

Gender Representation of Paite and Khasi Tribe of North East India in Selected Folklores

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Abstract: Folktales/Folklores originally known as 'popular antiquities' are stories of a community which gets passed from one generation to next generation over the ages. The literary theories pertaining to folklores, be it anthropological, comparative, oral-formulaic or psychoanalytical suggest that the study of folklores is indeed an upcoming school of thought and its social function in the academia can no longer be taken lightly. Gender and gender studies, similarly, is an interdisciplinary study which can and is to be applied in every field of humanities in order to analyze the gendered representations of a group of people or a community in art, culture and literary studies. Re-interrogating gender studies or the question of gender disparity in folklore would provide us a deep analysis of how such simple stories, when examined transforms into a completely new discussion on culture and cultural representations.

This paper would be discussing two Paite and two Khasi folklore of North East India. This, in turn, shall help us to analyze and discuss the cultural representations of a particular culture and how such representations shape the perception of women in the Paite and Khasi society or the representation of women in a society as a whole.

The Paite Tribe who are patriarchal constitutes one of the largest tribe in Manipur, they are recognized as Scheduled Tribes by the Government of India. They mainly inhabit the Churachandpur District of Manipur. The Paite tribe has their own customary rules and laws and traditions regarding succession, marriage, descent. The earlier records of these folklore were not available in a print form and was pass on through orally. The Khasis on the other hand are Matrilineal. The youngest daughter inherits ancestral property and material wealth, and the husband lives at his wife's residence.

Keywords: Patriarchial, Matrilineal, Paites, Khasis, Folktales

Introduction

The Paite and Khasi were taken for this paper because they are patriarchal and matrilineal respectively. Inheritance for the Paite tribe is traced through male line.

Khasi matriliney shares similarities with the world's other few matrilineal societies, such as wealth and property passing from mother to their daughters, and descent through the mother's line. Children take their mother's last name, daughters ensure the continuity of the clan. Daughters have the liberty to live in their ancestral home or move out, except for the youngest daughter (called *ka khadduh*), who is the custodian of the property. Even after her marriage, she never leaves home. She looks after her parents and eventually becomes the head of the household after her mother's death.

Baldick (2004) looked at folktale as "a story passed on by word of mouth rather than by writing, and thus, partly modified by successive retelling before being written down or recorded. The category includes legends, fables, jokes, tall stories and fairy tales or *Marchen*. Many folktales involve mythical creations and magical transformations." Baldick's opinion here goes to support the fact that indeed, oral literature can be written.

Folktales perform two significant functions in the life of the listeners ; one, they entertain the listener and two, they educate the listener. Although folktales contain tales that are usually possible to happen in real life, the stylistic aestheticism employed by the narrator keeps the listener seated as long as the story lasted. In the end of the story, the listener goes home not of the time determined to have a change of attitude because the folktales he or she has listened to, condemn vice and encourage virtue. The moral nature of folktales helps in no small ways in the character and skills enhancement, of individuals.

Paite Folktales

1. We will first discuss a folktale about a girl named **Lengtonghoih** who has seven brothers. She was very beautiful and had long lustrous thick hair. Once when she was taking a bath, a strand of her hair fell down while she was taking her bath and the strand of hair was swept down by the water. A few kilometers away a prince called Kawl Mangpa was taking bath. As he came out of the water, Lengtonghoih's hair happened to get stuck on his body, as he took out and pulled the hair which was an extraordinary long one and rolled the strand of hair, the hair ball became as big as a fig, thinking that since the hair is long the prince thought the girl no doubt must be very beautiful. The prince told his servants to go and find out the girl and bring her to him by any means possible. The servants went to the village and asked about a girl with very long hair the villagers told the prince servants her name and said that she was very beautiful. When the servants reported back to the prince that they have found the girl, the prince was so pleased he commanded the servants to go back and take her to be his wife. When the servants came to the mansion of Lengtonghoih, the mansion was locked from inside by her brothers who asked her not to go out or talk to anyone .The seven brothers had gone to get the brightest

star as desired by Lengtonghoih. The servants tricked Lengtonghoih and manage to capture her and took her to be the prince wife. When the brothers came back they were very sad to see that their beloved sister had been forcefully taken to be the prince wife and vowed to bring her back however the six brothers in their attempt to get their sister back died and only the youngest brother was left to save her. When the youngest brother saw his sister in the palace she was weaving, he proved to her that he was indeed her brother who came to save her. Finally, the youngest brother was able to rescue his beloved sister from the prince.

