

## Brewing the Perfect Story: Rearticulating the Rhetoric in Sri Lankan Tea Tale

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DOI Link: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v7-i2/2621>

Published Date: 05 February 2017

### Abstract

This paper analyses Sri Lankan tea industry in context to organizational storytelling. It focuses on the organizational narrative, conveyed through advertisements, annual reports and product packaging. While this story is easily accessible to society, there exists another set of 'unheard' stories arising from the workers of estates who supply tea to the island's tea auction. These marginalized voices hoard vital stories necessary for the creation of a comprehensive industrial narration to society. The study encompassed a qualitative research methodology incorporating the method of 'story- deconstruction', which enabled the creation of a 'restory'. Devoid of any form of dualities and hierarchies, the 'restory' avoided the centering on the rather 'optimistic' narration of *Titanarum*<sup>1</sup> or the 'pessimistic' story as put forth by the tea pickers. Aforesaid decentering facilitated the re-articulation of marginalized female worker story as a part of a collective narration instead of a story told in isolation.

**Keywords:** Story- Deconstruction, Marginalization, Restory, Decentering, Duality

### 1. Introduction

Tea was introduced to Ceylon (present day Sri Lanka) during the era of British colonization. Subsequently, the additional labor required by the growing tea sector resulted in the arrival of immigrants of Tamil ethnicity from southern India. Centuries later, Sri Lanka is the second largest exporter of tea in the world. *Titanarum*<sup>1</sup> is one of the biggest players in this industry and is the second largest buyer at the Colombo tea auctions. In this paper, the author puts the organizational tea tale into perspective. Contained within the images on a product package, narrated through advertisements and articulated via annual reports, these tales present us with one side of the story: *Titanarum*'s organizational narrative, which is often a story about the 'bright and happy' side of the industry, carefully knitted in order to influence its customers into buying a product. On the other side of this hyper-real media image is the

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<sup>1</sup> Due to the sensitivity of this research, the actual name of the organization will be withheld and will be named as *Titanarum* throughout this document

tale of the 'Other': the stories of the female plantation workers in the Sri Lankan tea estates. Hence, on one side, one of the most successful and famed entrepreneurs ever, asserting the positive aspects of its brands; on the other side a group of women who are seldom given a voice. The two protagonists standing in irreconcilable opposition attempt to refute the claims of the other in order to justify their beliefs and narrations.

## 2. The organization in focus

With more than 400 brands under its belt and 2 billion people using its products on any given day, *Titanarum* is pretty much the undisputed king of consumer products. 13 brands in the organization's portfolio boast of sales of more than €1 billion a year. As informed on *Titanarum's* official site, the firm's products are sold in more than 190 countries resulting in sales of €53.3 billion in 2015. What's fascinating is not just the financial figures, but also the impact the organization has on its significant labor force with more than 168,000 people working for it. In the local context, *Titanarum's* Sri Lankan office manages functions such as production, sales, distribution etc. of its products. With regard to this study, the focus was on *Titanarum's* tea brands, one of which is a 'billion-euro' brand generating annual sales of billion euros or more. It is interesting to note that while *Titanarum* maintains its own tea estates in countries like Kenya and India, the organization's main source of tea in the island is the Colombo tea auction, in which it is the second largest buyer.

## 3.0 Theoretical Framework

### 3.1 Stories and narratives

"For sale. Baby shoes. Never worn.".....So the story unfolds as the then young Ernest Hemingway scribbles on a napkin and passes around the shortest narration ever told (Miller, 1991:27). The six words may be insufficient to fill the pages of a book; nevertheless it exhibits a linear plot in accordance with Aristotelian narrations encompassing a beginning, middle and end (Aristotle 350BCE/1966). Such allocation of sequence through division into beginning, middle and end has resulted in the confinement of narrative within the boundaries of linearity. Such categorization and subsequent linearization of narrative creates one of the main disparities between a story and a narrative. In contrast to such Aristotelian narratives that are "whole" and of definite arrangement, a story is mostly fragmented. In addition to the above, a story and narrative differ on the basis of dialogisms. "Narrative genres are always enclosed in a solid and unshakable monological framework" (Bakhtin, 1973: 13). In contrast, a story is mostly dialogic in nature and incorporates different voices, styles etc. No longer confined to linear structures and monologic orientations, stories emerge in many places at varied times through diverse narrators incorporating different opinions and styles, exhibiting multiple ideas and logics.

