

NOTES FOR THE TIGER KING

-BY KALKI

Justification of Title

“The Tiger King” is a very appropriate title for the story for several reasons. First of all, the king is crazy about tiger hunting so much that he marries a princess whose father’s kingdom has a sizeable tiger population. He kills one hundred tigers just to fulfill his vow. Secondly, the king with all his frenzy, anger and ruthlessness is as ferocious as a tiger. Thirdly, he dies of a silver prick received from a wooden toy tiger. Finally, the prediction that a tiger would cause the king’s death also comes true. Since the story revolves round the king and the hundred tigers that he kills, it could not be better titled than “The Tiger King”.

Irony and Satire in ‘The Tiger King’

‘The Tiger King’ is replete with irony that reveals the follies of autocratic and willful rulers who flout all laws and bend them to suit their selfish interests. The dramatic irony in the story is sharp when the Tiger King alone is unaware that his bullet had not killed the hundredth tiger. The other characters and the readers anticipate his doom as he celebrates his triumph over his destiny. We realize how misplaced the King’s pride at killing the first tiger was. The astrologers had prophesied, “You may kill ninety nine tigers like this, but your death will be brought on by the hundredth tiger.” The King wanted to prove the astrologer wrong and to save his life. Ironically, to avert death he actually invites it. The lofty titles used to introduce the Tiger King, suggesting an invincible ferocity are indeed ironic for he is finally killed by a cheap, crudely made wooden toy tiger which became the tool of Nature’s revenge. He had killed a hundred tigers in vain and must be punished for it. Irony is indeed sharp when the surgeons announce the operation successful and declare the king dead.

Instances of Satire

Satire employs irony, sarcasm, ridicule, etc. in exposing and criticizing follies and vices in men. The story uses humour to criticize self-seeking Kings who willfully exploit both nature and their subjects for selfish interests.

- When the Maharaja of Pratibandhpuram was told that he would be killed by a tiger, he could never imagine the twist in fate where a toy tiger could be fatal. Because of his conceit, he was unprepared for such surprises flung by life at him.
- The grandeur associated with a king’s life proves a mockery. The news of the king’s ailment invited not one, but three surgeons. They got so tied up in technicalities that they declared the operation successful even though the king died.
- The story also satirizes the corrupting influence of power. Just because the Tiger King had power, he felt he could browbeat his subjects and even defeat fate. He neglected his responsibility as a ruler. He neglected the welfare of his subjects, his family, increased and reduced taxes at will and sacked his officers. They feared him or else he would have learnt the truth.

- When we see the king gloating over his bravery after killing the hundredth old, weak tiger, we notice that Kalki is satirizing the notions of cowardice and bravery. There is no heroism in fighting an unequal battle. The King's cowardice was obvious when he justifies that one may kill even a cow in self defense.
- Kalki is also criticizing the King's men and subjects who pander to his whims out of fear or like the shopkeeper manipulate and fool him.

Q. How would you describe the behaviour of the Maharaja's minions towards him? Do you find them truly sincere towards him or are they driven by fear when they obey him? Do we find a similarity in today's political order?

Ans. Maharaja's minions were subservient and sycophantic. Most of them were scared of Maharaja and tried to keep him in good humour by obeying his orders. They did not dare to disobey him as his displeasure could mean loss of their job or even loss of their lives.

The astrologer was afraid of predicting his death, till Maharaja told him to "speak without fear". Dewan who should have advised the king not to kill the tigers did not dare to go against his wishes and aided his marriage to a princess whose father's kingdom possessed a large number of tigers. Being afraid of losing his job, he presented an old tiger to satisfy the whims of his Maharaja. Likewise, the hunters chose not to inform him of the survival of the 100th tiger and instead killed it themselves fearing that they might lose their jobs. Even the shopkeeper, who sold the king a cheap wooden toy tiger, quoted a higher price lest he should be punished under the rules of emergency. So, it is evident that the king's minions were driven by fear rather than any feelings of sincerity towards their ruler.

Today's political order is no different—we know too well that many of the people in power are not there because of their ability but because of their influence and power. Moreover, others pander to them for their own vested interests rather than for the good of the country.

Q. The story is a satire on the conceit of those in power. How does the author employ the literary device of dramatic irony in the story?

Ans. The story "The Tiger King" is a supreme example of dramatic irony. The character acts in a way grossly inappropriate to the actual circumstances or expects the opposite of what fate holds in store for him'. Kalki has used a very dexterous use of dramatic irony in the story. After killing the first tiger the King flaunts its dead body before astrologer to show that he is more powerful than the tiger. However, the astrologer warns the king that he should be "careful with the hundredth tiger". The king chooses to prove the astrologer wrong once again and makes frantic efforts to kill hundred tigers. Thus, having shot at the old tiger, the Tiger king believes he has killed the hundredth tiger. But the reader as well as the king's officers and minions soon come to know that the emaciated tiger does not get killed but only faints. The king gets happy of killing the tiger but in actual ignorant of this ironical fate the prediction proves to be right and mere sliver on wooden tiger's body causes his dramatic death. Quite ironically the hundredth tiger kills the king instead and astrologer's predictions stands vindicated.

Q How does the author satirise the hunting instincts of the persons in authority?

Ans. The story tells us that big game hunting was considered a royal sport. The Maharaja of Pratibandapuram went to the extent of banning tiger-hunt in his own kingdom by all others except himself. Tiger-hunt became an obsession for him. He thought of tiger during the day and dreamt of it at night. He postponed all affairs of the state and devoted himself only to tiger-hunt. Thus, a pastime or sport became the only aim of his life. He married for the sake of tiger. He chose a princess in whose kingdom there were plenty of tigers. He could undertake any risks for tiger-hunt.

