



## MAGIC WITHOUT BORDERS: EXPLORING THE UBIQUITOUS PREVALENCE OF SUPERNATURAL ELEMENTS IN FOLKTALES ACROSS CULTURES

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### Abstract

The concept of magic, as a social reality, permeates every civilization whether it belongs to antiquity or modernity. The narrative landscape is replete with supernatural entities and extraordinary occurrences symbolizing human desires and aspirations that may be unattainable in the mundane world. This phenomenon reinforces human belief in metaphysical powers. This study aims to investigate the cross-cultural ubiquity of magic and supernatural occurrences as a transcultural phenomenon analyzing their symbolic significance, narrative utility and functional role within the heroic monomyth and global folktale tradition. This study contributes to the field of archetypes offering insight to understand the psychological and cultural significance of supernatural elements, their impact on human imagination and their utility within the folktales. This study employs archetypal framework based on Carl Jung's Collective Unconscious. The findings reveal that supernatural elements are a recurring archetype in folktale tradition and play an important role both in the story and the protagonist's transformation. Portrayed within the realm of cultural narratives, the supernatural forces, whether they are some objects, wizards, giants, fairies, demons, dragons or gods, play an important role in heroic monomyth in aiding or hindering the hero with their malign or benign intentions constituting a crucible for the protagonist wherein he can judge both his strengths and weaknesses.

**Keywords:** *Archetypes, Folktales, Supernatural Elements, Ubiquity*

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## 1. Introduction

Folktales construct a world where romanticism and realism, fantasy and reality are reconciled. Magic and supernatural elements, as a cross-cultural ubiquitous phenomenon and recurring prevalent motif within folktales, offer a unique window into the collective imagination and cultural values of diverse societies (Tatar, 2004; Propp, 1968). They provide entertainment, convey moral lessons, reflect human aspirations and explain the unknown ( Dundes, 1980; Luthi, 1982). Folktales of diverse cultures including Africa (Opoku, 1978), Asia, Europe (Luthi, 1982; Warner, 1994) and Latin America (Bettelheim, 1976 ) often showcase magical creatures , supernatural events and extraordinary abilities. Shaheen, Mumtaz and Khalid find folktales loaded with supernatural elements, "A fairy tale is often regarded as a type of story that generally has fairies, giants, witches, princes, princesses, magic and enchanting effects" (Shaheen, Mumtaz & Khalid, 2019, p.29). Fairy godmothers, for instance, in folk tales, appear to help the heroes reinforcing man's belief in metaphysical powers and that they have a great role in human life," when fairy godmothers are introduced in a story, they nearly always act as supernatural benefactors" (Coburn, 2006, p.14). But when seemingly supernatural parts of folktales are analyzed psychologically, they reflect human dreams, desires and wishes which probably a man is unable to materialize in the material world, " these (folktales) are the products of human mind what instigates a tale is a wish and fulfilment of that wish is the content of the tale " (Das, 2014, p. 18).

Buyu (2013) declares a folk tale to be a product of fantasy that manages an escape for the dejected and crest-fallen, " fairy/ folktales are product of fantasy that create a new world, taking the individual from the monotony of reality to the domain of escaping fears, frustration , poverty and humiliation " (Buyu, 2013, p. 01). Folktales provide a marvelous and soothing world, " they introduce us to worlds of talking animals, supernatural characters, handsome kings and beautiful queens, golden palaces with marvelous gardens , fantastic characters and many other events that fascinate the readers or listeners , impelling them to absorb everything without question" (Buyu, 2013, p. 01). Totibadze (2019) links fairy tales with myths and magical creatures, "what is a fairy tale? For some it is linked with folklore and myth, others believe them to be tales told to children filled with magical creatures like fairies, mermaids, giants, goblins, dwarfs etc. "(Totibadze, 2019, p. 916).

## 2. Theoretical Framework

The concept of archetype, embedded in the Collective Unconscious propounded by Carl Jung (1969), offers essential foundation and insight in examining magic and supernatural elements as a recurring motif within folktales. A central aspect of archetypal criticism is the identification and interpretation of archetypes in literary works. Contemporary mythologists assert that the genuine worth of a work lies in its global appeal and universality. Certain situations, images and characters generate identical

responses in all people regardless of time, culture and geography. These primordial images, recurrent and universal patterns, images, behaviors and situations are called archetypes in the sphere of psychology. Collective Unconscious, as articulated by Jung (1969), is a reservoir of shared human experiences, universal symbols or archetypes that are manifested timelessly across cultures in myths, dreams and stories including figures like magicians and supernatural helpers conveying shared psychological experiences and universal themes. Campbell (1969) explores structural and thematic archetypes shared by myths across cultures in his theory of Monomyth or Hero's Journey. Supernatural elements, as emphasized in Campbell's Hero-Journey, play a transformative role symbolizing the hero's internal psychological forces that empower the protagonist to cope with the trials of the journey. The consistent narrative role of magical helpers is identified by Vladimir Propp (1968) in *Morphology of Folktale* suggesting that supernatural archetypes become essential in shaping both narrative and symbolic meaning in folktale structure. This framework, by integrating the perspective of Jung, Campbell and Propp, highlights how recurring archetypes of magic and supernatural elements reveal universal and cultural narrative dynamics.

