



## Image and Text in Ravi Shankar and Vikram Seth's *Beastly Tales from Here and There*

Samarth Singhal

"Walt's view of the world... it is a world already colonized with phantom inhabitants who have to conform to Disney's notions of it... when something is said about the child/noble savage, it is really *The Third World* one is thinking about... The imaginative world of the child has become a political Utopia of a social class..." (Dorfman and Mattelart 48).

Dorfman and Mattelart speak of a simulated imperialist performance intrinsic to the Disney industry and imply that Disney's 'notions' help place the child into a clarified space within which s/he can entertain and perhaps be acceptably exotic. For Dorfman and Mattelart, Disney's address to the child is also an address to the Third World. They analyse particular Donald Duck episodes set in the Third World to arrive at an intimate relationship between infantilization and spatial politics. Their work is a particularly germane point of entry into a study of Ravi Shankar and Vikram Seth's *Beastly Tales from Here and There* (1991). Clearly, Dorfman and Mattelart ask questions of children's fiction while reading cultural colonization into Disney. As a corollary, their work suggests that politics can always be made to reveal itself in the study of children's fiction. The present study, in the same vein, proceeds to explore Vikram Seth and Ravi Shankar's collaboration. In the process of discussing Shankar's illustrations and Seth's text as examples of print history, the paper makes use of categories like dissent, comedy and caricature in order to elaborate upon the manipulation of power inherent in children's fiction. A central concern is to question if the visual addresses its audience differently, or indeed addresses its audience at all under textual duress. The complexity of such an undertaking becomes manifest when we understand that 'reading' an image or text may refer to a wider gap between reading text and reading images. The paper, however, attempts to move beyond a close reading of texts and images to ask if the colony or indeed the postcolony exacts a managerial profit from its visualization in the last decade of the twentieth century.

The *Panchtantra*, *The Jungle Book* (1894), and *Pashu: Animal Tales from Hindu Mythology* (2014), while divorced from each other in space and time, are congruous as they allow animals to talk and dramatize human conflicts through animal conversation. The fantastic nature of this conversation is centrally organized by a desire to comment on human reality (Devadawson 116, Swinfen 17-18) or consequences of human behavior. Swinfen (43), however, is unwary of agential capacity of these animals beyond the freewill imposed upon them by the storyteller. For her, the animal fable, however fantastic, must

stem to socioeconomic reality in analysis. "The best animal fantasies thus always operate on two levels: the animals serve as mirrors or models for human behavior, but at the same time they are also true animals in their own right." Swinfen is insistent that the animals be read as animals per se and not merely as human instruments of didactic interpellation.

Vikram Seth's steady progression in the tales toward an apprehension of this social reality is crucial. It seems to feed into the transparent sociopolitical context imagined by Devadawson for the animal fable. It is as if Seth is aware of the human-determined performances by animals and he revels in that knowledge. This would imply that Swinfen's anxiety regarding the agency of these animals is rendered unjustified. "The Elephant and the Tragopan" is the acme of this acknowledgement of animal performance as the tale meanders through party politics and media circuses. It is imperative to imagine Seth as a sophisticated self-aware artist who displays awareness about generic conventions by breaking them.

His sophistication becomes evident in the insouciant care with which he allows the reader a hint of where the tales have been 'borrowed' from. He claims that the tales are from "India, China, Greece, Ukraine, and The Land of Gup". A cursory glance at this list confirms an authorial position that potentially transcends national territories, especially the Indian subcontinent. If one were to assume his intervention to be authentically cosmopolitan in its reappropriation of fables from various cultures, then one would conclude that Seth is attempting a maneuver of astronomical historical and cultural depth. "Folk tales were used to create a body of ancient cultural traditions that was central to the project of nationalism, within which there was a need to include the child. The child becomes the focus of the process of creating a new consciousness: that of the citizen of the nation." (Gupta and Chatterjee 3). Gupta and Chatterjee describe an intimate link between children's fiction in India and the idea of the child. They lay emphasis on the nationalist project that inspires the inclusion of the child. Seth responds to this ideal in the particular selection of the sources. Such a consciousness is peculiarly postcolonial as it juxtaposes five divergent spaces- India, China, Greece, Ukraine, and the Land of Gup- that have experienced and inflicted colonial violence, and each of these spaces frame narratives of children to qualify the nation building agenda. The clear reference to Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*(1990) is an emphatic reaffirmation of postcolonial anxiety that marks the selection. The Land of Gup in Rushdie's text is under invasive threat by its obverse: the Land of Chup. Gup refers to gossip and volubility while chup to silence. Listing the particular sources allows Seth to outline the national imperative that animal tales function under.

