

Portrait of a Romantic Heroine Extraordinary: Analysis of *Rajul Malushahi*, A Kumauni Love Legend

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In this paper my focus is on an unusual heroine of a Kumauni love legend. The legend *Rajula Malushahi* is named after the central characters and I hope to be able to show that Rajula in at least one of the several versions of the legend is an extraordinary person, braving dangers and meeting challenges, upsetting old conventions and suggesting a new, more equal basis for man-woman relationship, and moving towards the ideal of an androgynous personality.

Rajula Malushahi is a most popular legend of the Central Himalayas. Originating in the Kumaun region, it is said to be equally popular in Garhwal. According to Trilochan Pandey (1979), who is one of the pioneers in the field of Kumaun folk literature, the legend is sung principally on long winter nights. Since this 15th century legend belongs entirely to the oral tradition, it is, inevitably, available in several different versions—four or five versions according to Trilochan Pandey (p. 145), depending on who is singing it and before whom and where. And there is perhaps no one original or universally accepted or authentic version of it. The vitality of the legend, due mainly to the character of Rajula, is reflected in the recent publication of two long poems based on the legend—one entitled *Malushahi* by Dr. Chandrakar (1993) who is a non-Kumauni and the other entitled *Rajula Malushahi* by Jugal Kishore Petshali (1991). The old legend, Petshali believes, is also the story of the woman of our own times. What fascinated him was the rebellious streak in Rajula's character. But though Rajula remains the source of the enduring appeal of the legend, the legend itself has not received the kind of systematic attention that I think it deserves, very little outside the Kumaun-Garhwal region. It would be useful to put the legend of *Rajula Malushahi* in the context of love legends in general and see the place of women in them, and then try to relate Rajula's depiction in it to the position of women in the hill society from which the legend has sprung. Love legends often subvert what we could call the official mores of the society in which they flourish,

particularly those relating to authority. Love in them has an autonomous morality, it is a religion almost, to which the lovers owe exclusive allegiance and for which no sacrifice is too great. So a degree of defiance of authority, whether of the father or of the husband, is built into their structure. Consequently love legends regard women as equal to men in passion and often give primacy to them. Sohni (in *Sohni Mahiwal*), Sassi (in *Sassi Punnu*) and Marwani (in *Dhola Maru*) are all more active than the men they love. This is even truer of Rajula who faces challenges and dangers that are largely unknown to the others. She is in fact a romantic heroine extraordinary.

All love legends are culture specific and they encapsulate the psyche of a people. They express what perhaps does not find expression in such a focussed manner in any other way—our inmost and often unconscious or semi-conscious hopes and fears, our yearnings and longings, even our terrors. They are “great and compelling cultural dreams” as Sudhir Kakkar and John Ross (1986) call them. But if *Rajula Malushahi* is a dream, it is grounded in the reality of life as it is lived in the Central Himalayas, particularly in regard to women. Speaking about the status of women in the hills, Gerald D. Berreman (1992) says:

It is important to note that the position of women in Pahari society is distinctly superior to the position of women in plains society. Both women and men are aware and proud of this feature of their society. Pahari women play an essential and recognised role in almost all aspects of the economy. They are not secluded, they are not limited in their movement, within and around the village. . . .

These remarks are made about all Pahari women but they are eminently applicable to the women in the Kumaun-Garhwal region. And they give some idea of the kind of sub-soil from which the legend of *Rajula Malushahi* particularly the character of Rajula has sprung. Nearer home, the noted Hindi writer Gaura Pant Shivani who belongs to Almora has adduced evidence to show that hill women were fearless and they knew how to protect themselves. Shivani goes on to say how the hill women defended themselves with *daranti* (sickle) when lustful British officers called them *lal bibi* and actually got their nose cut off for their eve-teasing.

We could now turn to examining the different versions of the legend. Like many other love legends, this legend is set within a patriarchal framework. Some of the patriarchal features are: For example, the parents pledge their children to one another and thus “decide” their fate even before they are born. Later when Rajula grows up her father Sunpati Shauk considers it his prerogative to dispose of

her at his will. A third mark of patriarchy is the polygamy with Malushahi in one version having as many as seven wives. (But this feature does not disturb Rajula. In this respect there is a parallel with a Rajasthani love legend called *Moomal* where Moomal the beloved does not feel disturbed at the fact that her lover Mahendra has other wives.) It is this patriarchal framework which Rajula who has a streak of rebellion in her, defies.

I have looked at 5 versions of the legend.* Three of these versions are of Kumauni origin and one is a Garhwali version. The fifth is actually a short summary of the legend in English in Oakley and Gairola's anthology called *Himalayan Folklore* (1935). This version is radically different from the other because it plays down the role of Rajula. The differences in the versions are many but since the focus in this seminar is on the depiction of women in History, myth and fiction, I shall confine myself to pointing out the difference as they relate to Rajula.

