Gender Role : Womenhood in Folk Narratives of West Odisha

Dr. Anjali Padhi

Folk narratives are powerful mediums through which folk assimilates and disseminates knowledge and power of a given society. Like any other oral discourse narratives construct, reconstruct social order, define gender roles and reverse it when necessary. It is a misconception that female voices are subdued, passive and in obedience to male dominance. On the contrary, mute voices denote meaning with social bearing. Folktales explain womanhood and basic principles of female biology which signifies social reality. The three stages; menstruation, defloration and childbirth are most important events of women’s life which rule and determine women’s behaviour in a society and culture. It seems, these phases of female life are expressed symbolically in a narrative. A brief study will be done of some selected tales who may speak gender discourse within it. Following three folktales from Nuapada District of Odisha have been picked up for the present study.

Folktale-I : “Tol Tol Phul Dada”

The story as narrated by Sukharam Paharia is presented below:

“There are Twelve Brothers and One Sister. One day the brothers want to go for slash and burn farming. They want to sow ragi. Therefore they ask their sister to cook food for them and bring it up the hill. Sister cooks food, breaks the egg of suibird (a small bird) into two halves. She keeps rice in one and water on the other. When brothers come from work, they become angry, because there is so little food and water. Out of anger they kill their sister and burn her flesh. They eat the burnt meat. But the younger brother buries his share of meat in an anthill. But to their surprise, they find the food in two egg halves not finishing. After some days, a tree blossomed with flowers comes out on the spot. One day the bridegroom and his party pass through the forest and find the tree and flowers. The bridegroom wants to pluck the flower but couldn't. Finally the younger brother comes and a voice comes from within the tree. “Brother, brother, pluck the flower but do not break my branches” when her brother wants to pluck the flower, it fell on his hand. A beautiful girl appears in flesh and blood. The younger brother narrates everything. Then the villagers kill the other brothers. Turmeric paste and oil is smeared on the body of the girl and after her bath, marriage take place. The bride and bridegroom live happily.”

In this tale various phases of a woman’s life is described. Female biology passes through different phases like the change in seasonal cycle and plant life. This tale on the one hand confirms the social reality and on the other advocates its acceptance. In the beginning of the tale the narrator explains the slash and burn type of farming prevalent in Sunabeda valley of Nuapada District. The narrator belongs to Paharia community. He explains the rituals and training imparted to small girls while performing household work. Twelve brothers kill their sister, because she hadn’t brought enough water and food. The narrator has presented symbolically the social message within the tale. A girl must learn cooking and domestic chores before her marriage, otherwise she would be punished. In the second phase of the tale, the younger brother buries her sister’s flesh in an anthill. As per the local culture and puberty ritual the woman has to stay in a secluded place for seven days. During this period nobody touches her. After seven days she is bathed with turmeric and oil water. Thereafter she is brought outside by her mother and aunt of the
family cladding her with new clothes. She is offered a ritualistic welcome followed by a *homa*. In the above-mentioned tale, the sister comes out of her seclusion when her brother comes near the tree. Small boys including the younger brother aged between seven and ten are given food on the day when the girl comes out of seclusion as per puberty ritual. Sigmund Freud while demystifying dream says that repressed impulse remains in the sub-conscious level of a person which resurfaces in disguise. At times the characters play reverse role too. And time-space-form and shape of an object also changes in a dream. One can not find grammar in dream language however dream is full of symbols.

The twelve brothers kill their sister and the younger brother buries the flesh and bone. A tree comes out with flowers in it. The narrator has made a symbolic disposition of a woman’s life from menstruation to defloration. A certain physical perfection is required for a girl to become fit for marriage. The coming of the groom to the forest and near the tree indicates certain pre-marriage rituals. It virtually means the sister’s union with her groom only after attaining complete physical growth. With most certainty, this indicates defloration in a woman’s life. The younger brother is instrumental in bringing both the bridegroom bride together.

The character of the youngest brother appears as a helping character in the union of male and female characters in the tale. According to the Paharia marriage system the younger brother has to perform certain ritual during marriage. He unlocks the sacred thread binding the bride and bridegrooms hand. Then he pours water over their hand as a symbolic gesture. In traditional society the character of younger brother is inevitable for accomplishing sacred rituals. Folktale reflects the variety of folk culture. The established social norms and rituals deeply influence the conscious and subconscious minds of a person and they get amply reflected in folktales. The chronology may miss in the folktales, but the originality of the theme remains intact is a beautiful testimony of how the behavior of a person is governed by time and space.

Folktale-II: “Sunaphula” (Golden Flower). (Here the narrator’s identity is unknown. She is a fifteen years old girl).

