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Daughters of the Hills: Folklore Narrative Meets Feminine Ethos in Indian Tribal Tales

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Abstract

India's tribal folklore, through the generations, have served as a mirror that captures and reflects the essence and nuances of "being a woman." The rich feminine spirit has coursed through the veins of these folktales since time unknown, while illuminating the symbolic metamorphosis of women from being victims of society to the paragons of resilience. The stories from the hills of North-East echo of upholding the feminine ethos and dignity. This land- a rich repository of narratives, attempts to laud womenfolk for being strong moral anchors of the civilization. By analysing the orally preserved story of *Tejimola*, from Assam and the legend of *Noh Ka Likai*, from Meghalaya, this paper aims to dissect and recognize the layers of the female experience as well as women's agency. Both the tales offer a deep emotional and spiritual resonance with the complexities that are associated to a women's role in the tribal community. And through tales like *Tejimola*, and *Noh Ka Likai*, do the unjust yet deeply embedded anxiety regarding women's power and position in a familial structure become apparent. However, these stories simultaneously voice the journey of women through complicated social obstacles that they must navigate in order to mould and gain their lost identities back. Despite their diverse trajectories, the protagonists of both the tales are like two kindred threads intertwined in a vast tapestry of tribal narratives. By interpreting these timeless folktales through the lens of femininity, this paper makes an effort to ascribe them the position of aesthetic artefacts of a culture which reveres both a woman's strength and her vulnerability.

Keywords: Tribal Narratives, Women in Folklore, Indigenous Storytelling, Cultural Significance, Femininity

Introduction

Folklore and native tales have often acted as treasure troves in the Indian cultural scene by imparting and preserving crucial societal values, beliefs, and norms. These stories often offer more than just mere entertainment; they capture the indigenous flavours and colours of local communities too. Among the vast tapestry of traditional tales, stories featuring female protagonists attract copious attraction as they encapsulate the struggles and rejuvenating journeys of womenfolk. Two such stories, *Tejimola* and the legend of *Noh Ka Likai,* from the culturally thriving North-Eastern states of Assam and Meghalaya, puts forth a profound

insight into the manner in which tribal societies envision the notions of gender and identity. These two tales have contrasting arcs; however, they stand in solitude to reflect the "feminine ethos" the socio-cultural consciousness of these regions.

These narratives might be meticulously crafted in ethnic contexts and planted in the bosom of the tribal societies, but they transcend these cultural boundaries to lend a hand in exploring and tackling universal issues surrounding the dynamics of gender and individuality. In addition to being decorated with intense symbolism and metaphors, these tales revolving around a young girl, Tejimola and a grieving mother, Ka Likai, are also emotionally deep and charging. While the former deals with an innocent child's transformative journey and rebirth through the power of nature- which is representative of hope and endurance; the latter sheds light on the soul crushing grief of a mother, which is immortalized in the hauntingly majestic landscape of a waterfall. Both stories resonate well with the receiving end, as it presents women as hallmarks of strength despite them being subjected to misfortunes and ill luck.

This paper strives to analyse tribal folklores from a feminine and ecological perspective. In addition, it offers a closer look at the daily dilemma, emotional exhaustion, and anxiety caused by the ever so strong, patriarchy. The preconceived, rose-tinted notion that the lives of the "fairer sex" are easy and smooth in the simpler tribal communities is contested with the fact that these women only rise to the position of earning respect after triumphing over a lengthy series of challenges and struggles. By adopting a comparative study of these two tales, this research tries to portray women as pivotal figures and enduring voices who birth strong civilizations.

Review of Literature

Exploring folklore has always offered insights into the cultural, social, and emotional aspects of communities. Indian indigenous traditions utilize tribal folklore to explore the construction of gender and identity through their strong ties to nature, spirituality, and human values. The stories of *Tejimola* and *Noh Ka Likai* exemplify how women's trials, resilience, and narratives are deeply integrated into the cultural fabric of tribal societies. Several scholars have also studied the portrayal of women in Indian tribal context, while underscoring and emphasizing on their link and connection with nature. This part explores existing research on tribal mythology, gender analysis, and literary customs, as well as making connections with analogous stories in world literature.

