CHAPTER 2

The Mother and The Wife

2.0 Introduction

Transculturally, women hold a central position in both the household and symbolic imagination, being mirrored in the twin figures of the wife and the mother and being two of the most socially grounded roles that they play. In the context of folktales, these figures are not so much an echo of domestic life; they are conditioned and reaffirmed by reigning gender ideologies, religious precepts, and socio-economic orders. This chapter analyzes the images of mothers and wives in Chinese and Khasi folktales, taking into account how these archetypes operate as both carriers of cultural reverence and tools of social control.

The mother in China is generally portrayed as a moral pillar and religious hub, although her authority is limited by Confucian values focusing on filial obedience and female submission. Similarly, the wife is idealized as being loyal, patient, and uncomplaining, particularly under conditions of adversity or widowhood. But not always are such characters contained in folktales to unresisting obedience; most tales present mothers and wives who show strength of purpose, cleverness, and moral wisdom, rebuking or subtly subverting assigned roles.

In contrast, Khasi matrilineal society operates within a unique lineage system, one whereby the transmission of inheritance and clan identity follows the female line. This framework plays a significant role in shaping the image of mothers and wives within Khasi folktales, thus depicting women as decision-makers, custodians of property, and ethical moorings within their community. But these representations are not without problems—narratives also expose underlying tensions, such as women's marginalization from official political power and the affective complexities they experience in marriage and kinship.

By comparative reading of a selection of the folktales in both traditions, the chapter probes the complex representations of motherhood and wifehood, their symbolic significance, and their intersections with the general theme of female heroism in cultural narrative.

2.1 Role and social status of mothers and wives in traditional China

The diversity and abundance of folktales have enhanced the richness of Chinese folk literature. There are over fifty nationalities living within the vast territory of China, alongside people of the Han nationality who have played a key role in the political and cultural development of the country. Tales emanating from these ethnic groups mirror their respective socio-cultural as well as socio-political traits and their collective wisdom and aspirations. Chinese folktales deserve special mention because of their prevalence in historical times as compared to the collection of other peoples. Complete versions of folktales were published in China hundreds of years before they were published in Europe (Leach, 1949, p. 228). This may be attributed to the good historiography of the Chinese people for having the oldest written records, dating from 4000BC.

Chinese scholars and folklorists have categorized folktales into (a) fantasy tales, (b) stories about human life, and (c) fables. However, distinctions between popular and other tales are obscure and all collections of stories in China are rich in folktale material. The tale is narrated in a lucid style, describing various characters from different occupations and social statuses and from different societies to which they belong. These are hunters, farmers, stone masons, carpenters, weaving maids, shepherd boys, and hired hands, along with emperors, kings, tribal chiefs, princes, princesses, courtiers, stewards, and landlords. The nature and activities of the characters are greatly influenced by their gender backgrounds. Although there are many elements of fantasy in these stories, nevertheless, all the tales manifest the perceptions and emotions of the people that are well grounded. An important feature of these tales is that they also incorporate the philosophy and notions of China (Karan, 1996, pp. 155-156). Knowledge, values and attitudes typical to the Chinese culture are transmitted from one generation to another, employing folktales as a tool to impart education. Virtues of great integrity, courage, honesty, diligence and endurance, popular morality and the concept of right and wrong are best reflected in these folktales. More than entertainment, folktales mirror social discourses and reflect social realities. It is also a powerful medium for expressing social discontent (Dundes, 1965, p. 26). These discontents or disapprovals, mostly encoded as hard facts in the folktales, need to be critically analysed and evaluated with an empirical approach to justify the role of women in China who were otherwise written off the course of development of the Chinese society and underrated by scholars as a subject of serious study (Billingsley, 2019, p. 4).

Confucianism epitomizes traditional Chinese culture in which the society is rigidly and distinctly stratified. The head of the state or family or any such unit, strictly a patriarch, is to be revered by the subjects, younger members of the family, and the servants, respectively. In the *Analects of Confucius*, the Three Loyalties expected from women are (i) loyalty to her father, (ii) loyalty to her husband and (iii) loyalty to her son. And the Four Virtues stipulated for women are (i) virtue. (ii) speech, (iii) appearance and (iv) work (d'Auvergne, 2020, p.13). This orthodox system, in all its capacity rendered the women powerless and subservient social beings (He, 2000, p. 10). In this context, depiction of strong female roles in the folktales of China is posed in sharp contrast with the Confucianist doctrine of idealizing a patriarchal society.

Traditional Chinese society, founded on strict Confucian principles, was distinctly hierarchical in nature (He, 2000, p. 5). Men were supposed to deal with matters outside (*wài*) their homes, while women's activities were firmly restricted inside (*nèi*) homes. This hierarchy also contributed to the creation and dissemination of folktales among the common people in China. Since writing was an exclusive mode of communication to be enjoyed only by the learned privileged class, ordinary village folks, especially women, took to the oral medium for communication through a plethora of colourful folktales. These folktales expose their oppressors and reflect their plights and agonies (Cartwright, 2017, p. 1).

It was a privilege to be born a man, who would take care of the financial concerns of the family and perform the rituals. The man would instruct and the woman had to abide by his orders. She would bear children and take care of all household work but was not allowed to take part in social engagements. Rather she had to yield to barbaric and sexist exploitations like foot-binding, polygamy, etc. These social and personal abuses were to such an extent that they started believing to be born a male in their earlier life and were penalized for being reborn as women (Xinyan, 2009, p. 230).

It is worth mentioning that women in China had been subjected to social prejudice long before Confucianism was accepted as the cardinal protocol of Chinese culture (Yu-lan, 1948, p. 112). Nevertheless, Confucian principles led to women's permanent servitude to men through marriage and reduced them to 'subhumans.' Although the *Analects of Confucius* (Lun Yu) touches upon social and moral behaviours encompassing almost every aspect of life, it hardly says anything about women. It merely states that women are

troublesome, inferior, and are better to be ignored. If women are allowed to work outside their homes, they are bound to bring shame and disgrace (Ben-Amos, 2006, p. 45). This came as an admonition, not only in books compiled after the Sayings of Confucius but also in documents appearing in different later stages. These opinions on women left a little or almost no place for them in society. Consequently, women were neither allowed to participate in state affairs nor had any other social role to play (Yu-lan, 1948, p. 133).

Surprisingly among those who backed these notions were women in direct relations with the followers of Confucius. They advocated that women are expected to be average or inferior in their words, appearances, or charms. Chastity in women became an obsession and was adopted as a desirable quality. Women sacrificing their lives for chastity were highly venerated and officially honoured during the Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 AD) (Bacchilega, 1999, p. 67). Remarriage after the husband's death was still acceptable. Loyalty towards the husband and his family was an impelling criterion for the wife. She practically would give up her identity by foregoing her name. She was expected to bear only sons and not daughters. In case of any deviation, she would be isolated in the in-laws' family, and her life would be further miserable. In the Song Dynasty period (420 – 478 AD), social regulations were even more stringent. Widow remarriage was abolished. Suicide of women after spouses' death became a trend (Mills, 1993, p. 179).

During the Ming Dynasty (1368-1643) retaining chaste widowhood was officialised. Such women, irrespective of their age, received great respect, which percolated down to not only the husband's family but also to the entire village (Hollis et al., 1993, p. 145). Confucianism pushed women to the confined status of being providers of carnal pleasures to men, bearers, and nurturers of children (most preferably sons) for their husbands, and slaves for the in-law's family (Al-Barazenji, 2014, p. 58). Prior to the earliest dynasties like the Zhou and the Shang, Chinese society was primarily a matriarchal society (Yu-lan, 1948, p. 47). Hence, a subtle privilege was provided to women as mothers. She would enjoy authority in the family in the absence of the male head, where every other member was supposed to obey her. However, she was not entitled to inherit or claim the family property (Yu-lan, 1948, p. 51).

The female child after birth was either choked to death or would be subjected to various measures of oppression, foot-binding being one of those. Somewhere around the Tang (618-907) and the Song (960-1297) dynasties, the custom of foot-binding disseminated

among the upper-class women. It was a painful process of crippling the feet into a three-inch golden lotus that helped the girl lure men from wealthy society and get married (Leach & Fried, 1949, p. 192). Women from the affluent class could afford the luxury of foot binding as they were not expected to engage in physical work. While women from lower levels of society had the liberty to escape foot-binding as they had to toil at home and in the fields. However, in the absence of bound feet, they were looked down upon and were visibly considered to belong to inferior lineage (Saltzman, 1987, p. 551).

Folktales depict the politics between the powerful and the powerless. From the inception of its civilization, China went through matriarchy, patriarchy, and slavery. In matriarchal China, women enjoyed superiority and sovereignty over males with regard to rights to marriage (polyandry was accepted), propriety, lineage, and inheritance. The biological ability to bear children endowed women with an edge over men. A child born was identified after its mother and not its father. This is evident because the Chinese word *xing* for surname suggests the child's origin from the mother. A girl was allowed to stay with her mother after her marriage. Women headed families as well as clans. After death, funeral offerings for women were much more than those for men.

However, agriculture and animal husbandry evolving from primitive hunting and gathering gave way for division of labour among male and female members. This bifurcation of labour was the root cause of the failure of matriarchy in China. Men were apt in the new jobs and began dominating women. Matriarchal rule weakened and patriarchy was established. Family headship was transferred to a male and the family and its ancestry came right under his control. Monogamy replaced polyandry, thus compelling women to be the sole property of men (Yu-lan, 1948, p. 123).

