

Women's Intersectionality in Folklore: Examining How Culture, Gender and Class Shape Narratives of Empowerment

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Abstract

Women have been portrayed very differently in every folktale around the world and, ironically enough, never outwardly empowered in any of them. Female characters are described as either suppressed, dependent, and powerless or stubborn, self-centered, and over-ambitious. It's interesting to note how all of these attributes have a negative connotation to them, making these stories immediately restraining. As traditional stories that are informally passed down from one generation to another, it becomes critical to analyze the gendered roles portrayed in these stories as they often become the moral standards that women are socio-culturally expected to emulate. In this context, folktales emerge as a critical site for inquiry to understand the gender biases that originate in folktales but as informal narratives eventually get standardized in multiple platforms such as literature, social media and public opinion. This study examines how intersectionality shapes the portrayal of women in folktales from India, Japan, and Africa. Despite their cultural significance in transmitting values across generations, folktales often present problematic gender narratives that contribute to societal expectations placed on women. The research problem centers on how these narratives, while preserving cultural heritage, simultaneously reinforce gender biases by portraying female characters through predominantly patriarchal lenses. Using both textual analysis of popular folktales and in-depth semi-structured interviews with 20 young adolescents from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds, this study investigates awareness, perception, and gendered understanding of these narratives. Findings reveal that female characters in folktales are typically portrayed dichotomously — either as submissive and selfless or as ambitious and threatening when they challenge societal norms. The research highlights how intersections of gender, class, and cultural background influence character portrayals and reception. This study contributes to an understanding of how informal narratives shape gender perceptions and how contemporary audiences interact with these traditional stories.

Keywords: Gender, Intersectionality, Folktales, Women's representation, Cultural narratives

1. Introduction

Folktales are a form of storytelling where traditional customs and cultural wisdom are passed down from one generation to another. They provide insight into the morals, beliefs, and traditions as they preserve a community's culture through impactful narratives and offer a reflection on an existing society that has been passed down hundreds of generations and contribute to the history of cultures and communities. Differing from other types of storytelling, they have developed from within communities through oral transmission as opposed to formal writing.

These narratives are ever-present sources of cultural knowledge and tradition, with mythical aspects and archetypal characters which have a lasting significance that surpasses generations, capturing universal themes and values while maintaining a strong cultural foundation. As Bottigheimer (2014) observes, folktales serve different purposes across cultures; for example, Japanese folktales often address the cycle of life and the natural world, while in India they reflect the differing customs and traditions across various regions and religious groups.

As stories that offer a mirror to society and culture and highlights the social groups, systems and relationships of the same, folktales emerge as an interesting and critical source of analysis. This is especially significant because most folktales involve contrasting roles between male and female characters who are intricately woven within their respective societal structures, with a hint of mysticism, and incorporated to represent the disputes between good and evil (Warner, 2014; Stone, 1985). Given that women have traditionally been assigned the responsibility of upholding values and morals in many societies (Ortner, 1974; Mies, 2014), it is easy to understand why the bulk of these narratives offer moral codes and prescriptions specifically for female characters.

According to Rowe (1979) and Lieberman (1972), women have been portrayed very differently in folktales around the world and ironically enough, rarely outwardly empowered in any of them. Female characters are described as either suppressed, dependent, and powerless or stubborn, self-centered, and over-ambitious, almost suggesting a binary depiction of women's psyche. It's interesting to note how all of these attributes have a negative connotation to them, making these stories immediately constraining. Some of these folktales can also be seen justifying and supporting the gender roles and stereotypes that were and continue to be ingrained in society (Haase, 2004; Bacchilega, 2013).

The portrayal of protagonists in folktales, especially that of female protagonists, is worth noting because often these characters are projected as a reflection of the real-life standards that women were expected to live up to (Tatar, 2003). It becomes important for us to analyze these stories for the same reason, to identify the gender biases and find the connections between folktales and modern literature and media and dive deeper into the cause-and-effect relationship that could exist. Furthermore, it's necessary for us to identify and highlight these stories that play a vital role in shaping social and cultural norms across different societies (Holbek, 1987).

These folktales are artifacts of the past that continue to be shared and passed down. Since these stories are a reflection of the values and norms of the time that they were first created, they give us insight into how gender roles first came to play and how, as these stories evolve over the years, the same stereotypes and biases are either challenged or persist (Greenhill & Matrix, 2010; Haase, 2008). Analyzing folktales can also show how gender stereotypes are created and reinforced in a community (Bottigheimer, 1987). We can recognize gender stereotypes ingrained in folktales by analyzing how male and female characters are portrayed, how power and agency are distributed, and how conflicts are resolved.