In his well-known work *Folklore of Assam* (1972), Jogesh Das accentuates on the role of women in being catalysts who bring forth change and transformation within their communities. Das's research also brings forth *Tejimola's* eco-spiritual narrative; he employs a banquet of natural imagery to amplify the profound struggles and triumphs of womankind. A similar thought is invoked in Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess's *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle: Outline of an Ecosophy* (1989). His work highlights the inherent worth of every living creature, corresponding with the symbolic role environment plays in the two tribal lores. Aligning with his concept of "deep ecology" is the fact that nature is not just a passive

backdrop in these stories, but an active force too- she acts as both a nurturer of her daughters and an observer of their suffering and journey.

When we talk about tribal narratives like *Tejimola* or *Noh Ka Likai*, we are really dealing with layer of pain, silence, survival, and memory, and for some reason, a lot of academic writing tends to smooth these rough edges too much. But in the last few years, a few researchers have taken the plunge and tried to dig deeper. Jharna Choudhury, in her 2021 paper titled *Aesthetics of the Grotesque Body: The Dismemberment Metaphor in the Assamese Folktale Tejimola*, touches on something incredibly important: how Tejimola's body– its breaking, reshaping, and reappearing, becomes a form of protest. It is not just folklore magic. It is the way women, especially girls, have historically endured cruelty in silence and yet found a way to speak through symbols, nature, or myth.

Similarly, Talukdar and Gogoi, in another 2021 paper *Retelling of Assamese Folktales from a Feminist Perspective: A Reading of Tejimola and the Tale of Kite Mother's Daughter*, take a more psychological angle. They look at the mental toll of Tejimola's suffering and how the story uses transformation not as escape, but as a return: a reassertion of self. They argue that her death and rebirth mirror a kind of resistance rooted in femininity, something that goes beyond voice and into presence. That is where the story hits hard. It is not just a fable. It is a metaphor for every girl who has ever been silenced or set aside but somehow chose to come back. And his experience is not limited to Assam. These themes echo in the story of Noh Ka Likai too, though in a much more heartbreaking way. You do not need to dig deep to see how the mother's grief has been buried, literally, in the earth, becoming part of a waterfall that never stops. Scholars have not written as extensively on Likai's story yet, but it keeps showing up in essays, travelogues, and oral archives because people feel the weight of that sorrow. There is this quiet understanding that some emotions cannot be spoken, they must be remembered in landscapes. That is what both tales do. They give pain a form, a body, a setting. And that is exactly where this paper aims to step in and help– not to over-theorize, but to listen. It seeks to read these stories not as isolated myths, but as reflections of real lived experiences that still influence how we discuss women, identity, and belonging. Because if nobody else says it: these stories matter.

The story of *Noh Ka Likai* is something that has lived more in whispers than in print, especially in the mainstream academic world. But its silence is telling. What happens when grief is so raw that it turns into landscape? That is what this Khasi tale does; it does not just tell you about a woman's heartbreak, it lets you stand in it, by a waterfall that bears her name. While scholarly attention to Khasi folklore remains somewhat scattered, there are still some deeply thoughtful sources. Evan Syngkon's work, *Cultural Contexts of Select Khasi Folktales*, offers a lens into how stories like these operate within the Khasi worldview. He points out how emotion and environment are not separate in these communities. Likai's grief does not vanish, it becomes geographically immortal. The lack of closure in Likai's story is what makes it resonate. Unlike Tejimola, she does not come back, she does not get retribution or rebirth. And that, honestly, feels more real sometimes. It is grief as a permanent fixture.

