

Empathy and the Ethics of Ambiguity in *Thakurmar Jhuli*:
A Children's Story Anthology from Bengal

Thakurmar Jhuli (Grandmother's Basket), an anthology of popular children's stories from Bengal, has circulated in written and illustrated forms for more than a century, and even longer, as oral folktales. These stories are often spooky, full of monsters and ghouls—perfect for night-time entertainments—while also cultivating a sense of connection, and even a deeper empathy, with characters who experience various mishaps and fortunes. The stories use female narrators, and the settings are usually rural and domestic, reflecting the rhythms of village life. They are fashioned as ethical tales, ending with a lesson on conduct, a determination of winners and losers, with accompanying grisly outcomes. Winners persevere through exercising wit, stealth, or subterfuge, thereby demonstrating *chhalak*, or cleverness, which inevitably helps resolve a crisis, encouraging readers to empathize with the winning characters. Given the unconventional, often seemingly subversive, behavior showcased in these stories, this paper examines the paradox of ethical tales that resist conventionalized ethics. Why do disguises, lies, misdirection and manipulation define the winners, while the losers are the ones who stick to ethical norms? Through exploring the ambiguous nature of winners in these stories, spaces open up in the dramatic turns of the narrative, where moving affections, and empathetic awareness, are sharpened, so that skills of ethical discernment may be developed in children. This paper will suggest that the *ad hoc* nature of ethical praxis in lived experience is articulated for children here, providing an important counterpoint to many conventional notions of ethics as a rule-based, normative enterprise.