

## **ROLES PLAYED BY WOMEN IN FOLKTALES OF BENGAL**

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### **Abstract**

Women play variety of roles in folktales. Women play roles of mother, sister, wife, fellow wife, sister-in-law, step mother, step sister etc. When they play different roles, their images are also different. In analyzing their position, it should be kept in mind that their representation is not beyond the patriarchal social system. To study the representation of women and their position in folktales, stories from *Folktales of Bengal* by Lal Behari Dey and *Thakurmar Jhuli* by Dakshina Ranjan Mitra Mazumdar are taken into consideration.

**Key Words:** Folk tale, fairy tale, representation, image.

### **Introduction**

Like other forms of folk literature, folktales were oral in form and passed down from generation to generation. Folktales have no specific author. These were the creation of the society. The stories were adapted with the course of time. Fairytale is a sub branch of folktale. The difference between folktale and fairytale is not vast. The incidents and characters of folktale come from day-to-day life though imagination is there whereas in fairytales we see the presence of imaginary beings like fairy, ogress, demon etc. Magic and supernatural activities play important role in fairytales. In India, folk tales were first collected during the British period when a group of towering personalities felt the necessity to collect old tradition of the rich past of the country. In this initiative we cannot ignore the British officials as well as the Indian writers. In case of Bengal, the most important name to be mentioned is Rabindranath who gave much stress to include folktales in children education. He appreciated the Bengali educated society to collect the stories. He wrote his valuable comment in Dakshina Ranjan MitraMazumdar's *ThakurmarJhuli*<sup>i</sup>. Rabindranath not only gave stress in collection of folktales, but also all other forms of folk literature. One important collection of folktales of Bengal is *Folktales of Bengal* by Lal Behari Dey<sup>ii</sup> and one important collection of fairytales is *Thakurmar Jhuli* by Dakshina Ranjan Mitra Mazumdar<sup>iii</sup>. In these stories, we will see the presence of different characters: king, queen, prince, princess, Brahman, fairy, witch, animals, ogress etc. Women are represented in different roles; mother, sister, wife, fellow wife, sister-in-law, step mother, step sister. When they play different roles, their images are also different. In analyzing the different roles of women, two collection of folktales, *Folktales of Bengal* by Lal Behari Dey and *Thakurmar Jhuli* by Dakshina Ranjan Mitra Mazumdar are taken into consideration. When we analyse the women characters in these stories, we can get a picture of the position of women in the society of that time. We also get their imagination, expectation, suffering and struggle.

**Discussion**

**Mother:** We see mother characters in stories *Life's secret*, *Fakir Chand*, *The Indigent Brahman*, *The Boy with the Moon on His Forehead* in Lal Behari's collection. In *Life's Secret*, Suo queen, mother of Dalim Kumar lived in complete retirement after the unexpected death of Dalim. She did what any mother would have done. Dalim's sons were exact image of their father. When Dalim's wife visited the Suo queen in the guise of a barber, Suo wept for Dalim and told that the two boys strongly reminded her of her son Dalim. This is also natural for a mother. Actually, Dalim used to come in life in day time when his step mother used to put off the necklace. Dalim's life was in that necklace. His condition was unnoticed by all except his friend. When Dalim returned again with his wife and two sons, that time also Suo's behaviour was not different from any mother. In the story, *Fakir Chand*, Fakir was a mad. Like any other mother, Fakir's mother did for her son's good. She captured the princess who lived in the palace under water and offered her to the king. Fakir's mother made the king to give the commitment to marry his daughter to Fakir. The story *Fakir Chand* is also in Thakurmar Jhuli. Fakir Chands's narrative is almost similar. The name of story in Thakurmar Jhuli is *Pataal Kanya Monimala*.

In the story *Princess Kalabati* in Thakurmar Jhuli, two mother characters may be noted here. They are the fourth queen and the seventh queen. Fourth queen's son is an owl named Bhutum and the seventh queen's son is a monkey named Buddha. Fourth queen and seventh queen were expelled from the palace for giving birth of an owl and a monkey respectively. The fourth queen lived as the maid of the zoo and the seventh queen lived as the cow dung picker. Bhutum's mother and Buddha's mother were not different from any other mother. One day Bhutum and Buddha were captured by princes' men unknowingly. In the evening, when their mothers returned back, they did not find their sons. They cried for their sons. One day all the five princes went to the country of Kalabati taking the Mayurpanki Boat (peacock shaped boat, luxurious boat), Buddha and Bhutum's mothers wept for their lost sons. On the day of the return of Bhutum and Buddha accompanied with Kalabati Princess, fourth queen and the seventh queen wept holding their sons. In the story *Ghumanta Puri* (Sleeping Palace) in Thakurmar Jhuli, the prince decided to go out for a tour. Hearing the news, the king gave the permission but the queen left eating and sleeping. The prince reached the Sleeping Palace. He spent some years there. The king lost his eye sight and the queen became bed ridden for his absence. One day the prince returned back taking the princess of the sleeping palace. Getting her son back and the daughter in law, the queen recovered. Another mother character is Duo queen in the story '*Sheet Basanta*' in Thakurmar Jhuli. The king had two queens, Suo and Duo. Suo was a quarrelsome woman and hated Duo. Duo's two sons were healthy. Suo was jealous of Duo. One day Suo put a tablet made of herb on Duo's head. Duo became a parrot of gold and fled away. Sheet and Basanta had to leave the country. Sheet's fortune made him the king of a country. Basanta acquired *gojomoti mukta* (imaginary pearl believed to be produced in elephant's head) by which he could marry the princess. Duo queen also returned in human form. We see her motherly heart at the end.

