

“A Flowering Tree”: A Woman’s Tale

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In this short paper I shall present a story about a woman, told by women in the Kannada-speaking areas of south India, hoping that you will hear even through my translation the voice of the woman-teller. Then I shall offer a reading of it for discussion and suggest in passing certain characteristics of the genre of women-centered tales.

Indian folktales told around the house usually have animals, men, women, and couples as central characters. There may be other secondary characters like supernatural beings, both divine and demonic, but they are not the focus of domestic oral tales. If the tales are comic, they invert and parody the values of the serious ones. In them, kings, tigers, demons, and even gods and goddesses could be figures of fun and act like morons, as they do not in the serious tales. King and clown change places. Thus the folktales of a culture have a number of contrastive genres in dialogue with each other. Each kind of tale has special characteristics, its own “chronotope,” if one wishes to invoke Bakhtin.

For instance, animal tales tend to be political, portraying how the powerless, the small, and the cunning sidestep or outwit the powerful. It is not surprising, therefore, that the *Pañcatantra*, a book of tales meant to educate princes on the ways of the world, should consist mostly of animal tales. Where men are protagonists, especially in tales of quest, women are secondary: they are usually part of the prize, along with half a kingdom; sometimes they help the hero in his quest for the magic flower or in his derring-do (for example, getting the milk of a tigress or slaying the ogre, thus qualifying him to marry the princess and receive his half of the kingdom). These stories end in marriage—for they speak of the emancipation of the hero from the parental yoke and of the setting up of a new family as he comes into his own. But in women-centered tales, the heroine is either already married or she is married early in the tale, and then her troubles begin. In a tale called “The Crab Prince” or “The Fish Prince” (*ēḍikumāra*, *mīnakumāra*) the young woman is often sold or married to a wild, murderous animal-bridegroom, and the rest of the story tells how she makes him human, handsome, and gentle. In another, the woman marries a

man fated to die soon (as Savitri does in the classic tale), vies with Yama the God of Death, and tricks him into giving her husband a long life (among other things). In “The Dead Prince and the Talking Doll,” he is already dead, predicted by astrologers to lie as a dead man until a good woman serves him for twelve years (or pulls out the thousands of needles from his body), after which he returns to life.

In such tales not only is the pattern of the tale different (and not easily accommodated by Propp’s schemes, which work well for male-centered tales), but the same symbols that occur elsewhere may take on different meanings. For instance, a snake in a male-centered tale is usually something to be killed, a rival phallus, if you will. In women-centered tales, that is, where women are the protagonists and also usually the tellers, snakes are lovers, husbands, uncles, donors, and helpers (see Ramanujan 1991a; Kakar 1989). Thus the meaning of the elements, the interpretation of the symbolism, depends on what kind of tale it is: a snake in an animal tale, a male-centered tale, and a women-centered tale is not the same animal. Far from being universal, symbols do not even mean the same thing as one moves from genre to genre. So the gender of the genre, if one may speak of such (and surely the gender of the teller, the listener, and the interpreter), becomes important in interpretation. A woman’s culturally constructed life-forms, her meaning-universe, is different from a man’s in such tales. This simple-minded essay is meant to further the exploration of this universe of women’s discourse.¹

Other kinds of women’s tales counter various constructs and stereotypes (held by both men and women), such as the passive female victim, conceptions of karma, or even chastity. Since I have treated these subjects elsewhere, I would like to focus here on a tale that speaks of a woman’s creativity, her agency, and the way it is bound up with her capacity for speech.

The rest of this paper will speak in some detail of one story—“A Flowering Tree”—collected in several versions in the Karnataka region over the last twenty years by me and fellow folklorists. Here is the story:

¹ This essay is part of a series that may be called Women’s Tales: They Tell a Different Story (see Ramanujan 1982, 1989, 1991b, 1993). As suggested in these papers, different kinds of women’s materials are relevant in constructing this story: proverbs and riddles used by women, female saints’ lives and poems, tales and *vrarakathās* told by women in women-only contexts, wedding songs, retellings of myths and epics of women, and so on. Folktales are part of this “female tradition,” yet need to be explored and seen as a whole in relation to other parts of the culture. The folktale universe (both men’s and women’s tales) itself is in a dialogue relation to the more official mythologies of the culture; see Ramanujan 1991b.

In a certain town, the king had two daughters and a son. The older daughter was married.

