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2. Reflection of Traditional Position of Women in the Folktales of Arunachal Pradesh

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Abstract

This paper explores the traditional position of women as reflected in the folktales of Arunachal Pradesh. The study aims to uncover the various indigenous narratives that reflect the societal roles, expectations and position of women within tribal communities. While some stories celebrate female wisdom, resilience and agency, others reinforce traditional gender hierarchies and domestic roles. Through the analysis of symbolic representation and narrative function of women in these stories, the paper highlights the complexities of power dynamics, social hierarchies, and gender relations within the narrative. Finally, the study emphasises the need to understand oral traditions not just as storytelling devices, but as windows into historical gender constructs and evolving identities within tribal frameworks.

Key Words: *Traditional Positions, Women, Folktales, Arunachal Pradesh*

Folktales tradition is a universal aspect of all human culture. Folktales are basically the traditional stories that have been handed down from generation to generation by word of mouth. They often reflect the cultural knowledge, worldview, beliefs, values, and societal norms of the communities from which they originate. They also tend to reflect perceptions of gender roles and positions in traditional societies. While interpretations may vary across different cultures and individual stories, there are several ways in which gender positions can be understood through folktales:

- (1) **Traditional Gender Roles:** Many folktales portray stereotypical gender roles, where men are often depicted as brave, strong, and heroic, while women are portrayed as nurturing, gentle, and submissive. These roles can reinforce societal expectations and norms regarding appropriate behaviour for each gender.
- (2) **Gender Expectations and Restrictions:** Folktales can illustrate the limitations and expectations placed upon individuals based on their gender. For example, female characters may be portrayed as being confined to domestic tasks and expected to prioritize marriage and motherhood, while male characters may be portrayed as having more freedom to engage in adventures and pursue careers.
- (3) **Challenges to Gender Norms:** Some folktales feature characters who challenge traditional gender norms and expectations. These characters may subvert stereotypical roles, engage in cross-dressing, or display qualities not typically associated with their gender. These tales can provide alternative perspectives and challenge rigid gender constructs.
- (4) **Empowerment and Agency:** Folktales depicting female characters as strong, resourceful, and capable of overcoming obstacles. These stories can empower women and challenge the notion of female passivity, encouraging individuals to question and redefine gender roles in their own lives.

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- (5) Lessons on Gender Equality: Folktales can also convey messages of gender equality and the importance of treating all individuals with respect and fairness. Stories that promote collaboration and cooperation between genders can help break down gender-based stereotypes and foster a more inclusive society.

Studying folktales can provide valuable insights into the position of women in a particular society. It's important to note that folktales are products of their respective cultures and historical contexts. While they can provide insights into societal perceptions of gender, they do not represent universal or fixed understandings of gender positions.

Not all folktales carry gender inequality, there are variations across different cultures and regions. It is therefore important to interpret folktales in the context of a specific culture. This will help understand the diverse perspectives crucial for a comprehensive understanding of gender roles and positions prevalent in that society.

In this paper an attempt has been made to analyse folktales of Arunachal Pradesh. Recurring themes, characters and narratives related to women have been critically analysed. It enquires into the ways women are portrayed- strong and independent or restricted by societal norms and gender roles. It also explores the role of women within the family and broader society as depicted in the folktales. Their role in decision making processes, their depiction as caregivers, nurturer or object of desire or their portrayal as leaders, warriors or problem solvers are also looked into.

Objectives of the study

The study has following objectives:

- 1) To study the roles and position of women as reflected in some of the folktales of Arunachal Pradesh.
- 2) To explore the power dynamics, social hierarchies, and gender relations within the narratives.

Methodology

For this study, a representative sample of folktales from Arunachal Pradesh were first collected and documented. The study is descriptive in nature. In this study, the authors have selected four folktales collected from different tribal communities like Idu-Mishmi, Meyor, Nocte and Nyishi of Arunachal Pradesh. Thus, factors such as diversity in narratives, time period, geographical regions, and ethnic communities from which the stories were collected have been brought under consideration.

The selected folktales encompass a range of themes and characters related to gender. The narratives, characters, and themes related to gender roles and representations have been systematically analysed. Focus is largely on identifying recurring themes, motifs, symbols, and plot structures that relate to gender. Also, an effort has been made to ensure it captures the nuances and cultural context of the original text.



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Context and Analysis

Story 1: 'The story of Anuli Akhiya'

This story portrays the experiences of a woman who is admired for her beauty and subsequently faces the consequences of rejecting a powerful man's advances. It highlights gender dynamics and power imbalances within the society of the Idu Mishmis.

Anuli Akhiya's beauty is emphasized as her defining trait, leading the powerful Igu to develop an intense desire to marry her. This reflects a common theme in many traditional narratives, where women are often objectified and valued primarily for their physical appearance. When Anuli Akhiya refuses the Igu's proposal, it challenges his ego and sense of entitlement. This refusal triggers his anger and ultimately leads to her imprisonment in a pit. Igu's reaction can be seen as a manifestation of toxic masculinity, as he resorts to violence and control in response to rejection. Anuli Akhiya's brothers, while initially attempting to rescue her, eventually resign themselves to the belief that her fate is to remain trapped. This suggests a social structure that places less value on the lives and agency of women, as the brothers and the community ultimately accept her confinement as inevitable.

