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Snow Brown and the Seven Detergents: A Metanarrative on Science and the Scientific Method

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# **Snow Brown and the Seven Detergents:**

## **A Metanarrative on Science and the Scientific Method**

*Banu Subramaniam*

Once upon a time, deep within a city in the Orient, lived a young girl called Snehalatha Bhrijbhushan. She spent her childhood merrily playing in the streets with her friends while the city looked on indulgently. "That girl, Sneha," as they called her, "is going to become someone famous, someday," they would all say. Sneha soon became fascinated with the world of science. One day, she announced, "I am going to sail across the blue oceans to become a scientist!"

There was silence in the room. "But you can be a scientist here, you know?"

"Yes," said Sneha. "But I want to explore the world. There is so much out there to see and learn. I want to visit all these places."

"Where is this place?" they asked.

"It's called the Land of the Blue Devils."

"But, that is dangerous country," they cried. "No one has ever been there, who has come back alive."

"Yes, I know," said Sneha. "But I have been reading about it. It is in the land of the kind and gentle people. In any case I can handle it."

Her friends and family watched her animated face and knew that if anyone could do it, it would be brave Sneha, and they relented. The city watched her set out and tearfully wished her farewell. She promised to return soon and bring back tales from lands afar. For forty-two days and nights, Sneha sailed the oceans. Her face was aglow with excitement and her eyes filled with the stars. "It's going to be wonderful," she told herself.

And so, on one fine day, she arrived in the Land of the Blue Devils. She went in search of the Building of Scientific Truth. When she saw it, she held her breath. There it stood, tall and slender, almost touching the skies. Sneha shivered. "Don't be silly," she told herself. She entered the building. The floors were polished and gleaming white. It all looked so grand and yet so formidable. She was led into the office

of the Supreme White Patriarch. The room was full. "Welcome, budding Patriarchs," he said. "We at the Department of the Pursuit of Scientific Truth welcome you. But let me be perfectly frank. These are going to be difficult years ahead. This is no place for the weak or the emotional or the fickle. You have to put in long, hard hours. If you think you cannot cut it, you should leave now. Let me now introduce you to our evaluation system. Come with me."

He led them across the hall into a huge room. At the end of the room stood a mirror, long and erect and oh! so white. "This is the Room of Judgment," he continued. "The mirror will tell you how you're doing. Let me show you." He went to the mirror and said,

Mirror, Mirror on the wall  
Who is the fairest scientist of them all?

"You are! O Supreme White Patriarch!" said the mirror. The Patriarch laughed. "That is what all of you should aspire to. And one day when it calls out your name, you will take my place. But until then, you will all seek Truth and aspire to be the number one. We want fighters here, Patriarchs with initiative and genius. And those who are consistently the last for six months, we believe they just do not have the ability to pursue Scientific Truth and they will be expelled. Go forth, all ye budding Patriarchs and find Scientific Truth."

Everyone went their way. Sneha found herself in the middle of the hallway all alone. "Go find Truth?" she said to herself. Was this a treasure hunt? Did Truth fall out of the sky? She was very confused. This is not what she thought it would be like. She went looking for her older colleagues, one of the Young Patriarchs. "Where does one find Scientific Truth?" she asked.

"Well!" said he, "First you have to find the patronage of an Associate Patriarch or an Assistant Patriarch. You will have a year to do that. Until then, you take courses they teach you and you learn about Truths already known and how to find new Truths. During this time you have to learn how to be a Scientist. That is very important and the mirror will assist you in this endeavor."

"How does the mirror work?" asked Sneha.

"Well, the mirror is the collective consciousness of all the Supreme White Patriarchs across the land of the kind and gentle people. They have decided what it takes to be the ideal scientist and it is what we all must dream of and aspire and work toward if we want to find Scientific Truth. You must check with the mirror as often as you can to monitor your progress."

Sneha tiptoed to the Room of Judgment and stood in front of the mirror and said,

Mirror, mirror on the wall  
Who is the fairest scientist of them all?