In the same town, there lived an old woman with her two daughters. She did menial jobs in order to feed and clothe and bring up her children. When the girls reached puberty, the younger sister said one day, "Sister, I've been thinking of something. It's hard on mother to work all day for our sakes. I want to help her. I will turn myself into a flowering tree. You can take the flowers and sell them for good money."

Amazed, the older sister asked, "How will you turn into a flowering tree?"

"I'll explain later. You first sweep and wash the entire house. Then take a bath, go to the well, and bring two pitchers full of water," said the younger sister.

The older sister listened to her carefully, swept and wiped and cleaned, took a bath, and brought two pitchers of water without touching them with her fingernails.

Right in front of their house stood a tall tree. The sister swept and wiped the ground under it too. Both girls then went there, and the younger one said, "Sister, I'll sit under this tree and meditate. Then you pour the water from this pitcher all over my body. I'll turn into a flowering tree. Then you pluck as many flowers as you want, but do it without breaking a sprout or tearing a leaf. When you're done, pour the water from the other pitcher over me, and I'll become a person again."

The younger sister sat down and thought of the Lord. The older one poured water from the first pitcher all over her sister. At once, her sister changed into a great big tree that seemed to stretch from earth to heaven. The older sister plucked the flowers carefully, without hurting a stalk, or sprout, or leaf. After she had enough to fill a basket or two, she emptied the second pitcher of water over the tree—and the tree became a human being again, and the younger sister stood in its place. She shook the water from her hair and stood up. They both gathered the flowers in baskets and brought them home. The flowers had a wonderful fragrance. They wove them into garlands.

"Where shall I sell them?" asked the elder sister. "Sister, why not take all of them to the king's palace? They will pay well. Mother is always doing such awful jobs for our sake. Let's pile up some money and surprise her," said the younger one.

So the older sister took the basketful of garlands before the king's palace and hawked her wares, crying, "Flowers, flowers, who wants flowers?" The princess looked out and said, "Mother, mother, the flowers smell wonderful. Buy me some." "All right, call the flower girl," said the queen. They both looked at the flowers, and they were lovely. The queen asked, "How much do you want for these?" "We are poor people, give us whatever you wish," said the older sister. They gave her a handful of coins and bought all the garlands.

When the older sister came home with the money, the younger one said, “Sister, sister, don’t tell mother. Hide it. Don’t tell anyone.”

They sold flowers like this for five days, and they had five handfuls of coins.

“Shall we show these to mother?” asked one.

“No, no, she’ll get angry and beat us,” said the other. The two girls were eager to make money.

One day the king’s son saw the flowers. They smelled wonderful. He had never seen such flowers anywhere. “What flowers are these; where do they grow; on what kind of tree; who brings them to the palace?” he wondered. He watched the girl who brought the flowers; one day he followed her home to the old woman’s house, but he couldn’t find a single flowering tree anywhere. He was quite intrigued. On his way home he tired himself out thinking, “Where on earth do they get such flowers?”

Early the next morning, while it was still dark, the king’s son went and hid himself in the tall tree in front of the old woman’s house. That day too, the girls swept and washed the space under the tree. As usual, the younger girl became the flowering tree, and after the older one had gently plucked all the flowers, the tree became the young woman again. The prince saw all this happen before his very eyes.

He came straight home and lay on his bed, face down. His father and mother came to find out what the matter was. He didn’t speak a word. The minister’s son, his friend, came and asked him, “What happened? Did anyone say anything that hurt you? What do you want? You can tell me.” Then the prince told him, bit by bit, about the girl turning into a flowering tree. “Is that all?” said the minister’s son, and reported it all to the king. The king called the minister and sent for the old woman. She arrived, shaking with fear. She was dressed in old clothes and stood near the door. After much persuasion, she sat down. The king calmed her and softly asked her, “You have two girls at your place. Will you give us one?” The old woman’s fears got worse. “How does the king know about my daughters?” she thought. She found her voice with difficulty and stammered, “All right, master. For a poor woman like me, giving a daughter is not as great a thing, is it, as your asking for one?”

The king at once offered her betel leaf and betel nut (*tāmbūla*) ceremonially on a silver platter, as a symbolic offer of betrothal. She was afraid to touch it. But the king forced it on her and sent her home.

Back home, she picked up a broom and beat her daughters. She scolded them.

“You bitches, where have you been? The king is asking after you. Where did you go?”

The poor girls didn’t understand what was happening. They stood there crying, “Amma, why are you beating us? Why are you scolding us?”

