



Storytelling As Social Instruction: Representation Of Women In Nocte Folktales From Selected Chapters Of ‘Tales From The Lapping Hills: *Nocte Folktales Retold*’ By Chatung Lowang

Muakhkek Tekwa

Guest Faculty,

Department of English

Wangcha Rajkumar Govt. College, Deomali,

Dist.-Tirap, Arunachal Pradesh

Abstract: Folktales have long been the medium of moral and social instruction within the tribal communities of North-East India. The practice of oral recitation within the Nocte community dates back to the tribe’s inception and remains as a moral compass using which the tribal folks get their moral codes and answers to the unknown transmitted down the generational stream. The moral instructions within the lores often serve as measure that define the code of conduct and outline the gender roles that the society expects of an individual within the community. This study is an attempt made to understand how women are represented in folklore of the Nocte community. The Noctes are one of the major tribes inhabiting the southeastern part of Arunachal Pradesh, India. Traditionally the art of storytelling within the Nocte community has always been performed orally and thereby requires deep transcription. One such effort into documenting the rich stories of the said tribe is performed by Chatung Lowang in her work ‘Tales From the Lapping Hills’. This study uses textual-analytical approach along with qualitative content analysis of the said text to reveal underlying ideologies that construct the women space within the studied community and their representation in folktales of the Nocte tribe.

Keywords: Folktales, Representation of women, Social Instruction, Noctes, Tales From the Lapping Hills.

1. Introduction

The tradition of storytelling has long permeated the tribal communities of North-East India and remains central to their history and identity as a medium through which stories about legends and common beliefs were transmitted from generation to generation. It stands as a nucleus around which the tribal society’s beliefs form and take shape. The message that folktales carry and the lessons they impart does for the tribal space what prose do for written literature—guide and instruct. Folktales henceforth, provide a window to peek into the tribal life and society. The oral stories become a microcosm of the whole tribal world filled with wondrous mystical tales of beast, supernatural elements and imagery animations as Alan Dundes asserts, “Folklore is collective fantasy and as fantasy, it depends upon the symbolic system of a given culture.” (Bronner 64). Folklores within the Nocte community has been transmitted orally and the present corpus of tales existing within the said tribe has gone through numerous re-touching with the central colour remaining the same in every generation. Within the ever-advancing tide of modernity in motion, the need to document the folklores of any community becomes necessary not just as a means of conservation but also as a tool to understand the myths and proverbs that allow for social cohesion in place.

The need of conversion of folklore to written format began after the advent of formal education in various parts of North East India due to colonial expansion. This transition came with challenges that require attention so that the underlying themes and motifs within the stories remain the same and as close to the source from which it is translated without outside influence. Various writers despite the challenges have tried to revive the traditions of North East India in Contemporary writings. Writers such as Temsula Ao and Mamang Dai, have incorporated folklore themes into their writings combining modern literary styles and oral traditional storytelling to explore themes of identity and memory (Souza 289).

Folktales have been the major source of entertainment within the Nocte tribal community as it included riddles, tales, myths, legends, proverbs and so on. The stories included instructions and moral code of behaviour that supported social construction and relationships. One interesting notion within tribal body finds women to be the primary narrator of tales and transmitters of parables as K.E. Rowe, asserts, “Women as storytellers have woven or spun their yarns, speaking at one level to a total culture, but at another to a sisterhood of readers who will understand the hidden language, the secret revelations of the tale” (Rowe 57). It can be understood that women added to the social institutions by conforming to the stereotype image generated by men and society in general (Al-Khalaf 375), and passed on the seed of subversion at its inception to the younger generation. The present paper analyses the representation of women found in selected chapters of the folklore titled *Folklores From the Lapping Hills* (2025) a collection of folk stories recorded by Chatung Lowang, an amateur short story writer from Tirap district in Arunachal Pradesh, India, who through her writing provides insight into the rich tapestry of indigenous life of the Nocte community. As a member of the Nocte tribe, her work provides a unique lens through which the tribal narratives of the said tribe can be understood. Her work is an attempt to transcribe the stories she heard as a child while making an effort to maintaining its core essence. By endowing the characters within her stories dialogue, she renders them accessible to a wider audience beyond her own community, while also promoting the traditional beliefs of the tribe and providing insights into its cultural space through storytelling and proverbs.

