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Reconnoitring Gender In Narrative: A Special Focus On The Matrilineal Khasi-Jaintia Society

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Gender history has its roots in the Enlightenment Movement which developed in Europe during the Renaissance era of the 14th century. Gender history involves evaluating the role of both men and women in shaping history. The term "gender" originates from the Latin word "genus," which means "kind" or "sort" or "type." In simple terms, gender refers to the characteristic of women, men, girls and boys that are socially constructed. This includes norms, traits and roles associate with being a woman, girl, or boy and a relationship with each other. Initially, "gender" was used primarily in a grammatical context, referring to the classification of nouns and pronouns as masculine, feminine, or neuter. This linguistic use of gender is still prevalent in many languages today.ⁱ

By 'gendered society', we understand the division of people into two broad groups 'men' and 'women' and the organization of the major aspects of society along those binaries. Throughout, history, gender issues have been narrated in many folktales. However, it was with the emergence of the feminist movement from the west and with the publication of the book "A vindication of the Right of Women" in 1792 by Mary Wollstonecraft's that scholar started to take interest on gender issues.ⁱⁱ However, in the 21st century gender is often described using terms such as man, woman, or transsexual, which are applied to people based on their sex, or occasionally on culturally constructed features.

However, this article focuses on the role of gender in indigenous narratives from the tribal perspective of the Khasi-Jaintia society, which practices a matrilineal form of society. The study of Khasi-Jaintia folktales reveals profound insights into the cultural, social, and spiritual fabric of Khasi-Jaintia gender roles. The Khasi-Jaintia society, indigenous to the northeastern part of India, presents a unique case with its matrilineal structure, distinguishing itself from the rest of the country and other parts of the world, which predominantly practice patriarchal systems.

This article explores gender roles, identities, culture, and the representation of gender in Khasi-Jaintia narratives, shedding light on the intricacies and division of gender in this matrilineal society. The relationship between gender and indigenous narratives is a complex and fascinating subject. Khasi-Jaintia folktales possess unique traits, narrating and describing in depth how they have withstood the forces of patriarchal society and providing extensive information about the roles played by genders at certain points in time. Therefore, the matrilineal Khasi-Jaintia society of Meghalaya, India, offers a unique lens for rediscovering gender issues in their stories.

Understanding Matrilineal Societies

Matrilineal societies trace lineage and inheritance through the mother's line rather than the father's. Since time immemorial, the Khasi-Jaintia have adopted a matrilineal form of society, where lineage and inheritance are traced through the mother. Property and clan membership are hereditary through the female line, typically passing from mother to daughter. While men do not inherit property, they often occupy roles as guardians, political leaders, and warriors. They are responsible for defending the clan and performing certain public duties.

Furthermore, it is important to understand the difference between matriarchy and matrilineal societies. In a matrilineal society, women do not enjoy absolute power and authority. In the Khasi-Jaintia family, the 'Kni' or the great uncle manages all family activities. In a matriarchal society, descent is traced through women, who also enjoy absolute power and authority. Thus, the Khasi-Jaintia matrilineal system does not equate to a matriarchy. Men still hold significant social and ritual power, and gender roles are clearly defined. However, there is a sense of balance and respect between the genders due to the complementary roles they play in society.ⁱⁱⁱ This system significantly impacts gender roles and dynamics within the community.

Indigenous narratives, including myths, folktales, and oral histories, play a crucial role in shaping and reflecting societal values. In Khasi-Jaintia society, these narratives often emphasize the centrality of women in maintaining social and cultural continuity. The matrilineal structure of Khasi-Jaintia society deeply influences its storytelling traditions. Stories passed down through generations reflect the values and norms of a society where women hold central roles and men also play active roles in society. The Khasi-Jaintia tales act as mirrors of the society, authenticating their origins, culture, and rituals, and freeing them from the complexities of the world. Young minds listen to these tales without prejudice, learning moral lessons and values, and becoming aware of the harsh realities that humanity faced in the olden days.

Gender Representation in Khasi-Jaintia Narratives: Their Relevance and Influence on Society

Mythology and Creation Stories

The origin of the Khasi-Jaintia people is shrouded in mystery, as their history has been orally handed down from one generation to another. According to tradition, the Khasi-Jaintia arrived in these hills from the east. Their script is said to have been lost somewhere between *Madur Maskut* and *Nongkseh*, while other accounts state it was lost in the flood.^{iv} In recent years, several scientific studies have been carried out regarding the origin of the Khasi-Jaintia. With the help of linguists and ethnographers, the Khasi-Jaintia have been traced to the Indo-Mongoloid race, and their language has been linked to different Austric languages, specifically the Mon-Khmer group. Gurdon points out that the Khasi-Jaintia might have migrated from Southeast Asia and settled in Sylhet. However, due to constant floods and the hot tropical climate, they migrated to the hills and settled there permanently.^v The Khasi-Jaintia people, indigenous to the Meghalaya state in northeastern India, are known for their distinctive matrilineal society, which significantly shapes their gender narrative.

