

Folktales as a Mirror of Biate Women's Image and Identity

Priskili Nampui

Assistant Professor, Department of History,
Dhakuakhana College (Autonomous), Dhakuakhana

Email- prisznampui@gmail.com

Abstract:

Folktales are popular stories that were passed on in spoken form from one generation to another where the author is usually unknown. They are often used as teaching tool and entertainment for children by acquainting the community's old traditions and culture. They constitute a folklore genre that comprises of fables, fairy tales, old legends, myths and even urban legends. Folktales have both a function and a purpose. They are often employed to share a common history to reinforce cultural values or highlight important traditions. But the Biate folktales exhibit the unremitting use of gender bias approach. Women took the major role in transmitting the old tradition through the recitation of folktales to the younger generation in the modern times. This research attempts to analyze the gender and power relations and struggle within the small patriarchal Biate society of North-East India through the folktales. The findings will show how women have been subjected to objectification. The results contemplate the patriarchal ideology remaining deeply rooted from the folktales. The folktales show that women even in imagination of the Biate community occupy inferior position than the men holding on to the patriarchal norms. The basis of data collection will be historical analysis and observation. Primary data as well as secondary sources will be consulted for this study.

Keywords: women, folktales, gender, community, patriarchy.

Introduction:

The existence of folktales in the community can be described as an ethnographic description of that particular community through its stories or tales. It describes in its own ways its value and overview (Andalas, 2018; Aristama et al., 2020; Sulistyorini & Andalas, 2017). Throughout the world, folktale is used as a medium of entertainment as well as a tool in imparting knowledge by parents to their children. Thus in understanding the folktales of the Biate community, the actual community life and views can be better understood. The Biate folktale is accused of being gender bias where male and female characters are depicted differently. Here the men are portrayed as independent, strong, wise and superior while the women as opposite. Few folktales cited below would give a clear picture of the community's views and norms. On the other hand, folktales found in Saudi Arabia presents women as brave and intelligent (Al-Khalaf, 2019). C. Khongla (2008) traces the long journey of India for the success of the National Commission for Women, but the Biate community took a very long time to realize the development of the community depends upon the development of its women folks. Till the Fourth World Conference in 1995, the Biate women are found to be following the old patriarchal norms. B. Pakem (1980) exposed the trend of blending both

traditional and modern political institutions leading to the formation of a diarchical political institution of the Biates, but discussion on women was avoided. C. von Furer-Haimendorf (1982) carried a study on several tribes of India pointing out their disrupted traditional life after the invasion of their habitat by the new technologically advanced civilization which remained incompatible in many aspects with the basic orientations of the indigenous culture. The patriarchal point of view in folktales has deep roots that eventually led to the accepted norms of the contemporary period. Studies on gender issues in folktale have been done in various regions of the world but study on Biata women and its folktales has never been carried out. Thus it is necessary to study and do research work on those unsung tales of the Biata folktales to understand the social and cultural problems imposed by the patriarchal ideology. In view of the statement, the main aim of the study is to understand how women are depicted in the Biata folktales. The study makes a novel attempt to investigate the Biata women's status and position through the folktales. Furthermore this paper will discourse in understanding the relationship between the gender and also examine the gender relation in the Biata folktales to understand the subordination of women.

Literature Review:

Manorama Sharma (2017) provides a clear understanding to the concept of gender and the question of writing women's history through use of folklores, oral tradition, oral history, and vernacular literature to create alternative narratives. Nivedita Menon (2012) puts an allusion to patriarchy's subjugation of women while Gerda Lerner (1986) explains the concept of patriarchy as cultural construct and traced the roots of patriarchal dominance. Economic interdependency is one main factor that the egalitarian societies created the patriarchal society. Meeta Deka (2013) traces the portrayal of women in myths, legends and historical writings that led to the growth of subsequent growth of consciousness through changes in social and economy. Desmond L. Kharmawphlang's attempt on cultural conservation through collection of various Khasi tales helps in formulating a theoretical position and assessing the significance of folklores of Northeast India in general which is dependent on the approach of inspiring professional appraisal of the immanent cultural materials. Ramdina Lalsim (1995) only glorifies Lamira the legendary hero of the Biates but mention of his consort and female family members have been avoided by the author clearly indicating the denial of women's role and contribution in the making of history of the Biates. Several popular folklores along with the famous fables of Sura find mention in the books of Biata authors but women have been given the consort status or position inferior to that of men.

