



ARE FOLKTALE HEROINES STEREOTYPED? A TEXTUAL STUDY IN THE LIGHT OF A FEW BODO FOLKTALES

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Abstract

Every society has its own ways of treating girls and boys or male or female and assigning them different roles, responsibilities and attributes. All the social and cultural differentiation made for males and females from birth onwards is 'gendering'. Each society slowly and steadily transforms a male or a female into a man or a woman, into masculine and feminine, with different qualities, behaviour patterns, roles, responsibilities, rights and expectations. Ann Oakley rightly said, 'gender is a matter of culture, it refers to the social classification of men and women into masculine and feminine'.

Key-words: Folktale, culture, society, patriarchy, gender, identity.



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Introduction

The study of Folklore from the point of view of gender is very much relevant as folklore can provide us useful insights in understanding the status of women in such cultures. In the context of Indian culture, where the society is a male dominant one, each and every aspect regarding women is decided according to the wishes of the dominant gender. The male identity is constructed as superior in terms of power, authority and status. Women in the patriarchal set up were not allowed to think, decide and hold opinion independently. In other words, women are not expected to question male hegemony. The patriarchal set up of our society constrains women to safeguard, sustain and perpetuate patriarchal values throughout their lives.

Objective

The present paper tries to attempt an understanding of how women are portrayed in the folktales of a particular tribe.



Cultural Context

The themes of tales differ from culture to culture. Almost all the story types in one way or the other have a tendency to establish the archetypal Indian image of women. Women are always looked at subordinate to male interest and as the possession of men. Because of the cultural hegemony, we get to see tales of virtuous, passive, obedient, all-obliging women, childless women. . Tales projecting the supremacy of motherhood are found in large numbers. The overriding symbolic pattern of women in tales is one of giver of love and affection. But in a negative way emphasize the longing for motherly affection. Ramanujan in this context observed that mothers are split into good mothers and wicked step-mothers to express ambivalence. Tales depict rivalries among women and portray them as jealous and wicked even in the kinship context. There are examples of rivalries among co-wives and mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. Construction of gender is closely related with kinship. Another symbol of womanhood stressed in the tales is childbearing and upbringing role of a woman. Virtue of a woman depends on her success in giving birth. A woman unable to give birth to a male child had to undergo a lot of trial and tribulations. She had to bear with a co-wife, lack of love from husband and family members and sometimes even thrown away from the house. Again, loyalty and chastity is traits desired in women. In a patriarchal culture what we get is a masculinize definition of ideals and vision are not women's creations. Thus the study of tales in their cultural context is very much necessary to understand their distinctiveness. There is no denying the fact that women are exploited everywhere but the nature and degree of exploitation is not the same in all cultures. Stephens and McCallum argue that traditional stories and folktales have important cultural functions. One can hardly analyse the cultural expectations and interactional processes that construct gender inequality without attention to the action of the dominant group. We must pay attention to what men do to preserve their power and privilege.

About the tribe

Bodos are one of the major ethnic tribes of Assam. The term *Bodo* indicates that they came from the Tibetan region though their original home had been the upper reaches of Yang-tse-Kiang and the Hoang -ho in western China. Present Assam is inhabited by a number of Kachari tribes, such as Bodo-Kacharis in the districts of Kamrup, Barpeta, Kokrajhar, Udalguri, Baska, Dhubri, Goalpara, Darrang, Sonitpur etc. Sonowal Kacharis and Thengal Kacharis in