2. Overview of Nocte Folklore

The Nocte tribe, inhabiting the Patkai region of Tirap District, Arunachal Pradesh, India possess stories and legends that informs us about how the tribe views the world around them. Stories consisting of inanimate objects and animals possessing human like attribute and intelligence fills the narrative structure of the tribe. The oral tradition of recitation was one of the primary sources of entertainment within the tribe through which the natives passed on common beliefs to the next generation. These oral narratives provide insights into the manifestation of general ideologies through which the tribe perceives others and find answers to the unknown (Ayub 2). Folklore within the Nocte tribe functions not merely as myth but as a living system of knowledge. The Noctes are greatly influenced by the idea that the natural world and the spiritual realms share a very close connection. Myths and legends tell the story of the Nocte people coming to settle down in the Patkai hills, and how the clans and chieftainships were formed. Most of the stories within the tribe are told as replies to the “why” and “how” questions—why some animals act the way they do, why the seasons change, why a family is afflicted with misfortune, or why certain taboos are to be kept. Thus, while communicating these inquiries, folklore makes the world inhabited by spirits and ancestors to be of some kind of order and meaning. By filling the narrative world with animals and objects with human qualities, the tales provide an animistic understanding of life.

3. Objectives of the study

- To understand how women are represented in the Nocte folklore by analysing the work titled Folktales From the Lapping Hills by Chatung Lowang
- To understand how folktales act as social instructions within the Nocte community

4. Methodology

This study uses textual-analytical approach focusing on representation of women in the book *Folktales From the Lapping Hills* by Chatung Lowang (2025). Four chapters were selected from the book and Interpretations along with qualitative content analysis was conducted in order to highlight the underlying ideologies prevalent within the narratives to determine societal perception towards women within the Nocte tribe. The study also tries to understand storytelling as medium of instruction that offers didactic models of feminine behaviour and probes into the institution of common belief within the stories that views women gender as nurturers as well as harbinger of misfortune within the tribal community.

5. Findings and Discussions

5.1 The Joak Phamtong

The first tale that I have selected is titled *'The Joak Phamtong'*, where *Joak* refers to Goblin and *Phamtong* meaning Magical bag. The story revolves around a greedy person in a Nocte village who loses his way when returning from the forest and happens to chance upon a Joak playing with its phamtong. The description given by Lowang regarding the creature in her book is that in the Nocte tradition, it is considered to be a 'magical creature' with a shy and sly nature who dislikes human contact. The Joak is portrait to always carry its phamtong along as without it the creature becomes powerless. The bag here is synonymous with identity, status and power, something that women in tribal society could achieve only through her association with a man. The act of the man stealing the magical bag and enslaving its rightful owner under the pretext of promising to return it back if the creature works for him creates a parallel between the creature and the situation of women in a patriarchal community. Women in tribal society often find themselves confined within the parameters set by men and even though they possess the magical quality to bring life into the world, they are always subordinated by their male counterparts. Their gift becomes means to nurture the primogeniture tradition forward by giving birth to strong sons. In a tribal society, ground ideology of coercion finds mirror in tales that showcases men asserting dominance over others. The man in the story, in spite of his wife persuading him to free the Joak refuses to listen to her and asserts that he would make the creature work for him even though he already has everything he needs to survive. This act of domination highlights how the society critiques greed, presenting it as a destructive force that disrupts moral balance. Lowang in this chapter presents a woman taking the fall for her husband when she is outwitted by the deceitful creature. Motivated by concerned for her husband's wellbeing, her actions highlight how the story portrays female emotional vulnerability and sentimentality towards their loved ones. The creature casting magic on the whole family members before disappearing can be interpreted as a reflection of how misfortunes sometimes befall on innocent individuals. The consequences of the man's action was borne by the wife—who was caring, not just towards her family but also towards the creature. Retribution falls on the man when he loses a faithful and loyal partner as his wife following which he begins to travel from place to place in search of the creature to bring back his family. The tale preaches the consequences of greed and shows women possessing a moral guiding force that embodies both empathy and sacrifice. Similar description is seen in Hailah Abdullah Al-Khalaf's tale of *'The Hunter and the Witch with the Feather Hat'*, where we see a witch named Salma who has a magical feather hat which allows her to transform into a pigeon (380). Both the stories have almost the similar plot but with subtle differences, as in the latter, the witch comes back to the man's family but this time on her own terms thereby asserting her own individuality and autonomy. Both the Joak and Salma in the stories could rise above their situations using their wits showing how women are seen as magical creatures in a male dominant society and sometimes need to use the situation to her advantage.