“Who else can I beat? Where did you go? How did the king hear about you?”

The old woman raged on. The terrified girls slowly confessed to what they had been doing—told her how the younger girl would turn into a

flowering tree, how they would sell the flowers and hoard the money, hoping to surprise their mother. They showed her their five handfuls of coins.

“How can you do such things, with an elder like me sitting in the house? What’s all this talk about human beings becoming trees? Who’s ever heard of it? Telling lies, too. Show me how you become a tree.”

She screamed and beat them some more. Finally, to pacify her, the younger sister had to demonstrate it all: she became a tree and then returned to her normal human self, right before her mother’s eyes.

The next day, the king’s men came to the old woman’s house and asked her to appear before the king. The old woman went and said, “Your Highness, what do you want of me?”

The king answered, “Tell us when we should set the date for the wedding.”

“What can I say, your Highness? We’ll do as you wish,” the old woman said, secretly glad by now.

The wedding arrangements began. The family made ritual designs on the wedding floor as large as the sky and built a canopied ceremonial tent (*pendal*) as large as the earth. All the relatives arrived. At an auspicious moment, the girl who knew how to become a flowering tree was given in marriage to the prince.

After the nuptial ceremony, the families left the couple alone together in a separate house. But he was aloof, and so was she. Two nights passed. Let him talk to me, thought she. Let her begin, thought he. So both the groom and the bride were silent.

On the third night, the girl wondered, “He hasn’t uttered a word. Why did he marry me?” She asked him aloud, “Is it for this bliss you married me?”

He answered roughly, “I’ll talk to you only if you do what I ask.”

“Won’t I do as my husband bids me? Tell me what you want.”

“You know how to turn into a flowering tree, don’t you? Let me see you do it. We can then sleep on flowers, and cover ourselves with them. That would be lovely,” he said.

“My lord, I’m not a demon, I’m not a goddess. I’m an ordinary mortal like everyone else. Can a human being ever become a tree?” she said very humbly.

“I don’t like all this lying and cheating. I saw you the other day becoming a beautiful tree. I saw you with my own eyes. If you don’t become a tree for me, for whom will you do that?” he chided her.

The bride wiped a tear from her eyes with the end of her sari, and said, “Don’t be angry with me. If you insist so much, I’ll do as you say. Bring two pitchers of water.”

He brought them. She uttered chants over them. Meanwhile, he shut all the doors and all the windows. She said, “Remember, pluck all the flowers you want, but take care not to break a twig or tear a leaf.”

Then she instructed him on how and when to pour water, while she sat in the middle of the room meditating on God. The prince poured one

pitcherful of water over her. She turned into a flowering tree. The fragrance of the flowers filled the house. He plucked all the flowers he wanted, and then sprinkled water from the second pitcher all over the tree. It became his bride again. She shook her tresses and stood up smiling.

They spread the flowers, covered themselves with them and went to bed. They did this again and again for several days. Every morning the couple threw out all the withered flowers from their window. The heap of flowers lay there like a hill.

The king’s younger daughter saw the heap of withered flowers one day and said to the queen, “Look, mother, brother and sister-in-law wear and throw away a whole lot of flowers. The flowers they’ve thrown away are piled up like a hill. And they haven’t given me even one.”

The queen consoled her, “Don’t be upset. We’ll get them to give you some.”

One day the prince had gone out somewhere. Then the king’s daughter (who had meanwhile spied and discovered the secret of the flowers) called all her friends and said, “Let’s go to the swings in the surahönně orchard. We’ll take my sister-in-law; she’ll turn into a flowering tree. If you all come, I’ll give you flowers that smell wonderful.”

Then she asked her mother’s permission. The queen said, “Of course, do go. Who will say no to such things?”

The daughter then said, “But I can’t go alone. Send sister-in-law.”

“Then get your brother’s permission and take her.”

The prince came there just then and his sister asked him, “Brother, brother! We’re all going to the surahönně orchard.”

“It’s not my wish that’s important. Everything depends on mother,” he answered.

So she went back to the queen and complained, “Mother, if I ask brother, he sends me to you. But you don’t really want to send her. So you are giving me excuses. Is your daughter-in-law more important than your daughter?”

The queen rebuked her, saying, “Don’t be rude. All right, take your sister-in-law with you. Take care of her and bring her back safely by evening.”

Reluctantly, the queen sent her daughter-in-law with the girls.