Using folktales as the primary lens, this paper aims to analyze how identities and perceptions of race, gender, and class categories shape narratives of empowerment in folktales, with specific focus on selected stories from India, Japan, and Africa. This study employs a qualitative approach involving two levels of analysis: first, a textual analysis of predominant folktales popular across different cultures in the selected regions; and second, a primary study that encompasses conducting in-depth interviews among youth regarding their awareness, understanding, perception, and reproduction of folktales in their respective cultures.

2. Folktales in India: A Textual Analysis

As a multilingual and multicultural society, India is home to diverse religious, cultural and ethnic groups, all of whom have their own distinct spoken language, ritual status, cultural norms and moral standards, which in many cases are often in dialectics with one another, yet as a society India offers space for multiple interpretations of societal norms. The diversity of language and cultures are reflected not only in terms of their written histories but also in terms of their oral narratives. Folktales and folklores are one of the primary means through which older generations pass on their social, cultural and moral values to their next generation, which often depict norms and standards critical to each cultural group.

From among the myriad oral narratives prevalent in India, this paper attempts to critically explore some of the most widely known and reproduced folktales from across different regions of India like Bihar, Manipur, Gujarat and Nagaland. Using textual analysis as the primary method, this section will explore how women's narratives, interlinked with culture, class, race and ethnicity are depicted across the above mentioned folktales.

This paper uses textual analysis, a method used to describe and interpret messages within recorded or written texts. Textual analysis is selecting appropriate texts and determining which analytical approach to use. The four key

approaches are rhetorical criticism, which analyzes the persuasive power of messages; content analysis, which examines the presence and meaning of quantitative and qualitative information; interaction analysis, which studies the structure of interviews, focusing on communicative purposes; and performance studies, which involves interpreting texts to generate insights. Textual analysis helps researchers understand human thought and behavior by examining patterns.

2.1 Manasa Devi the Naga Goddess of Bhagirathi (Bihar) (Bhattacharjee, 2006)

Manasa Devi, the Naga Goddess of Bhagirathi, is the folktale on Hindu Goddess, Manasa Devi, who is worshiped mainly in Bihar, Bengal, Jharkhand, Uttarakhand, South Assam and other parts of northeastern India, mainly for the prevention and cure of snakebite, and also for fertility and prosperity. According to the legend, along the Bhagirathi River lived the Naga-Devata, Manasa Devi. Chand Nagar, a wealthy man who too lived at Bhagirathi, refused to worship her for he saw her as an inferior deity. Manasa Devi, powerful and short-tempered, had a weakness for luxury and only Chand Nagar could provide these offerings. For years, she sent signs demanding he fulfill her desires but he remained obstinate. Finally, she appeared before him asking for the same but he refused. Enraged, she threatened to kill his seven sons. Seeing his negligence to her threat she commanded her snakes to bite his sons one by one. Over six weeks, six of his sons died, yet Chand remained unmoved. Only his youngest son, Lakhindar was left. Manasa Devi threatened to kill Lakhindar too of a snakebite on his wedding night. Chand Nagar built an iron room to protect Lakhindar. Three months later, Lakhindar married Behula. On their wedding night, they stayed in the iron room, with Behula staying vigilant, however, despite her efforts, Manasa Devi couldn't be stopped. Lakhindar was bitten and killed. Determined to revive her husband, Behula prayed in a banana grove, then set out on a raft with his ashes, floating down the river to Manasa Devi. Moved by Behula devotion, Manasa Devi promised to revive Lakhindar if Chand Nagar worshiped her. Behula returned home and pleaded to her father-in-law, who, realizing the consequences of his stubbornness, agreed to worship Manasa Devi. Satisfied with his offerings, she revived all seven sons, and peace was restored between Manasa Devi and Chand Nagar. (Team Dharma Dispatch & Team Dharma Dispatch, 2023).

This old and widely known folktale touches upon the politics of gender identity at different levels - while on the one hand, it depicts a gendered conflict between Goddess Manasa and a wealthy but mortal Chand Nagar when the latter refused to worship Manasa whom he saw as an inferior deity because she was a woman; the other story is that of Behula which depicts a woman's loyalty, dedication and determination. Both Manasa and Behula, were determined women, something that is often overlooked when folktales are discussed. Behula especially, as a woman sacrificing and saving a man, breaks traditional stereotypes and challenges gender norms in other ancient tales and folktales of India. Even though determination is a virtue that is often seen in this folktale, it seems to have a negative connotation, especially since Manasa Devi is portrayed as over ambitious and can be seen having a superiority complex which in society is typically viewed as a masculine trait. In many traditional folktales across India, female characters are often restricted by and hidden behind societal norms. However, this folktale challenges these norms through characters like Manasa Devi, who as a determined and capable female showcase agency and power.

