

Exertion of Val Plumwood's Theory of Instrumentalism in the Manipuri folktale "Uchek Langmeidong" in Dr. Haobam Bilashini Devi's *Folktales of Manipur*

**Monica Potsangbam, Ph.D. Scholar**

JRF/NET & GATE qualified  
Manipur International University  
Department of English  
MIU Palace, Airport Road, Ghari  
Imphal, Manipur, India 795001  
[monicaimphal111@gmail.com](mailto:monicaimphal111@gmail.com)

=====

**Abstract**

It is to the advantage of the study conducted in this paper that Val Plumwood's instrumentalism in *Feminism and the mastery of nature* is exploited. The study in this paper explicates the dualistic relationships involved in the folktale "Uchek Langmeidong" in Dr. Haobam Bilashini Devi's *Folktales of Manipur*. The fundamental purpose of this study is to unfold the elements in the dualistic relationships of the folktale that align with the Val Plumwood's theory of instrumentalism.

**Keywords:** Folktale, Manipur, instrumentalism, dualism

**Defining "instrumentalism" in *Feminism and the mastery of nature***

The theory of instrumentalism, or objectification, in *Feminism and the mastery of nature* refers to the conventional theory of dualism. The theory of dualism dates back to the dualism of Ferdinand de Saussure in Structuralism. Dualism is a western school of thought, designed in binary oppositions of two terms. Binary oppositions are operated not independently, with reference to the fact that the two terms are rendered the positions of first and second terms under not mere difference but on account of the values and qualities associated with the terms. Categorically, the terms are classified the first and second terms; the first term stands superior to the second. As in the dualistic pair- men/women, men in the first term are conveyed superior; serving a contrasting figure to the women in the second figure. When it is exchanged to-

women/men, the same is interpreted; here, women stand superior to men as to the fact that women are positioned in the first term and men in the second term.

Val Plumwood's theory of instrumentalism deconstructs the structure of dualism. Making use of instrumentalism, the politics embedded in the configuration of dualism is exposed by Plumwood in her *Feminism and the mastery of nature*. Instrumentalism extends a notion that the framework of dualism is configured entirely to make the ends meet for the dominator which refers to the first term. Pertaining to instrumentalism, the construction of a dualistic pair is marked with the target to deliver the interest of the superior first terms at the expense of the inferior second terms; the dominated second term is instrumentalised to facilitate the needs and purpose of the dominator first term. The dominated second term in a dualistic relationship is perceived as a mere resource to the first term. The needs and interest of the second terms are set aside, while that of the first term is prioritised. The play of the theory of dualism is executed in the interest of the upper side of a pair. The dualistic theory capacitates the upperside of the pair, the freedom to "impose his own ends."<sup>1</sup> The upperside of a pair recognises not the needs and interests of the underside, owing to the fact that the position of the underside is conceived to serve the interest of the upperside; the worth of the underside depends on its being useful to the upperside. Laying bare the given circumstances of the framework of dualism, the expounded context of the state of affairs involved in a relationship between the two terms is positioned to establish a "moral dualism".<sup>2</sup> It is the understanding that the underside in a dualistic pair is ruled out to get their identity acknowledged morally, yet they are in fact perceived entirely independent of morality in light of a different standard.

### **Construing "Uchek Langmeidong" in the context of "instrumentalism"**

The folktale "Uchek Langmeidong" in Dr. Haobam Bilashini Devi's *Folktales of Manipur* exceedingly foregrounds a relationship between a step-mother and a step-daughter (Heiyainu) of a negatively intense nature. Deprived of a mother, a father figure in the story takes a woman in marriage to look after his daughter, Heiyainu and the house. Thereafter, the second wife who is a step-mother to the daughter gives birth to a son. The son is often left under the care of Heiyainu. Despite the fact that she is physically and emotionally abused by her step-mother, she takes care of her younger step-brother when he is left under her care: she requests their

---

<sup>1</sup> Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the mastery of nature*. pp. 53

<sup>2</sup> *Feminism and the mastery of nature*. pp. 53

neighbouring women to breastfeed her step-brother as he cries in hunger. Moreover, she bids farewell to her baby brother when she transforms into a hornbill. In the absence of the father, the daughter is ill-used, abused and tortured by the step-mother. Notwithstanding the torture, the daughter escapes her tragic reality by transforming into a Uchek langmeidong, which stands for a hornbill bird. Requiring an income of the family, the father leaves home for a trading. The narrative maintains that the father leaves home for work in consideration of the fact that his daughter is under the care of his second wife. With a heavy heart, the father consoles his daughter to come back and live with him together at the time when she has transformed into a hornbill. On refusing his request, the narrative concludes with a farewell from the daughter and with the bitter cry of the helpless father.