in Upper Assam districts, the Barmans in Cachar Districts, Mech Kacharis who are more or less scattered in the plains districts in small groups and the Dimasa Kacharis in the autonomous Hill districts namely North Cachar Hills and Karbi Anglong districts. According to Mr. G.A. Grierson, the Europeans called the Dimasas Hill Kacharis to distinguish them from the plains Kacharis speaking Bodo. According to Mr. M.M.Brahma since the Bodos worshipped the *Kechai-Khati* or *Kacha Khaori* (Goddess who eats raw flesh), they were called Kachari. But the opinions differ in regard to the precise meaning of the term Bodo. It might refer to the first male forefather of the race or any natural object. According to Grierson like other tribal names in Assam, the name probably once meant a male member of the tribe. The Bodos are the ardent devotees of their supreme God '*Bathow*' which is represented by a *Siju-plant* (belonging to the *Euphorbia* genus). Their important traditional festival is Baisakhu or the spring festival, where singing, dancing, drinking and holding feast, grace the occasion. Drinking of rice-beer occupies a vital place in their social life. Kachari maidens enjoy a free life in singing, dancing and marry making on the occasions, the married women refrain from such outdoor show. Women are very industrious and spend much of their time in agricultural field and weaving works. Child marriage is uncommon to them. They are monogamous and polyandry is strictly prohibited.

The Bodos have a rich tradition of folk literature which is yet to be fully explored. These are still orally transmitted, even though some of the folk literature have been recorded and preserved in the printed form. Folk literature gives us a glimpse of the daily life of the earlier people, their ideas, life-style, hopes and fears, expectations, social set up and also their primitive philosophies. "The folk tales or narratives of the Bodos, like their folk songs depict profound thought and imagination". (M.M.Brahma, Folk Songs of the Bodos).

In the folktale *The Tale of a Rakshasi* a *Rakshasi* turned herself into a beautiful girl. The king of that certain kingdom got attracted to the girl. He gave shelter to her and eventually married her as his Queen did not have a child. Now soon after the marriage the peace of the house was disturbed by domestic quarrels and mishaps. Cattle and men began to disappear without any reason. The senior queen complained to the king, "this girl is inauspicious. It is because of her that we are all suffering from mishaps". The king misunderstood her and drove her away. The queen at that time was pregnant. The poor lady found shelter in a village.

The mishaps in the kingdom did not stop. The senior queen after a few months gave birth to a



male child. The child began to grow. He was so lovely and good that even birds and beasts felt affection for him. He was named neglected son. When the junior queen (actually the rakshasi) came to know about the child she grew afraid and looked for a way to do away with him. But the neglected son successfully perished all traps laid down by the rakshasi and finally killed her. the king repented for his past deeds and accepted back his senior wife as well as Neglected son, the prince.

Sung-Ae Lee during her research on Korean Folktales observed that female characters are either passive as victim or prize or active as evil. This is also reflected in this Bodo folktale *the tale of the Rakshasi* where the elder queen of the king had a small role to play in the action of the story, but her principle function is thematic, as she occupies the important position of victim. Her role precludes initiative. But the new wife (who was actually a demoness in disguise) who changed her shape and turned herself into a beautiful girl had complete control over the king. Folktale heroines are usually powerless like the elder queen unless they possess a power aligned to monstrosity and evil like the new wife who is a demoness and thus evil. The elder queen was thrown out of her house on the instigation on her new co wife. She had to bear with a co -wife on the pretext of not bearing a child, the ultimate want of patriarchy. Finally she got back her position in the family when the evil wife was killed with the help of her son. She as a passive heroine was dependent on a male figure (her son who was born after she was thrown out) to restore her status and to get back her lost ground. Thus female characters whose attributes are grounded in feminity schema (what is common to all members of a class) had happy lives if their behaviour revolves around beauty, passivity and dependence on outside forces. Karen E Rowe suggested that to sustain a schema for feminity based on passivity, dependency and self-sacrifice suggests “that culture’s very survival depends upon a woman’s acceptance of roles which relegate her to motherhood and domesticity” (Rowe, 1991).

