

## Unlikely Friends in Patriarchal Lands: An Ecofeminist Reading of Rajasthani Folktale “Sonal Bai”

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### Abstract

"Sonal Bai" is a popular folktale about a girl told by women in Rajasthani-speaking areas of north India to initiate young girls into adulthood. This paper investigates the metaphorical representation of a girl's coming of age through her relationship with a Sandalwood tree analysing, "Sonal Bai" as an ecofeminist text. The story renders voice to socially prohibited themes of menstruation and women's sensual desire as embodied in silent friendship between a sandalwood tree and Sonal (girl with golden hair). The paper highlights how the outwardly simple tale of "Sonal Bai" is in fact an encoded lesson for teenage girls, inverted as a relationship between two highly treasured "belongings"/ "commodities"—sandalwood and a unmarried girl—in a patriarchal society economically dependent on agriculture. The sandalwood tree is highly valuable for farmers; different parts of the tree are used to produce furniture, oil, fragrance and food items. It is also a part of religious rituals where its essence is used as *tilak* on idols in Hindu traditions. Rajasthani Language is spoken prominently in the desert regions of India (Thar Desert) and the existence of such a tree in a desert is as precious and rare as a girl with golden hair. The paper draws reference from recurrent invocation of olfactory senses of the listeners captured by the images of the sandalwood tree in the story. It also explores use of growth metaphors using 'rhizome' like imagery of sandalwood branches reaching the sky which become an escape route for a teenage girl hiding from her family. The temporal and spatial indicators are infused together in the story of Sonal Bai leading to an unlikely friendship between two prized possessions that eventually breaks with the arrival of a patriarchal archetype: a handsome young prince. This study discusses the prevalent *katha* culture in India where women exercise freedom of voice through singing and narrating tales within all-female groups. This site of independent feminine interaction in a highly patriarchal society is investigated using Bakhtin's "Chronotope" to highlight culturally encoded lessons in folktales meant for young girls in Indian society as a means of informal education.

**Keywords:** Chronotope, folktale, ecofeminist.

### Resumen

"Sonal Bai" es un cuento popular sobre una niña que las hablantes de rayastani del norte de la India cuentan a las niñas que van a convertirse en mujeres. Este artículo investiga la representación metafórica de la llegada a la adultez de una niña por medio de su relación con un árbol de sándalo analizando "Sonal Bai" como un texto ecofeminista. La historia da voz a temas socialmente prohibidos como la menstruación y el deseo sensual de las mujeres por medio de la amistad silenciosa entre el árbol y Sonal (la niña con cabello dorado). El artículo destaca cómo el aparentemente sencillo cuento de "Sonal Bai" es de hecho una lección codificada para chicas adolescentes, invertido como una relación entre dos "pertenencias" / "mercancías" muy valiosas—sándalo y una chica soltera—en una sociedad patriarcal que depende económicamente de la agricultura. El árbol de sándalo es muy valioso para los granjeros ya que diferentes partes de éste se usan para fabricar muebles, fragancias y alimentos.

También es parte de rituales religiosos en los que su esencia se usa como *tilak* en ídolos de las tradiciones hindúes. El idioma rayastani se habla principalmente en las regiones desérticas de la Inida (desierto de Thar) y la existencia de tal árbol en el desierto es tan preciada y rara como una niña de cabello dorado. El trabajo toma referencias de la invocación recurrente de los sentidos olfativos de la audiencia capturada en las imágenes del árbol de sándalo en la historia. También explora las metáforas del crecimiento usando imágenes rizomáticas de las ramas del sándalo elevándose hacia el cielo, convirtiéndose en una ruta de escape para la joven que se esconde de su familia. Los indicadores temporales y espaciales se infusionan juntos en el relato llevando a una amistad improbable entre dos posesiones preciadas que al final se rompe con la llegada del arquetipo patriarcal: un joven y guapo príncipe. Este estudio discute la cultura *katha* de la India en la que las mujeres ejercen su libertad de expresión a través de canciones y de relatos dentro de grupos formados sólo por mujeres. Este espacio de interacción femenina independiente en una sociedad altamente patriarcal se investiga utilizando el concepto de cronotopo de Bakhtin para enfatizar las lecciones culturales codificadas en los cuentos destinados a las jóvenes indias como un medio de educación informal.