The archetypal businessman (Sadhaba Budha) has seven sons, seven daughter-in-laws and the only dearest daughter. Her name is Sunaphula. One day the sister-in-laws asked her to become a tree and bloom to which she agreed.

They dug a big pit, made her sit inside it and sealed it with clay. They then poured water from their pots and when it became evening withdrew to their respective rooms. The next morning they saw that a tree has come up there with seven golden flowers. They decorated each of the flowers on their locks. They then asked Sunaphula to get up and she got back her original human form. The golden flower from the lock of the youngest sister-in-law fell down and somehow reached the king. At the behest of the king the messengers located Sunaphula and the king knew that she become a tree where golden flowers appear. He wished to marry her. The marriage was solemnized and they led a happy conjugal life. But the other wives of the king could not tolerate this. One day while the king was out on hunting they asked Sunaphula to become a tree. Initially she was reluctant but when the queens persuaded her she agreed with the condition that they would follow the rituals strictly. The queens performed the rituals and Sunaphula soon became a tree with golden flowers. But out of jealousy they broke its branches and when it became evening somehow they sprinkled some water but Sunaphula did not get back her original form. They threw the broken tree
and the dead like body into the river and went away. The king rescued the
tree and prayed Lord Shiva who sprinkled holy water on the tree and
Sunaphula came to her human form. She lived happily with the king and the
wicked queens were punished.

There are parallels between this tale and a Kannad folktales “Flowering Tree”\(^4\). This
Kannad folktales is also all about a girl transforming into a tree, flowers appearing in it and
the king son being attracted. Here also the girl’s changing into a tree requires certain
rituals. Her sister pours two pots of water and chants some mantra. A close observation of
the structure and the motif of “Sunaphula” reinforce the claim that women play an
important role in every sphere of life. Seven sister-in-laws have performed the rituals of
digging the pit, sealing it and pouring water. More importantly, seven is holy number and in
every folk tradition seven holy pots lams and candles are used. The seven sister-in-laws
justify the role of supporting characters in the story. In every folktales there is a hidden
meaning. The girl transforming into a tree and flowering reflect the subconscious
mysticism. Flowering in the tree symbolize a woman’s attainment of physical perfection
which means puberty. In the locality from where this tale has been collected this is known as sian. The king has been attracted by this physically complete woman and has desired
to marry her. In the second lag of the tale the narrator mentions the jealousy of the step-
queens towards Sunaphula. They have induced her to become a tree after the king went
out on hunting to which she is not agreeing. This reluctance may be because she was in
her menstruation and was impure in her body and was sexually not fit. The absence of the
king may be seen as this sexual negation of Sunaphula. With most probability her final
approval to become a tree at the persuasion of the queens was because she might have
by then been fit for sexual conjugation. She has become a tree and flowers have
blossomed in it. But she failed to get back her original human form as the ritual was not
performed and the branches of the tree were broken. This means she could not attain her
physical purity due to the evil design orchestrated by her step queens. There are two
aspects of a woman- malevolent and benevolent. The queens here represent the
malevolent aspect and act as stumbling blocks on the way of Sunaphula’s attaining
perfection. Contrary to this the king has tried to give Sunaphula back her human form
which has been made possible by the blessings of Lord Shiva. This is in conformity with
the idea that women tales believe in the crucial role played by man in giving perfection to
women.

Folktale-III: “Phula Rani”\(^5\) (Flower Queen).

_Sade Budha had four daughters and they wished to marry the
king’s cook, chowkidar, counselor and the king himself respectively.
When this was brought to the notice of the king he arranged the
marriage of three sisters as per their wish and finally he himself
married the youngest one. He made her the principal queen. The
youngest sister had stated that if she happened to marry the king she
would beget a number of children. In fact this happened and after
marriage she conceived and her sisters became envious. They
conspired to expel her from the palace. When the time for her to
deliver came coincidentally the king was out on foreign expedition.
The sisters removed the servants and nurses and remained on guard
near the queen. The queen gave birth to a lovely looking male child
and the sisters took away the child and tried to kill it by throwing in the
pond. But when the child did not die they dug a pit beside the manure
dump and buried it there. Its place they kept a wooden baby near the_
queen. The king came back from his tour and became sad after knowing the incident. Subsequently, the queen delivered a male and a female child and the sisters did the same trick. Still they were not satisfied and spread the rumour all through the kingdom that the queen is an evil spirit and hence is giving birth to wooden babies. The king was disturbed and dismissed her from the palace. She stayed in the stable. The queen who was used to live in luxury had to accept this new life. But destiny had planed differently. Three trees; Arjuna, Kha and Krushna Chuda came up from the manure dump where the three children had been buried. When they blossomed people desperately tried to pluck flowers. Songs came out from the trees. Finally the king also came but could not pluck flowers. All the people came tried but could not pluck flowers. Some one sang from the tree, “If my mother comes she can pluck flowers”. The king thought all but the queen herself has not tries to pluck flowers. He took the queen to the tree. The moment the queen touched the trees two delicate male children and one female child emerged from the trees and narrated the entire episode. The king became glad and took back the queen to the palace. The three sisters were nailed from above and below and were buried.¹