Everyone went to the surahönně orchard. They tied their swings to a big tree. Everyone was merrily playing on the swings. Abruptly the king’s daughter stopped all the games, brought every one down from the swings, and accosted her brother’s wife. “Sister-in-law, you can become a flowering tree, can’t you? Look, no one here has any flowers for her hair.” The sister-in-law replied angrily, “Who told you such nonsense? Am I not another human being like you? Don’t talk such crazy stuff.”

The king’s daughter taunted her, “Oho, I know all about you. My friends have no flowers to wear. I ask my sister-in-law to become a tree and give us some flowers, and look how coy she acts. You don’t want to become a tree for us. Do you do that only for your lovers?”

“*Che*, you’re awful. My coming here was a mistake,” said the sister-in-law sadly, and she agreed to become a tree.

She sent for two pitchers of water, uttered chants over them, instructed the girls on how and when to pour the water, and sat down to meditate. The silly girls didn’t listen carefully. They poured the water on her indifferently, here and there. She turned into a tree, but only half a tree.

It was already evening and it began to rain, with thunder and lightning. In their greed to get the flowers, they tore up the sprouts and broke the branches. They were in a hurry to get home. So they poured the second pitcher of water at random and ran away. When the princess changed from a tree to a person again, she had no hands and feet. She had only half a body. She was a wounded carcass.

Somehow, in that flurry of rainwater, she crawled and floated into a gutter. There she got stuck in a turning, a long way off from home.

Next morning, seven or eight cotton wagons were coming that way and a driver spotted a half-human thing groaning in the gutter. The first cart driver said, “See what that noise is about.”

The second one said, “Hey, let’s get going. It may be the wind, or it may be some ghost, who knows?”

But the last cart driver stopped his cart and took a look. There lay a shapeless mass, a body. Only the face was a beautiful woman’s face. She wasn’t wearing a thing.

“Ayyo, some poor woman,” he said in sorrow, and threw his turban cloth over her, and carried her to his cart, paying no heed to the dirty banter of his fellows. Soon they came to a town. They stopped their carts there and lowered this “thing” on to a ruined pavilion. Before they drove on, the cart driver said, “Somebody may find you and feed you. You will survive.” Then they drove on.

When the king’s daughter came home alone, the queen asked her, “Where’s your sister-in-law? What will your brother say?” The girl answered casually, “Who knows? Didn’t we all find our own way home? Who knows where she went?”

The queen panicked and tried to get the facts out of the girl. “Ayyo! You can’t say such things. Your brother will be angry. Tell me what happened.”

The girl said whatever came to her head. The queen found out nothing. She had a suspicion that her daughter had done something foolish. After waiting several hours, the prince talked to his mother.

“Amma, amma.”

“What is it, son?”

“What has happened to my wife? She went to the orchard to play on the swings and never came back.”

“O Rama, I thought she was in your bedroom all this time. Now you’re asking me!”

“Oh, something terrible has happened to her,” thought the prince. He went and lay down in grief. Five days passed, six days passed, fifteen

days passed, but there was no news of his wife. They couldn’t find her anywhere.

“Did the stupid girls push her into a tank? Did they throw her into a well? My sister never liked her. What did the foolish girls do?” he asked his parents and the servants. What could they say? They, too, were worried and full of fear. In disgust and despair, he changed into an ascetic’s long robe and went out into the world. He just walked and walked, not caring where he went.

Meanwhile, the girl who was now a “thing” somehow reached the town into which her husband’s elder sister had been given in marriage. Every time the palace servants and maids passed that way to fetch water, they used to see her. They would say to each other, “She glows like a king’s daughter.” Then one of them couldn’t stand it any longer and decided to tell the queen.

“Amma, Amma, she looks very much like your younger brother’s wife. Look through the seeing-glass and see for yourself.”

The queen looked and the face did seem strangely familiar. One of the maids suggested: “Amma, can I bring her to the palace, shall I?”

The queen poohpoohed it, “We’ll have to serve her and feed her. Forget it.”

So the next day again the maids mumbled and moaned, “She’s very lovely. She’ll be like a lamp in the palace. Can’t we bring her here?”

“All right, all right, bring her if you wish. But you’ll have to take care of her without neglecting palace work,” ordered the queen.

They agreed and brought the Thing to the palace. They bathed her in oils, dressed her well and sat her down at the palace door. Every day they applied medicines to her wounds and made her well. But they could not make her whole. She had only half a body.