Throughout the history of China, three major philosophies that guided the Chinese society were Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism. Although many scholars are of the view that they are complimentary to each other, others assert that they are mutually antagonistic. Confucianism emphasizes the Man-to-Man relationship, Daoism the Man-to-Nature relationship, and Buddhism the Man-to-Paradise relationship. While Confucianism doctrines profess the mode of social activities, Daoism advocates individualistic non-action and Buddhism preaches meditation and self-introspection (Ben-Amos, 2006, p. 205). Chinese folktales are abundant resources of human thoughts that touch upon all these aspects of philosophy (Claus & Korom, 1991, p. 67).

It is worth mentioning here that the political objective of Confucianism was to establish the leadership of aristocracy over a stable and harmonious society, where nobility ruled over the working class, and a strict hierarchy was maintained. The ultimate virtues were obedience and loyalty to the emperor, the supreme ruler. The family, dominated by males, worked as a prototype of the country with an unconditional display of filial piety (Yu-lan, 1948, p. 89). These attributes of Confucianism conformed to the feudal regime in China. Eventually, the rulers began exploiting their subjects in the country, and as reciprocated in the family setup, women became the objects of domination (Farrer, 1975, p. 115).

In order to have a proper perspective of the social outlook on women in China, it is imperative to deliberate the Yin-Yang Theory, which laid the foundation of male-female relationships in China. The concept of the Yin-Yang Theory is mentioned in the 2500-year-old divination book *Yijing* (The Book of Changes), primarily compiled to explain the formation of the universe. Later on, this concept was extended to define the male-female dynamics. It states that all elements in this universe comprise of two quintessential elements – the Yin (literally meaning 'dark') and the Yang (literally meaning 'bright') (Yu-lan, 1948, p. 56). These elements with antithetical nature mutually complement into an integral entirety. The Yang refers to all strong (masculine) elements while the Yin refers to all soft (feminine) elements. A few examples of Yang are sun, light, day, and heat, and those of Yin are moon, darkness, night, cold, etc.

Many Chinese women of the elite class were literate. They could read and write. This is evident from the books on rules and rituals for women following Confucianism as the guideline. However, books for women were more like rule books on filial piety and absolute subservience to the male members, e.g., (1) *Nüjie* (Lessons for Women): by a Han Dynasty woman historian Ban Zhao (a.k.a. Cao Dajia, 45-117); (2) *Nü Lunyu* (Analects for Women): by two sisters of the Tang Dynasty, Song Ruoxi and Song Ruozhao (c. 770?-824?); (3) *Neixun* (Teachings for the Inner Court): by Empress Renxiao Wen (1361/2-1407) of the Ming Dynasty; (4) *Nüfan Jielu* (Short Records of Models for Women): by Chaste Widow Wang of the Ming Dynasty, also known by her maiden name Madame Liu (1480?-1570?) (Ann, 2018, p.18).

Ordinary women would employ folktales for oral education. They had no access to education. For centuries daughters in China were used for the betterment of the natal

families. They grew up as courtesans, married off early as concubines (particularly those with bound feet) to rich people in lieu of wealth or positions, and would end up in brothels. In general, women were not decision-makers in marriage, divorce, employment, or government affairs. Marriage was a deal and divorce was impossible, unless the husband decides. Failing to bear a male child led to polygamy. Self-sacrifice, like immolation etc, was rampant after the husband's death since sustaining as a widow in the in-laws' family was discouraged by society (Moeller, 2003, p.2).

Extreme bondage of women gradually came to an end during the Qing Dynasty (1644 – 1912) under the Manchus, with the advent of western missionaries around the middle of the nineteenth century, and also because of social reforms by leaders of the Taiping Rebellion (1850 – 1864) and liberal Chinese intellectuals like Kang Youwei (Yu-lan, Fung, 1948, p. 135).

As a consequence of the strong influence of Confucianism, man-to-man relationships in China were based on the concept of the five traditional social relationships – those between sovereign and subject, father and son, elder and younger brother, husband, and wife, friend and friend (Hiriyanna, 2005, p. 180). The family maintained three out of these five relationships in which filial piety (Xiao) was considered to be the principal code of ethics. Paying homage to the ancestors was also an expression of filial piety (Ben-Amos, 2006, p. 124).

To legitimize male dominance, Confucianism illustrated the Yin-Yang Theory and regarded Heaven (Tian) and Earth (Di) to be respective male and female symbolic forms. The Heaven rains and the Earth bear crops. Similarly, the father and the mother give birth to a child, and they should be considered as great as Heaven and Earth whom the child should honour with veneration because one can please the parents only through loyalty and filial piety. Likewise, a woman should be grateful all along her life to men, be it her father, husband, or son, for being fed and provided with shelter (Hollis et al., 1993, p. 45). She should adhere to their words and be always ready to fulfil their wishes. And this she can do only by showing obedience and loyalty. According to Confucius, filial piety is the foremost among all the virtues of the world (Farrer, 1975, p. 49).

To be born a male was considered a boon in the family because the eldest member was eager to have a male heir to sustain the family lineage and for worshipping the

ancestors. Ancestral worship was a mandatory custom for every Chinese family, and only the male successor was permitted to observe it (Jordan & De Caro, 1986, p. 512). Thus, a son was believed to be much superior to a daughter. The son was licensed to carry out the customs and traditions of the family; he would head the family in the future; he would bring in his bride who would become another working member of the family and reduce his mother's burden; and lastly, would produce children to extend his family further. These reasons added to the strong bias of the family towards sons (Ragan, 2000, p. 77). This favouritism gave rise to folk expressions where a 'stupid son' is more welcome than a 'crafty daughter'. However foolish he might be, but he is still a son who would ultimately provide the family with financial assistance. But daughters would go to someone else's family someday. So, bringing up a daughter and giving her away in marriage was considered to be a complete wastage (Handoo & B., 1999, p. 88).

It was advisable for the family to give in the marriage of the daughter as soon as she grew up because society frowned upon the family where she had been kept unmarried for a long time (Claus & Korom, 1991, p. 102). In earlier times, Chinese society was orthodox in outlook and regarded the family incapable of holding the marriage of the daughter or would find fault with her. Girls were not allowed to have affairs with other males before her marriage as this ushered ill-reputation to her family. Hence, daughters were married to candidates of her parents' choice at the earliest (Ben-Amos, 2006, p. 132).

It was also a great concern for the family to fix the marriage of a daughter who was extremely good-looking. It was believed that such a girl was more engaged in caring for herself rather than being good at household works (Kousaleos, 1999, p. 25). As a result, others did not take much interest in accepting her as a bride to their families. Daughters were given some space, albeit in the absence of sons. In some families devoid of sons, daughters served the natal family and were sincere in their work, particularly sympathizing with their parents, trying to make up for the inadequacy arising out of the lack of a male heir (Jorgensen, 2014, p. 133).

In China, as in most other contemporary oriental families, the relationship between the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law had always been a strained one. Affection and love centering around the son usually gave rise to envy and quarrels between the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law (Ragan, 2009, p. 232). A mother continuously provoking her son to be hostile to his wife would at times affect peace and prosperity in the family.

But the mother would usually expect honest service and respect from the latter one for accepting her as her daughter-in-law. And the new bride, instead of serving her agonizing mother-in-law, would pray for the latter's early death so that she becomes the sole commander of the household affairs. Therefore, her devotion to the mother-in-law was considered apparent and fake. In this way, these two ladies would loathe each other and curse their own fates to live and work together (Saltzman, 1987, p. 551).

2.2 Selected Chinese Folktales

2.2.1 The Origin of Opium Smoking

Narration:

The tale is about an ugly wife who had married a man called Wang Ta. Her face was full of pockmarks, for which Wang Ta strongly hated her. He would treat her very badly and would often curse her. Despite the miseries caused by the husband, her love for her husband knew no bounds. However, feeling disgusted and hopeless with her ugliness, the wife fell acutely ill. Before dying, she reminded her husband of his cruelty and said that he would realize her love for him after her death. But Wang Ta ignored her last words. Within a week of her death, a small plant bearing a snow-white flower and a large round fruit grew by her grave. Wang Ta was worried and scared as he thought of the ill-treatment meted out to his wife. Day by day, his fear grew, and he lost his night's sleep. Without a wife and children, there was no one to take care of him. When all the doctors failed to cure him, Wang Ta, out of anguish and self-reproach, found himself on his deathbed. One night his wife appeared in his dream and asked him to save himself by smoking the juice from the little plant – formed from her soul. Wang Ta, finally believing his wife's last words smoked the juice (opium) that immediately cured him of his illness.

Interpretation:

The tale reflects a strong patriarchal backdrop, where the looks of the wife matter highly, but her name is insignificant. This may also indicate that the wife barely has any existence (represented by name here) without her external beauty --- the sole factor to win over her husband. That is why the husband in the tale has a name (Wang Ta) but the wife doesn't. The husband has every right to curse and abuse his wife. That they do not have any children amply indicates mental and physical rejection by the husband. The wife was also denied

medication or remedy while she was dying. Even her last words were ignored by her husband. On the contrary, when the selfish husband is sick, he is attended to by all the doctors in his locality. Even when he realizes his mistakes, he is scared lest his wife avenge her miseries by taking the form of the opium plant, something one had never seen before. Until her death, the wife defies all odds in her life and manifests true and pure love for her husband not only before death but also after death. Turning herself into the snow-white flowered opium plant shows the transformation of her life and her utmost desire to live-even beyond death, to help her husband who is left alone and unattended. The eternity of her love and her good wishes for her husband helped him live until his old age, as there is no mention of the husband's death till the end of the tale. Her incessant love and compassion for her husband finally persuade him to extract juice out of the opium fruit. His smoking (inhalation) of opium symbolizes his acceptance of his wife's love that cures him of his illness (hatred, cruelty, selfishness, fear) and addicts him to love --- the elixir of life (Zhang, 2018; Gao, 2003).

