

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Folktales play an important role in the indigenous culture and hold a serious position in folklore studies. Culture significantly shapes folktales, similar to the fact that folktales reflect cultural influence. Due to the emergence of folktales that have been gathered and compiled with intense patriarchal overtones, folktale heroines have allegedly become physically weak and have relied on taking advantage of their beauty and charm. Their functions progressively got downplayed, passive, and secondary to their male heroes, emphasizing gender discrimination (Bacchilega 37). As opposed to such folktales with weaker influence or no influence of male domination, such folktales have largely attracted attention of studies in gender studies. Surprisingly enough, female characters in the folktales from non-Western cultures appear to counterbalance the gender discrimination observed in the Western folktales. They also appear to possess more robust education values to foster consciousness of the female identity in the rural illiterate women (Jordan and De Caro 25–26).

In nearly all cultures of the world, women are mostly expected to generate, develop, maintain, and perpetuate folktales. Women's roles within these folktales vary from the queen to the maid and from the good to the bad. This is very natural, considering that women were largely kept within the four walls of the home and were expected to bear and raise children in addition to being involved in repetitive domestic work (Handoo 112). All these eventually culminated in venting their feelings and wishes through folktales as a measure of creating an imaginary realm where girls are as physically powerful and adventurous as the boys, and girls are not only victims, but rescuers as well. It is arguable whether folkloric imagery can be viewed as mere examples of Freudian wish-fulfilment. But the fact that women were being portrayed as heroes in myths tells us about women's struggle to change from submissiveness to expressiveness, and from marginal to centrality (DeGraff 53).

The gender is the most important factor in determining, justifying, and stratifying sexual identity within a social group. While "sex" points towards physical differences,

"gender" conveys social differences. Gender is made highly apparent to judge this social difference between males and females. While gender difference has been a product of socially constructed difference that has been historically built, gender is used in all cultures of the world with political, economic, and cultural significance. Relationships within and outside the family expand based on gender. Gender is also the principal cause of social inequality among male and female members. The degree of biases against women can be comparatively stronger or weaker, but the existence of biases is pervasive (Hollis et al. 45).

Gender research and studies are quite a recent phenomenon. Such work was begun in the late 1960s, at the same time as the second wave feminist movement. But until the 1970s, all debate, discussion, and study centered around men. The functional dimension and identity of the feminine gender were still indistinct, with women being mostly confined to domestic functions (Margaret 112).

The 1970s were a time when there was a tendency to interpret folktales in a romantic sense. Love was romanticized, and marriage was promoted. However, this also created a question of whether one should be culturally progressive or conservative. It was with the second wave of feminism and male domination and patriarchal presence in folktales that such aspects were realized. It was the third wave of feminism that took into consideration the synthesis of fantasy and reality in folktales (Saltzman 78).

Women were kept under suppression by the patriarchal systems for a long time. They did not get much access to indulge in social activities. They were socially tailored to serve the male members and children in the family and were never provided with school education. Thus, different aspects of folklore started to take root, and women found folktales to be an influencing proxy to express themselves and redefine their positions in society. Through myths, women began contributing and giving a parallel type of education to society. This education mainly generated awareness among women to speak out and raise protests against social suppression (Kumar 45).

Apparently, women appear to have been depicted as lovely and beautiful in most of the folktales and fairy tales. The main test of a princess or a maid or a queen is that she is fair and beautiful. Additionally, she must wait passively and patiently for the prince to come as a protector and marry her. Such aspects in folklore demonstrate social and gender discrimination that downplay women's roles (Dundes 112). Researchers have identified

that gender bias and sex discrimination against women are very predominant in folktales. Heroism exhibited by women in folktales never received its rightful place. Female heroines' roles were belittled and consciously repressed to emphasize the male hero. Such bias can be seen even in analytical criticism of gender roles (Borgohain 89).