*Palabras clave:* Cronotopo, cuento, ecofeminista.

'Sonal Bai' is a popular folktale about a girl told by women in Rajasthani-speaking areas of north India to initiate young girls into adulthood. This article investigates, through interpretive commentary, the metaphorical representation of a girl's coming of age through her relationship with a Sandalwood Tree analysing, 'Sonal Bai' as an eco-feminist text. The story renders voice to socially prohibited themes of menstruation and women's sensual desire as embodied in silent friendship between the sandalwood tree and Sonal (girl with golden hair).

### Extended Summary of "Sonal Bai"<sup>1</sup>

In a village there lived a farmer whose daughter was very beautiful. She was called Sonal Bai because her hair was made of pure gold. Her mother was very particular about the daughter's hair. Each day when Sonal went bathing in the lake, her mother would count her hair before and after she came back. One day, when Sonal's mother was counting her hair after Sonal returned from the lake, she realized that she had one hair less, and, no matter how many times she counted, the missing hair remained missing. She scolded Sonal with harsh words and told her that she was no longer a small child, and she should not be so careless. She should grow up and stop acting childish. Sonal was very sensitive and when her mother talked with such rage she could not stop sobbing and crying.

Sonal left her house and climbed up a Sandalwood tree that was growing nearby. She was so heartbroken that she hugged the Sandalwood tree and asked it to grow taller. When Sonal's teardrop fell on the branch of the tree, the Sandalwood tree started growing taller. After some time, Sonal's family realized that she was not in the house, and they started searching for her. Finally, reaching the tree, they saw

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<sup>1</sup> The Summary was written after reading the three versions available; Rajasthani (Original), Hindi and English translations. The English translation by Vishes Kothari is especially helpful for its adept cultural translation.

Sonal sitting on one of its branches. She was sat so high that they were only able to see her by craning their necks.

One by one, Sonal's friends and family members tried to convince her to climb down. Her mother promised to never scold her ever again, but no matter how much her friends danced the *Ghoomar*<sup>2</sup> and sang to appease her, Sonal was unmoved. Each time they finished their song she would ask the tree to grow taller. Finally, her little nephew started to request her to come down. Sonal was especially attached to her nephew. She was unable to ignore his pleas. She requested Sandalwood tree to bend. When she was close enough to climb down from the tree; she picked her nephew up and sat back on a branch asking the tree to grow taller again. No matter how much her family and friends tried to appease her Sonal sat in the tree with her nephew and refused to come down. Each day Sonal's sister-in-law would come with a golden bowl full of *churma*<sup>3</sup> and a golden pot full of water. She would implore Sonal sweetly to eat and drink. Sonal would ask the tree to bend down, and then she would collect the food and drink and climb back up again. She would first offer it to her nephew and then she would eat after him.

Many days passed in the same way. One fine day, a Prince's wedding procession halted under the Sandalwood tree to rest. They were hungry and thirsty. Looking down from the tree, Sonal's heart melted when she saw the procession. She dropped a morsel of *churma*. When the morsel touched the ground, it became a large amount, enough to satisfy everybody's hunger. She then let fall a drop of water which turned into a whole pond of sweet fresh water when it touched the ground.

