



# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

## Feminine Stereotypes in Folk Tales : Implications in the Present Day

(Class room experience as well as a reality check)

Dr. KALPANA.R

Associate Professor of English

Government First Grade College

Sulibele, Hoskote Taluk

Bangalore (R)- 52129

### ABSTRACT

From time immemorial, storytelling has been a favorite pastime of people across cultures, religions and nations. In this regard, folk tales have had an appeal for the masses whether narrated in a simple story form or whether the content gets rendered in the form of a ballad. Such stories have passed on from mouth to mouth allowing people to interpolate their own content and creativity. This leaves a distinct individual imprint. The content could be region specific. One thing is for sure, i.e they have existed with a few variations. This helped in the perpetuation of stereotypes. That is why the trope of a **self- abnegating woman** is popular across cultures all over the world. It should be remembered that in the primitive, uncertain times since mankind had to live in communities, strong individualistic attitudes and independent thinking were discouraged in women because, such tendencies were not conducive to sustaining communities. These stories, maxims and parables were the staple diet of the common people since these were the rules by which they had to live. Most of these are rendered from the patriarchal point of view. Revisiting such stories in the present time reveals the politics of making virtues out of negative tendencies. An examination of one or two stories in this regard will reveal the same and how detrimental such attitudes are for the present day and how such attitudes continue to affect us in the present negatively.

**Key Words:** Perpetuation of stereotypes, Self-abnegating woman, Detrimental, Feminist perspective, Idiosyncratic version, Constituting identities, Damaged psyche, Fractured identities, Deconstruction

Story-telling is foundational to constituting identities of communities and people. It is said that all great societies have inevitably had the tradition of story-telling. Folklore is popular among all age groups ranging from children to old people. At the outset, they may look simple but their simplicity is deceptive. They have been powerful in forming identities by fulfilling the role of carriers of cultural meaning. But the deep rootedness of the beliefs instilled will take a long time to erase. The relevance would not be or ideally speaking, should not be for all time. Once they outlast their relevance, instead of serving the purpose of carriers of culture they may become detrimental to the very culture from which they had once upon a time originated. There are many dimensions to folklore itself.

I focus here on the perpetuation of stereotypes from the feminist perspective. For this purpose, I will analyse a few stories in the course of the paper and how it affected people in the past and how it affects them in the present. The following story that I narrate is the story that I had read some forty years ago during my childhood days. The details may not be faithful to the original version. But that is the beauty of a folk story. This may be treated as an idiosyncratic version of the original. The reason why I remember the story and time in such graphic detail is due to the fact that story books never used to be available to us easily. Our elders had a skewed understanding that anything related to education had to do with reading our course books with the sole aim of scoring marks. We i.e kids of those days pretended to go along the flow all the while clandestinely reading them when available, keeping them amidst the cover pages of our prescribed text books, reading them and re-reading them again and again but the understanding at which we had arrived would not change. We were groomed in a manner not conducive to sharpen our critical thinking. We were very clear about whose side we were on, understanding characters only in binaries as good or bad. During the re-reading, focus used to be on pictorial illustrations mainly.

The following is the narration of the story of *Sukhu and Dukhu*. They are two sisters. Sukhu's father is a villager and she is the daughter of the first wife who is no more. Dukhu is the daughter of the second wife. She is Sukhu's step sister. Sukhu is too good and hardworking while Dukhu is evil and lazy. Sukhu is lovable and humble while Dukhu is arrogant and hateful. The step-mother tortures Sukhu in various ways. She makes her do the work from morning till evening, does not give her proper food to eat and does not let her play. All this, in addition to the daily quota of beatings and scolding. She is even bossed over by her younger sister Dukhu.

One fine day for no reason Sukhu is told to get out and the father is helpless. Sukhu sorrowfully keeps walking until she reaches a forest. As darkness envelopes the place, she is terrified. She notices a light and walks towards it. The light is from a cottage where lives an old woman. She sees Sukhu crying and welcomes her. She listens to Sukhu's story. She asks her to freshen up and asks her whether she wants hot water or cold water. Sukhu modestly replies that cold water would do. The old woman gives her hot water which feels soothing and refreshing on a cold winter's evening. Next she asks her whether she wants fresh food or stale food. Sukhu in all humility says that stale food would do. She is served the most delicious hot and freshly cooked food. Finally, the old lady asks her whether she wanted a warm, soft and cozy bed or if she would sleep on the floor. Sukhu says that she is used to sleeping on the cold floor. But she gets the warmest, softest and coziest bed ever. The next morning the old woman rewards her with gold, silver, diamonds and precious stones and Sukhu goes home. She is welcomed heartily by her step mother.