However, male heroes in folktales appear to have quite restricted and monotonous roles. But depictions of women in folktales have never been just limited to their beauty and charm. Women play varied roles in society as well as in families in folktales. She plays the kind queen or an old woman, the cruel witch, the handsome and gifted princess, the compassionate warrior-mother, the domineering wife, or the miserable maid. She personifies herself as the faithful wife or maidservant; occasionally, a mere village maid finds the courage to rescue the accursed prince or the imprisoned brother or the whole village or kingdom; occasionally, she is the wicked sorceress wreaking vengeance upon injustice. Importantly, in the twist of events, women in folktales are prone to grow and change, something that is typically not seen with the men (Handoo and B. 45).

Crucially, contemporary folklore studies now recognize that folktales are not solely confined to rural, indigenous, or traditional spaces. Scholars such as Linda Dégh and Jan Harold Brunvand have shown how *urban legends* and narratives emerging from cities form a vital component of folklore studies, adapting to the anxieties and structures of modern life (Dégh; Brunvand). Jack Zipes has similarly explored how fairy tales evolve in modern and urbanized contexts, including through mass media, literature, and cinema, demonstrating that folktales continuously transform in response to contemporary cultural forces (Zipes). This acknowledgment expands the scope of folktale studies, bridging the traditional rural focus with modern urban transformations, and strengthens the understanding that gendered representations in folklore adapt across both indigenous and urban spaces.

Folktales are worthy documents that can be used to learn the gender imbalance across the world's cultures and comprehend the respective roles of the Chinese and the Khasi women in their cultures.

1.2 Aims and Objectives of the Study

The principal aims and objectives of this thesis are as mentioned below:

- 1) To explore the portrayal of female characters in Chinese and Khasi folktales
- 2) To contextualize these tales by situating them in the backdrop of their respective societies and, more specifically, in terms of their gender dynamics
- 3) To make a comparative analysis of Chinese and Khasi folktales in terms of their depiction of female characters to make sense of the ways in which two matrilineal societies construct ideas of female heroism

The following hypotheses have been tested in the course of this study:

- 1) Folktales are invaluable sources for understanding the collective unconscious as universal images in a community and its popular/folk culture.
- 2) These universal images generate universal values reflected in repetitive characters in folktales.
- 3) A comparative study of these images and values of two such corpora of folktales unfold the similarities and differences of two such peoples so as to highlight the variant cultural trends in their respective social history.

These series of propositions have served as guidelines for my research. The authenticity of these claims has been evaluated based on the evidence in Chinese and Khasi folktales.

As Vladimir Propp has rightly put it – “Scholarly literature concerning the tale is not especially rich.... mostly text themselves are published; ... Such works as do exist are of an informational rather than an investigatory nature” (Propp, 1968, p. 5), serious approaches towards the study and analysis of folktales as one of the principal elements of folk literature seldom occur in the history of folkloric studies. Despite substantial works on folklore, distinct aspects of folk literature, such as folktales, have rarely been explored as an independent subject of research.

1.3 Method & Methodology

The method of research will be basically qualitative research and content analysis, which are folklore research's main instruments. More specifically, my procedure is composed of three phases: (1) Narration, (2) Interpretation, and (3) Comparison.

First, I introduce women's roles within Khasi and Chinese folktales. Second, I put such portrayals within the sphere of culture. Third, I contrast the two groups of folktales by theme to find differences and similarities.

Technically, hermeneutics and comparative study will be the most significant components of my method. Hermeneutics is the science of text interpretation and entails interpreting a given text according to sociological as well as anthropological criteria. Comparative study entails contrast and comparison with the aim of leading to similarities as well as differences regarding the said subjects.

Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928) remains a seminal text in folklore studies, with structuralist readings of the traditional functions in narratives of folktale genre (Propp 21–65). Propp's work, though, is bolstered by the intellectual culture of early twentieth-century Soviet ideologies, fixated on formal narrative structures over cultural or gendered considerations. Later scholarship has elaborated on Propp's approach to incorporate sociological, psychological, and gendered readings of folklore. Jack Zipes and Maria Tatar, for instance, have considered socio-political constructions of the folktale and how narrative inscribes power, ideology, and cultural fear (Zipes 45–67; Tatar 12–29). Ruth B. Bottigheimer and Kay Stone have also placed in the foreground women's representation, challenging previous universalist or male-normed readings (Bottigheimer 101–15; Stone 243–60). Postcolonial reading by Sadhana Naithani and feminist re-readings by Cristina Bacchilega also continue with this line of argument, illustrating how folklore must be situated within wider cultural negotiations surrounding modernity, colonialism, and gender (Naithani 88–104; Bacchilega 55–78).

