

A Study of Assamese Folktales from ‘The Folktales from India’ by A.K.Ramanujan

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Abstract

Assamese folktales taken from ‘The Folktales from India’ present the clash of the virtue and evil, innocence and cunningness and nature and culture where there is the victory of the good at the end of the story. The story titled ‘The Kite’s Daughter’, ‘Teja and Teji’ and ‘The Priest Who Could See as Far as Mecca’ are the folktales from Assam found in ‘The Folktales from India’. The major part of these tales is occupied by the female characters and evil as well as virtuous sides of female are presented in them. There is harmony between nature and human in the story and they can communicate with each other. Besides these stories have morals to teach and magical elements to please. This paper will study these folktales to understand representation of female characters and will attempt to analyze the use of anthropomorphism in these folktales from ecocritical perspective.

Keywords: Anthropomorphism, Assamese Literature, Ecocriticism, Feminism, Folktales

Introduction

Britannica entry on the ‘Folktale’ can be used to understand some characteristics of Folktales. It mentions the association of the folktales with oral tradition and the freedom of the storyteller to make changes in the story but it must be within the taboo of the society. This also suggests that folktales also reflect the culture and beliefs of the society they emerge from. Britannica entry also mentions the large amount of animals’ presence in the folktales in their real form or through anthropomorphism. It points out the close relationship between animals and humans in them. There is also be presence of semi-divine, supernatural creatures and some creatures having ill-intentions against whom there would be a fairy like creature to help human beings in the folktales. Good is rewarded and the bad is punished in them. It also says, “Stories of the activity of witches and devils, or water spirits and the supernatural guardians of mountains or trees vary in details from land to land, but many of the incidents related about them are easily transferred from one to another.” (Stith, Britannica) In the stories, the dead may also return. These aspects makes the folktales unrealistic, adding the elements of fantasy in them but the representation of cultural beliefs can also be found hidden behind the simple tales because the tale also tells about the teller. It is also pointed out by A.K.Ramanujan in his ‘Preface’ to *Folktales from India* “A folktale is a poetic text that carries some of its cultural contexts within it; it is also a travelling metaphor that finds a new meaning with each telling” (Ramanujan, Preface) Folktales can also be used to teach morals to the children so they are written in simple language.

About Assamese folktales, the findings of some researches already done should be taken into consideration. Manashi Borah, in her *Women in Assamese Folktales*, mentions the meaning of Folktales in Assam. As she mentions, the word 'Sadhukatha' is used for Folktales in Assam. The word 'Sadhu' means 'The Righteous' and 'Katha' means 'the tale'. From the use of the word 'Katha' it also becomes clear that the tales would be told in the third person. She has studied different women characters, their roles in accordance with their age which show stereotype in it. Dr. Deepshikha Hazarika has attempted to analyze the moral aspects of the folktales of Assam. She finds out the importance of intelligence over physical strength given in the tales and mutual understanding among animals and human beings in it. She writes about female characters, "They shared love with man and try to help them as far as possible in exchange of love." (Hazarika 55) Kalyani Hazarika in her research also mentions that Assamese culture finds reflection in their folktales and they help them to understand and solve life problems. The present study, attempts to analyze women character from the feminist perspective and human non-human relation from the perspective of Ecocriticism in the selected Assamese folktales.

Study of Women Characters

Even though the stories taken here revolve around the women characters, they represent women in the patriarchal society where they are to obey men and the male child is even given more importance. Women, as daughters, as wives and mothers, are represented in the stories. Their lives revolve around the male counterpart. Pramod K. Nayar writes in his book *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory*, "Feminist theory argues that the representation of women as weak, docile, innocent, seductive or irrational- sentimental is rooted in and influences actual social conditions, where she does not have power, is treated as a sex-object or a procreating machine, has fewer political and financial rights and is abused." (Nayar 83) Such condition of women is also presented in the stories selected here.

