Representation of Women and Nature: A Re-reading of Mising Folk Tales from Feminist Perspective

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Abstract: Most of the tribal states of the North East region in India have rich tradition of oral literature. Folk Tales are one of the forms of literature that are found in abundance in this region. They depict the life, culture and tradition of the people. In many of the folktales of the Mising community, the representation of women is placed in stark contrast to the traditional folk tales where women characters play passive roles in the stories. But in the folk tales of the Mising tribe, the role of women, their identity and their power positions have an impact factor in men-women relationships. Another important feature in the folk tales of the Mising Tribe is that Nature is often compared to women who is powerful and can sustain itself in many forms. So the issues of decision making, standing for equal treatment, fight for dignity and to sustain oneself are some of the major themes found in Mising folk tales that are in concordance with feminist ideologies. The paper tries to highlight the representation of women characters in Mising folk tales-'Lighting & Thunder', 'Karpunpu' and ‘Origin of the Sago Palm’ from a feminist perspective where the women are depicted as strong individuals who can question the patriarchal norms and emerge as equals and sustain themselves.

Keywords: Misings, Folktales, Feminist Perspectives, Nature, Culture & Society.

Introduction

Folktales are part and parcel of every culture and human civilization. Folktales as an oral form of literature played an important role in shaping human thinking and behaviour and values that any culture or community practice as a way of life. Folktales are oral literatures transmitted through the words of mouths from one generation to another.

S. Thomson in his work, The Folk tale, defines as the “…the story, which has been handed down from generation to generation either in writing or by word of mouth”. He also adds that folktales exist across time and space and are affected by the nature of the land, where they are current, by the linguistic and social contacts of its people and by the lapse of years and their accompanying changes”. (Thomson, 1977).

The folktales have universal phenomenon and its values can appeal to people from all race and culture. Max Luthi mentions five aspects of folktales-One-dimensionality, depthlessness, abstractions, isolation and all- inclusiveness, and their application to the categories of time and space, society and reality, emotions and thought are manifested in the narrative style of the genre. (Luthi, 1909)

Recent studies in folktales have gained attention due to the increased interest given to oral literature which seem to have receded from focus, overshadowed by the explosions of studies in new genres in contemporary literature. A section of academicians believe that studies and research in folk literature is necessary to preserve and explore the richness and pleasure of oral literature where people, their culture and traditions are depicted. Folktales as a genre is a storehouse of rich cultural nuances where the life of a community is known and studied. Folktales are part of folklore studies. India is a country of folktales which are diverse in nature. It is a home to people of multilingual and multicultural origin where ‘unity in diversity’ acts as a binding factor in national integration.

Folk tales are often underestimated as simple narrative stories but when we look at the function of these tales at a deeper analysis, we are compelled to see the values that are imbibed into the culture and life of the community. The stories in the characters act as mirror of the society, their mannerism, and their ideological stand points on issues of life. They talk of universal themes on subjects such as love, loyalty, betrayals, greed, ambitions; truths which become part of human behaviour. Folktales open space for communicating, make connections and develop knowledge and understanding about other cultures.

Folktales contain certain narrative motifs. Some of the universal characteristic features of folk tales are: they have flat characters, the hero and heroine are often young, and heroes are usually courageous and the heroines gentle and passive. They are gifted with supernatural powers. The setting in a folk tale is far off place, typical geographical locations but of humble dwellings. The concept of time in folktales is often painted in fantasy with the starting point of the story line starts as “long long ago” or “Once upon a time…there was…and ends with” happily ever after” as a closing of the tale. The plot in a folk tale can be very simple but has the power to capture the attention of the listeners. Contrasting characters with good and evil intentions encounter and thus a conflict arises after which action moves faster with a great deed, conflicts resolved with morale to learn.
As oral narratives, folktales play an important role in transmitting the values and ideologies of the Mising community - its age old customs and traditions whose written script is not yet developed to call it a language. Mising are the second largest tribe in Assam after the Bodos. They are dominantly populated in the 12 major districts of Assam especially along the North banks of river Brahmaputra. Many historical studies mentions that Misings were originally from Arunachal Pradesh who have migrated down to the plains for better life and stability in the early thirteen century AD after the Ahoms came to establish their kingdoms in Assam. Misings are basically an agrarian tribe who live near the rivers. They have rich traditions of folk narratives which are part and parcel of their life style and culture. The men in the Mising community are skilled in various art and crafts such as building boats, making fishing nets, baskets and farming. The women of the Mising community are expert weavers and are skilled in making dress patterns. The oral stories of the Mising tribe are woven around the activities of the community. They live in typical still houses called ‘Chang’ which are made of bamboo and wood.

