SABITA

3107-376X (Online)

Journal Homepage: www.sabitajournal.com

Article

Reality through the Looking Glass: The world of Women in Social Perspective of Folktales

Dr. Sampan Chakrabarty
Assistant Professor, Department of Bengali, Banaras Hindu University
Email- sampan@bhu.ac.in

Keywords:
Folktales, women, heroines, villains

ABSTRACT

By taking a range of women characters, this article delves into the world of women as depicted in the folktales to argue that not all women characters subscribe to the conventional notion of being docile and submissive. There are women who despite restrictive gender norms, can be depicted as heroines. These women display intelligence, courage, wit, and moral strength. In many tales, female protagonists overcome obstacles not through physical strength but through cleverness and perseverance. And herein one can find women who challenge the stereotype to chart their own path.

Let us begin with a Bengali quote from the newly written Rupkatha's by one of the prominent feminine writers of 20th century, Nabanita Debsen. She is writing a story book of rupkotha for children and in introduction she writes, "আমার রূপকথায় একটু নারীশক্তির প্রকাশ আছে।রাজা রাজপুত্তুররা আর নায়ক নন, ভুলভ্রান্তি ভরা সাধারণ মানুষ।রানিরা আর রাজকন্যারা আর দুর্বল নন,অসহায় নন, তাঁরাই সক্ষম। বিপন্ন হলে উদ্ধারের ব্যাবস্থা তাঁরা নিজেরাই করে নিতে পারেন। ... নারী পুরুষের সামাজিক অসাম্য ঘোচাতে, নারীর আত্মনির্ভরতার প্রতি সম্মান জাগাতে এই দৃষ্টিভঙ্গি জরুরি"।[1] & she is writing this in 2011,in the context of Woman empowerment, liberty and concept of equality in a society where till date women are fighting for their fundamental rights, fighting for their identity and voice. The medium of voice is undoubtedly, Folktales. Though it is not from oral sources, but from an individual pen. Folktales are not monolithic. Moreover, folktales evolve over time. Contemporary retellings increasingly reinterpret traditional stories through feminist perspectives, highlighting suppressed voices and reimagining women's agency. Women's roles in folktales are shaped by class, caste, ethnicity, and local customs. In some tribal and matrilineal societies, folktales depict women with greater autonomy and authority, challenging dominant patriarchal narratives. This demonstrates that folktales are dynamic social texts, open to reinterpretation and critique. By this, I may come to a basic rule of

Folklore, the world of Folktales is half a way nurtured, maintained prospered and originated from the woman. Woman, are the sky of the world of folklore. Far from being mere fantasy, folktales are deeply embedded in social life, shaping and reflecting the lived experiences of women across generations. So, by examining women in folktales, we gain insight into how societies conceptualize femininity, power, morality, and social order. Understanding these narratives allows us to critically engage with cultural traditions and recognize the enduring influence of storytelling in constructing social realities. From a social perspective, women in folktales reflect the complex realities of gender relations within traditional societies. The same has been passed through orally from generations to newer generations. The subject is huge because you would definitely find woman in the study of folklore, every corner of it. But I shall concentrate on some specific instances of '**how the identity of the woman**' is made through folktales or how **'the woman are represented'** in folktales. The looking glass is reverse both ways. Man, Nature, Animal, woman- we all belong in the same environment and we all make a 'society'. So, in folktales, all of these play a pivotal role engaging each other to create the subject focus- **'Woman in social perspective of Folktales'**.

Obedience and Socialization: Woman as good daughters or bad spoilt - One of the most common representations of women in folktales is that of the daughter. Daughters are often depicted as symbols of purity, obedience, and familial honour. Their behaviour reflects not only on themselves but on their entire household. In many folktales, a daughter's virtue is rewarded with marriage, wealth, or social elevation, while, on the other hand, disobedience leads to punishment or exile. Stories such as Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Beauty, all the nameless princesses, Vasilisa the Beautiful, our very recognized *sukhu-dukhu*, Native African story of *Good Blanche and bad Rose,* numerous worldwide folktales portray young women subjected to have been characterised with pure quality of obedience, moral purity, virtuous positivity and overall marriageability. They face hardship within their natal homes and overcome it. These narratives mirror the limited autonomy of daughters in traditional societies, where their lives are shaped by parental authority and social expectations. The emphasis on patience, endurance, and moral integrity reinforces the ideal of the "good daughter," preparing her for her eventual role as a wife. However, these tales also delicately acknowledge the emotional vulnerability and exploitation of young women, particularly in contexts of step-parental conflict or economic deprivation. The suffering daughter becomes a moral centre of the narrative, evoking sympathy and social critique. These are woman dependent on male heroes for salvation, here, the young and beautiful are passive, asking for completion to be married to a prince and happily living ever after. Not criticizing, but these expressions are not patriarchal, but many a woman's dream indeed. It is the refined world of love care and passionate desires to be the chosen one. We love to believe one day; we shall become *Cinderella* or the *sleeping beauty* and meet our prince living happily ever after.