The beginning of the story 'The Kite's Daughter' shows the discrimination in the society about male and female child in which the birth of the daughter is unwanted and being compelled by this condition, potter's wife had to abandon the girl child. The child is brought up by the Kite. At first she is called 'The Kite's daughter' and then, after being married to the merchant, she is called 'the eighth wife'. No character in the story is given name, instead they are known by their profession, like 'the potter', 'the merchant'. The wives are also not named. But they are known as the wives of the merchant, so they are identified by the husband's identity here. This shows the subordination of female characters to the male characters in the story. The story 'Teja and Teji' is also about the peasant who had two wives. Here too, except the character of Teja and Teji, no character is named. Such quality makes these stories general and shows how the people of certain community or profession might have been at certain time. Both the stories also reveal the practice of polygamy in the society. Talking of the representation of women in the story, it should be noted that both, good and evil, sides of the women are presented in the stories but they are in polemic manner. Either women are represented as angel; innocent and beautiful or they are complete evil; witches.

In 'Teja and Teji' the younger wife is liked by husband and she had a daughter and a son. This leads to the jealousy and the troubles are created by the elder wife for the children and the younger wife. The elder wife is an evil creature and she possesses supernatural power. In

Assamese culture, there are beliefs in white magic and black magic but in these stories women are shown as possessing the supernatural capabilities and using them to fulfill their purposes. The excessive use of them in the story to handle every situation makes the story unrealistic but even though excessively used, they show the evidence of such beliefs in the society which are exaggerated in this narrative. While the female characters possess them in this story, the rationality is embodied by the male character, the king, who finds out the solution through his intelligence. He does not require magic to find out solutions to his troubles.

The story of 'Teja and Teji' also presents the motherly nature of women. As Helen Cixous writes, "In women, there is always more or less of the mother who makes everything alright, who nourishes, and who stands up against separation; a force that will not be cut off but will knock the wind out of the codes." (Cixous 882) Such characteristic of mother is also presented through the mother of Teja and Teji in the story taken here for consideration. The elder wife converts the younger wife into a tortoise. But in the form of tortoise too, her love for her children is made evident by the food she manages to provide to them and she provides food even to the daughter of the elder wife. When the elder wife comes to know about it, she demands the flesh of the tortoise. Here too, the wisdom of the younger wife is clear when she informs her children that no other than Teja and Teji will be able to take her out of the tank. She asks them to sow the flesh of her which will turn into a tree of gold and silver. Here, the submissiveness of the younger wife to the evils of elder wife can also be seen. In the form of tortoise, she can manage to protect her children but not to go against the evil. She had to sacrifice herself in order to save her children from the evil creature. But still she does it in a way that can help her children. The king comes to know about it and wishes to take the tree to his palace but no other than Teja could do so and he demands the king to marry his sister. When after many years, king takes Teji with him; she is also the eighth wife of the king. The jealousy of women is again projected in the story when the other wives did not allow her to land on any ghat. After marriage, she becomes the mother of a boy and visits her stepmother who converts Teji into mynah and sends her daughter in disguise of Teji to the king's palace. Being mynah, she sees her child crying and she cries and laments in her songs. If the attention is paid to the work done by the queen, then too, the duties of women in the society become clear. She is taking care of the child and she is weaving. When the king comes to know about the treachery of the stepmother and stepsister, he kills the stepsister and serves her flesh to her own mother.

'The Kite's Daughter' reveals the essentiality of beauty for marriage which is revealed by the incident when the merchant sees the Kite's daughter for the first time. The daughter is having long hair and she was combing them when he saw her. Her beauty was so much that he exclaims whether the girl is human or goddess. The Kite's daughter stands as an epitome of the innocence who has not seen the outside world and seeks her mother's guidance every time. Kite's daughter is innocent creature because she is brought up by the Kite who is part of nature. Kite, playing the role of mother in this story, also present the role played by mother in the upbringing of the child. Helen Cixous has mentioned, "There always remains in woman that force which produces/is produced by the other- in particular, the other woman" (Cixous 881) and she writes, "It is necessary and sufficient that the best of herself be given to woman by another woman for her to be able to love herself" (Cixous 881) The Kite creates a big nest for the child when she brings the child with her, brings everything she finds good for her and provided her with "Food, clothes, toys" (Ramanujan 125) The little girl, being away from the human world is brought up outside

the confines of patriarchy and she grew up with Kite who provided her with everything. This shows the motherly nature embodied by the female creature in nature and considering the mother figure also shows the way a female child can be brought up in a way that she is at ease with herself and the way a woman can be a companion to another woman.