Many scholars have tried to trace the origin and advent of the Khasi-Jaintia settlement in these hills. According to Khasi-Jaintia traditional faith, they believe that God the Creator created the earth, 'ka Ramew.' As 'ka Ramew' felt lonely, the Creator allowed her to beget children. Thus, five children were born: the first child was the Sun 'Ka Sngi,' followed by the Moon 'U Bnai,' Water 'Ka Um,' the Wind 'Ka Lye,' and the youngest, 'Ka Ding,' who inherited the property and wealth of the family. To be the caretakers of 'ka Ramew,' the Creator sent the 'Hynniew-Trep Hynniew-Skum' to inhabit the earth. The Creator also planted a giant tree in a place known as *Lum Diengiei*, not far from 'Sohpet Bneng,' which acted as a ladder, 'Ka Jingkieng Ksiar,' for the 'Hynniew-Trep Hynniew-Skum' to shuttle up and down to heaven to meet the 'Khyndai-Trep Khyndai-Skum,' who dwelt in heaven.^{vi}

Nevertheless, the era of the golden epoch, where man and beast coexisted side by side, came to an end when man fell into the evil trap of '*Iakjakor*' in the form of a snake (Satan). The '*Iakjakor*' met two brothers, '*U Sormoh*' and '*U Sorphin*,' who resided near the tree, and persuaded them to topple the tree to the ground as soon as possible. If they failed, the whole world would be in darkness as the tree would block the entire '*Ramew*' from receiving light from the sun and the moon. But as the tree collapsed, mankind realized they had committed a blunder, had been cheated by the '*Iakjakor*', and had disobeyed and defied the command of the Creator. The holy bond with the Creator was broken, and the only redemption for the Khasi-Jaintia to reunite their holy bond with the Creator was to follow certain principles. Only by practicing these three important commandments—'*Kamai ia ka hok*' (earn righteousness), '*Tip Briew Tip Blei*' (know God, know man), and '*Tip kur Tip Kha*.'^{vii} (know one's kin)—would they be able to meet the Creator and the '*Khyndai-Trep Khyndai-Skum*' who dwelt in heaven.

The Khasi-Jaintia narratives about their origin and beliefs indicate that they have a cosmos-theandric vision of reality, where the universe ('*Ramew*'), God the Creator ('*U Blei Nongbuh Nongthaw*'), and mankind ('*Hynniew-Trep Hynniew-Skum*') meet together but constitute one, differentiating them from other beliefs.^{viii} The Khasi folktale '*U Sohpet Bneng*' holds significant cultural, educational, spiritual, and social relevance. This myth is more than just a story; it represents the values, beliefs, and traditions of the Khasi people. The narrative summarizes collective knowledge, wisdom, historical background, and ensures that the traditions, habits, and cultural practices of the Khasi-Jaintia are carried on from one generation to the next. '*U Sohpet Bneng*' also reflects the exclusive cultural landscape and societal norms of the Khasi-Jaintia. It points out that the Khasi-Jaintia practice naturism or physiolatry, describing the forces of nature and the spirits that reside in them.^{ix} Thus, mountains, forests, and stones are often considered sacred and imbued with divine presence.

The story emphasizes the close-knit relationship between the Khasi-Jaintia people and their natural environment. It reflects the community's respect for nature and the belief in living harmoniously with the flora and fauna of the earth. Since science has not been able to explain the natural forces, this myth serves as a tool for teaching children about their cultural heritage, traditional values, and the imaginative ways their ancestors explained the world around them. In the face of globalization and cultural similarities like the Garden of Eden from the Bible, tales like '*Sohpet Bneng*' are vital for maintaining cultural resistance. They offer a source of pride and continuity for the Khasi people amidst changing times. Recently, archaeologists discovered some black earthen pots along with iron arrowheads on the slope of the western section of '*U Lum Sohpet Bneng*.' With the help of carbon dating, the tools were dated between 500-300 BC.^x This strengthens the traditional beliefs and practices of the Khasi-Jaintia.

