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Repositioning women in the Early Meitei Society through folktales

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Abstract

The women in the society of Manipur have been one of the most crucial socio-economic generators. It is considered that the sources to understand women and their position seem to be veiled and kept silent. To study the relationship between women and their male counterparts, the genres of folklore would be yet another historical tool to add up in the present researches especially in the case of Early Meitei society. As a part of folklore genres, folktales have been considered as the tradition of passing the socio – culture, belief and customs which tell various stories from one to another generation. The origin of the culture of folktales within the Meitei society considered vague. Yet, the storytelling or *phungga wari* culture have embraced various beliefs and culture which could be both relevant and irrelevant. The elder members of the family play vital role to generate such storytelling culture to the younger ones depicted as a very unique culture. Such culture of storytelling in an artistic manner evolved within the Meitei society could be assumed as a part of teaching the young ones about various aims to understand the position of women as an elder of the family as well as a character within the folktales.

Keywords: Women, folktales or *phungga wari*, society, culture, Meitei

Introduction

In Manipur, women have been showing their ability and contributing as a socio- economic generator both in private and public spheres since early period of time. The larger number of womenfolk in the markets or *Keithels* than their male counterparts as vendors showed the prominent involvement in the public spheres. Almost all the market affairs have been handled by the women since time immemorial. Undoubtedly, women in every society have been contributed in socio-economic sphere and managed significantly in the household arena. Yet, scholarly works on the gender perspectives seem to be appeared only in minuscule amount comparative with that of their contribution since ages. The role of women could be counted through their prominently involvement in the socio-economic and cultural realms. To understand much deeper about women in historical scenario of the early Meitei society, folklore genre would be one of the crucial element to deal with.

Folktales as a significant tool for historical analysis

Folklore genres of the Meitei society could be considered diversely which embraced various experiences and expressions. Folklore basically is unfolded as the earliest manifestation of human civilization in verbal and expressive form of art ^[1]. The folktales as a part of folklore genres can be considered as the tradition of passing the social culture, belief system, customs, telling uncountable stories from one generation to another ^[2]. The folktale genre can be generally considered as one of the oral tradition which passed on from one generation to another ^[3]. As a result of such tradition, the accuracy of the origin is vague and hard to trace ^[4]. The storytelling of the Meitei society which generally known as *phungga wari* is considered to be unique one. The storytelling has been generated by the elder person irrespective of the gender to the younger generations near the hearth area or *phungga* in the kitchen. Popularly, the storytelling has been conducted before the dinner as a way of waiting for the meal to be prepared. Another terminology used for *phungga wari* is *Chak - ngai wari* which means story while waiting for the meal.

The stories have been generally fictitious ones which are told in a very artistic manner by the elders in order to entertain the younger ones. It is argued that the unfortunate changing of social culture due to so called technological modernity led to decline of such a beautiful and unique culture^[5]. The rapidly increase in the utilization of various mode of entertainment such as radio, television, mobile phones, internet and so on literally declining the time which was previously spent on listening to the storytelling by the elders. Such declination in the traditional storytelling led to the minimization of the transmission of the traditional knowledge in the society. Every community settled in the valley and hills of Manipur have their own folklores. Therefore, the Meitei society has large number of folktales which depicted the socio-cultural aspects. Some of the tales seem to be unreal yet every story holds a depiction about the society.

Projection of Women in the folktales

The present paper tried to discuss the role and status of the women who were the storytellers as well as the depiction of women in those folktales. The women's role and position in the folktale of *Keibu Keioiba*^[6] has shown the perspective of a patriarchal society. Besides the ancient text of *Manusmriti*'s pointed that the father protects the daughter in childhood, her husband protects her in youth and her son protects her in old age which eventually shows that a woman is never fit for independence^[7]. The story depicted about such perspective where the daughters have been considered as the property of the father then to the husband after she got married. The story narrates about a lone beast who disguised himself in human form in the day time and tiger in the night and a girl who is the only sister of seven brothers. The story depicted further that the beast went out to hunt for his prey as usual. Incidentally, he came to hunt the only sister of the seven brothers namely *Thabaton* by the suggestion of an old lady. After kidnapping the beautiful *Thabaton*, the beast *Keibu Keioiba* didn't eat the former but made his wife without her consent. This very narration of the folk story shows that the consent of the girl was not always taken for marriage. This form of marriage of Meitei society could be seen as *Chingba*. The society also has the tradition of elopement by the girl and boy with their mutual consent which is known as *Chenba*. The arrange marriage or *Hainaba* within the society has also been prevailed. The other forms of marriage are *Loukhatpa and Nambo – Thaba* have been commenced within the Meitei society since very early period of time. The story further indicated that *Thabaton* fleeing away with her brothers leaving her child and husband behind when the brothers came to fetch her away from her husband *Keibu Keioiba* by burning blazing the house.

As far as the notion of a loving motherhood is concerned, *Thabaton* left her children when she fled from her husband as if she didn't care about her children. This traditional narration of *Keibu Keioiba*, therefore furnished the vague picturisation of a loving motherhood. The folktale of *Houdong Lamboiba amasung Pebet* narrates a different perspective of motherhood comparative with the narration of *Keibu Keioiba*. The former folktale depicts about a clever bird (*Pebet*) who saved her seven chicks from the hungry mystic or monk cat (*Houdong Lamboiba*)^[8]. The story seems to be all about the love, care and teaching of a mother to her children to face the evil world.