The people were puzzled at the food and drink that appeared by magic. The prince instructed men to climb and investigate. They were unable to find anybody despite checking thoroughly. The prince was not satisfied and decided to climb and check for himself. He searched behind every leaf and branch. When the prince reached the top of the tree, he found Sonal Bai and her nephew sitting behind two leafy boughs. The prince was startled by the beautiful girl with golden hair sitting atop the tree. He asked her whether she was a fairy or a demonness. Sonal Bai blushed and answered that she was neither, she was just a girl upset with her mother and hiding in the tree with her nephew. The prince was infatuated by her sweet voice and beauty. He urged Sonal to marry him and come to his palace with him. Sonal agreed on the condition that her nephew would remain with her wherever she goes.

Sonal bowed her head, and put her hands together in gratitude to the Sandalwood tree, indebted by the hospitality. Then she rode with her nephew in a golden chariot all the way to the prince's palace. The procession had a long distance to cover to reach the prince's kingdom. On the way, Sonal's nephew grew thirsty. He asked Sonal for water. They arrived at a lake, and Sonal asked her ladies-in-waiting to

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<sup>2</sup> *Ghoomar* is a Rajasthani dance form where women dance around in circles wearing long, wide skirts. The dance was earlier used to invoke the goddess of learning, arts and wisdom by specific communities. It has since become common among diverse communities and is no more gender specific.

<sup>3</sup> *Churma* is a dish made by mixing jaggery and ghee into fresh pan fried or deep-fried dough prepared by making the mixture with hands.

fetch some water. The ladies told her that whoever drinks from the lake will turn into a crow. Sonal told her nephew that the water was bitter, and they would get sweet water at the next lake.

When they reached the next lake Sonal urged her ladies-in-waiting to hurry and fetch water. The ladies did not move and told her that whoever drinks the water of the lake will turn into a dog. Sonal was desperate, but again convinced her nephew to wait till they reached the next lake. On reaching the third lake, the ladies told Sonal that whoever drank its water would turn into a snake. Sonal convinced her nephew to wait again for the next lake. The procession hurried to reach the next lake. At the fourth lake Sonal begged her ladies-in-waiting to run and fetch water for her nephew. The ladies informed Sonal whoever drinks water from the lake will turn into a peacock. The nephew's eyes were swimming; he was unconscious. Sonal was faced with a dilemma, whether to choose a dead nephew or a nephew in the form of a peacock. She sent the ladies to fetch water.

The instant the nephew drank the water he turned into a peacock. The beautiful peacock sang, and Sonal cried as she saw her nephew. The nephew could not see his aunt crying and started crying himself. They spent hours hugging and crying. The prince could not wait any longer and convinced Sonal to leave her nephew and move ahead. He promised her that she could visit her nephew every day.

Each day Sonal visited her nephew with *churma* and pot of water. One of the prince's wives was very jealous of Sonal as she had completely taken over the prince's time and attention. The older wife planned to get even. She visited Sonal and asked whether she could visit her nephew instead of her. She spoke sweetly and convinced Sonal to stay back while she went to give food and drink to her nephew. On reaching the lake, the older wife found the peacock (nephew) and offered him *churma*. The peacock was gullible like his aunt. He bent down to eat, suspecting nothing. The older wife twisted the neck of the peacock and killed him. With her bloody hands she ate the *churma* and drank the water.

Next day, when Sonal went to the lake to meet her nephew, he did not come when she called. She searched everywhere and called his name several times. After looking for a long time, she found the dead body of the peacock under a tree. Sonal was inconsolable, and the peacocks at the lake all cried with her. She was heartbroken and life left her body. The peacocks performed the final rites for both Sonal and her nephew. They all gave up food and drink and wailed night and day. Soon, they also perished. The trees and plants also withered away. There now stood two worn out Sandalwood trees where Sonal and her nephew died. The trees still grieve and wail for Sonal and her nephew.

