

A Case of Dancing Sati: The Construction of Feminine Divinity on Subaltern's Crinoline in *The Red Shoes* by Hans Christian Andersen

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ABSTRACT: *This paper attempts to scrutinize the short story *The Red Shoes* by Hans Christian Andersen under the relational analysis. This perspective is specifically chosen to destabilize the text to locate it in another dimension i.e. the tradition of Sati. Andersen has positioned the protagonist's identity in an ambivalence which is significant of her trial and her subalternity in pursuing the path of mysticism. In this research it is made visible that how the story contains liminal threads of exotic reality of feminine divinity. In this paper an attempt has been made to analyze Karen's masochistic pattern of being a female mystic and this pattern is compared with the subaltern subjectivity, the idea given by Gayatri Spivak in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" by taking Sati as referential point. Sati and the story, *The Red Shoes* converge on specific motifs and expressions to consign their spiritual tendencies in one frame. The discussion focuses on the entity where subalternity and spirituality unite and those are slippages provided by imposed social constructs, hence a deconstructing factor. The paper offers the understanding of underlying patterns of feminine spirituality used by Sati and Karen while projecting the new space as an extension of subaltern's identity.*

Keywords: Red Shoes, Identity, Mysticism, Subaltern, Sati, Dance, Masochism, Society

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Introduction

The magnum opus of human imagination which has moved and stirred emotions, fantasies and unlocked the unseen worlds is the yardstick of fairy tales. These fairy tales comprising timelessness have bestowed human culture with various colors, ideas and twigs of thoughts to enhance their morals, ethics and values. But when it comes to religion, the stories generally include the element of fear i.e. fear of punishment. This element is exaggerated by social ideologies and most haphazardly the patriarchal domination. With this combination, a suffocated environment is projected for those who do not have voices and this includes women, children and other minorities, categorized as Subalterns by Gayatri Spivak in her essay “*Can the Subaltern Speak?*” Spivak has suggested some spaces for subalterns and those spaces invert the set ideologies of religion. Particularly, Hindu religion is emphasized in her essay by taking the case of *Sati* but the very inclusivity of the term “subaltern” open up the space for the case represented in the story

The Red Shoes written by the well hailed Danish author Hans Christian Andersen, in which Christian ideals vehemently negated voiceless members i.e. Karen. The story reveals Andersen’s inclination to religion and the tint of Transcendentalism which flourished Europe in the 19th century. The story talks about the little girl who is obsessed with the red shoes and Andersen has not been merciful to her and placed her in an ambivalent position as the story starts with Karen’s mother’s funeral and ends with her own death. The story holds the normative culture in contrast to Karen’s dance as a tenet of romanticism in it. In this regard, the goal of this paper is to determine that voiceless have domains of their own but those spaces are juxtaposed with dominant social ideals. The term ‘subaltern’ is used at many levels but the very element of its “transcendental space” seems to be having little attention. Subalternity has its location in contrast with the structure as Sarah Bracke emphasized that the term offers a non-hegemonic point of view of the lives of people labeled with this tag. It is more peripheral outlook towards the machinations of meanings, politics, economy and all the cultural traits which shape subaltern’s identity (2-6). In this regard, the semblance of performance as “non-hegemonic” outlook will be considered and this research will be following the dance of Karen and burning of the widow presented by Spivak at the expense of the comparison of their performance. The story illustrates specific expressions which lead towards the case of *Sati* to be conjugated with the story. This research

holds an extension in the form of spiritual tenet to Spivak's frequently asked question, taken from her own essay.

The story *The Red Shoes* is a story depicting religion as part of the metanarrative. The narrative invites several interpretations and screen adaptations. The era in which Andersen was writing, was Romanticism and romantics highly believed in individual's transcendental relation with God and man's spiritualism. To address it, many critics came forward and justified the dilemma. In this regard, Hillary Keegan in her article illustrated that feminine identity and her sanctity can be measured by the scales of Eve and Mary; endorsing the idea that the sanctity and purity of Church was secured by considering these two extremes having Karen as its core (19). The text itself provides the iteration of rigidity and the tint of conformity. This contradicts with the notion of romanticism and limits the choice of a child. The idea of self-actualization starts when the individual recognizes his/her relation with the surroundings but surroundings were made blurred for Karen and hence unapproachable. Additionally, the social division was also working side by side which is giving an external framework to the story to project that downtrodden groups in society are highly infatuated by the elites. According to Frankel, the desire to reach the object of dreams which is the gap between the classes was the red shoes. This class difference is mingled with the desire, fantasy and imagination of Karen (47). Connecting the idea of fantasy, Karen is portrayed as living in a metaphysical world which has the ability to set her free from all trials and sufferings. The religion, society, the gender all come under the material theology connected with bodily assumptions as they can inflict pain on body but in Karen's case her soul's transformation was ideal despite all the hurdles