Discussion: There are a lot of clichéd representations of women in this story. The girl *Lengtonghoih* had long hair so she was assumed to be beautiful. This particular emphasis on the length of hair is an important factor to analyze since it has become a symbolic representation of ‘beautiful’ women even in our society today. Flavia Rando in the 1992 article on the representation of women argues that gender is both a structural component of the society and a way of knowing. Which means, gender, sexuality the human body and individuals’ experience of them are given meaning by the symbolic and cannot in any way be understood as natural, unmediated by culture.¹ The emphasis of ‘Lengtonghoih’ possessing long hair as a symbol of beauty then becomes not a natural representation of women but rather cultural.

Simone Beauvoir in her seminal work ‘The second sex’ states in her introductory notes that *‘The ideal of feminine beauty is variable; but some requirements remain constant; one of them is that since woman is destined to be possessed, her body has to provide the inert and passive qualities of an object’*² Beauvoir emphasizes this objectification of a woman with reference to her hair by citing examples from the Bible. *“I am the handmaiden of the Lord,” she answers. Mary Magdalene is prostrate at Christ’s feet, and she washes them with her long womanly hair.*³ The representation or the objectification of women to be of a particular kind in appearance and in behavior has long been a tradition in cultural and even in religious contexts. This fact is striking in the cultural field of literature and the arts from the ancient Greco-Roman civilization till the Italian Renaissance where women and their beauty were considered to be a source of ‘Man’s inspiration.

The next point of discussion from this particular folktale is that of the representation of women as weak, not strong enough to protect themselves, submissive and that they are the other gender which needs protection, a protection which could only be provided by the male gender. Interesting here is to read how ‘Lengtonghoih’ brothers had locked her and told her not to go out and talk to anyone while they were gone. This shows that the brothers do not trust her to be left alone as her brothers were ‘the protectors’ and if she goes out without her brothers something bad would befall her. This stereotypical portrayal of women even now where they are not advised or encouraged to go out alone is also a cultural representation of women as the ‘weaker sex’. In ancient literature as

cited by satirists and moralists, have often delighted in depicting women's weaknesses. Beauvoir again states this in her work

“Woman is weaker than man; she has less muscular strength, fewer red blood cells, a lesser respiratory capacity; she runs less quickly, lifts less heavy weights—there is practically no sport in which she can compete with him; she cannot enter into a fight with the male. Added to that are the instability, lack of control, and fragility that have been discussed: these are facts. Her grasp of the world is thus more limited; she has less firmness and perseverance in projects that she is also less able to carry out. This means that her individual life is not as rich as man's.”⁴

What Beauvoir tries to contest and discuss here is the problem of representing women as a ‘weak’ and ‘fragile’ being in literatures, and it has indeed become problematic in defining gender roles and identity in the society. Folktales, literatures and religious texts are the representational sources of ascertaining a woman's capacity or incapacity to protect herself by accepting the human perspective of defining the body from its biological existence. Having said that, this then implies that there are limited chances of re-defining these determined image of women and it continues from time immemorial and depicts women as weak, fragile who need protection from the opposite sex..

Susan T. Fiske identifies this benevolent sexism as a reflection of the attitudes that women deserve special treatment, deserve to be set on a pedestal, and should be revered, as a complimentary justification of gender inequality. Despite the positive nature of these beliefs, she says, people who hold such attitudes tend to see women as weaker, more in need of protection, and less competent than men.⁵

Another point of discussion is that Lengtonghoih is seen her weaving a handloom in the palace, this particular deed is another symbol of female specific work and identity. Projecting women in traditional roles such as performing domestic roles as nurturers, cook and weving and so on , has been a very important theme in defining gender roles today. Cross-cultural research on gender roles and gender stereotyping has indicated that all cultures delegate different roles to men and women, but what traits are associated with each show some cultural variation. Gender stereotypes have more similarities than differences across cultures, with the male stereotype fitting the instrumental, or agentic, model and the female stereotype fitting the expressive, or communal model. This communal model of gender stereotyping is what we are particularly interested on focusing. Literatures of marginalized communities have and are still depicting women have never been associated with representing women as independent, self-reliant but domesticized.

Such representations in cultures then becomes a catalyst of how women are perceived and expected to be in various cultures. Any one not conforming to the gender stereotypical roles then becomes some sort of a taboo and may be ostracized for not falling into the stereotypical gender roles.