2.2.2 The Faithful Lady Meng

Narration:

Two families and next-door neighbours, the Mengs and the Jiangs, planted a pumpkin tree each. Both the pumpkin trees grew and met on the wall that separated the gardens of the families. It further grew jointly into a single plant. The plant bore a huge fruit, and both the families decided to cut it into two halves for them. Surprisingly, they found a beautiful little girl inside the pumpkin. Thereupon the girl was brought up by both the Meng and the Jiang families and was named Meng Jiang after them. Meanwhile, the wicked emperor Qin Shi Huang, disgusted with frequent attacks from the northern barbarians, thought of erecting a formidable Great Wall along the northern side to protect his kingdom. But all attempts failed as the Wall collapsed as soon as it was built. A wise man advised the emperor that only through human sacrifices can such a long wall be built. The subjects who were always susceptible to atrocities by the emperor panicked when they came to know of this. A witty scholar intervened and suggested that instead of making several sacrifices, the emperor should get hold of a fellow called Wan (meaning Ten Thousand). A single sacrifice of this person shall be equal to ten thousand sacrifices to build the Ten-Thousand-mile-long Wall. Wan, however, fled and hid inside a banana garden close to a pond where one night, he caught the sight of Meng Jiang bathing. This forced Wan to

marry Meng Jiang, and she, too, accepted Wan as her would-be husband. But unfortunately, Wan was whisked away by the emperor's men on their wedding day. Knowing about the fate of her husband, the wife embarked upon a long and treacherous journey to finally reach the Great Wall. However, she could not find Wan's bones anywhere as they lay beneath the Wall. Out of misery and frustration, Meng Jiang wept so profusely that the Wall collapsed revealing the bones. When brought before the emperor, he was so impressed by her beauty that he immediately decided to make her his empress. Realizing there is no way out, Meng Jiang agreed on three conditions- a forty-nine days mourning festival, presence of the emperor in person during the burial and a forty-nine feet terrace in the memory of her husband. When all her three wishes were granted, she climbed up the terrace, shouted out cursing the emperor, jumped, and died. The angry emperor asked his soldiers to cut her body into small pieces and crush her bones. The pieces of her body transformed into small silver fish, which housed her soul.

Interpretation:

This is one of the four Great Folktales of China. The story is set in the Qin (Ch'in) era when the first Yellow Emperor of China politically united other small kingdoms into a powerful country called 'China', the name derived from the dynasty itself. The Qin emperor was highly autocratic and brutal. This is evident from the references in the tale that "he regarded his subjects as so much grass and weeds" and they would "tremble under his threat".

The word 'wall', which frequently appears in this folktale, is a significant metaphor. On the one hand, the 'wall' is a symbol of separation for Lady Meng Jiang. Meng Jiang's journey started with her birth inside a pumpkin on a wall; she was separated from her husband for the construction of a wall, and her life ended in a river by the wall. Lady Meng Jiang was not borne out of human unison, but was found inside a fruit. She is a product of agriculture and is symbolic of the prime occupation of the ordinary masses in China. The uniting of two pumpkin plants into a single plant and bearing of a single fruit symbolizes the unity of the common people, particularly the peasant class. It is this union that gave birth to the beautiful Meng Jiang, and it is the strength of the unity idolized by Meng Jiang that stood against the tyrannical emperor. She was a woman of impeccable character and an epitome of chastity. Despite the fact that she was certain about her husband's death, she crossed the mountains and rivers alone. Putting aside the temptation of becoming the queen

as offered by the emperor, she preferred to give up her life — the supreme sacrifice — and remained faithful to her husband till her death. Before dying, she also ensured that her husband had a respectful death, observed by rituals and followed by a royal burial. Since 'fish' in Chinese culture is a symbol of prosperity, the transformation of Lady Meng Jiang into silver fish after her death at the end of the tale implies bringing wealth and fortune in the lives of the common Chinese people.

On the other hand, 'wall' is also an object of ego and pride of the emperor. Towards the beginning of the tale we see that the emperor's inability to erect the Wall signifies how hollow his ego is. Towards the end the Wall that was constructed on human sacrifice (untiring toil of the masses) gets washed away by the tears of Meng Jiang. The bones (remains) of Wan lay visible under the debris – exposing cruelty and hypocrisy of the wicked emperor.

2.2.3 The Water Mother

Narration:

Long ago, a simple-minded poor woman lived with her daughter and mother-in-law. She was very caring towards both of them. The mother-in-law, on the contrary, was hostile to her. They had no water source nearby. The families in the neighbourhood had to buy water from the water carriers. One day, the cruel mother-in-law said that they cannot afford to waste money for buying water and ordered her to fetch water by herself. Apart from managing all the household works, she had to travel to the far-off place to carry water back home. She even had to go to such a far- off place twice or thrice a day when there was shortage of water. Life was extremely difficult, but she won't dare to protest, lest she would be beaten blue by her mother-in-law and have to live without food. Eventually, she found it intolerable to sustain life anymore and decided to kill herself. As she prepared to jump into the well, an old lady appeared in front of her. Upon hearing her untold miseries, the old lady gave her a pail and a rod. It was a magic pail which would be filled with water when struck only once by the rod. She was also warned not to strike more than once and not to reveal this to anyone. The woman after thanking the old lady went back home. The pail saved her from the daily toil of going out and carrying water back home. But the mother-in–law grew suspicious and discovered the trick. Unaware of the warning, the mother-in–law tapped the pail thrice and water surged out of the pail. The entire village

was submerged. Helpless, the poor woman also died drowning in the flood. The pail turned into an artesian spring and the later generations built a temple in honour of the poor woman and revered her as the Water Mother.

Interpretation:

This tale gives an account of the deification of an ordinary woman as the Water Mother because of the abundant source of water she made accessible to the people who faced hardships for scarcity of water. Water is the theme of this tale. It is the source of all lives on earth. The poor woman is symbolic of a mother who nourishes life of her child. Like all mothers, she is simple, kind-hearted, diligent and caring, not only to her dear child but also to the mother-in-law who hated her. Her family is without a headman, which gives the vile mother-in-law ample opportunities to exploit her. But love oozes out of her heart with spontaneity. She endures unbearable hardships to take care of her family. She was threatened by the mother-in-law to survive without food. She knew it well that if she dies, there is no one to look after her little daughter and old mother-in-law. This compels her to use up the last drop of her blood to work and carry water for them. Although the kind old lady saved her life and gifted her with the magic rod and pail, she died because of the folly and greed of her mother-in-law. It is mentioned in the tale that she was drowned because she did not know how to stop the water gushing out of the pail. This is symbolic of the fact that she was used to an ordinary life ignorant of opulence. This ignorance barred her from controlling the excess of water and saving herself. Nevertheless, the source of water that was exclusive and restricted to her family was made available to the whole village as the pail turned into a natural fountain of water. Thus, through her self-sacrifice she gained eternity as the water (i.e., life) providing mother.

2.1.4 Two Mothers and A Child

Narration:

A young lady called Woo-Liu-Mai lived in a village happily with her beloved husband and a kind mother-in-law. But misfortune struck when one day suddenly her husband died leaving behind their two-day old baby. Woo-Liu-Mai, barely sixteen then, being a good soul, refrained from sharing her grief with other people and gods. However, before the New Year's Day she asked her mother-in-law what the point is of celebrating and

worshipping the gods in their house when this would not bring back his husband to life or allow them to live happily. The kindhearted mother-in-law urged her not to feel sad, since there are so many people around who can't even afford to have one square meal a day. They were in a way much better off than the downtrodden poor people. The mother-in-law's words healed Woo-Liu-Mai's mind, and they started preparing to celebrate the New Year. But when she woke up in the morning, to her horror, she found her baby lying dead. A blue cloth was hung on the door as a funeral symbol. The neighbours and passersby thought that the mother-in-law had passed away. The baby was wrapped in a cloth for the funeral in three days. Woo-Liu-Mai was heartbroken and went to visit her native place. She had lost both her husband and child. She lost all hope and had nothing else in her life. Her relatives came to console and comfort her. Woo-Lau-Chan, a close cousin sister who had deep love and sympathy for Woo-Liu-Mai, had a baby just of the same age. She was deeply hurt on hearing the sad news and pondered over for quite some time. Finally, Woo-Lau-Chan decided to quietly exchange her child with the dead one. That night she stealthily entered Woo-Liu-Mai's in-laws' home, kept her own child wrapped in the dead baby's clothes and left the dead baby in the great forest on her way back. She hinted at Woo-Liu-Mai that her child might have come back to life, and she should return to her in-laws' home. But Woo-Liu-Mai was convinced only when her mother-in-law informed her that the child was surprisingly alive with its appearance completely changed. Woo-Liu-Mai's happiness knew no bounds as she rushed home and picked up her baby in her lap.