Expressing the narrative in a dualistic construction, the story exclusively emphasises on the dualistic pair of step-mother/step-daughter. The step-mother/step-daughter is accounted a dualistic pair with the comprehension that the step-daughter is abused and ill-used by the step-mother to make her own ends meet, intensely impacting the character to the extent that she transforms into a hornbill. As a matter of fact, the abuse initiated substantiates the perception that the step-mother has the power and capacity to treat her step-daughter on her own terms, which offers her the space of the superior first term. With no physical and emotional power to retaliate the abuse, the step-daughter is backgrounded.

Making exertion of Plumwood's "instrumentalism" on the folktale, it is construed that the dualism step-mother/step-daughter is maintained with the understanding that the step-daughter is instrumentalised to fulfil the needs of the step-mother; the vulnerable little girl is used by the step-mother to do house chores, to look after her younger brother, collect fish and vegetables for her step-mother to sell in the market and failing to fulfil any share of the duties imposed on her, she is tortured physically and emotionally. The construction of the narrative prioritises the interest and needs of the step-mother which occupies the space of the first term. The underside of the pair is a construct availed to the disposal of the upper side. Hence, it infers that the upperside in a dualistic relationship is an end in itself. Concerning the dualistic relationship – step-mother/step-daughter, the needs and interest of the step-daughter is disregarded in all respects, yet she is instrumentalised to fulfil the daily duties of the step-mother. The identity of the step-daughter in the narrative is structured in terms of the purpose and needs of the step-mother. A fundamental aspect that occasions the manifested verbal assault and physical abuse

on Heiyainu by the step-mother in the narrative is associated with the consciousness that her step-daughter is a vulnerable maiden, unguarded by any stronger figure in light of the fact that her mother is demised and her father is absent. Being well-aware of the capacity her step-mother holds over her, her psychological surrender to her step-mother is marked evident in her execution of the share of major responsibility of the household chores, which includes looking after her younger step-brother to the extent that whenever the baby boy cries, she requests their neighbours to breastfeed the baby. The delivered share of house chores and looking after the baby which is accountably generated by the psychological surrender reflect the psychological constitution of the dualistic relationship between the step-mother/ step-daughter with the apprehension that the step-daughter is aware of the threatening physical and psychological power of her step-mother as much as the step-mother is mutually aware of the weakness and vulnerability of her step-daughter.

The detrimental affairs maintained in this dualistic pair are secured clarity in rendering extensive comparative study on the dualistic pairs- father/mother (second wife) and Heiyainu/step-brother. Contrasting the dualism- step-mother/step-daughter, the dualistic pairs- father/mother and Heiyainu/step-brother are not in exact alignment with the Plumwood's instrumentalism bearing the fact that the mother in the second term and the step-brother in the second term are not instrumentalised by the figures in the first terms without any exchange of something in return. Be that as it may, the physical and psychological power of the first terms father in father/mother and Heiyainu in Heiyainu/step-brother over its second terms are immense, yet, the physical or psychological abuse is not rendered on the second term by the first term; instead, they are protected. The constitution of this paper gets wise on the fact that the unwritten gaps of the narrative is observed and studied concerning the argument that the contentment of the father in the pair father/mother depends on his daughter's being well taken care of by the mother and the safety of the Heiyainu depends on her looking after her step-brother, failing which she may be abused by her step-mother, owing to the paradigm of actions laid out in the narrative. The dualisms- father/mother and Heiyainu/step-brother are rendered rather on the grounds of potential power that the first terms have over their second terms, yet these second terms in the narrative are conveyed with no abuse of any forms. The figures in the second terms are not instrumentalised to a great extent by the first terms because they are well protected with genuine intention by the first terms: mother in the second term is asked to look after her step-daughter in exchange of the financial and food provision by the father and