### 3. Discussion

The belief in magic and sorcery has always been an omnipresent phenomenon throughout the annals of human history (Frazer, 1890; Collingwood, 2005). Magic, as a common belief across cultures, permeates both ancient and modern civilizations (Johnson, Harris & Rosengren, 2000) mirroring human aspirations and the desire for their actualization (Djumaeva & Akhmadova, n.d). Magic is considered to be a great power, "Witchcraft, magic and sorcery are all concerned with the producing of effects beyond normal powers of man" (Pratt, 1915, p. 9). Witchcraft and sorcery are very closely associated with magic. They are processes of oracularity exploited for counseling, divinations and treatment of ailments (Motshwari, 1998). People of all cultures believe in both the positive and negative exploitation of magic, "human beings generally believe that magic directly affects nature and people for better and worse" (Motshwari, 1998, p. 1). The concept of magic and sorcery permeates every region in the world, "It is impossible to ignore witchcraft, sorcery and divination when dealing with the concept of magic because these concepts are often used to create or counter misfortune in a magical way" (Motshwari, 1998, p. 1). Multifaceted manifestation of magic, sorcery and supernatural elements emerges time and again as a recurring element in folktales. Magic, like trickery, too is adopted by both the hero and the villain in the heroic journey. The supernatural forces whether they are wielded by wizards, fairies, witches or giants can facilitate or obliterate the hero's aspirations and targets. They, sorcerers and magicians, can appear to guide or misguide, to aid or to hinder, to propel the hero forward or to derail him in the course of his journey. They can be malevolent or benevolent to the hero, his dear and near ones and to society in general. They are there to test the true worth of hero's potentialities. The supernatural elements within folktales

reflect religious beliefs, societal afflictions, human deprivations, existential dilemmas and the concepts associated with defeat and victory.

The narrative 'Prince Lionheart and His Three Friends' (Steel, 1917) stands as an exemplary illustration, replete with enchantment and otherworldly phenomena. At the very outset of the story we are introduced to a *fakir*, a holy man who offers some barley corns to the issueless King and Queen advising them to eat it and tells that as a result of this magical remedy they will have a beautiful little son, "at last the fakir or devotee , coming to the palace asked to see the Queen , and giving her some barley corns, told her to eat them and cease weeping , for in nine month she would have a beautiful son" (Steel, 1917, p. 42). The Queen eats the magical barley grain whose mystical property facilitates her conception and pregnancy. Consequently, she, after nine months, gives birth to a beautiful baby prince (Steel, 1917). The magical barley grains symbolize many childless couples desiring for some magical remedy to their barrenness. The folktale portrays a demon occupying a city, devoid of human populace, whose residents have abandoned the city under duress of the blood thirsty demon (Steel, 1917) and the demon can grow himself terribly tall and the very next moment can shrink himself as small as a finger. The protagonist, prior to embarking on the hazardous journey , bestows upon his friends a mystical barley plant to know about his (the hero's) health or plight telling that if the plant remains verdant it will convey that he is safe and sound but if it withers away , it will unfold that his life is at stake.

The tale, Prince Lionheart and His Three Friends, describes another deserted and desolate city "where the dreadful ghost lives which kills everyone" (Steel, 1917, p. 47). A witch, to deceive the protagonist, manifests herself in the guise of a beautiful woman adorned like a bride but the hero identifies her to be a witch by witnessing her feet bent backwards. The hero, in the tale under discussion, observes the slain head of a beautiful maiden hanging in an extended branch of a tree from where blood drops into the river and changes into rubies (Steel, 1917). The hero finds the rest of the body, places the head and the rest of the body together whereupon the girl comes back to life. She informs the protagonist about her abduction by the giant, who, under the fit of sexual jealousy of sharing herself with any outsider, slays her daily separating her head from the rest of the body before his departure and when, at nocturnal hours, returns, he, through his mystical powers, infuses life in her body again (Steel, 1917). The giant has a marvellous ability to smell the presence of human beings. We know it when the giant smells the presence of Prince Lionheart even when he is hidden in some corner of the house "Fee! Fa! Fum! This room smells of man's flesh!" (Steel, 1917, p. 51). The giant's life lies in a bumble bee. The hero kills the bee and thus the giant expires. A witch, through her magic, gathers information about the day routine of the hero Prince Lionheart. The hero's life lies in the magical sword which is thrown on burning coals by the witch wherein it gets burnt and stained and there the hero is burnt to death after receiving stains and blisters on his body. The barley plant falls down to the ground indicating that some misfortune has overtaken Prince Lionheart and thus seeing the signal, his three friends, the knife grinder,