As in many love legends, the basic story in *Rajula Malushahi* follows the pattern of initial meeting—hurdles—reunion and/or final separation. Rajula is the daughter of Sunpati Shaik who is a prosperous businessman and who as his name shows is a Shak or Bhotia and who lives on this side of the Tibetan border. Malushahi on the other hand is the son and heir of the Katyuri king Dulashahi.

In all the five versions the lovers are predestined to marry each other. In four of them they are actually pledged to marry each other even before their birth. In course of time the pledge is forgotten but the young people fall in love and desire to marry each other.

If we leave Gairola's version aside, we find that Rajula has uniformly been projected as being more active in love than Malushahi. And she undertakes a journey that is long as it is hazardous in order to meet her lover Malushahi. It is only in Gairola's summary that she does not undertake the journey. The consequent diminishment in Rajula's character is obvious. But even here she takes the initiative by appealing to him in a dream to come and save her from a hateful marriage. In contrast Malushahi shows more enterprise.

*The five versions are available in the following books: (1) Two versions in Dr. Urba Datta Upadhyaya, *Kumauni Lok Gathaon ka Sahityik aur Saanskritic Adhyayan* [A Literary and Cultural Study of Kumaun Folk Legends] (Bareilly: Prakash Book Depot, 1979), pp.146-73, 173-84; one version in Dr. Krishnanand Joshi, *Rupahle Shikharon ke Sunahre Swar* [Golden Notes from Silvery Mountains] (Bareilly: Prakash Book Depot, 1982), pp.16-22; Govind Chatak, *Garhwali Lok Gathain* [Folk Legends of Garhwal] (New Delhi: Takshila Prakashan, 1996), pp. 484-509; one version in E.S. Oakley & T.D. Gairola, *Himalayan Folklore, Kumaun and West Nepal 1935* (Kathmandu, Nepal: Ratna Pustak Bhandar, 1977), pp. 92-4.

In the other four versions the story could be divided into two parts. Part one deals with the visit of the childless parents to a temple in order to ask for the boon of a child and ends with the arduous journey of Rajula to meet Malushahi and her visit to his bedroom. Rajula finds Malushahi in deep slumber and leaves a token of her visit and a letter almost daring him to come to her place and marry her.

The second part of the legend deals with the journey of Malushahi in quest of Rajula and its consequences. There is much greater variation in the second part than in the first. Also, magic figures more prominently in the second part than in the first, a point to which we shall return later.

Rajula's journey in all the four versions is obviously perilous, though the Garhwali version which ends happily makes the briefest mention of the difficulties encountered on the way. There is also no encounter with Lord Bagnath in it as there is in some other variants, that tests her mettle. Significantly, this version introduces Mrityu Singh Garhwali who is Malushahi's maternal uncle and whose help his mother seeks.

In the happy-ending Kumauni version, however, Rajula is shown encountering and successfully outwitting several characters, both young and old, who wish to make her a sexual prey. The visit to Lord Bagnath's temple is however wholly pleasant. She prays to him for help in meeting Malushahi and she gets the blessing she asks for.

In Bairath which is Malushahi's place she uses her magical powers to throw mist round the town and then sends everyone in town to sleep. She finds Malushahi in deep sleep. But she leaves a letter asking him to come within 16 days or else she would be married. She also leaves a picture of herself.

However Rajula has little to do in the second part of the version which is taken up with Malushahi's journey in quest of Rajula, and his meeting with her, the poisoning of Malushahi by Sunpati Shauk and his revival through magic, and also the magical war between the two sides, which ends with the defeat of Sunpati Shauk.

Both the tragic versions are Kumauni in origin. In one of them given in Dr. Urba Datt Upadhyaya's book *Kumaun ki Lok Gathaon ka Sahityik aur Saanskritic Adhyayan* we again see a plentiful use of magic and dream. But if we look beneath the overlay of the marvellous element, we get to see a Rajula who is both strong and defiant, and also somewhat weak and traditional. She is fearless and resourceful—the list of dangers in her journey she encounters is bigger than ever—she is strong enough to dismiss Lord Bagnath's advice to dress herself in the robes of a yogi while looking for Malushahi, saying that if he had been considered auspicious he would have been installed within

homes, not in the cremation ground. But the same Rajula weeps profusely both in the temple and in Malushahi's bedroom. What is more, in spite of defying her father, she casts herself up in the role of a traditional Hindu wife—she actually dresses herself as a bride and addresses her husband as her lord and master at whose feet it would be her good fortune to die. Towards the end of the version their interdependence is compared to that of a tree and a creeper. This copresence of defiance and conformity is perhaps an attempt by the folk singer to try to accommodate the love story to the norms of acceptable behaviour in our culture. But this has the effect of undermining some of the independence of her spirit and her self-possession.