When Kite's daughter goes to the husband's house, she becomes the victim of jealousy of other wives and the story revolves around the works she had to do. These wives show the stereotypical representation of women. She is shown as cooking, cleaning the cowshed and making cloths for festival. In all these, she is helped by the Kite mother and she had to compete with her co wives and wins her husband's favor through them but as a result, when the co-wives came to know about the Kite mother, they tricked her and killed her. When the husband goes away for some work, the Kite's daughter is asked not to go outside of their house and she obeys her husband. Here her submissive nature becomes clear but she is persuaded by other wives at the end and she had to suffer. Such structure of the story can also make people misinterpret the value of obedience. The co-wives exchanged her in order to buy goods from the merchant. When the merchant took her, she was assigned the task of taking care of drying fish and she sings her gloom while doing this. When merchant could hear her song, he recognized her and came to know the whole story from her. The brutality towards the co-wives becomes evident when he returns home and while testing them, he kills the six wives while the seventh is spared because she had not been with the others when the Kite's daughter was given to the merchant. In considering both the stories, it should also be noted that women are shown as the enemy of other women while the male counterpart are shown as saving a woman from another women. This also represents man as dominant and essential for a woman for their survival and as their savior from other women. There are less male characters in these stories where the role played by man is shown positive while both the sides of women, positive aspect of motherhood and the jealous evil side are portrayed.

The story 'The Priest Who Could See as Far as Mecca' gives a hilarious scene of a priest who claims to see the dog at the door of Kabba of Mecca. The woman of this little tale is witty who exposes the folly of the priest by hiding under the rice, the curry she had served and when the priest could not find it he is asked, "You can see as far as Mecca. Can't you see what there is under your rice?" (Ramanujan, 328)

Study of Human- Nature relation in the story

Greg Garrard defines, "Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship of the human and non-human, throughout human cultural history" (Garrard 5) Literature can present the cultural history of human beings and the way human-nature relationship is presented in literature can help one understand the connection they have. In the case of folktales, non-humans are given human characteristics like, possession of language and the capability to communicate with humans. They share the same emotion as humans do. To understand this from Ecocritical perspective, it is necessary to consider the idea of 'Ecological self' given by Arne Naess in which there is "identification with nonhuman living beings" (Naess 22) which leads to empathize with other creatures. Use of anthropomorphism can help in learning this. Folktales, being rooted in the ancient past, consist of anthropomorphism which presents the perception in which nonhumans

are seen just as humans. Being transmitted through the words of mouth among the folks, folktales represent the human beings close to nature.

In these stories too, humans have harmonious relation to nature and anthropomorphic characters are used which show the nonhumans possessing human emotions like motherly love and care. In 'The Kite's Daughter' the child abandoned by human is taken care by the Kite and she gives her all the love and everything the child would require. She adores her and follows her words about helping her whenever she calls her. It should also be noted that the Kite here is a female and plays the role of mother. Being brought up in nature, by the creature from nature, being away from the human society, the daughter turns out to be an innocent creature and when he goes into human civilization, she faces troubles from which Kite could save her. The clash between nature/culture is visible in the clash between the Kite's Daughter and the other wives. They even killed the Kite and this led them to create troubles for the Kite's daughter. Till the time kite was there, she is saved from every problem but her problems became unavoidable with Kite's death. There is anthropomorphism in the representation of Kite but it shows her as a character having the same emotions as human beings. She has the motherly love and care and desire to marry her daughter. She even dresses her daughter as a bride where the human customs are followed. The human characters, like the daughter and the merchant, can talk with the kite and understand each other's language. This shows the closeness with nature and the state of human beings where they are not separated from nature completely. In 'Teja and Teji', human beings are transported into the animals or birds and because they were human being originally, they are also anthropomorphized.

Conclusion:

Thus, from the discussion above, it can be understood that the folktales selected here, show the lives of women in the male dominated society where they are known by their husbands and they are represented as doing the household work. Though they are represented as evil creatures sometimes, the reason behind it is generally because of their insecurity from their male counterpart which makes the other innocent fellow suffer. These stories also show man as necessary for woman to be saved from other women too. The relation of human and nature is presented through anthropomorphism which can help in realizing the similarities shared by human and nonhuman which can help in empathizing with them. The motherly nature of human and non-human creatures is presented without making distinction between their species. The tales can be taken as a moral tales as well because they also show that at the end there is the victory of the virtues and the one who does evil deeds is punished.

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