



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

MONSTROUS BODIES, SACRED BODIES: DISABILITY, LIMINALITY AND THE SUPERNATURAL IN ASSAMESE AND JAPANESE FOLKLORE

Dr. Dhanya Ravindran R.K
Associate Professor of English
Govt. Polytechnic College, Kothamangalam
Kerala

Abstract:

Folklore frequently constructs bodies that exist at the boundaries of the human and the non-human, the sacred and the profane, the ordinary and the extraordinary. This article examines the representation of disability, bodily difference, and liminality in Assamese and Japanese folklore through a comparative analysis of supernatural figures, spirits, and sacred beings. Drawing upon disability studies, Victor Turner's concept of liminality, and folklore theory, the study argues that bodily difference in both traditions functions as a symbolic marker of transition and power. While certain bodies are portrayed as monstrous and socially disruptive, others are sacralized as vehicles of divine agency and spiritual mediation. Through an examination of Assamese narratives concerning spirit possession, shape-shifting beings, and supernatural entities alongside Japanese yōkai traditions and religious folklore, the paper demonstrates how disability and bodily irregularity occupy an ambivalent position between exclusion and reverence. The analysis reveals that folklore transforms bodily difference into a cultural language through which societies negotiate fears, uncertainties, and sacred possibilities.

Keywords: Disability Studies, Folklore, Liminality, Assamese Folklore, Japanese Folklore, Yōkai, Supernatural Bodies, Monstrosity

I. INTRODUCTION

The body occupies a central position in folklore because it functions as the primary site through which societies imagine normality, difference, power, and danger. Across cultures, bodies that diverge from accepted physical, cognitive, or behavioural norms often become invested with supernatural meanings. Such bodies are rarely interpreted merely as biological realities; instead, they are transformed into symbolic texts upon which communities inscribe fears, aspirations, religious beliefs, and social anxieties.

Disability studies has increasingly challenged the medicalised understanding of disability as individual deficit. Scholars such as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Lennard Davis, and David Mitchell have demonstrated that bodily difference is culturally produced through narratives that define certain bodies as normative and others as deviant. Folklore constitutes one of the most influential narrative systems through which such meanings are generated. Long before the emergence of modern medicine, unusual bodies were interpreted through cosmological frameworks that connected physical difference with divine intervention, supernatural agency, ancestral power, or monstrous alterity.

This article examines the relationship between disability, bodily difference, and supernatural representation in Assamese and Japanese folklore. Although these traditions emerged within distinct historical and cultural contexts, both exhibit remarkable similarities in their treatment of liminal bodies. Assamese folk narratives associated with spirit possession, goddess worship, transformation, and supernatural encounters construct bodily difference as a site of sacred mediation. Japanese folklore, particularly through its rich yōkai tradition, similarly portrays anomalous bodies as occupying unstable positions between the human and non-human worlds.

Drawing upon disability studies, Victor Turner's theory of liminality, and folkloristic approaches to embodiment, this paper argues that bodily difference functions as a liminal category in both traditions. The disabled, transformed, possessed, or monstrous body destabilizes ordinary classifications and consequently becomes endowed with supernatural significance. Such bodies simultaneously attract exclusion and reverence, demonstrating that folklore frequently locates power precisely within forms of embodiment that society considers abnormal.

Rather than treating disability as a fixed biological category, the article explores how folklore constructs bodily difference as a symbolic language through which communities negotiate existential concerns regarding mortality, impurity, divinity, and social order.

II. DISABILITY, MONSTROSITY AND LIMINALITY: A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Modern disability studies has fundamentally altered understandings of bodily difference. The social model of disability distinguishes between impairment and disability, arguing that social structures rather than physical conditions create exclusion. Garland-Thomson further suggests that cultures actively produce "extraordinary bodies" by measuring individuals against ideals of bodily normalcy.

Folklore contributes significantly to this process. Traditional narratives frequently classify certain bodies as extraordinary because they challenge accepted categories of identity. Such bodies become objects of fascination precisely because they resist classification.

Victor Turner's concept of liminality offers a particularly useful framework for analysing these representations. According to Turner, liminality refers to an intermediate state in which established social categories are temporarily suspended. Liminal beings occupy thresholds; they exist between life and death, human and divine, purity and pollution, self and other.

Disability frequently becomes associated with liminality because bodily difference disrupts assumptions concerning human completeness. Folkloric narratives often transform such disruption into supernatural power. The anomalous body becomes culturally significant because it exposes the instability of supposedly fixed categories.

