

Construction of Female Identity in Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps*

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Abstract: This paper attempts to analyse the representation of women in folktales through Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps*, a novel, conveyed in the form of a folk story. The novel mentions a unique kind of women, termed as Kirhupfumia – women born with poisonous powers. It is interesting to look at the representational aspect of women in folktales and the way it influences in the identity formation of women as a whole. The society tries to construct the image of a woman so as to suit its hegemony and control over them, and folk stories being the part and product of the society, they follow the same pattern when it comes to this tendency of portraying women. The novel highlights the socio-cultural milieu of Nagaland and its people by infusing it heavily with legends and myths. It also underlines the aspect of how folktales can become; a tool to mirror the existing attitudes towards women and a device to enforce the ideal traits as defined by the patriarchal society for the women.

Keywords: Kirhupfumia; Folktales; Women; Nagaland; Easterine Kire

Introduction

Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps* (2014) is a magnificent tale, a mystical combination of both myth and legend, with a breath-taking and fantastic depiction of the supernatural and the natural world of Nagaland in general. The novel's central focus is on the adventures of the protagonist, Vilie, who is on a quest – to obtain the heart stone which is rumoured to contain immense power and to be the worthy keeper of it. Along his journey, he comes across two sisters, Ate and Zote who are Kirhupfumia, the women with enormous “evil” powers, “the most feared persons in the mountains” (Kire 130). They are banished and ostracized by the society for their power. These women serve as a plot catalyst to the novel and assupporting characters to the protagonist but they also serve as the perfect example – of the stereotypical dichotomy of the angel and the witch, a patriarchal divide among women, a motif quite popular in folk tales. This is not the first time the author has employed the mythical figure of Kirhupfumia in her writing. She employed it first in *A Naga Village Remembered* (2003) which became the first novel in English from Nagaland by a Naga writer. By employing the motif of Kirhupfumia, the author in a way exposes – the condition of women in a patriarchal world in general and the compartmentalisation of women into good and bad in particular. It

becomes a tool for the author to reiterate the double standard of the society which is basically patriarchal, that is infested with prejudices against women. In this context, what Bronislaw Malinowski has observed about folktales is worthy to be mentioned where he states that folktale“ is not merely a story told but a reality lived. It is not of the nature of fiction... but a living reality, believed to have once happened once in primeval times, and continuing ever since to influence the world and human destinies” (qtd. in Meitei 23). It can be said that folktales occupy a unique position not only in the collective consciousness of the society but also in its lived reality and the novelist shows how in this lived reality, elements in folktales represent in a way the lived conditions of women in a male dominated world.

As mentioned in the novel, Kirhupfumia are women with both constructive and destructive powers. Constructive in the sense that they are said to have great healing powers and knowledge about herbs. The villagers offer sacrifices and their first harvest to get cured of their ailments. These same women who are regarded as healers are also looked upon with contempt and hatred. The hypocrisy of the villagers is evident as Ate says, “When they need us to tell them what herbs would be good for curing tumours and other ailments, they come to us with offerings” (Kire 131). These healing powers can be compared with the caring and nurturing nature of women, the ability of giving life. However, they are regarded as destructive when they decide to go against the established social and moral codes. This double standard of the society in their attitude towards women is reflected in the novel through the Kirhupfumia women. They are seen as destructive since they hold the power of death. Their touch is said to be poisonous and destructive.

These women are definitely not the heroines of the male centric novel, however, they become representative figures of all the capable and bold women that the society fears and thus ostracizes. Kirhupfumia women embody human fears because they have the knowledge that a normal being cannot possess and the power that a normal being cannot control. As stated in the novel that “Kirhupfumia are outcast in every village they are born into” (Kire 131), women with great knowledge and capabilities are often scrutinized by the patriarchal society. Moreover, not being able to control its women is patriarchy’s greatest fear. Thus, hatred for such kind of women becomes inevitable. They are regarded as a threat to the society. Their own ability is a disruption for the patriarchal social order. In an attempt to neutralize this disruption, Kire establishes a distinction among these women, who in the likes of the western fairy tale concept, is the good witch and the bad witch.