However, the story also highlights the resilience and creativity of Anuli Akhiya. Despite her dire circumstances, she finds solace in the beauty of her surroundings, particularly the snakes that surround her. This represents a shift from her initial objectification to her ability to appreciate the natural world and find inspiration within her confined space. Anuli Akhiya's desire to weave patterns on a piece of cloth and paint birds showcases her artistic expression and desire to share her creativity with the world. This demonstrates her agency and the human capacity to find meaning and purpose even in the most challenging circumstances.

Overall, the story of Anuli Akhiya reflects gendered power dynamics, the objectification of women, and the resilience and agency that women can exhibit even in oppressive situations. It serves as a reminder of the importance of recognizing and challenging gender inequalities within societies.

Story 2: 'The Story of Aku Kolu'

This story is told among the Meyor community of Anjaw district, Arunachal Pradesh. The story of Aku Kolu portrays gender dynamics within the Meyor community, focusing on the relationships between Aku Kolu, her brothers, and their wives. A gendered analysis of the story reveals various themes and power dynamics. The story presents a narrative that is deeply rooted in patriarchal norms and power dynamics. From the outset, the story reinforces traditional gender roles, with Aku Kolu being depicted in a stereotypical gendered role. She is portrayed as a skilled weaver and a caring sister who weaves outfits for all her brothers. This emphasizes her nurturing role within the family and her contribution to their well-being. Her weaving work also portrays the traditional role of women as providers. This portrayal reinforces the expectation that women should fulfill nurturing and domestic roles within the family.



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As the brothers marry, the story highlights the emergence of jealousy and competition among the wives. This reflects a harmful stereotype that portrays women as inherently envious and petty, pitting them against one another in a struggle for the attention and affection of their husbands. By focusing on the wives' resentment towards Aku Kolu, the story perpetuates the biased notion that women are the primary instigators of conflict and discord.

The wives' manipulation of Aku Kolu and their subsequent act of murdering Aku Kolu, beheading her, and consuming her flesh further underscores the power dynamics and violence against women within the narrative. These violent actions reveal a disturbing portrayal of women turning against each other. The story suggests that women's relationships are primarily marked by jealousy, deceit, and violence, reinforcing negative stereotypes and undermining the potential for supportive and cooperative female relationships.

Furthermore, the brothers' reaction to the discovery of Aku Kolu's murder demonstrates a reinforcement of patriarchal power dynamics. Their immediate response is to seek revenge and assert their dominance over the wives by drowning them. This portrayal perpetuates the idea that men are the rightful arbiters of justice and that violence is an acceptable means to restore honor and protect the family's reputation. This also reflects a societal expectation of male authority and control over women's actions, even when seeking retribution.

Throughout the story, there is a notable absence of agency and empowerment for female characters. Aku Kolu is ultimately victimized and murdered, while the wives are portrayed as conniving and violent. The youngest wife's refusal to consume Aku Kolu's heart is seen as an exception rather than a representation of women's autonomy and resistance.

Overall, the story of Aku Kolu reinforces harmful gender stereotypes, portrays women as antagonistic towards each other, and maintains a patriarchal narrative that perpetuates male dominance and violence as a means of resolving conflicts. It is important to critically analyze and challenge such narratives to promote gender equality and empower women to break free from limiting and oppressive roles and expectations.

Story 3: 'The Story of *Nga-me* (Mermaid)'

This story is told among the Nocte community of Tirpa district, Arunachal Pradesh. The story presents a complex narrative involving multiple characters and their actions, which can be analyzed from a gendered perspective. It's important to note that analyzing a story from a gendered perspective does not imply that every individual of a particular gender behaves or thinks in a certain way. Rather, it examines the representation and portrayal of gender roles, expectations, and dynamics within the story.

The story reflects traditional gender roles where the father (Opha) and grandfather are portrayed as the providers, going to the field for work, while the mother (Oyu) is expected to stay home and take care of the child. The grandfather's decision to eat his grandchild arises from extreme hunger and

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desperation, emphasizing the dire circumstances he finds himself in. This act can be seen as a metaphorical portrayal of the desperate measures people may take when faced with survival challenges. But this act from a different angle can also be seen as a representation of the abuse of power, as the grandfather asserts dominance and control over the child, who is defenseless. This violence highlights the vulnerability of marginalized individuals within the family structure.