In the folktale about Lengtonghoih patriarchy comes to the forefront when the prince abducts Lengtonghoih forcefully to marry her and make her his wife, it reflects the plight of women even today where they are seldom asked for their choice of partner in marriage. Marriage becomes here an imposition of sorts. The institution of marriage then is understood to be the first assertion of patriarchy where women, according to Levis Strauss, are just the means through which marriage becomes a possibility. He states” *“The relationship of reciprocity which is the basis of marriage is not established between men and women, but between men by means of women, who are merely the occasion of this relationship.”* Marriage, is portrayed as an institution which is a necessity and the fulfillment of womanhood and also a commodity used to fulfill a man’s existence. This statement is particularly interesting by the cultures that surround us. It is a fact known that sometimes woman is no longer passed from one clan to another through marriage: she is sometimes abducted from the group she is born into and annexed to her husband’s; he buys her like a head of cattle or a slave, he imposes his domestic divinities on her: and the children she conceives belong to her spouse’s family, her only identity is define by her being married to her husband.

2. Vanleeng’s daughter

This is a folktale about a very beautiful girl who was the daughter of Vanleeng .The story goes like this:

Two brothers wanted to woo Vanleeng’s daughter and marry her after they heard how beautiful she was. The elder brother went out first to woo her, on his way he met a snake and sparrow who were trapped and a grandpa and grandson who needed his help but the eldest brother did not help him. On his way he met Vanleeng’s daughter but he did not know that she was Vanleeng’s daughter, she was carrying some firewoods in a basket and asked him to get her a walking stick, he gaver gave a walking stick however it was a very crooked one. When the elder brother reached Vanleeng’s house, she asked the man to rest in the guest room without serving any meal or drinks, at dusk Vanleeng returned from farming and immediately enquired to his daughter and whether she entertained him she lied to him by replying positively. The next morning the elder brother was put to many tests but failed.

The younger brother set out to woo Vanleeng’s daughter and met the animals snake and sparrow who were trapped , the grandpa and grandson and help them and also gave the best walking stick possible to Vanleeng’s daughter who was carrying firewoods. When the younger brother reached Vanleeng’s place the girl who was already impressed with him fed him and told the answers to the tests her father was going to put him to. Then she resumed her weaving. The next morning Vanleeng asked the guest his intention and the younger brother said he had come to asked for his daughter’s hand

in marriage, he was put to tests and he pass all the tests. The two got married and set out for their home. When they came about half way, Vanleeng's daughter realize she had forgotten her metallic comb and oil casket, her husband told her to sit on the top branch of a tree and not talk at all and not to let a wild human Tawmi know that she was there. However, Tawmi tricked Vanleeng's daughter to come down and killed her. Tawmi then put on all the dresses of Vanleeng's daughter, however the husband was suspicious of her appearance but Tawmi managed to convince him. When they reached home, Tawmi disguise as Vanleeng's daughter urinated and only blood was coming out of her urine that was the blood of Vanleeng's daughter. The same night a gourd sprang out from the place Tawmi urinated blood. The gourd grew rapidly and exceedingly wide, covering the entire house in the matter of one night. There were many gourds, one of the gourds had a very lengthy arm that was crooked. Thangte (name of the younger brother) plucked out the gourd and kept it near the bed. Both Thangte and Tawmi used to go to their farms quite far away from their home. Whenever they were away, leaving the house empty, the house was kept clean and food was cooked. It happened many times, he found out that Vanleeng's daughter was coming out from the gourd that he hang near the bed and started sweeping and cooking. Thangte sprang and caught her, Thangte killed Tawmi when she came back from the farm rushed towards them to tear and eat them, but Thangte lashed out his sword and cut off her head. From the body grew up a broad based banana like plant called Saisuang and the head became a very big rock. Thangte cautioned his wife not to cut the leave nor use the rock for drying clothes. However, the wife wanted to prepare lunch packets for some guest, she went and cut the Saisuang leaves, the Saisuang caught her and devoured her. When Thangte knew it he peeled off the Saisuang and split open it and rescued his wife, one day during rainy season, clothes were so wet and damp that the wife went to spread them on the rock, the rock caught her and devoured her and she died, this time Thangte could not save his wife.