Kire has portrayed these two sisters as an opposite to each other. One is marked with charity, kindness and passivity while the other is revengeful, malicious and speaks her mind. Ate is the embodiment of the good, meek woman who is quite contented with her life. She has happily accepted her condition as she is in consonance with her fate as she claims, “... we have come here and we live by ourselves where we have nothing to fear from each other and from others. And the village we fled from have nothing to fear from us now. We never chose to be the way we are. It is the destiny life chose to give us” (Kire 130-131). Even though they are denied integration by the society, she quietly accepts this rejection. She is the symbol of the ever-forgiving womankind that a patriarchal society pedestalizes. Her docile, forgiving, caring nature are the kind of characteristics which are traditionally linked to femininity.

Zote is depicted as a complete contrast to the character of Ate. She is bold and unforgiving. She is demonized by her portrayal too. She is described by the author as “A tall woman with

long hair [who] stood with her hands on her hips, watching him with her lips drawn back to reveal her teeth. She looked like a dog about to attack” (Kire 127). Immediately she is portrayed as a vicious, destructive figure. Ate is the angelic projection of women – the healer, the nurturer. She saves Vilie from her sister and offers him food and a place to stay. Zote is nothing like her sister. Her (not so) feminine, unapologetic nature makes her an abominable being. She is projected as a deranged mad figure and Ate as the angelic saviour which is clear from the novel as the author writes:

The tall woman snarled and tried to grab Vilie’s bag. But the younger woman was too quick for her. She stepped between the two of them and shielded Vilie, at the same time pushing the tall one away. At least the younger woman looked pleasant and certainly more welcoming than the older woman, so Vilie let her lead him to her home.” (Kire 127)

Zote is the everything (un)pleasant in a woman. Emphasizing on the (un)desirousness of her character, the writer writes that “her very presence was evil. She was so full of contempt for everything around her that she could not speak a sentence without ending it in a curse. Vilie tried to speak but his voice stuck in his throat and all that emerged was a hoarse sound. It was as though she had emasculated him.” (Kire 133). However, her strong personality does threaten the masculinity of the onlooker, the male protagonist. He feels victimized by some aspect of the female power. Zote shocks his established idea of a woman. This aspect of representation of women in folktales can be substantiated with what Meitei writes:

Myths, tales, fairy tales and fables are expressive of the biased views of society where women are eternally bound to their femininity, that is, to live up to the expectations of male ego. Represented as subservient to man to serve him through sacrifice, submission and as models of virtue, docility, sweetness, all to uphold man vision, she is a lost identity, never a full human being ... (12).

The two sisters too serve to uphold Vilie’s idea of a woman and legitimize his patriarchal morality.

The abnormality of Zote’s character, however, is made aware to the readers that it arises out of the cruelty and brutality, the abusive environment they grew up in. Their boon-curse exposed them to a life of perpetual exclusion and a hostile social climate. It is evident from Ate’s narration to Vilie:

“Back in our ancestral village a woman was very cruel to my sister. She would spit in our direction every time we met her on the village path. You know that when someone spits in a certain way it is a curse, so that woman laid a curse on us every time she saw us. My sister was so upset that the next time she crossed our path, she pointed her finger at the woman’s womb which was swollen and pregnant, and in that instant her baby died inside her. The woman screamed and clutched her stomach and fell to the ground. I dared not help her because I knew the malignant power that there is in my touch. The next morning we had to leave the village, and her relatives followed us until the end of the road, shouting that if we had not left they would have killed us.” (Kire 131)

Zote is well aware of her powers, and when such cruel treatments are meted out to her, she does not just silently suffer it but acts against it. She raises her finger towards the belly of the pregnant lady not out of prior evil intention to harm her, but as an act of resistance since her

humiliation became a routine of her life. Moreover, it seems they use their power not to harm and have domination over others but as a means to protect themselves. It is also evident when Ate narrates how her aunt blinded a man by pointing her finger towards him because he tried to rape her. But instead they have to pay the price for transgressing their limits (for using their power as a medium for defence) – by being banished from the village.