Folktales are part of the cultural practices of the Mising people. The practice of telling ‘Leke Do:ying’ (folktales) is a regular activity in the evening time when the elders of the family recline on the ‘kareng:’ a portion of the ‘Chang ekum’ (Still house) with children waiting to listen to stories. The stories are narrated with great enthusiasm as they relate to stories and legends of their clans and tribes of the bygone years.

**Literature Review**

Professor Tabu Ram Taid, a well-known linguist and an educationist of the Mising tribe has compiled a book titled, *Mising Folk Tales* (2016) under the broad area of Indian Literature in Oral Languages which he translated into English and is published by the Sahitya Academy. This work, in fact is a major contribution made by him as part of his effort to preserve the folk tales for its cultural and narrative values. Most of the major folk tales of the Mising tribe is lucidly rendered into English by professor Tabu Ram. He has divided the folk tales of the Misings into the following category:

a. Tales about the Mising people
b. Tales about Nature
c. Tales about destiny
d. Tales of the supernatural
e. Tales of Birds and animals
f. Tales of Adventure
g. Other tales related to human emotions and moral ethics.

A major chunk of the stories in the collection deal with the origin and decent of the Mising tribe. They claim their ancestry from Abo Tani as the forefather. The tales such as ‘Abotani and Abotaro’, The Origin of the Sirang Clan, ‘The origin of the Sunkurang Clan’ deals with the ‘beginning/origin’ stories of the Mising community. Other tales, namely Origin of a Mibu’, Origin of the festival of the ‘Ali a-ye Ligang’ and ‘Matrimonial Tales’ depict the animist faith of the community where the concept of birth and death are narrated.

Due to lack of historical records, not much has been written about the Mising tribe. Only a few secondary materials are available on the life and culture of this tribe which otherwise remain only in oral form. With the recent development and encouragement in regional literatures, folklore studies; scholars and writers are making efforts to preserve the oral literatures in many ways. In this context, research on folktales as a narrative form is a much sought after area which includes the study of the origin history of the Misings can be traced.

Andrita Saikia in her article, “Rivers, Raids and Resilience: A History of the Mising Community through Folktales”, has made an effort to trace the history of the Mising tribe through folktales. Another scholar and teacher, Pritilota Pegu Doley in her article, “Role of Mising Folk -Tales in Developing Moral Values among Children”, has discussed the importance of using folk tales in imbibing moral values, interpersonal social relationship and building community sense among the young children.

Mising folk narratives have strong presence of women characters. Though Mising community is considered as patriarchal society, there is ambiguity in terms of practice in the society. Through the years, most of the Misings in Assam have embraced Vaishnavism, a monotheistic Hinduism who are the followers of Sankerdeva. But the folktales of the Misings through the years, have managed to maintain the originality of their earlier practices when they were in the hills. In most of these folk tales, there is a strong presence of women characters that have defiled the patriarchal set up to create their own identity and space of their own. The present study is an attempt at re-reading the role of the women characters in the Mising folk tales and their representation; placing them in contest against the patriarchal view that women are in need of control of men. The paper also highlights the treatment of women in Mising society tracing it from the characters in the Mising folk tales.
Objectives:

a. To study the representation of women in literary oral tradition, in this case folk tales.

b. To study how folk tales impart values to life and this extends to treatment of the opposite gender.

c. To understand the role of women in Mising society & to see how it is in contrast to the assumed notion that they are weaker section in society.