Behula's character, in particular, attacks gender stereotypes by taking on the role of the savior, traditionally a role assigned to male characters. Her determination to save a man challenges the notion that women are passive or weak, showcasing their agency and ability to take charge of their own destinies. Contrarily, Manasa Devi with a more complex character, is a protagonist with ambition and a sense of superiority. She serves as a character adrift from traditional norms and showcases how women who challenge societal norms can be seen as either empowering or a negative influence. In a patriarchal society like India, women striving for power or independence are sometimes labeled as ambitious or domineering, what are referred to as "masculine" characteristics.

This portrayal of determination highlights the role of gender dynamics within folktales as it reflects on broader societal attitudes towards women. It is interesting to note here that over generations, Manasa Devi continues to be worshiped, as the goddess who protects from snake bites, animal bites, especially by lower caste and classes in India who live in bogs and marshes in states like Bengal, Jharkhand, Orissa, among others, which is a natural habitat for snakes. She is also worshiped as a goddess of fertility and prosperity as the legend accords her powers to revive the life and riches of the dead. Simultaneously, Behula is widely regarded in these regions as the symbol for love, devotion,

sacrifice, feminine strength and resilience which also form the image of the desirable and ideal wife for a Hindu man. While both characters continue to be remembered and revered, their depiction as the ‘feared’ and the ‘pious’ respectively reflect the two main forms in which women find reflection in Indian narratives.

2.2 Khamba Thoibi (Manipur)

Much like other hill states of North East India, the state of Manipur has several ethnic groups living in the region - such as the Maitei, who are the largest ethnic group in the region, the dominant group, the Kukizo group of tribes who are next in size, followed by other tribes like Chiru, Chothe, Kom, Maram, Maring, Mao, among others - each of whom have their own distinct folktales and folklore heroes, all of which have been passed down across generations, some of which are popular even across other tribes. One such tale is the Maitei story of “Khamba Thoibi”, which narrates the tale of an orphan Maitei boy Khuman Khamba, also known as Moirang Khamba, who was raised by his elder sister, Khamnu, and came to the kingdom of prince Chingkhua Akhuba to look for work. There he saw Princess Thoibi and fell in love with her but was not able to acknowledge his feelings; the princess also felt the same affection for Khamba. The prince liked Khamba as he insisted on working to earn. As his skills and strength increased, the prince and Nongban, the man who was destined to marry Thoibi became jealous of him. They tried to kill him and as a punishment for falling in love with an ordinary man, the princess was sentenced to exile. Later when she was called back, she and Khamba united. One day, Khamba decided to put Thoibi's loyalty to the test - he whistled from the bushes close to their house, irritated by this disturbance, Thoibi threw a spear toward the noise and Khamba died instantly. When Thoibi learnt of it, she killed herself out of shame (Ningthoujam, 2024).

The story of Khamba Thoibi has witnessed several adaptations over the years where both characters have been critically examined to understand how they conform or challenge existing socio-cultural norms. Although Thoibi is introduced as an independent woman, throughout the story, her agency as a woman has been significantly undermined. Thoibi's determination when rejecting her father's decision not to marry the man of her choice eventually leads to her being exiled. Even Khamnu, in taking on maternal responsibilities to raise her sibling Khamba, have not received significant depiction for their agency. The story shows glimpses of women exerting power surreptitiously, but it is ultimately cynical of disrupting traditional power structures. The story is critical as it offers a lens to understand how identities of class and gender intersect in everyday lives and offers a perspective to understand how together such identities respond to structural positions. Not only are the dynamics of love and power portrayed in this narrative, but the roles played by the female characters, Thoibi and Khamnu, are highlighted as well. Thoibi is positioned in traditional gender norms and social expectations. She is observed to be in charge of her actions, makes her own pace, and is in charge of herself. Nevertheless, in the patriarchal culture that surrounds her, Thoibi is also narrated as being unable to practice her agency entirely, resulting in her being sent to exile. As per the narrative of the story, Thoibi, a seemingly independent woman is punished when they seek to challenge established norms.

Khamnu, despite tough choices, plays a critical part in Khamba's life as a courageous, resilient, and supportive sibling who takes on the responsibilities of a mother. But she does not have a voice of her own like Thoibi. Her character demonstrates the social expectations, familial responsibilities that women are often expected to take upon in accordance with traditional Indian culture.

The depictions of Thoibi and Khamnu, in contrast to the active voice of Khamba, together demonstrate the complexity of a woman's life, especially in traditional settings. The narrative illustrates female choice and control but also examines the broader issues of agency as Thoibi and Khamnu face gender disparities. The story can be observed to show the struggle of attaining agency and power, when placed under the broader social and cultural context.