the step-brother in the second term is looked after with true genuine intent on its being assigned to her by the step-mother, even though Heiyainu is liable of receiving physical and psychological torture from her step-mother on general terms, regardless of her looking after the baby with great care. In the dualisms- father/mother and Heiyainu/ step-brother, it is delivered that the immense power and capacity that the first terms hold over the second term is not ill-used in terms of physical, psychological and emotional abuse. However, the dualistic pair- step-mother/step-daughter serves a stark contrasting affairs, considering the power and capacity that the step-mother has over the step-daughter and the imposition of it upon the step-daughter is in fact in requirement of a genuine intent; as the step-daughter is instrumentalised for her advantage and she is physically and emotionally abused to the extent that she escapes her tragic life by transforming into a hornbill. Diving into a greater depth, it is undeniably imperative to call attention to the impact initiated by the father/mother dualistic pair on the step-mother/step-daughter as to the possible underlying key factors that bring the toxic relationship into play. Though the consequences positioned in the narrative require the father to marry his second wife to take care of his daughter and the house, the toxic construct of the relationship is occasioned by the father's lack of cross-checking the relation maintained between his second wife and his daughter; provided that he rarely makes himself available to look into the matter as he spends most of his time outside his home for his work. If the father marries not for the second time, presumably, his domestic life with his daughter is likely to go haywire in managing the household chores. Nevertheless, it is unlikely to estimate encounters of any catastrophic circumstances concerning the well-being of Heiyainu, the tragic transformation of Heiyainu into a hornbill that is witnessed in the narrative, is out of picture in consideration of no second marriage of the father; given the temperament and the love of the father for his daughter that is conspicuous at the end of the narrative.

## Conclusion

In application of the theory on the narrative, the study discovers that the step-daughter occupying the space of the inferior second term is instrumentalised by the step-mother in the first term to fulfil the needs of her own. The study conveys the dualistic relationship -step-mother/step-daughter in the general context that this step-mother exploits the step-daughters to make their ends meet, considering the fact that they share no blood. It is supported by the situation structured in the narrative; the son who shares blood of her own is treated with care

and love while the step-daughter is ill-used. The application of instrumentalism in the dualistic pair- step-mother/step-daughter is effectively elucidated with precise clarity with a contextual comparative study of the pairs- father/mother and Heiyainu/step-brother; drawing the difference between possessing the capacity over the other in the second term yet not using it in abusing the other and possessing the power over the second term figure, executing its true intent of abuse on the second term. Contributing the comprehension of the power dynamics between the figures in dualism, the impact of the dualistic pair- father/mother on the step-mother/step-daughter is stressed on this paper.

### References

- Abrams, M.H., and Geoffrey Galt Harpham. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 80-103. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Delhi: Cengage Learning India Private Limited, 2015.
- Behari Singh, Huiem. "A study of Manipuri Meitei Folklore": PhD. diss., 1985. <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/68226>.
- Culler, Jonathan. *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*. Vol. 1. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982.
- Dundes, Alan. *The Study of Folklore*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1966.
- The Meaning of Folklore: The Analytical Essays of Alan Dundes*. Logan: Utah State University Press, 2007.
- Haobam, Bilashini. *Folktales of Manipur*. Imphal: R.S. Publications Pvt. Ltd., 2009.
- J. Claus, Peter and Frank J. Korom, *Folk, Folklore and Folkloristics from Folkloristics and Indian Folklore*. Regional Resources Centre for Folk Performing Arts, 1991.
- Krishna, Niyathi R., and Pashupati Jha. "Ecofeminism in the Novels of Sarah and Joseph and Anita Nair." *International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature* 2 (2014): 103-9.
- Laishram, Rena, *Early Meitei History*, Akansha Publishing House, 2009.
- Lawlor, Leonard. *Jacques Derrida*. Stanford, CA: Metaphysics Research Lab, 2019.
- Lindow, John. *Scandinavian Studies* 61 (1989): 4. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

MacGregor, Sherilyn, *Beyond Mothering Earth: Ecological Citizenship and the Politics of Care*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2006.

Mies, Maria, and Vandana Shiva. *Ecofeminism*. London & New York: Zed Books Ltd., 1993.

Oinam, James. *New Folktales of Manipur*. Chennai: Notion Press, 2016.

Oinam Bhagat. "Patterns of Ethnic Conflict in the North-East." Vol. 38. No. 21. *Economic and Political Weekly* (2003). <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4413594>.

Plumwood, Val. "Dualism: The Logic of Colonisation." *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 41- 43. London: Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2003.

Propp, Vladimir. *Morphology of the Folktale*. Vol. 9. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968.