The folklorist Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's influential "Monster Culture" thesis further illuminates this phenomenon. Cohen argues that monsters embody cultural anxieties and reveal the limits of social order. They are not merely terrifying figures but symbolic manifestations of collective uncertainty. In many traditions, bodily difference becomes the visible marker through which monstrosity is imagined. Yet folklore also demonstrates the inverse process. The same bodily features that generate fear may become signs of divine election or spiritual authority. Consequently, monstrous and sacred bodies often occupy overlapping symbolic territories.

III. GROTESQUE BODIES AND TRANSFORMATIVE SUFFERING IN ASSAMESE

FOLKLORE

Folklore contains numerous narratives in which bodily fragmentation, transformation, and suffering become sources of supernatural meaning. The folktale Tejimola provides perhaps the most compelling example.

The narrative centres upon a young girl subjected to repeated violence by her stepmother. Tejimola's body undergoes a series of transformations following her death, reappearing successively as a gourd plant, lotus flower, and other living forms. On the surface, the tale appears to recount persecution and eventual justice. However, from the perspective of disability and body studies, the story offers a more complex meditation on corporeal instability.

Tejimola's repeated bodily transformations challenge the assumption that identity resides within a stable physical form. Her body is dismembered, dispersed, and reconstituted across multiple material manifestations. What initially appears as bodily destruction becomes a process of regeneration. The

grotesque body, to borrow Mikhail Bakhtin's formulation, is never complete or closed; it continuously exceeds its own boundaries. The tale therefore destabilizes normative understandings of bodily integrity. Tejimola survives precisely because her identity cannot be contained within a single corporeal form. Her transformed body acquires supernatural resilience, suggesting that power emerges through rather than despite bodily fragmentation. Such narratives resonate strongly with disability studies' critiques of the idealized "whole" body. Folklore here challenges notions of bodily perfection by presenting transformation as a source of agency.

IV. POSSESSION, EMBODIMENT AND SACRED DIFFERENCE IN ASSAMESE

RELIGIOUS FOLKLORE

A distinctive feature of Assamese folklore is the close relationship between supernatural narratives and living ritual traditions. The Deodhani performances associated with Kamakhya and related goddess traditions provide an important example.

During possession rituals, performers enter altered states characterized by unusual bodily movements, trance behaviour, and extraordinary physical endurance. From a biomedical perspective, such manifestations might appear pathological. Within ritual contexts, however, they are interpreted as evidence of divine presence.

The possessed body occupies a profoundly liminal position. It is neither entirely human nor entirely divine. The performer becomes a medium through which supernatural forces communicate with the community. This transformation reveals how bodily difference acquires positive cultural value under specific circumstances. Behaviours that might be stigmatized in ordinary contexts become revered within sacred settings. The possessed body thus demonstrates the social construction of bodily meaning.

The Kamakhya tradition offers an even more radical challenge to normative bodily discourse through its celebration of menstruation during Ambubachi. Menstruation, often associated with impurity in patriarchal religious systems, becomes in this context a symbol of cosmic creativity. The goddess's reproductive body is not hidden but publicly venerated. The sacred body therefore emerges not through transcendence of physicality but through intensified embodiment. Material bodily processes become manifestations of divine power.

V. YOKAI AND THE POLITICS OF BODILY DIFFERENCE IN JAPANESE FOLKLORE

Japanese folklore similarly associates bodily anomaly with supernatural significance. The yōkai tradition contains hundreds of supernatural beings whose defining characteristic is bodily irregularity. Many yōkai possess incomplete, excessive, or distorted anatomies. The Hitotsume-Kozō appears with a single eye. The Rokurokubi possesses an impossibly elongated neck. The Noppera-bō lacks a face altogether. These figures violate fundamental assumptions regarding bodily coherence and identity. Importantly, their significance extends beyond visual grotesqueness. Such creatures challenge the classificatory systems through which society organizes reality. They are frightening because they cannot be easily categorized.

Disability studies offers important insights into these representations. The yōkai body frequently embodies what Garland-Thomson describes as the cultural stare—the tendency to fixate upon visible bodily difference. Yet Japanese folklore often complicates this gaze by granting supernatural authority to anomalous bodies. The one-eyed figure, for example, appears repeatedly in Japanese folklore and religious narratives. Rather than representing simple deficiency, singular vision frequently signifies access to hidden knowledge. Physical difference becomes associated with alternative forms of perception. The yōkai tradition therefore transforms bodily anomaly into epistemological power. What appears lacking from one perspective becomes extraordinary from another.