In *A Naga Village Remembered* too, the author has portrayed the plight of Kirhupfumia women which in turn reiterates the condition of women in general. In the novel, there are two sisters similar to Kire's *When the River Sleeps*, who are Kirhupfumia. The older one tries to console her younger sister as she says "My sister, we are not as the other women. I cannot explain how we are different." (Kire 41). The younger one too tries to accept the bitter reality since acceptance can only be gained by subjugating to the social hegemony. She thus learns to accept her sad fate as she claims, "We are Kirhupfumia and what is born of us will never find life. Our destiny tends towards death and destruction, not life." (41). They not only become the targets of hatred, contempt and ostracization, but are also silenced; hence, their predicament remains unarticulated and unexpressed. It is so typical of women in general who are subordinated and suppressed.

The author, however, marks a departure from her earlier work in the portrayal of Zote. She is projected as a character who is unwilling to submit to the social constructions. She is tired and weary of her social ostracization, of society's indifference and injustice. She too wants to lead a normal life. She yearns to be accepted, to be integrated into the society. But she is not somebody who would silently accept the injustice meted out to her and her kind. She wants to seek revenge for being driven out of her village. Revenge usually has patriarchal connotations, to avenge for the wrong done to somebody, and such desire is unwoman, thus making her character fearful. Revenge emerges as a form of empowerment for Zote. She is able to gain her agency through it. Zote's "recognition of her power and voice confidently leads to improve her representation from marginalization to centralization as a triumphant feminist." (Al- Barazenji 50). With the help of the heart stone she attacks the village which once drove them away. She even breaks the age-old taboo by entering the war council hall where earlier women were forbidden from entering it. She even does not care and is prepared for confrontation when "she has invoked the wrath of the ancestor spirits" (Kire 155). She knows that she would not be able to emerge out alive. Her self-immolation in a way makes her heroic but then again it reaffirms accepted notions about female transgression; one who violates established social codes is ought to be punished. The wrath of the spirits in the novel can be compared with the wraths of a patriarchal society.

Analysing the textual and cultural representation of women, Catharine R. Stimpson observes that feminist literary critics "have found women as beautiful other, as aesthetic object... they have found woman as mother, whose will and power if checked and directed, will succour. They have found woman as schemer, whose will and power, if unchecked, will devour" (116). Similarly, in the novel, Ate is rewarded for her kindness and tolerance. She goes on to live, marry and have a family of her own. Zote is, however, consumed by her flames of revenge. We may argue that it would also be a fallacy to equate kindness, tolerance and endurance to inferiority. Such characteristics definitely does not signify weakness. Ate has the goodness of heart, the ability to forgive. She understands that it would be wrong to punish those who did not do any wrong to them. However, enduring injustice and then trying to justify it as the

purpose of existence can definitely be linked to passivity. Ate too tries to justify the mistreatment meted out to them as she says:

The exchange of offerings for our knowledge is just a ritual without which the women here would feel completely isolated. So long as they feel they are useful for something, even if it is by way of helping the villages that had mistreated them, they are giving back, and in a strange way that gives meaning to their lives. If they felt they had nothing to live for they would die out here..." (Kire 144-145).