### **Text in Context: “Sonal Bai” in 20<sup>th</sup> century Rajasthan**

Outwardly simple, “Sonal Bai” is, in fact, an encoded lesson for teenage girls, inverted as a relationship between two highly treasured ‘belongings’/ ‘commodities’ (sandalwood and unmarried girl) in a patriarchal society economically dependent on

agriculture. The sandalwood tree is highly valuable for farmers, as different parts of the tree are used to produce furniture, oil, fragrance and food items. It is also a part of religious rituals where its essence is used as *tilak*<sup>4</sup> on idols in Hindu traditions. Rajasthani Language is spoken prominently in the desert regions of India (Thar Desert) and the existence of such a tree in a desert is as precious and rare as a girl with golden hair. The tale forms part of '*katha*'<sup>5</sup> culture in India where women exercise freedom of voice through singing and narrating tales within all-female groups. Culturally encoded lessons in folktales meant for young girls in Indian society represent a means of informal education. Moreover, this safe space that women build transforms into a site of independent feminine interaction and exchange of values inside a highly patriarchal society.

The story was recorded at Borunda village in Rajasthan, North India. Rajasthani is a language spoken in state of Rajasthan and to an extent in the surrounding states of Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Haryana and Punjab (north-western region of Indian subcontinent). There are two important geographical features of the area; the Aravalli mountain range and Thar desert run diagonally dividing the temperature and vegetation. The village of Borunda was one of the first to start using tube-wells and tractors for farming (Thomas A. Timberg report, 1981). The latter half of 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed development and awareness that was a clear reflection of India's freedom from colonial rule in 1947. Arrival of electricity helped the agriculture flourish where earlier water was drawn from deep wells manually and access to even drinking water was limited (Chandidan Detha)<sup>6</sup>. The change in natural landscape also reshaped the cultural landscape embedded through the literary expressions that underwent translations from orality to textual forms.

When folktales began to be printed in anthologies and collections categorization of the audience/listeners based on gender or age was no longer possible. 'Sonal Bai' the folktale was first recorded in Vijayadan Detha's collection of Rajasthani folklore titled, *Baatan Ri Phulwari, A Garden of Tales*, a collection published over the span of 15 years (1960-1975) in 14 volumes. Thus Sonal Bai's story was no longer restricted to female listeners. The folklore anthologist Vijaydan Detha wrote in his introduction to *Baatan Ri Phulwari*:

My Village was my university, and my literary education if any came from rural women who always had so many interesting stories, anecdotes and wisdoms to share. When men my age went out to hunt or drink, I used to sit in my courtyard listening to what the women had to say, their gossip, their tales. At one point, I specifically started to invite all the women who were willing to just sit with me and talk. There were days when I was surrounded by women lost in conversation for hours at end. (Detha)<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Tilak: a mark on forehead worn by Hindus.

<sup>5</sup> Katha: Oral stories recited on specific occasions.

<sup>6</sup> Chandidan Detha's letter published with the introduction of *Baatan Ri Phulwari* volume-1 (1963), published by Rupanayan Sansthan. Ruapanayan Sansthan was established by Komal Kothari and Vijaudan Detha in Borunda village, Rajasthan and published literary work in Rajasthani language. The folktales collected in Borunda were published as *Baatan Ri Phulwari* in 14 volumes.

<sup>7</sup> A closed quotation from Vishes Kothari's translation of select folktales from *Baatan Ri Phulwari* titled; Folktales from Marwar.



Detha gives credit for his ‘literary education’ to the female get-togethers where women shared tales and anecdotes in the absence of men. This particular tale was meant for young girls as a cautionary tale forewarning them to keep themselves in check lest they try to break free from under the mother’s tutelage. The tale in form of ‘katha’ opens space for women to share and address often stigmatized and taboo subjects like female desires, menstruation and coming of age. ‘Coming of age’, with its physical and emotional changes in a female body, also comprises distaste towards parental supervision, the need for freedom, the search for companionship and the discovery of personal desires, all of which are evident in the first part of the folktale. Sonal Bai’s ill-fated life and death have one single episode of peace and fulfilment, which is her time spent in the Sandalwood tree.