The quarrelsome womanhood, the little household chorus and the rising hope: Women as Wives- Marriage is a central institution in folktales, and women's identities are often defined through their roles as wives. Folktales reflect the patriarchal structures of traditional societies, where marriage is less a personal choice and more a social obligation. The "ideal wife" is portrayed as loyal, submissive, hardworking, and self-sacrificing. In the process of making the household happy and clean, the woman either can become irritated or become quiet, through the hassle-Bassel. Here, many an example can be quoted for reference. I am

sharing two instances where the wives are furious and hopeless about their regular earning to run a typical household and leads a very important message to us; impoverished people cannot write song of wealthiness. I quote Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar from *Thakurma'r Jhuli*- 'চোখ টানিয়া মুখ বাঁকাইয়া – তিন ঝাকনা ভিরকুটি, সুখুর মা বলিল, - "বালাই! পরের কড়ির ভাগ-বাঁটরী – তার কপালে খ্যাংরা মারি! তেমন পোদ্দারি সুখুর মা করে না! ছাই নাতা আগর বাগর তোরাই নিয়া ধুইয়া খা" ।[2] 'ব্রাহ্মণীটি যে, -রণচন্ডী-! - নথের ঝাঁকিতে নাক ছেঁড়ে । - মাথার চুলে তৈল নাই, গা গতরে খৈল নাই, 'নিত্য ভিক্ষা তনু রক্ষা' তার ওপর বামুনের আবার চাটাল চাটাল কথা। ... কুলো মুলো ফেলিয়া খ্যাংরা নিয়া ব্রাহ্মণী গর্জে উঠিল, "হ্যাঁ পিঠে করতেই বসেছি! চাল বাড়ন্ত হাঁড়ি খট খট – এক কড়ার মুরদ নাই পিটা- খেকোর পুত পিটা খাবে! – বেরো আমার বাড়ি থেকে!"[3] What more realistic examples can be given in support of utmost poverty and need of earnings to run a household like the *laksmis* portrayed in that particular brahmani's dream when she came to his in-law's home! Wives become gruesome, unpopular and old, as they are thrown into the grilling real world from the fairytales!! Many folktales emphasize a woman's ability to endure suffering within marriage—whether through trials imposed by fate, hostile in-laws, or cruel husbands. Such narratives normalize female suffering as a social virtue, reinforcing the expectation that women should prioritize familial harmony over personal happiness. The *Bratakaths* of pan-Indian folklore wonderfully reflects the same dynamic environment. Suchandra Bhattacharya, in her book 'ষাইটোরী মাও', comments, 'সংসারে প্রতিদিন প্রতিমুহূর্তে অশুভশক্তির সঙ্গে যুদ্ধ করে নারীকে কল্যাণী হতে হলে পুরুষের চেয়ে উদ্যোগী হবার জন্য তৈরি থাকতে হয়। ব্রত তারই প্রথম পাঠ'।[4] Brata, in general, focus on karma or the regular household duties. It is to be noted that in folk religion both the God and Godesses are many, not one. They, by virtue, can be good or bad both. That is the reason behind the belief of magical instances practised in the folktales or 'katha's' in brata. You rub a ring, a demon comes, regular utensils like pots and pans and '*chulla*' and the '*shilpatta*' may become magical objects when you paint them with the '*alpana*', the mirror can change you in a fairy or princess, you play the 'bin' and can mesmerise a snake, you put a clay horse or clay doll to the 'Than' and serve the purpose to worship wealth to be given as sacrifice. Behind the whole belief system of *bratakathas*, mostly cherished by woman only, devours the voice of hope. The *bratas* are for all woman, '*sadhabar brata*' '*bidhobar brata*', '*kumari meyer broto*' and '*sakal narir broto*'. It's an entertainment through ritual with performance, narratives, feast and rites. Non shastriya bratas are named as 'anyobroto' with the woman practising it called 'bratini'.it examine woman's patience. It conveys woman's agony and victory over their wishes unfulfilled. In *senjuti brata* 52 items of mere household things are to be drawn as *alpana*. It covers the Ashwath Tree and the broomstick, where the Ashwath tree, as symbol of old and wise listens to the desire of the *bratini*, 'অশ্বথ তলায় বাস করি/ সতীন কেটে আলতা পরি' অথবা 'খাংরা খ্যাংরা খ্যাংরা/ সতীনকে ঝেটিয়ে করব দিশেহারা'।[5] also there shall be prize after the anxieties and scorching hardships where Laksmi would fulfil her hope of good health and wellbeing. The pot of rice shall make the foam of gold. Liquid money would save the *bratini's* everyday life. These are not resistance narratives, but the social happiness and physical and mental wellbeing are preserved through the participation of the collective woman fraternity of a standard society.