Origin of the Jaintia Kingdom, Shillong Syiemship, and Ka Pahsyntiew

The Ahom Buranjis mentioned that the Khasi-Jaintia had already developed a matrilineal system and state structure. They maintained a good relationship in their commercial activities with the plains people of the Brahmaputra valley. Hence, it may be assumed that they were in the hills long before the arrival of the Ahom. A calculation of the date of the arrival of the Ahom's into upper Assam through the eastern hills has been dated to 1228 AD. The Ahom records do not mention passing by the Khasi-Jaintia on their entry into the Brahmaputra valley and refer to them only in later Buranjis, after the Ahom's had spread their control over the entire valley.^{xi} There is reference to Shillong and the Jaintia, the largest of the Khasi-Jaintia States. The latter state came to be known as the Jaintia state after the goddess Jainteswari. The Jaintia rulers became advocates of the Hindu religion while continuing to maintain their tribal culture. The capital of the Jaintia state was located in Jaintiapur, in present-day Bangladesh, well into the Surma plains to the south of the hills. The ruins of the Jaintia rulers' palace and the monoliths can be seen today at Nartiang.^{xii}

Some Sanskrit sources, including the chronicle of Kashmir, Kalhana's *Rajatarangini*, make reference to the people who inhabit the southern hills of the Himalayas known as the Kasa. However, though these people were of Mongoloid descent, their culture, language, customs, and traditions are completely different from those of the Khasi-Jaintia of Meghalaya. The similarity in the name does not prove that there is a connection with the Kasa. Despite the lack of literary sources, the term Khasi found mention in the Assamese *Bhagavata Purana* of Sankara Deva in 1500 A.D., which points out that the Khasis were the neighbours of the Garos, the Miris, the Kacharis, and the Ahoms. Through these sources, scholars have tried to reconstruct the history of the Khasis in a scholarly manner.^{xiii}

According to tradition, around the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, before the advent of Muslim rule in Bengal, the Jaintia kingdom was ruled by a Brahman king, Indrasena. It was believed that the line of Brahman kings continued, and the names of five kings—Kadaresvar, *Dhanesvar*, *Kandapa*, *Maink*, and *Jayanta*—were known. However, no confirmation can be given regarding these kings, but with the ascendancy of Jayanta as a king, the tradition became more elaborate. Further, legends mention that as Jayanta had no son, he prayed to the goddess Gauri, and he was blessed with a daughter named Jayanti Devi. Later, she married a son of a court priest named *Landhabhar*, and her father, Jayanta, recognized Jayanti's queen under the name of *Ranisimha*. At this time, the Jaintia kingdom was fully under the influence of Hinduism, and its territories included both the plains and the hills.^{xiv}

According to S.K. Chatterjee, the Jaintia state was under the control of a powerful king, *Parvata-raya* or 'lord of the Hills,' which was more of a sobriquet than a name, as also mentioned in Assamese accounts like the *Jayantia Buranji*, a compilation of old manuscripts edited by S.K. Bhuyan. The Khasi and the Jaintia did not maintain historical records; however, legends from the Assamese *Buranji* mention that the first Jaintia king was a degraded Brahman named Landhabar. They were in constant conflict with their eastern neighbours, the *Kachari*, and at times with the Ahoms. The Jaintia state seems to have been in existence since 1500 A.D. Later on, they became fully Hinduised, becoming staunch followers of the goddess Jayanti, another form of goddess Durga, and constructed a temple in their capital, which exists to this day, becoming known throughout Bengal.^{xv}

The emergence of Shillong Syiemship centred on the legendary ancestress of a royal dynasty, Ka Pahsyntiew. This anecdote narrates the story of a woman who embodies fertility and prosperity, symbolizing the vital role of women in sustaining life and community. A story goes that a plague had almost wiped out all family members of the Wahlang clan, but as it was about to kill a certain child, a centipede appeared and protected the child by challenging the plague to count the number of legs the centipede had; if the plague succeeded, it would have the child, but if it failed, it would have to leave the child alone. The plague continually failed to count the number of legs of the centipede until it finally surrendered, and the child was safe. The young child then lived in a cave at a place called Marai, situated near present-day Shillong Peak, and later grew up to be a beautiful lady. She would hardly come out of the cave for fear of being discovered. However, on a bright and sunny day, she was seen coming out of the cave by some cowherds who immediately reported the strange event to the village. Many men from a nearby village tried to capture her but in vain. However, one man from the Myllemngap clan cleverly laid wildflowers at the entrance of the cave leading up to her hiding place and was finally able to capture and take her to his home.^{xvi} The narrative serves as a guide for the modern-day generation, emphasizing the need to preserve and take good care of our ecosystem to coexist with it. Had we seriously practiced what our forefathers did, we could have saved the world from the global warming we are facing today.

Ka Pahsyntiew remained under the guardianship of the Myllemngap clan. Her mythical origin, politeness, and graceful behaviour attracted many people. She was considered to be the daughter of the Shillong god. When the time was ripe, she was ordained as a royal clan member and married to a man from a highly respectable clan. According to the story, she bore two sons and one daughter. Later, she accepted the office of Syiemship or the kingdom's protector, and her son became the first king of the Shillong Syiemship. Later, the Myllemngap clan and other powerful clans united to establish the Pahsyntiew Syiemship. Other clans also submitted allegiance to the Shillong Kingdom while conducting their state affairs. Thus, the history of the Shillong state began.^{xvii}