The comparative method forms the basis of the entire research, and it utilizes findings from researchers like F.L.K. Hsu, Oscar Lewis, Durkheim, and MacIver, who emphasize the need to study similarities and differences within societies. The technique not only enhances cultural insight but also avoids reductionist generalizations (Srivastava 45–47).

While academic work on folktales or any other form of folk literature remains firmly in the domain of Western folkloristics, gender critique in terms of those concerned with women in folklore has increasingly been out there visible in the last few decades across many traditions. Comparative analytical studies of female heroes in Chinese and Khasi folktales are few, especially in an intercultural context putting both patriarchal Confucian and matrilineal societies together (Stone 257; Bacchilega 61; Naithani 95). The purpose of this study is, therefore, to bridge an important knowledge gap by examining the female hero characters in two separate cultural traditions.

1.4 Chapterization

Four major depictions of women characters are the focal point of this research, as they are of specific relevance in Asian folktales. Each chapter focuses on one of these archetypes in great detail, both in relation to their cultural background and comparative nature.

The Mother and the Wife: This chapter examines how women's identities are constructed in folktales through maternal and spousal roles. It examines the manner in which women have been described as nurturers, caregivers, and family stabilizers and also reflects on the patriarchal limitations inherent in these illustrations.

The Sister and the Daughter: Here, the emphasis is on the kinship dynamics and filial obligation. The chapter examines representations of sisters and daughters as symbols of loyalty, sacrifice, and moral accountability and symbolic roles in passing on cultural and family values.

The Wise Old Woman: This chapter analyzes the archetype of the old woman as a well of wisdom, a source of guidance, and a moral authority. This chapter explores how she acts as a custodian of culture, often balancing the domains of tradition, spirituality, and social order.

Angels and Tempresses and Beyond: The last chapter looks to the polarized representations of women as virtuous, ethereal figures on the one side, and as threatening, seductive women on the other. It goes beyond these extremes to examine multivalent portrayals that refuse to be reduced to a simple binary.

1.5 Review of Literature

The richness and diversity of the Chinese and Northeast Indian folktales attest to their people's cultural imagination and collective wisdom. Chinese folktales, especially those of the majority Han population, have been influencing political, cultural, and moral debates for ages. The emphasis of researchers such as Xu Liting (1981) and Leach (1949) has rested on how the Chinese historiographical tradition enabled the publication and preservation of complete versions of folktales decades before Europe and hence their entry into the cultural mainstream. The richness of Chinese historiography, where the earliest accounts date as far back as 4000 BC, illustrates how folktales were not only utilized as forms of entertainment but also as sources of social memory and political satire.

Collections of folktales, however, remain in the domain of anthologies and not interpretive commentary. Foreign Languages Press's *Folktales of China* series remains a benchmark in presenting authentic stories from Han and minority populations. But, like John Minford's *Favourite Folktales of China* or Yin-Lien Chin's *Traditional Chinese Folktales*, these books provide abundant tales with little critical analysis. Their greatest value is in preserving oral traditions and discovering patterns of story-telling in very dissimilar regions, but the interpretive work is left largely to future scholars.

Khasi folklore, as rich and diverse in its own right, has suffered similarly. Early collections such as Mrs. Rafy's 1920 collection and G.K. and Shukla Ghosh's *Fables and Folktales of Meghalaya* record community belief and myth but rarely make analytic comments. Systematic categorizations only appear in Bijoya Sawian's *Khasi Myths, Legends & Folktales*, where tales are organized by genre—origin tales, trickster tales, moral tales, and supernatural tales—thus implying underlying social values. Apart from these sets of folk narratives, ethnographic and historical studies such as Hamlet Bareh's *The History and Culture of the Khasi People* and his *Encyclopaedia of North-East India* expand the discipline in examining matriliney, politics, and social change. These books illustrate how Khasi matrilineal institutions not only structured household power but also influenced forms of the larger community, rendering them unique to South and Southeast Asia.