The British officers had also developed a fondness for this royal sport. Perhaps they considered it a status symbol. They were publicity conscious and wanted to be photographed with a gun in hand and the carcass of a tiger at feet. Various other hunts were also prevalent. These included boar-hunt, mouse-hunt and mosquito-hunt. The descending order of risk and resistance from the victims makes us laugh at the whims and craziness of the hunters. Thus, the story exposes the fondness of persons in authority for hunting wild animals.

Q Comment on the ending of the story 'The Tiger King'. Do you find it convincing?

Ans. The ending of the story 'The Tiger King' seems tame, unconvincing and rather contrived. It seems unnatural and unrealistic. It is beyond comprehension how a king who has over powered ferocious tigers in single combat with bare hands succumbs to a prick from the sliver of a wooden tiger. It is amazing to find how the infection flares in the Maharaja's right hand. In four days, the prick develops into a suppurating sore and spreads all over the arm. The three sur-geons perform a successful operation but fail to save the Maharaja. How is the operation successful then? It seems that the author wants us to believe that the astrologer was right and the hundredth tiger took its final revenge upon the Tiger King. This ending may satisfy superstitious readers with orthodox beliefs, but for the enlight-ened minds of the age of computers and rockets it is a bitter pill to swallow.

Q. We need a new system for the age of ecology—a system which is embedded in the care of all people and also in the care of the Earth and all life upon it. Discuss.

Ans. Modern age is the age of ecology. A new consciousness has arisen among human beings. Animals and birds are as much part of nature as human beings. The destruction or haphazard killing of one species may not only lead to its extinction, but it will adversely affect the ecological balance. Those animals which serve as food for the wild animals will increase in large number, if the beasts of prey are wiped out. Each species, howsoever fierce, deadly, ferocious or poisonous has its own role in the scheme of things. We must devise a new system. It must focus on the care of all living beings on the Earth as well as the Earth itself and all life—vegetative or animal living on it. Steps have to be taken to preserve ecological balance in nature and prevent environmental pollution. Unpolluted air, water and food can make all living beings healthy and enable them to enjoy longer lives.

Q . What is the author's indirect comment on subjecting innocent animals to the willfulness of human beings?

Ans. For centuries innocent animals have been subjected to the wilfulness of human beings. Man has been killing animals for sport, meat or organs of body. The author does not make any direct comment about it in the story. Man advances strange logic to defend even his unlawful and cruel acts. The

Maharaja quotes an old saying, "You may kill even a cow in self-defence". Hence, he finds no objection to kill tigers in self- defence. It reveals not only the callousness of human beings towards wildlife but their disregard for maintaining ecological balance. The extinction of tiger species in Pratibandapuram state and the state ruled by the Maharaja's father-in-law amply illustrates the result of man's cruelty towards wild animals. An old tiger has to be brought from the People's Park in Madras to satisfy the king's whim to kill one hundred tigers.

Q. Why did the Maharaja's anxiety reach a fever pitch? What steps were taken to hunt the hundredth tiger?

Ans. The Maharaja's anxiety reached a fever pitch. One more tiger was to be killed to achieve his tally of a hundred. By this time the tiger farms had run dry even in his father-in-law's kingdom. But soon came the happy news that dispelled his gloom. There was a possibility of a tiger living in a hillside village. The Maharaja announced a three-year exemption from all taxes for that village. He set out for hunt at once. The tiger was not found but the Maharaja refused to leave the forest. The dewan himself was in danger of losing his job. He got a tiger arranged from the People's Park in Madras. The tiger was left in the forest where the Maharaja was hunting. He took a careful aim at the beast. The tiger fell down on the ground in a heap. Then came the anti-climax. The tiger survived. The Maharaja's bullet missed its mark. Unfortunately, the king didn't know that the hundredth tiger was not killed by him. So the hundredth tiger caused his death. Ironically, the hundredth tiger that caused his death was not a ferocious beast. The king died of the deadly infection. A wooden toy-tiger, was the cause of his death.

Q. How did the Tiger King come in the danger of losing his throne and how did he save his kingdom?

Ans. The state banned tiger hunting by anyone except the king. Once a high ranking British officer visited Pratibandapuram. He was fond of hunting tigers. He liked to be photographed with the tigers he had shot. The Maharaja was firm in his resolve. He refused permission. He was ready to organise any other hunt. The officer could go on a boar hunt but the tiger hunt was impossible. The British officer's secretary sent word through the dewan. The Maharaja could do the actual killing. The officer only wanted to be photographed holding the gun near the dead tiger. The Maharaja didn't relent. He prevented a British officer from fulfilling his desire. The Maharaja stood in danger of losing his kingdom itself. He held deliberations over the issue with the dewan. Samples of expensive diamond rings were ordered. A famous British company of jewellers in Calcutta sent fifty rings. The Maharaja sent the whole lot to the British officer's good lady. She was expected to choose one or two rings. The lady kept all the rings with her. She sent her thanks to the Maharaja for the gifts. The Maharaja was very happy. Though he had lost three lakh of rupees, he had managed to retain his kingdom. Even the coteries who surround these power centers are interested in taking advantage of the proximity for their own welfare. This is a story about transience-of life, of power and reverberates the maxim: "Too many slips between a cup and a lip."