Reworking of Fable in Vikram Seth’s *Beastly Tales from Here and There*

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**Abstract**

This article attempts to establish a link between Vikram Seth’s *Beastly Tales* and the traditional genre of the fable with particular emphasis on its genesis, popularity and varied functions in different ages of history. It shows that both eastern and western fables incorporate religious, literary and humorous elements, in addition to an abundance of materials from the observation of nature.

Vikram Seth’s *Beastly Tales from Here and There* (1995) is a collection of animal stories from different parts of the world. These stories have been classified as fables because of the presence of animal characters that delineate qualities of the human species. Seth’s apparent simplicity of form, lyrical quality and light-hearted humor tends to make critics and readers of the tales categorize them as children’s literature. However, they seem to have disregarded the fact that the medium of the fable was and still is a vital form of representation, not reserved for children. This article attempts to establish a link between Seth’s *Beastly Tales* and the traditional genre of the fable with particular emphasis on its genesis, popularity and varied functions in different ages of history. Adrados (1999) attributes the origins of the fable to the animalistic basis of the festival in Greece, which gave rise to Comedy, Satirical drama and the Fable. In the *History of the Graeco-Latin Fable*, he writes that:

There was a long process of development that started with the animal-god or the animal rooted in some way in worship and dance and …with the intervention of a period of playful use of animal motifs…the literary
animal represented by the fable. Thus various playful and comic elements proper to the festival like the agon, the dance, the disguise and the banquet have penetrated the fable. The festival, the banquet, and iambic poetry included themes found strongly in fables; myths, insults, exhortations, maxims, anecdotes, enigmas, tournaments of ingenuity, and insulting comparisons. (18)

This observation points towards the origins of the fable in the West. Since animals held an important place in Greek mythology and religion, they were used to perform the sacred task of educating the common people. This religious undertaking eventually became one of the basic purposes of the fable i.e. to instruct. The origins of the fable in the East are also believed to be religious. In The Fables of Aesop (1880), Jacobs analyses how the great ethical reformer, the Buddha is believed to have initiated the habit of using the Beast-Tale for moral purposes, or, in other words, transformed it into the Fable. Thus both Eastern and Western fables came to incorporate religious, literary and humorous elements, in addition to an abundance of materials from the observation of nature.

Seth draws upon some of these aspects of the traditional fable in his collection of Beastly Tales. The presence of a ‘celestial court’ (37) of Gods and godlings in The Rat and the Ox (BT 293-9); the Eagle’s refuge in ‘the lap of the mighty Zeus’ (83) in The Eagle and the Beetle (BT 300-3); and the manner in which the Tragopan kneels and prays to the god of birds, the ‘Great Partridge…/…dwelling in the sky’ (82-3) in The Elephant and the Tragopan (BT 337-63) point to the religious inclinations of the tales. The Nightingale’s song in The Frog and the Nightingale (BT 332-6) is also considered ‘divine’ (29); while the Cat and Cock sing to their heart’s content in The Cat and the Cock (BT 313-23) as a tribute to the god of music, ‘And the pair would dance and sing /While the house with joy would ring’ (13-4). There is also subversion of the biblical text in some stories. The mangoes in The Crocodile and the Monkey (BT 279-85) have been described as ‘nectar from the tree of life’ (73) which may stand for the tree of the Forbidden fruit in Paradise. Mrs.Crocodile’s attempts to devour the
Monkey would, in that case, symbolize the evil at the heart of such beauty. Bingle Valley in *The Elephant and the Tragopan* (BT 337-63) has also been described as ‘a minor paradise’ (10) for the animals. This paradise, like Eden, offers the creatures with all sorts of comfort and Man, like the Serpent, intends to deprive them of this heavenly bliss. The Hare in *The Hare and the Tortoise* (BT 304-12) spends cash only because it is a ‘sin’ (246) to save it, while ‘the shrine of sleep and beauty’ (222) ironically replaces a holy place of pilgrimage.

Although none of the characters in Seth’s stories wears a mask, as in the Greek festivals, their false feelings serve as a disguise which hides their true intentions from each other. In *The Crocodile and the Monkey* (BT279-85), Kuroop conceals his motives of killing his friend behind ‘accents gruff’(107) and a ‘gentle smile’(77); the Rat in *The Rat and the Ox* (BT 293-9) feigns ‘gloom and grief’ (131) in order to gain the sympathy of the Ox; and the Fox in *The Cat and the Cock* (BT 313-23) disguises her voice in accents ‘smoothly oiled’ (42). Seth has also made effective use of the element of the banquet in his stories. There is feasting in nearly all the stories of the collection. The crocodiles in *The Crocodile and the Monkey* (BT 279-85) eat ‘Mangoes gold and ripe and sweet’ (25); the clan of lice in *The Louse and the Mosquito* (BT 286-9) drink ‘the king’s blood’(6) for their food; the beasts of Runnyrhyme gobble ‘popcorn’ and drink ‘beer’ (97) while waiting for the contestants of the race in *The Hare and the Tortoise* (BT 304-12); and the Elephant is served tea with ‘milk’ (448), ‘sugar’(448) and ‘biscuit’ (492) in *The Elephant and the Tragopan* (BT 337-63). This constant presence of food and drink not only adds to the humor and gaiety of the tales, but also displays the religious motive of celebrating life in general. Thus the presence of all these features formulates the link between Seth’s *Beastly Tales* and the traditional fable.