The mother's decision to blame herself for her child's death and subsequently sacrifice herself by drowning in the river perpetuates harmful stereotypes of maternal guilt and self-sacrifice. This narrative reinforces the societal expectation that women should bear the responsibility for their children's well-being, often at the cost of their own mental and emotional health. It emphasizes the immense emotional burden placed on women and the societal expectations surrounding their roles as nurturers and caretakers. In contrast the father's absence during the critical event of the story is notable. This absence can reflect the societal expectation that fathers are not actively involved in childcare and are primarily responsible for providing material support. The story reinforces the notion that nurturing and caregiving are primarily the mother's domain.

The story presents a narrow view of gender roles, with the mother (Oyu) primarily depicted as a caregiver and the father (Opha) portrayed as the provider. This traditional division of labor reinforces societal expectations that place the burden of childcare and emotional nurturing primarily on women. The mother's role is defined by her relationship to her child, and her worth and value as a character is tied to her ability to fulfill these maternal responsibilities.

By depicting the mother's transformation into a mermaid as a result of her tragic death, the story reinforces the idea that women can only find power or agency through sacrifice and suffering. This narrative perpetuates the notion that female characters must endure pain and make extreme sacrifices to gain strength or agency. It diminishes the possibility of women having inherent agency or the ability to actively shape their own narratives without resorting to extreme measures.

The limited agency afforded to the female characters in the story restricts their roles to predetermined societal expectations. This portrayal overlooks the diversity of experiences and capabilities that women possess. It fails to explore alternative narratives where women can assert agency, challenge societal norms, and actively participate in shaping their own lives and those of their families.

Moreover, the absence of the father during the critical event of the story reinforces the societal expectation that fathers are not actively involved in childcare. This reinforces the idea that nurturing and caregiving responsibilities primarily fall on women. The story overlooks the possibility of a shared parental responsibility, where both parents are actively involved in the care and well-being of their child.

Story 4: 'The Story of Haat Nyem and Haa Nyem'

The story of Haat Nyem and Haa Nyem presents various gendered elements and dynamics that can be analyzed critically. The story begins with the introduction of a man who has two wives, Haat Nyem

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and Haa Nyem. This portrayal of polygamy reflects the traditional practice of polygamy in the Nyishi community. As the story unfolds both the wives find themselves in a challenging situation when the snake demands their child. Haat Nyem initially refuses, but eventually submits to the snake's insistence. This portrayal can be seen as reflecting societal expectations of women's submissiveness and the limited agency they have in making decisions for themselves and their children. The wives' appear to be in a position of vulnerability and powerlessness. This is evident in their encounters with the snake. They feel compelled to comply with the snake's demands, reflecting a power imbalance and the potential for exploitation. Although the story do not explicitly convey the practice of child marriage, some elements highlighted in the story clearly connects it to the broader issue of early and forced marriages also traditionally widespread in the community. Child marriages often involve a significant power imbalance, with young girls being married to older men who have more control and authority within the relationship. Similarly Haat Nyem's daughter's marriage to the snake boy was already promised to him during her childhood and most importantly without her consent.

When Haat Nyem's daughter falls in love with the snake boy, the central theme of their relationship is centred on love and not force. However, the story reinforces the trope of sacrificial love, where the snake boy tests the girl's love, and she fails by choosing a material possession (the ring) over him. This narrative perpetuates the idea that women should prove their love through self-sacrifice and that material possessions can be equated with love. Further in the story the girl's journey and transformation from an old lady to her younger self demonstrate themes of redemption and the possibility of second chances. However, her transformation is conditional upon completing a challenging task set by the snake boy's parents, reinforcing the notion that women must prove themselves and overcome obstacles to be deemed worthy of love and acceptance.

Haa Nyem's envy of Haat Nyem's prosperous life and her attempt to replicate it by marrying her daughter off to a snake boy, further reinforces negative stereotypes of women being pitted against each other, promoting competition and jealousy. It highlights the consequences of such negative emotions and the potential harm that can be inflicted on others. The story concludes with a gruesome scene where Haa Nyem kills the snake and retrieves her daughter's lifeless body from its stomach. This act of violence and the subsequent grief represent the tragic consequences Haa Nyem's had to bear as a result of her actions. Her neglect and disregard for her daughter's pleas for help while being swallowed by the snake results in her situation of loss and grief. It appears to emphasize that her situation came as a result of her negligence towards her maternal duty of care and nurture. Posing a message that women who neglect their social roles are punished and suffer.

Overall, the story raises critical questions about gender roles, agency, maternal responsibility, and the consequences of jealousy and neglect. It underscores the importance of promoting healthy relationships, empathy, and responsible decision-making within a gendered context.



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Conclusion

Folktales are not merely meant for entertainment purposes, but also serve as mirrors of the cultural values regarding multifaceted roles of the women and their positions in the traditional societies of Arunachal Pradesh. Analysis of folktales reveals many critical issues regarding gender roles, gender dynamics and power imbalances, the objectification of women, patterns in the portrayal of male and female characters and their interactions, shared parental responsibility, etc. that are prevalent in the societies. The study from a gendered perspective also allows for a critical examination of the societal norms and power dynamics that perpetuate gender inequalities in tribal society.

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