Consequently, the story has also swung across media fields e.g. music and film. The story celebrates the exuberance of femininity with various colors. The idea of divine femininity is endorsed by Deborah M. Withers who has outstandingly evaluates the original story by taking Kate Bush's music album named as *Red Shoes* and her film *The Line, the Cross and the Curve*. For Withers the film and the album strongly shackled the misogynistic frame with the ambiance of red shoes to have a counter visual discourse with misogyny in the story (19). Therefore, the idea of wild feminine expression is promoted which is the act against the Christian moralistic society in the story or a considerable threat to the porous foundations of social norms. Relating to it, the use of visual

discourse is itself a tool to carve out Karen's persona which was suffocated under patriarchal representations. Additionally, the story contains some unusual metaphors which merge two ideas in one frame and that is opposition and religion. Within this context, Tara Maylyn Frankel criticized Andersen on objectifying feminine beauty product and using it as provocatively unacceptable. He contrasted the red color with black and white sharp binary in order to subdue Karen's desire and her wish to the access of freedom and expression (47). Children are the subject of these stories but Andersen's frame was contradictory to the romantic target. In the story the freedom has been snatched in white and black veil of religious restrictions. Moreover, the freedom is projected in the form of performativity as R. Bacchus while taking *Sati* as its core, emphasized that the performance is carried out by an active subject not by the repressed though it places the subject in paradox (25). Based on this concept, the research will try to disclose this idea of performance in *The Red Shoes* by comparing narrative of *Sati* with Karen's exuberant dance performance as cross-cultural perspective.

The story *The Red Shoes* contains a specific pattern of punishment which liberated Karen from all other pains. In light of this phenomenon, this research is designed to locate the pattern of punishment within the narrative of *Sati* elaborated by Spivak in her essay "*Can the Subaltern Speak?*". Based on this narrative, Karen faced troubles while reaching the ladder of spirituality due to imposed silence. This combination of femininity and silence lead the research towards the motif of "spirituality" as the ulterior desire. Her silence made her alien in the society. Joseba Gabilondo supports the idea that in history the uncivilized and irrational nature of females is always situated in the east as Subaltern, hence their identity becomes trivialized with respect to territory (78). Based on this phenomenon, the performance of Karen found its equivalence with the ritual of *Sati* where the widow found liberation and purity. The goal of this paper is to locate the tropes of *Sati* in the text of the story by using method of relational analysis in order to compare the specific expressions and motifs to highlight similarities of both narratives. This research will be carried out in the framework of feminist approach within its mini narrative of spirituality along with other factors. The research will be considering the previous studies in order to build a dimension to the language of subaltern in the form of performance.

Beginning with the discussion, the mesmerizing landscapes, the ever-enchanting fairies, and the morals are all gifts of fairytales. The

representation of characters in these tales is reflection of society. In some cases these representations are made worsened by objectifying aspects in specified characters. Throughout the history of fairy tales female characters are made the subject of morals and punishment as compared to male characters. Kuykendal and Sturm in their article "We Said Feminist Fairy Tales, Not Fractured Fairy Tales!", highlighted that the extremes for female representations in the stories are terrible but there are those characters who embrace those resistant representations with a "price" (39). This demonstration is categorized into a rebellious, oppositional kind of representation and taking this point further towards the story *The Red Shoes*, the girl is made the culprit. The male narratives of religion made her a part of silenced community i.e. subaltern a problem highlighted by Gayatri Spivak. The story starts with the brief sketch of Karen as a lively little girl and this liveliness is haunted by the funeral of her mother. At this point, Spivak's imagery of *Sati* can be compared and in this regard, the pain is the main driver in the story which leads Karen to the mystical realm.

In the beginning of the story it is stated that "in winter she had to wear large wooden shoes, so that her little instep grew quite red" (Andersen 600). This "reddening" of feet is the expression of pain inflicted on her and deep down the patriarchal desire to humiliate the less privileged community is exhibited. In this regard, Elaine Scarry in her book, *The body in pain: The making and unmaking of the world* evaluates the phenomenon of pain which exuberantly resists treatment within a set domain. It clearly sets itself in emotional catalogue rather than a mere expressible notion (4). The element of pain is rooted in Karen's silence and this case shows her determination; her hurting feet capture the imagery of building persona of *Sati*. Further, the narrative follows the arrival of red shoes on the funeral of Karen's mother; she "walked humbly behind her coffin" (Andersen 600). Comparing this imagery with *Sati* by taking exceptional case of widows who wore their red wedding dress for their ritual and this red dress is switched with Karen's red shoes. Spivak pictured it out as the widow (subject) who is now the representative of her deceased husband, is misplaced from her own identity in order to exteriorize husband's death. The inconsistency lies in the situation that for male, *Sati* engulfs woman as compulsion but it is the foundational act of transcending the imposed meaning of it by woman (96). Taking Karen's mother as subject, the mother being the affectionate strata is absent. Here Karen imposed self-inflicting pain on losing such relation