The story takes place in three different environmental settings; in the first part there is an allusion to swimming and eventually the protagonist loses a golden hair while in water; in the second part Sonal lives on top of a tree away from her family; and in the third part she is married to a prince but spends most of her time with her nephew near the lake where he turned into a peacock. When her nephew dies, and she passes away grieving for him, they both metamorphose into Sandalwood trees. The movement from internal to external records the temporal and spatial shifts in a space that is neither domestic nor public. This third space is nature; Sonal’s life on the Sandalwood tree is marked with peace and contentment. Sonal’s movement in physical terms from interior to exterior chronotopes (Bakhtin) echoes Tamil’s poetic concepts of *akam* (domestic) and *puram* (public space)<sup>8</sup>. Unlike the common notion that dangers lie outside the domestic space and once a girl crosses the safe space she will be exposed to all kinds of vices, she finds her solace in a tree which can only grow outside it. She is endangered once she leaves the tree, establishing the symbolic power of the tree as the protector. The tree in this sense is a domestic space that is rooted and safer than a prince’s palace. The creation of this personal space with the tree challenges the domestic and public spaces.

### Active or Passive: Role of Flora and Fauna in Sonal Bai’s tale

Plants as anthropomorphic beings is a common motif in folktales. The presence of Sandalwood tree in this story alludes to certain olfactory and masculine elements that attract a young adult’s senses. The sandalwood tree and its products are called *chandan*; the off-white shade of lightest beige is referred by the same term. This masculine tree develops a connection with a young girl. The dropping of food or water from the sandalwood tree attracts the prince to search for Sonal and he immediately gets infatuated by her sweet voice and beauty. He abandons his wedding procession to another town and decides to marry Sonal. The stages of a young girl’s

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<sup>8</sup> In Tamil classic poetics; the external space and internal space divide the private and public called: *akam* and *puram* respectively. A.K. Ramanujan in his essay ‘Flowering Tree’ uses this distinction to inspect the form of female-centric narratives where agency is given or taken from a women based on internal and external space.

attempt to adopt to her changing body and hormones is echoed from the outset where she leaves her house as a teenager longing for personal space, she then experiences the peaceful companionship of nature (sandalwood tree) followed by her marriage to the prince who comes to rest under the tree on his way to his wedding. Sonal becomes capable of choosing a partner for herself after spending time practising in a temporary family setting, where she is a mother-like figure to her nephew and the sandalwood's partner. She lives in the tree with her nephew sharing water and food given by her family. Despite her anger and frustration against her mother and family she comes down from the tree only to take her nephew with her. When she does finally leave the tree, she is soon met with challenges that turn her nephew into a peacock, leading to his death and eventually to her own end as well.

The relationship between the tree and the protagonist is one of silent companionship. The Sandalwood tree has no dialogue in the entire story. Sonal talks to the tree and asks 'him'<sup>9</sup> (gender marking based on Hindi and Rajasthani language) to grow taller so that she can distance herself from her mother. It is important to note that the gender of the Sandalwood tree is male, unlike most representations of the tree in narratives where its function of nurturing and bearing fruits renders it a female character. The gender of sandalwood trees is male in Sanskrit, Rajasthani and Hindi language. Thus, the choice of a sandalwood tree highlights the desired male intervention in a young female's adventure. The tree provides Sonal with a safe home without asking for anything in return. The Sandalwood tree responds to everything Sonal asks him whether it is to grow or bend. The ability to communicate with the tree becomes Sonal's power. It also highlights a lack of connection and communication with nature from the other characters in the narrative. The phallic imagery of the Sandalwood tree growing taller and taller each time Sonal pleads is also an important motif that suggests the young adult's sensual fantasies. The sprouting of two sandalwood trees on the occasion of death asserts an active role on the part of the Sandalwood tree. Sonal comes to the tree when she wants to distance herself from her family, and disassociate from the obligations of growing up. The tree offers Sonal a safe abode away from her family and society. It transforms her character from a sensitive little girl to a young adult capable of living alone and taking decisions for herself.