Henceforth, she never ever complained about anything to the gods. The boy grew up as Woo-Liu-Mai's son and was named Kwoh-King. He was bright and diligent, and received a good education. Woo-Lau-Chan, however, planned to choose a suitable time when Kwoh-King grows up, to tell him the truth, since worshipping one's true ancestors was a primary custom in China. So, when Kwoh-King was sixteen years old, his original mother Woo-Lau-Chan, who was also a widow then, wrote a letter to him with his family details. Woo-Liu-Mai, Woo-Lau-Chan and Kwoh-King were all summoned by the Emperor. After listening to all three and coming to know their accounts, the Emperor built a beautiful house for them. Both Woo-Liu-Mai and Woo-Lau-Chan stayed in their new house. Kwoh-King stayed nearby and took care of both the mothers throughout their lives.

Interpretation:

Although the tale revolves around Woo-Liu-Mai, the real protagonist actually is her cousin sister Woo-Lau-Chan. Woo-Liu-Mai who tragically lost her husband and child at a very early age was courageous enough to face the sorrows of life all alone. To state that she was only sixteen then indicates that she was married off even earlier. This is a true reflection of contemporary society that regarded the girl child as a burden for the family and was compelled to get married at a very early stage of their life. Fortunately, Woo-Liu-Mai found a strong support in her kind-hearted mother-in-law who exceptionally did not blame her fate – a typical belief that still runs in many Asian traditions – for ruining the family (Clark & Wang, 2004). Her words, blended with deep philosophy, were reasonable enough in the grief of Woo-Liu-Mai to make her understand the realities of life. Her social outlook practically brought Woo-Liu-Mai's life back to normalcy before the demise of her child. But above all, the role played by lady Woo-Lau-Chan was the strongest of its kind. Endowed with rare humane qualities of empathy and benevolence, Woo-Lau-Chan was truly sensitive about the disasters that shattered Woo-Liu-Mai's life. It is mentioned in the tale that "In China it is bad to be a widow, but to be both widowed and childless makes a woman almost an outcast". The supreme act of sacrifice by Woo-Lau-Chan in giving away her own child in lieu of Woo-Liu-Mai's dead baby is undoubtedly a resolute and rare virtue. Since it is mentioned towards the end of the tale that she later became a widow, it also adds to astonishment how she had taken such a bold step when her spouse was still alive. At the same time, one may observe that Woo-Lau-Chan was quite pragmatic in taking the right and timely decision of divulging the true identity to her son Kwoh-King, firstly, to evade any misunderstanding at his later stage of life, and secondly, to be righteous to his true ancestors in worshipping them. Thus, Woo-Lau-Chan impressively succeeded in maintaining a unique balance between emotion and rationality. Nevertheless, all three women - Woo-Liu-Mai, her mother-in-law and Woo-Lau-Chan, in their own capacities were capable to display their strength in the face of challenges that life posed before them.

2.2.5 Husband and Wife in this Life and in the Life to come

Narration:

The tale is about a husband and a wife who have a strong bond of love between them. Unfortunately, one day the wife died. After her death, the husband found it difficult to

forget her. So, he decided to look for his wife in the land of ghosts where people resided after death. On his way he put up in an inn where a waiter told him that the land of ghosts was not far away. He was also advised to stay beside a well and wait there for his wife. Upon reaching the land of ghosts, the husband did as he was told. As a beautiful woman approached the well, the husband could recognize her as his wife. However, when he called her, the wife neither recognized him nor did she look at him. Out of despair, the husband went back to the inn and told everything to the waiter. He was then advised to go again to the well, meet his wife and this time throw a coin into her pail which will certainly make her talk to him. The next day when the man reached land of ghosts, things happened exactly as he thought. His wife recognized him and told him to leave the place as she was already married to a ghost, an official. But seeing her erstwhile husband not ready to part with her, she concealed him in her house and warned him not to accept foods offered by her ghost husband, as they may be poisonous. When the ghost husband came home, he smelt human flesh. The wife, however, convinced him that the human was her brother and thus saved him. The man stayed with his former wife for ten days in the underworld and then in order to reunite, they fled to an upper world. As they reached the house, the wife felt thirsty and went inside the house to have some tea. Before entering the house, she broke the coin that the husband had given her earlier into two pieces and gave one half to the husband and kept the other half with her. The husband kept waiting outside the house until it was dark. Being angry, he dashed into the house and enquired about his wife with the owner. The owner denied having seen her. The husband was baffled. In the meantime, a baby girl was born to the owner and his wife. The husband refused to leave without his wife and took the job of a worker in that very house. As the baby girl grew up, she kept on weeping at everyone's lap except that of the worker. She also had her right fist so tightly closed from birth that nobody was able to open it. When the girl was seventeen, the worker could open her fist, inside which lay half of a coin. It exactly matched the other half that the worker had. They recognized each other and got married again as husband and wife.

Interpretation:

The tale is based on the folk belief that 'the dead become ghosts and live in the spirit land' and can recall their past by touching a piece of metal. The theme of the tale manifests the eternity of love that transcends beyond mortal life. It gives an account of a man's journey in search of lost love after his wife's demise. It was only through courage and relentless

dedication towards her husband that she made impossible feats possible and realized the husband's persuasion of love for her. While she was married to the ghost official, she demonstrated fearlessness and wisdom to save his former husband's life and flee from the ghost's house with him. Although she was already settled in a different realm of the netherworld, it was her undaunted commitment to her true love that lifted both the husband and the wife as if from a curse to a fresh lease of life. Her firm conviction that love can certainly be rekindled has been indicated in the tale when she physically transforms from the underworld into the upper world by taking birth as a baby girl with the half-coin in her fist. Retaining the two halves of the coin each by herself and her husband and later joining the two pieces together is symbolic of their love reconciled.

2.3 Role and social status of mothers and wives in traditional Khasi Society

Khasi folklore abounds with colourful folktales that reflect their cultural ethos. Khasi folktales in their primary form are known to be collected by Reverend Dr. Roberts, a Christian missionary from Cherrapunji in the state of Meghalaya. These folktales were later translated into English by a certain School Inspector and author of educational books on the Khasi language, U. Nissor Singh (Gurdon, 1907, p. 3). Whether the Khasi society is matriarchal in its true sense is a debatable issue. A cursory observation from the perspective of a Khasi woman as the single custodian of the ancestral property, undertaking responsibilities of her kith and kin in crises, or functioning as the sole guardian of rites and rituals of her family (iing), might lead to the conclusion that matriarchy rules the Khasis. However, women's roles are quite restricted outside the domesticities. From historical times, since men were busy in wars, women have been minding family affairs.

Nevertheless, when talking about the Khasi culture, one should consider the exclusive status and privileges that the Khasi women enjoy. The societal setup is distinctly matrilineal. According to folk belief, the Khasi race is believed to have originated from 'seven huts' (Hynniew trip) out of the 'seventeen huts' that were allotted to humans by God. Each 'hut' is also interpreted as 'nest,' which in turn actually refers to 'family.' These huts or nests were inhabited by seven pairs of virgin couples who descended to the earth and gave rise to the Khasi race (Roy, 1936, p. 21).

Interestingly, Khasi tradition says that a clan (Kur) originated from the common ancient mother (Ka Ïawbei). Lineage from the ancestress is perpetuated by women (Kpoh)

of successive generations who, by virtue of social precedents, inherit ancestral properties and are assigned to reside in and preserve respective matrilocal families (Ryndem, 2017, p. 42).

The mother within a Khasi family is such an authority that she practically represents her clan and inherits the property – be it ancestral (Ka nongtymmen) or self-acquired (Ka nongkhynraw) (Ryndem, 2017, p. 23). In marriage, the mother is as responsible, if not more, as the father is, and bringing up children in a righteous way, abiding by the family tradition is primarily the responsibility of the mother (Chacko, 1998, p. 15). As divorce is quite common in Khasi society, the breakup between the parents does not significantly affect the children. Social regulations allow the children to stay in the custody of the mother. The identity of the father is obscure, and the children do not find it difficult to unite with their mother's family as they belong to the same clan. They take the surname of their mother's clan and are traditionally named by the father's mother – the Meikha (Mawrie, 1981, p. 45).

There are plenty of references throughout the Khasi culture pointing major sources of creations to a 'mother.' Khasi matriliny might have attained a certain degree of matriarchy that their Creator God (U Blei Nongthaw), a male deity, is also regarded as the Mother Creator - Ka lei Synshar (Gurdon, 1907, p. 67). The Mother Creator again gives rise to Iawbei Ram-ew – the primitive mother (along with the primitive father); the Earth is a mother – Ka Mei Ram-ew; the environment is a mother – Ka Mei Marlang (Bareh, 1997, p. 112).

Folktales, being a very prominent medium of folklore, shall certainly help in tracing the existence of such female attributes and strong matrilineal tradition in Khasi society (Ben-Amos, 2006, p. 89). Since the Khasis strongly believe that the mother is the source of a clan (long wait na ka synthetic), the family system that is centred around the mother is also absolutely dependent on mother-kinship. All hereditary ownership is bestowed upon the mother (Ryndem, 2017, p. 25). Being the source of the family, the mother is the head and the decision maker, while the mother's elder brother (kni) supervises rights and rituals within the family (Lyngdoh, 2017, p. 53). The children, irrespective of being daughters or sons, develop a sense of belonging to the mother's clan. The primary reasons are that their entire earnings are channelled to a common pool of funds that is utilized to manage and run the family. The mother essentially represents both

parents. Daughters become more responsible than sons as they eventually inherit the property from their mothers. The society being matrilocal, the daughter brings the groom to her mother's family (Chacko, 1998, p. 20).