Significance of the Study:

Mising folktales have their uniqueness in the way women are represented. Women characters are drawn as strong individuals who can stand for themselves in times of hardships and pressures from society. To put in record, when it comes to equal rights and equal treatment of the men-women relationship in the Mising society, there is no reliable source to indicate any stark distinctions and this amount to some undeclared ambiguity. This brings us to the focus on folk tales of the Misings which are popular oral literatures and have sustained their influence in the life of the community. Folktales of the Mising community throws much light on the representation of the women characters. Women and men have equal positions in the social structure though it must be understood that the turn of the 20th century has to its credit brought about many changes in the way folktale are studied, practiced and the way they are transmitted to the modern generation. To cite an example from Assamese folk tales, women who are educated are not restricted to household works alone. They are empowered to work at per with man. In likewise manner, women in Mising society are considered as equals in the way they are treated though the Mising community is basically considered a patriarchal society. Representation of women are found in the very structure of the Mising society and in this context, the feminist ideologies as mentioned by Jone Jhonson Lewis is very apt in the assessment of women’s position where he says that, “Feminism is a complex set of ideologies and theories, that at its core seeks to achieve equal social, political, and economic rights”. In the core practices of the Mising society, there was an air of ambivalence on the role of women as not much work has done on the subject related to women. Never the less, they were never depicted as inferior or subordinate beings which only reveal the fact that there has been evidence of women’s equal space in all the spheres of life. The patriarchy as defined by AG Johnson in his work, The Gender Knot: Unraveling Our Patriarchal Legacy (2005, p.4) is, “organised around an obsession with control...with men elevated in the social structure, women are assumed to need men’s protection or control”. A re-reading of the Mising folk tales does not significantly proves that the women were in need of control by men. On the contrary men and women relationship have an amicable presence in every spares life in Mising society which again, indirectly vouches for the feminist ideologies on equality. There is ample evidence to indicate that there is a strong representation of women in the oral narratives of the folk tales of the Misings in stark contrast to the projection that women are passive beings in a Mising society.

Research Methodology

The research design is a Qualitative analysis of the primary text. The analysis made is based on the three folk tales taken from Mising Folk Tales namely-‘Lightning & Thunder’, ‘Karpunpuli’ and “Origin of the Sago Plam”.The text is read from feminist perspectives on the representation of women in Mising society. Secondary web sources are also taken for substantiating issues discussed in the primary text.

Analysis of the Chosen Folktales

The themes in the major Mising folk tales revolve around the valor and courage of the women characters. The stories selected for analysis are the following

a) Lightning and Thunder

b) Karpunpuli and the

c) Origin of the Sago Palm tree.

“Lightning and Thunder,” is the story of the origin of lightning and thunder as to why a flash of lightning is followed by a roar of thunder or how they came into being. This natural phenomenon in the sky is connected to tale of two siblings-Panoi and Panbor who were asked to go to their relative’s place as helping hands for the preparation of a wedding ceremony. On the way, while crossing a stream, Panaoi lifts her petticoat to save herself from getting wet. When Panbor saw the bare body of his sister, he overcame with lustful desire and wanted to marry her. Knowing the evil desire of Panbor, Panoi runs away to the riverside and sought help from the river gods. She turns into a bird and flies away. Panbor comes to know about it and he too turns into a bird and follows her. Panoi, flew up into the sky and uses her supernatural power and turns into a lightning. Panbor too changes himself to be a thunder and continues his chase after her, but all in vein. For the Mising community, incestuous relationships such as marrying a person from one own blood relations are highly condemned and considered as an act of transgression to the whole community. The character of Panoi in the story upholds that value in the institution marriage as practiced in the community.