### 3.2 Stories and Sense

Sensemaking as defined by its neologist Weick, "is the making of sense" (Weick, 1995: 4) and is an activity which aids us to "comprehend, understand, explain, attribute, extrapolate, and predict" (Starbuck & Milliken, 1988: 51) the unknown to gain contextual rationality. "It is built out of vague questions, muddy answers, and negotiated agreements that attempt to reduce confusion" (Weick, 1993: 636) and is primarily about how we perceive the unknown. Numerous ways of making 'sense' has been suggested by organizational theorists, out of which Boje's eight ways of sensemaking is of particular importance as it is not limited to retrospective methods of sensemaking but also gives equal emphasis to present

and future ways as well. Boje's model of sensemaking can be broadly classified under narrative ways and story ways and the mannerisms in their interplay can be utilized to analyse their impact on story dynamics (Boje, 2008). Out of the narrative ways, **BME (Beginning, Middle and End) narratives** are the most common and make sense by revisiting the past in order to consider a foregone experience which can be related to the present situation. Most of the traditional theorists such as Weick, Burke, Czarniawska et al. have focused on this facet of sensemaking. These, as previously stated, make a reference to Aristotelian narratives with beginning, middle and end. Composed of six elements: plot, character, dialog, theme, rhythm and spectacle (Aristotle, 350 BCE/1966), these form a coherent representation of an event which is both linear and of sequential order. In organizations, proper BME narratives are uncommon and more often than not just one part of the retrospections maybe present. These **fragmented retrospective narratives** are the second form of narratives in Boje's model of sensemaking. The third form: **Antenarratives**, refer to future ways of sensemaking, which also represents the most common form of narratives in an organization.

In addition to the narrative ways Boje has also laid down five story ways of sensemaking: Tamara, Emotive-Ethical, Horseness, Dialects and Dialogisms. In the context of this study, Tamara, Emotive-Ethical, Dialects and Dialogisms are of particular importance. Here, **Tamara** refers to sensemaking in complex organizations where simultaneous storytelling occurs in multiple rooms. As it is not possible for an individual to be in all rooms at the same time, it becomes necessary to select the rooms they want to be in and create the individual view of the whole story by patching up the gaps created by the "unvisited" rooms through assumption or by inquiring from others. In this mode of sensemaking, the order of room selection and the number of rooms visited determines the meaning derived by individuals in the room.

Since narrating and storying is simultaneous, yet distributed across different rooms where people meet to converse, as well as hallways, and cars (etc.), people are making sense of what they are missing in other rooms. If this is the case, then training executives in two-minute story pitches, or collecting archetype stories in focus groups, are rather shallow, flat-earth ways to try to change or lead a rather more complex, dynamic, moving Tamara-Storytelling Organization! (Boje, 2008:16).

**Emotive-ethical** on the other hand refers to how an individual's decisions with regard to his choice of actions are influenced by ethics as well as emotions and they subsequently determine if he/she chooses to be an actor or a bystander when faced with a compelling story. In this regard, emotive-ethical form of sensemaking takes into consideration the association between emotional intelligence and ethics and hence makes a reference to the relationship between emotion and cognition. In an organizational point of view, ethics often incorporate 'answerability': a response triggered as a result of ethical choice and emotional inciting which not only decides which door an individual decides to open in a 'Tamara-organization' but also his decision to enter, to speak out and to act (Boje, 2008). **Dialects** take into account the various identities in the business sphere that encompass a single powerful organizational identity as well as other stakeholder identities. Out of the different types of dialects 'sameness verses Otherness' and 'I verses we's' are of particular importance considering their relevance to domination of the organizational narrative and probable marginalization of the story of the Other. Paul Ricoeur in *Oneself as Another* (1992), states that the identification of the self inevitably results in the recognition of its binary opposite: the Other. Built upon Paul Ricoeur's findings, Boje's dialectic of 'Sameness vs. Other' takes into consideration "an

identity of sameness that is dialectic to an identity of difference” (Boje 2008:19). Here, ‘sameness’ refers to the organizational narrative that remains largely unchanged while the founding narrative is creatively told in a different way, nevertheless keeping the core content/message the same. An identity of difference on the other hand would largely repel the narrative control of the organizational story and would give a completely different perspective of the organization. While ‘sameness’ and ‘otherness’ co-exist within the story dynamics of an industry, the excessive narrative control exerted by the organizational narrative can often silence its opponent: the Other. Built upon George Herbert Mead’s (1934) findings, the I versus We dialect takes in to consideration the reflexive relationship demonstrated between the ‘I’ and the ‘we’. The way an individual views his/her identity is dependent on his/her interaction with parents, siblings, friends, co-workers etc. Due to such socialization and subsequent internalization of many ‘we’s’, an individual may face difficulty in describing his/her ‘I-ness’ in a society that is built upon our ‘we-ness’.

With regard to **Dialogisms**, Mikhail Bakhtin was one of the first to suggest the dialogic orientation of a discourse.

Such speech constitutes a special type of double-voiced discourse. It serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author. In such discourse there are two voices, two meanings and two expressions (Bakhtin, 1981: 324).

