



The White Elephant: A Study Of Transformation, Kinship And Justice In Tripuri Folklore

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Abstract

Tripuri folklore, transmitted orally across generations, is a repository of moral lessons, cultural norms and social values. *The White Elephant* is one of the most emblematic Tripuri tales, exploring themes of transformation, kinship and justice. Transformation manifests in reincarnation, moral growth and the resolution of social dilemmas; kinship highlights human-animal relationships, social obligations and bonds of friendship; justice emerges through the triumph of truth, courage and ethical behaviour. Using a qualitative methodology, including oral narratives, field observations and secondary literature, this study examines how the story functions as a moral, social and cultural guide, illustrating the enduring relevance of folklore in shaping community ethics, identity and collective consciousness. The analysis also explores environmental symbolism, gender dynamics and supernatural motifs, positioning the tale within broader Southeast Asian and Indian folkloric traditions.

Keywords: Tripuri Folklore, White Elephant, Oral Tradition, Gender Roles, Cosmology.

1. Introduction

Folklore serves as a mirror of a society's collective consciousness, moral code and cultural heritage. In Tripura, oral narratives have historically served as a medium for entertainment, education and moral instruction. *The White Elephant* is a tale that not only entertains but also embodies the ethical, social and spiritual values of the Tripuri community.

Through its complex narrative structure, the story conveys lessons on courage, loyalty and social justice. It also demonstrates the interconnection between humans, animals and supernatural forces. Central to the narrative are themes of transformation, kinship and justice, which operate together to transmit cultural norms, ethical teachings and moral guidance.

This study investigates how these themes are interwoven in the tale, illustrating how Tripuri folklore negotiates the tension between personal bonds, social expectations and cosmic morality. The story's continued popularity underscores the importance of oral tradition in transmitting cultural knowledge and ethical lessons across generations.

2. Objectives of the Study

1. To analyse *The White Elephant* as a reflection of Tripuri social, ethical and cultural values.
2. To examine transformation through reincarnation, moral growth and ethical challenges.
3. To investigate kinship structures, including human-animal relationships and social obligations.
4. To explore justice as a narrative theme, emphasizing moral and social restoration.
5. To examine the pedagogical role of oral tradition in preserving and transmitting values.
6. To interpret the symbolic use of supernatural elements, natural landscapes and animals.
7. To provide a comparative perspective with other Southeast Asian and Indian folktales.
8. To explore gender roles and agency within the narrative.
9. To investigate environmental symbolism and its role in moral and ethical guidance.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Type:

This study employs a qualitative and descriptive research approach, focusing on thematic, symbolic and cultural analysis of the folklore.

3.2 Sources of Data:

- **Primary sources:** Oral narratives collected from Tripuri elders, storytellers and community members.
- **Secondary sources:** Scholarly works, books and research articles on Tripuri folklore, anthropology and comparative literature.

3.3 Analytical Techniques:

1. **Textual Analysis:** Examining plot structure, narrative patterns and character development.
2. **Thematic Analysis:** Identifying recurring themes such as transformation, kinship, justice, gender and morality.
3. **Symbolic Interpretation:** Analysing metaphors and symbols, including elephants, trees, rivers and supernatural entities.
4. **Cultural Contextualization:** Situating the narrative within Tripuri social norms, traditions and belief systems.
5. **Comparative Analysis:** Relating motifs and narrative structures to other Indian and Southeast Asian folktales to explore cultural continuity.

4. Synopsis of the Tale

The story revolves around Rangiya, the virtuous younger brother and true hero and Butuya, the elder brother who later embodies deceit as the “False Hero.” Their journey intertwines with the princess, the reincarnation of the original village woman’s daughter and the white elephant, the reincarnated son of the cow.

4.1 The Initial Pact and Tragedy: The tale begins in a small village, where a kind woman befriends a pregnant cow. They make a pact: if their children are both boys, they will be best friends; if one is a boy and the other a girl, they will marry. The woman gives birth to a daughter and the cow gives birth to a son. Villagers ridicule the woman, calling her daughter the “cow’s wife,” which leads to her tragic suicide and the cow’s sympathetic death under the gooseberry tree.