In *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak argues that the subaltern, specifically womenfolk are often denied the chance to speak and are, in most scenarios, spoken on behalf of. Her essay analyses in depth the suppression of voices from marginalized groups of India who are bound by the shackles of colonial and patriarchal structures. Tejimola's lack of voice to stand up against her tyrant step-mother and her eventual fusion with nature as an alternative way to express her turmoil underscores Spivak's notion that the subaltern often communicates in indirect, yet symbolic ways. In the tale of *Noh Ka Likai*, patriarchy's inability to grasp and acknowledge the weight of a mother's grief and sorrow result in the immortalization and enshrinement of her trauma through nature- in the form of a waterfall, instead of being discussed in open civilly.

Carl Jung's concept of the Great Mother archetype, as proposed in his work *Man and His Symbols* (1964), does not just belong in dusty psychoanalytic theory, it echoes in stories like *Noh Ka Likai* and *Tejimola*, though perhaps not in obvious ways. Jung wrote of the Great Mother as a paradox; she nurtures and destroys, heals, and hurts, depending on how she is received and understood. In tribal folklore, this duality is not hidden, it is embraced. Likai's character, for instance, is caught between immense maternal love and soul-crushing loss. Her identity is not allowed to be just a woman or just a mother– and when her grief finds no outlet, it spills into nature, creating something both beautiful and terrible: a waterfall that mourns. Tejimola, on the other hand, is the softer face of that archetype. She is wronged and silenced, but transforms, not through vengeance, but rebirth. That is the other side of the same feminine force Jung was trying to map: the regenerative energy that survives betrayal, survives death, even. What is striking is that these stories never reduce their women to passive victims. They embody that deep, unconscious image Jung spoke of– the woman as earth, as vessel, as storm. And when viewed through that lens, both tales feel less like fiction and more like encoded memory, reminders that cultures across time have always recognized the complexity, even the danger, of feminine energy. Yes, Jung gives us a language for that. But these stories? They lived it long before the language came.

Vandana Shiva's work often starts from a place of grounded urgency. She does not theorize for theory's sake; her ideas come from soil, sweat, and memory. When she speaks of women and nature, it is not as a metaphor but as a lived reality, particularly in rural and tribal contexts where the two are deeply entwined. Her book *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development* (1988) makes this clear. What resonates with the stories of *Tejimola* and *Noh Ka Likai* is that neither tale treats nature as separate from the woman at the centre. Nature is not just a witness, it is a participant. In *Tejimola*, her rebirth through natural forms is not merely a plot device. It mirrors Shiva's insistence that women regenerate not through power, but through quiet resilience, deeply rooted in the land. Meanwhile, Likai's grief does not dissolve; it takes the shape of a waterfall, carved permanently into the landscape. That speaks volumes. Shiva reminds us that ecofeminism is not just about caring for nature, it is about how women are treated like nature: expected to give endlessly, even in grief, even in silence. Both stories show us what happens when that patience breaks, and what healing might look like, not as restoration, but as remembrance. This is not theory wrapped in academic jargons,

it is a reality lived every day by women whose pain and power often go undocumented, except in the stories passed down around fires and fields.

Although previous researches that discuss Indian folklore exists, however, much of these researches follow stories from the mainland. Indian tribal tales are often sidelined, and the in-depth and nuanced analysis of women protagonists of these stories are left unexplored. This paper adds diversity to the existing realm of academic studies on folklore as it dives deep to amplify the voices of women from tribal communities through *Tejimola* and *Noh Ka Likai*. Moreover, these tribal tales act as a hub where feminine ethos and natural essence collide. These narratives do not just offer meaningful and timeless lessons about resilience and strength but also broadens the scope of ecofeminist studies by highlighting the connection that humanity and nature share. In addition, despite being orally present through the entirety of history, these tales have missed out on being the motif of global discussions. By offering fresh interpretations of contemporary themes like identity and trauma to these cultural relics from the prominent regions of Assam and Meghalaya, this paper aims to assert the gravity of these tales from the tribal lands in international discourse.