As Seth strings them together, he attempts a rethinking of the imperium through animal fable putatively meant for the child born in a postcolonial world. In fact, the animal fable becomes a fable of protest. Animals usually considered vulnerable, like the rat, the monkey, the goat employ stratagems to outsmart the tormentor thus overturning typical relations of sovereignty. This carries an instantaneous affective appeal to geographies that have recently adopted self governance, say 1947 for India and Pakistan. The animals seem to allegorize the movement of regions from being colonized to being 'independent'.

The ten tales composed by Seth elaborate the process of acquiring agency, culminating in *The Elephant and The Tragopan* where Seth abrogates the appearance of folklore and topically addresses contemporary debates of land, rehabilitation and ownership. Exactly half of his reworked fables feature creatures who must struggle to keep out of the food chain. The monkey, the beetle, the mouse, the cock, the goat in "The Crocodile and the Monkey", "The Eagle and the Beetle", "The Mouse and the Snake", "The Cat and the Cock",

“The Goat and the Ram” respectively tackle predators and thereby avenge themselves on figures of authority. The predator is a figure of authority owing to the narrative power it can exercise, and thus becoming the excuse for the prey to transform into a trickster in order to wrest agency from the predator. However, the other half are stories of ambiguous coding, and overturn the agency gleaned before. The trickster figure remains central in the other half but transforms now into the victimizer. In the last tale, agency is thoroughly complicated and the effectiveness of collective action is blunted by a collusion of party politics and media reception. In other words, the stories feature both the use of the trickster as a subject fighting for control and as a victim turned victimizer.

In fact, these latter stories may be read as cautionary tales meant to terrify the agency that the bullied character has acquired early on. This is a direct manifestation of the maneuver present in children’s fiction. “The basic paradox that underlies all discussions about children’s literature is, after all, the fact that the literature is written by adults, while the child-consumers have very little to say about the entire process.” (Gupta and Chatterjee 4). Seth is interesting as he is able to bypass this maneuver. His tales speak to both caregivers and wards in the division of the tales into those that inspire agency and those that caution such an agency. In Seth’s hands it is a calculated double maneuver meant to appeal to adults and children. Yet, the figures of authority- the predators for instance-stand in for the parents and decision makers and Seth’s permits them to actively permeate the tales. Thus, the tales become examples of didacticism despite an appeal to children.

However, since it is obvious that Seth’s cheeky introduction alludes to nation states who have struggled with imperialism, the complication of agency serves as a scathing comment on the agency wrested from the empire in the movement towards self rule. “The Elephant and the Tragopan” invokes contemporary marginalization of tribal land as the animals wait for the destruction of their habitat, while “The Frog and the Nightingale” punctures the rhetoric of merit in the favour of profit expansion as the manager Frog survives and the singer Nightingale perishes. The contemporary nation state has failed the ‘tryst with destiny’ and must now negotiate with its own investment in the oppression of its citizens.

Agency may underscore the affective appeal that a narrative of triumph extracts. But, the anxiety of governance is palpable in everyday realities, especially in the unchanging governmental response to tribal groups, and towards caste oppressed. If the colonial superpower distilled wealth and sharpened divisions in colonized societies, then the post-colonial nation does not seem to be intervening. As the victim turns victimizer, the postcolonial nation state finds itself negotiating with internal fissures. For instance, the publicized case of Shah Bano, the raging controversy effected by the Mandal Commission report, and the mob violence in 1984 after Operation Bluestar emphasize the traumatic turn national history takes post 1947. In which case the complication of agency in the animal fable may be read as a comment on the failure of a postcolonial undertaking, and the fable becomes a device to critique the status quo. Thus Seth’s work with the animal fable is a site of contradictory impulses: on the one hand, if his audience is meant to be children then the nature of the tales repudiates complete sympathy with the child. On the other, as the narrative folds in upon itself, by setting up agency only to compromise it, then it dramatizes the always already present ruptures in the fabric of a postcolonial state.

The beastly tales remind the readers of the intimate relation between protest and power. Seth opens the trickster up and demonstrates the other side of protest. Cunning is

used to demonstrate protest, but it can as easily be used to reproduce power. This power is to be revered and feared. Such a stance on the reproduction of power transforms Seth's tales into narratives that appear to be less patronizing to the child, and might even be considered 'objectionable'. For instance, "The Hare and the Tortoise" invites the reader to think about the desirability of the Hare losing the race, but manipulating social media through her youth, beauty, and charm. The fluidity of the hero and the villain compromises narrow normative ideas of didacticism. Therefore, the tales appear to cater to children only and not to the caregivers. At the same time Seth cannot risk antagonizing the caregiver reader. Hence, he retains the doublespeak in advocating caution about power accrued through dissent.