With the arrival of the British in the southern parts of the Khasi-Jaintia foothills, trade and commerce, particularly in iron and limestone, further improved. By the 1830s, the British were able to acquire a plot of land at Cherra-poonjee from the Syiem of Sohra, where they set up a British sanatorium. After the Anglo-Khasi War of 1826-1830, the British had direct and indirect control over the Khasi-Jaintia Hills, and by 1866, the British shifted their colonial government from Cherra-poonjee to Shillong.^{xviii}

Relevancy of the Narrative

The story regarding the beginning of Shillong and the origin of Jaintia kingdom strengthens the fact that the Khasi-Jaintia society existed alongside other cultures of ancient India. Even though the Khasi-Jaintia society doesn't have its own script to support their claims, the Ahom Buranjis shed light on the Jaintia Kingdom, enabling scholars to clarify doubts and convert the myth into reality supported by historical facts. The tale illustrates the cultural practices of the people in the Khasi-Jaintia kingdom prior to the advent of colonial rule. Anthropologists and sociologists can reconstruct the ethnography of the people based on the literary as well as archaeological evidence from the neighbouring plains of the Surma and Brahmaputra valleys. The story narrates that the kingdom spread to the plains of the Surma Valley, yet they were not influenced by the patriarchal society of the plains. They were able to preserve and maintain the matrilineal form of society.

Female Agency and Empowerment

On the other hand, the narratives of 'Ka Pah Syntiew' illustrate and empower women with self-determination and the right to make decisions for their own well-being as well as for their family. Her condition for marriage highlights her autonomy and the importance she places on her own principles and desires. This echoes that in the Khasi-Jaintia matrilineal society, even though the great uncle played a leading role before the advent of Christianity, women also held significant power and influence within the family and community. The narratives show the deep connection of 'Ka Pah Syntiew' with nature. The young man's eventual understanding of the bond between 'Ka Pah Syntiew' and nature highlights the Khasi-Jaintia respect for nature and the environment and its surroundings. This respect for nature is mirrored in the way gender roles are perceived. As the dwelling place of 'Ka Pah Syntiew' was amidst beautiful natural surroundings, this demonstrates that careful nurturing and balance of human relationships with nature was a societal norm. The tale suggests that both men and women must cooperate, respecting each other to create a harmonious and prosperous environment.

The Khasi folk tale of 'Ka Pah Syntiew' is a profound narrative that summarizes key cultural values related to gender roles and relationships. By highlighting female agency, cooperative partnership, and respect for nature, the tale reflects the matrilineal structure and the emphasis on balance and mutual respect within Khasi society. It serves as a cultural lesson on the importance of shared responsibilities and the harmonious coexistence of genders, reinforcing the idea that both men and women play crucial roles in nurturing and sustaining the community. Through its rich symbolism and storytelling, the tale offers valuable insights into the indigenous Khasi-Jaintia worldview, where gender parity and respect for nature are paramount.

U Thlen

One of the oldest references to the use of iron in Khasi-Jaintia culture can be traced to the story of U Thlen. It is said, "In olden days, there was a market in the village of *Langhiang Kongkhen*, and there was a bridge sacred to the gods there. All the children of men frequented that heavenly market. They used to pass by *Rangjirteh*, where there was a cave inhabited by a gigantic Thlen. When they went to market, they had to pass by the cave at *Rangjirteh*, and if ten of them passed, five were swallowed up, but if one passed by alone, he was left unharmed. When many people had disappeared, a meeting was convened at *Sunnai* market, where both the Khasi and the plains people discussed ways and means of killing the Thlen. After thorough discussion, they decided to persuade *U Suidnioh* to befriend the Thlen. He used to walk alone, so when he went to the Thlen, the latter did not eat him because there was no one else with him to let go. The people advised *U Suidnioh* to give the Thlen flesh every day, either goat, pig, or cattle.^{xix}

When *U Suidnioh* became its friend, he constructed a smelting house and made the iron red hot. Holding it with a pair of tongs, he carried the iron to the cave where the Thlen lived. Upon reaching there, he said, 'Open your mouth, open your mouth, brother-in-law, here is some flesh' (P.R.T. Gordon). As soon as the Thlen opened its mouth, he threw the red-hot iron down its throat. The monster then struggled and writhed so violently in its death agony that the earth shook as if there had been an earthquake. When the Thlen died, a meeting was convened to decide what to do with the body. It was decided that they would divide the Thlen into two parts: one for the Khasi and the other for the plains people to eat. The plains people consumed all

the Thlen meat, but the Khasi did not. The folktale suggests that the Thlen reappeared and remained with the Khasis.^{xx}

Gender Roles and Community Responsibility

The tale narrates the different roles played by both genders. *Suidnioh*, who killed the Thlen and learned the art of smelting iron ore, illustrates the male role in matrilineal society. Men were protectors and guardians of the family, clan, and society. The Khasi-Jaintia use the masculine prefix 'u nar' for iron, signifying the strength of Khasi-Jaintia men. The narrative also emphasizes the triumph of good over evil, with Iaw *Shibadi*, the progenitor of the Laloo clan who brought iron smelting to the hills, enabling *Suidnioh* to kill the Thlen. Today, it is 'Ka Syiem' (the queen) who performs the rites and rituals to cure individuals affected by the Thlen, highlighting women's wisdom and bravery.

