitating the wife, fearing the loss of business temporarily replaces the wife. The weaver wakes up and in a drunken rage chops off the bawd’s nose and falls asleep again. The wife returns and frees the bawd. The wife wakes up her husband and tells him that her nose was whole again because she was faithful to him. The weaver is fooled and overjoyed. The bawd clutching her chopped off nose returns home and tries to trick her barber husband into believing that he had mistakenly cut off her nose. The matter reaches the King’s court and an ascetic who had witnessed the whole thing reveals the truth. The bawd is punished for her immoral and evil ways.

¹⁰ Book III Story 6. In this story the carpenter suspects his wife of having a paramour. He pretends to go out and sneaks back in hiding under the cot. The unsuspecting wife invites her lover home and proceeds to make merry on the same cot. However her foot accidentally brushes against the hiding husband and she realizes that her husband had set out to catch her in flagrante. She tells her lover that she loves her husband more than him. On hearing this declaration of love the overjoyed husband picks up the cot with the wife and the lover and runs about the village in sheer happiness. The people of the village laugh at his foolishness.

denigrating herself humorously while at the same time mocking the men- her paramour and her husband. The author calls the carpenter “a fool” and continues “becomes appeased by soothing words.” (Olivelle, 1997, 129)

The humour as in the earlier story is satirical and ironic with the unfaithful wife tricking the ‘honest and faithful’ husband. The fooled husband is portrayed as a tragic character. The depiction of women is as corrupt and sexually voracious. The wife does fool him and makes him behave foolishly in public making him the butt of laughter. The trope of a corrupt sexually active woman is found in other stories too like ‘The Old Merchant and His Young Wife.’¹¹ The title eloquently captures the theme of the story. Sexual desire of the old man for the young wife is socially approved and sanctioned. Denial of conjugal rights in this case is considered a severe social transgression. Her denial of marital rights to her husband renders her as unworthy of even a thief. The thief says to the husband, “You have nothing, I see, I’d want to steal.” (Olivelle, 1997, 127) The men -the husband and the thief mock her and laugh at her. Her lowly outcaste status is a synecdochic depiction of women who do not fulfil their conjugal duties and thus become an object of ridicule and laughter. Though it’s not clear in the story whether the wife grants the old man any conjugal rights beyond the incident!

The anthropomorphised animals too are represented in the same semantic framework. The story ‘On Losing What You Have Gained’¹² is about male friendship of a monkey and a crocodile that is destroyed by a gossiping and insecure crocodile wife. The trope of the scheming and gossiping wife/ woman of this tale is also commonly found in folktales. The depiction of the uncontrollable and greedy wife is used as a negative misogynistic portrayal to create humour. The crocodile says, “What one does **for a woman** in this world; Is both the worst and most essential; Here I am, committing and condemning; For a **woman’s sake this horrible deed** (Olivelle, 1997, 150: emphasis added). The male hero, the crocodile and the monkey are again depicted as tragic comic characters who garner the sympathy of the audience much like the male characters of the tales discussed earlier. In a shift of power dynamics the wife is successful in making the husband spend time with her and not with his buddies.

The story of ‘The Ass without Ears or a Heart’¹³ is again on the sexual desires of both the sexes. In this story the ass loses his life because of his lust for a female ass. Sexual desire is

¹¹ Book III, Story 4. This is the story of a young woman married to an old man. The woman avoids all sexual contact with her husband. One day a thief enters their house out of fear she clutches her husband. The husband is overjoyed and thanks the thief. The thief sympathizes with the poor husband and mocks the wife and calls her unworthy. The merchant out of a sense of shared brotherhood lets the thief go.

¹² Book IV frame story. The story is about a friendship between a monkey and a crocodile. They spend many hours eating sweet fruit and lounging about. The crocodile’s wife is suspicious of her husband of infidelity since he spends so many hours away from home. When she shares her woes with her friends the friends adding fuel to the fire say that they had seen him with a female monkey. The wife then pretends to be very ill with the only cure being the heart of a monkey. The sad crocodile sets out to invite his friend home so that he could kill him. The clever monkey senses that all is not well and manages to outwit the crocodile and escapes.

¹³ Book IV Story 1. This is a story about an ass who gets fooled by a jackal to enter a lion’s den. As soon as the ass enters the lion’s lair the hungry lion pounces on him. The ass manages to escape. But the wily jackal convinces the ass that it was a female ass who had pounced upon him out of lust. The foolish ass goes back to the cave and is killed. The lion before feasting goes to bathe. The greedy jackal meanwhile eats the ears and the heart of the ass. On being questioned by the lion on the missing ears and heart the jackal convinces the lion that the ass did not have either of the body parts. He says that if the ass had a heart and ears he would have been wiser and would not have returned.

couched in the absurd and the carnivalesque depiction. The male ass is again a tragic comic character who gets fooled and killed because of a woman, although an imaginary one.

The stories are also about the covert depiction of sexual desires of both the sexes. There is erotic humour in the stories. However it is sanctioned and approved for the males even if they are much older than their wives. Any acts of violence like the beating of the wives, the physical disfigurement, the forcing of the young wives to allow conjugal rights to an old husband are all sanctioned. A feminist telling of the tales give us instances in which women have successfully made fools of their men. There is a subversion of patriarchy. The power dynamics are constantly shifting. For women there is a subtext of sexual liberation with many of the characters taking on lovers. We laugh at the cuckolded outwitted husbands who appear ridiculous. Humour too vacillates between the serious and the playful.

3. Section IV: Conclusion

In the preceding sections we have discussed the gendered misogynistic portrayal of women couched in humour and fun. The stories may have been set in the past, and in India but their gendered representations resonate with the present and cut across cultures.

The humour in these stories is tongue in cheek. The humour is restrained and the funny is generally seen in a barbed and a veiled comment and is full of derision. The function of the humour here is to enforce social norms albeit in a violent and grotesque manner. These are acts that are comic but also bizarre and repulsive leading to disfigurement. It operates in a carnivalesque space in which the normal rules of behaviour are suspended. The cutting of the nose, the wife beating, and the disfigurement of the ass are exaggerations but believable ones. It is a censure on the immoral and corrupt behaviour in this case always women. The stories have a sense of righteousness, ire and justice that appeals to a shared set of cultural beliefs and norms and practices.

The Pañcatantra as a text through the medium of entertainment is about adulterous couples caught in flagrante or narrowly escaping being caught. There are assignations and lessons on marital duty and gender hierarchy. Satire is also used by women to resist and subvert patriarchy. The stories from the Pañcatantra provide insightful illustrations of the female characters as clever, resourceful, and quick witted. These stories challenge prevailing stereotypes that confined women to passive or submissive roles. The women in these stories turn over traditional power dynamics. They do manage to poke fun at the men and to deflate their patriarchal balloons a little. There is laughter and mockery of the man who loses his honour and is cuckolded. Patriarchal authority is under attack by insubordinate wives. From the feminine perspective it is the laughter of assertion of feminine agency and subversion. Humour is bound to mechanisms of power, so the feminist laughter is one in which power is with the women and not with the men. It is laughter which is cathartic, joyous and gleeful at managing to outwit their husbands.

The laughter here is serious business. The humour reflects the dynamics of the shifting power structure between the men and women. The modalities of comedy imbued in the Pañcatantra do not belong to the past but reflect the present. Satire and humour are used to reinforce hidden structures of power in society. The satire that is used to invoke laughter-temporally extends across time and is a never-ending web or tantra.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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