In Greece as well as the Indian sub-continent, fables were related to audience by way of gesture, song and dance. This form of narration was popular because of its ability to influence all kinds of spectators. The story tellers were not bound by rules of authorship and had the freedom to include whatever they wanted in their stories. This gave their stories a contemporary appeal. Seth draws upon some of these features of oral narration in *Beastly*
Tales. His medium of expression is the rhyming couplet, which makes the tales musical and captivating and tends to mirror the oral story tellers of South India who punctuated and dramatized their stories with music from different instruments. Use of the rhyming couplet further reflects his self-discipline as a poet. Seth’s poetics are best described by his own comment that, “The joy of poetry for me lies not so much in transcending or escaping from the so-called bonds of artifice or constraint as in using them to enhance the power of what is being said.” (*The Poems XXIX*)

Seth’s use of dashes, question marks, and dialogues within the rhyme-scheme further adds to the rhythmic quality of the tales. The reaction of Number Two to the appearance of a rally of animals in *The Elephant and the Tragopan* (BT 337-63) is an example of the recurring tempo of the tales; “Yes, yes, sir—“ said the Number Two. / “I mean, no, no, sir— what to do?” (309-10), “And when I met them, they weren’t far—/ Oh Sir— oh no, sir – here they are !” (347-8). The questions may additionally serve the purpose of the agon or the conflict in a play. Thus in spite of the absence of stage directions, Seth’s stories can be acted out with gestures, music, and song and dance- all the qualities of the traditional oral fable.

Seth remains loyal to the fable tradition by inserting morals within his stories. However, his tales do not end with a preachy moralizing text as moral tags, which according to Gregory, “not only jar with the fable’s sophistication of form but also deprive them of one of their prime functions: to make the reader think” (qtd in Howe 2). Aesop’s original version of *The Hare and the Tortoise* (19) grants victory to the tortoise advocating the maxim ‘slow and steady wins the race’. Seth’s story on the other hand retains its focus on the Hare, whose defeat in the race is eclipsed by her victory at the social level. This keeps the story open-ended, allowing it to be subjected to modern and feminist interpretations. The Mosquito keeps a look-out for “further prey (97) at the end of *The Louse and the Mosquito* (BT 286-9), thereby suggesting the possibility of more deception and foul play. Likewise, the readers are left to visualize Kuroop’s encounter with his wife at the end of *The Crocodile and the Monkey* (BT 279-85). This absence of a definite conclusive note adds to the enigma of the stories. It also makes the form of the fable wonderfully flexible. In the words of Rushdie, “It hits a
very beautiful note somewhere between the real and the unreal, and allows you to speak very directly but often in very strange ways” (1). This inversion of the fable tradition enables Seth’s stories to transcend the traditional bonds, imparting variety and diversity to *Beastly Tales*.

Humor is also an essential component of Seth’s mental equipment and literary charm. His astounding command of English language helps, for he can joke, make puns and produce comic play on words at will. The stories incorporate comedy and wit in the descriptions, dialogues and behavior of the characters. The “beastly appetite”(16) of the Goat and Ram in *The Goat and the Ram* (BT 324-31); the “gibble-gabble” (20) of The Hare in *The Hare and the Tortoise* (BT 304-12); Mrs. Crocodile’s “indigestion” (117) in *The Crocodile and the Monkey* (BT 279-85); and the actions of different animals in “The Beastly Board of Forest Folk” (106) in *The Elephant and the Tragopan* (BT 337-63) are hilariously funny. It is because of this light-hearted style that *Beastly Tales* has mistakenly been regarded as children’s work. However, humor for Seth is not merely a matter of dexterity with words and puns. It is, as Chouler (2000) writes:

. . . a state of mind, the ability to perceive the dual aspect of any situation, the comedy as well as the tragedy in every sentient being’s life . . . Seth’s sense of humor is an indication of his penchant for tolerance, kindness, friendliness, and goodwill. (46)

This can be seen from the fact that nearly all the stories in the collection have a serious note of tragedy. The mango trees are lined “rank on rank” (22) like soldiers in a battle in *The Crocodile and the Monkey* (BT 279-85); the louse clan is “killed without ado” (95) in *The Louse and the Mosquito* (BT 286-89); a battle of life and death rages between the protagonists in *The Mouse and the Snake* (BT 290-2); and The Eagle rips off the Hare’s head and tail in *The Eagle and the Beetle* (BT 300-3). This recurrent imagery of blood and death represents the dark side of life, thereby maintaining the equilibrium between the positive and negative. The many references to blood-shed and murder indicate the tragedy in the life of every human being. They also point to the darker side of the tales, emphasizing the comment that they have not only been meant for children.
Thus one observes that the collection of *Beastly Tales from Here and There* is a serious piece of writing. While drawing on classic sources for his stories, Seth has transcended the boundaries of tradition, giving to the reader a portrait of characters that are appealing and timeless.

**Works Cited**