Now the prince wandered through many lands and at last reached the gates of his sister’s palace. He looked like a crazy person. His beard and whiskers were wild. When the maids were fetching and carrying water, they saw him. They went back to the queen in the palace and said, “Amma, someone is sitting outside the gate, and he looks very much like your brother. Look through the seeing-glass and see.”

Grumbling indifferently, the queen went to the terrace and looked through the seeing-glass. She was surprised. “Yes, he does look remarkably like my brother. What’s happened to him? Has he become a wandering ascetic? Impossible,” she thought. She sent her maids down to bring him in. They said to him, “The Queen wants to see you.”

He brushed them aside. “Why would she want to see me?” he growled.

“No, sir, she really wants to see you, please come,” they insisted and finally persuaded him to come in. The queen took a good look at him and knew it was really her brother.

She ordered the palace servants to heat up vats of oil and organize great vessels of steaming water for his bath. She served him and nursed him, for she knew he was her brother. She served him new dishes each

day, and brought him new styles of clothing. But whatever she did, he didn't speak a word to his elder sister. He didn't even ask, "Who are you? Where am I?" By this time, they both knew they were brother and sister.

The queen wondered, "Why doesn't he talk to me though I treat him so royally? What could be the reason? Could it be some witch's or demon's magic?"

After some days, she started sending one or another of her beautiful maids into his bedroom every night. She sent seven maids in seven days. The maids held his hands and caressed his body, and tried to rouse him from his stupor. But he didn't say a word or do a thing.

Finally, the servant maids got together and dressed up the Thing that sat at the palace door. With the permission of the disgusted queen, they left It on his bed. He neither looked up nor said anything. But this night, It pressed and massaged his legs with its stump of an arm. It moaned strangely. He got up once and looked at It. It was sitting at his feet. He stared at It for a few moments and then realized It was really his lost wife. Then he asked her what had happened. She who had been silent all these months suddenly broke into words. She told him whose daughter she was, whose wife, and what had happened to her.

"What shall we do now?" he asked.

"Nothing much. We can only try. Bring two pitchers of water, without touching them with your fingernails," she replied.

That night he brought her two pitchers of water without anyone's knowledge. She uttered chants over them and instructed him: "Pour the water from this pitcher over me and I'll become a tree. Wherever there is a broken branch, set it right. Wherever a leaf is torn, put it together. Then pour the water of the second pitcher."

Then she sat down and meditated.

He poured the water on her from the first pitcher. She became a tree. But the branches had been broken, the leaves had been torn. He carefully set each one right and bound them up and gently poured water from the second pitcher all over the tree. Now she became a whole human being again. She stood up, shaking the water off her hair, and fell at her husband's feet.

She went and woke up the queen, her sister-in-law, and touched her feet also. She told the astonished queen the whole story. The queen wept and embraced her. Then she treated the couple to all kinds of princely food and service and had them sit in the hall like a bride and bridegroom for a ritual celebration called *hasĕ*. She kept them in her palace for several weeks and then sent them home to her father's palace with cartloads of gifts.

The king was overjoyed at the return of his longlost son and daughter-in-law. He met them at the city gates and took them home on an elephant howdah in a grand ceremonial procession through the city streets. In the palace they told the king and queen everything that had happened. Then the king had seven barrels of burning lime poured into a great pit and

threw his youngest daughter into it. All the people who saw this said to themselves, “After all, every wrong has its punishment.”²

One could say many things about this story. For instance, one of its themes resonates with our present concerns with ecology and conservation. Each time the younger daughter becomes a tree, she begs the person who is with her to treat it/her gently and not to pluck anything more than the flowers. Indeed, we were told by our mothers when we were children not to point to growing plants in the garden with our sharp fingernails, but only with our knuckles; our fingernails might scratch the growing ends. Poems like the following in classical Tamil speak of the sisterhood between a woman and a tree:

What Her Girl Friend Said

to him (on her behalf) when he came by daylight

Playing with friends one time
 we pressed a ripe seed
 into the white sand
 and forgot about it
 till it sprouted
 and when we nursed it tenderly
 pouring sweet milk with melted butter,
 Mother said,
 “It qualifies
 as a sister to you, and it’s much better
 than you,”
 praising this laurel tree.

So
 we’re embarrassed
 to laugh with you here

O man of the seashore
 with glittering waters
 where white conch shells,
 their spirals turning right,
 sound like the soft music
 of bards at a feast.

² Beck and Claus 1987:142-50.

