

WOMEN FOLKLORE: THE UNOFFICIAL CUSTODIAN OF CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

*The article brings forth the presence of gender in folklore with the focus on folklore **by** and **about** women. As with the other genres and Feminisms in Literature, issues of gender biasness have marred the conception of a wholesome body of folklore leaving out the “better half”- women’s narratives-out of its purview. Consequently, as with the other genres in Feminisms and Literature, women have come up with their body of folklore which is mostly domestic. Thus, the women creators have not only created a way to enter the universe of folk literature but also re-interpreted their domestic role. The article follows the trajectory of women’s folklore from its paucity to its emergence, from presentation (by male folklorists) to re-interpretation (by female folklorists).*

Keywords: *Folklore, Culture, Gender Bias, Western Fairy Tales, Women’s Genres, Folksong, Vrat-Kathas, Dyodhi, Herder, Acculturation, Feminine Stereotypes, Passivity.*

Introduction

“The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.”

– Marcel Proust

The paper, broadly, follows two lines of thought. First, following the title “Women’s Folklore”, focuses on folklore **by** and **about** women. The emergence of gender in folk literature, deliberately or propelled by the need of the hour due to turning a blind eye towards the importance of gender in folk literature or was it always there and promoted by the creators of folktales and encouraged by society, how prevalent societal attitudes shaped female characters in folktales are the questions that serve to critically evaluate the meaning of “Women’s Folklore”. This is done with the help of bibliographic survey of the material on women’s folklore, barring nationalities. Second, the subtitle part “Unofficial Custodian of Culture”, focuses on how the women have created their own folklore, helping in the re-interpretation of the roles set aside exclusively for them, in order to mitigate the gender biases in folklore’s content.

The porous boundaries of literature have opened up to the marginalized spaces encompassing folklore and the interplay of orality and literacy. The democratization of Literature and Humanities has lent voices to the so-called crude forms of art. The ‘classics’ endowed with the credibility of great literature are no longer ‘the only’ means of wisdom for those who never had access to them. However, the wisdom upon which the classics rested comes from the marginalised spaces. The cognitive dimension of Literature helps to incorporate the problems of inclusion of the periphery. It changes the constitution of mainstream both physically and psychologically as more and more identification with multiculturalism occurs.

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Folklore or *lokvidya* are umbrella terms which include many other aspects of human 'lore'- 'lore' comes from an Old English word *lar* which means learning. Dan Ben-Amos views art as the core of folklore and folklore as the "artistic communication in small groups" (12), emphasizing the aesthetic qualities of folklore and the importance of group interaction in observing and defining it. Barre Toelken seconds this as "the participation in a distinctive and dynamic process" (101). Satyendra shares the Indian point of view. For him, folklore is not the material capital of a community but the mental resources which create it (5). A. K. Ramanujan views folklore as a co-partner in the production of cultural meaning and wisdom alongside other systems like Sanskrit classical literature as well as acting as "counter-systems, anti-structures, a protest against official systems" (Becker et al. 55).

Gender first emerged as a significant issue in the study of folk literature in light of the women's movement of 60's and 70's and scholars analyzed common western fairy tales and criticised the image of passive, somnolent beauty (Bottigheimer 116); focus on self-sacrifice, marriage and helpless woman (Rowe 211); and the connection of woman's power and action with evil and ugliness (Lieberman 391). The critique centered on the idea that "traditionally knowledge, truth and reality have been constructed as if men's experiences were normative, as if being human meant being male" (Personal Narratives Group3). In the 1975 special issue of the *Journal of American Folklore* "Women and Folklore", the first collection of writings about gender and folklore, Editor Claire Farrer argued that women's genres have been downplayed and even ignored by folklorists. The cultural expectations of gender roles affect what is studied and how it is studied. Torborg Lundell scathingly criticizes the Aarne-Thompson tale type index, a dominant scheme for the classification and study of tales:

That there is urgent need for revision of these research tools is particularly clear when we read the following cross-references in Stith Thompson's *Motif Index of Folk Literature*: 'Man, see also person'. 'Woman, see also wife' (162).

Paucity of folkloric data on women is reflected in various journals around the world since their inception in the nineteenth century till the twentieth century- *Journal of American Folklore*, *California's Western Folklore*, Newman Ivey White edited *The Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore*, Archer Taylor's *English Riddles from Oral Tradition*. The trend was overwhelmingly biased towards women's expressive behavior manifested only in charms, quaint customs, home remedies and re-telling of folktales (only when male informant is not available otherwise only the male version is preferred).