and this promotes her masochistic tangent to show her love. This representation in the realm of “funeral” was paradoxical in the eyes of society and the red color of her shoes stood starkly against the black and white Christian rituals. Similarly, in context of *Sati*, the widow’s act is masochistic, in order to destabilize the patriarchal notions, as it deprives her of fear and pain plotted by society.

Consequently, the idea of liberation in the form of self-immolation is juxtaposed but they are interconnected. For Spivak, pain is necessary to pursue liberation as she counted on widows’ self-sacrifice which is driven out of losing relation. Jumping in the fire is the chosen act not out of compulsion as Spivak registered. Spivak critically evaluates the ritual that woman must set herself free from the imposed religious meaning of the act, as the metaphysical world requires a non-individual agency which she called “supraindividual”, locating it in altered ideological catalogue (99). The pain liberates the self of widow and in case of Karen, the religious patriarchs fixed their eyes on her shoes and when she entered in the Church a crippled soldier enchanted her...when psalm was been recited she forgot to say the prayers and thought about her red shoes (Andersen 601,602). This recounting on enchantment and her feet are the representatives of a rebellious figure obsessed with the pain and punishment metonymically represented in the form of red color.

Here is the answer to Spivak’s question about subaltern’s ability to speak. Definitely a subaltern can speak even he/she ‘performs’ by outlawing the scriptural ruling with his/her choice of objects. Maintaining the element of masochism as the main driver of events, Kerry Kelly Novick & Jack Novick invokes the investigation of pleasure out of pain when masochists realize their defeat and accept pain and translocate that relation of pain to an “intrusive object” (368). Objects play an important role in Karen’s case. The red shoes made her to ignore the patriarchal rules just as *Sati*, being aware of the strict codes, intentionally jumped in fire to make an avocation of liberation. For widows the fire is that ‘liberating’ object and Karen chose the red shoes that imparted the pleasure on the forefront of freedom by crippling the patriarchy by their performances.

Consequently, the construction of identity is projected through the doubling metaphor i.e. mirror. As Andersen narrates, the mirror told her being more “beautiful than pretty” (600). Linking this metaphor to previous events, the absence of parental figure in Karen’s life, made her to look at herself as lost narrative. She discovered the other side of self

which was suppressed beneath the dominant figure of religion. By adding a mythical element i.e. talking mirror, the author gave the hint of subsumed paradox of self. Brian Carr, evaluates this dilemma of mirror representation as loss of meaning generated through misrecognition of individual by social influences in operation (23). Karen's reflection was her ideal self, reflecting the thoughts which went misrecognized by the society because those thoughts were based on non-linguistic (systematic) basis, which is the sign of subaltern identity defined by "inability to speak" (Carr 26). Sati is represented as subaltern, but the question lurks how she is silenced while expressing herself through burning and the answer lies in the identification of self. Apparently the self of widow is connected with the deceased husband; the relation is quite anomalous yet it is sanctioned as per Spivak.

Contrary to this, Spivak called it as a register of free choice (96) and made the self of widow as autonomously liberating from the curse of patriarchy. For her, the language she adopted was reflective (mirror) and the fire (place) provides the site to enter into it, to form an unidentified symbolic language. Here lies the slippage of social construct that the space is provided within the imposed narrative to be altered by women, as the "*differend*" (Spivak 97), making an extension to obligation while iterating it. Connecting with this idea, Karen believed in her language i.e. an aspect missing during the funeral of her mother, but expressed in later occasions especially at the event of execution of her feet as "non-suicide" act, per Spivak (95).