the blacksmith and the carpenter arrive to help their friend. Step by step, they mend the sword and in the same fashion, the hero comes to life again. The blacksmith "blew up the fire, forged a rivet, and fastened the hilt to the blade. No sooner had he done so than the Prince's head grew to shoulder" (Steel, 1916, p. 58). The knife grinder deftly spins his wheel and removes stains and blisters from the sword, " and as he spun his wheel, the burns and scars disappeared likewise from Prince Lionheart's body , until at last the prince sat up alive , as handsome as before " (Steel, 1917, p. 58). The carpenter, to rescue Prince Lionheart's beloved imprisoned in a high tower by a king, prepares a wooden palanquin which can fly.

'Prince Aubergine' (Steel, 1917), from the beginning to the end, is loaded with magical events and supernatural elements. Princess Aubergine, the heroine of the story, takes birth out of an aubergine, an egg-plant, to a poverty-stricken Brahman couple. The Brahman's wife, to relish the egg-fruit, holds the knife to cut it off. As she is about to cut the fruit off the plant, a low moan is heard to her. As soon as she starts peeling the egg-fruit, once again she hears a tiny voice requesting her to peel the fruit cautiously, "Take care! \_\_Oh, please take care! Peel more gently, or I am sure the knife will run into me" (Steel, 1917, p. 72). She removes the rind gently and a beautifully dressed maiden steps out of the fruit, "out stepped the most beautiful little maiden imaginable, dressed in purple and white satin" (Steel, 1917, p. 72). On growing young, Princess Aubergine's beauty becomes the talk of the town making the king's wife jealous who actually is a sorceress. She, with an intention to kill her, brings her to the king's home telling her that a beautiful girl like her should live in a palace instead of wasting her life in a poor hut. Being a sorceress, the king's wife is well-acquainted with the fact that the maiden is not a fairy and her life lies in some other object. Once, when the maiden is fast asleep, the sorceress asks her to talk about the object which contains her life. Unfortunately, the maiden, unknowingly, reveals the secret of her life saying that a red and green fish in a faraway river contains her life, "Inside the fish there is a bumble bee, inside the bee a tiny box, and inside the box is the wonderful nine-lakh necklace. Put it on, and I shall die" (Steel, 1917, p. 75). Meanwhile, the maiden, feeling something fishy about the Queen's activities, comes back to the house of her foster-parents and tells them that she should neither be buried nor burnt in case she dies. She requests them to place her body in the north where none can approach her. There, the jealous Queen, somehow or other, gets the necklace and as soon as she wears it, the maiden dies at her cottage. The king, while hunting, happens to visit northward and finds the maiden there dead surrounded by many flowers. It is amazing that even though she is dead and married to none yet she gives birth to a son in the wilderness. The King comes daily there and engages himself in talking with the child. The child tells him that her mother is alive and cares for him at night as does the king at day. He elucidates his seemingly paradoxical assertion by explaining that during the day, when the Queen adorns herself with the necklace, his mother remains in a state of suspended animation, akin to death. However, when the Queen removes the necklace at night, his mother is revitalized, returning to life once more. Later on, the son of the maiden succeeds in grabbing the necklace from the jealous

Queen. He brings the necklace to her mother, throws it over her head and she becomes once more alive after so many years (Steel, 1917).

The tale 'The Son of Seven Mothers' (Steel, 1917) is teemed with many supernatural elements. The hero of the tale brings marvelous cow from the land of demons "whose milk flows all day long" (Steel, 1917, p. 96). He becomes wealthy by selling endless milk to the confectioners. He also brings "million-fold rice, which ripens in one night" (Steel, 1917, p. 99). When, after plucking the million-fold rice, the hero is returning he hears voice telling him "pluck me too! oh! Please pluck me too!" (Steel, 1917, p. 100). The hero looks back and becomes a heap of ashes. An old witch, supposed to ensure the safety of the hero, collects the ashes, adds a little water, and kneads the ashes giving it shape of a man and then drops a blood-drop from her finger on it to bring back the hero to life (Steel, 1917).