The mirror replied,

Not you, you're losing this game  
You with the unpronounceable name!

Sneha was very depressed. Things were not going as she had expected. "Oh mirror," she cried, "Everything has gone wrong. What do I do?"

"First and foremost," said the mirror, "check Murphy's laws. They will hold you in good stead as a graduate student. Anything that can go wrong will go wrong, or haven't you heard? And if you think this is as bad as it gets, wait a few years. And stop looking so pathetic. You have to develop a sense of humor about these things!"

Sneha was now really upset, "I've just sailed forty-two days and nights, leaving all my family and friends behind and am now told that I am worthless by a mirror and I should think it is funny?"

"Oh, stop being so damned emotional," said the mirror. "Stop whining. To be frank, I don't think you are cut out to be a scientist unless you're willing to really work at it."

"I've dreamed about this all my life. What should I do?"

"Well," said the mirror. "More than anything, you have to learn to act like a scientist. That's your first task. Deep within the forests around here lives the Wise Matriarch in the House of the Seven Detergents. Go see her, she will help you."

Sneha set out to meet the Wise Matriarch. "Come in, child," she said. "What seems to be the problem?" She seemed a very kind woman and Sneha poured out her misery.

"I know this is a very difficult time for you, but it is also a very important one," the Matriarch said.

"Why do they call you the 'Wise' Matriarch?" Sneha inquired.

"I joined the Department of the Pursuit of Scientific Truth some twenty years ago," the Matriarch replied. "That is why I understand what you're going through. I was expelled. When the Department offered me this position, I felt I could begin changing things. Over the years, I have advised many budding Patriarchs. You could say I've earned my reputation."

"My child," she said. "This is where the Department sends its scien-

tific misfits. Let me show you what they would like me to have you do." She led Sneha to a room and in it stood seven jars. "These are the seven detergents," she said. "With them you can wash away any part of yourself you don't want. But the catch is that once you wash it away, you have lost it forever."

Sneha was excited. "Well! Firstly, I'd like to get rid of my name and my accent. The mirror told me that."

The Wise Matriarch shook her head. "My child, do not give away your identity, your culture—they are part of you, who you are," she cried.

"But," said Sneha, "I've always dreamed of being a scientist. I spent all my savings coming here. I cannot go back a failure. I understand your concern because I've noticed that the mirror did not say that to everyone. There were those from other parts of the white continents from places they called Europe that had difficult names and different accents but the mirror had no problem and was almost indulgent at times. I am treated differently. I understand that. But this is truly what I want." Sneha got into the Great Washing Machine with the first detergent. *Rub-a-dub-a-dub. Rub-a-dub-a-dub*, went the detergent.

"You may come out now, Snow Brown, good luck."

Snow Brown went back amazed at how differently her tongue moved. For the next week she met the other budding Patriarchs and decided her course listings and went out socializing with her colleagues. But everything was new in this land. How people ate, drank. What people ate and drank. She felt stupid and ignorant. And just as she expected, when she went to the mirror, it told her that such behavior was quite unscientific and that she had to learn the right etiquette. Off she went again to the House of the Seven Detergents and used two other detergents that worked their miracles in the Great Washing Machine.

"Now I sound and act like everyone else," she said, satisfied.

Snow Brown went to her classes. She thought them quite interesting. But the professors never looked her in the eye, they never asked her for opinions. "Maybe they think I'm stupid," she thought. In class discussions everyone said things. Some of the things they said were pretty stupid, she thought. And so, she would gather up her courage and contribute, only to be met with stony silence. On some occasions others would make the same point and the professor would acknowledge it and build on it.

She knew the mirror would be unhappy with her, and sure enough she was right. "You have to be more aggressive," it said. "It doesn't matter as much *what* you say as *how much* you say."

"But that's ridiculous," she said. "Most of what is said is just plain stupid. Have you listened to some of them? They like the sound of their voices so much."

"That may be true, but that is the way. You have to make an impression, and sitting and listening like a lump of clay is not the way. And another thing, why did you let the others operate the machine in lab? You have to take initiative."