I have chosen to focus on the second tragic version given in Krishnand Joshi's book *Rupahle Shikharon ke Sunahre Swar* (1996). In this version Malushahi becomes a bird—a parrot with red feathers—with the help of the Katyuri Rajguru and flies into the presence of Rajula where he gets back to his original human form. Rajula is happy at this meeting. Her husband is away hunting and Rajula serves him food in her husband's *thali* but she knows that their union is shortlived. The husband returns. Inevitably there is a battle between her husband Bikhpal and Malushahi in which Malushahi dies and the two lovers are united in death. Rajula emerges as an alternative woman— independent, fearless and resourceful, a woman who is endowed with intellect as well as beauty. In her insistence that her lover return her love in full measure, she suggests new parameters for a more equal relationship between man and woman. More concretely what makes Rajula such an extraordinary character are the situations she has to confront and her responses to them. These, I suggest, could be studied under the following heads:

- i) Rajula's perilous journey to her royal lover Malushahi's capital city Bairath.
- ii) Her visit to Malushahi's bedroom.
- iii) Her thoughts at the end when death is certain.

Her decision to venture out alone and meet Malushahi in apparent defiance of her father shows her decisive nature and indomitable spirit and runs counter to the romantic convention that require man to be active and woman to be a passive recipient of his attention and adoration.

Journey is a common enough motif in love legends as it is in literature in general. What makes Rajula's journey significant is what it involves in terms of dangers and how she reacts to them.

"Beauty provoketh thief sooner than gold," said Rosalind in *As You*

Like It when faced with the prospect of having to go in exile to the Forest of Arden. But while Rosalind has Celia with her and they both are disguised as men, Rajula is alone and potentially vulnerable.

Her first two encounters are with an old man who lusts after her when he sees her and then with two young men who are ready to fight it out between themselves to decide who shall have her. She uses her wits to escape them both. But the third danger is far more formidable than these—danger from Lord Bagnath himself who breaking the stony silence appears in a human form and expresses his infatuation for her. His reasoning which is as much male as it is specious is that as she belongs to the same place as Saryu Ganga who is his consort, she is his sister-in-law. The implications of this remark are deep and serious as is clear in the saying prevalent in north India—*Saali Aadhi-Gharwali* (sister-in-law is half a wife), which means the woman addressed as a *saali* is available for some kind of sexual play. What makes this reference even more significant is the fact that some Garhwali folk legends deal specifically with the danger posed by the brother-in-law (*jija*) to the family happiness.

Unable to understand the god's words, Rajula is stunned. But when the meaning does sink into her mind, she is furious and reprimands him. At this Lord Bagnath resorts to the use of the weapon of pronouncing curse on her saying that she would have to wander about long in search of her lover. Rajula's response is splendidly audacious—she remains undismayed and returns the god's compliments by cursing him back—she locks up his speech (आपकी वाणी भी अभिषिप्त हो। वह कभी न खुले—) May your voice be accursed! May you never speak!" (Krishnanand Joshi, p. 18). In trading a curse for a curse she gives evidence of being a person who considers herself empowered. The third danger turns out to be the most formidable of all as the "eve-teaser" is none other than god himself—the very god whose help she had come to invoke for meeting her lover Malushahi.

The episode is of course a testimony to Rajula's beauty which is so divine that even a god finds it difficult to resist it. And as Prayag Joshi (1990) suggests, the episode also adds humour and a touch of mockery to the legend. But I suggest that the episode through its irreverence under-cuts patriarchal authority and its role in the legend, and places it on a more human level than it would otherwise be. The episode pits Rajula's strength against the might of a god and happily Rajula comes through the ordeal triumphant.

Dr. Prayag Joshi gives further details of what happens when Rajula goes to Lord Baghnath's temple at Bageshwar, apparently from a

similar version. As in the earlier version the god appears in his own person and out of infatuation pulls Rajula's hand. When Rajula understands the meaning of the gesture she hits him with the back of her hand, knocking out one of his eyes. This gesture of hitting someone with the back of one's hand is significant because it suggests anger combined with gross contempt for the offending person. Rajula is iconoclastic both literally and figuratively, dealing a blow to patriarchy if not demolishing it altogether. Besides being a testimony to Rajula's heavenly beauty, the episode also highlights an entirely new image of a woman—decisive, agile, full of self-esteem, and self-empowered; and above all, tough, unafraid to defend herself. Shivani's reference to the use of *daranti* (sickle) by the hill women assumes significance. In this context *daranti* or the sickle becomes at once a tool necessary for work in the field and also a weapon for self-defence against a treacherous enemy.