The tale 'The King of The Crocodiles' (Steel, 1917) is full of magic and magical events. A king demon crocodile asks the hand of a farmer's daughter, when refused, he curses the family and mysterious happenings take place. Whoever comes to the farmer's home as a candidate to make the farmer's daughter his wife, her son dies, unless, willingly or unwillingly, the farmer has to express his willingness to the crocodile's proposal. The events of the story symbolize forced marriages, and it shows how parents are harassed by the influential ones to marry their daughters against their wishes. The demon takes the farmer's daughter as a bride to his palace constructed under the water. The bride, on the bank of the river, feels hesitation in following her bridegroom fearing that she will drown to death. But, when she puts her first step into the water, the river parts and there emerges a road that leads to the palace, "no sooner had her foot touched the water than it divided before her, and, rising up on either side, showed a path" (Steel, 1917, p. 135). The demon crocodile gives magical bricks to the farmer that will facilitate him in reaching his daughter's palace under the water, "If ever you want to see your daughter, go down to the river, throw this brick as far as you can, into the stream, and you will see, what will see" (Steel, 1917, p. 114). Thus, the father throws the brick into the water and a path appears for him to reach the desired place (Steel, 1917). The farmer, wonder-struck, sees his son-in-law in the shape of a beautiful young prince and knows that he can change himself into a crocodile while he is out of water (Steel, 1917). The crocodiles celebrate marriage in the fashion of the culture of local Indian people. They, crocodiles, bring trays full of precious clothes and other decorative things for the bride (Steel, 1917).

A starling, in the tale 'The Two Brothers' (Steel, 1917) predicts that whoever eats his meat will become Prime Minister, "I am so important a bird, that if any man eats me, he will without doubt Prime Minister!" (Steel, 1917, p. 131). A parrot is also there to proclaim the kingship for the man who eats his meat, "If any man eats me, he will without doubt become a king!" (Steel, 1917, p. 130). The two brothers, the leading figures of the tale, aim at the two birds respectively and shoot them dead. The elder

brother eats the parrot whereas the younger one eats the starling. The elder brother happens to enter a land of strange customs. According to the custom of the land, an elephant selects the new king, after the death of the previous one by kneeling down and saluting the favourite personality. As soon as the sacred elephant casts the first glance at the newcomer, it approaches the elder brother and with his ways announces the coronation of the new king, "it caught sight of the prince it went down on its knees and began in a great hurry to salute him with its trunk. So, the prince (the elder brother) was immediately elected to the throne"(Steel, 1917, p. 133). The elder brother becomes the King, appoints his younger brother to be the Prime Minister and thus the prediction of the birds comes true. There is an ogre, in the very tale under discussion, who daily eats a goat, a wheaten cake and a young man, " In this kingdom their lives an ogre, which every day devours a young man, a goat, and a wheaten cake"(Steel, 1917, p. 135). In the very land, vessels of merchants move only when human sacrifice is made, "they declared that until a human sacrifice was made the vessels would never leave port "(Steel, 1917, p. 139).

The tale 'Thunder and Anansi' (Barker, 1917) describes a character named Kweku-Tsin having the mystical power of changing himself into anything he desires and once he does change himself into a tiny fly to spy on his father "Kweku-Tsin had the power of changing himself into any shape he chose; so he took the form of a tiny fly" (Barker, 1917, p. 42). Similarly, the tale 'The Grinding-Stone That Ground Flour by Itself' (Barker, 1917) describes a wonderful stone which grinds flour of its own accord, "The stone lay on the grass in the forest and ground flour of its own accord" (Barker, 1917, p. 81). Kofi, the hero, gets delighted at the magical discovery. He, daily, takes enough food from the grinding stone, feeds himself and his family in the time of famine "each morning he returned to the stone and got sufficient food for that day. In this manner he and his family kept well and plump" (Barker, 1917, p. 81).

#### 4. Conclusion

Supernatural elements emerge as a recurring motif within the analysis of the selected folktales. Magic and sorcery play an instrumental role not only in the progression of the story but also in the physical and mental transformation of its protagonist. Magic as a social reality exists in all cultures whether they are ancient or modern (Frazer, 1890; Rosengren, 2000). Exploitation of magic and supernatural elements within folktales asserts people's belief in divine and metaphysical powers. Magic, as portrayed in folk and fairy tales, allegorically highlights human fears, power, knowledge, aspirations, deprivations, fascination with the unseen and existential dilemmas. The examination of the cross-cultural folk narratives reveals that magical occurrences and supernatural elements are a transcultural and omnipresent phenomenon. There is hardly a folk tale that does not have supernatural elements. The Holy Man in 'Prince Lionheart and Three Friends' possesses magical barley having the ability to make someone pregnant. A demon in the aforesaid narrative, through his mystical power, can

grow himself both terribly tall and small to the size of a human finger. The life of the protagonist in the tale 'Prince Lionheart and His Three Friends' owes to a magical sword. Similarly, the heroine in 'Princess Aubergine' takes birth out of an egg-plant and remains alive unless her garland is stolen by the jealous queen. A marvellous cow in 'The Son of Seven Mothers' can give milk endlessly all day long and the hero in the very tale brings rice from a demonland that ripens overnight. Two birds foretell the future of the two brothers in 'The Two Brothers' and they become king and prime minister as foretold by the mysterious birds.

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