Comparative and cross-cultural research highlights the universal along with particular nature of folktales. Yüce and Tarakçıoğlu's (2013) comparative analysis of

Turkish, Estonian, and Greek heroes illustrates how national traditions meet at the level of archetypes but differ in cultural nuances. Similar research by Wardarita and Negoro (2017) indicates that folktales such as Indonesia's Jaka Tarub and Japan's Tanabata share motifs and structures but are rooted in varying cultural symbolisms. These texts allude to the productive nature of comparative endeavors in highlighting the ways in which local identity, cultural transmission, and archetypal forms meet.

Within this broader comparative terrain, gender has emerged as a focal point. Writers such as Nancy Schimmel (1992) and Aili Nenola (1999) discuss the way women are created in folk-tale conventions: usually forced into passive or stereotypical roles, but occasionally developed as active heroines or protagonists of conflict. Velasco (2018), for instance, reveals how Maranao mythic women employ wisdom as survival strategy in patriarchal settings, while Kabaji (2005) shows how Kenyan performance women reinforce and subvert gender ideologies through performance. Weinger et al.'s (2006) work on Cameroonian myths is informative regarding how stories often disguise male culpability by claiming women as rivals, and which indicates the manner in which folklore expresses and makes normal gendered rivalries.

Gender is a genre in itself in South Asian contexts. Marcussen (2009) refers to the way Indian women's oral tradition inscribes cultural values and gender ideologies, and Padhi (2009) highlights the way folk tales trace womanhood not as passivity but as active negotiation of biology, voice, and social comportment. Ramanujan's forays into Indian folklore have been particularly important, relocating themselves as cultural texts where genre itself is gendered and where translation as transcreation indicates psychological and social undertows.

Research on Chinese and Persian tradition in particular adds yet more depth to gender analysis. Hosseinpour and Afghari (2016) reveal stark imbalances in Persian children's fiction, where women are chiefly defined by appearance and men represent autonomy and rationality. Similarly, Cheng and Bo (2012) detail the patriarchal roots of women's roles within ancient Chinese society and how Confucian ethics entrench gender expectations. But other voices are also audible: Karen Gernant's (1995) analysis of Fujian folktales argues for Chinese women's strength and agency, reversing Eurocentric depictions of them as passive. Saihanjula He (2000) also illustrates how Chinese folktales

gave expression to movement among the powerless—particularly subordinated women—through themes of injustice, transformation, and resistance.

Coming to Khasi society, the theme of matriliney has invited scholarly interest in continuity and change. Das (2001) and Singh et al. (2011) point out that Khasi matriliney is a rare global system where descent, inheritance, and dominance flow through women. In spite of the coming of the missionaries and colonial contact with attendant changes, the contemporary Khasi societies still acknowledge matriliney as a marker of cultural uniqueness. Ryndem (2017) also discusses how the maintenance of power between maternal uncle and mother reflects a democratic and interdependent ethos, and indicates a system of kinship that complicates the traditional binaries of patriarchy-matriarchy.

Overall, this set of scholarship illustrates that folktales are not static cultural commodities but living social texts. They inscribe memory, embody gender ideologies, and provide spaces for contesting and affirming authority. Chinese and Khasi folktales, though varying in their contexts of history and culture, both reveal to us how communities build female agency, family, and shared values. But the gap is still there for ongoing comparative study between the two traditions, particularly in observing how women characters in matrilineal and patriarchal societies variably personify heroism, resistance, and cultural identity.