4.2 Royal Rebirth and Bond Formation: A queen and her royal elephant later eat fruits from the same tree, resulting in the birth of a princess and a white elephant. These characters are the reincarnated souls of the original daughter and cow. The princess and the elephant grow up together, forming a strong, magically sanctioned bond. Their companionship symbolizes loyalty, kinship and the corrected form of the original, transgressive pact.

4.3 Supernatural Challenges: As the children grow, they encounter various supernatural obstacles:

- 4.4 Magical Obstacles:** The forest they traverse contains enchanted barriers, such as rivers, thick jungles and animal-dominated territories. Footprints regress symbolically—from birds to deer to cow to elephant—marking a journey from the human world into a primordial, magical realm.
- 4.5 Ghostly Threat:** A powerful ghost appears, drawn to the princess. It steals the princess and Rangiya’s voice, representing lingering chaos and moral danger. The ghost’s threat is not merely physical but ethical, embodying deceit, desire and disruption of social and cosmic order.
- 4.6 Supernatural Tests:** Crossing the “river of elephant urine” using a bamboo bridge and solving the Life-Index puzzle in a beehive atop a palmyra tree further test the heroes’ courage, intelligence and moral discernment.
- 4.7 Restoration and Resolution:** Rangiya, with the princess’s clever guidance, overcomes these supernatural challenges, restoring her safety and moral order. Butuya later attempts to claim credit as the “False Hero,” presenting mouse teeth as proof. Rangiya, however, brings the real elephant tusks, exposing the truth. The king, as the arbiter of social justice, validates Rangiya’s deeds, ensures his marriage to the princess and restores harmony in the kingdom, marking the final resolution of both social and cosmic imbalance.

5. Analysis I: The Crisis of Kinship

5.1 Maternal Pact: Fictive Interspecies Kinship:

The story opens in a domestic space where a woman weaves *rignai* and *risa*, symbolizing the creation of social fabric. Her bond with the pregnant cow represents shared maternal experience and empathy. The pact to unite their children formalizes a personal bond into a socially recognized structure, though in an unconventional, interspecies manner.

5.2 Social Stigma: “Cow’s Wife!”:

The birth of the human girl and bovine boy forces a transgressive kinship: marriage across species. The village’s ridicule embodies social enforcement of categorical boundaries, marking the mother and daughter as outsiders. This stigmatization underscores Tripuri social norms and the consequences of transgressing moral boundaries.

5.3 The Gooseberry Tree: Tragic Collapse:

The woman’s suicide and the cow’s death under the gooseberry tree signify the failure of this kinship pact. The tree becomes a liminal symbol, containing unresolved spiritual energy and marking the story’s transition from social to supernatural resolution.

6. Analysis II: Transformation and Transition

The story, having reached a tragic social impasse, moves into the realm of **transformation** and **transition**, both narratively and symbolically. Transformation refers to the change in status, identity or form of characters, while transition highlights the movement of the narrative across social, cosmic and moral domains. These mechanisms allow the tale to “rewrite” the problem so it can be resolved without violating societal norms.

6.1 Structural Transformation: From Village to Kingdom:

The gooseberry tree acts as a liminal agent of transition. Its fruits are consumed by a new, royal pair: the queen and her elephant. This narrative shift represents both social elevation and moral recalibration. The original, stigmatized pair (village woman and cow) is transformed into a socially acceptable, magically sanctioned pair (queen and royal elephant).

Original Pair (Problem)	Transformed Pair (Solution)
Village woman (low status)	Queen (high status)
Domestic cow (low-status animal)	Royal elephant (high-status animal)
Bond: Marriage (transgressive)	Bond: Friendship (acceptable)

This shift illustrates **transition** from the social realm of stigma to a symbolic realm of magical, morally sanctioned bonds. Transformation honours the original pact's spirit while enabling the story to restore social and cosmic harmony.