Listening to her story of success, she confidently tells Dukhu to do the same which she does with her usual insolence. She gets the reverse of what she wants. She addresses the woman as a old hag, shouts at her for asking silly questions, demands hot water, fresh food and a warm bed but gets cold water, stale food and is asked to sleep on the cold floor. The next morning, the old woman beats her black and blue and the story ends with Dukhu headed homeward, empty handed and crying all the way back.

As a child, I immediately and obviously had taken Sukhu's side. She is the one wronged and so she is the one to be righted. Apart from that Dukhu, the evil gets punished. The story had a neat ending, good enough to keep a child's faith in the goodness of life, while instilling the idea that evil gets punished. Our critical faculties were not developed enough to be skeptical of the old woman, her role in the matter, or from where she had got all the wealth that she had rewarded Sukhu with or to figure out the merit in asking for stale food, cold floor or cold water when a better alternative was offered.

But the problem starts when students in the present day and studying in the Undergraduate classes think this way. The present day trend in revisiting history, politics, mythology and the deconstruction of those ideas and ideals which were once upon a time considered an inseparable part of the culture has brought such stories into the text books. William Bascom's argument that folklore validates culture by justifying its rituals and institutions and those performing them highlights their importance. Folklore was a powerful medium for socialization especially in the pre-industrial societies among the masses. There has been a revival of interest recently in this area which also shows their contemporary relevance. In the Indian context, A.K. Ramanujan is the name to reckon with in this regard. The continuum of societies also implies continuum of folklore in its various forms.

Conversely, it has to be noted that folklore also perpetuated certain stereotypes which cannot be considered a positive intervention. It is against this background that this paper proposes to throw light on the feminine stereotypes in folktales. Another story *The Clay Mother-in-law* from the anthology edited by A.K. Ramanujan, titled *Folk Tales from India*, explores the damage done to the psyche when old attitudes are expected to be followed in a restructured society, the need for such unnecessary sacrifices the implications thereof. This story was a part of the curriculum for the first B.A students of The Bangalore University a decade ago. The summary of the story titled *The Clay Mother-in-law* is as follows:

An obedient daughter-in-law is so dependent on her mother-in-law that even to cook rice, which she does every day, she goes to her to ascertain the number of measures of rice she is to cook. The mother-in-law who thinks of herself to be in a superior and lofty position, instead of talking shows an upraised hand with one finger, two fingers or three fingers outstretched indicating that many measures to be cooked on that particular day. The inmates continue with their peaceful existence until, one day when the mother-in-law dies. The obedient daughter-in-law is inconsolable since she feels that she is orphaned and wonders who will guide her on the measures of rice that she is to cook in the coming days.