Methodology:

Since not much work has been done to document the knowledge of folktales, a survey was adopted for its study. This study is based on a qualitative method along with radical feminism. Information was obtained through semi structured interview from the community members. The interview for the study comprised of samples including both men and women of the concerned Biata community of Fiangpui, Sangbar and Thingdol of selected villages of Dima Hasao district of Assam based on population density, location accessibility etc. A cluster sampling on division of gender was adopted for the selection of the respondents with a

structured questionnaire to gather the data required to achieve the objective of the study. Thereafter a random sample from each cluster with a total of 115 inhabitants selected were interviewed, 85 were female and 30 male. The study is largely based on the application of ethnographic techniques like participant observation, interviews and surveys for a deeper understanding and detailed description. As far as methodology is concerned, historical analysis, observation and interview method has been adopted. The literature available reflects that no proper research has been done on the women as well as folktales. The main sources of research data are the Biate folktales namely *Fapite*, *Sorlaili nen Parual Sarika hei*, *Mairangkoki neh Supinteli* etc. which have been selected for a vivid picture of women as perceived by the society. And these folktales had been accessed from the documentation of the folktales through secondary sources of books by few Biate authors for documentation and preservation. For this a probe into the intricacies of radical feminism is made first and then the selected Biate community women are analyzed for understanding their position through the folktales.

Results and Discussion:

The existence of women's history has been obscured and neglected by patriarchal thought, a fact which has significantly affected the psychology of both men and women. Women's history has already presented a challenge to some basic assumptions that historians make. Such a culture of history writing would include not only the separate occupations, status, experiences and rituals of women but also their consciousness which internalizes the patriarchal social male values. Men and women also differ in the way they were socialized and in the roles assigned to them. It is under the patriarchal hegemony in thought, values, institutions and resources that women have to struggle to form their own status and position. Lerner defines 'gender' as 'the cultural definition of behaviour defined as appropriate to the sexes in a given society at a given time. Gender differences are found in almost all societies at all times though the type of gender differences may differ from society to society and from time to time.

Biate folktales reveal many facets of women in the past. They acquaint the community with old traditions and culture and constitute a folklore genre that comprises of fables, fairy tales, old legends, myths and even urban legends. Folktales have both a function and a purpose. They are often employed to share a common history to reinforce cultural values or highlight important traditions. Folktales are rich powerhouse of portrayal of women in various fields. Folktales are tales or stories that have been passed down from the ancestors as a part of oral tradition while folklores encompasses a collection of fictional tales about people or animals with superstitions and unfounded beliefs as key elements. Also tradition and culture have myths and legends in their core, myth being a traditional story and an attempt to explain mysteries, supernatural events and cultural traditions, while legend is story that is purported to be historical in nature but without substantiation. The Biate community possesses rich folktales representing its own culture, traditions and religious norms. It is also through the folktales that the status and position of woman could be analysed through interpretations of its surroundings and followed norms. Biate women, in particular, played a major role in transmitting the old tradition through the recitation of folktales to the younger generation in

the modern times. Grandmothers or even mothers usually play the part of narrating stories or tales as bedtime tales to the younger generations which has become structured by the social system. Women in fairy tales appear as a witch, an enchanted princess, a maid or an elf. These roles seem to embrace certain characteristics traditionally linked to femininity. But the discrimination against women is deeply rooted in the society which is apparent in the folktales where the women's role revolve around as the mother, daughter, sister, witch etc. who are depicted as weak, vulnerable and dependable, though some are depicted as fairies or goddess.

When the accepted norm in a society runs along patriarchal lines, discrimination against women become so deep rooted and a girl is conditioned to accept all the trouble and injustice happily by the time she matures into a woman. This is well reflected in Biate folktales. In a popular folktale of *Fapite*, 'the paddy queen' or deity or goddess, Fapite is depicted in this folktale as both a woman as well as a goddess. The tale depicts the picture of the society where old weak women and orphans are not given due status nor appreciation. They are regarded as burden instead. In the tale the goddess was welcomed but not the old ragged lady who both happened to be females. This distinction shows the clear status of women in society. Fapite illustrates the state of two women where the one woman possessing special power is rejoiced and welcomed whereas on the other hand the ordinary poor old lady is regarded as pity and also seen as burden. The two different feminine images depict the struggle of women to prove fit for survival in the society.