Narrator plays a vital role in the structure and arranging the motif in the folktale. Since the narrator is mostly from the weaker section of the society he/she has an irresistible obsession towards the higher order in the subconscious. With some amount of imagination the characters such as farmer, labourer, deserted woman, widow, orphan, beggar in course of time take the shape of folktales. The ever-neglected and exploited women society also provides feedback for the plot construction in a folktale. Though appears frail, the woman voice is pregnant with rituals, customs, traditions of the conventional society and desire and aspiration of women. In the above-mentioned tale the four daughters of Sade Budha express their subconscious desire to achieve a certain social status. The desire of the youngest daughter to marry the king and become the queen proves that even if they are subdued and have a suppressed social status they are ambitious to achieve the higher social order. As like men women also have an attraction for wealth, power and status in the society. This is substantiated by analyzing the motifs in folktales. Wealth and power on the other hand also invite trouble as they create envy in others. Since the youngest sister has achieved wealth and power by marrying the king even her own sisters have become jealous and have planned to remove her from the palace and separate her from the king. They have been largely successful in their evil design by replacing the new-born with the wooden ones which leads the king to dismiss the queen from the palace who in turn lives a dejected life in the stable. It was by virtue of her good fate only the queen got rid of the trouble orchestrated by her jealous sisters.

The folktales are replete with motifs of sibling rivalry, co-wives rivalry, sister-in-law rivalry, mother-in-law rivalry and daughter-in-law rivalry which are common day to day social happenings. In this tale also sibling rivalry has been explicitly presented. But the symbolic disposition of women’s rituals cannot be completely ruled out. Childbirth is an important development in the life of a woman. As per folk ritual the woman is kept isolated for a period of twenty one days after delivery. The locality from where this folktale has been collected adheres to this ritual quite strictly. Such women are not allowed in any

¹(This was collected from Late Chandra Sekhar Rout of village Pandrapathar in the year 2002 when he was 92 years old).
sacred social function during this period. No member of the family also touches her during this period of inhibition. After twenty one days the woman is allowed her normal life after undergoing certain holy rituals. King’s punishment to the king, her isolation in the stable perhaps reflects these post-delivery restrictions. There is a lot of bleeding during childbirth and the woman is treated as impure during this period. She is kept separated from her husband and it is but obvious that union or separation of male female is purely governed by biological development of woman. The narrator has superbly presented the social ritual supported by imagination and biologically universal truth. "The experience accumulated over several thousand of generation is stored in the form up collective unconscious. The collective unconscious is reflected in dream contents or other form of thought behavior archetypes. Thus, the archetypes are product of racial experiences". it is reflected in folktale, folk belief, art, painting, dance and dream of a race in a natural way.

Coming back to the context, trees have come up and have flowered from the place where the new-born babies were buried. No one from the kingdom including king was successful in plucking flower from the trees. Finally when the queen has come and touched, the children have appeared in flesh and blood. The relationship of mother and child starts from the mother’s womb. The umbilical cord of child and mother’s placenta use to join. In biologically term child’s relationship with mother’s womb is intimate. That basically is the reason when the queen, the mother touches the trees they reciprocate actively and get back their human bodies. This is one of the finest examples of mother-child relationship.

The three folktales represent the three vital phases in a woman’s life. More importantly, in all these three tales women have been central to the plot construction and overall growth of the storyline. They represent the biological growth, its restriction and the rituals justifying and providing a friendly and enabling environment for a woman to attain perfection. One thing similar in all these tales is the hardship undergone by the central woman character and their final restoration. This poetic justice can be seen as the social viewpoint towards women.

REFERENCES

2 Sahu, Fakirmohan, Swapna O Adhunika Kabita Ekasamntarata” in Chahani, Bhubaneswar, P -15.
3 Informant is Smruti Sarita Khamari of village Larka in Nuapada district, Odisha.
5 Informant is Late Chandra Sekhar Rout of village Pandrapathar in Nuapada district, Odisha.