After death, the bones of all descendants are laid in the cromlech of their respective mothers' clans (Bareh, 1997, p. 56). In case the property is not inherited but purchased by the son, the mother acquires it on the occasion of the son's demise (Gordon, 1975, p. 129).

The claim of the wife over the man on ancestral property is justified by the Khasis in their notion based on the process of birth. The mother's biological contribution is much more than that of the father as the life of the child is infused in the mother's womb. Vital forces of life are drawn from the mother's blood which establishes a natural and inseparable connection with the mother (Mawrie, 1981, p. 43). This also signifies the foundation of the mother's clan that is naturally inherited from the mother by virtue of birth (Lyngdoh, 2017, p. 120).

The Khasis believe that since the mother is bestowed with natural custody of the child for nine months within her womb, this also bequeaths her with life-long custody of the child, even after divorce and separation from her husband, as mentioned earlier (Nongbri, 2008, p. 99). The active and predominant participation of the mother in reproduction and her decisive role in the upbringing of her child/children assigns her a pivotal role and renders her a paramount stature in the family (Chacko, 1998, p. 62).

However, the authority of women in family affairs does not grant them self-indulgence and absolute liberty. There are certain social bindings that formulate attributes for women to preserve and uphold the family honour (Nongbri, 2008, p. 103). The domestication of women is further accentuated by society curbing their involvement in political and administrative affairs (Gordon, 1975, p. 131). Role-playing in Khasi society has been divided distinctly among men and women from earlier times. Men are supposed to be engaged in politics and war, while women are in charge of the property and children (Mawrie, 1981, p. 55).

Therefore, latent patriarchy apparently seems to exist in the garb of the matrilineal tradition embedded in Khasi culture from its inception (Simon, 1988, p. 21). Allowing only men into politics and governance outside the four walls of a room in a clandestine

way pushed women to the corners of the households with all sorts of domestic responsibilities (Mills, 1993, p. 178). The eldest and the youngest female members of every family are bound to remain as the custodians of their ancestral property as soon as they attain their respective status within the family (Bareh, 1997, p. 68). Regardless of the privileges they enjoy as far as making major decisions and participating in family rituals, their responsibilities and bindings are far overweighed (Lyngdoh, 2017, p. 126).

Regardless of assuming duty as a keeper, a woman is deprived of the propriety of her ancestral property but has only the right to oversee it (Gordon, 1975, p. 132). She is liable to accumulate resources on her own or from other members of her clan to maintain her ancestral abode (Simon, 1988, p. 23). She is also obliged to look after all the anguished members of her clan (Chacko, 1998, p. 67). Even the rights to make decisions and engage in clan rituals are carried out under the strict supervision of the woman's elder brother (Nongbri, 2008, p. 106). Despite the existence of the fathers of children who traditionally belong to the lineage of the mothers, the maternal uncle acts as their guardian all along (Mawrie, 1981, p. 58).

The husband, on the other hand, serves his own clan and is not allowed the custody of his children. He has no right to decide his children's future. He stays with his wife in his in-laws' family merely as an outsider since he belongs to his mother's clan. His conscience is torn between his natal and his uxorilocal families. Being too loyal to their wife leads to social remorse while being preoccupied with his mother and sister, which precisely is his own clan, distances him from his own family (Nongbri, 2008, p. 78).

It is a matter of choice for the husband whether he would be more faithful towards his wife's family or to his sister's. The wife's perpetual anxiety about her husband's fidelity, even after marriage, proves to be a social and personal menace. The husband, seemingly helpless in the face of matriliny, infringes marital consciences with veiled support ["so what, he is a man of means" (yn lei sa ia u bah eh kamai)] (Nongbri, 1988, p. 113) from the family and society. Often extra marital relationships and polygamy ["a man with many flags" (u rang khadar lama)] (Nongbri, 1988, p. 115) are encouraged. Since the onus of running the family by garnering resources primarily lies with women, the wife strives hard to lure her husband away from her in-laws. Consequently, she is represented in a bad light as a sexual enticer as well as a deceiver (ka nongpah ka nongphon) (Nongbri, 1988, p. 116).

While the husband has a way back to his own family or clan and can depend on his sister for the rest of his life, the wife on the other hand is bound to carry on the task of looking after her parents and children. Significantly, the preference of a girl child hinges on the economic prospects of the parents. However, although a woman is considered to have choices over the economy of the family, all her decisions are governed by her brother who is a male. Even the family rites and rituals that are as a rule conducted by the woman cannot be executed without the brother's guidance. So, there are constant underlying animosities between the husband and the brother in-law on one side, and between the wife and the sister in-law on the other side.

Thus, the apparent economic dominion of a woman on her clan is as a matter of fact reined by intrinsic patriarchal male stakeholders. Matriliny has not served in her interest to attain gender equality and male dogmatism has burdened her with domesticity in order to keep her out of the socio-political realm. A male member may bypass his commitments and duties towards his family, but if a woman fails to comply with her family liabilities, she is outcast by society (Nongbri, 2008, p. 122). Furthermore, personal freedom of a Khasi wife is curbed by social constraints when she marries a non-Khasi man. She is also denied her economic prerogatives.

2.3.1 The Waterfall of Ka Likai

Narration:

The beauty of the high and picturesque waterfall of Ka Likai (Noh-Ka-Likai) that originates in the village of Rangjirteh and flows through the village of Nongriat could be enjoyed particularly during autumn from the village of Laitkynsew when it is in full vigor. It is said that there was a poor woman called Ka Likai from the village of Rangjirteh, whose husband died after the birth of a girl child. She had a tough time bringing up the child amidst poverty. As the child grew up enough to be able to walk, she married another man. She earned livelihood by carrying iron ore. Most of her time was spent with her child. The husband, feeling neglected by her wife, became angry with the little girl. One day, when the wife went out to work, the husband killed the child, mixed her flesh with curry, and kept it for the mother to eat. Although he threw away the head and bones, he stealthily kept her fingers inside the betel nut basket since he forgot to dispose of them. When the mother came back hungry, she was surprised not to find her child at home. Upon enquiring,

the husband lied that he was unaware of her whereabouts. Ignorant of the cruelty of her husband, she consumed the curry. As she opened the betel nut she was horrified to find her child's fingers in it. She at once realized the gruesome fate of the little girl. She was completely heartbroken and devastated. With a cutter (*da*) in her hand, she rushed to the mouth of the waterfall and threw herself into it. Henceforth, this fall came to be known as the *Noh-Ka-Likai*, or the Leap of Ka Likai.

Interpretation:

This is a very old and popular Khasi folktale tracing the legend of Ka Likai. Typical of the ordinary rural Khasi woman, Ka Likai had been a supportive wife and a caring mother, providing bread and butter to her family. She had been fighting poverty and dealing with the hardships brought about by the early death of her husband. She was completely dedicated to the upbringing her child. It is evident that she remarried so that her new husband would be at home to look after her child. She was the only bread earner. So, she toiled very hard engaging in heavy manual work to run the family. The selfish and envious husband could not tolerate his wife's single devotion for the child. He breached the trust reposed on him by her wife and made her life purposeless by killing the child. As a mother, she could not endure the loss of her dear child. Being helpless of her deplorable situation, unable to lay trust on her spouse and as a mark of protest against brutality of men she met the tragic end of her life. Needless to say, this tale epitomises the utmost sacrifice of a mother for her child. The waterfall plunging from a great height is symbolic of the leap of a wounded mother (Mukherjee, 2018) and disappearing into the oblivion, perhaps in search of her deceased child.

2.3.2 Hunting the Stag Lapalang

Narration:

Long ago a young deer called Stag Lapalang (*U Sier Lapalang*) who lived with his mother on the Plains of Sylhet. The young animal was much dotted by his mother. She would always defend him from all vices. After Lapalang grew further in age, he gained considerable strength, confidence and dignity. Frustrated with his usual neighbourhood, he ventured to travel to the Khasi Hills to gauge his vigour and look for begonia leaves. The mother's pampering was unrestrained and Lapalang had no inhibitions. Though her

mother had warned him of the perils of the Hills, yet the young Stag bubbling with pride and courage did not pay heed to his mother's admonitions. At his first visit he found enough leaves and green grasses to feed on. He was elated with ecstasy. Soon this joy turned into utter dismay when all men, having heard of the healthy young deer, put aside their chores and gathered around Lapalang, cried loud and chased him with arrows, spears and swords. He endured the chase for days and gave the hunters a good run but was finally killed. The lonely mother, staying far away heard the hunting-cries. She was gravely worried and impatiently left home to seek her son. Upon reaching the Khasi Hills she was informed about his son being hunted to death. Her sorrow and misfortune knew no bounds, as she set off in search of her dead son. As she cut across the country, her heart-breaking cry resounded all over the places. Her cry bore such pain that all the people were stunned; the hunters were stupefied and broke their arrows. The lament of the mother was unprecedented and so intense that it belittled mourning of a human death. The Khasis to this day still revere the way the mother mourned for her son and follow her to mourn the departed souls of their kin.