The Khasi-Jaintia matrilineal society provides social justice to all its members. The tale of U Thlen reinforces the positioning of women at the forefront of the fight against social injustice and corruption. This reflects the cultural narrative that women are integral to maintaining and restoring social order and moral integrity. The narrative also emphasizes that both men and women play crucial roles in upholding the community's well-being. While the women from the Syiem clan play a vital role in defeating and curing a person from the evil spell of U Thlen, collective responsibility and action are essential for the upliftment of the entire community. This narrative promotes a view of gender roles that, while distinct, are complementary and equally important in addressing communal challenges. It serves as a reminder to present society that both genders must work together to uphold social order and fight against corruption and greed. Through its rich allegory, the tale offers deep insights into the indigenous Khasi-Jaintia worldview, where gender roles are balanced, and collective responsibility in maintaining the moral fabric and etiquettes for which the Khasi-Jaintia were once famous must continue in the twenty-first century.

Ka Iew Luri Lura

The Khasi-Jaintia people have long pondered over the close relationship between mankind and dogs. Legend has it that during the golden epoch of "*aiom Ksair-aiom Rupa*," a time of innocence and peace among all creatures, a fair known as "*ka Iew Luri-Lura*" was held periodically in the northern section of the Khasi Hills. The Tiger, governor of this market, ensured that all animals could come and sell their goods, thereby improving their living conditions. However, humans were excluded from these markets due to their hunting practices with bows and arrows.^{xxi}

In the central region of the Khasi Hills, a lazy dog decided to venture towards this fair in the north. Upon reaching Sadew, he felt the fresh air but also smelled the unpleasant odour of "*Tung Rymbai*" emanating from human dwellings. Seeking food, the dog approached a house where the hospitable Khasi-Jaintia inhabitants generously fed him for the night.^{xxii}

The next morning, the dog persuaded the house owner to give him a few clay pots to carry some "*Tung Rymbai*." After bargaining, he acquired a pot of fermented beans. Along the way to the fair, the dog boasted about his new products, claiming they were unique and never tasted before by any animal. Setting up his shop in the market's centre, the dog proudly displayed his goods. However, when he opened the clay pot and revealed the "*Tung Rymbai*" wrapped in a banana leaf, a foul smell spread, causing everyone to flee. Insulted and rejected, the dog appealed to the Tiger in charge, who refused to intervene.^{xxiii}

Disheartened, the dog returned to the man who had fed him. Recounting his plight, the dog found sympathy in the man, who had initially given him the "*Tung Rymbai*." Inviting the dog to stay, the man promised to help him seek revenge on those who had insulted him.^{xxiv}

with the dog now a hunting companion, the man's success in hunting grew. The dog's keen sense of smell, still lingering with the scent of "*Tung Rymbai*" from the trampled beans, enabled him to track animals effectively. As the dog settled with the man, he shared his shelter with a pig. While humans engaged in both hunting and agriculture, the man realized the dog and pig must also contribute by working for their food.^{xxv}

One day, returning from the fields, the man found both animals well-fed but idle. He ordered them to plough the land, with the pig obediently using his nose to plough and the dog lazily hiding in the shade. Each evening, the dog would run over the furrows the pig had ploughed, annoying the pig immensely. This behaviour repeated daily, leading the pig to complain to the owner^{xxvi}.

Initially incredulous, the man investigated and discovered that most furrows showed traces of the dog's feet, not the pig's snout as claimed. Convinced of the dog's innocence, the man punished the pig by confining it to a sty with leftovers for food. In contrast, the dog was welcomed into the man's house, sharing meals at the master's table. Thus, the dog found a permanent home with the man. This tale of "*Ka Iew Luri Lura*" illustrates the cultural significance of relationships and responsibilities in Khasi-Jaintia society, emphasizing hospitality, justice, and the rewards of loyalty^{xxvii}.

Analysis of Gender Relevance in the Narrative and the Role of Women in Khasi Matrilineal Society

This narrative revolves around a family exemplifying qualities of compassion, kind-heartedness, and sympathy. It highlights the traditional role of women in matrilineal societies as caretakers, providing guests with warm hospitality and empathy despite their busy schedules and household chores. Thus, the narrative underscores the power of female qualities in pacifying even the wildest creatures, reinforcing respect for women's roles within households and the broader community. However, it is the man's ability to form a bond with the dog and integrate it into human society that signifies his authority in making decisions for the family's well-being. This story aligns with the societal structure where different genders play complementary roles in maintaining harmony and stability within homes, clans, and society.