Discussion: From the above folktale one can draw the conclusion that the girl was beautiful so she had suitors who wanted to marry her , it does not talk about her other personality traits only that of physical beauty. Physical characteristics and differentiating male and female stereotypes according to such physical characteristics are components that form the general association of what is 'male' and what is 'female'. Deaux and Lewis in their 1984 argued that it is a tendency of people to view men and women as differing more in physical features than in psychological characteristics. Such analysis have also formed the accepted article "Structure of gender stereotypes: Interrelationships among components and gender label" norm of physical appearance which in turn affected judgments about the other components more strongly than information about traits, behaviors, or occupations influenced judgments about appearance. Emphasizing on the

importance of beauty or such a necessity for a woman to be beautiful in order to charm a masculine heart is nothing but the concept of all cultures across societies. Their beauty is often asked in most cultures in fairytales folktales or oral folklores. Beauvoir says that, "It is thus understandable that attention to her physical appearance can become a real obsession for the little girl; princesses or shepherds, one must always be pretty to conquer love and happiness; ugliness is cruelly associated with meanness, and when one sees the misfortunes that befall ugly girls, one does not know if it is their crimes or their disgrace that destiny punishes. Young beauties promised a glorious future often start out in the role of victim."

The other point of contention is the fact that certain pre-defined tasks were expected of the female gender in the society, for example, Vanleeng's daughter was carrying firewood, she was expected to entertain guests, she was weaving till her parents returned home. All these instances reflect stereotypical expectations from women. Such defined gender roles, affecting access to factors like education, experience, time and financial support, have had their influence on the ways in which men and women could participate in literature as writers, readers, critics, and arguably even as characters. Therefore, gendered approaches to literature such as the folklore of the marginalized societies have often sought to either create or ascertain the stereotypical image of women in a particular culture.

Vanleeng's daughter forgot to take her metallic comb and oil casket (underlying the fact that she likes to beautify herself, she could be shown to forget other things like books but was not). Such statements again show that there are indeed gender stereotypical tasks assigned to the male and the female gender. The female body is an object which is to be beautified or glamourized in order to reflect the gender's femininity and beauty.

The fact that her husband offered to bring her the things, while asking her to sit on top branch of the tree while he goes to get her things and not talk to Tawmi, she disobeyed. Her disobedience here is not the reason of misfortune but rather her disobedience to her husband which is highlighted as the reason for her misfortune. This reflects the nature of women who are prone to not listen to their husbands because of which misfortune befalls on them. Such precarious conclusions assigned to one's misfortune is again the gendered perspective made prominent through such indigenous tales and folklore but also a product of cultural conceptions.

Khasi Folktales

1. Ka Pahsyntiew

Hundreds of years ago there was a cave named Marai Cave. Near this cave stood a downright rock. Young cowherds would gather there, merrymaking all around, playing

on their flutes while their cows would graze on grasses. The rock was so straight and high that they assumed it must have never been touched by human feet as it was impossible to reach it.

One day when the young cowherds gathered as usual like any other day, they were surprised to see a very beautiful girl sitting on top of that rock looking down at them wistfully. All of them got frightened and ran back to their villages leaving the cows grazing by themselves. The name of the village was Myllem. After the news spread among the villagers, they held a meeting to discuss among themselves as what to do about the girl who was seen by the young cowherds. To see for themselves if it was an illusion or a human being the villagers decided to walk there. Led by the cowherds they really saw an exquisitely beautiful girl sitting on the rock.

The clothes and apparels she was wearing seemed to be much more beautiful, of better quality and expensive than theirs. Hence they assumed she must belong to a very rich family. They were so much in awe of her beauty that they forgot to blink their eyes. But the villagers did not know how to bring her down from such height? It was not possible for them to climb so high a rock as that. They tried to talk to her but she did not utter a word. They waved their hands indicating her to climb down, she did not make a move. The villagers found themselves confused.

Among the people a man called U Myllem Ngap known for his wisdom and valor thought that as she was not responding because she was frightened. He then collected some bamboos and joined them into a pole adequately long so that it can reach her. He beckoned at her to take hold of it so that she could climb down, but she kept sitting on.

Then U Myllem Ngap noticed a cluster of flowers blooming near the cave. To let the girl see the flowers U Myllem Ngap immediately fastened the flowers to the end of the pole and held it up so that the girl could see it. She uttered a cry of delight seeing the flowers and held out her hands to take them. As soon as the girl held out her hands to take them U Myllem Ngap immediately lowered the pole and the girl moved towards it. The pole was again lowered and she moved closer. Slowly and slowly the pole was lowered and the girl kept trying to take the flowers, this process was watched by the people with bated breaths and finally the girl was brought down on ground immediately.

U Myllem Ngap took up her responsibility and named her Pahsyntiew which means 'fascinated by flowers'. No one knew about her origins. Following everyone's consent Ngap brought her up as his own daughter. Likewise she accepted and respected him as her own family.