“Karpunpuli” is the story of the creation of the Galaxy and the constellation of stars in the sky. Karpun and Puli were two beautiful sisters who were known for their dancing skills. One day after their dance in village, they entered a forest to pluck some edible leaves. But they were soon followed by the evil spirit of the forest to devour them. The frightened sisters appealed to the 'Epoms' (nymphs) the tree dwelling forest gods to rescue them from this situation. They shielded and whisked away the two sisters to the sky creating the MilkyWay. The character of Karpun and Puli are drawn as women are adorned with purity and grace that enables
them to thwart any evil forces that come their way. They are women who do not allow their body to be succumbed by male gaze or desires against their will.

The next story is of the ‘The Origin of the Sago Palm’. It is the story of a maid who was requested by her master to go and help his neighbor in preparing for the harvesting festival in the field. The maid was hesitant to go as she did not have the appropriate dress for the occasion. The mistress of the house gave the maid a beautiful dress with fancy jewels made of beads to comply with her demand. The satisfied maid goes to the harvest festival with a happy spirit. While returning from the festival, she had a second thought and wanted to keep the beautiful jewels with her. So she sat by the wayside of the road for a long time never to go back again to her master’s house. As time passed, roots began to grow from the lower part of her body and leaves began to grow from the upper part of her body. And that is how she became a sago palm tree with fruits of the sago palm looking like the jewel beads on her neck. The maid in the story is projected as a strong woman who makes her own decisions—a person who believes that she has the right to be happy and is ready to face the consequence for the same but not to surrender to anyone’s control that may deprive her of her rights; a feminist sensibility that any modern day women could associate with.

Discussion

Another aspect to be noticed in the Mising Folktales is the depiction of woman and Nature. In all the mentioned selected stories, Nature comes to the aid of the young girls in danger. Judith Plant in her essay, “Woman and Nature” compares the Earth as a woman who has two faces—one that of nurturing and the other that of wild and uncontrolled. We see that gentle and beautiful side of Nature which is compared to a woman and as a mother who takes care of the family and in the process to the society. But when the Earth is plundered and destroyed, we can see the other face of Nature in repercussion to destructive action of men. In ‘Lightning and Thunder’, young girl Panoi is a gentle sister to her brother Panbor and accompanies him to her uncle’s place. But her brother’s regressive behaviour makes her take up action to save her from such evil design. She turns into a bird and then transforms herself into lightning in the sky which further shows us the strength and determination of a woman to fight against the dominance of men. Nature comes to aid in the form of a bird and then a lightning.

Similarly in the story of ‘Karpunpuli’, the two sisters are like Nature in its pure form; a beauty of harmonious existence when not spoiled by the various onslaught of men. When followed by the evil spirits, their innocence and grace saves them as the forest gods, ‘Epmos’ comes to their rescue which shows that Nature only takes sides with the good. Thus the spiritual strength of the two beautiful sisters helps them fight against the evil forces. They are like the Nature in its pristine state where no evil can penetrate. Nature, here plays the role of a mother, a protector of her children in distress.

In the “The Origin of the Sago Palm”, the character of the maid is an epitome of what modern women would do for herself. She is depicted as strong women who make her own decision and she is ready to face the consequence for the same. She becomes one with Nature; wild and untamed in her transformation into a Sago Palm and not to be bend under control.

Women’s Representation through the Folktales:

In the Mising community, women are part and parcel of the development of the society. The ideologies of gender equality, concept of equal rights to women are vibrantly represented in the folk tales of the Misings.

To understand the position of the women in Mising society, one needs to trace the history of the migration of the Misings from Arunachal to the Brahmaputra valley of Assam. The migration story of the Misings in Assam throws light on the changes in ideologies of the present day Mising community. The Mising tribe through the years has acclimatized themselves to the customs and traditions of the Hindu religion and in many ways abandoned the animistic faith the community which was originally followed by them when they were in the hills. To this effect Professor Tabu Ram Taid aptly said -

“In the Brahmaputra valley, the Misings have undergone a process of acculturation, the life and customs of their Assamese speaking Hindu neighbors influencing their life and customs significantly. It does not however; mean that they have given up their traditional culture totally. This phenomenon has hybridized both their material and non-material culture” (Taid, Vii).