Interpretation:

This is one of the most fascinating tales from Khasi folklore. Although the story revolves around the Stag Lapalang, initially showcasing its magnificent grace and courage, yet the mother deer emerges as an outstanding character manifesting the universal virtue of motherhood that underrates all other virtues. As a mother her love is stated to have exceeded that of the humans. She is responsible enough to have nurtured her son as the noblest among others in his race. She is also a protective mother. It is evident from the tale that the prowess and pose instilled in Lapalang were certainly the traits that his mother bore. However, the ever-indulging mother could not compensate her grief in the death of her brave child. The extraordinary mourning of the mother for her son is a testimony to this. Breaking of the hunters' arrows in their quivers is symbolic of their submission in the mother's helplessness. Her kindness and lament for her child that find eternity even among the humans stand out in sharp contrast with the cruelty of the hunters.

2.3.3 The Legend of U Raitong, The Khasi Orpheus

Narration:

This Khasi folktale relates to the legend of the hill of Shillong. Many years ago, there lived a great *Siem* or chief and his wife Mahadei, who was an epitome of paramount beauty. As per the local custom the chief left his kingdom for a long time, handing over the responsibilities at the hand of Mahadei. There was a poor wretched fellow called U Raitong gifted with a rare capacity of enchanting people by playing *sharati* (flute). In the past, misfortune fell upon him as his entire family along with many others in the village died in a terrible epidemic. Every night when the whole village fell asleep, U Raitong would drape himself elegantly and play his flute. His music mesmerised Mahadei and she immediately, fell deeply in love with U Raitong. Their romantic yet illicit affair led to the birth of their son. When the chief came back, he was furious to know about this illegitimate child that his consort had borne. U Raitong was identified as the father and was punished to be burnt alive. Upon hearing the flute being played by U Raitong for the last time as he walks over to the pyre, Mahadei sacrificed by burning herself to death. From then on, this hill came to be known as the Hill of Raitong.

Interpretation:

The apparent portrayal of the protagonist of this tale--U Raitong, the Khasi Orpheus, has been outweighed by that of Lady Mahadei. She plays the most significant role. On one hand, she is capable enough to manage her administrative duties of the kingdom, and on the other hand, she is committed to her lover, Raitong. She is bold enough to leave the palace every night to visit her beloved. Her commitment and dedication let her bear the child of Raitong in her womb. She defied social norms to pursue her passion even when she could foresee the tragic aftermath. She remained true to her love and her sacrifice was phenomenal.

2.3.4 U Ramhah

Narration:

There was a mighty giant called U Ramhah who lived in the dark ages. He was the savior of mankind and earned a lot of praise and admiration. He was so strong that he even

defeated the ferocious giant U Thlen. But since then, he became very proud and began afflicting the Khasi people. He used to plunder the markets and houses of the common people and loot their belongings. A wealthy woman called Ka Bthuh from the village Cherra trained up the village-folks to avenge the misdeeds of U Ramhah. She challenged the giant and humiliated him. Consequently, the giant ravaged her godowns in a bid to reduce her to a beggar. Once, Ka Bthuh arranged a great feast to lure U Ramhah. The giant appeared on the day of the feast and started eating large mouthfuls, unaware of the fact that Ka Bthuh had put a sharp steel blade into the rice. When the giant died on the hillside, his bones were carried away by a strong storm and scattered along the southern borders of the Khasi Hills. The marrowless bones took the form of lime rocks and became the source of wealth for the Khasi people.

Interpretation:

The tale of U Ramhah is evident of the fact that the Khasi people could not have got rid of the tormenting giant had the lady Ka Bthuh not garnered courage and wit enough to subdue him. Her challenging the dreaded giant exemplifies undaunted valor. She warned the giant not to underrate the ability of a woman. She took the giant head-on in her decisive statement, "You may conquer the strength of a man, but beware of the cunning of a woman.". She not only dispersed the fear of the giant by killing him, but the bones that transformed into lime also became an asset for the Khasi people as compensation for his misadventures.

2.4 Comparative Analysis

Our study mainly relies on a comparative framework to highlight the portrayal of women in two cultures. Let us try to trace the developments that occur in the major roles portrayed by the women acting as mothers or wives in the selected Chinese and Khasi folktales cited in this chapter. Let us also try to analyze the way these characters evolve in the course of the tales. We will begin by looking at some Chinese folktales first.

The Origin of Opium Smoking **(Chinese folktale)**

Oppressed woman: The wife of Wang Ta led a miserable life. Her married life was marred by her appearance. She was ill-treated and cursed regularly by her husband because

her face was filled with pockmarks. Her physical appearance repelled her husband. She was repeatedly reminded of her ugliness until she died of frustration and despair.

Reincarnated woman: Although she loved her husband despite the treatment she received from him, the wife of Wang Ta realized in her mind that she had no place in her husband's heart. She was of no use to her husband in her mortal life. So, when she saw Wang Ta falling sick in her absence, she transformed her soul into an opium plant after her death.

Woman as emancipator: The concern for her husband remained in her mind so strongly that even after death, the wife appeared in the dream of Wang Ta. Seeing her husband in his death bed and no one to attend him, Wand Ta's wife turned her soul into an opium plant, pursued him to smoke its juice and brought him back to life. Endless concern for the well-being of her husband could not stop her from revisiting her husband from the nether world and helping him survive the claws of death.

The Faithful Lady Meng **(Chinese folktale)**

Woman of humble origin: Meng Jiang, as stated in the tale, was borne out of a pumpkin fruit and not of biological parents. This element essentially reflects the nature of her birth --- simple yet extraordinary---defined clearly at the very onset of the tale.

Woman as conformist: It is interesting to note that although Meng Jiang had an unconventional birth without human intervention, she followed prevalent rituals and abided by social norms. She was very particular about choosing her fiancé Wan Xiling since he had seen her naked while taking a bath. Although her foster parents had already fixed her marriage elsewhere, she abided by the village law and decided to marry Wan. Later, when she found Wan dead and buried under the Great Wall, she gathered all his bones and proposed to the Qin emperor to hold a proper funeral ceremony for the man she had yet to marry.

Devoted Woman: The independent-minded nature of Lady Meng Jiang is prominently reflected in her character throughout the tale. She chose to suffer a lot because of her commitment to her fiancé Wan Xiling, yet neither did she deny her love for Wan, nor did she disdain him after his death. When the wicked and tyrannical Qin emperor cast his evil eyes on her beauty and coerced her to marry him, she was not swept away by the emperor's

flattery. On the contrary, she stood resolutely for her fiancé's last rites and sacrificed her life for her beloved.

The Water Mother **(Chinese folktale)**

Oppressed woman: The ingenuous village housewife who used to run the house and take care of her daughter and mother-in-law lived a pitiable life. She was often rebuked and abused by her cruel mother-in-law, possibly as the son is conspicuously left out in the tale. She was not only assigned all household work, but she was also compelled to travel out of home to a far-off place to fetch water, and on occasions for more than once. Life was already difficult due to the scarcity of water. Moreover, this additional burden of carrying water day after day from a distant place took a toll on her health and mind. However, she was left with no option because firstly, her mother-in-law was too old and her daughter too young to replace her in her daily housework; and secondly, she was too scared and hard-pressed to work by her mother-in-law and was pushed to give up on life and commit suicide.

Woman as emancipator: Just when the housewife was about to jump into the well where she and others collected water, an old lady appeared as an angel and prevented her from doing so. The old lady not only gave a new lease of life to the housewife, but she also gifted her with a magic pale and a stick to wondrously produce water that could save her from coming to the well. This definitely resolved the problem at home for some time. However, as the story unfolds, this recourse for one individual household turns out to put an end to the water crisis in the entire village, albeit kicking off with an interim flood, where many houses including the housewife's one was submerged. But finally, it is observed that a water fountain is installed in the village in memory of the housewife honoring her with the epithet 'Water Mother'.

Two Mothers and A Child **(Chinese folktale)**

Woman as altruist: The given tale is about Woo-Liu-Mai who features as a victim of misfortune right at the onset. At a tender age, she first lost her husband and then her baby boy. She was disgusted with her fate for which she blamed the gods. Nonetheless, her close cousin Woo-Lau Chan became truly compassionate about Woo-Liu-Mai's deplorable condition and, with an unwavering mind, abandoned her only son in exchange for Woo-

Liu-Mai's dead son, without her knowledge. She never thought of her son, nor did she contemplate a future without her son. The only thought that she was focused on was to reinstate happiness in Woo-Liu-Mai's barren life.

Unfeigned woman: Notwithstanding her empathy for Woo-Liu-Mai and sacrificing her son Kwoh-King to replace the dead child of the latter, Woo-Lau Chan was upright enough to confess to her son his descent. She was completely aware of the ancestral rites and wanted Kwoh-King to remain truthful to his ancestors. This was quite a bold act that she undertook. There were high chances of misunderstandings between the trio --- the two mothers and the son. Moreover, this could have also given rise to disbelief against Woo-Lau Chan, and she could also have forfeited any rights towards her son. Irrespective of these possibilities, her honesty in bringing out the truth surpasses all the other emotions surrounding the three of them.

Husband and Wife in This Life and in the Life to Come **(Chinese folktale)**

Devoted woman: The man's wife around whom the tale centers around is an epitome of dedication and commitment, be it the nether world, or the mortal world. When she was married to the man, she was attached so emotionally to him that even after her death her husband went out looking for her as he was unable to live without her. In the second place, when she died, she became a ghost wife and initially did not respond to the human husband. She was further not willing to remarry him as she was already married to a ghost. And finally, when she recalled her human husband and his love for her, she did not hesitate to leave with him for the 'upper world'. She also made it a point to find a way for her rebirth as a human in order to reunite with him.