Moving towards the expression of dance, it appeared to be unaccustomed on Christian landscape which Andersen tried to sketch as the background. Dance is more lyrical, fluid and feminine. In the story, Andersen expressed it through Angel as a command to dance till she left pale, cold and a skeleton (603). The words "dance, pale, cold, skeleton" appear to be parallel in Spivak's terms of torture. Before discussing dance, it is important to establish the relation of dance with the recurrent motif of masochism in the story. In this regard, the pain and trauma of losing affectionate figure is the loss of language for Karen. The meaningful strain of language is missing therefore Karen adopted the metaphor of dance to exhibit her emotions which were alien to phallogocentric language. Elaine Scarry defined the feature of pain that it encourages to be healed or caressed upon or in contrary to this, the pain is generally attended with respect to dominant culture around (16). The self-attending on trauma

made Karen to choose the agency of dance as the register of language because the religion and the society were muting her by their imposed sanctions. There was no idealized space for her to speak, to express and to rejuvenate herself. The pain (of mother's separation) occupies the body of Karen and made her to dance similar to the widow who attended her pain by burning herself to unite with the ultimate i.e. her husband.

In this case Spivak highlighted the true nature of *Sati* as a form of renunciation of all edicts with her absence not with silence, as subject is formed out of religion as the knowledge which displaces woman out of it (102). This is the place which Spivak is providing to subalterns to write a deconstructive history rather than destructed history. This absence relents to a new adoptive language i.e. dance which is the expression of feminine rejoice. It happens when performing is interpolated with the constant silence. The angel's curse at this point can be taken as the blessing on her as it imparts the knowledge of her true self amidst of all trials. In this case, the words of the angel i.e. dance, pale, cold, skeleton up to the disturbing imagery of "thorns which made her bleed" (Andersen 603), are all the building blocks of her struggle to unite with her mother (ideologically) as the widows did to reunite to the ultimate entity and transcended to the One (husband) who is a supernatural chronicle and for Karen it was her mother.

Similarly, the dance is synchronized with spirituality as a build-up of new identity. In this case, Spivak's idea of dance can be validated which is ideological exception in the case of *Sati*. She offers a view that self-immolation provides space to unite with the "transcendental One" i.e. the husband which is placed at the pedestal of "sovereign" (98). Altering "husband" to "mother", Karen deliberately chose to wear red shoes and her conscious act in paradox, turned out to be in the form of performance. Thus it destabilizes the sanction by adding greatness and courage at forefront. Moreover, Spivak provides a space of relief to widows by stating the holy Hindu imagery of dancers praising widow unless she burns herself in order to be "released" (98, 99). Here Spivak has set the sanction herself by criticizing the act by validating transcendence with utmost pain of liberation. Transcendence is epitomized through the act of dance and it is highly concerned with the question of self of the performer. Self is created at the periphery as the performative expression.

Self is justified when the desired performance is carried out to transcend the fixed identities of meanings. For Karen, the self lies in her desire and

the desire is intertwined with her performance, thus making her transformed identity. Andersen juxtaposed her feminine desire with the hard nut of patriarchal agnostics. When Karen went to executioner's door, she beseeched him to cut off her feet not the head so that she could repent her sin (Andersen 603). The self is congealed with masochistic desire; the self is expressed in the subversive manner in the outskirts of norms as if the self is controlling and manipulating, turning into a masochistic self. Karen's performance is in contrast with the widow's choice to embrace fire for salvation so it can be said that Karen's desire of bearing pain was the sacrificial performance. The other is the mother figure, the One to which Karen desired to reunite with her mystical performance. Spivak reversed the ritual of Sati by attacking on its etymology which is originated from the word *Sat* which "transcends" notions and gender towards spiritual essence (100). The subalternity is transcribed as the divine performance; depicted by act of *Sati* and dance. In the end of story, the soul met the ultimate One in the heaven and the angel i.e. the patriarch made Karen free just as society made the widow free by immolating her. The metaphors of fire and dance allowed the spaces to these women to project their radiance with the boundless expression. The identity is constructed through the languages adopted by widow and Karen i.e. *Sati* and dancer respectively in the metanarrative of subaltern and their newly formed identities of freedom spun out of control, imposing an instability factor in religious doctrines.

In a nutshell, the above discussion holds the dimension of locating patterns of *Sati* in the story *The Red Shoes* within the metanarrative of subalternity. The idea of spirituality is also explored as the feminine space, though spirituality can be explored through various other techniques but this paper views it with respect to the pain as its main driver. For women, the question of liberation comes up with divinity by holding a language which is different from phallogocentric language. *Sati* and Karen, belonging to different cultures bear identical pains and seek freedom through a singular pattern based on ideological juxtapositions proposed by Spivak. Power is deconstructed by 'fire' and 'shoes' which were the slippage points of ideologies. Hence, Karen not only seeks salvation but she debarred herself by bearing pain of execution like *Sati* who sacrificed her own body in the burning pyre. Both females, made their course by taking pain as it acts as a disability which cannot be counted as part of system. The feminine divinity thus is the liberation, the

jouissance not only to seek God's favor but another dimension to subaltern's identity.

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