Symbolism of Protection and Loyalty

The dog's loyalty to the man's family and its protective instincts reflects societal expectations for men to guard, protect, and provide for their families. In a matrilineal society, however, protection and loyalty are mutual responsibilities shared by both genders, illustrating underlying values of equality and partnership within the community. The Khasi folk tale of the dog's domestication through kindness offers a narrative emphasizing values of mutual respect, loyalty, and partnership, which are integral to the social fabric of the community. This tale serves as a cultural touchstone, perpetuating values associated with gender roles in Khasi society.

Cooperative and Complementary Roles

The tale of *Iew Luri Lura* illustrates the active participation of the Khasi-Jaintia in commercial activities, as people throughout the Khasi Hills engaged in business transactions. In addition to agricultural activities, a significant portion of the population participated in internal and external trade. To facilitate smooth market operations, specific weekly market dates were assigned across the Khasi and Jaintia hills. These markets, known as '*hats*,' connected community members of all genders and species, with many female traders being primary breadwinners for their families. This narrative offers insights into the cultural ethos of the society, highlighting mutual understanding and cooperation among its people.

Khasi Folk Tale on Romance

The Khasi folk tale of "The Cooing of the Dove" is an emotional story that delves into themes of love, loyalty, and betrayal within the Khasi-Jaintia society, which is characterized by freedom from class or caste divisions. However, this narrative reflects ethical values, manners, respect, cultural norms, and societal roles, particularly the dynamics between genders. Here's an overview of the tale and an analysis of its relevance in the context of gender roles in Khasi society.

The Cooing of the Dove

In ancient times, doves sang melodiously like other birds, but an incident changed this for Paro, the dove, who now expresses her emotions through simple cooing. The tale recounts the life of Paro, a beautiful dove cherished by her parents, who allowed her to venture from the nest only with their consent. One day, while Paro was preening her feathers, a handsome young bird named *Jylleit*, renowned for his enchanting

voice, joined her on the branch and sang to captivate her attention. This ritual of meeting and sharing wild red berries became their routine, and they fell deeply in love. Paro approached her parents seeking permission to marry *Jylleit*.^{xxviii}

Wise parents, foreseeing the berries' scarcity in winter, advised caution, urging their daughter to test *Jylleit's* loyalty, faithfulness, and sincerity. When winter arrived and the berries vanished, so did *Jylleit*. Despite her love for him, Paro hoped in vain for his return, yearning for his farewell or promise to come back when the berries bloomed again. His sudden departure left her heartbroken, and from that sorrowful day onward, Paro ceased singing.^{xxix} Even amidst moments of happiness, she continues to mourn her lost lover by cooing sadly.

Analysis of Gender Relevance in the Narrative

The tale highlights the pivotal role of parents in nurturing their children, especially during their formative years. In this story, the parents showered great care upon the dove, who was not only beautiful but also their youngest child. This reflects the ethos of the Khasi-Jaintia society, where children are expected to obey and heed parental advice, showcasing a mutual understanding between parents and their daughter as they collectively observed *Jylleit's* behaviour. The romance that blossomed between the two lovers illustrates that in matrilineal societies like the Khasi-Jaintia, the dove, as the *Khatduh*, (youngest) must seek guidance not only from elders but importantly from her own parents before shaping her future. Paro's obedience to her parents' counsel symbolizes love and upholding traditional principles, encapsulated in the Khasi saying '*ban im haka hok bad sheptieng ia u Blei*' (To walk in the path of righteousness and to fear God). This reinforces the central role of parents in Khasi-Jaintia society in nurturing both family and cultural values.

Moreover, this narrative reflects cultural values and evolving gender dynamics. It underscores the significant role of parents in fostering social cohesion and exemplifying virtues such as loyalty and perseverance. The tale offers valuable insights into the indigenous Khasi-Jaintia worldview, where gender roles are harmoniously balanced, and women play a critical role in perpetuating cultural practices and maintaining social integrity.

What Makes the Eclipse

The Khasi folktale "What Makes the Eclipse" presents a rich narrative that delves into the cultural and social dynamics of matrilineal Khasi society. Through its themes and content, we gain insights into how gender roles and relationships are portrayed, offering a glimpse into Khasi-Jaintia culture.