VI. BLINDNESS, SPIRITUAL VISION AND ALTERNATIVE EMBODIMENT

One of the most striking parallels between Assamese and Japanese folklore concerns the relationship between sensory impairment and spiritual authority. Japanese folk traditions frequently depict blind musicians, monks, and wanderers as possessing unique forms of insight. The biwa hōshi tradition, for example, granted significant cultural authority to blind performers who transmitted historical and religious narratives through oral performance.

Blindness in such contexts does not merely signify loss. Rather, it becomes associated with access to realms unavailable to ordinary perception. Physical limitation is reimagined as spiritual specialization.

Comparable motifs appear within Assamese traditions surrounding shamans, spirit mediums, and ritual specialists. Individuals who display unusual bodily or psychological characteristics are often regarded as possessing heightened sensitivity to supernatural forces. These representations reveal an important departure from modern biomedical understandings of disability. Folklore frequently conceptualizes bodily difference relationally rather than deficitively. Impairment becomes meaningful because it enables alternative modes of perception and interaction. Consequently, disability emerges not as absence but as transformation.

VII. THE LIMINAL BODY AS CULTURAL NEGOTIATION

The comparison between Assamese and Japanese folklore demonstrates that bodily difference functions as a crucial mechanism for negotiating cultural anxieties concerning order and disorder. Liminal bodies repeatedly appear at moments when established categories become unstable. They emerge at boundaries between life and death, nature and culture, human and divine. Such figures enable societies to think through contradictions that cannot easily be resolved within ordinary discourse.

Importantly, folklore does not produce a singular image of disability. Instead, it generates competing representations. The anomalous body may be feared as monstrous, revered as sacred, or both simultaneously.

This ambiguity reveals the fundamentally unstable nature of bodily categories themselves. Normality exists only through continual comparison with forms of difference. Folkloric narratives make this process visible by dramatizing bodies that resist classification.

The monstrous body and the sacred body therefore represent two responses to the same phenomenon: the encounter with embodied difference.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The comparative study of Assamese and Japanese folklore reveals the centrality of bodily difference to traditional understandings of the supernatural. Across both traditions, disabled, transformed, possessed, and anomalous bodies occupy liminal positions that challenge conventional social classifications.

Rather than depicting disability solely as deficiency, folklore frequently transforms bodily difference into a source of sacred authority, supernatural perception, and cultural power. At the same time, these narratives also encode social anxieties concerning disorder, impurity, and alterity.

The liminal body emerges as a site where exclusion and empowerment intersect. Through monstrous figures, spirit mediums, transformed heroines, and supernatural beings, folklore demonstrates that bodily difference is not merely a biological condition but a culturally meaningful category.

By bringing disability studies into dialogue with comparative folklore, this article highlights how traditional narratives continue to shape contemporary understandings of embodiment. The boundary between monstrosity and sacredness remains permeable because both categories originate in encounters with bodies that exceed normative expectations. Folklore thus reveals that the extraordinary body is not marginal to culture; it is one of the primary means through which cultures imagine the limits and possibilities of being human.

WORKS CITED

1. Bordoloi, Saswati. "Burhadangoria and Belief Stories: An Analytical Study on the Spirit Medium of Assam." *RGU Journal of Social Science and Research*, vol. 1, no. 1, Jan. 2025, pp. 31–41. <https://doi.org/10.3254/rgujssr.v1i1.12>.
2. Choudhury, Jharna. "Aesthetics of the Grotesque Body: The Dismemberment Metaphor in the Assamese Folktale 'Tejimola.'" *DUJES (Dibrugarh University Journal of English Studies)*, vol. 29, 2020–21, pp. 125–134.
3. Das, Reshmi Deb Choudhury. "Bleeding Goddess: The Kamakhya Temple's Folklore and Literary Reverberations in Assam." *Erothanatos: A Peer-Reviewed Quarterly Journal on Literature*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2025/2026, pp. 109–113. <https://doi.org/10.70042/eroth/1001249>.
4. Davis, Lennard J. *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body*. Verso, 1995.
5. Garigliano, Irene Majo. "The Dreadful Dance of the Goddess: Creativity and Mimesis in a Possession Cult of Assam." *Cracow Indological Studies*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2018, pp. 185–222. <https://doi.org/10.12797/CIS.20.2018.01.08>.
6. Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. Columbia UP, 1997.
7. Tsutsumi, Ayuto, and Yuu Jinnai. "Do Large Language Models Know Folktales? A Case Study of Yokai in Japanese Folktales." *Findings of the Association for Computational Linguistics: ACL 2025*, 2025, pp. 16124–16146. <https://doi.org/10.18653/v1/2025.findings-acl.829>.
8. Turner, Victor. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Aldine Publishing, 1969