3. Folktales from Across India

3.1 How the Mahi River Married the Sea (Gujarat)

The story is about a girl named Mahi who falls in love with the Sea, who's father, Satpura does not approve of her love and decides to marry. Determined, Mahi leaves home on her own to find the Sea, however when she finally reaches, the sea rejects her proposal. Heartbroken, Mahi returns home and is questioned by her father. While she

refuses to say what occurred, she requests her father for his army. With an army of stones, Mahi confronts the Sea for the second time, and this time he accepts her proposal and agrees to her (Adhikary, 2003).

3.2 The Rain God's Bride (Gujarat)

In the state of Gujarat, one of the most popular folktales is that of Maya, a poor young girl who lived with her parents. The tale narrates the story of a day when the girl follows her parents in their search for food but gets lost. She finds an old couple growing maize and learns how to cultivate it, but soon realizes that her new family doesn't have access to a water source. A handsome young man appears and offers to bring rain if Maya agrees to marry him. She agrees to his proposal and promises to love him even when he changes due to a curse. When it rains, Maya introduces her husband to her parents but one day the curse takes effect. Maya in order to escape her enraged husband transforms into lightning and follows behind as thunder. (Adhikary, 2003).

3.3 The Woman Who Was Loved by a Tree Spirit (Nagaland)

This is a story about a woman from a village in Nagaland, who falls in love with a handsome stranger who visits her every night but disappears in the morning. Her family suspects him to be tree spirit and plan to mark him with items to see if such spirits show up on a nearby tree. With each passing night, the items started on the tree, which then confirmed that the man was indeed a tree spirit. Afraid of the spirit, the villagers tried to cut down the tree but failed. In revenge, the tree spirit takes its revenge by sending down a chip of wood that instead of harming the villagers ends up killing the woman (Adhikary, 2003).

3.4 The Man Who Loved Two Women (Nagaland)

Another folktale from Nagaland narrates the story of a young man who loves two women - a rich woman and a poor woman, and feels challenged when deciding who to marry. His mother advises him to set a test to see their true morals and values. He agrees and takes them on a picnic, in order to observe their behavior. The rich woman eats very little but the poor woman eats as much as she can. Suspicious, the man secretly checks on the rich woman at home and sees that she ate greedily when alone, contradicting her behavior earlier. The next day, he invites them again and offers them the amount of food the rich woman actually ate. The poor woman admits that she would eat it all if she was able to, while the rich woman rejects it. Seeing their truth, the man decided to marry the honest poor woman (Adhikary, 2003).

These stories together highlight the intersectionality of gender roles, societal expectations and agency of women. These narratives together reinforce the themes of individual choices, relationships, female agency, autonomy, patriarchal control, virtues, and sacrifice all of which are combined with an element of mythicism.

In "How the Mahi River Married the Sea," Mahi's determination to marry the Sea despite her father's disapproval shows female agency and determination. This story depicts the ongoing struggle against patriarchal control. Mahi refutes her father and similarly in "The Rain God's Bride", Maya alone handles her cursed husband's transformation. Both of these narratives underscore women's journey of resistance to parental or societal pressures and their resilience to gain independence. This fight against resistance can be seen in "The Woman Who Was Loved by a Tree Spirit" when the family of the protagonist take protective measures against her supernatural lover. In "How the Mahi River Married the Sea," Mahi's determination to marry the Sea despite her father's disapproval shows female agency and determination. This story depicts the ongoing struggle against patriarchal control. Mahi refutes her father and similarly in "The Rain God's Bride", Maya alone handles her cursed husband's transformation. Both of these narratives underscore women's journey of resistance in order to gain independence. This fight against resistance can also be seen in "The Woman Who Was Loved by a Tree Spirit" when the family of the protagonist take protective measures against her supernatural lover. This issue remains in Indian women's lives in and out of the narrative. These tales underline the difficulties women endure to maintain their morality. While in one story, we see that a rich woman's dishonesty is contrasted with the impoverished woman's truthfulness, emphasizing the expectations that society has on women as well as the ideals of feminine virtue, sacrifice as an ideal prevails in these folktales as female characters undergo acts

of selflessness for their loved ones. While Mahi risks her life to become one with the Sea, Maya marries the Rain God in an attempt to save her family and bring rain. Most of these stories have an element of mythicism like the tree spirit and the Rain God, often placing women in interactions with powerful male figures. These mythological contexts highlight gender dynamics where women navigate relationships with unrealistic and “more” powerful men.

Additionally, the female protagonists are portrayed as submissive. Maya's escape from her spouse and Mahi's resistance to her father both represent the longing for independence. In similar lines, these tales express both vulnerability and strength. While the wealthy woman in "The Man Who Loved Two Women" and the woman in "The Woman Who Was Loved by a Tree Spirit" exhibit deceit and weakness, respectively, Mahi and Maya show resilience. These stories are a reflection of societal norms that emphasize women's sacrifices, honesty, and morality and reflect cultural expectations of women.