"That was a ten-thousand-dollar machine. What if I broke it? I've never used it before."

"Leave your Third World mentalities behind. The Patriarchs see it as a lack of initiative. They think you are not interested. You have to shoot for number one, be the very best. You have to act like a scientist, like a winner. Girl, what you need is a good dose of arrogance and some ego."

Snow Brown was a little perturbed. She was disturbed by what she saw around her. Did she really want to act like some of the people she had met? What happened to kindness, a little humility, helping each other. Just how badly did she want this, anyway. Her family was going to hate her when she went back. They would not recognize her. She thought long and hard and finally decided to go ahead with it.

She went back to the House of the Seven Detergents and used the anti-Third World detergent, and when she emerged, she came striding out, pride oozing out of every pore. The next day, the Supreme White Patriarch called for her. "So what kind of progress are you making in your search for Scientific Truth?" he asked.

"Well," she said. "The mirror has kept me occupied with learning to act like a scientist. Surely you can't expect me to make as much progress as the others, all considering."

"We don't like students making excuses, Snow Brown. You had better make some progress and real soon. There is no place for laziness here."

Snow Brown started developing some of her ideas. So, she went to the Great Mirror to talk them over.

"I'm thinking of working with mutualisms," she said. "Organisms associate with each others in numerous ways ecologically. They can both compete for the same resources, as in competition. Some live off other organisms, and that's called parasitism. When organisms get into ecological relationships with each other that are mutually beneficial, its called a mutualism."

"Well, to be frank, Snow Brown, I would recommend studying competition or parasitism."

"But most of the studies of ecological interactions have focused on

them," Snow Brown said. "I am amazed that there has been so little study of mutualisms. We know of some examples. But just how prevalent they are is still up in the air. For all you know, they may be a fundamental principle that describes demographic patterns of organisms on our planet."

"Whoa! Whoa!" cried the mirror. "You're getting carried away with your emotions. We would all like a 'and they lived happily ever after' kind of fairy tale. You are violating one of the fundamentals of doing science—'Objectivity.' You don't pursue a study because you 'think it would be nice.' You base it on concrete facts, data. Then you apply the Scientific Method and investigate the problem."

"I do agree that the Scientific Method may have merit," she said. "I will use it to study mutualisms too. But, tell me, why do you think competition has been so well studied?"

"That's because they are so important. Just look around you," the mirror replied. "Are the Patriarchs working with each other for their mutual benefit or are they competing? This is what I do—promote competition. It is nature's way."

"Aha!" cried Snow Brown triumphantly. "You throw emotionalism and subjectivity at me. Listen to yourself. You are reading into nature what you see in yourself. I happen to believe that mutualisms are very important in the world. The Patriarchs have decided to work with a particular model. It doesn't mean that it's the only way. It is not, for example, the way of some of my people. There are some studies to back me up."

"But many more to back me up, and you are not with your people, little one," said the mirror, laughing. "Besides, get realistic. You need the patronage of an Associate or Assistant Patriarch. You need to get money from the Supreme White Patriarch to do the research. That's a lot of people to convince on a whim of an idea, don't you think? Don't forget you need to please the Patriarch to get ahead. I am the collective consciousness, remember? And you are still way behind in the game. This is not the time, or you the person, to get radical."

Convinced that pragmatism was the best course, the supremely overconfident Snow Brown developed her ideas, talked in classes, aggressively engaged the Patriarchs in dialogues. She was supremely happy. Things were finally going her way. She went to the mirror and said,

Mirror, mirror on the wall  
Who is the fairest scientist of them all?

And the mirror replied,

It sure ain't you, Snow Brown,  
You're still the last one in town.

Snow Brown could not believe her ears. "I act and think like everyone around me. I am even obnoxious at times. What could I be possibly doing wrong this time?"

"Well," said the mirror. "You are overdoing it. You don't know everything. You should be a little more humble and subservient."

"Am I hearing things? I don't see anyone else doing that. This place does not validate that. You told me that yourself. What is really going on here?"