Tejimola's Metamorphosis: From Resilience to Rebirth

Assam, the land of rivers and hills, with its natural beauty and cultural ethos acts as the perfect backdrop for the tale of *Tejimola*. The state, also regarded as one of the sisters amongst the seven sisters of the North-East, and its folklore stands as an emblem reflecting the ideals of feminine spirit and strength. The natural elements of Assam encapsulating rivers, lush green forests and hills are symbolic of the character's transformative journey that involves the cycle of life. In Tejimola's story, however, lies the testament of Assam itself. As if out of floods, invasion, and all the political turmoil that it had undergone, she has emerged anew - a metaphor of a state's power to revive and grow, as if born out of sheer destruction. Like Assam's landscapes, which withstand disasters, Tejimola is a representation of feminine fortitude and hope-a continuation which did not waver. This connects her story with a larger, universal story that issues can resonate with the struggles, sacrifices, and triumphs of women across cultures. Feminine ethos and essence such as resilience, emotional nourishment, adaptability, and the power to turn pain and suffering into a thing of beauty. Her metaphorical transformation in the face of adversity is symbolic of women in Assamese households, who are custodians of culture and who nurture and replenish despite being in states of adversity. By portraying the young girl Tejimola as a vulnerable yet powerful figure, this tale not only celebrates the beautiful Assamese culture of storytelling but touches upon a much heavier trait of women's narrative throughout history- endurance of life through preservation of culture. In addition, it introduces an angle of eco-feminism since even in the face of destruction, women, much like nature, regenerate while taking the shape of a beacon of hope.

Ka Likai: Feminine Strength and Sacrifice in Khasi Folklore

Noh Ka Likai is one of the most mysterious and spine-chilling folklore of Meghalaya. This story of a grieving mother is packed with feminine ethos which seeps through the themes of

love, betrayal, and sacrifice. It stands as an emblem that showcases the depth of a mother's love- extremely feminine in spirit, as in most societies, a woman's identity is intimately connected to her role as a caretaker and nurturer. Meghalaya's mystical scenery aligns very well with Likai's tale. The lush green natural imagery symbolically reiterates the very fact that feminine ethos is eternal, and intricately knit into the very fabric of the land. This tale also sheds light on how the traditional woman in conservative societies is often seen through the lens of the relation to others. Likai, however, do not lose her own distinct identity in the story- her iconic leap into the waterfall only reminds the generations of how strong of a woman she was. The spiritual and emotional implications of this story stretch beyond the Khasi culture so it can be heard on an international level as a motherly love, loss, and transformation story. That integration of these components into a tangible environment by Likai further brings out the solid interrelation between women and motherhood, nature, and various cultural practices, capturing the powerful essence of the feminine spirit.

The Domestic Space as an Emotional Landscape

Both *Tejimola* and *Noh Ka Likai* emerge from tribal landscapes that are often celebrated for their natural beauty and cultural richness, Assam and Meghalaya, respectively. But beneath the surface of these tales lies a shared narrative thread: the interiority of women's pain within intimate and domestic spaces. These are not tales of external conquest or public humiliation but of silent suffering inflicted from within the home. This subtlety makes them powerful. In *Tejimola*, it is the stepmother's jealousy that initiates the violence, while in *Noh Ka Likai*, the husband's manipulative brutality leads to irreparable emotional devastation. The private sphere, often imagined as a sanctuary, becomes the theatre of betrayal in both stories, complicating the idea that tribal societies are entirely protective of their women. At the same time, both stories underscore that women are not passive sufferers– they leave behind symbols, traces, and echoes that outlive their pain.