Yet, if you wish,
there's plenty of shade
elsewhere.³

Or there is the Vīraśaiva poem that connects the gentle treatment of plants with other kinds of love, by Dasarēśwara, a saint who would not even pluck flowers for his god but would pick only the ones that had dropped to the ground by themselves (Ramanujan 1973:55):

Knowing one's lowliness
in every word;

the spray of insects in the air
in every gesture of the hand;

things living, things moving
come sprung from the earth
under every footfall;
and when holding a plant
or joining it to another
or in the letting it go

to be all mercy
to be light
as a dusting brush
of peacock feathers:

such moving, such awareness
is love that makes us one
with the Lord
Dasarēśwara.

They say in Kannada that when a woman is beautiful, “one must wash one's hands to touch her” (*kai tōlakōṇḍu muṭṭabeku*). There is also the suggestion that a tree is vulnerable to careless handling, just as a woman is. A tree that has come to flower or fruit will not be cut down; it is treated as a mother, a woman who has given birth. Thus the metaphoric connections between a tree and a woman are many and varied in the culture. A relevant one here is that the words for “flowering” and for “menstruation” are the same in languages like Sanskrit and Tamil. In Sanskrit, a menstruating woman is called a *puṣpavatī* (a woman in flower), and in Tamil *pūttal* means “menstruation.” Menstruation itself is a form

³ *Narriṇai*, 172, anonymous author, in Ramanujan 1985:33.

and a metaphor for a woman’s special creativity. Thus a woman’s biological and other kinds of creativity are symbolized by flowering. In this tale, as in a dream, the metaphor is literalized and extended. The heroine literally becomes a tree and produces flowers without number over and over again, as the occasion requires. It is her special gift, one that she does not wish to squander or even display. She makes her secret known to her sister first only because they have no money and because she wishes to save her mother from some of the rigors of poverty. After that, her gift becomes known to others and she has to do it at their bidding.

As described in the tale, out of the five times she becomes a tree, only the first and last times are voluntary acts. The second time, her mother orders her to show her how she earned her money because she suspects her of selling her body. Then the prince eavesdrops on one of these transformations and wants to have such a woman for himself. Once he gets her, he compels her to become a tree in his bedchamber on his wedding night, and on every night thereafter. It becomes almost a sexual ritual, a display of her spectacular talent to arouse him sexually, so that they can sleep together on the flowers from her body. Even before she gets used to it, thanks to the flowers that pile up outside her bedroom window, her young adolescent sister-in-law gets curious, puts her eye to a chink in their door, and wants to show her off to her companions. She uses her own and her mother’s clout as in-laws to coerce her to go with her alone to the orchard; she and the other pubescent teenage girls tease her (“Will you do it only for your lovers?”), playing on the sexual nature of her talent, and force her to become a tree. Despite her abject requests not to hurt her, they ravage the tree; when she is returned to her human state, she too is left ravaged and mutilated. It is a progressive series of violations until she finally ends up being a Thing.

In a way people have begun to treat her as a thing, asking her “to make a spectacle of herself” by displaying her secret gift. In a way, one might say, even the first time, she herself becomes a tree to sell her flowers, making herself a commodity. The fifth and last time she becomes a tree, she has to wait for the right person and the safe occasion, another bedchamber in an older married sister-in-law’s household, with a husband who has missed her and searched for her and thereby changed.

These five occasions seem pointedly to ask the question: when is a woman safe in such a society? She is safe with her own sister,⁴ maybe with

⁴ In women’s tales, the true antagonist as well as the helper of a woman is another woman, just as in men’s tales the hero battles always in the company of an older male, a father-figure, and often with brothers. Stepmothers, stepsisters, mothers-in-law, sisters-in-

her mother, but not quite with a newly wedded husband who cares more for a display of her talent than for her safety, and most certainly not with a teenage sister-in-law or mother-in-law. She is safe only with a married sister-in-law (who is probably not threatened or envious), and lastly with a husband who, through an experience of loss, has matured enough to care for her as a person.

As I said earlier, she is most vulnerable when she is a tree. She can neither speak nor move. She is most open to injury when she is most attractive, when she is exercising her gift of flowering. Each time she becomes a tree, she begs the one who is pouring the water to be careful not to hurt her. Yet, paradoxically, when she is mutilated, she cannot be healed directly. She can be made whole only by becoming the tree again, becoming vulnerable again, and trusting her husband to graft and heal her broken branches.