"When I advised you last," answered the mirror, "I advised you like I would advise anyone, but I've been watching how the other Patriarchs interact with you. Apparently their expectations of you are different. You're brown, remember?"

Snow Brown was furious. She stormed out and went to the House of Detergents and the sixth detergent washed her brownness away. She was now Snow White. She marched back to the Department of Scientific Truth. All the Patriarchs stared at her. They suddenly realized that what stood before them was a woman, and a beautiful woman at that.

"Well, am I white enough for the lot of you now?" she demanded.

"Oh! but you're too pretty to be a scientist," cried the Supreme White Patriarch."

"But you can be a technician in my lab," cried another. "No! in mine," cried yet another.

The Wise Matriarch had been right. She had now lost her whole identity and for what? Why did she not see this coming, she asked herself? How could she ever have been the "fairest" scientist? How could she have been anything but last, when judged by a mirror that wanted to produce clones of the Supreme White Patriarchs? She went to the House of the Seven Detergents.

"It's too late, my child," said the Wise Matriarch. "You cannot go back now. I warned you about it. I wish I had more resources to support you and others like you. I have seen this happen far too often. It is important for you to communicate this to others. You must write down what has happened to you for future generations."

Two days later, they discovered her cold body on the floor of her room. Her face looked tortured—her eyes were sunken and in them lay a resigned look of someone who had nothing more to lose to the



world that she had come to live in. On the nightstand by her body rested the tale of "Snow Brown and the Seven Detergents."

**End 1: And Injustice Prevails . . .**

The Patriarchs stood around the body. "It is so sad," they said. "But she was too emotional, a very fuzzy thinker. Some people are just not meant to pursue Scientific Truth. I wish they would learn, accept it, and leave instead of creating all this melodrama." The other Patriarchs nodded in agreement at the unfortunate event. "There is no reason for anyone to see this story, is there?" The others concurred. They poured the last detergent on her. There was nothing left. No pathetic face, no ugly reminders, no evidence.

**End 2: Into Empiricism . . .**

Snow Brown in her subversive wisdom sent copies of her story and insights to all in the Department. There were some who kept it alive. It soon became apparent that there were dissenters within the Patriarchy. They broke their silence and the movement slowly grew. Scientists began forming coalitions, talking and supporting each other in forming pockets of resistance. They questioned the power inequities. Why are most Patriarchs white? Why are most men? Over many decades, the negotiations continued. Women scientists and scientists of color rose up in the power structure. The collective consciousness was now male, female, and multicolored. But it was still supreme. It was privileged. The Pursuit for Truth continued, although new truths emerged—truths from the perspective of women, from the black, brown, yellow, red, and the white. The world had become a better place.

**End 3: A Postmodern Fantasy . . .**

The story of Snow Brown spread like wildfire. The Land of the Blue Devils was ablaze with anger and rage. The Wise Matriarch and a number of budding Patriarchs stormed the Department of the Pursuit of Scientific Truth and took it over. The Great Mirror was brought down. The Room of Judgment was transformed into the Room of Negotiation. In their first, historic meeting, all the scientists sat together. "We need a different model," they said. They dismantled the positions of the Supreme White Patriarch, the Emeritus Patriarch, the Associate Patriarch, the Assistant Patriarch, and the Young Patriarch. We will be self-governing, they decided. They debunked the myth that

truth is a monolithic entity. "Truth is a myth," they said. One person's truth is often privileged over someone else's. This is dangerous. The White Patriarchs privileged their worldview over all others. This distorts knowledge and an accurate description of the world. Together they decided they could help each other in reconstructing science and rewriting scientific knowledge. They ushered in the age called the Age of Celebrating Difference. The House of Detergents was dismantled and the detergents were rendered invisible. The new Department of Scientific Endeavor was very productive. They solved many problems that had eluded the world for years. They became world renowned and their model was adopted far and wide. If you are ever in the forests in the Land of the Blue Devils and come across the voice of an old-school scientist arguing vociferously, you know you have stumbled across Snow Brown and the Seven Detergents.

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