Similar to such explorations regarding literary works, there exists a comparable dialogism in organizations when one takes into consideration the discourse between the organizational voice and that of various stakeholders. However, this form of discourse addresses just one type of dialogism, i.e. the voice. In addition, there is another important type of dialogism: the style, which refers to multiple ways of writing, speaking, and presenting as seen in annual reports, interior décor and architecture which ultimately aid the process of sensemaking. “What is key to analyse is the juxtaposition of styles, the orality, text, and visual storying and narrating going on around us, that is not being noticed” (Boje, 2008: 23).

### 3.3 Facts or Fiction?

In an organizational context, the inherent property of making “sense” or adding “meaning” is largely responsible for recognition of a story as a tool in business and management. It not only refers to the way the organization gives meaning to its experiences with the world, but more importantly how the latter makes sense of the organization and its activities. A storytelling organization is a “collective storytelling systemicity in which the performance of stories is a key part of members’ sensemaking and a means to allow them to supplement individual memories with institutional memory” (Boje, 2008:29). These stories ‘tell’ the listener about the present events in the organization as well as the directions it may take in the future, which in turn serves as a source of information to society in understanding the said organization. As highlighted by Gabriel, in this ability to stimulate the senses of the listener, lies both the merit and probable demerit of a story.

Stories will often compromise accuracy in the interest of poetic effect, itself an expression of deeper fantasies, wishes and desires. They may focus on the incidental details, remaining stubbornly silent about what a researcher may regard as vital clues; they may contain inconsistencies, imprecisions, lacunae, non-sequiturs, illogicalities, and ambiguities.

(Gabriel, 2000:135).

Such distortions are unavoidable as stories deal primarily with experiences. While facts about events are expected to deliver information, stories are supposed to serve the purpose of giving meaning to experiences. Hence as a currency measuring human experiences, stories are emotionally stimulated. Herein lies the dissimilarity between a story and a report. A story “does not aim to convey the pure essence of the thing, like information or a report. It sinks the thing into the life of the storyteller, in order to bring it out of him again; thus traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel” (Benjamin, Arendt, & Zohn, 1969:5). It is this poetic effect that brings into question the use of stories in organizations as a source of information. Hence a story in its pure folklorist’s form cannot be applied to an organization and “only by treating stories as distinctive types of narrative, claiming special privileges and subject to special constraints, can we use them as windows into organizational life” (Gabriel, 2000: 29). Gabriel further states that aforementioned irony of a story which can both accentuate the truth as well as distort the same, paves way to a deeper understanding about the truth as a listener may not be solely concerned about the entertaining aspects of the story but might also look at it from a cause and effect point of view. ‘How and when did this happen?’; ‘Who made it happen?’, and more importantly, ‘Did it really happen?’ Such interrogation at individual and collective level opens up new avenues to fact finding through questioning of organizational experiences.

### **3.4 The Power of Stories**

In an organizational context, where interactions are polyadic in nature, stories determine how meaning is extracted from various internal and external stakeholder activities. The role played by stories in “making of sense” (Weick, 1995: 4) aids us to “comprehend, understand, explain, attribute, extrapolate, and predict” (Starbuck & Milliken, 1988: 51) the unknown to gain contextual rationality. Hence, storytelling is an integral part of today’s business world where it is a currency of human contact and means of sensemaking. “Stories are approached as a sign of strong corporate culture, a culture that penetrates deeply into the lives of its members drastically shaping their meaning systems” (Gabriel, 2000:89). Interestingly, this primary function of a story is not seen only within the walls of an organization, rather they can be seen to penetrate into wider society helping people to “generate behavioural expectations” while offering “models of emulation and avoidance” (Gabriel, 2000: 88). These models of emulation and avoidance are determined by that part of social memory consisting of accepted social behaviours, beliefs and concepts while those in conflict with the same provide the basis for models of avoidance. Also, these models are passed from generation to generation, thus dictating how we view and interpret our sociocultural environment by virtue of numerous narratives played through various frames of time and space (Cunliffe et al., 2004). However, stories pertaining to an industry or a commodity that penetrate into society cannot be delegated solely to an organization. Rather, they originate through numerous other storytellers such as concerned activists, newspapers, television broadcasters, publications etc. Hence upon its entry into society, the organizational story (which is often a hyper-real media image) faces other stories, which can either be in alignment or in conflict with the dominant organizational narrative, thereby creating a system of stories incorporating many voices, and logics that subsequently serve as a source of information to wider society. This system of information is composed of stories that are narrated and re-narrated among its members thereby concreting a socially accepted narration while providing the basis for belief and concept construction. Subsequently this ‘social memory’ directly influences the individual

memory, as "It is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories" (Halbwachs, 1992:38).

Furthermore, organizations incorporate multiple discourses, voices, identities, logics etc. Thus in context to such plurality of storytellers and stories, there is always "latitude to author their own reality, though always in ways shaped by the available social discourses" (Humphrey, 2002: 422). The social discourses in discussion here are also a reference to social power systems such as social conventions, community scrutiny, legal norms, familial obligations and religious injunctions (Rose, 1990 :1).