Ka Pahsyntiew grew up into a woman of mesmerizing beauty. She excelled with her unique intelligence and wisdom. She took a leading place in the Khasi dance and all the merrymaking. She taught the other girls how to dance and sing. Ka Pahsyntiew initiated the Virgins Dance in the Khasi Hills. Even to settle matters pertaining to solving

disputes of the village her foster father consulted her. When the people realized she was more intelligent and wise than their rulers they made her Ka Syiem or their queen. When she reached the marriageable age Ngap married her off to a man of wisdom and prowess. She gave birth to many noble sons and daughters.

After the children grew up one fine day she called them together and revealed to them who she actually was. That she was the daughter of U Shillong and to live among mankind she came with her father's permission and that time had arrived for her to go back to her actual home.

Few days later Ka Pahsyntiew walked in the direction of Cave of Marai. No one accompanied her for all knew who she was and that it was time for her to return. In the Khasi Hills her descendents had two families of Khasi Chiefs or Syiems. These two are known as Kharim and Mylliem. Two provinces of these names are still there.

Discussion

The Khasi people in the state of Meghalaya, Northeast India, observe matrilineal customs. Among the Khasis, descent is traced through the female line. Women hold an esteemed status of the persons who continue lineages and promote the welfare of their families and clans. This folktale legend portrays Khasi outlooks on female generative power, wifehood/motherhood, and women's vital roles in the formation of a secured and wholesome society. Children take their mother's last name, daughters ensure the continuity of the clan. Daughters have the liberty to live in their ancestral home or move out, except for the youngest daughter (called *ka khadduh*), who is the custodian of the property. Even after her marriage, she never leaves home. She looks after her parents and eventually becomes the head of the household after her mother's death.

The folktale of Ka Pahsyntiew produces a legend that extols female generative power and virtues when told and received in Khasi matrilineal society. However, even when the female protagonist is a highly intelligent and a capable female taking the pivotal role of teaching, training and consultative roles, she was still bounded by the institution of marriage when she attained a particular age. This legendary folktale represents a strong female character but nevertheless continues to subjugate the role of a woman eventually to marriage. In the article "*Made for Man*": *Marriage as Subjugation in American Women's Literature*, Taylor la Carriere writes that the extreme comparison of marriage to enslavement relies upon the assessment of gender roles within the Victorian society during the 19th century too. The theme of marriage as the subjugation of women endures throughout literature in the last few centuries till date.⁶ Many canonical literary representations of women up until the nineteenth century, particularly that of the Victorian era and also folklore of many cultures present an extreme binaries that lacked nuance, denied female agency and desire, offered up moral judgments and socializing

warning about female behavior, and, as Virginia Woolf points out, lied, because women up until the nineteenth century women were “almost without exception [...] shown in their relation to men” which confines them to a limited range of roles that are inevitably either domestic or sexual.⁷

2. *What makes the Eclipse*

Long time ago, a beautiful female child was born to a family, the parents named her Ka Nam, and they lived in a village on the borders of one of the great Khasi forests. Ka Nam was a very beautiful child and fearing that some strangers passing by would kidnap or cast an “evil eye” on her, Ka Nam mother decided to bring her up in as much secrecy as their circumstances would permit them. However Ka Nam father did not want to bring up their child in isolation and in secrecy so he told his wife not to have any insane ideas, but to bring up the child normally like how other people bring up their children and taught her to do work so that she may be of use in the coming future. So Ka Nam was brought up like any other child and was taught to work so that she can make herself of use.

One day when Ka Nam was going to draw water from the well, a tiger suddenly appeared and carried her away to his den. She was shaking with fear as she knew that tigers were one of the most cruelest of all beasts and that it would eat her. The tiger's name was U Khla, and his only purpose in carrying off Ka Nam was to have her for his meal, however when the tiger looked at her it saw how young and small she was and that she will not be enough for one full meal so he decided to keep her in his den, started feeding her well so that she will grow up big and then he would eat her.