It is also important to discuss the transformation of Sonal's mother from an active participant to passive one. When the flora and fauna attain active roles, the mother becomes an absent figure in Sonal's story. Even when Sonal decides to marry, the family, including the mother, are neither informed nor invited. She bids goodbye to the tree and leaves with the prince and his people. The theme of absent mother/parents which is common in young adult literature comes to play in the folktale after the first episode where Sonal Bai leaves her family after she is scolded by her mother, who tells her:

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<sup>9</sup> *Chandan* in Hindi and Rajasthani, *Chandana* in Sanskrit is the name for Sandalwood trees and its products. The tree is referred with male pronouns in Sanskrit, Rajasthani and Hindi (other languages with Sanskrit origins).

you aren't a child any longer, but your childishness has still not one!...Ultimately, only one's own common sense can be of use!...You have gone and lost a hair worth a lakh...dare you repeat this again! Then there will be no one worse than me! (43, from Vishes Kothari's English translation of Sonal Bai)

Physically, the single hair lost in water alludes to the loss of freedom and innocence. The loss is not just physical but economical as well. The hair is pure gold and worth a lakh (one hundred thousand in Indian currency). Sonal's mother attempts to discipline her, reminding her of the responsibilities of girls. The mother's character communicates the socio-cultural code of behaviour, including control over freedom of movement, the importance of physical beauty (as wealth), and vocal domination. Melanie Duckworth writes: "In children's literature, maternal desires are generally (and understandably) seen as secondary to the character development of child protagonist. The characters of mothers are frequently required to get out of the way of narrative in order for the child to experience her own adventure. The desire for a mother to protect and nurture can stifle a child's narrative potential" (105). The character of Sonal criticises the practices of parental supervision and control as she commences her own personal journey. The geographical displacement provides her with a temporal space in which to delay the next phase of her life as a responsible adult. The sandalwood tree becomes her safe haven, emotionally and physically distancing her from impending womanhood.

### **The Socioeconomic Wealth of Patriarchy: Sonal and Sandalwood Tree**

Unlike the western conception of humans as a superior species, which allowed them to treat non-human species as resources, traditional Vedic understanding of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*<sup>10</sup> implies that all living beings on the planet are one family as they are all made of *Panchmahabhutas* (five elements: water, fire, air, earth and space). However, environmental awareness, of the philosophical and physical levels found in the ancient Vedic texts, has been long abandoned. The aftermath of the colonial era in India resulted in a frenzy of development that concentrated on the creation of urban spaces, an industrial boom that overshadowed the rural agricultural spaces, distancing the population from the "ecological paradigm" (Shiva 2002; Rangarajan 2013). The traditional world of the folktales contained a closer relationship with nature that faded with the arrival of urbanization. The commercial lens seeps into the patriarchal view of the household where girls are referred as '*Paraya Dhan*'<sup>11</sup> which literally translates as 'another's wealth' in patriarchal families in India (Rawat 44). The hierarchy is established essentially by the family system

<sup>10</sup> The idea of Universal brotherhood i.e.; '*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*' is emphasised in Hindi Vedic philosophy implying that everything on the planet is part of one big family. If harmony is disrupted by one family member it will reflect on the others as well.

<sup>11</sup> *Paraya dhan* automatically disassociates the girl's parents by its terminology establishing the ownership of females as the wealth of her husband's family.



(Bhasin). The terms used for unmarried girls in society further highlight their state and status in the context. Similar to a girl being nurtured until she comes of age, after which she is married off, the Sandalwood tree is a long-term investment for farmers. Farmers plant a tree and wait for two to three decades to sell it. The status of both Sonal Bai and the Sandalwood tree in the household is like that of a prized ‘resource’ that will be traded off once they reach the acceptable age. Such socially common notions of proprietorship are referred to as a “rhetoric of ownership society” by Vandana Shiva a renowned Indian Ecofeminist.