It is about the ways in which the ruling class establishes and maintains its domination. The ability to impose a definition of the situation, to set the terms in which events are understood and issues discussed, to formulate ideals and define morality is an essential part of the process. Hegemony involves persuasion of the greater part of the population, particularly through the media, and the organization of social institutions in ways that appear "natural," "ordinary," "normal" (Donaldson, 1993: 645)

These social discourses, of which the industrial story is a part, establish and maintain the social power systems enabling the domination of the ruling class. Interestingly, continuance of aforesaid hegemony also "involves the successful mobilization and reproduction of the active consent of dominated groups" (Clegg, 1989: 160).

### **3.5 Storytelling Organizations**

Boje, in his analysis of Disney (1995), put into focus the multiple competing discourses existing in an organizational setting and how the marginalized voices hold evidence to a darker side of Walt Disney's Legend. His analysis of Disney's pre-modern, modern and postmodern discourses revealed that the media giant "was not a very postmodern organization" (Boje, 1995). Further, he suggested that "organizations are not exclusively premodern, modern, or postmodern but composed of fragmented, competing discourses" (Boje, 1995). Further inroads into the aforesaid competing discourses were made in Boje's analysis of Nike in which he compares the contrasting storytelling and counter-storytelling by the organization and the activists by seeking answers to the question: does Nike propagate entrepreneurial ideology to mask its Asian labor practices, thereby restoring Nike as a hero to consumer and investor? (Boje, 1999). In this study, he also established that the story play between Nike and the activists is influenced by a double logic.

In "double logic," for every report of Nike exploitation, there is the distinct possibility that the story of the event is an exaggeration or even a fictitious tale by an activist. Conversely, for every charge that Nike is being victimized, there is the possibility that exploitation is being caused by Nike. (Boje, 1999)

However, the dominating organizational narrative often negates the perplexity created by dual interpretation infused through double logic. Hence, while numerous stakeholder stories attempt to create a state of 'disorganizing' by virtue of their various dialects, dialogisms etc. the powerful dominant narrative re-organizes the storytelling organization, thus setting a continuous cycle of disorganizing and reorganizing (Boje, 2008). In fact, "Narrative, over the course of modernity, has become a (centripetal) centering force of control and order" (Boje, 2008: 1). The decentring force generated through disorder and diversity is exerted by the story in instances where it is not wholly subjugated by the narrative order. Nevertheless, we

often find that the narrative order is so dominant and powerful that at times it almost silences all other voices and stories that might oppose it. However, in the absence of alternative stories the meanings implied through the official managerial story “may become seemingly taken-for-granted, reified, and thus definitively authoritative totalizations” (Brown & Humphreys, 2006:7), thus creating a form of hegemony which in reality is never complete and does not reach a state of finality (Rhodes, 2000) and is in a constant battle attempting to concrete its position as the dominant narrative against the resisting stories.

#### 4.0 Methodology

Boje first defined the storytelling organization as a collective storytelling ‘system’, and later redefined it as a ‘storytelling system[icity]’ (Boje, 2008: 29). Similarly, Bakhtin used the term ‘systematicity’. The reluctance to use the word ‘system’ in reference to a storytelling organization was rooted in the understanding that it was not a ‘whole system’. In reality, it was “continually being reorganized, and never seem to finish long enough to have merged parts or some kind of fixity of wholeness” (Boje, 2008: 29). Also, analysing a storytelling organization as a system would incidentally deem its possession of linear levels of hierarchy. Such a hierarchical structure would feed on a dominant storyline and would overlook the stories that are not in accordance with its grand narrative. Hence adopting a model of analysis that views a storytelling organization as a system would not result in proper representation of the narrative-story interplay which takes place in a business environment. Addressing aforesaid complexities and story dynamics, the author has adopted the method of story-deconstruction introduced by Boje & Dennehy (1993).

An organization’s narrative is often transmitted to society through the voices given to their brands. Also, “successful brands are built through creative repetition of themes in various types of media” (Ghodeswar, 2008:7). These themes narrate a story as intended by the organization. Either in the form of direct declarations through mission statements or via more subtle representations through minute details on the product packages, these anecdotes are “an answer to something (either from an old battle, or some new one brewing)” (Boje, 2008:24). Furthermore, the brands in Ghodeswar’s above commentary are the spokesmen through which the managerial narrations are presented to wider society. Correspondingly, envoys of *Titanarum*, in the form of advertisements, annual reports, and product packaging, narrate a story as intended by the organization. On the other side is the story of the Other: the female plantation workers. Thus, in order to carry out a comprehensive analysis of the Sri Lankan tea tale, it was necessary to take into consideration the multiplicity of narrations. One side of this story was provided by the managerial narrations entrapped in the advertisements, packages and the organization’s annual reports. The other side of the story was gathered by collecting plantation worker stories: stories which are rarely provided with a podium for narration and thus inaccessible to society. The amalgamation of these two sides of narrations aids the process of resituating: the final step in the method of deconstruction as specified by Boje & Dennehy (1993) where a “new perspective is found, one that resituates the story beyond its dualisms, excluded voices, or singular viewpoint” (Boje, 2001:21). Most importantly, it is this “re-story” that enables the re-articulation of Sri Lankan tea tale where it is viewed, not as a story in isolation, but as a constituent of a collective system of stories thereby rendering new meanings to their narrations.