She now turns to her husband for help. Initially her husband is flattered that she consulted him on something as basic as that. He rejoices in her dependency. Gradually, annoyance takes over and to get rid of the situation, he gets a life sized clay doll made from a potter with one hand showing one raised finger and the other showing two raised fingers. He instructs his wife to cook as many measures as she sees first thing early in the morning on taking a look at the clay mother-in-law. He feels happy for having resolved the issue for a while until one day he gets suspicious on the rice getting over faster than usual and asks her for an explanation. She bursts out and wails pitifully saying that it is due to her dead mother-in-law eating more than she would eat when she was alive. He is shocked and when pressed for further explanation, she reveals that every day, after cooking she would serve the clay image a full meal on a plantain leaf. But, after some time she would find the leaf empty and she would serve her share as well. She wails saying that she herself had gone without food for several days because of this. In reality, a cunning neighbor living next door is the culprit. She would enter their house through a cleverly made hole in the wall, she would then take away the offering made by the daughter-in-law and depart stealthily. This way, she didn't have to do much work while the naïve woman had all the while been thinking that the clay image had been partaking of the offering. This apparently goes undetected. The husband thinks he has had enough of this foolishness and throws her out of the house with the clay mother-in-law. She cries inconsolably and reaches the woods before nightfall. She is terrified and climbs up a tree. She ties herself up to a branch with the pallu of her saree for fear of falling down in case she would fall asleep, holds on tight to the clay image and dozes off. A gang of thieves come right under the tree towards midnight to share the loot. She wakes up with a start and upon seeing their severe countenances and red fierce looking eyes, starts trembling violently. The image falls right under the tree with a crashing noise and the gang disperses all over in dread of being caught. She loses consciousness in her fear and shock. Upon regaining consciousness, the next morning, she finds that the thieves have abandoned the place leaving behind a huge treasure. In gratitude to her clay mother-in-law, she gathers all the broken pieces safely along with the treasure. She returns home with the broken image and all the gold diamonds and rubies she finds there. Her husband who is angry at first, welcomes her lovingly on seeing the wealth. He sends her to the cunning neighbour's house to borrow a measure to measure the same. The inquisitive neighbour sticks some tamarind underneath the measure. Upon returning the measure, the neighbour finds a costly gem sticking to the tamarind. She wonders where they had got this from. She wheedles out the secret from the naïve woman. Though reluctant at first, the persistent efforts of the neighbour pays off. The woman reveals it all.

The cunning neighbour wants to try her hand too and does all of this including getting a clay image made for this purpose. The same scene gets enacted in the middle of the night in her case too. But the only difference is that she doesn't tremble. She aims the clay image right on the gang of thieves and they disperse in shock. But, this time, they make themselves bold enough. They come back and start watching from a safe distance. They see her come down the tree and take all the loot. Now, they are convinced that it was this woman who had taken away their loot the previous time too. They surround her and demand the loot of the previous time as well while snatching away what she had taken now. Though she denies that it was not she who had looted the treasure the previous time, the bandits are not prepared to believe her. The woman is shocked out of her senses at such a turn of events and though she tells

them she had no hand in it, they beat her up black and blue. They abandon her after tying her up to a tree. The next morning her husband finds her nearly gone crazy and tied up to the trunk of the tree.

So far, the narration relates to the textual content.

After teaching this story and as I ended the story, all through the explanation of which I had with great difficulty withheld my comments, I could see the mirth in the eyes of the students towards the end. They could not contain the giggles and joy on the neighbor coming to such an end. I asked them for their opinion and most of them said that it was a very beautiful story, humorous and it serves the neighbor right. Some even ventured to say that good always triumphs in the end. I asked them a pertinent question as to why such a story would be prescribed in an Undergraduate text book. The reply was invariably the same. It is to reiterate that good gets rewarded and evil gets punished in the end. I have taught the urban and the semi-urban and rural set of students. Of course I am aware that the understanding and response of the urban crowd, at least most of them would not be this simplistic. This set of students to whom I taught the story was a semi-urban crowd and this naiveté in understanding even in college students at the undergraduate level was a trifle disturbing to me.

Then I asked which of them would like to take commands like that from the clay mother-in-law let alone the one in flesh and blood. None of them claimed it. They only simpered. Then a flash of light seems to have dawned on them, they called the daughter-in-law very foolish. It took some time for me to make them understand that obedience is not subservience and conceding all the time is not a good quality either. Then the question was whether goodness is equal to stupidity. Then I asked them a question of what the relevance of the story was. The discussion went back to square one about the greedy neighbor and the innocent daughter-in-law. Then the difference between innocence and ignorance was discussed. At this the daughter-in-law was proclaimed to be ignorant. Then, in their own parlance I asked them the moral of the story if it had one. They could not decide which quality was better off, ignorance or greed and cunningness. Finally it was arrived at that it was a kind of no moral story just for the sake of entertainment. It was at this stage that discussion regarding the past when the story would have originated was taken up. Explanation was given on how self-abnegation on the part of women was required to sustain patriarchal system and community living in the bygone times. Such stupidity was not required in the present day. In fact, the times in which we live today wherein each one is unto herself or himself, stupidity, naiveté, gullibility or ignorance will prove very costly for a man or a woman.