The story of *Sandrembi Chaisra*^[9] reflects the narration of two step sisters namely Sandrembi and Chaisra. The folktale

tells the polygyny culture of the Meitei society. The story furnished about the domestic issues and conflicts due to the polygyny form of marriage form where wives dislike each other due to jealousy and unsatisfied family scenario. Sandrembi's mother was the elder wife who went to collect fire woods and the second wife practising fishery. Apart from the domestic issues, the story also extended to depict women being involved in the economic arena for their survival such as fishing, collecting fire woods from the forest both to use and sell etc. The narration of the *Lazy Woman or Atanbi Nupi* which literally means lazy woman depicts about a couple who lived in a village^[10]. The narration unfolds the wish of the hard working husband for his wife to be economically active in order to lead a happy and prosperous life. Therefore, he encouraged his wife to manufacture yarn from the cotton but the wife could not complete the task due to her laziness. The involvement of women in textile production could be visible. The very interesting folktale of *Ita Thaomei* would not stay behind as far as women involvement in the textile production. In this tale, an old widow who lived alone but she was very hardworking yet meticulous^[11]. The story further extended that when a thief came to steal valuable things from the old widow's house at midnight. The old widow was then depicted to be spinning yarn in her room even at night. Since time immemorial, women of Meitei society have been engaging in the household maintenance and management of household along with economic earnings. It is accounted that both the married and unmarried women of early Meitei society occupied larger space in the cotton and silk textile production especially in the form of cottage industry. Under the *Sinnaipham Kaba*^[12], unmarried women engaged in spinning and yarning under the guidship of elder women^[13]. The *Sinnaipham Kaba* can also be considered as a unit which taught culinary, lessons to handle and maintain a household to the girls in order to make a good wife once she got married. N. Ibohi Singh pointed out that predominantly involvement of women in the handloom weaving industry boosted the economic growth in pre – colonial Manipur^[14]. Colonial Ethnographer E.W. Dun also viewed that women of Manipur were more industrious than women of any other regions^[15]. The economic productions like textile manufacture involved by women mostly could be done within the household arena. Despite women of royal household humbly involved in weaving, spinning agricultural works, they possibly performed for the recreation purpose by the royal women. N. Sanajaoba in his compiled work *Manipur Treatise and Documents (1110-1971)* mentioned of King Yanglou Keiphaba's Queen Lairenjam Chanu Mubisa as *Sinbee* which literally means an expert in weaving^[16]. N. Pramodini accounted that *Tampha Wangamlon*, a royal lady performed certain agricultural works which probably must be out of choice instead of commercial purpose^[17].

There is a plot within the folktale of *Sandrembi Chaisra* which recounts of the evil natured step sister Chaisra who happened to be the co – wife of the prince husband of Sandrembi. Chaisra and her mother killed Sandrembi out of jealousy and greed. However, the moment the prince husband got to discover the evil tactics against this lovely wife Sandrembi, he punished the evil doer. As far as the forms of punishment in early Meitei society is concerned, the *Wayenshang* (Courts) provided verdict to the criminal for his or her crime. It is stated that the *Kuchu Wayenshang* (Judiciary) and *Pacha Wayenshang* (Civil or Women Court) were the two kinds of *Wayenshang* were Civil or Women

court popularly known as *Pacha* Wayenshang headed by the queen dealt with the cases related to women such as adultery, divorce, wife beating, assault and so on ^[18]. This shows the considerable significance given to the women in the early period. It is unfolded that the *Pacha* Court was also responsible to determine the kind of punishment to be inflicted to the female criminals. The highest form of punishment to the women criminals was *Khonggoinaba* in which the head of the culprit was shaved off and exposed in the public places like market areas in almost naked condition ^[19].

The Meitei society has been considered as a social realm where patriarchal system and its related social elements run the society. The folktale of *The Stepmother* depicts of how a girl chose herself her husband against her wealthy father's will ^[20]. Many at times, the women belong to wealthy family gain more privilege to vocalize herself. The father eventually accepted as well as gifted certain aid or dowry for the daughter. It is considered that in a patriarchal society like Meitei, the concept of men staying with their in – laws seemed to be rare. The folktale of shy husband depicts about a married couple in which the husband stayed in maternal home of the wife. The husband was shown to be too shy to even have food along with other family members. The shyness and under confidence made the husband to run away from the wife's home. Such narration would be one of the most unique stories to pass on within a society where male member of the society are projected strong.

Conclusion

Conclusively, the genres within the folklore indicated varied form of moral stories to understand good and bad situations. It can be definitely appraised as significant genre to preserve one's own cultural diversity, tradition, customs and beliefs. It can be considered a very crucial element of cultural heritage as well as a source of historical analysis of every community. As the folktales are easy to understand and entertaining, it turned out to be a filler to fill the gap in historical understanding about the marginalized and hardly touched aspects of the society. It is added that the oral epics cherished universality of patriarchal social order and structure based on the hierarchy, gender differentiation, discrimination and domination of women by men along the gender binarism ^[21]. One cannot deny the fact that folklore study open up various instances and ideas about the gender relations in the respective society as it augmented to understand certain ideas about how the past society was; how the society perceived and portrayed the notion of the gender relations. Therefore, one needs to study deeper to understand the position and role of women within the male dominated narrations among the folktales. The folklore culture can be considered as a significant space where elderly women took up the role of a teacher who taught various social cultures and tradition of the Meitei society through those folktale narratives.

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