#### 4.1 Fieldwork at the estate

Unearthing the story of the Other in the form of the female plantation workers demanded the gathering of field material through semi structured interviewing of a judgment (purposeful) sample. In total, 14 female plantation workers were interviewed. The estate shop keeper, teachers at the estate school, care taker at the day care center, workers at the factory and the bungalow were also interviewed in pursuit of a comprehensive narration of the story of the female plantation workers. This of course was in addition to the field observations at the estate premises. The estate employed about 200 tea pickers and most of them were living at the plantation premises. The government provided the land and the plantation workers were allowed to build their houses and live at the estate as long as they were willing to work in the estates. Interviews were carried out in the native language of the tea pickers in order to avoid difficulties in expression and to aid unhindered transfer of information from the informant to the data collector. In view of the majority of plantation workers being of Tamil ethnicity, the expertise of a professional translator was used to assist in the story collection. The interpreter's support was also sought to translate the collected data back to English prior to analysis. Where applicable, interviews were also carried out in Sinhala. The use of English for the purpose of interviewing was an option only with the superintendent, as the knowledge of English language of others was not found to be sufficient to carry out a coherent conversation. All interviews were tape-recorded for processing at a later time. Data was collected only in the audio and written format and did not include any image/video-recorded material due to restrictions imposed by the Sri Lanka Tea Board. However, in the absence of such image based data collection, the notes taken at the site turned out to be informative documentations of the observable plantation worker stories.

#### 5.0 Deconstructing the Sri Lankan tea tale

##### 5.1 *Titanarum* vs. the Other

A look into *Titanarum's* annual reports echoed their commitment to the supply of 'sustainable' tea. Throughout the document, the attainment of Rainforest Alliance certification was used as a guarantor of organization's commitment to improve livelihoods of farmers. In contrast, a glance at the estate and the housing revealed the existence of a story that was in stark contrast to the one narrated by the organization. For example, at temperatures that would be considered unbearably cold by most Sri Lankans and made worse by the pouring rain in the hill country, the tea pickers were walking along the narrow paths on the hills wearing soaked jackets and pieces of polythene wrapped around their waists and heads. In addition to the attire, which was ineffective against the rain, it was evident that they were traversing those terrains with nothing more than rubber slippers on their feet. Few inquiries into the outfit revealed that the estate did not provide clothing or footwear to tea pickers. According to Punidha, a 31 year old female tea picker, a jacket was provided for the rainy seasons, 'if' the plantation workers were willing to bear 50% of its cost. However, she was very quick to show one of these jackets and point out that the fabric was useless when it came to providing sanctuary from the rain. Hence, the first close view of these plantation workers portrayed the exact opposite of the perspective given by *Titanarum* through its stories in annual reports. While the reports were highlighting the organization as a champion of sustainable production, I witnessed a form of duality and a story, which was not told as a part of the grand narrative. Similar to the way Kinney's story deconstructed Disney's monologue (Boje, 1995), the visuals at the estate initiated the deconstruction of *Titanarum's* narrative. Also, the domination of *Titanarum's* narratives with regard to sustainability over

the stories of the female plantation workers highlights the hierarchical structure of narrations. It is almost a reflection of the varied forms of acknowledgment provided for two contrasting interpretations on adherence to sustainable practices. The visuals at the estate also put into perspective the narrations on the product packages as well as those conveyed through advertisements, where it was almost always a story about the quality, taste, aroma, beauty of the hill country etc. As stated by Boje & Dennehy (1993), the citing of one side of a duality implies the existence of its other side. In fact, the other side of Titanarum's narration was witnessed at the estate where the poorly dressed female tea pickers painted a rather contradictory narration to that told by the organization. The identification of this duality enables the observation of the well-known activity of tea picking without getting too caught up in the fascinating spectacle created by the organization's advertisements or the disheartening visualization observed at the estate itself. Rather, in the context of this study, it reinforces the notion that there indeed is a marginalized narration and puts into perspective the positioning of the respective stories in the hierarchical structure, where Titanarum's narrations are provided a well heard voice and the story of the tea picker is almost always sidelined.