Overall, these stories reveal a multifaceted portrayal of women, illustrating their struggle for autonomy and independence. By navigating between speaking up and resistance, the female characters provide insight into the cultural values and gender dynamics in India. Through their journeys, we gain a deeper understanding of the roles women play and the challenges they face in these traditional narratives.

4. Folktales from Across India: A Comparative Analysis

Ramanujan (1991) argues, Indian folktales operate as "metafolklore," commenting on the very social structures they appear to reinforce. This self-reflexive quality appears prominently in tales like "How the Mahi River Married the Sea," where female determination challenges paternal authority.

According to Adhikary (2003), the story of Mahi depicts a young woman's defiance of her father's disapproval, illustrating the tension between individual desire and familial obligation. However, as Blackburn (2007) notes, this apparent celebration of female agency ultimately reinforces patriarchal structures by channeling female power into marriage. This dynamic appears similarly in "The Rain God's Bride," where Maya's apparent agency in choosing her supernatural husband ultimately serves to benefit her community through life-giving rain (Adhikary, 2003).

The tales from Nagaland present a different pattern. Naga folktales often feature supernatural elements that serve as metaphors for cultural boundaries and social taboos (Noni & Sanatomba, 2015). In "The Woman Who Was Loved by a Tree Spirit," the protagonist's death represents the consequences of transgressing cultural norms regarding appropriate marital partners (Adhikary, 2003). However, as Grosz (2018) observes, these apparent cautionary tales also acknowledge the possibility of boundary-crossing, creating narrative spaces where alternative social arrangements can be imagined.

Class dynamics play a particularly important role in "The Man Who Loved Two Women." While Adhikary (2003) presents this as a simple moral tale about honesty, Barasa (2007) argues that such narratives serve to naturalize class divisions by associating moral virtues with economic status. The honest poor woman and the deceptive rich woman represent not only individual character traits but broader social attitudes toward class mobility and economic justice.

5. Bukusu Folktales from Africa (Florence, N., & English, R. M.2016)

Bukusu folktales, derived from the Bukusu people, one of the 17 Kenyan tribes of the Luhya people, are traditional narratives and forms of storytelling in Africa that although depict socio-cultural norms of a different racial and ethnic group, are nevertheless quite similar to Indian folktales in terms of the narratives, but differ in terms of the portrayal of women characters. With the help of mythical aspects and the comparison of weak and powerful, these folktales seek to educate, empower and inspire women to lead. With ordinary characters such as farmers, neglected wives, shepherds, orphans, etc., these folktales aim to reflect the lives of Bukusu people as these stories are framed around their struggles, traditions and triumphs. These narratives tackle the themes of gender roles, morals and values. Female characters tend to need the help and protection of men especially as they carelessly put themselves in danger which, similar to Indian folktales, showcase women as dependent, less intelligent and vulnerable. However, these stories also highlight the consequences of misusing power, through characters such as orphans and neglected wives, who defeat those who abuse their wealth or status. These stories promote values like honesty, integrity, unity and hard work and

conversely pass judgment on those who believe in the opposite. These stories involve mythical elements, showing interactions between humans and animals and illustrating human control, which together reflect and help shape prevailing social and gender norms in a community. Folktales are primarily narrated by women in the Bukusu community thus women play a key role in defining the culture, characters and beliefs that these stories represent that seem to reinforce patriarchal concepts. Although Bukusu folktales underscore the important theme of following the right morals and values, having these narratives revolve around stereotypical characters and abide by traditional gender roles, these stories must consider opportunities for broader representation and empowerment (Florence, 2016).

6. Folktales from Japan

Japanese culture has several folktales that, with the recurring theme of mysticism, mirror the expectations that women have been asked to adhere to as well as underscore the values they must follow. Five folktales, in particular, that are *Meshikuwanu Onna*, *Tsuru Nyoo boo*, *Uguisu no Sato*, *Urashima Taro*, and *Urihimeko* stand out as they reflect these themes and can be used to analyze whether such narratives can be molded to advocate for women's agency or if they can not be pulled apart from the ingrained stereotypes they originally abide by. *Meshikuwanu Onna* revolves around a man that gets married to a woman who pretends not to eat but secretly consumes everything including people, and to escape and save himself, the man poisons her; *Tsuru Nyobo* is the story of a man who saves a crane and marries a mysterious woman who weaves valuable cloth, later discovering she is the crane he saved, leading to her departure and his lonely return after she chooses not to come back to him; *Uguisu no Sato* is about a young woodcutter who breaks his promise and destroys nightingale eggs in a woman's house then causing her to transform into a nightingale and abandon him; *Urashima Taro* surrounds a fisherman who marries a princess turtle from the undersea realm but turns into a crane after returning to find his mother dead; Lastly, *Urihimeko* is about a girl who, born from a melon is killed by a witch who impersonates her, but the elderly couple who raised her uncover find out and kill the witch before she marries a wealthy landowner (Thomson, n.d.).