Mothers and Maternal Authority: the alternative power dynamics of the eternal relationship of mother and child - Motherhood is one of the most revered roles assigned to women in folktales. Mothers are often portrayed as nurturing, protective, and morally

upright. The "good mother" embodies sacrifice and unconditional love, reinforcing the social expectation that women's primary fulfilment lies in care giving. Equally, the figure of the wicked stepmother is one of the most persistent negative archetypes in tales. She is portrayed as jealous, cruel, and manipulative, particularly toward stepchildren. This dichotomy between the biological mother and the stepmother reflects deep-rooted social tensions surrounding inheritance, lineage, and resource distribution in extended family systems. From a social perspective, the demonization of stepmothers reveals anxieties about women who do not conform to idealized maternal roles. It also exposes the fragile position of women within patriarchal family structures, where their worth is often tied to biological reproduction. The concept of *'Fairy Godmother'* in European folktales are benevolent spirits helping the young daughters and in Asian contexts, all are the representations of the mother who is caregiver and supportive. Thus, in the process the Women in folktales often function as symbols rather than realistic individuals or to be precise, become the figure to worship, as *'Devi's'*. They may represent fertility, land, prosperity, danger, or moral order. Goddess figure, in many cultures embody both nurturing and destructive aspects, reflecting the dual perception of women as life-givers and potential threats. The association of women with nature—forests, rivers, seasons—reinforces traditional gender symbolism while also granting women cosmic significance. These symbolic roles elevate women beyond social constraints, positioning them as essential to cultural and spiritual continuity. In the *Mising* tribe of Northeast India, women are depicted with agency and resilience. Folktales highlight women's roles in sustaining nature and community, often equating female identity with ecological power. One of the significant questions behind the formation of Myths, was - "পৃথিবী জুড়ে এই মাতৃকা কেন্দ্রিক কাল্ট প্রাক ঐতিহাসিক আদিম কাল থেকেই উদ্ভুত, বিকশিত এবং বিস্তৃত হল কেন? কৃষি এবং উর্বরতা সাধনার পত্তন হবার বহু হাজার বছর আগেই কোন অনিবার্য কারণে মানুষ মাতৃকা উপাসক হয়ে উঠল?"[6] Because they believed woman or the Earth as their mother and behind the belief worked two reasons. First is related with the agriculture and second is with the fertility and productivity of woman. The mothers can produce food and give birth to newer generations. Woman, in social context, thus became myth.

When we cannot control a woman, we name her *Rakshashi, Daini:* Women as Villains whom we Fear -Folktales frequently portray women as antagonists. witches, sorceresses, seductresses. Contrastingly, women also appear as witches, sorceresses, or goddesses, embodying fearsome independence. Such figures symbolize anxieties about female autonomy and sexuality. The witch archetype, common in European, African, and Asian folktales, symbolizes the fear of women who exist outside male authority—widows, healers, or elderly women living alone. Their association with magic and danger reflects historical suspicion toward women who possessed knowledge or independence. Similarly, the femme fatale figure embodies anxiety around female sexuality. Women who actively desire or manipulate men are often punished, reinforcing moral codes that regulate female behaviour. Let me quote one story collected by Verrier Elwin from *Agaria* communities of *Madhyapradesh* at about time published in 1945.Witchcraft, which has a severe connection with fertility of a woman determines the choice of the society to label a woman as *Daini,* if she is non-productive. The woman shall be tagged as practising devastating misconduct of *Daini* where she can use black magic with intensions to seduce or abuse young men or other fertile woman and their babies.

Similarly, *rakshasi rani* is very ambitious. She lives in *rajpuri* and aspires to be the next queen. *Rakshashi rani* gradually overpowers the king and banish the only heir to her mother's kingdom. She tries to get the throne by hook or by crook until the 'legitimate' prince takes control over the situation and re-establishes 'order'. The *rakshashi rani* remains the demonic equivalent to a 'fallen woman', remains the representative of a fear-psychosis of how woman misuse power. In *'Nilkamal-lalkamal'* the *rakshasi rani* had a disturbing desire for the flesh of her step son *kusum*, she also devours her own son, *ajit*. In '*Dalim kumar'*, a treacherous deceitful *rakshashi rani* disguises herself as a beautiful young woman and marries the king whose throne she wanted. In *'sonar kathi rupar kathi'*, she consumes all the three friends of *rajputra*, but somehow the *rajputra* escaped. In all these tales we can find the cannibalistic old woman as *aaima*, the motherly figure to the *rakshasi rani*, representing the rakshashi society. However, all these kinds of stories where the woman is more powerful, ambitious and sexually independent, the socio-normative beliefs and customs set by the patriarchal authority marks them as malevolent, harmful and to be defeated. Because it challenges the patriarchal norms. Their negative portrayal reflects societal fear of uncontrolled female power.