As stated by Priya, the tea pickers were not provided with any form of training, and were required to learn on the job, right from the first day of employment. The irrelevance of training to carry out the job is probably an encouragement for many to pursue a career as a tea picker. The interviews also indicated that they were not entitled to any form of medical insurance. If needed, they were provided with the service of an ambulance, for which a deduction was made from their monthly payments. Also, annual profit distributions were not allocated to them. As Rajeshwari narrates: "the profit is not distributed to estate workers; all I get is Rs.1000 (less than \$7) at the end of the year and my leave bonus". This however, provided an interesting perspective when juxtaposed with the numerous instances where *Titanarum* narrated the organization's profits and its allocations to executives: a duality in context to financial reporting.

## 5.2 Diverse Voices

In order to identify if the female plantation worker voice was sidelined by the organization's narrations, I explored the annual reports in context to tea picking activities at the estates. Interestingly, in the annual reports from the year 2008-2012, "estate" was used just 6 times and 3 of those were in 2012, with reference to the design of a new tea-picking basket. The remaining three instances were in context to Rainforest Alliance Certification. I was also interested in knowing if the annual report incorporated any voice, which was specifically telling a story about tea originating from Sri Lankan tea estates. Since Sri Lanka is the third largest exporter of tea and *Titanarum* is the second largest buyer at the Colombo tea auction, it was anticipated that the word would be frequently mentioned in the annual reports. Also, since the Sri Lankan branch of *Titanarum* does not publish any reports, as it is not a listed company in the Colombo stock exchange, a better representation of the country's contribution was anticipated in the global annual reports. Contrary to such expectations, 'Sri Lanka' was mentioned only seven times in the five years; out of which, two were with regard to hygiene promotion activities related to soap. All other mentions were in the sentence: *we have revenues either from our own operations or through agency agreements in the following locations:.....Serbia, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, Slovakia, Slovenia, Solomon Islands, Somalia, South Korea, South Sudan, Sri Lanka*. The sentence appeared in the exact same manner at the end of all five reports and for most years was the lonely presence of 'Sri Lanka' in the

documents. It was noteworthy that the reports were vehemently promoting the quality of a tea brand while being tightlipped about one of the main places of origin of that tea. Subsequent explorations revealed that the organizational narrative ceased to give any form of significant representation to female plantation workers which not only resulted in the omission of their voices but also the sidelining of their stories.

### 5.3 Exceptions & reversal of plot

Explorations into Titanarum's narrations revealed that the words "Rainforest Alliance Certification" was used almost always to denote their adherence to sustainable practices. For example, the annual report for 2011 states that 57% of *Titanarum's T1*<sup>2</sup> tea bag blends contained sustainable tea at end of that year. It also stated that 28% of the tea procured for all tea brands was obtained from Rainforest Alliance Certified farms. Thus, Titanarum's claims on adherence to sustainable practices are supported on its attainment of Rain Forest Alliance certification. However, another excerpt from the same year links the use of the word 'sustainability' to improvements in livelihoods of worker families by stating that the organization promotes sustainable practices to help preserve the environment and develop the livelihoods of estate workers and their communities. Hence, quite clearly the organization uses the Rainforest Alliance certification as a guarantee of its adherence to sustainable practices, which are subsequently linked to improvements pertaining to living standards. Thorough analysis of the annual reports revealed that this was the norm whenever references were made with regard to sustainability or improvement of living conditions. To investigate further into the hidden narrations integrated with the use of this accreditation, I analyzed the stories narrated by the organization providing this particular certification. This was vital as it gave access to finding a form of "exception" (Boje & Dennehy, 1993). Interestingly, explorations into Rainforest Alliance's objectives revealed that it was an organization working "to conserve biodiversity and ensure sustainable livelihoods by transforming land-use practices, business practices and consumer behavior" (Certification and Assurance Services | Rainforest Alliance for Business, 2013). Such a mission statement gives more emphasis to conservation of the environment than to social and economic improvement of communities. Their strategy was to demonstrate to businesses the profitability of forest conservation, which was achieved by "helping famers, forest managers and tourism businesses realize greater economic benefits by ensuring ecosystems within and around their operations are protected, and that their workers are well-trained and enjoy safe conditions, proper sanitation, health care and housing" (Certification and Assurance Services - Rainforest Alliance for Business, 2013). Thus, community development is merely another route through which the organization was attempting to reach its destination of safeguarding forests and consequently questions the outcome in situations where social and economic development of workers did not have a direct influence on environmental conservation. Hence, the attainment of this certification cannot be used as a complete inference of its possessor's ethics towards its social responsibility or more importantly as a reference of livelihood improvements. These two stories, one narrated by *Titanarum* where the certification is made to look like a guarantor of livelihood development and the other merely denoting its interest in safeguarding the environment, reflect the presence of "exceptions" where the second

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<sup>2</sup> Due to the sensitivity of the research, the actual name of the tea-brand will be withheld and will be named as T1 throughout this document

narration almost breaks the strictures of principle in the first narration (Boje & Dennehy, 1993)