Summary of the Folktale

In ancient times, when the world was young, there lived a family near a forest with a beautiful daughter named 'Ka Nam'. Her mother, concerned for her safety, often worried that a stranger might take her away. Despite her concerns, the husband refused to relocate, and thus 'Ka Nam' was raised like any other ordinary girl. One day, while fetching water from the pond, she was abducted by a wild beast known as 'U Khla' the tiger. Taken to the tiger's den, she was intended as a future feast, but the tiger, captivated by her beauty and realizing she was still young and not yet matured, decided to care for her until she matured enough to serve as a lavish meal for himself and his friends.^{xxx}

However, a compassionate mouse residing near the den learned of the tiger's plans and took pity on the maiden. The mouse led her to 'U Hynroh' the toad, who ruled his own kingdom despite being disliked by his subjects due to his ugliness. With no other recourse, 'Ka Nam' and the mouse beseeched the toad for help. 'U Hynroh' agreed under the condition that she wear toad's skin to conceal her beauty and never reveal herself.^{xxxi}

Meanwhile, when the tiger and his friends discovered 'Ka Nam' missing, they quarrelled among themselves in confusion until they perished. Over time, the mouse grew remorseful seeing 'Ka Nam' enslaved by the toad, prompting a secret rescue. Leading her to a magic tree, the mouse instructed her to utter the words, "Oh tree, grow up and take me to the sky." Instantly, the tree soared into the sky with 'Ka Nam' concealed in her toad skin. Finding no acceptance among the sky-dwellers, except for the sun who allowed

her shelter in a small shed outside her mansion, '*Ka Nam*' eventually succumbed to temptation and removed the toad skin while resting, inadvertently revealing her true beauty to the sun's son. Moved by her beauty, the sun's son fell deeply in love with her, marking a turning point in the tale.^{xxxii}

The Resolution of the Conflict

The wise and elderly mother instructed her son not to reveal the truth to anyone, assuring him that she would uncover why such a lovely young girl was rapt under a wicked spell. The sun vigilantly observed the toad, and one day, '*Ka Sngi*' discovered the girl sleeping without her toad skin. Silently entering the small room, the sun took the toad skin and burned it to ashes. From that day onward, the girl appeared in her true form as a young, beautiful woman and became the wife of the sun's son.^{xxxiii}

'*U Hynroh*' learned of this and, given his ongoing feud with the sun due to the latter's failure to pay tribute, '*U Hynroh*' ascended to the sky to confront the sun. The ensuing battle between the sun and '*U Hynroh*' caused a great cataclysm that shook the entire earth, throwing it into turmoil. Humanity, fearing that the toad might overcome the sun, their patron, began creating loud noises by beating their drums. Hearing the drums, '*U Hynroh*' mistook the noise for an advancing army coming to aid the sun and immediately retreated back to earth. Since that day, whenever an eclipse occurs in the Khasi-Jaintia hills, loud noises are made to prevent such a catastrophe.^{xxxiv}

Symbolism and Cosmic Conflict

The tale allegorically describes a cosmic event involving celestial beings that results in an eclipse. The conflict between the sun and the toad revolves around an ancient feud characterized by jealousy, trickery, or a quest for balance, common in all societies. Personifying these celestial bodies add layers of meaning related to human behaviours and societal norms. Their conflict can symbolize the self-motivated traits inherent in both genders. Resolving their dispute often emphasizes themes of balance and harmony, reflecting the Khasi-Jaintia belief in the complementary nature of gender roles. This reinforces the matrilineal system by underscoring the importance of balance and cooperation between genders, pivotal in a society where mothers play central roles in nurturing their sons and daughters.

The Legend of *Ka Panshandi*: The Lazy Tortoise

The tale recounts the story of a lazy tortoise named '*Ka Panshandi*'. She was both ugly and foolish, residing near a large lake surrounded by serene beauty. The lake's calm, crystal-clear waters reflected countless stars on clear nights, transforming it into a majestic sight. During these magical moments, the lazy tortoise would lazily swim in the lake.^{xxxv}

Among the celestial beings who visited the lake was '*U Lurmangkhara*'. Observing from high above the sky, *Lurmangkhara* noticed the tortoise playfully swimming near his reflection. As a noble and handsome man, he mistakenly thought she was attracted to him. Despite warnings from his relatives and friends to consider his decision carefully, *Lurmangkhara* disregarded their advice and descended from the sky to marry her, bringing all his wealth as a gift.^{xxxvi}

Soon after, the tortoise realized her noble husband provided her with all comforts and necessities. Proud of her newfound riches, she began boasting and grew lazy and arrogant. She neglected her personal hygiene and household chores, preferring idleness. Despite *Lurmangkhara*'s kind attempts to change her ways, she remained stubborn and ignored his warnings. Disappointed by her behaviour, *Lurmangkhara* eventually took back all his wealth and returned home.^{xxxvii}

The narratives reflect the personality, attitude, and self-confidence of Khasi-Jaintia men in a matrilineal society. It illustrates that once men reach maturity, they gain independence and the freedom to choose their life partners, while considering the advice of their parents and elders. In this story, '*Lurmangkhara*' exemplifies optimism and a lack of careful thought, disregarding concerns about leaving his homeland. This reflects his adventurous spirit and willingness to settle down with '*Ka Panshandi*', who belongs to a different tribe.