What distinguishes these narratives, however, is how they construct memory and legacy through female experience. Tejimola's transformation is fluid, regenerative. Her story aligns with the cyclicality of nature; death, decay, bloom. She reappears in the form of a flower, a fruit, a song. Each of these acts is not just metaphorical but representational: she asserts her presence even when denied voice or justice. Her metamorphosis is an act of cultural resistance, rooted in the Assamese worldview that sees the self and nature as intimately connected. On the other hand, Noh Ka Likai does not offer renewal in the traditional sense. Her grief solidifies into permanence. The waterfall that bears her name does not change forms but remains fixed, haunting, unmoved. Likai's sorrow becomes geographical, and in doing so, forces an entire community to remember. This contrast between renewal and stasis mirrors different forms of resilience– both valid, both emotionally complex.

More importantly, neither story frames these women as helpless. On the contrary, both Tejimola and Likai exhibit agency, though it manifests differently. Tejimola's agency is quiet, regenerative, and embedded in the slow reclamation of life through nature. Her story is not about revenge but remembrance. In contrast, Likai's final act, her suicide, is not an admission

of weakness but an assertion of unbearable truth. The world, as it is, cannot contain her grief, and so she becomes something the world must carry, in water, in name, in story. Their endurance is not heroic in a mythical sense, but deeply human. It recognizes fragility without giving up strength. This subtle expression of feminine values is what makes these stories unique. They do not glorify pain; instead, they allow for its expression. In doing so, they create space for shared memory and healing

Together, these folktales act as collections of gendered histories and emotional experiences that do not neatly fit into categories of victimhood or triumph. They show a belief that storytelling helps people survive. It supports not just individuals but also communities that value these stories as part of their cultural heritage. The feminine spirit in both narratives does not look for validation through societal redemption but through continuity, through echo, song, water, and root. In a world still reckoning with how to honour grief, transformation, and silent resistance, the tales of *Tejimola* and *Noh Ka Likai* stand as gentle but unshakable reminders of how stories can carry pain without diminishing dignity, and how tribal folklore is a powerful site for rethinking what it means to endure, remember, and be seen.

The Female Voice as Pedagogical Force in Tribal Tales

In many tribal homes of the Northeast, stories do not come from books. They come from people– mostly women. They show up in conversations over rice-cleaning, or during long pauses between chores. Tales like that of *Tejimola* and *Noh Ka Likai* travel this way too, not through loud proclamations, but through careful telling. They are not structured like textbooks, but they teach. They teach important lessons. Lessons about what it feels like to be ignored, or loved too little, or misunderstood. These are not grand myths about gods and kings, but close, quiet narratives about women who were broken inside their homes, and somehow, still left behind something lasting. In tribal societies, where silence often says more than speech, such stories shape how women see themselves, how they carry their own emotions, and how they pass on warnings and hope, both at once.

Tejimola's tale, though brutal in its beginning, refuses to end with pain. Her return in forms that can be held tells younger girls that even if they are silenced, there is a way back. Not always through words, but through presence. And Ka Likai's grief, which does not get a second chance, still holds space. Her name becomes the land itself. The waterfall does not stop flowing, much like her sorrow did not either. These are not lessons you learn from bullet points. They are stories that stay. People sit with them. People grow up with them. And they influence how one reacts to betrayal, loss, or anger. This is the kind of teaching people remember, even if no one ever referred to it as "education."

The way these stories are told, slowly, in fragments, sometimes out of order, is also part of the learning. There is no linear path from pain to peace. It loops. It hesitates. It does not tidy itself up. And in that way, it reflects what womanhood often feels like, especially in small communities where grief and joy exist side by side. Nothing is ever completely private. These

stories, shared from one woman to another, do not just recount events. They hold emotion. They teach how to notice patterns, how to remember things others forget, and how to carry feelings that do not always have names.

More than anything, these stories help women remember themselves. In places where textbooks may never mention their names or pain, folklore steps in. It becomes a form of remembering that does not need paper. Both Tejimola and Likai become more than characters– they become feelings. They become warnings, and in some strange way, companions. For a girl listening to her grandmother recount the waterfall story, or a sister humming a song that once carried Tejimola's name, the tale becomes part of her. That is the quiet work of folklore. Not just to survive, but to show the listener that her own survival is already part of the story.