It is obvious that women were subjects of submissiveness where evidence of women's victimization is found mostly in tales. In the Biate tale of *Sorlaili neh Parual Sarihei* (Sorlaili and her Seven Brothers) narrates the tale of a most beautiful lady named Sorlaili who was loved and pampered by her seven brothers. The story demonstrates the weak and feeble nature of women who needs to stay under constant protection of men. The story represents the real and symbolic nature of victimization who was forced to repress her feelings and be submissive. The tale also points out that the mark of beauty for a female is to be found in her submission, obedience, humility and patience. Women in the patriarchal Biate society have no voice but are believed to follow and bow down to male hegemony. The narrative in *Mairangkoki neh Supinteli* (Mairangkoki and Supinteli) is a story above of a jealous woman who killed another woman to take her place. The woman considered occupying a higher exalted position which ultimately led to the death of a woman in the tale. It was through magic that the witch transformed herself in the guise of the queen and Supinteli turned into an orange and then to a woman again. Here the hero is the King, a male while of the other two women, Supinteli was represented as weak and submissive and Mairangkoki as the witch, a villain. The positions given to the women in the story were of weak and bad character, while an exalted position is given to the male. Women's power in the tale offers a general outlook of witches and women's desire for wealth, prosperity, security and power.

Urna Inikahei (The Two Sisters) is a tale of two orphan sisters who had no one to look after them. The tale narrates the pathetic and sad picture of women's life in the earlier times where women needed to stay under the protection of men. If women lived alone with no male member to look after them, then they were regarded as vulnerable and can be tortured at will.

The tale also reveals of the ugly truth that a disabled woman, one without a voice is not accepted in the society. The story depicts the unfavourable attitude towards physically challenged females where the plight of such women seem to worsen and becomes an added problem. The notion of a woman or a queen in the earlier times had to be fit enough and physically fit so as not to spoil the image of her husband or the King prevailed. The tale also reflects the nature of men, where the king being enchanted by the beauty of the girl decided to marry her; Beauty is considered as an important quality in a girl.

In the tale of *Irungnu neh Lingthite* (The Dove and the Lizard), Irungnu, the dove depicts a woman and Lingthite the lizard depicts a man. The tale also depicts the societal life of the past in the Biate society, where single women were looked upon as frail and weak. Not every man could accept the success of women and were envied. Women did not get the desired respect and were always exploited. They were underestimated and kept under mere consideration. Dominance and ownership here is predicted to be of male gender which is a clear indication of the prevalent social system. Women's power and independence are overshadowed by the male in the tale which is also a reflection of the human society as well. The Biate folktales have a very popular and short story of '*Naifarate neh Puingaksia*' (The Orphan and her Wicked Stepmother) that narrates the story about an orphan girl who had a wicked stepmother. The story reflects the nature of women; while one woman is full of hatred and partiality, the other is an innocent and despaired orphan girl. Women are considered to be the symbol of love and compassion but here the story is about a woman who could not accept her step-daughter as her own. The woman was aware of her duties but failed to perform and instead tortured and hated her stepdaughter which eventually made the latter forsake her family for good. The story tells us of two different nature and character of women that exist. The tyranny of the stepmother leaves the stepdaughter in a repressed freedom. The tale of '*Nunvangi neh Rangsuma*' (Nunvangi and Rangsuma) runs about the tale of the undying love between two people, Nunvangi and Rangsuma. Nunvangi belonged to a rich family while Rangsuma was from a poor family. The story of '*Nunvangi neh Rangsuma*' explains the deplorable condition of females in early times. They were regarded not less than a possession without neither respect nor authority. Girls could be given away for marriage in exchange of animals; they were objectified. Value of a girl was measured with just few animals. No heed was given to the girl's will on her marriage decision, it was mostly decided by the patriarch, the father of the girl. The story proves the greed of the father who neither bothered to consult his daughter nor gave freedom to choose a partner for herself. She was given away in exchange for seven ugly mithuns. The father was inconsiderate enough to not even enquire about his son-in-law whether he was a good human being or not with whom his daughter would be spending the rest of her life. But much change can be witnessed in the modern period where daughters are given the freedom to choose their own partner and not given away in exchange to any other animals or materials.