In the late twentieth century with a period of intensive fieldworks of Francis Lambrecht in Philippines and Linda Deigh's discussion of Hungarian folktales, Roger Abrahms examined in detail the style, repertoire and conscious manipulation of elements producing songs performed by a female in his "Creativity, Individuality and Traditional Singer" published in *Studies in Literary Imagination*, Robbie Davis Johnson has investigated women's usage of verbal resources to control interactional situations in "Folklore and Women: A Social Interactional Analysis of the Folklore of Texas Madam" (1973) it became pretty apparent that women's creativity and expressive traditions were limited behind the *dyodhi*, that is, men's expressive traditions were exercised in the public places and those of women take place inside home. Consequently, as Edwin Ardner noted in "Belief and Problem of Women", published in *The Interpretation of Ritual* by J.S.La Fontaine that surface structure may express the male view of the world, obscuring the existence at deeper levels of an autonomous female view (152).

The germination of negative conception of women seeped into folklore due to Herder's idea of romantic nationalism. Hailed as the "creator god" of folklore, Herder's ideas circulated "cultural scripts" dictating the roles of men and women in creating and transmitting culture and traditions, situating women out of the work of creating culture. Against Europe's urbanization and industrialization, Herder's doctrine sought after a nation built on an idealized *Volk* society- largely patriarchal and bounded by tradition and living in a close-knit structure following a single script. Herder's advocacy for the folk culture against imperial hegemony became synonymous with the literary revolution of the Romantics who focused on cultivating the national consciousness through common intangible heritage of the people. Furthermore, in Herder's cultural script:

Paternal love is best displayed by a manly education. The father early inures his son to his own mode of life; teaches him his art, awakens in him the sense of fame, and in him loves himself, when he shall grow old or be no more. This feeling is the basis of all hereditary honor and virtue: it renders education a public, an external work; it has been the instrument of transmitting all the excellences and prejudices of the human species. (Fox 568)

In fact, the tales may serve as training manuals in passive behavior and millions of women must surely have formed their ideas of what they could or could not accomplish, what sort of behavior would be rewarded and the nature of the reward itself. These stories have been made the repositories of the dreams, hopes and fantasies of generations of girls (Lieberman 385). The treatment of women in tales across cultures reveals specific patterns that aim at sexualizing the child's psyche and how a person's chances at success are limited by his/her sex. Instead of compartmentalizing certain traits as feminine on the basis of biological and cultural reasons, one needs to ask what is inherent in human nature and what has become ours through gentle but forcible processes of acculturation. The "primary channels of acculturation" (Lieberman 384) need to be examined for the same.

Various patterns emerge but only the stereotyped figure of the wicked mother receives much notice. Besides, the beauty of a girl as her most valuable asset is portrayed as the real deal that can win a desirable suitor for her. In fact, good temper and meekness are associated with beauty and ill temper with ugliness. In the case of several daughters, the fairest of them all receives the fairest reward. This promotes jealousy, divisiveness and an intensely competitive spirit. Beauty is shown as a luxury that only fortunate ones are bestowed with. Girls may be predisposed to imagine that there is a link between the loveable face and the loveable character. The predictable result is that: beautiful girl does not have to 'do' anything to merit being chosen and thus her passive subjectivity. In the absence of any conflict or motivation to undertake any action, her existence becomes "*en-so*" (Lieberman 390), that is, just existing as opposed to "*pour-so*" (Lieberman 390) which is existence in a purposive state. Her life before and after marriage is not much different. She follows the same routine, performs the traditions and even lives in the same luxury. Powerful good women are either always fairies or good-tempered ghosts which makes them remote, for example, the ghost of the mother who nurses her baby in Romani folktale "Vana". They come only when desperately needed. There is no living, good tempered woman in their place who always stays together. These heroines are not just passive but also unusually patient, obedient, industrious and quiet. A woman who fails to become those could not be a heroine. The heroes are provided with all the acts and success. They are judged by their ability to overcome obstacles as they turn out to be future kings. Heroines are already portrayed as perfect and the only test they are required to pass is: a beautiful face, pleasing temperament (which is not explored in the tale) and waiting for the arrival of the prince.

Marriage is the fulcrum and a major event in almost all of the tales and the princess is a part of a package deal including half or the entire kingdom. At times, the focus is completely on the hero's quest and his winning the kingdom so that resulting marriage gets completely drained of humane feelings and becomes an objectivity. Married life is hardly shown and if at all then the ability of women to endure and put up with the pressure of moulds takes the center stage. In such cases, the role of men takes a backseat and once again 'private sphere' takes the limelight. Added to this, vague statements like 'they lived happily ever after' cements all the happenings associated to a particular temperament, categorically. The stereotypes do not shift; they do not change but take up a watertight role in otherwise fluid folkloric genres.