The gist of the whole thing was that re-visiting the story in the present day was done from the feminist point of view. The position of women in joint families and such issues were taken up for discussion. Issues like the significance of such stories to socialize women into the system which expected self-abnegation and sacrifice was driven home. The point that I am trying to make is beliefs which served a greater good once upon a time are so deep rooted that even in the present time, it is possible to see such characters like the naïve daughter-in-law. But, unlike the daughter-in-law the present day women are neither rewarded nor appreciated for the naiveté. Even the husband of the daughter-in-law in the story had found her to be irritable after a certain point of time.

At least in the present day, it is gratifying to know that such stories are meant to sharpen one's critical thinking. But I distinctly remember one similar Italian story in the early nineties, in the English Non-detailed text for the tenth standard students titled *Griselda*, a girl from a peasant background. A rich man willingly marries her only to torture her for seventeen long years just to test her love and loyalty. Griselda is supposed to have withstood all the tortures silently and with good humour. She gets accepted as his wife finally. The textual exercises had the content regarding what it takes to be a woman. Griselda was the shining example. By this and such examples, it is possible to ascertain that across cultures and nations too these were the parameters to be fulfilled by women in the name of feminine. Only in recent times we are taking a critical look at such stories.

### **A Few Thoughts on the Deleterious Effects of Programming of the Feeling of Unworthiness**

About the deleterious effects on critical thinking of women, the role played by such stories is beyond doubt. As I started connecting these stories in the contemporary situation, a conscious awareness of what damage these innocent, entertaining stories may still be causing bewildered me. But these stories helped me connect better with the predicament of the present day Sukhus, Griseldas and the daughters-in-law in the story the clay mother-in-law.

### **Two Case Studies**

These stories connected well with two incidents or rather two individuals. One is too young about seventeen years and the other named Supriya is of a mature age. Both of their stories were similar. This student, let us name her Vimala got married while pursuing her studies. She was in second year degree then. She continued with her studies. One day she came for student counseling. She was distraught with grief. When asked what her problem was, she confided that the person whom she had married had betrayed her trust. He had entered into a relationship with her without revealing that he was already married. She had a small kid. She had lost the support of her parents since they had objected to her marriage with him. She was given to understand by him that he would inform his parents eventually and she had no doubt in her mind when he would refuse stay with her overnight for even one or two days in a week. She assumed that his parents must have been resisting in the same way as hers had done. Now the question naturally arises on where, how and when she had met him and what his background had been. There was nothing called a meeting as such. He was a bus conductor by profession and a government employee. Everyday around three o'clock, she would go home by the same bus. The conductor had become acquainted with her as a passenger of the bus. Sometimes, in case he saw her from afar also he would make it a point to stop the bus till she boarded. This had melted her heart. That is what she thought was love. The question arises on how undeserving girls are made to feel while they are socialized this way when they should accept stale food and cold floor to sleep on with gratitude and while the other party is too condescending to concede them this much even. Paying a little attention to enable Vimala to board the bus was understood as deep love by her.



Another example I take here is of a woman called Supriya around thirty five or so, a supposedly mature age and a postgraduate in English. After watching the news in major television Telugu channels on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of March 2023, in Vizianagaram, I decided to include it as well since it resonates with the daughter-in-law's example. This is the story of a woman named Sai Supriya. She and her children were totally in her mother-in-law's control and both her so called educated sons did their mother's bidding. This daughter-in-law was literally under house arrest for fourteen long years under the watchful eyes and surveillance of CC Tv cameras, that she was not allowed even to go out into the sunlight. Strange but true. Several times, her parents had come all the way only to be waylaid at the door. Fearing social embarrassment they stopped even trying to contact her after the year 2009. She was married in the year 2008. By the way she is a Professor's daughter. Since he has been hospitalized, the mother and her brother came back once again in a state of desperation but the same thing transpired this time also. They finally met the Superintendent of the police, a woman who directed some policemen to do the needful. They were dealt with in the same way as before and they were accused of legal transgressions. Sai Supriya's husband is an advocate while her brother-in-law is a highly educated person. Finally they resorted to the court orders which even issued a search warrant. Sai Supriya set eyes on her people after fourteen years. The climax is yet to come. She had no access even to a phone and she says that a thought to confide, ask for help or contact her parents over someone else's phone also had not crossed her mind. It was a greater shock when she revealed in fluent English that she is a postgraduate in English. Her people were very open about how much money and gold they had given her in the form of dowry during her marriage. The mother-in-law was so dominating that her sons and even Supriya's father-in-law would merely take her orders. Even the kids were in her control and they were taught to address the grandmother as *amma*, in the same way as the South Indian kids address their biological mother.