1.6 Observations

"The role of gender acquired a new and significant dimension in the 1970s following the feminist movement and extensive scholarly works on women's studies, the social implications of which consequently gained a broader perspective (Chen & Bo, 2012, p. 45). There was a paradigm shift in women's studies emphasizing a diversified role and influence of gender on the individual and the society. This new emergent role of the gender deliberated upon how the male-female disparity has been a social and cultural outcome through ages. The universal phenomenon of gender disparity underwent critical scrutinization, thus opening new avenues of research on the issue of gender (Ibrahim Al-Barazenji, 2015, p. 67). There emerged a paradigm shift from an essentialist thought to a pragmatic approach. It was recognized that notwithstanding the biological and physiological differences, gender difference had largely been the product of social and cultural dogmas. Gender hierarchy in a society is a symbolic representation of both an

exclusive and an inclusive system, where both the male-dominative and the female-submissive act at the same time in defiance and deference.

A significant trait that may be observed in folktales is the remarkable representation of Goodness and Evil through portrayal of women in a large number of characters. Sometimes the roles played by women in these tales may appear to be metaphoric or imaginative. However, as folktales are said to reflect the society, hence the said portrayals must have broader and definitive roles in the community (Gernant, 1995, p. 88). Prevailing stereotyped images of “good” women and “bad” women in the society blurred by male dominance have gained magnification in the folktales, sometimes as the rescuer and sometimes as the trapper.

Folktales being the folk genre attributed particularly to women provides an alternative platform for women’s liberation. Tales that are women-centric or have female protagonists as heroes project women with outstanding wit, wisdom and courage. Portrayal of strong female characters and with an apparent objective of influencing society, folktales serve as a significant medium for women to express their ideas and ideals with strong conviction. These women characters are so powerful that they have an intense effect on other characters of the tale and run the story. Folktales redefine the identity of a woman and her influential role in society."

The males in these tales are rather weak, lacking courage and confidence and are easily influenced by other females. Male heroes actually are less heroic as they hardly act and achieve on their own (Wardarita & Puspo Negoro, 2017, pp. 1-6). While the female characters, regardless of their goodness or evilness, bring all twists and happenings in the tales through their strong performances. It is this quality of folktales that women authors have been employing in their works to emphatically voice women’s opinion in order to balance the gender equilibrium in the society.

The unfolding of feminine identity in the folktale genre led to emergence of legendary and strong heroines. They replaced the traditional docile image of women as perceived in the society through their powerful performances. Regardless of whether she is the adventurer princess or the evil sorceress, these female roles contributed major turns of events within the tales. But even more significant is that the emergence of these strong heroines struck a blow at the root of patriarchy (Singh et al., 2011, pp. 57-65). This

challenge to patriarchal system was interpreted from various perspectives as a women's attempt to strike a gender balance, to revive love and romance, to gain social stability through happy and blissful marriage etc.

As a reflection of this attempt of equating genders, role models in the folktales often swap their roles and genders. Thus, on one hand we see daring women playing the role of a courageous warrior - a socially accepted male stereotype, and on the other hand we also see helpless men - a socially accepted female stereotype, waiting for the heroine to be salvaged. The point worth mentioning here is that these tales, when read out to children, help them to conceive the idea of women not as a passive player in the family or society, but as a significant stake-holder no less significant than her male counterpart.

The manifestation is of a realm where women are at the helm of salvation or restoration. It is important here to note that while women in classics are considered to be simple, pure and pious, women in folktales are shrewd and deceptive. The latter qualities become indispensable in the context of the folktales to win a battle and emerge as a hero.

1.7 Inferences

Reading of the literature mentioned above and other related articles show that these traits of male dominance and female submission are not natural endowments but are imbibed through the respective gender roles assigned (Handoo, 1998, pp. 55-66). These roles reflect carefully and culturally maintained symbolic concepts and elements attributed to the male and female members of the society. Historically, symbolic ideas are conceptualised and propagated to establish supremacy. It is thus understood that male-superiority over females has been a cultural trait, and likewise, compliance of the women has not been a coincidence or a natural choice.

It is under these circumstances that women discovered that folktale, like most other forms of folklore serve dual objectives. On one hand, it helps to retain and conform to hierarchical traditions as 'a tool for consensus', and on the other hand it is also an instrument through which dissidents are able to challenge the status quo as 'a tool for contestation' (Velasco, 2018, pp.434-441).