The recurrent unit of the story is “girl becoming tree becoming girl.” This is also the whole story; the recurrent unit encapsulates the career of this woman in the story. What are the differences between a woman and a tree? A woman can speak, can move, can be an agent on her own behalf in ways that a tree cannot. Yet symbolically speaking, the tree isolates and gives form to her capacity to put forth flower and fragrance from within, a

law, and rival women who usurp the heroine’s place abound in these women’s tales. In the tale of Lampstand Woman, even Fate is Mother Fate. (In a man’s tale, “Outwitting Fate,” Fate is Brahmā, a male.) Men in these tales are usually wimps, under the thumbs of their mothers or other wives; mostly they are absent. Sometimes they are even dead, waiting to be revived by their wives’ ministrations. Mother-in-law tales in south India have no fathers-in-law. The wife and the mother share a single male figure (who is both son and husband); the older and the younger woman are rivals for power over him. In other tales, where the central figure is an active heroine, she may battle alongside a man, usually her husband—sometimes she has to rescue him from his scrapes and often from bondage to another woman. In a tale called “A Wager” (an Indian oral tale, also found in the eleventh-century *Kathāsaritsāgara*, it is also the story of Shakespeare’s *All’s Well that Ends Well*, which he gets from Italian novella-writers, who probably got it from India), she talks back or out-riddles an arrogant, spoiled prince who vows that he will punish her for out-talking him by first marrying her and then abandoning her. She makes a wager with him that she will beget a son by him and get the son to capture the father and bring him to her. She wins the wager by disguising herself as an acrobat dancer, sleeps with him, and gets herself with child by him. Through her son who is an expert in all the arts, including banditry, she triumphs over her husband who is now the king. Her son outwits all the father-figures in the realm, especially the police chief and the king. He finally captures the king, his father, in a humiliating laundry sack, smothered in the dirty linen of the whole town, and delivers him bound hand and foot to his mother. The father and the mother are reunited, if this could be called a reunion. The central bond in this case is between the mother and son, not between the husband and wife who are really in conflict.

gift in which she can glory, as well as one that makes her vulnerable. It expresses a young woman’s desire to flower sexually and otherwise as well as the dread of being ravaged, a possibility that the very gift brings with it. In telling such a tale, older women could be reliving these early, complex, and ambivalent feelings towards their own bodies—and projecting them for younger female listeners.⁵ If boys are part of the audience, as they often are, the males could imaginatively participate in them in ways that might change their sensitivity towards women.

The repetition of the unit “girl becomes tree becomes girl” marks the divisions of the story and gives it its narrative time, the *chronos* of the “chronotope.” In a typical male-centered story, this dimension is marked by the adventures of the prince, his failures, and final success, often measured in threes. The spaces in the women-centered story are marked by alternations of Interior and Exterior (the *akam* and *puram* of classical Tamil poetics), by alternations of domestic and public space in which the action takes place. In this story, the given instances of the transformations move from the girl’s own yard to the prince’s bedchamber, then to the orchard, where it is most dangerous, and back to a second bedchamber. Indeed, one of the oppositions between a woman and a tree is that the former is an interior (*akam*) being, both living indoors and having an interior space, a heart (all of which are meant by the South Dravidian term *akam*), and the latter lives outdoors, in a public space (*puram*). It is one of the ironies of this story that she is forced to become a tree in the wrong space, in the bedchamber. And when she becomes a tree in the orchard, the greatest harm comes to her. These transitions emphasize the special symbolic charge of the tree: it is not any old tree, but a phase in a human career; its past and future is human and female, capable of living both within and without. Such is the time-space, the chronotope, of this woman’s tale. Other women’s tales also play with this balance and alternation of interiors and exteriors.

In the orchard, with the wild pubescent girls, the young woman becomes a tree, full of fears that are all too real and unable to return to her whole human female being: she becomes a Thing, something that has the face of a woman but the helplessness of the tree. She is neither woman nor tree, but both, betwixt and between. The Thing cannot move by itself and does not speak. She lives in the servants’ quarters, both within and without. It is only when she speaks to a “significant other,” her husband in this tale, and tells him her story, that she is able to return to her original female body. She waits for recognition by him. She waits to tell her story in its

⁵ I am indebted to a discussion with Sudhir Kakar for this formulation.

entirety and give him instructions on how to heal her: he is to pour water on her, and, when she becomes a tree, to put back the broken leaves and branches lovingly in their place, and pour the water on it—and she will be whole again. This is also the time when she voluntarily, and for her own good, undergoes the transformation. She has recovered her agency.