Rajula's response to the sleeping Malushahi illuminates other aspects of her personality.

In spite of her deep love for Malushahi, she shows remarkable restraint when she finds him sleeping, and maintains an equanimity that is born of a quiet confidence in her love and her valuation of her own worth. Eager to ask him if he recognizes her, she checks herself thinking that no one welcomes an uninvited guest. The implication of her withdrawal are first that love becomes real only when it is fully reciprocated and second that it must be consonant with dignity. In asking Malushahi to reciprocate, she is suggesting a new basis for 'man-woman relationship.' The words attributed to her and to Malushahi by the folk singer are significant. Rajula says: राजा तेरे प्रेम में दीवानी मैं तो तेरे नगर चली आई । तुम्हें मुझसे प्यार है तो आना मेरे जलनर प्रदेश तक । आओगे तो समझुंगी कि मां का दूध पिया है । न आना चाहो तो तुम्हारी इच्छा । (p. 19)

When Malushahi wakes up the following morning and finds the token and her letter, he makes up his mind to go. His reply to his mother's efforts to dissuade him was: यदि वह लड़की होकर भी यहां तक आ सकती है, तो क्या मैं पुरुष होकर भी बैठा रहूँ । उससे अधिक रुपवती तरुणियां भी अवश्य होंगी इस धरती पर, किन्तु मुझे तो पारखी नहीं बनना है । मुझे जाना ही होगा राजुला के पास । (p. 19)

If she in spite of being a girl could come all the way to this place, should I—who am a man—continue to remain here? Malushahi is aware that in coming over from her place Rajula has crossed the traditional gender boundaries and has challenged him to behave like a man. The whole episode strengthens our impression of Rajula's self-esteem and her admirable self-control.

At this point the almost ubiquitous presence of magic in the legend

needs to be mentioned. This could be attributed to the belief in magic and tantra and incantation in the hills where it has lasted longer than in the plains. But it is, I think, significant—hope I am not reading too much—that magic figures less prominently in the first part dealing with Rajula than in the second which is concerned with Malushahi's journey (and the necessity to bring him back to life when he is poisoned to death), and the war. As a result Rajula is often left to her own devices—particularly in this version where she has no aid except that of her courage and native wit. On the other hand, magic helps Malushahi circumvent the hazards of the journey. In this version he is turned by the royal rajguru into a parrot with a red tail so that he reaches Rajula fast and undetected. Moreover he is not alone as the Rajguru has provided him with security guards.

Rajula never fails to surprise us. In the second part of the legend her character takes a back seat initially but she again moves towards the centre of the narrative. Two new situations confront her—her meeting with her lover Malushahi and the inevitability of the battle between Malushahi and her husband Bikhpal. And her response to both sheds light on new aspects of her personality.

The woman who has 'silenced' a god himself is silent when she meets her lover Malushahi. Blushing deeply she is tender and playful. She is not without tears either - for she asks him if he noticed her tears in his bedchamber. But her realization that their union is temporary brings out the stoical facet of her personality. Trapped as she is in marriage to Chandra Bikhpal she sees no way out except in death which, she says, will eternalize their brief happiness. I am not sure whether this is a more sophisticated response than one would expect to meet in a folk ballad. But while dealing with folk legends we should be ready to be surprised. Rajula's desire to stretch their brief union to eternity through death is such a surprise. I am reminded of Keats's line in his Ode to a Nightingale. *Now more than ever seems it rich to die*. In choosing death to ensure permanency of love Rajula is probably suggesting an idea similar to the idea of love-death or *liebestod* prevalent in the West in the 19th century.

The total impression of Rajula is that of a person who is completely herself, completely integrated and because she is herself, she can face situations as they come.

Rajula is an idealized figure but she is a creature of flesh and blood, rooted in the reality of Kumauni life. Clearly the image of a woman as projected in this version of the love legend can be seen moving beyond the traditional gender roles, beyond the either/or categories of male or female. The ideal presented here seems to be that of androgynous

person—combining devotion, affection, care and endurance with fearlessness and action and courage and toughness. Failed by her father and her God, and fuelled only by her faith in herself and in her love, she goes through life meeting its challenges as they come. In this sense Rajula is a forerunner of a woman of the future. If this 15th century legend is still popular in the central Himalayas, it is I think primarily because of the beautiful, innocent and dynamic figure of Rajula. Her portrait is truly a triumph of the folk imagination.

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