These stories highlight the mystical aspect that surrounds them in traditional narratives. It is interesting to notice how this sustains throughout these stories of supernatural characters being portrayed as more positive than "normal" or "powerless" female characters which sets an unattainable standard for women. Each of these stories have an insightful learning that underscores the traditional gender roles and stereotypes and the societal expectations placed upon women. With mysticism surrounding female characters, often with hidden powers that challenge societal norms, the female characters are often portrayed as elevated from the ordinary, creating an unrealistic standard that cannot coexist with traditional societal expectations. The narratives emphasize virtues such as selflessness and loyalty, but also underscore the fear of female autonomy and the potential threat women pose when they step outside their roles. By acknowledging and addressing these themes, we can reinterpret the stories in a way that empowers rather than confines women, transforming these narratives into modern narratives of resilience and agency.

7. Field Study: Methodology

7.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design combining textual analysis of folktales with in-depth interviews to explore how intersectionality shapes the portrayal of women in folktales and how contemporary youth interpret these narratives. This mixed methodological approach allowed for both close examination of the cultural artifacts themselves and investigation of their reception and interpretation by young people from diverse backgrounds.

The textual analysis component utilized critical discourse analysis (van Dijk, 2015) to examine folktales from India, Japan, and Africa. Selection criteria for the folktales included: First, stories featuring prominent female characters; second, tales with widespread cultural recognition in their regions of origin; and third narratives that address themes of gender, class, or cultural identity. The analysis focused on identifying patterns in character portrayal, plot development, moral themes, and the intersection of gender with other identity categories. Each tale was examined for explicit and implicit messages about gender roles, agency, power distribution, and the consequences for characters who conform to or challenge gender norms.

For the in-depth interviews, 20 participants aged 16-22 were recruited using purposive sampling to ensure cultural diversity. The sample included participants from 13 countries: one each from Egypt, UAE, Romania, Kenya, Sudan, Vietnam, Germany, and two participants each from South Korea, Canada, Nigeria and three participants from USA and India respectively. Such a culturally diverse sample was intentionally selected to capture varied cultural perspectives on folktales.

Inclusion criteria required that participants: first, had exposure to folktales from their cultural background during childhood; second, could communicate fluently in either English or their native language with translation assistance; and third, represented diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. The sample size of 20 was determined to be sufficient for reaching thematic saturation in qualitative research of this nature (Guest et al., 2006), while remaining manageable for in-depth analysis.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted either virtually via secure video conferencing platforms or in person, depending on participant location and preference. The interview protocol was developed based on the research questions and piloted with two individuals prior to full implementation.

The interview guide contained four main sections:

1. Cultural background and exposure to folktales
2. Awareness and perception of female characters
3. Understanding of gender roles in folktales
4. Perception of class and cultural elements

All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed. Further the interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach: 1) familiarization with the data, 2) generating initial codes, 3) searching for themes, 4) reviewing themes, 5) defining and naming themes, and 6) producing the report. Particular attention was paid to how participants discussed the intersection of gender with other identity categories such as class, culture, and ethnicity in their interpretations of folktales.

7.2 Research Analysis

The interviews highlighted the familiarity of folktales amongst respondents across a range of age groups showcasing the pivotal role these narratives have played in their lives especially during childhood by shaping their understanding of their respective cultures.

Folktales offer shared values and traditions that have been passed from one generation to another further helping to form certain perspectives in young listeners or readers. The interviews highlighted varying levels of familiarity with folktales amongst respondents across age groups, showcasing the pivotal role these narratives have played in their lives, especially during childhood. Participants described how these stories shaped their understanding of their respective cultures and helped form certain perspectives.