Reincarnated woman: The man's wife, after her leaving the mortal world, was already settled as a ghost wife in the nether world. However, she was so moved by the ardency of her human husband for her that she could not help transforming herself to human again, taking birth as a little girl who would but love only her husband, already an old man by then.

Woman as emancipator: The man, who kept looking for his dead wife and also pursued her to marry him again, would have not been successful in his mission without the wit and wisdom of his wife. When he met his wife as a ghost, he was about to be killed by the

ghost husband by poisoning, had his wife not saved his life from the ghost. Even before she was reborn, she was witty enough to break the metal coin into two halves, one for her and the other for her human husband. This plan helped her human husband to identify the wife reborn as the little girl by matching both the coins.

While analyzing the representation of mothers and wives in the selected Khasi folktales, the following traits were found to be prominent.

The Waterfall of Ka Likai **(Khasi folktale)**

Unfeigned woman: When Ka Likai became a widow, she did not inherit property from her husband to lead a decent life. The tale does not hint at Ka Likai's acquired ownership of ancestral resources from her mother, as has been the law of the land. Moreover, she had a baby girl to feed and bring up. Being left alone penniless at such a young age with liabilities of maintaining a family of two and nurturing her baby, she was surprisingly not rattled. It would have been perhaps easier for her to either marry a man immediately or leaving her daughter with someone from her family or friends. On the contrary, she took charge of her own and her daughter's lives by taking up a tough job for earning money. Since there was no one else in her family, it is obvious that along with carrying heavy ores, she also had to carry her daughter along, as the baby had yet not learnt to walk. She was also wise and responsible enough not to marry again until her daughter learns to walk. She knew well that the man she was going to marry won't be able to look after a toddler. The day the tragic incident happened when her new husband killed her daughter, she was surprised to find that he had prepared food for her. This also hints that she not only had to work hard outside home but also would cook food for the three members of her family including her. These adequately illustrate Ka Likai as a responsible headwoman, an affectionate mother and a concerned wife.

Resolute woman: This legend showcases the tragic story of Ka Likai who was afflicted with unbearable adversities throughout her life. Her husband died leaving behind a baby girl with her to bring up. On the one hand she was poverty- stricken and had to earn money bearing extreme hardships at her work carrying iron ore; on the other hand, she had to look after her child. Her second marriage only increased the burden on her as she had to continue to work hard as before to earn bread and butter for herself, her daughter and now even for her new husband. But when life just seemed to be a bit pleasant, misfortune befell,

and she found her little daughter killed by her second husband. Her life was shattered, and she jumped off a cliff into the waterfall to unite with her daughter in death. The woman was a born battler. Throughout the life she endured all her sufferings only to find a purpose of sustaining life in her daughter. She took up a man's job of carrying iron ores and persisted on working to bring a little comfort to her family, especially her loving daughter. There has not been even a lone mention of someone helping her, or she taking help from anyone including her parents or friends. When her first husband passed away, she was young and her baby, just a toddler. She single-handedly brought up her daughter. Her ceaseless spirit of fighting odds is perhaps embodied in the spectacular waterfall that is thus named after her.

A conventional Western understanding of heroism will not suffice here. Heroism has here been redefined. We have to look at the heroism of Ka Likai from within the perspective of the community.

***Hunting the Stag Lapalang* (Khasi folktale)**

Vulnerable woman: The stag Lapalang stayed with his mother who was his sole guardian. There is no reference of the father in the tale. The mother overindulged the son with her love and affection, and strived to protect him from all sorts of perils. Dilemmas of a woman playing the dual role of both the father and the mother are distinctly portrayed through the character of Lapalang's mother. As the son grew up, the mother continued to dote on him with her unfettered love; yet being conscious of the hazards of unrestrained liberty, she was worried about her son's wishes to venture out to the Khasi Hills. She was uncertain whether to restrict her son within the known territory or to approve his aspirations and let him go far from her. Possibly considering her concerns to be too self-centric and perceiving her son's stubbornness to grow up on his own, the mother had no way but to comply with Lapalang's hankering to be self-reliant and travel to the hills.

Passionate woman: Lapalang's mother was so attached to him that it wasn't easy for her to accept his death. Before she had acceded to her son's desire to part with her, she had a hunch of her son's fate and was thoroughly reluctant to give her consent. In return of all her love and pampering showered on him over the years, the son did not prove himself to be obedient. He defied her warnings and was chased and killed by the hunters upon reaching the hills. The mother heard the last cry of her son, yet she cared not for her life

and set out on an uncertain and eternal journey in search of her son. Her incessant adoration for her son drove her from place to place traversing the entire land and crying loud in despair. She was in a hapless state. Regardless of being convinced of her son's death, she would not give up looking for him. Her intense mourning for her son echoed through the minds of the people and was ingrained in such a manner that, to date, it has been characterized and is being followed during the funeral ceremony of the dead.

The Legend of U Raitong, the Khasi Orpheus **(Khasi folktale)**

Confident woman: As per tradition, the eldest member of a Khasi community was selected as the *Syiem* or the chief. He was supposed to have expertise on governing the state, the art of warfare, performing the last rites of strangers, occult, etc. The job of a *Syiem* thus was quite complex and crucial, directly related to the welfare of the community. Mahadei was young when she was handed over the *Syiem*ship before her husband, the chief, was gone on a trip elsewhere. The tale does not speak about her prior experience in this regard. It was absolutely impressive how efficiently she managed the job of running the kingdom that was entirely thrust upon her.

Courageous woman: The depiction of Mahadei the queen is overloaded with extraordinary daring and fearlessness. Being the wife of the *Syiem* she indulged in an illicit relationship with U Raitong the gifted flutist. U Raitong was a lowborn man with no relatives alive. But the queen did not restrain herself in acknowledging her yearning for Raitong and the magic of his flute. She also did not refuse to bear her child from Raitong and had the courage and conviction to confess her extramarital involvement with him in the presence of the king. In the end, when Raitong was punished to die alive atop a funeral pyre, she did not hesitate to come out in public and ascend the funeral pyre to die together with Raitong, her lover.

Unfeigned woman: The *Syiem*'s queen Mahadei as described in the tale, was young and an epitome of beauty. The *Syiem* on the other hand must have been old, since he is presumed to be a veteran in his community. Obviously, he was aged and likely to be much older than his queen. It also appears that they had no children out of their wedlock. Thus, in all probabilities, the considerable age gap might have distanced Mahadei both mentally as well as physically from his spouse, the *Syiem*. Deprived of marital bliss and a child to emotionally look forward to naturally made her feel stifled within the four walls of the

palace. Subsequently, when she heard the mesmerising flute played by Raitong every night, she cared nothing and would rush to him without anyone else noticing her. This also reveals how lonely and deserted her life was at the palace. Apart from foisting his administrative liabilities on her, the chief failed to be a true companion of his wife Mahadei for reasons already stated above. All these aspects persuaded her to look for true love. She was desperate in her search of a man who would be her ideal mate. In Raitong she found her love and she too submitted herself to Raitong disregarding his kinship. She stood by his side all through and dared her fake relationship with the *Syiem* by having a child from Raitong, thus vouching for her love that she was denied by the *Syiem*. She was extremely honest in not concealing her affair and birth of the child with Raitong, and was simultaneously bold enough to unflinchingly remain true to her love for Raitong. She was also undaunted and heedless regarding her community's wrath on her until she gave up her life on the pyre of Raitong together with him.

***U Ramhah* (Khasi folktale)**

Resolute woman: In Khasi folklore, although the majority of the demons are benevolent or indifferent to humans, yet often, under certain situations, they tend to become fierce and indulge in harassing and plundering people. The demon U Ramhah, after defeating the gigantic demon-snake U Thlen, boasted with pride and began tormenting the masses. The wealthy lady Ka Bthuh in the tale picked up the courage to organize the villagers to fight against the demon. The backlash was evident, and U Ramhah robbed Ka Bthuh of her property and impoverished her. She unusually did not repent for her defeat or the debacle thereupon. But being a lady of unremitting courage, Ka Bthuh was determined to teach the demon a lesson on her own. Not only did she work hard day in and day out to regain her lost wealth, but she also succeeded in her plan to kill the mighty demon U Ramhah alone by inviting him to a feast and hiding sharp blades in his food.

Woman as emancipator: Though apparently, the tale demonstrates the fight between the formidable giant U Ramhah and the lady Ka Bthuh for vested reasons, it primarily resembles the conflict between a human and a superhuman. The battle, however apparent it seems to be, is not precisely on individual fronts. The hint is dropped when it is mentioned that Ka Bthuh is leading the villagers to face the demon. Since no one else in the village could gather the courage to lead the battle, she emerged as the leader. She urged her fellowmen to fight against the atrocities of the demon in order to bring peace back to

their lives. Even when she challenged the demon as a woman after the defeat, she had a broader sense of collective benefit for the villagers in her mind. From the experience of losing the first battle and their properties to the demon, she realized that taking up the challenge on her own would incur much lower casualties in her village, thus saving lives and properties of the ordinary people. This apart, she also acted smart to take advantage of the short sightedness of the demon and mixed the sharp blades in his food that destroyed him from within and killed him, all of it without the show of strength. Ka Bthuh knew it well that the demon was mighty and could be killed not with power but with intelligence. Above all it was her attitude of benevolence that rescued the people of the village out of the miseries and barbarities inflicted by the colossal demon U Ramhah.