5.2 The Perfect Bride

The second story centers on a man from a wealthy family who falls in love with a young woman from humble background during his travels and brings her home. The couple soon got married but the man's mother feeling otherwise started to devise a plan to find fault in the young woman. In a tribal society, status and prestige are considered to be paramount and the man's mother playing the role of an overbearing snob can be understood as her simply being a traditionalist. She makes the young woman perform various tasks to uncover her true nature: from putting an egg in the *Thamken* (pounding hole) and asking her to pound paddy just to see whether the other party would be conscientious enough to find it, or, setting a trap by putting *kaap* (bamboo tongs) at the doorway to see if she would be careless and clumsy enough to trip and fall. These tests actually puts forward the idea of what a perfect bride should be like. It lays down moral instructions and portrays society's expectancy of a woman to being meticulous—even if means to remain oblivious to the fact that it is test conducted on them on terms set by others. Women too, expect other women to confirm to the institutions in place, to read between the lines and fill in the gaps herself with careful consideration. In the story, the young woman passed the tests gracefully yet the man's mother was not satisfied. Proving that it is still not easy for a woman to earn the respect even from her own gender and even after fulfilling all the conditions expected of her. In the final section of the chapter, we see that the man's mother accepts the young woman as her daughter-in-law and considers her to be a 'perfect wife' only when she disposes a banana skin that her mother-in-law threw in the middle of a small path so that others might not slip or get into an accident. The peel was actually seen by many villagers who came before her but none took the liberty to stop and dispose it. This shows that the quality which one might consider as perfect is missing in the majority and the story is didactic in instructing the listeners—especially women—to embody the qualities of virtue and conscientiousness. Tribal ideology

often conceptualizes women as socially incomplete in the absence of a male partner; consequently, marriage functions as a primary mechanism through which women attain identity, legitimacy, and status within the community. Within this framework, women are expected to demonstrate diligence, deference, and moral attentiveness, expectations that are intensified if one wants to be a ‘perfect wife’.

5.3 The Pumpkin Girl

The third story takes place in a Nocte village where a girl named Charu whose mother had passed away and she lived with her father who remarried in order to provide a motherly figure for his daughter. As the story progresses, we come to know about the wicked personality of Charu’s stepmother who makes her perform labour to the point where she becomes ‘thin and sickly’. Lowang portrays the stepmother as a lady who is never satisfied with whatever the child does and presents her as a person with dual faces who treats the child with attention in front of her husband and harshly in his absence. The father not noticing the changes (physical/emotional) taking place with his own daughter can be seen as parallel to the plight of women that goes unnoticed within a patriarchal society. It could also be considered as a necessary ingredient for the story to progress in order to show the evils prevalent within the society. The incident where the stepmother smashes Charu’s hands and legs with the *Maan* (pounding club) used for pounding paddy while asking her to shove in the scattering grains inside the *Thamken* (pounding table) during the pounding process shows how women are unable to turn away from various situations imposed on them by the society. Women in Nocte community perform both agriculture and domestic duties and the *Maan* represents women’s connection to both these spheres from which she can never truly free herself and is the source of her suffering. The stepmother’s act of burying her victim and informing the father that his daughter ran away from home is an attempt to cover and distort the truth but the latter prevails when the daughter—now a pumpkin—tells her father about what had happened. The tribals believe in the quality of retribution which is seen in the chapter when the father reports the evil committed by his wife to the chief who then arrests the perpetrator and condemns her to lifetime punishment. The father feeling remorseful for neglecting his own daughter and the daughter reverting back into her human form by the end of the chapter mirrors the ideology of redemption and second chances that exists within the tribal community.