Continuing from the previous discussion on exceptions, *Titanarum's* sustainability report suggested that trends in customer demands were largely influenced by the initiatives taken by the organization to adhere to sustainable practices and business ethics. For example, a look at *Titanarum's* sustainability report for 2012 revealed that by 2015, the organization was thriving to source all tea for their "tea bags" from sources that had gained the certification of Rainforest Alliance: The organization's guarantor of sustainability. Interestingly, tea bags represent the dominant tea culture in the west: a consumer base, which is increasingly concerned about sustainability. Also, according to *Titanarum's* report for 2012, 75% of all of T-1 "tea bags" contained a proportion of sustainably sourced tea. A closer look at the 2012 report indicated that 39% of all T-1 tea was from sources certified by Rainforest Alliance. Such demarcations based on continental segregations and their respective tea cultures is quite intriguing in consideration of the growing consumer base in the western world whose buying trends are increasingly dictated by producers' assurances confirming that their purchases were produced using sustainable processes. For a clearer view of this differential attitude towards varied market segments and tea cultures, the trends in the use of certified tea was compared as below.

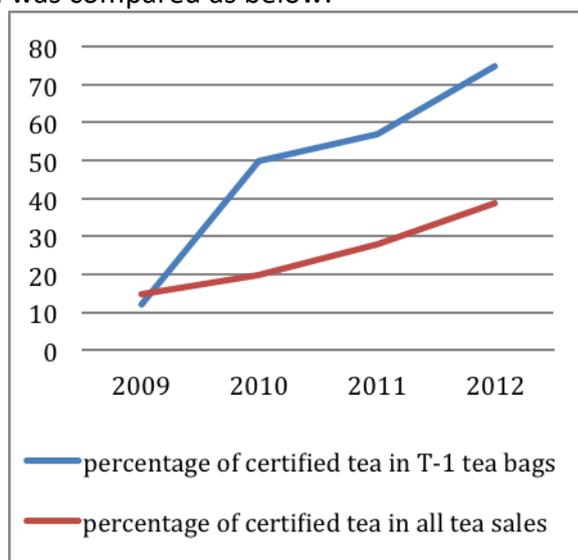


Figure 1

Percentages of certified tea

(Source: Developed from *Titanarum's* annual reports from 2009-2012)

Quite visibly, the organization was catering as per consumer requirements and expectations. This brings to light the actual driving force behind the use of Rainforest Alliance certification, showcasing that the organization's commitments towards livelihood improvements of its stakeholders is in fact a result of changing consumer requirements. What would the situation be if this plot was reversed where customers were no longer interested about business ethics or sustainability? How would the narration be if the tea consumers in certain parts of the world paid no interest to livelihood development or workers? Would the organization still be required to adopt sustainable policies and more importantly, would they need to narrate stories about them? It is almost as if *Titanarum* was demanded to be ethical and thus the

organization is merely telling 'stories' about it. Denying this plot for 'ethics' would probably result in the cessation of corresponding narrations by the organization.

#### 5.4 The Gaps

In the method of deconstruction, identification of the gaps refers to the tracing of what is not said (Boje & Dennehy, 1993). It also brings into discussion the different ways in which these gaps could be filled. The initial gaze at these alternatives gives the impression that they make an inference to a form of story dynamics which is similar to that portrayed by Boje's (1995) Tamara-land.

'Meanings' inferred by a particular telling is largely dependent on the writer (Calas & Smircich, 1993). Also, meanings that are already delivered by the available narration and subsequent re-articulation of the missing stories would essentially be reminiscent of the essence of the story that is already narrated. In contrast, Boje's idea of 'tracing' the missing story during deconstruction was more of finding other stories than merely filling in the gaps by 'assuming' what was being narrated behind 'closed doors': alternate stories which might have a different meaning, plot and scenarios. For example, *Titanarum's* commitment to improve livelihoods fly solely on the wings of the two words 'Rainforest Alliance': a silhouette within which the firm attempts to wrap all countries and estates from which it sources its tea. By presenting such a generalized narration, and by limiting its utterances on livelihood improvements to farming techniques and practices, *Titanarum* conveniently avoids making references to any direct initiatives it has taken to create positive social and economic impact on its labor force in tea estates, consequently being tightlipped with regard to female plantations workers in these estates as well. This exemplifies how the organization is narrating just one part of the story where the listener is required to trace what is said between the lines. The alternate story in this instance was that the organization was not committed to livelihood improvements in the same manner it was engaged in improving farming techniques and practices: an instance where the untold story can become a whole new narrative (Boje 2008).