Ka Nam was well looked after by the tiger who would feed her delicious food very well which her parents could never afford because they could not afford it as the tiger was very good to her she never doubted the tiger's intentions. As she grew older and older and more and more beautiful she began to feel comfortable and at ease like she was before with her parents. The tiger was only waiting his chance to eat her as a full meal, and when he saw that she had grown up and would be enough for one full meal he was ready to kill her, as this was the moment he was waiting to eat the beautiful maiden whom he had fed delicious food and looked after very well. One day, when the tiger was pacing up and down in his den, he began to talk to himself that now as the girl is all grown up and would suffice for one full meal, it was now time to kill her and he wanted to invite his fellow tigers so that after killing her they would feast upon her. When the tiger was talking to himself about his plan it so happened that a little mouse who was near the den at that time overheard the tiger talking to himself. She felt very sad and sorry for the maiden, the mouse knew that she was all alone and had no friends was entirely at the mercy of the tiger who was ready to kill her for food and eat her with his

fellow tigers; so feeling bad for the maiden , the little mouse went and told the maiden about the tiger true and bad intentions that she was going to be killed and eaten on the following day. Ka Nam was in terrified ,helpless, afraid and cried very bitterly. She begged the mouse to help her to escape form the tiger's den , the mouse had a good heart and helped Ka Nam by whatever she could to help her escape the clutches of the tiger.

The mouse told the Ka Nam about the tiger's bad intentions and asked her to go out of the den and search for the cave of the magician, U Hynroh, the Giant Toad, to whom the realm was under tribute. He was an ill tempered and demanding monster whom every one would try to avoid and stay away from, and were afraid of , Ka Nam would have been afraid to approach him under ordinary conditions, but the danger which was facing her her (of the tiger intention to eat her) gave her courage to approach and with the help of the mouse she went to the toad's cave.]When he saw her and was struck by how fair and beautiful she was, and when he also learned that she had under the captive of his old nemesis the tiger, he agreed to give her his protection; however he did this by clothing her in a toad skin, warning her not to shed or come out of the toad skin in the presence of others . This was a cunning way for the magician to keep the maiden as his slave and as his captive.

When the mouse came to know that beautiful maiden had been transformed into the likeness of a hideous toad she became very sad and felt sorry that she had sent her to ask for help and protection of U Hynroh, for the mouse knew that as long as the maiden remained in the forest she would be held captive and would be living with the toads and to be their slave . So she decided to help the maiden by taking her secretly and brought her to a forest which had a magic tree, she told the maiden that she will be transported in to the sky by climbing the magic tree and speaking magic words , where she would be safe from any danger. So, Ka Nam climbed into the magic tree and spoke the magic words taught her by the mouse: "Grow tall, dear tree, the sky is near, expand and grow." When these magic words was spoken by the maiden the tree began to grow upwards till its branches touched the sky, and then the maiden was transported into the Blue Realm after which the tree immediately went back to its original former size.

Meanwhile back at the tiger's den, the tiger friends had arrived at the den, fierce and hungry for their feast, however when he found that his prey (the girl)had disappeared, his disappointment and anger knew no bounds and it was a very terrible sight to witness. He roar loud threats for vengeance on whoever had aided and helped for the escape of his captive, and his roars were so loud that the animals in the jungle ere terrified. His fellow-tigers also became enraged when they got to know that they had been deprived of their feast, and they turned on U Khla (the tiger) and in their anger ferociously tore him to death.

Meanwhile Ka Nam wandered here and there with no home to go to in the Blue Realm, clothed in the toad skin that the magician had given her and warned not to come out of it in the presence of others. In the Blue Realm every one there lived in palaces and splendour, and they refused to admit the loathsome, ugly venomous-looking toad within their portals, while she, she not forget the of the warning of U Hynroh, the magician, so because of feared she did not remove or come out of the toad skin. Finally she appeared before the palace of Ka Sngi, the Sun, who, ever gracious and tender, took pity on her condition and permitted her to live in a small outhouse near the palace.

On a day when the maiden thought that she was all alone and that no one was looking, she put aside her covering of toad skin and sat to relax for a while in her small room. She was accidentally seen by the son of Ka Sngi, a noble youth. He was surprised beyond words to find a maiden so beautiful hiding herself under a hideous toad skin and living in his mother's outhouse, and he started to think what an evil spell could have caused her to take the help of such a hideous covering. Her beauty mesmerised him and he fell deeply in love with her. He quickly made his strange discovery about the beautiful girl known to his mother Ka Sngi, and earnestly asked his mother her to keep the maiden without delay in the palace and to let him marry her and become his wife. Ka Sngi, was an experienced and wise lady and wanted to wait before accepting the request of her young and impetuous son until she herself was convinced whether a maiden of such beauty spoken by her son did actually lived under the covering of the toad skin or if her son was put under an evil spell because of which he thought he saw what he told his mother.