These patterns show how women have been en-gendered and the ways of their negotiation as well. These prejudiced patterns are employed to teach girls to "play dead across the path of some young man who has been led to believe that he rules the world", "glorify passivity", "dependency and self-sacrifice as a heroine's cardinal virtues", promote a theme of inferior position of women, teach that "girls win prizes if they are fairest of them all; boys win if they are bold, active and lucky" (Waelti-Waters 181). Karen E. Rowe affirmed the significance of romantic tales in forming the female attitudes toward the self, men, marriage and society in her paper "Feminism and Fairy Tales". The romantic paradigms and fantasies influence not only the childhood but the adult women who "internalize romantic patterns from ancient tales" and "continue to tailor their aspirations and capabilities to conform to romantic paradigms" (222).

However, with the juggernaut of feminist movements within and outside the realm of Literature, society's "previous mores and those tales which inculcate romantic ideals" (Rowe 211) have been exposed and challenged. Modern women have become increasingly conscious of the gap between romantic ideals and the reality that "all men are not princes" (222). Meenakshi Sharma speaks about the tactics women employ in the tales as well as songs to make their demands not just noticeable but fulfilled. She says

Women still act in relation to husbands, but it is not so much that they want things for themselves from men, as that they know what is needed for everyone and can tell men how to proceed in getting it. In the stories, it appears that female demands are based on genuine prescience. Women speak with authority; if men accept and act on their wives' council, all goes well. (Sharma 34)

Speaking about Rajasthani women's folklore, depictions of husband-wife arguments in folksongs are plenty and present an interplay of contested control as well as men acting as the yes-man of their wives. Folksongs provide them a resistance against the submissive reality and make forthright demands. The notion of submissive bride does not apply to these women in the songs and yet in some ways it manifests. In the songs of Gangaur and Tij, women, observing fasts make explicit demands and summon their absent spouse to come home for the celebration bearing gifts. Their voice is firmly authoritative. This authority derives from her outspoken love for her husband and the enduring traditions. Hence, women's power extends from the domestic sphere- *akam* (Ramanujan) - towards the public sphere-*puram*. Some selected verses follow:

Kisangarh ho sa mukangarh chakri dhola sayba ji

Tij sunyan ghar aav

(Whether your work is in Kishangarh or Mukangarh, husband-lord

Having heard of tij, come home).

Phari to chodya thaari nokri dhola sayba ji

Aaya aaya tij tanwhaar

(Leave your job at once, husband lord

The festival of tij has come). (Gold 117)

Similarly, in women's ritual storytelling- *vrat katha*- women dictate men and if they follow prosperity prevails. Luce Irigaray in her piece "Divine Women", included in *Sexes and Genealogies* declares "Divinity is what we need to become free, autonomous and sovereign. No human subjectivity, no human society has ever been established without the help of the divine" (Deutscher 90). And in the absence of the divine model or "Divine Women", she is forced to comply and follow the dominant models. Although she writes about the absence of any symbolic figure in Western culture to play an equivalent role for women, Vrat-kathas in Rajasthani folk literature abounds with such divine figures where the women themselves attain a position either equal to creator/mould for others to follow or with the grit, which comes "naturally" to them and tap on the right nerve to make their demands fulfilled, by husband and God/Goddess. *Vrat-kathas* are their "domestic literature" (Menzie's, 139) where they are in complete control of the culture and ritual as "doer" compared to men who remain outside the action. Moreover, *kathas* are read out in groups in city or villages, thereby allowing women to create their own arena of folklore devoid of men. This is a folklore **by** and **about** women. Thus, the claims of *vrat-kathas* being a manual of female subordination can be re-interpreted as the manual of female power. Being selfless, compassionate and nurturing male is considered a gentleman and respected. Similarly, these are not the characteristics of a subordinated female but the one who can keep it under voluntary control.

Women in Rajasthani folklore are not portrayed as shy or ashamed. Rather they speak boldly and present articulate demands. In all the genres these demands include demand for love- in the form of fidelity, gifts, services and perhaps above all physical proximity. Today women are caught in a dialectic between cultural status quo and the evolving feminist movement, between a need to preserve values and yet to accommodate changing mores, between romantic fantasies and contemporary realities. The capacity of women to achieve equality and of culture to rejuvenate itself depends upon the metamorphosis of these tensions into balances, of antagonisms into viable co-operations. But in the midst of these tensions they are the unofficial custodian of culture and contrary to what Herder declared, women folklore can very well preserve and transmit the culture, although domestic, which the males cannot.

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