The reminiscence of the tale '*Tuisanglian Thurchi*' (The Great Flood) is about the great flood and a widow who lived with her young daughter named Naitaii. The story is also the reflection of the position of women in the early society of the community. The mother and daughter lived alone and nobody bothered to help them in their need. Widowed women and

orphan children were rather looked upon as trouble. When Naitaii was found crying, the villagers did not bother to search her mother nor did they take her along with them to the safe place. They rather sacrificed her, a little girl for their own benefit. The villagers rather than showing compassion and care, tried to get rid of her and also of all the problems as soon as they knew that the girl child was connected to the flood. The underestimation of women is clearly depicted in the story while it also shows the true love of a mother and that a child cannot be loved better than a woman, her mother. The story shows the power of a woman and her connection with nature, whose lamentations brought the dissemination of rain and flood.

Findings of the Study-

In the above tales, the position of women reflected as low and weak in the society that could never be changed unless a male power or a patriarchal authority interferes to change the situation. It is a fact that women have carved a niche in all fields and the folktales are a rich powerhouse of portrayals of women. Folktales as the ethnographic totality of communities or tribes are the reflection and description of the culture, tradition, economy or social structures with religious practices. This may be termed as an autobiography of the tribe or community which also acts as the creator or preserver of culture, tradition, religion and social norms. The Biate community possesses rich folktales representing its own culture, traditions and religious norms. It is also through the folktales that the status and position of woman are analysed through interpretations of its surroundings and followed norms. Mental or emotional abuse is powerful and harmful as much as physical abuse. The trauma contributes to low esteem and even depression, having a long-term effect on brain and body with a core feeling of worthlessness. The wise sayings, proverbs and folktales establishes the authentic traditional social status of woman in the Biate community.

Conclusion:

The emergence of life history in anthropology and folktales replicates in several respects the historical and metaphysical preconditions for autobiography as a literary genre. Folklorist and historians appreciate the powerful associations of folktales to life and with the circumstances of their acquisition and performance because they so vividly remember learning them in specific contexts. The songs and tales continue to carry these associations over the years and to evoke memories each time they are told. All tales cited here are important voices in an ongoing dialogues about women, folktales and their status, they seek to bring women to the centre by pointing out the ways women have been seen by dominant cultures by describing women's experience and status from women's perspective. The folktales acted as the purpose in creating unity and connection among its community. The tales reflect understanding on how women were perceived in the society and their way of life. The depiction of women as weak and meek created the gender stereotype making them dependent on men. The tale of Fapite illustrates the social stratification and position of women in society where the powerful and rich are rejoiced while poor women were seen as burden. While the tale of Mairangkoki and Supinteli is the example of gender discrimination where the women were termed as witch, bad and weak while the king was exalted and hailed a hero and powerful. Several of the tales point out the connection of women with nature where it responded to their call.

Supinteli turning into an orange tree in the folktales Mairangkoki neh Supinteli and the lamentations of a mother bringing dissemination of rain and flood on not being able to provide water to drink to her daughter Naitai in Tuisanglian Thurchi (Story of Great Flood), shares a powerful connection of woman with fertility and nature.

The hierarchal dominance of the Biate male over the female has been exposed in different ways through the Biate folktales. The folktales are the ways the community understands and interprets its surrounding, culture, society and religion. Awareness on feminism will be an attempt to articulate the hope of transforming society to make room for individuals like women. This will empower the women since the problem with Biate women is lack of rational choice. Women can be in true sense, free only when the relations between the sexes are based on equality rather than on the tyranny and domination of men over women. Inequality of the sexes can be mitigated by eradicating the discrepancies in their upbringing, emerging from the differences in their education.