Respondents from traditional cultural backgrounds often described more intimate experiences with folktales as part of their upbringing:

"In my family, folktales weren't just bedtime stories. My grandmother would gather all the cousins in a circle during family gatherings and tell us stories that her grandmother had told her. It felt like being connected to a long chain of our history." (Vaanya, Indian, 18 years old)

In contrast, participants from more urbanized or Western contexts reported more formalized encounters with folktales:

"I mostly learned folktales in elementary school. We had this special class where the teacher would read us traditional stories and then we'd discuss the moral lessons. It wasn't really an at-home thing for us." (Logan, Canadian, 20 years old)

The medium of exposure also varied significantly across cultural contexts: "In my village in Nigeria, storytelling was a community event. During certain evenings, children would gather in the community square and elders would tell stories. There was singing, dancing, and sometimes acting out parts. It wasn't just hearing the story—it was experiencing it." (Fatima, Nigerian, 21 years old)

Belonging to diverse cultural backgrounds, respondents argued that either they were introduced to folktales in the form of oral stories and narratives heard from grandparents or they were read in the form of local tales and short stories that showcased such tales as community stories and shared narratives which were considered important as a part of familial upbringing. In some cases, respondents added that folktales were also viewed as a unique form of media, spread through oral tales, books or other media outlets which underscored the influence they have across generations. Some of the respondents also shared a personal connection or affection for the stories, again highlighting their lasting impact.

The responses further reflect the interconnectedness of folktales and cultural identity, as they represent the different values and traditions efficiently. Most of the respondents spoke about stories unique to their cultural heritage, emphasizing how these narratives helped them understand their cultural roots.

"The story of Shim Cheong, who sacrificed herself for her blind father, was something we all grew up with. It's not just a story—it represents *hyo* [filial piety], which is fundamental to Korean identity. When I think about what it means to be Korean, these stories are part of that understanding." (Irene, South Korean, 19 years old)

Similarly, an Egyptian respondent connected folktales to historical identity:

"Our stories are filled with references to the Nile, to desert life, to ancient beliefs that go back thousands of years. When I heard these tales as a child, I was absorbing what it meant to be Egyptian without even realizing it. They connect us to our pharaonic past in subtle ways." (Isis, Egyptian, 18 years old)

Some participants noted the integration of Western folktales into their cultural narratives:

"I grew up with both. My mother would tell me traditional Vietnamese stories, but I also learned all the Disney versions of European fairy tales. I think my generation has this mix of cultural influences that previous generations didn't have." (Hanh, Vietnamese, 17 years old)

Irrespective of their cultural differences, a common theme that emerged across the folktales highlighted how diverse native cultures tend to share the same values and themes. Folktales aim to leave a positive influence on their reader by way of highlighting virtues such as courage, resilience, and wisdom. The aspect of gender roles and stereotypes in most of these stories, recognize that folktales reflect society's expectations and norms. Folktales both reflect individual cultures and express universal human experience and value.

The respondents also discussed a diverse portrayal of female characters in folktales, highlighting both traditional and modern narratives. Respondents unanimously agreed that in their cultural stories, female characters are depicted as either submissive and selfless or strong and independent. This diversity reflects the cultural values and societal norms of each tradition. While some respondents emphasize the presence of powerful women who defy traditional gender roles, others point out a more traditional depiction of women who are often in need of rescue or are defined by their relationships to men. Several respondents expressed a sense of underrepresentation of female characters in certain folktales, particularly in Western traditions, where women are often portrayed as passive. Additionally, the recognition of recurring female characters underscores their significance in embodying cultural ideals. However, there is also an indication of tension between traditional portrayals and more modern interpretations that challenge stereotypes, suggesting a gradual shift towards more multifaceted representations of women in folktales. The responses paint a picture of female representation in folktales as both diverse and evolving, shaped by the cultural contexts in which these stories are told.

The responses also spoke about the importance of socioeconomic backgrounds in shaping narratives in their respective folktales. Characters from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were reported to be driven by a desire to improve their circumstances. This often leads to positive outcomes, where humility and resilience triumph over wealth and power, as seen in tales like the Vietnamese "The Story of Tam and Cam". Conversely, affluent characters are frequently portrayed as selfish and greedy, often done in an attempt to emphasize the 'better' or more virtuous characters of the less privileged. However, the influence of socioeconomic background on actions and outcomes was observed to be varied, as folktales from different cultures may showcase it differently. While some respondents argued that folktales primarily reinforce class divisions, others believe that folktales can challenge these divisions by

highlighting the triumph of virtue over wealth. This duality in perception and understanding suggests that folktales serve as both reflections of existing societal structures and a way to challenge them, depending on the cultural context.

Finally the responses also highlight how cultural traditions are integral to the folktales and that these stories reflect the values, beliefs, and societal norms of the cultures they originate from. Many respondents emphasized that folktales often depict specific cultural practices which influence the storyline. For instance, some respondents mention how folktales from their regions incorporate traditions like ancestor worship, respect for nature, or the importance of family roles, further providing insight into the cultural and societal values of the time. While most respondents agree that folktales reflect societal values, some note that these values may no longer align with modern beliefs as they have shifted away from traditional depictions. Overall, these stories were observed to be internalized as means of understanding the cultural heritage of the respondent's culture and social norms.