Parallel Analysis of the Tales

Both the narratives of *Tejimola* and *Noh Ka Likai*, borrowed from the mysterious North-Eastern lands encapsulates the undercurrents of the feminine spirit and helps to illuminate its mark on the global literary canvass of emotions. The perilous and complicated nature of familial and marital structures are discovered in addition to the precarious treatment of women within intimate relationships. This includes Tejimola's step-mother's jealousy and unfair attitude towards her during her father's absence and Likai's husband's resentment of the love she shared for her daughter. The tales of this pair of women, despite their cultural differences, display problems that are still relevant in the contemporary world such as psychological exhaustion and manipulation of women, undermining their identity and societal failure to protect their dignity and peace.

Storytelling is a vehicle for cultural transmission and ethical instruction in tribal societies. Both stories use symbolic elements, nature in *Tejimola* and the waterfall in *Noh Ka Likai*, to "put" their message into the minds of the people. They represent cultural signposts, merging individual narratives with ecological and spiritual aspects. They are also consistent with ecofeminist notions in the sense that the degradation of the ecological domain is thematically synonymous with the women's domain of that which is oppressed, whilst adding another layer of depth to the analysis.

The primary divergence in the tales comes only at the endings. *Tejimola* possesses the characteristics of the modern-day hero that brings nature into action as she is given another opportunity to live and becomes a symbol of hope and renewal in the tragic world. But *Noh Ka Likai* ends with an irrevocable catastrophe that underscores the dire consequences of social conflict. It also helps to build a layered apprehension of the dichotomy about feminine power: power that nurtures and heals, yet which has the potential to be crippled by social defeat. In such a way, by placing together two so different stories, this paper possesses a slightly richer understanding of how indigenous cultures bring forth feminine ethos in folklore. These living chronicles are packed with struggle, beauty, and they even stand for restructuring the hierarchical structure of mankind through gender and identity.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, this contemporary discussion of *Tejimola* and *Noh Ka Likai* from a contemporary perspective helps us to understand the gravity of storytelling and narratives. These two Northeastern tales act as tools to empower the modern women while simultaneously taking the role of a preserver of culture. These age-old tales hold in them the power to inspire movements relating to gender and ecology; this only reinforces and underscores the idea that the ancient will always have a crucial role in shaping the moderns. This paper also tries to lay a path to open avenues for further discourses and exploration of ecofeminist ideologies within indigenous narratives. By threading this framework into the analysis, this paper also demonstrates how tribal narratives often collapse the boundary between human suffering and natural response. Nature, in these stories, is not a passive witness but an active participant– a force that holds memory, grief, and rebirth. It is more than metaphor; it is a deep articulation of how emotion lives in environment. This aspect invites further interdisciplinary inquiry, not just into literature and gender studies, but also into how indigenous ecological knowledge systems articulate trauma and recovery. What truly lingers about these stories is their quiet pedagogical force. They do not instruct in the formal sense but their emotional weight teaches in ways that last much longer. In many tribal homes, it's women who pass these tales on, not through textbooks but through memory, song, and speech; often during shared chores or hushed conversations between generations. The pedagogy here is rooted in empathy– in learning to carry emotions that aren't always spoken aloud, in noticing patterns others overlook, and in recognizing oneself in the silences of a story. They become soft frameworks through which women learn not just how to live, but how to remember, resist, and remain. Furthermore, this paper aims to bridge the gap of "cross-cultural" comparisons between native tales and narratives of India and other parts of the globe. In addition, this paper does not just discuss the feminine ethos and spirit on the surface; the gravity of this critical and sensitive aspects is viewed from a contemporary perspective to allow immense depth to the ideas of resilience and strength. These attributes are symbolic and synonymous to the existence of womankind and this paper argues to underscore the equivalent.

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