Remarkably, Sonal Bai recounts an unlikely friendship between two prized possessions that eventually breaks with the arrival of a patriarchal archetype—a handsome young prince. The sandalwood tree is highly valuable for farmers. Different parts of the tree are used to produce furniture, oil, fragrance, and food items. It also plays a part in religious rituals where its essence is used as *tilak* on idols in Hindu traditions. The narrative also has to be understood from the socio-religious context where the Sandalwood tree’s close association to god worship is translated as symbol of purity. “Sandal plays an important role in the worship of Gods, its paste and oil are used for incense and religious ceremonies and for cleansing holy places” (Kumar et al.). The tree is praised in Vedic texts and its heartwood is considered sacred. It is claimed that Goddess Lakshmi lives in the sandal tree, and the wood is used to worship God Shiva. Similarly, a young maiden is also considered a symbol of purity in socio-religious contexts (Ploss and Bartels); the partnership in the story is indeed reaffirmed as pure through Sonal’s choice of partner. The transience of flowers and short blooming period makes products made of trees like sandalwood that retain their scent and other properties indefinitely (McHugh) the symbol of permanency which allows Sonal to return to form at the end of the story.

However, *oikonomics*<sup>12</sup>, the wisdom of living in harmony with world, was preserved in traditional households through women-centred narratives that were part of female tradition (see Rangarajan, Ramanujan). Unlike, male-centric tales especially where the boy/man sets out on an adventure for a princess, treasure or special powers, the female-centred tales focus on providing agency to their protagonists who are otherwise marginalized in reality. The difference in patterns and symbolic meaning of flora and fauna in narratives shared among women are based on the culturally perceived world of the gendered teller, listener and interpreter (Ramanujan).<sup>13</sup> At end of the tale, Sonal’s and her nephew’s bodies metamorphose into Sandalwood trees, returning to the state where they felt happy and fulfilled. Once dead the rules of the social world do not apply, and they choose to revert to the family they formed before the arrival of the prince. In an almost poetic way Sonal chooses to be one with the sandalwood tree upon her death. The ‘seeds’ of

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<sup>12</sup> *Oikonomics* is the term used for economics and management of a household. In patriarchal societies women and girls are responsible for domestic chores. Hence, the concept of oikonomics is closely related to female-centric narratives.

<sup>13</sup> Folktales like the ‘Flowering Tree’ from Karanataka, ‘Tezimola’ from Assam in India are women centric stories wherein the young-adult female protagonist transforms into a tree.

experience before and after living in the tree reflect her final decision to be one with the Sandalwood tree. The end also hints at the essence of Sandalwood tree that the two carry with them, even after they leave it far behind for the palace of the prince. Sonal is protected from the manipulations and rules of the human world when living in the tree. Her most fulfilling time is spent in the company of her nephew and the tree giving.

### Cautionary or Revolutionary Tale?

The story of Sonal and the Sandalwood tree represents a form of cautionary tale for young girls, warning them against the harsh reality of the society. Ramanujan suggests in his rereading of a Kannada female-centric folktale titled "Flowering Tree", "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." Further, if the listening audience included boys, they might be enriched by such tales by developing empathy for female's struggles in society. The agency provided by such women's tales addresses the socially prohibited themes of a girl's coming of age, love, and the dangers of transgression, simultaneously exercising freedom by asserting the immortality of nature and the mortality of humans. The close relationship between females and nature bestows them with peace and companionship that transcends life and echoes the Hindu Vedic philosophy of *Panchmahabhutas*<sup>14</sup> where all living and non-living things are indivisible since everything is made of the five elements; fire, earth, water, air and sky.