6.2 Royal Friendship: A “Corrected” Bond:

The princess and white elephant are born into a royal context, fulfilling the “corrected” pact. Their relationship embodies a transition from human-animal transgression to socially sanctioned companionship. However, their bond leads them away from human society, symbolizing the tension between natural loyalty and societal expectations. The narrative uses this journey to explore ethical, social and supernatural challenges, showing that transformation is not solely physical or social—it is also moral and spiritual.

6.3 Comparative Motifs in Regional Folklore:

The motifs of reincarnation, magical transformation and human-animal kinship are not unique to Tripuri folklore:

- **Bengali folklore:** Tales often depict humans and animals transforming to resolve moral dilemmas, such as in stories where animals act as moral guides.
- **Mizo folklore:** Reincarnation and transformation highlight the restoration of social and cosmic balance, with spirits or animals guiding protagonists.
- **Burmese folklore:** Magical transformations frequently resolve conflicts between humans, animals and supernatural beings, emphasizing cosmic justice and moral rectitude.

These parallels demonstrate a shared cultural repertoire across Northeast India and Southeast Asia, where transformation and transition serve as mechanisms to resolve ethical and social crises, reinforcing communal values and moral lessons.

6.4 The Supernatural Journey: Transforming the Landscape:

The quest to recover the princess and restore order represents both **narrative transition** and **symbolic movement**. The heroes move from the familiar human world to a primordial, animal-dominated space. Footprints regress from bird to deer to cow to elephant, symbolizing movement through stages of nature and consciousness. The “river of elephant urine” and bamboo bridge signify a threshold: human ingenuity navigating the transformed, magical world. This stage underscores that transformation in folklore involves both **change of form** and **passage across moral, social and cosmic realms**.

7. Analysis III: The Restoration of Justice

Justice in *The White Elephant* operates on multiple levels—cosmic, supernatural and social—and serves to restore both moral balance and social order. In Tripuri belief, the concept of khamar refers to harmony and balance within the social and natural world. The narrative reflects this principle by ensuring that all disturbances—whether caused by transgressive kinship, supernatural forces or deceit—are corrected, restoring equilibrium to both human and cosmic realms.

7.1 Cosmic Justice: Severing the Elephant Bond:

Rangiya's confrontation with the white elephant represents cosmic justice. The elephant embodies the unresolved pact between the first woman and the cow, a transgressive bond that disrupts social and moral order. By defeating the elephant, Rangiya restores khamar, reestablishing harmony between humans and the natural/supernatural world. This act is sanctioned by a higher cosmic authority, highlighting that justice transcends human intervention and reflects a broader metaphysical balance.

7.2 Supernatural Justice: Defeating the Ghost and the Life-Index:

Following the elephant's defeat, residual chaos manifests as a ghost that abducts the princess and her rescuer's voice. This represents lingering disorder in the cosmic-social hierarchy. The narrative resolves this through intelligence and strategy: the princess reveals the ghost's life is contained in a beehive atop a palmyra tree. This objectification transforms abstract evil into a solvable problem, allowing Rangiya and the princess to restore harmony and prevent further disruption of khamar. This stage emphasizes collaboration, wisdom and moral agency, showing that justice involves both courage and intellect.

7.3 Social Justice: The True Hero and the False Hero:

The final resolution occurs in the human social domain. The “False Hero” motif (Butuya presenting mouse teeth as proof) parallels similar tales in Indian and Southeast Asian folklore, where deceitful individuals claim credit for heroic deeds, only to be exposed later. Rangiya, as the true hero, brings the “real elephant tusks,” providing undeniable evidence of courage and virtue. The king, as the ultimate arbiter, validates truth and punishes deceit.

Through these layers, justice is not only a punishment for wrongdoing but a restoration of balance across cosmic, supernatural and social realms. The marriage of Rangiya and the princess symbolizes the final harmonization of human relationships, reaffirming societal norms, ethical conduct and the Tripuri principle of khamar.

8. Character Analysis

- **The Woman:** Empathetic, morally upright; her death underscores societal injustice.
- **The Princess:** Virtuous, intelligent; her evolution from passive to active agent signifies female agency.
- **Butuya & Rangiya:** Represent deceit and truth, respectively, embodying moral lessons.
- **Cow & White Elephant:** Symbols of loyalty, guidance and ethical continuity.
- **Ghost:** Embodies vices, fear and ethical challenges.