Ka Sngi decided to go herself, check and watch the movements of the toad in the outhouse, and indeed as her son has described, she saw the the maiden uncovered from the toad's skin, and was astonished at her beauty and pleasing appearance. But she did not want her son to rush into marriage with the maiden, so she gave him a command that he should not go anywhere near or converse with the maiden until the toad skin had been destroyed and the evil spell upon her broken. Ka Sngi set herself to watch the movements of the toad once again, and her vigilance and patience was rewarded when she discovered that Ka Nam was asleep and the toad skin was kept aside. Ka Sngi quietly seized the toad skin and burned it to ashes. After the toad skin was burned the maiden appeared in her own natural form, she was released and free from the spell of the Giant Toad and lived very happily as the wife of Ka Sngi's son.

T U Hynroh and Ka Sngi were enemies and feuding because Ka Sngi refused to pay him tribute, and when he came to know that she had succeeded in destroying the magic (toad) skin in which he had wrapped the maiden, his anger was kindled against Ka Sngi, and he climbed up to the Blue Realm to kill her. However Ka Sngi bravely stood up against him, and a fierce struggle took place between the two which was witnessed by

the whole universe. When mankind saw the conflict they became silent, subdued with apprehension and worried that the cruel monster should conquer their benefactress. They uttered loud cries and began to beat mournfully on their drums till the world was full of sound and clamor.

Like all bullies, U Hynroh was a real coward at heart, and when he heard the noise of drums and shouting on the earth, his heart was filled with him with fear, for he thought it was the sound of an advancing army coming for battle and he was terrified shuddered with fear. He quickly released his hold upon Ka Sngi and retreated with all speed from the Blue Realm. Thus mankind were the unconscious deliverers of their noble benefactress from the hand of her cruel oppressor.

To this day the Khasis believe that U Hynroh continues to make periodical attacks on the sun, and in many countries people call these attacks “Eclipses,” but the Ancient Khasis, who saw the great conflict, knew it to be the Giant Toad, the Great Cannibal, trying to devour Ka Sngi. He endeavors to launch his attacks when the death of some great personality in the world is impending, hoping to catch mankind to be too preoccupied to come to the rescue. Throughout the whole of Khasi-land to this day it is the custom to beat drums and to raise a loud din to avoid any calamity and misfortune whenever there is an eclipse.

Discussion: In this folktale, the female protagonist Ka Nam is yet again represented in the conventions of society as a female who is to be taught to work and make herself ‘useful’ for marriage, as the father of the protagonist suggests. Although the story portrays the importance of strong female characters through the figure of Ka Sngi, at the same time, it continues to depict that the male characters consider themselves as the custodian of a ‘beautiful’ delicate being as in the case of the tiger U Khla and the ferocious toad U Hynroh. Similarly, the duties and the societal obligations of Ka Nam were always stressed upon in the entire story instead of her braveness to flee from the clutches of the tiger and the giant toad. Her courage to flee the Blue Realm, is given no emphasis as to what she is eventually to become – that is, a wife. Luma Ibrahim Al-Barazenji in her article: *Women’s Voice And Images In Folk Tales And Fairy Tales* states that during the 1970s, scholars reaffirmed the significance of fairy and folk tales by reevaluating them from romantic point of view. As Karen E. Rowe (1945)⁸ focuses on the role of women and tales in affirming and encouraging concepts like marriage, love, and romance. Rowe points out those lovable figures of these tales present romantic materials of eroticism, happy marriage, and devoting love that affected not only children but also the lives of adults. Rowe also asserts that women in fairy tales began to challenge the mores of their societies and question the romantic ideals. Rowe continues to argue that fairy tales left women in an ambiguous position swaying in loss between romantic ideals and the realities of their cultures: *Today women are caught in dialectic between the*

*cultural status quo and the evolving feminist movement, between a need to preserve values and yet to accommodate changing mores, between romantic fantasies and contemporary realities...But one question remains unresolved: do we have the courageous vision and energy to cultivate a newly fertile ground of psychic and cultural experience from which will grow fairy tales for human beings in the future?*⁹

Cultural Representations

Societies and cultures have been subjected to define roles and identity which are gender specific. Such differences in gender roles and identities then become the very factors representing a particular society to be what they are perceived to be. In the postcolonial representations of cultures, such overemphasis on ‘differences’ are what determines the essentialist impasse of one being different from the other. *“If ‘difference’ is what makes culture visible to observers, then the emphasis on difference has the merit of underscoring specificities that would be muted and ignored otherwise. But an overemphasis on dissimilarities is likely to lead from racial and biographical determinism into an essentialist impasse.”*¹⁰

Hence, culture which encompasses every human action, tradition, custom and existence as a whole, is reflected most unequivocally by literature. The representation of a particular society or societies/ cultures are essentially executed effectively by literatures. Folklore being one of the genres of literature becomes an important catalyst in forming identities and roles be it gendered or not.