While analyzing the folktales selected in this chapter characterizing mothers and wives in both Chinese as well as Khasi communities, the attributes of the female characters that play major roles were underscored in the previous paragraphs and are listed in the chart below (Table 1). The attributes, as explored in the selected tales from both the communities, are indicative of the significant impressions marked by the depiction of these female characters in the respective folktales. While over a dozen attributes were noted in the Chinese and Khasi folktales selected and categorized under this chapter, their distribution is not uniform and reflect the cultural ethos related to the positions of the mothers and the wives in Chinese and Khasi families and societies respectively.

Accordingly, characterizations of mothers and wives featured in these tales shall also be evaluated under the same category.

2.5 Observations and Inferences

Traits Highlighted	Frequency of occurrence	
	Chinese Folktale	Khasi Folktale
Being oppressed	2	-
Reincarnated	2	-
Emancipator	3	1
Of humble origin	1	-
Conformist	1	-
Devoted	2	-
Altruist	1	-
Unfeigned	1	2
Resolute	-	2
Vulnerable	-	1
Passionate	-	1
Confident	-	1
Courageous	-	1

Table 1: Chart of Traits and their Frequencies in Chinese and Khasi Folktales

Secondly, the occurrences and recurrences of these attributes in Table 1 simultaneously indicate the relatively dominating attributes in Chinese or Khasi mothers and wives that might be prevalent in their folktales.

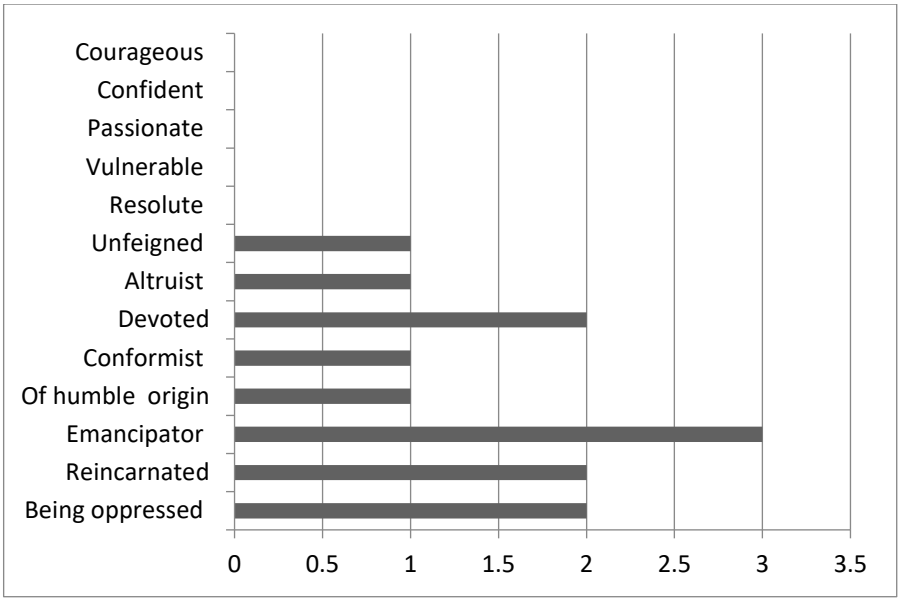

Figure 1: Assessment of Traits in Chinese Folktales

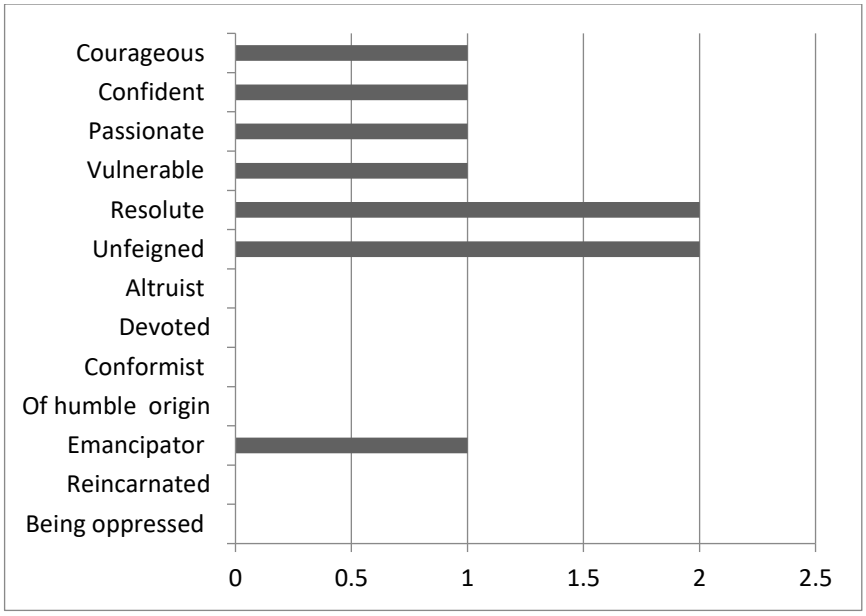

Figure 2: Assessment of Traits in Khasi Folktales

The comparative features in Table 1 indicate recurring patterns of representation of women in both Chinese and Khasi folktales. They cannot be read as merely descriptive features, however. They need to be understood in the broader cultural, historical, and gender contexts that informed both traditions. The distribution of traits in Figures 1 and 2 not only mirrors literary preferences but also the presence of social structures like Chinese Confucian patriarchy and Khasi matrilineal kinship.

Repression occurs repeatedly in Chinese folktales but is absent in Khasi folktales. This discrepancy highlights the difference in gender ideologies. Chinese stories embody what Simone de Beauvoir famously characterized as woman becoming "the Other" in a patriarchal society (de Beauvoir 267). The focus on women's beauty, such as oppressive traditions like foot-binding, shows the way female bodies came to be socially constructed as objects of domination (Ko 23). Despite the decline of feudalism, Chinese property and inheritance systems excluded women, perpetuating what Judith Butler calls the "heteropatriarchal matrix" that naturalizes gender hierarchy (Butler 9). Conversely, the exclusion of Khasi women from tropes about oppression in folktales is understandable owing to their matrilineal inheritance and matrilocal residence that gave women valid rights to property and self-governance in the clan (Gurdon 87; Nongbri 41).

The reincarnation motif in Chinese folkloric narratives expresses the cosmological influence of Buddhist and Daoist but not Confucian rationalism. The cycle of rebirth conforms to Carl Jung's "transforming feminine" archetype, as women assume cyclical renewal and spiritual transition (Jung 215). Khasi folklore, based on a Christian-dominated environment, does not have this motif, expressing alternative cosmological predispositions. Here, Bronislaw Malinowski's anthropological insight that myth reflects the "living faith of a culture" becomes apt: Chinese folktales preserve Buddhist-Daoist cosmology while Khasi tales mirror Christian eschatology (Malinowski 101).

Despite patriarchal constraints, Chinese folklore sustains archetypal female figures who act as saviours—such as Nüwa, Guanyin, and Xiwangmu. These figures embody what feminist folklore theorist Kay Stone calls the "active heroine," whose power disrupts male-centred narratives (Stone 13). These representations are preserved in the face of Confucian repression of female heroism, and this implies that folklore existed as a counter-discourse against elite patriarchy (Raphals 146). The place of women as rescuers is less prominent in folklore in Khasi culture because it is institutionally embedded in daily life: women already hold central positions in economy and kinship through their matrilineal responsibilities (Nongkynrih 57).

The assertiveness of Khasi women, as observed in Figure 2, is understandable through their socio-economic functions. Being domestic managers, inheritors of property, and primary caregivers, they encapsulate Annette Weiner's "inalienable possessions," women's power based on the intergenerational transmission of goods and resources

(Weiner 210). Such tenacity is in contrast with Chinese mothers and wives, who, according to Confucian ideals, had to exhibit obedience and piety instead of decisiveness (Ban Zhao 45).

Chinese women's devotion needs to be understood in the context of Confucian prescriptive writings like Ban Zhao's *Nüjie* (Lessons for Women). Devotion in this context becomes both a moral virtue and a disciplinary tool to control women within patriarchal households. As Dorothy Ko contends, these codes unveil not only conservative restrictions but also women's negotiation of patriarchal discourse (Ko 41). This is similar to Michel Foucault's concept of "disciplinary power," whereby obedience is internalized as virtue (Foucault 135).

Characteristics such as altruism, conformity, and vulnerability in Chinese folktales and courage, passion, and confidence in Khasi ones may also be explained from Jungian archetypes. The Chinese wife is usually the "caregiver" or "martyr" that supports patriarchal moralities, whereas the Khasi mother identifies more with the "warrior mother" who guarantees survival through management and strength of will (Jung 178). These archetypes imply that folklore not only conveys cultural norms but also expounds collective psychological patterns.

Overall, Chinese and Khasi notions about mothers and wives illustrate two opposing cultural rationalities: the Confucian-patriarchal model that situates women in subordination, and the Khasi-matrilineal model that places responsibility in women's hands and assigns them economic roles. Folklore in such cases serves as what Jack Zipes has termed a "cultural mirror," at once holding entrenched ideologies in place and creating space for imaginative resistance (Zipes 32). The Chinese mother-wife vacillates between piety and liberation in a patriarchal regime, whereas the Khasi counterpart represents tenacity and economic prominence under matriliny.