9. Character Analysis and Symbolism

9.1 Character Analysis:

- **The Woman:** Embodies empathy, moral integrity and patience. Her tragic death highlights societal injustice and the consequences of rigid social norms.
- **The Princess:** Represents virtue, rebirth and moral restoration. She evolves from a passive figure into an active agent, demonstrating intelligence and agency in overcoming supernatural challenges.
- **Rangiya:** The younger brother embodies truth, courage and ethical heroism. His actions restore both social and cosmic order.
- **Butuya:** The elder brother serves as the “False Hero,” representing deceit, selfishness and the social consequences of unethical behavior.
- **Cow & White Elephant:** Symbolize loyalty, protection, guidance and moral continuity. These animals are more than companions; they reflect the Tripuri belief in animism, where animals are imbued with spiritual significance and act as moral agents.
- **Ghost:** Represents human vices, fear and ethical challenges. Its supernatural power tests the moral and intellectual capacities of the protagonists.

9.2 Symbolic Interpretation:

- **Cow:** Maternal care, loyalty and guidance. Reflects indigenous reverence for animals as moral and spiritual beings.
- **White Elephant:** Strength, virtue and sacred protection. In Tripuri animist worldview, elephants are often considered divine or spiritually potent, bridging human and cosmic realms.
- **Tree & Fruits:** Life, death, destiny and moral choice. Trees, like the gooseberry and palmyra, act as liminal spaces connecting the human and supernatural worlds.
- **Sword:** Courage, agency and justice. Human ingenuity acts in harmony with cosmic will.
- **River:** Purification, trials and resilience. Crossing rivers symbolizes moral and spiritual growth.
- **Ghost:** Vice, fear and ethical obstacles, embodying moral lessons about vigilance and intelligence.

9.3 Ecological and Animist Lessons:

The narrative embeds ecological awareness and animist principles:

- Animals are respected as sentient beings and moral guides, reflecting sustainable, harmonious human-animal relationships.
- Forests, rivers and trees are depicted as sacred spaces, requiring respect, courage and ethical interaction.
- The story reinforces the Tripuri principle of khamar (balance/harmony) between humans, nature and the spiritual realm.
- By portraying animals as teachers and moral agents, the tale conveys ecological wisdom: care for the environment, respect for wildlife and recognition of the interconnectedness of all beings.

10. Gender Roles and Social Commentary

- Female characters display resilience, moral insight and agency despite societal constraints.
- Male characters embody protection, justice and heroism, reflecting Tripuri patriarchal norms.
- The tale critiques social gossip and scorn, while highlighting the moral and ethical significance of women.

11. Environmental Symbolism

- Trees, rivers and natural elements are both obstacles and moral guides.
- The palmyra tree and beehive symbolize supernatural power, moral wisdom and the nexus between human and cosmic forces.
- Nature is depicted as a moral agent, reflecting ethical and social principles.

12. Discussion: Interplay of Themes

1. **Transformation as Engine for Justice:** Reincarnation, magical tools and supernatural interventions reset the initial social crisis, allowing justice to unfold.
2. **Pedagogical Function:** Folktales teach social order, truth, courage and ethical behaviour.
3. **Gender and Agency:** The narrative demonstrates a progression from passive female figures to active, intelligent agents, promoting moral and social empowerment.
4. **Integration of Social, Cosmic and Supernatural Realms:** Justice operates across levels, linking human action to cosmic balance.

13. Conclusion

The White Elephant exemplifies the richness of Tripuri oral tradition. Beginning with a crisis of kinship, it validates deep personal bonds while showing the social consequences of transgression. Transformation—through reincarnation, royal elevation and magical intervention—resolves social and supernatural challenges. Justice is enacted across cosmic, supernatural and social levels. The story concludes with the marriage of the true hero and the princess, restoring order and reinforcing moral, ethical and social norms. The tale offers a powerful cultural lesson on truth, courage, female agency and the moral authority of the cosmos. Its enduring appeal highlights the continuing relevance of folklore in shaping social values, collective identity and ethical consciousness.

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