It is, in many a note believed that folktales are binary in character shaping. They are either good or bad. Definitely the portrayal of woman in folktales shall fall in the same category. It is no doubt to comment that folktales are not always fairylike, they are cruel, vindictive and negative in reality. The range of agony, rage, jealousy among woman community also play a big role in folktales. But there are always exceptions & let's conclude with those women, standing apart from the binary line. That are the **woman as heroines or the victorious -** Despite restrictive gender norms, folktales also contain powerful representations of women as heroines. These women display intelligence, courage, wit, and moral strength. In many tales, female protagonists overcome obstacles not through physical strength but through cleverness and perseverance. Examples include women who solve riddles, outwit tyrants, or rescue their families from danger. In South Asian folktales, women often act as moral guides or problem-solvers, influencing male authoritative figures. These stories suggest an undercurrent of resistance, acknowledging women's capabilities even within patriarchal frameworks. From a social perspective, such heroines provide alternative models of femininity—ones that emphasize agency and moral authority rather than passive obedience. We can remember *Kiranmala*, who fought against all odds to protect her brothers. We can remember the witty young daughter, who answered all the problem riddles asked to her father by the zamindar. We can remember number of folktales from the Soviet world where woman was equally capable of men. *Vasilisa, Anayit, Jarniar* and many more. They are the 'Ideal Idol's' among the vibrant family of folktales. The answer to every disparity ever faced. 'কিরণমালা সেই ইচ্ছাপূরণের নারী, যার আসার প্রতিক্ষা করেছে বাংলার কথক মহিলামহল, -হয়ত পুরুষ সমাজও'।[7]

1. দেবসেন, নবনীতা। রূপকথার গল্প। গুয়াহাটি, আসাম: মধুরিমা বুকস। ১৪৩০-৩১। পৃ. ভূমিকা।
2. মিত্র মজুমদার, দক্ষিনারঞ্জন। ঠাকুরমার ঝুলি। কলকাতা: মিত্র ও ঘোষ পাবলিশার্স। সপ্তত্রিংশৎ সংস্করণ, ১৪০০। পৃ. ২৩১।
3. তদেব। পৃ. ২৩৬।
4. ভট্টাচার্য, সুচন্দ্রা। ষাইটোরী মাও। কলকাতা: আনন্দ পাবলিশার্স। জানুয়ারি, ২০১১। পৃ. ১০।
5. মজুমদার, আশুতোষ। মেয়েদের ব্রতকথা। কলকাতা: দেব সাহিত্য কুটির। আগস্ট, ২০০৫। পৃ. ২৩।

6. সেনগুপ্ত, পল্লব। পূজা পার্বণের উৎসকথা। কলকাতা: পুস্তক বিপনি। পরিবর্ধিত ও পরিমার্জিত সংস্করণ, জানুয়ারি, ২০২০। পৃ. ৪৬।
7. দেব পাল, ঈশা। নারী ও ঈশ্বরী। কলকাতা: খসড়া খাতা। আশ্বিন, ১৪২৭। পৃ. ৪০।

References

Propp, V. *Morphology of the Folktale*. Austin: University of Texas Press. 1968.
Dundes, A. *Interpreting Folklore*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 1984.
Bascom, W. "Four Functions of Folklore." *Journal of American Folklore, 67 (266)*. 1954. pp. 333–349.
Bottigheimer, R. B. *Grimms' Bad Girls and Bold Boys: The Moral and Social Vision of the Tales*. New Haven: Yale University Press. 1987.
Tatar, M. *Off with Their Heads! Fairy Tales and the Culture of Childhood*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1992.
Warner, M. *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers*. London: Vintage. 1994.
Haase, D. *Fairy Tales and Feminism: New Approaches*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press. 2004.
Ortner, S. B. "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?" *Feminist Studies, 1(2)*. 1974. pp. 5–31.
Douglas, M. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. London: Routledge. 1966.
Ramanujan, A. K. *Folktales from India: A Selection of Oral Tales*. 1991.
Blackburn, S. H., & Ramanujan, A. K. *Another Harmony: New Essays on the Folklore of India*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 1986.
Tharu, S., & Lalita, K. *Women Writing in India, Vol. 1*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. 1991.
Chaudhuri, S. *Feminism in Indian Folklore*. New Delhi: Rawat Publications. 2010.
Ong, W. J. *Orality and Literacy*. London: Routledge. 1982.
Goody, J. *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1977.
Narayan, K. *Monday's Not Coming: Everyday Stories of Women in Rural India*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1997.
Shulman, D. *The King and the Clown in South Indian Myth and Poetry*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1993.