A few hours after this reportage her brother-in-law's wife, a doctor appeared on the television. She had tolerated this torture for five years and had gone back to her parents' house with a small kid. The older one had refused to go with her at that time and had expressed that he would stay back with his grandmom, to him *mom*. Subsequently her parents' and her attempts at contacting the kid had ended up in smoke. In her case the parents stood strongly by her unlike Sai Supriya's parents who had cowed down so easily. The only difference in the condition of the present day Sukhus and the daughters-in-law is that they are not rewarded in the end for their docility but bullied, abused and tortured until death if it were to be the fate to continue living with such abusive people.

Apparently a few thoughts leave us disturbed on the role of education in the present day. Ironically the sons, the so called educated ones used their credentials to bully wives and people as in the case of them not allowing even the law keepers into the house without a search warrant. How about Sai Supriya who is an M.A in English? She says she is too scared to get into any arguments. She has been groomed and bullied in such a way that she acknowledges that she had resigned herself to her fate. Who is to blame her if her father, a Professor gives up on her so easily fearing a verbal altercation or social embarrassment? How about the sons who are so divest of values, totally bankrupt in thinking and who could not stand up to their mother when she was wrong and stand by their wives when they were being badly oppressed?

Such a grooming obviously starts during early childhood while socializing girls and boys this way. Unfortunately, women have a big role to play while discharging their role as mothers in what is called *complicit patriarchy*. While critiquing such stories, an incident to which I was a witness comes to mind. I am sure that this is the case with many of us since they are not rare. I was a witness to an incident which had shocked and angered me. It gnaws at me sometimes. The narration of the incident will make my argument more concrete. A fight broke out between a brother and sister over a geometry box. The girl lay claim on it strongly since, she had won it as a prize for her performance in sports. Her brother, older than her by four years wanted it. He offered her his old geometry box which he was currently using. The girl was unwilling to part with her prize. When things went out of hand, the mother intervened. After listening to what was happening she simply adjudicated in favour of her son. She merely told her, “Give it to him. He is a boy.” Now could there be a more damaging upbringing than this? It connects so easily with how gender bias is fostered in boys and how damaging it is to the girls whose self worth gets annihilated all because she is born a girl. And who could be more powerful than a mother to socialize kids into such attitudes.

Throughout the whole thing, I am focusing on such systems wherein the total bankruptcy of self worth in many girls and idiocy of being enslaved to some feudal attitudes in men prevail even today. The reasons are not hard to find. Even today it is the reality of innumerable women and men. Both are the victims of patriarchy. Their fractured identities bodes good neither to themselves, their families or the society. Instead of mouthing useless proverbs like *A Woman is a Woman's enemy*, it is high time to teach the male children to stand up to bullying mothers or bullying wives even, in short, to stand by what is right. More and more, such stories with new perspectives should be prescribed at school level involving both boys and girls equally in the unlearning and relearning experience. Needless to say that even the males are the victims of patriarchy. Even the males suffer when relationships are damaged. What was meant to be ideal principles for socializing men and women to sustain families and communities in those uncertain times using such social constructs serve no purpose in the present day. I don't mean to say that such is the value of all folk tales but am only referring to such stories which have a decadent value. There are many which are relevant today also.

Let me conclude my paper by summarizing that a woman is elevated to the position of a goddess or demonized. Even when she is elevated to the position, she has to be voiceless like a stone statue. The offering made in her name is meant for others. In reality she is not even considered for a tiny bit and the others eat it. Let us teach our children and students that there are far greater reasons to celebrate womanhood and manliness and dumbness and bullying are definitely not among them, whether it is doled out in the name of instilling a sense of duty, filial bonding or whatsoever.



## Bibliography

Ramanujan, A.K, *Folk Tales from India*, New York: Random House USA Inc,1994

Bascom, William R. (1954)“Four Functions of Folklore”, *The Journal of American Folklore* 67(266) : 333-349. ISSN 0021-8715, JSTOR 536411

House arrest for 14 years – TV Nine, march 4,2023,

<https://www.youtube.com/live/vk4yoEgdwrc?feature=share>