8. Discussion

This study examines the complex interplay of gender, class, and cultural context in folktales across India, Japan, and Africa, revealing patterns in female representation that both reflect and challenge traditional power structures. Rather than simply mirroring patriarchal norms, these narratives often contain subversive elements that offer alternative visions of female agency.

The duality of female characterization emerges as a consistent theme across cultural contexts. Characters like Manasa Devi and Behula demonstrate contrasting expressions of female power - one viewed as threatening when exercising direct authority, the other celebrated when channeling strength through culturally sanctioned sacrifice. This pattern aligns with Lieberman's (1972) observation that folktales often present women in moral binaries, but the analysis extends this understanding by identifying how these apparent binaries actually represent complex negotiations of power within patriarchal structures. Unlike Bottigheimer's (1987) emphasis on the purely restrictive nature of female characterization, the findings suggest that even seemingly conformist portrayals contain elements of resistance.

The intersection of gender with socioeconomic status creates particularly nuanced dynamics. While Rowe (1979) identified class as a secondary factor in female characterization, the comparative analysis reveals it as a critical determinant of female agency. The contrast between the wealthy woman's deception and the poor woman's honesty in "The Man Who Loved Two Women" represents more than a simple moral lesson; it demonstrates how class position shapes the available strategies for female survival and advancement. This complex interplay between gender and class supports Holbek's (1987) theory that folktales encode social contradictions rather than simply reinforcing dominant ideologies.

The interview data further complicates this picture by revealing how contemporary audiences interpret these intersections. Unlike Warner's (2014) assertion that modern audiences receive folktales primarily as entertainment divorced from social context, the respondents demonstrated sophisticated awareness of the social dynamics embedded in these narratives. While gender constitutes a primary axis of characterization in the folktales studied, the analysis reveals how its operation is inseparable from class dynamics and cultural contexts. This intersectional approach reveals patterns invisible to single-axis analysis.

In the Indian folktales, class position fundamentally shapes female agency. Behula's ability to challenge fate derives not only from her gender identity but from her status as a new bride in a wealthy household, providing her with resources unavailable to lower-class women. Similarly, in "The Man Who Loved Two Women," the moral framework privileges honesty, yet this value is evaluated differently based on class position. The wealthy woman's deception is condemned more harshly precisely because her class position affords her material security, rendering her dishonesty a moral failing rather than a survival strategy.

Cultural context further complicates these intersections. The Bukusu folktales from Kenya demonstrate how women's status operates differently within African cultural frameworks compared to Indian or Japanese traditions. While the Japanese folktales emphasize supernatural transformation as a path to female power, the Bukusu tales more directly address the material conditions of women's lives. This difference reflects not only divergent cultural traditions but also the specific historical and economic conditions of each region, supporting Ortner's (1974) argument that gender symbolism must be understood within specific cultural and material contexts.

The interview data confirms the importance of these intersections in contemporary reception. The Egyptian respondent's observation about "references to the Nile, to desert life, to ancient beliefs" highlights how cultural specificity shapes the interpretation of gender roles. Similarly, the South Korean participant's explanation of "hyo (filial piety)" as "fundamental to Korean identity" demonstrates how cultural values create specific frameworks for understanding gender expectations.

9. Conclusion

Through the above analysis, this paper attempts to critically explore folktales as a site of social, economic, cultural normatives that shape gender narratives and community perceptions. Through a textual analysis of this paper, this paper discusses folktales from around India and other parts of the world and delves into the how the characters are interwoven with societal norms and cultural practices, but also gain perspective on how youth around the world interpret and are impacted by folktales they have grown up with. This paper explores how race, gender, and class influence the narratives of empowerment within folktales emanating from different cultural variations and how they either conform with or challenge gender stereotypes and societal expectations that restrain females around the globe. However, a few limitations were faced in this regard. Due to lack of sufficient access, the sample size for the interview was relatively less and hence the pool of respondents was not as racially diverse as originally planned. For the same reason, it was not methodologically possible to categorize responses by social indicators like race, religion or ethnicity. In future, the researcher hopes to overcome this shortcoming and extend this research to a more socio-culturally diverse group of respondents which might yield deeper insights into how race factors into the representation of gender within informal media.

Despite these shortcomings, this research paper offers a novel insight into the relevance of folktales that despite their generational existence, continue to prevail as dynamic, culturally adjusted narratives and exert their influence upon social thought. By looking at both traditional and modern interpretations, this paper attempted to identify how these stories perpetuate or deny gender stereotypes and help frame the current debate over gender roles in literature and media. Folktales are a means of storytelling that still continue to function as one of the most native and accessible means of cultural transmission that influences the way societies conceptualize gender, class, and race over generations.

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