5.4 The Story of The Opium Flower

The final chapter of the book tells a story of a young girl named Hinnya, who had all the qualities that a man longs for in a maiden. Everything except the quality of being attractive as Lowang puts her as: ‘plan and not attractive’ (94). Men of all ages have pursued women they find attractive and have even fought wars over them. The winsome quality is one of the prerequisite measures for a woman to be considered a ‘perfect bride’ and in this chapter we find a maiden who despite embodying all the qualities except one is sidelined with almost no man pursuing her. Her situation reflects the collective experience of women who are diligent but are never courted for in the test of taste, men often prefer beauty over grace. The girl holding out hope that a right man would come for her at the right time is synonymous with young girls having notions about a prince on horseback who would take them to a happy place. The advances made by a man towards her finally seemed to end her anticipation and with their marriage ceremony set post the Loku festival, she felt hopeful for the future that awaited her. The mentioning of the marriage ceremony that was to take place after the Loku festival holds deep significance as Loku—harvest festival and the major celebration of the Nocte tribe which marks the end of a season—symbolises the end of her waiting for her perfect partner and her worries. The story takes a sudden shift when the man brings home a beautiful woman home just weeks before the festival which breaks Hinnya’s heart and soul. The protagonist not having the will and courage to confront her fiancé after seeing the bewitching woman shows how women can sometimes go under and question their own worth. Consequently, her parents passing away even after much care shows how situations add on to intensify women’s suffering resulting in her withering away. The vow she makes in her final moments to return to the world of the living to extract her revenge on all men can be seen as her trying to regain her place within the society and assert her own identity. As she says in the chapter:

“I had so much to give, but all I received was only betrayal. Remember that I will come back. My new form will be so intoxicating that men will sacrifice everything they have, to get me, and yet they will never be truly satisfied. Any man that touches me will forever become my slave.” (Lowang 97)

The world may take her flesh but not her spirit that tries to win what it never could while she was alive—to be desired and chased. This becomes evident in the concluding section of the chapter when she reincarnates as an enchanting flower (poppy) above her grave. The place where her worldly story ended became the starting point of her next life where she, now a flower becomes something desired by men. Men having learnt to make

opium out of the 'intoxicating' flower chase her to the point of leaving everything; dignity or loved ones behind and at the end of their lives die in a miserable and lonely manner similar to how she did. This shows how the Noctes associate the withdrawal symptoms that comes from psychoactive substance abuse to have an agenda. The girl becomes a sinister force that breaks individuals and families but deep down it can be understood that she is a victim who just wanted to feel loved and to love. The story is a reminder that a woman's wrath can be disastrous if incurred. Women in tribal community as often viewed as caregivers and nurturers but here is one who breaks that image and emerges as an entity that asserts herself through addiction. By making her victims helpless and isolated, she allows them a share of her own experience of being unwanted in particular and a woman in general. The story also embodies a narrative that behind every bad person there lies something that was once pure and innocent.

6. Conclusion

The tales examined are a blend of fantastical imagery and moral ideas that act as means of social instruction within the Nocte community. The representation of women within the book *Folktales From the Lapping Hills* by Chatung Lowang shows the collective psyche of the Nocte society that considers the female gender to possess a sentimental and attentive nature. Female gender within the chapters are portrayed as a source of emotional and ethical support to their male counterparts making them core of the family's social and moral stability. The stories assert various ideologies by reinforcing the institution of common belief prevalent within the society in terms of gender expectations which postulates how a perfect maiden is supposed to be. Simultaneously, it also presents women as a complex figure who is capable of bringing misfortune and downfall if she confirms to her dark feminine archetype instead of the usual nursing quality. Additionally, the narratives also expose how women themselves can become enforcers of patriarchal expectations by participating in the persecution and control of other women thereby creating limits for the whole female gender within the community. Together, these representations reveal the heavy emotional and moral burden placed upon women in Nocte society and shows the paradoxes surrounding womanhood, for the female gender can become the pillar supporting the stability or disrupts the balance within the society.

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