The beast fable, in any form is a problematic mode of thought and other forms of talking animals like the Disney industry or the Discovery Channel, where the animals perform their races and nationalities are as mediated by genre and culture. Seth does the best he can in reappropriating the content of the fables, especially by inserting what McLuhan calls 'new media' into his universe but the expectations that he capitalizes on do not change, and this may explain his easy appropriation by the CBSE. This insertion of the new pushes the tales into the present, emptying out the fabular, demonstrating the devices of the fabular to be merely devices. "The Elephant and the Tragopan" uses the idea of the media circus for instance. As a result, these are tales reconfigured for the post Nehruvian welfare state. The last tale is the key to this response to the inadequacy of welfare schemes. The irony is that reworking these tales may comment on governments and power but also reaffirms the fear and caution of power, thus rendering the process didactic.

At this point, it must be noted that Seth may not intend to create fiction for children. It is in the reception of these tales by the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE), in India, that we can discuss Seth's work as children's fiction. The CBSE has included "The Frog and the Nightingale" in their class X syllabus and the poem in school, is understood as innocuous, read as a witty narration of corruption in the country. It is significant that the tale finds itself being included in school syllabi despite the vivid nature of its dissent.

I will now discuss the speculation of protest, if any, that may replicate itself in Shankar's illustrations. The paradox of muting dissent through a parable of dissent, as in the CBSE's use of these tales, may be what Mirzoeff calls 'managing the subject of visual culture' (18) as the creator, the content and the reader are determined through a politics of compromised representation. In other words, the visual nature of this print element describes dissent but is also mobilized and managed by larger discourses of power that reproduce iniquitous relations of production. Related to this uneven distribution of readerly attention, the insignificant signature of the illustrator -which announces the 'social construction of the visual' (Mitchell175)- reminds the reader of the vague presence of the illustrator. The presence remains vague throughout the ten tales, and at most, the illustrator is only queried when understood as the creator of light hearted aesthetic pleasure. Therefore, if the illustration and the tale are meant to reinforce each other and if some of the comic power is mutual, then here the visual element in print seems to 'accompany' the textual, being lead by it. Twin management is visible here: that of image per se and of the image by text.

The first illustration in the text accompanies "The Monkey and the Crocodile" and is notable for its attention to detail. It bears the heart shaped necklace mentioned in the text and the invocation of the ideal "the table is laid", also as elaborated in the text. Shankar is

careful to dangle a solitary branch above the crocodile suggesting perhaps that the 'missus' is dining al fresco. Ironically, the guest becomes the dinner thus complicating the "table is laid" as both the dinner and the guest lie on the table. The crocodile by being visualized as a crocodile, and as a sartorially invested creature, exposes the 'beastly' nature of the tale, but also hides the beastliness in plain sight by visualizing it as social comedy. In other words the collapse between the sinuous body of the crocodile and the elegant costume forced on its shape leads to an oppositional emphasis. On the one hand, the heinous rupture of hospitality is underscored in the beastly body; on the other hand, the clothes, the distortion, and the paraphernalia of wealth undermine the beastliness of the tale by shifting attention to the comic nature of the scenario. The caricature obscures the moral message as it seems to extract comic mileage off a dressed up crocodile waiting for her choice meat. This ambivalence between the beastly and the comic is, in fact, determined by a powerful affective leverage of the comic in the use of caricature: the pleasure of the comic subordinating the anxiety of the beastly.

The question now is, if visual management occurs precisely at the use of caricature. Mirzoeff explains the 'management' of the 'subject' of visuality as an epistemological organization of both the content of the visual art and of audience. This takes Lacan's 'gaze' forward in order to imagine that both the viewer and the viewed are bound by an impulse to visual knowledge. For Mirzoeff, visual management would *also* work through caricature, but it would always already be innocuously working through all forms and genres that base themselves on visuality. It is possible to draw a relationship between caricature and the 'child', however, and to say that the comic image in its performance of contrast between expectation and fulfillment (Freudn.p.) socializes the child, and thus caricature in children's fiction is able to manage the subject of visual culture. Indeed, that is the crux of *How to Read Donald Duck*. If the joke underlines incongruity between the expected direction of the joke and its compromised fulfillment, and if as Freud argues, laughter is a statement of social cohesion then, the child reader of caricature is being socialized.