As Simone de Beauvoir categorically states in her book -concepts such as ‘culture’, ‘Woman’ or ‘difference’ comes to create a reality that is then ossified into objects of study urgently requiring reading and interpretation if it is to retain its usefulness as a category.

The stories of Lengtonghoih, Vanleeng’s daughter, Ka Pahsyntiew, Ka Nam and many other such stories which is a cultural representation of that particular society becomes markers of the gendered roles and identities and represents the way the society perceives such differences in genders. Literally texts such as folklores/ folktales are essential to interpret, decode and if necessary, de-construct the existing gendered differences. It becomes very important to analyze and read into such gendered differences and the stereotypical representations therein since they represent the culture to the other. It is imperative that such representations are evaluated in order to establish a more non-gendered perspectives in the said culture and in societies. *“The study of literature gives us insight into the mediated process of reading and decoding which central to most of our cultural activities. Literature opens us up to a more complex understanding of difference and ‘marginality.’”*¹¹

In his article ***Objectification: Examples of Female Characters in Selected Traditional Fairy Tales***, Hisham Muhamad Ismail writes that Undoubtedly, the notion

of objectification can be strongly enhanced in patriarchal societies (where many privileges are given to men and all authority and control are collected in the hand of men), women are “identified with their body ... a thing which ... has been regarded as less inherently human than the mind of personality”. So, within these societies, the males look at women according to their bodies regardless of their minds or personalities. In other words, this degrading view of women excludes dealing with her as a body to meet the sexual desires of men, like what can be found in the animal realm.¹²

Conclusion

In this study, folktales from two different societies of northeast India have been analyzed—one that of the Paite society which is a patriarchal form of society and the other, the Khasi society which is a matrilineal one. However, the stories from these two societies are completely not different from each other as in all these tales, many of the female protagonists are conformed to the societal roles of a wife, mother, and ‘beautiful’ maidens whose eventuality lies in becoming wives of a male character and to be rescued and protected by men in these stories. The history of these folklore reveals the male control of the literary folktale canon which results in a whitewashed, paternalistic, pedagogical stories. The Khasi tribe, although a strongly matrilineal society, conforms to such representations of women in their folktales too. The characters of the female protagonists may be represented as empowered women who are brave, strong and capable, however, in times of adversities, it is observed that the male protagonists are sooner or later made to be the ones rescuing them and ultimately positioning the women characters to a life of domesticity. . But, having said that, the existence of such folklore and its availability in texts books as part of literally texts should be dealt with much consideration in terms of gender portrayal and stereotyping of women in the society. The contention here is the ready acceptance of the image of women and representations of women as an object of beauty, domestic, fragile and weak, which stands true to all societies at large.

The folktales are associated with women as they are tales of old mothers and grandmothers. Fairy and folk tales can be devoted to enhance the concept of women’s self-expression because the protagonists of these tales depict powerful female’s personality. Simultaneously, strong feminine characters could be found in real and imaginative tales in that both images reflect the influential voices of women. There should be a serious challenge against the cultural ideals of subordinating women in several such of romantic folktale versions.

Notes

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2. Beauvoir, Simone: *The second sex*. Gallimard, Paris 1949.
3. Ibid. Pg. 351
4. Beauvoir, Simone: *The second sex*. Gallimard, Paris 1949. Pg.68
5. Glick, Peter; Fiske, Susan T.: An ambivalent alliance: Hostile and benevolent sexism as complementary justifications for gender inequality. *American Psychologist*, Vol 56(2), Feb 2001, 109-118.
6. Taylor La Carriere (2022) "Made for Man": Marriage as Subjugation in American Women's Literature, *Women's Studies*, 51:5, 543-559, DOI: 10.1080/00497878.2022.2079127
7. Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. Oxford UP, 2015. Pg. 81
8. Row, E. Karen. *Feminism and Fairy Tales*. Radcliffe College, 1978. Pg. 211
9. Ibid. 223
10. Lionnet, Francois: *Postcolonial Representations- Women, Literature and Identity*. Cornell University Press. London. 1995
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