Through the different images of women, the dichotomy of good and bad, angel and evil are employed extensively in folktales in order to validate the idea/characteristics of women. The evil is usually placed in a sharp contrast to the good one which emphasizes the role of women and their limitations in society. Kire, however, struggles "to find a terminology that can rescue the feminine from its stereotypical associations with inferiority" (Showalter 331). She, therefore, attempts to portray her women characters as strong but she eventually succumbs to the stereotypical representation as while portraying her characters as striking and bold on one hand, on another she tends to romanticize certain characteristics associated with women like docility, tranquillity, charity, etc. maybe because she herself is a product of the 'lived reality' of her own world. She thus asserts the patriarchal morality which believes that women's transgression of social and cultural boundaries leads to their ultimate doom. In doing so, however, she might be highlighting the constricting nature of the society where going against the established norms and attitudes would ultimately bring downfall and destruction as it is pointed out earlier that she is a part and product of the world she depicts. And this reality of women being caught between two different perspective & choices – looking towards a changing trend yet still bound by the shackles of the older values – needs to be resolved by finding a new way. In this regard, David Haase's quote from Karen E. Rowe may be stated here:

Today women are caught in dialectic between the cultural status quo and the evolving feminist movement, between a need to preserve values and yet to accommodate changing mores, between romantic fantasies and contemporary realities... But one question remains unresolved: do we have the courageous vision and energy to cultivate a newly fertile ground of psychic and cultural experience from which will grow fairy tales for human beings in the future? (qtd. in Haase 5)

It is the portrayal that decides the construction of identity of women. Folktales, however, do not fare well when it comes to representing women as it is stated in the "Introduction" to *Folklore Studies: Local and Global* that "oral narratives are social and cultural documents which reflect the vicissitudes of life, image of women in oral narratives is no more than fanciful than real in all probability" (Meitei and Dhawan 12). Folktales often tend to romanticize the basic/inherent traits of femininity and pave the way for the social and cultural constructions where the meek and the passive are represented as good and the bold, the active and the rebellious are projected as bad which leads to the subjugation of women in general. However, folktales can also advocate the empowerment of women. Alison Lurie in her article 'Fairy Tale Liberation' explicates that "folktales and fairy tales can advance the cause of women's liberation, because they depict strong females" (qtd. in Haase 15). Identifying women as powerful and influential in folktales is a step towards their

liberalization. Analysing the idea of representation, Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) writes:

On the one hand, representation serves as the operative term within a political process that seeks to extend visibility and legitimacy to women as political subjects; on the other hand, representation is the normative function of a language which is said either to reveal or to distort what is assumed to be true about the category of women (2).

So, representation can play a great role in the creation of the female identity.

Identity is established through the self in relation with others. Erick Erikson in *Identity: Youth and Crisis* states “Identity is a configuration arising out of ‘Constitutional Givens’ idiosyncratic libidinal needs, favoured capacities, significant identification, effective defences, successful sublimations and consistent roles” (qtd. in Kroger 7). (Un)favourable capacities discourage one from identifying oneself with it. Thus, the representational aspect, be it in folktales or other, affect the identity formation and acceptance of roles. Folk stories can be gendered in its discourse and intentionally/unintentionally transmits the patriarchal hegemony unto the readers/listeners. Folktales appeal to the common mass because it represents collective consciousness of the society, which in a way may uphold the patriarchal consciousness. And as a result, the patriarchal messages forwarded by folktales is thus ingrained in the psyche of the society which is highlighted by Sumita Puri in “Rewriting Folk Narratives: A Case Study of Canadian Feminist Fantastical Voices” as she writes:

... representation of women in folktales and fairy tales, analysing how these narratives have depicted women as timid objects of male gaze and the consequential transmission of the dominant power structures of patriarchy. Traditional tales have been operational in setting these cultural constructs directly or vicariously. Through them patriarchal programming is done and social values as deemed fit are indoctrinated by patriarchy so that women essentially perpetuate these norms and values of social constructs with acquiescence(72).

Conclusion

Thus, as the transmitter of cultural and social codes, it becomes necessary to look at how and what is conveyed through folktales. Compartmentalising women into good and bad assists in upholding patriarchal morality. Written in the form of a moral story, *When the River Sleeps* exposes the plight of women on one hand and on another affirms that it is futile to deviate from established social norms. Depending on the politics of representation, folktales can either serve as a tool of female resistance or can assist in sustaining patriarchal hegemony.

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