After settling with her, he soon realizes his mistake. Despite his honourable and kind nature, he tries to persuade 'Panshandi' to mend her ways and correct her behaviour. Unfortunately, she ignores his requests. Eventually, 'Lurmangkhara' makes the difficult decision to leave her and return to his family. To this day, the lazy tortoise stretches her neck from her shell, gazing up at the sky, awaiting 'Lurmangkhara's return. The Khasi-Jaintia people use the phrase 'Ka Panshadi dem lor khah'^{xxxviii} to describe any woman who hopes for the return of her beloved after mistreating him.

The Leap of the Likai.

The story of the 'Leap of *Ka Likai*' is an emotional and heart-wrenching tale about an innocent widow who, after remarrying, discovers that her husband has betrayed her trust, leading her to take the drastic step of ending her own life.

The narrative centers around *Ka Likai*, a woman who lived in a village named *Rangjirteh* near a beautiful waterfall. Initially, she had a happy marriage, but after giving birth to a beautiful baby girl, her first husband passed away. Struggling to support herself and her daughter, she decided to remarry while still young, hoping to alleviate their hardships^{xxxix}.

Her second husband, however, turned out to be egocentric and abusive. He resented *Likai's* devotion to her daughter, which escalated his anger. Believing *Likai* had married him only for financial benefit, he became increasingly violent, especially towards her daughter. Meanwhile, *Likai*, who worked in an iron smelting house, had to travel to Sylhet plains for trade. This provides her husband with an opportunity to carry out his sinister plans.^{xl}

During one of her trips, the husband seized the chance to murder *Likai's* daughter. When *Likai* returned home, exhausted from her journey, she was surprised to find her husband unusually cheerful. When she inquired about her daughter, he falsely claimed she was playing with neighbour's. After supper, as *Likai* reached for the basket of betel nuts and pans—a customary practice in Khasi-Jaintia culture after meals—she discovered human fingers hidden inside. Realizing they belonged to her daughter, she confronted her husband, who confessed to his crime.

Overwhelmed by grief and anguish upon hearing her husband's admission, *Likai* could not bear the thought of consuming food tainted by the flesh of her own child. In her agony, she ran to the edge of the waterfall and threw herself down, ending her life.^{xli} Since then, this waterfall has been known as the 'Leap of *Ka Likai*'

Conclusion

The folk tales of Khasi-Jaintia society provide interesting information about how, in olden days, they perceived the creation of the world by God. Their perception of the world and other living things show that they were well aware of the forces of nature, and through their tales, they wanted future generations to understand the complexities of the world. These tales were narrated with the aim that future generations would not commit any blunders that might ruin their future. They would learn from and observe earlier generations' practices and carry forward these practices, customs, habits, and beliefs for perpetuity.

The matrilineal system adopted by the Khasi-Jaintia people offers a unique perspective on gender roles, challenging conventional patriarchal norms. Through myths, folktales, and oral histories, the narratives of the Khasi-Jaintia people celebrate the integral roles of both genders and highlight the complementary relationship between them. As the society navigates modern influences, the interplay between tradition and change continues to shape its gender dynamics, offering valuable insights into the flexibility and adaptability of indigenous cultures.

The Khasi-Jaintia matrilineal system does not equate to matriarchy. Men still hold significant social and ritual power, and gender roles are clearly defined. However, there is a sense of insecurity among men. Due to modern influences and legal frameworks, sometimes conflicts arise that challenge traditional practices. Some Khasi-Jaintia men feel subjugated by the matrilineal system. Therefore, a movement known as the "Mait Shaphrang," led by Micheal Syiem, focuses on the economic equality of Khasi-Jaintia men and the

equal distribution of wealth and property, gaining momentum. To strengthen and maintain the matrilineal society, they also demand the codification of Khasi-Jaintia traditional laws.

Similarly, though the narrative explains the power and position of women as favourable, women in Khasi-Jaintia society do not enjoy absolute freedom in decision-making. Therefore, in the 21st century, Khasi-Jaintia women, under the banner of the 'Seng Longkmei,' demanded the right to make decisions in all social, political, economic, and other aspects of society, especially in the traditional *dorbars* of modern days.

Khasi-Jaintia folktales were preserved to educate, entertain, and uphold their culture. Folktales are instruments for understanding the values, traditions, customs, and habits of the society. Some folktales portray the power of thinking, which modern science can sometimes prove, while others remain unsolved. Folktales also act as parables that guide society toward a better future. To conclude, these folktales can be termed as etiological stories. In fact, these narratives do not need to be proven, as they originate for specific reasons that must be told and retold from generation to generation. They preserve the values, beliefs, and worldview of the Khasi-Jaintia people.

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xxxvii ibid 109-110

xxxviii ibid 110

Ibid 85-86

xx Ibid 86-87

xx Ibid 867-87

xxxix Ibid 85-86

xl Ibid 86-87

xli Ibid 867-87