Similar gaps were recognized when analyzing the product packages and advertisements. For example, none of the four advertisements taken in for analysis made any sort of reference to the process or the individuals engaged in tea production. All the advertisements aimed to instill through sensory stimulation of the human mind, were various properties of the product and the associated effects consumers of the product would gain, such as higher efficiency at day-to-day work and revitalization. When any reference was made to the tea estates, it was done to portray the beauty of Sri Lanka's hill country and omitted any form of visual or audio representation of the female tea pickers who are integral to the activities taking place in the estate. For example, the verbal narrations in *Titanarum's* advertisements tell a story about freshness and hope while the visuals capture the beauty of the country's hill country and sight of people enjoying a cup of tea and. Tea estate workers and their narrations were left out of both the verbal and visual telling trapped in the advertisements. In none of the four advertisements taken into analysis, were female tea pickers given any form of representation. Their omission gives rise to an alternate story which suggests that their addition into the said visual/audio could have somehow deterred the conveyance of the intended message, which in this case is the illustration of the natural beauty of the hill country and the rejuvenating capabilities of the product. Would the image of a female tea picker somehow make the view not so 'beautiful'? Would it not have jelled in well with the verbal narrations of "new day, hope, sunshine" and "revival of life"? Any intentional exclusion hints at an awareness that the presence of tea pickers could have

portrayed a not-so-pleasant view of the tea estate, thereby obstructing the delivery of the dominant narrative. Thus the alternative story in this instance suggests that the story of the tea pickers is not quite “beautiful” and not necessarily “refreshing” or of “hope”.

Correspondingly, the narrations that were to be read on the packets did not deviate much from the content that was omitted in their corresponding advertisements. While they echoed the various positives of the end product, the storyteller in the package seemed to be tightlipped with regard to the tea pickers. For example the image of tea estates on the packet of *T-1* tea was barren of any sort of indication of tea pickers who on a day of good harvest would have been an obvious sighting on the same fields. Such exclusion, similar to the case of advertisements brings forth the necessity to explore the possible causes that could have motivated the concerned parties to neglect the female tea pickers. Taking aesthetics into consideration, such omission could be due to the thought that the images of tea pickers would not have bonded well with other colors and content on the packets. Their inclusion could have mellowed down the psychological influence created by the incorporation of a warm color, i.e. yellow. Also, as Mitchell & Papavassiliou (1999) suggested, lesser the amount of information, smaller the number of alternative choice sets presented to the consumer and hence results in reduced possibility of causing confusion over too much detail and information. In such perspective, the limited amount of information should only capture the product quality and other similar information. On the same note, their inclusion could have resulted in the narration of a hidden story, which in this case could have resulted in the creation of an extra set of information for the consumer. Ironically, attempts to hide this story gives rise to the alternative story, which implies the existence of a narration that might not be in line with the customer demands for ethics and corporate social responsibility.

## 6.0 Conclusion

Similar to Nike’s use of storytelling to justify employing “Asian female workers to accumulate billions in capital” (Boje, 1999), *Titanarum* uses its narrations to project itself as a champion of CSR and thus as a corporation which is a pioneer in introducing practices and processes that promote sustainability and livelihood improvements. However, as made evident in the above discussion, *Titanarum*’s statements seem to self-destruct when using deconstruction as a method of analysis. While the organization was exhibiting itself as a corporation that gave importance to ethics, sustainability and CSR, there were counter stories by female plantation workers as well as Rainforest Alliance that stand in opposition to the managerial narration: A duel which is analogous to that between Disney’s voice and the ‘others’ as the latter is rarely given a podium for expression and thus seldom heard (Boje, 1995). While the official website of *Titanarum* claims that it has sought to provide workers with pay and working conditions significantly above the agricultural workers’ norm, it was evident that the tea pickers were not even provided with appropriate clothing or footwear to carry out their daily work. Another interesting finding when looking at the collective story regarding wages and profits was that while *Titanarum*’s annual reports repeatedly echoed its financial stability and profitable earnings, the plantation workers were not entitled to annual profit allocations. Similar contradictory narrations were found with regard to *Titanarum* and sustainability where the organization’s stories continued to deconstruct on its own in the presence of the narrations of Rainforest Alliance. Such analysis of opposing narrations and subsequent identification of hidden voices clearly depicted the existing order of hierarchy that gave more recognition to the voice of the organization over that of the estate workers; thus resulting in the marginalization of plantation worker voices.

In a nutshell, the restory encompassing the narrations of *Titanarum* and that of female plantation workers brings forth their respective narrations sans any form of hierarchy thus decentering them from their dominant and controlling voices. This gave equal emphasis to varied stories and their narrators. In comparison to Boje's establishment of Disney as an enactor of its environment in order to create Disney knowledge (1995) *Titanarum's* narrations attempt to create a dominant story that echoes its commitment to sustainability while highlighting the organization as a largely profitable business. The marginalization of female plantation workers was ensured by their omission from the most publicly accessible modes of narrations such as annual reports, advertisements and packaging. When the 'gaps' were filled in these modes of narrating by *Titanarum*, it was rather obvious that the inclusion of the female worker narration would have deterred the transmission of the story as intended by the organization, as the telling of the female tea picker appears to be far from one about 'beauty' 'hope' or 'rejuvenation'.

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