As a result the positions of the Mising women in Assam have gone through the folds and tears of varied cultural practices of the Hindu society where women are not treated at per with the men. But a deeper re-reading of the folk tales reveals that, in the Mising community there has been strong representation of women. Folktales have always been the byproducts of the cultural practices of the Mising tribe such as-family set up, animistic practices where Nature is revered and worshipped. The feminist ideologies that vouch for women’s equal right at par with men are vibrantly present in the nuances, the essence and moral values that are imbibed through the Folk Tales. Thus the women characters in the folk stories are adorned with qualities that do not adhere to unequal treatment or dominance of men. And where there have been such issues; women have fought back for their dignity and fair treatment.

The case in the discussion is the character of Panoi in “Lightning and Thunder,” represented as one of a strong women for whom surrendering to the incestuous brother is not her cup of tea. She relentlessly changes her power to be a strong version of herself to fight against dominance of the male member. In the story of ‘Karpunpuli’, the sisters, Karpun and Puli are represented as spiritually strong women who lives by the power of their innocence and resilience and manages to ward off the presence of evil; in their fight against evil spirits of the forest. This also reiterates the fact that folk tales in the Mising community always played a big role in
influencing the moral ethics of the people. And in the story of the, ‘Origin of the Sago Palm’ the protagonist is represented as person who knows her position, makes her independent decision to stand for her right to dress well and the right to be happy by not returning to the subjugation in her master’s house.

Conclusion

Through the analysis of the folk tales, it is found that representation of women in Mising society has a positive and progressive presence. At a closer reading of the folk tales, we are led to understand that women have had equal representation in the political, economic and social space in the Mising community. Folk tales as narrative framework can be relied upon to give us the true picture of a particular community, culture and tradition of a particular time period.

Thus, a re-reading of the folktales of the Mising tribe provides us with ample information on the representation of women and their status at par with men. Among the Mising women, as revealed in the Mising folktales gender identities do not give the patriarch, the right to gender discrimination. So Panoi in the story of ‘Lightning and Thunder’ is representative of modern women who will not bow down to the dominance or dictation of patriarchy at the cost of sanctity and moral ethics.

Similarly, the women characters in “Karupunpuli”, represent the strength and power of integrity and purity when evil forces tries to deprive them of their spiritual and moral ethos. They are symbolic of women of upright characters which enable them to withstand the onslaught of any dominating force. And the women in the story, “Origin of Sago Palm” is a typical representation of the present day women of our time for whom, asking for a proper dress to go for an errand for her master is her right to basic requirements. And her desire to keep the beautiful ornaments of her mistress and her refusal to return to her master’s house; is an act of protest than to submit to slavery an ideology much upheld by feminist thinkers. There are several other customs in the Mising society which favors the women. Customs such as the practice of “Maqboo dug:nam” and the title “Borani” given to the woman representative. Maqboo du:gnam is a practice prevalent in the Mising community when a suitable groom is expected to stay in the girl’s home for a certain period of time to prove his eligibility and acceptance by the would be bride’s family. Even at the time of marriage, groom has to offer gifts to the bride’s family in both cash and kind, a custom similar to the bride prize practice in Arunachal Pradesh. And a woman in Mising society is given the title “Borani” by the process of nomination. She represents the womenfolk to handle the community activities such as community harvesting, community festivals, community fencing and community fishing. She acts as the women representative along with her male counterpart who is called the “Bora”. In all the above mentioned customs, traditions and administrative activities, there is strong representation of women who are entitled to rights and duties towards their community. The folktales of the Misings reveal such practices in their culture even though the ‘telling of the tales’ it has gone through several changes.

Thus, a re-reading of the Mising folk tales reveals a strong representation of women, which helps us understand the family set up, customs and practices and equal treatment in men-women relationship.

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