References:

1. Al-Barazenji, Luma Ibrahim. (2015). *Women's voice and images in Folk Tales and Fairy Tales*, International E-journal of Advances in Social Sciences, Vol. 1, Issue 1.
2. Al-Khalaf, H.A. (2019). *Feminist Voices in Saudi Folktales: Analysis of three Folktales Retold by Abdulkareem al-Juhayman*. Middle Eastern Studies, 55(3), 374-385. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00263206.2018.1520101>
3. Andalas, E. F. (2015). *Mitos-Mitos Kabupaten Malang: Cara Orang Jawa dalam Menjelaskan Dunianya*. Puitika, 11(2), 150-162.
4. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/323113958_Mitos-Mitos_Kabupaten_Malang_Cara_Orang_Jawa_dalam_Menjela
5. Andalas, E. F. (2018). *Cerita Rakyat dan Tradisi Masyarakat Agraris Nusantara: Mitos Dewi Sri (Jawa) dan Legenda Putri Mamdalika (Sasak)*. In P. Karyanto (Ed.), *Kisah-Kisah Perempuan dan Cerita Rakyat Nusantara* (pp.1-12). Kajian Sastra dan Budaya Universitas Airlangga.
6. Bagchi, J. (2017). *Interrogating Motherhood*. New Delhi, Delhi: SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd.
7. Darnei, N. (2011) *BiateTaibulZongna :Search of Biate Origin*. Shillong: Don Bosco Press.
8. Darnei, N. (2013). *Politics neh Kristianna* . Shillong. Don Bosco Press.
9. Darnei, L. M. (2013). *Taptechanga Biate Phung :Biate Narratives by the Fireside*. Shillong: Don Bosco Printing Press.
10. Directorate of Assam Institute of Research for Tribals and Scheduled Castes. (2008) *Empowerment of Tribal Women of Assam*. Guwahati: Bohniman Printers Press.

11. Lerner, G. (1993). *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness (From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-Seventy)*, Oxford University Press, New York.
12. Lerner, G. (1986). *The Creation of Patriarchy*. Oxford University Press, New York.
13. Hazarika, N.A. (2007). *Tribal Women and Development*. Guwahati, Directorate of Assam Institute of Research for Tribals and Scheduled Castes Publication, Bohniman Printers Press.
14. Hooker, Jessica. (1990). *The Hen who Sang: Swordbearing Women in Eastern European Fairytales*. Folklore Vol. 101, No. 2, Taylor & Francis, pp. 178-184. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1260321>
15. Jordan, R.A. & Caro, F.A. de.(1986). *Women and the Study of Folklores*. The University of Chicago Press. 11(3). 500-518.
16. Kharmawphlang, D. L. (2017). *Folklore Imprints in North East India*. Shillong: Don Bosco Publications-DBCIC.
17. Khonglah, C. (2008). *Women in North-East India: An Annotated Bibliography*. New Delhi, Delhi: Akansha publishing House.
18. Lalsim, E. R. (2013). *Zoimi Biate Nam Choilung*. Ganesguri,Guwahati: Top Printers Press, Guwahati.
19. Lalsim, R. (2013). *History of the Biates*. Guwahati. Directorate of Assam Institute of Research for Tribals and Scheduled Castes: Bohniman Printers Press.
20. Lalsim, R. (2012). *History of the Biates and their Folktales*, Aizawl, Mizoram: Mizoram Publication Board, Art and Culture, Govt. of Mizoram,
21. Lalsim, R. (1995). *Biate Pipu Toisong*. Director of Cultural Affairs, Assam.
22. Mahanta, U. (2015). *An Introduction to Women Studies: Theories and Concepts*. Panbazar, Guwahati: DVS Publishers.
23. Mazumder, V. & Sharma, K. (1979). Women's Studies: New Perception and the Challenges. *Economic & Political Weekly*, 14(3), 113-120.
24. Menon, N. (2012). *Seeing Like a Feminist*, New Delhi, Delhi: Zubaan and Penguin Books India.
25. Mukhopadhyay, A. (2016). *Feminism*. Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan Private Limited.
26. Nampui, R. (2004). *The Biate Folk-Tales*. Bohniman Printers Press, Guwahati: Directorate of Assam Institute of Research for Tribals and Scheduled Castes.
27. Pakem, B. (1980), *The Biates*. Shillong: North East Council for Social Science Research.

28. Sharma, M. (2017). *Ed, Rethinking Gender History: Essays on Northeast India and Beyond*, DVS Publishers, Assam.
29. Sugiarti, S., & Andalas, E.F. (2018). *Perspektif etik dalam penelitian sastra*. UMM Press.
30. Vidyarthi, L.P. & Rai, B. K. (1976). *The Tribal Culture of India*. New Delhi, Delhi: Narang Rai, Concept Publishing Company.