I would suggest that agency in these women's tales is connected with their being able to tell their own story and its being heard.⁶ After the first time, every time that she protests that she does not wish to become a tree, she is not heard; she is forced to do so against her will. Many women's tales end with this kind of self-story being told and being heard. Very often, as in the story of "The Dead Prince and The Talking Doll," they are told in an adjoining room, to a lamp or a talking doll that says "Hm Hm!" as a human listener would when he hears a story. The husband overhears it and learns the truth about his wife. It moves her from being a silent or unheard woman to a speaking person with a story to tell. Indeed, the whole tale tells the story of how this woman acquires a story through experience, mostly suffering—until then she has no story to tell. In some tales, as in "The Lampstand Woman," this is explicit: she is usually a princess whose life is a blank at the beginning; she marries and her troubles begin. She becomes a servant, usually in her own sister-in-law's house, is accused of stealing a child's necklace, and is punished. Her head is shaved and a lamp is placed on a cowdung patty and slapped on her shaved head. She becomes a living lampstand and has to light the path of visitors. But she hardly speaks until her suffering reaches its nadir; when the husband from whom she is separated arrives, she has to light the path to his bed. He does not recognize her and asks for a story. She tells her own story and as the narrative proceeds it dawns on the husband that he is in the presence of his own wife, who is now a lampstand woman to whom all these horrible things have happened, unbeknownst to him. When the whole story is recapitulated in her own voice, he recognizes her and the tale ends in a reunion.

One may add that speech means not only agency for the woman but also sexuality. In many Kannada tales, the coded phrase for sexual intimacy

⁶ In other tales, there are other ways for a woman to be an agent on her own behalf: for instance, in tales of abandoned wives who have to travel, often to rescue their own dastardly husbands, they travel in male disguise—as women writers like George Eliot and Charlotte Bronte often wrote under male pseudonyms. In some tales, they are not safe with their brothers or fathers who have incestuous designs on them, though the folktale universe, as it explores many different emotions and attitudes toward the same situations, also presents protective brothers, though rarely protective fathers.

between a woman and a man is “they talked to each other.” In a tale about a husband who is not sleeping with his wife, the forlorn wife is asked by a caring old woman, “Isn’t your husband talking to you?” When she hears that he is not, she proceeds to find ways of making the husband talk to the wife, even angrily: she asks the young woman to put pebbles in his yogurt or rice, or to pack salt into his curry so that he can get angry with her and they can exchange words. At the end of “Dead Prince,” the prince and the young woman are found “talking to each other all night.”

Since writing about the transformation of the “dumb” woman to a speaking person, and the relationship of speech to a woman’s agency, I came across Ruth Bottigheimer’s pages on speech in Grimm’s household tales, especially in “Cinderella” (1987:ch. 6). She points out how speech is an indication of power. Many recent sociolinguistic works have been concerned with the question of who speaks when, for discourse is a form of domination, and speech use is “an index of social values and the distribution of power within a society” (51).

In English, one speaks of “having a voice, having a say;” in German *mundig* (from the word for mouth) means legal majority and legal personhood. The poor do not have it; they are silent. Women, like children, should be seen, not heard: “Since the early days of the Church, women had been barred from speaking in the house of god, as well as preaching, teaching, or speaking in public” (Brown 1986:59-60). The good woman has a soft low voice and says little; Cordelia in *King Lear* is praised for this. Eve’s sin begins with her speaking to Satan. There are many jokes about garrulous women: women, generally speaking, are generally speaking.

In the later editions of the folktales that Wilhelm Grimm rewrote, as a male rewriting women’s tales, he gives women little direct speech; he also substitutes *sagen* or “said” for *sprechen* or “spoke,” as the latter is more forthright. *Sprechen* emphasizes the act of speaking and *sagen* the content of an utterance (see Bottigheimer 1987:55). In his last version of “Cinderella” (1857), Cinderella, the good girl, speaks only once in direct speech; the bad women, the stepsisters and the stepmother, five and seven times; the prince in authority has eight direct speeches and the ineffectual father only three, two of which are mere thoughts. However, this feature may be different in different cultures: in Danish variants, where women have greater freedom and power, Cinderella is not gagged as in the German ones. It would be interesting to ask similar questions in the Indian context, especially of tales that are told by both men and women. It would also be

revealing to see how men like myself interpret these tales and what biases we bring to them.⁷

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