The two sandalwood trees that grow from the graves of Sonal and the peacock (nephew) are described as 'worn out' and that cry for the loss. Sandalwood is an important component of funeral rituals in Hinduism. "It is customary in certain communities among the Hindus to put a piece of sandalwood in funeral pyre" (Kumar et.al), providing further rationalization of the choice of tree in the folktale. It draws olfactory (fragrance and pheromones), religious (*tilak* and essence for offering), economic (monetary value) and physical (smooth texture, rooted and magnanimity) meaning. The nature markers in the story—peacocks, plants and trees—perform the final rites of the deceased and offer an ode to their closeness to sandalwood trees, which make them a family. The sandalwood trees that wail for the loss signify the purity of the sacrifices made by Sonal in her life.

The internal conflict in the narrative where the protagonist's choices lead to her early death and her rebirth as a sandalwood tree echo the female preoccupation with conduct in society. A rereading of the ending provides an answer to the question of whether the tale is cautionary or revolutionary. The wailing of peacocks on their death, the final rites conducted by the peacocks, and their metamorphosis, provide a

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<sup>14</sup> According to Ancient Vedic Philosophy *Panchmahabhutas* are the five elements; *Akasha* (sky), *Vayu* (air), *Agni* (fire), *Jala* (water) and *Prithvi* (earth) that constitute everything on the planet. This implies the indivisibility of humans and non-humans displacing the idea of human superiority. The five elements are also indicators of the five senses.

freedom that transforms the tragic ending of a cautionary tale into the hope for a higher existence.<sup>15</sup> Nature, as represented by the trees, peacocks and water in the lake, accepts Sonal and her nephew as family when humans abandon and attack them. Only a deeper reflection upon the fear and sorrow of Sonal's tragic death (cautionary) can lead a reader/ listener to this revolutionary initiation of an empathetic female into immortality revoking the image of the two Sandalwood trees rooted to the ground where Sonal and her Nephew died. This 'rhizome' like beginning of 'after-life' at the end of the story sprouts from the growing voices of struggle, valorizing marginal entities like women, flora and fauna in a patriarchal, consumer-centric society.

### Final Observations

This tale allows us to 'engage ecocritically with a contemporary ecological dharma'<sup>16</sup> in the words of Rangarajan. By foregrounding such female-centric folktales, valorizing their bodies, feelings and emotions and situating them in the present ecological crisis, the tale revives the oikonomical wisdom encoded with "ecosocial ideals" (Barnhill).<sup>17</sup> Invoking a 'rhizome'-like figure such folktales sprout from unforeseen patriarchal (and consumer-centric) social spaces and grow with other marginalized entities such as flora and fauna. The rhizome only grows with the growing voices and narratives giving space to discourses such as eco-feminist stories of struggle and survival. Ecofeminist critics cite the close proximity of two marginalized groups, women (and girls) and nature, in a patriarchal capitalistic society (see Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, Carol Adams, Douglas Vakoch). Ecofeminism in literary discourse aims at a rereading of texts to identify the connection between women and nature and to further establish a subject-subject relation to defy their objectification. This folktale is a testimony for the prevalent practise of women's and young girls' close association with nature in Rajasthan.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> The idea of good deeds leading to a higher form of existence in the next life is known as Karma in Hindu Philosophy.

<sup>16</sup> *Dharma* essentially means the correct way of living, the moral conduct of life, based on the Sanskrit literary tradition. Rangarajan suggests that *Dharma* implies environmental wisdom at its core.

<sup>17</sup> 'Ecosocial ideals' is a term coined by David Barnhill and means solving the present ecological crisis by searching for positive ways to alter it using ideologies, social structures, cultures, values and behaviors that propagate the wellbeing of the Earth and healthy relationships among all things.

<sup>18</sup> Folktales like 'Ras Kas Diya Jale' (where a woman chooses a snake as her partner), 'Naagan, Tharo Bansh Badhe' (where a male cobra transforms into a human to marry a girl) are common in Rajasthani folklore, highlighting the proximity of female protagonists to nature, especially in the role of beloved or desirous partners.

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