Jealous Step Mother is a tale of two wives of a certain king. The elder one had a daughter and a son and the younger one had only a daughter. Out of sheer jealousy the younger wife had pushed the elder one into the tank where they were bathing together. The elder one changed into a tortoise first and later into a *bel* tree. At the end of course the crime of the younger one was revealed and the king welcomed the elder one and punished the junior one by driving her out of the house. The step mother had maternal feelings for her own children despite her



wickedness. She treats her own children well. The meanness she displays towards the orphans is often caused by jealousy she feels towards her co -wife. A wicked step mother is always a bad wife by being a jealous wife. The mothers so kind to their own children often become hostile toward the offspring of the other wives. Each wife is seeking the favour of the father through her progeny. Sonia Lee observed that in the case of a chief's or King's wives, jealousy can be mixed with political ambition that might go as far as murder as it happened in this tale where the young wife pushed the elder one in a tank in order to kill her. Jealousy is also a revolt against the tradition because from time immemorial man has had more than one wife, a custom to which women have always submitted on the ground that it was for the common good. This act of jealousy, a negative trait is punished as it happened in the end of the tale where the younger wife was exposed and punished.

The ever patient, uncomplainingly submissive woman is not the unique type of woman we find in folktales. There are some examples of female cleverness and independence as we find in the tale "King's *Son and the Minister's Son*" where a wise old woman could successfully create rift between two intimate and seemingly inseparable friends through her intelligence. The parents of the two rowdy friends wanted to separate them but were unsuccessful till then. She created misunderstanding between them over nothing and they started quarrelling with each other.

In the folktale *Raona and Raoni* , there lived a brother and sister named Raona and Raoni respectively. When they came of age it was time for their marriage, Raona developed love for his own sister. Without telling her anything he fixed a day for his marriage with Raoni. Raona's grandmother supported him in his illicit desire. One day Grandmother was keeping watch over the paddy which was spread out open in the sun for rice that would be necessary for marriage. While driving away the birds she said, "Go way, you birds, do not eat up the paddy. My grandson and granddaughter are going to marry and this paddy is meant for the marriage". Raoni heard what her grandmother said and she was extremely shocked to know this. In order to save herself from the wicked desire of her brother she straightway flew into the sky.

The patriarch stands for Father Right, the right of ownership over the seed. He is not a person but an institution, a mindset, a practice, hegemony, and thus an oppressor. Religions which believe the Manusmriti, Bible or other religious text often follow it faithfully by its every word, which puts the men in charge. The



Bible, which most Christians live by states boldly that every woman should be submissive to man. In Manusmriti, it is said that every woman should treat her husband as her God and her chastity is known from the fact that how much faithful is she towards her husband. With that in mind and those beliefs instilled in cultures, Women do not stand a chance at gaining strength in their gender. But interestingly enough, for a variety of complex reasons women also support and perpetuate patriarchy. This is called internalization of domination. Women continually renegotiate their bargaining power. There is no doubt that women often treat their son better, become partial towards them at the cost of the daughter, deprive their daughters of education, restrict their freedom, encouraging daughters to sacrifice for the family and be happy with that, mistreat daughter-in laws and so on. But all these need to be understood in the context of the respective power and position that men and women have and enjoy in family and in the society. In this tale, Raona and Raoni, it is the grandmother who support and perpetuate patriarchy. By supporting her grandson's illicit demand and by going against the grand- daughter she actually renegotiated her bargaining power.

Conclusion:

Women often gain economic benefits of patronage for themselves and their children in exchange for their subordinate status. Gender inequality is based on embodied cultural expectations. When we talk about universal devaluation of women Sherry Ortner rightly links women's secondary status to the tendency in almost all cultures to view women as closer to nature and men as responsible for cultures. In the nature-culture debate, nature is often seen as subordinate to, lesser than, culture.

Women in folktales are more or less stereotyped images. We get beautiful girls, cruel and cunning women, jealous step-mothers, passive co-wife as victim, scheming co wife, woman as victim of illicit desire etc. Exceptions like the intelligent old woman do exist but most of the time we get negative portrayal of women where their faults are highlighted. From the point of view of male, women with so many faults explain their inferiority. This negative image is a product of male psyche; the women probably identifies with it and accepts it without much



difficulty, as this image is given to her by male for it comes from the one who possesses power and presumably wisdom.

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