It seems as if the comic and caricature blunt any anxiety and transform the image into a source of pleasure. However, the method of the illustrator-caricature- is modified by the illustration's presence as accompanying print. The ill shaped body of the crocodile, the lipstick, the bangles, the expectant air are details of the image. The caricature must be detailed by Shankar, and emphasized in discussion, in order to understand the intent behind the image. The illustration intently imitates the double speak in the tale: the violation of hospitality and the violation of appearances. The violation of appearances, however, determines representation in social comedy. Therefore, the tale itself, after a close look at the illustration, can be *re-read* as a social comedy; the crocodile couple standing for a corrupt refinement and the monkey for the 'natural' pleasant peasant in his relationship to mangoes. In which case, Shankar more than Seth brings out the dissent in the story by visibilizing the problem, he locates the 'cause' as it were in the class of the crocodiles, which renders hollow their claims of refinement.

There seems to be a contradiction here. On the one hand, the joke in the visual renders the sincerity (regarding representation of national beastliness) of the tale obscure. On the other, the joke emphasizes an aspect of the text facilitating an allegorical class based reading. It must be remembered that a contradiction or confusion also exists within the 'text' of the tale: a doublespeak mediated both by parents and children, as explained earlier. If the text and the image offer differing systems of intelligibility, there is a similarity in the shape of the affect they exhort: movements away and toward radical critique. At the same time, as

Berger (5) opines, seeing is essential to locating the self in the world. The pull of the visual, in other words, may be pushed to the margin by the inclusion of the 'text' in print but it announces itself in this reinterpretation it offers, a rereading that is both pleasurable and critical.

For instance, the evocation of class based identity is more potent in the visual, as costume connoting privilege and wealth can be illustrated and read affectively around a character. Such a class analysis is replicated in "The Frog and the Nightingale", where the tale resonates with the unfair treatment meted out to the talented individual, especially in an environment of heightened capital management. The illustration makes this obvious not only in its composition of visual space but also in the content. The nightingale is spaced off in an insignificant corner, in a bubble of postcard landscape amidst a reduced moon and tree. The frog on the other hand, not only dominates the space but also reveals the social position he occupies. The costume that he is allowed is an exaggerated reworking of the costume of classical music experts and his hands move in accordance with the image of expert performers. Prabha Mallya, who illustrates the 2014 Puffin reprint of *Beastly Tales from Here and There*, names it the 'Hindustani Frog'. By combining frog and classical music, a literal relationship between class, caste and privilege is established as if to say that privilege transmogrifies the individual into a frog. The tale can now be thought of not as an expression of a hurt meritocracy but a hollow meritocracy where talent is a 'representation of imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence' (Althusser n. p.). The illustration suggests that the nightingale never has a chance, not only repeating the tale, but rereading her gullibility as an allegorical victimhood owing to capitalism, telling the readers that capitalism understands merely talented individuals as gullible.

Seth delays to finally arrive at making this relationship between social position and resource allocation to be made obvious, in "The Elephant and the Tragopan". Shankar on the other hand seems to diagnose it early on. Book illustrations usually function with a hierarchy of text over image, as the credits page shows very obviously, and while this may sound like a limitation, it may as Shankar shows, also be an opportunity of reinterpretation. Shankar does what Seth only reluctantly gestures to. In the relationship between Seth and Shankar, text and image are in conversation with each other as opposed to the image 'accompanying' the text.

In conclusion, we may venture answers to the questions posed at the beginning of this paper. It is clear by now that narratives of dissent are appropriated by the genre of children's fiction as Seth's text is received by the educational and reading apparatus in South Asia. The tales can be read as explicating dissent but erring on the side of caution. The tales complicate 'agency' and therefore render claims of the child reader deriving vicarious pleasure in the acquiring of agency suspect. Tales of dissent, when read to or read by school children reading CBSE prescribed textbooks, are used to mitigate or manage dissent. The visual, through illustrations, appeals to a different sense of knowledge acquisition, and attempts to make the cause of class visible, and so can be read as being in conversation with the text. Illustrations and caricature help magnify an awareness to dissent but owing to the potency of the visual as epistemological may be used for didactic purposes by making a literal or even an iconophilic reading of the visual. The management inherent in the visual, as in *The Monkey and the Crocodile*, therefore may be both liberating and constricting. The postcolonial nation state dramatizes ruptures in the contradictions explained above but it also curtails ambiguity through the use of state and ideological apparatuses.

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