**Step mother:** Representation of women as step mother is very important in folktales of Bengal as well as of India. In Indian folk tales it is generally seen that step mothers are jealous of their step children, try to harm them or kill them. The stories *Life's Secret*, *The story of Swet-Basanta*, *The Boy with the Moon on His Forehead* in Lal Behari Dey's Collection illustrate stepmother characters. In *Life's secret*, Dalim's life was in a necklace which was in the heart of a *boal fish* (a South Asian species of cat fish). The fish was in the tank in front of the palace. Duo queen (duo means 'not loved'), step mother of Dalim, acquired the necklace and Dalim died accordingly. In the story *Swet-Basanta*, the step mother like all other stepmothers hated Swet and Basanta with a perfect hatred. She also hated Swet's wife. One day Swet and Basanta quarreled with their stepmother. The stepmother cursed and swore and added, "Wait, when the head of the house comes home, I will make him shed the blood of you both before I give him water to drink." 4 The woman had boundless influence over her husband. Swet, his wife and Basanta feared so much that they fled away. In the story, *The Boy with the Moon on His Forehead*, the king had six queens. All of them were childless. So, the king married an exquisitely beautiful girl. She was the daughter of a cow dung picker woman. So other six queens hated her. When she became pregnant, other six queens became jealous of her good luck. They sent for the midwife of the palace and heavily bribed her to make away with the infant that was to be born. The seventh queen gave the birth to a son who had the moon on his forehead and stars on the palms of his hands and also to an uncommonly beautiful girl. The midwife had come provided with a couple of newly born pups. She put the pups before the mother and said that she had given the birth to those pups and took away the twin children and put them in a vessel. The queen was quite insensible at the time and did not notice the twins at the time they were carried away. The king came to see the queen the next morning; the pups were produced before the king as the offspring of the queen. The king's anger and vexation knew no bounds. He ordered that the queen should be expelled from the palace, that she should be clothed in leather and that she should be employed in the marketplace to drive away crows and to keep off dogs. We may mention another story '*Sheet Basanta*' from Thakurmar Jhuli. The king had two queens, Suo (suo means 'loved one') and Duo. Suo was quarrelsome woman and hated Duo. Duo's two sons were healthy. Suo had three sons. They were very ill health. Suo was jealous of Duo. She always used to scold the Duo's sons. One day Suo put a herb tablet on Duo's head. Duo became a golden parrot and fled away. One day, when the two brothers came back from school, she scolded them bitterly for no reason. Suo complained to the king that they had rebuked her. She persuaded the king to kill the two brothers. The king ordered the killer to kill them. The killer bound them and took them into the forest. He informed them about the king's order. He told them to go away somewhere else. The killer killed a dog and a jackal and smeared their blood on the sword to satisfy the king.

**Wife:** In *Life's Secret*, the Suo Queen and the Duo Queen had no voice at all. The Suo queen was loved by the king but Duo was not loved. After Suo became mother as a result of taking the herb given by the mendicant, Suo's position to the king became much higher. It was natural for Duo to be jealous of Suo's fortune but she couldn't raise her voice against the king. She was searching the opportunity to harm Dalim Kumar, son of Suo for jealousy of

Suo's fortune. At last, she got the chance. After the death of Dalim, as owing to her great loss the Suo queen lived in complete retirement. The king gave up his nights entirely to Duo. It was the king who earlier ignored Duo. Duo considered it as her great reward but she couldn't question king's new role. In the story 'Fakir Chand' the princess of nether world was captured. She was captured to be married with the prince of that country where as her husband; the prince of another county was in the subterranean palace. The princess spent her days and her nights in sorrowing and sighing. She lamented for idle curiosity which had led her to come to the upper world, leaving her husband below. When she recollected that her husband was all alone below the water, she wept bitter tears. The ladies of the palace and Phakir's mother tried to divert her mind, but in vain. She took pleasure in nothing; she would hardly speak to any one; she wept day and night.

In this story, we see that the minister's son was the heart friend of the prince. He spent long time with his friend leaving his wife. In his absence she lived in her father's home. She was devoted worshipper of goddess Kali. We can consider that her devotion was the result of her husband's absence for such a long time. Minister's son was turned into a marble stone for not abiding the words of *Bihangama* (imaginary bird that can speak like human being, foretell human fortune and show the way to overcome the danger) and *Bihagami* (female of *bihangam*). The prince and the princess killed their son immediately after its birth and besmeared its blood into the marble body of minister's son and restored to life. The minister's son, intent on the reanimation of his friend's child, consulted all the physicians of the country; but they could do nothing. The minister's son at last he thought himself of his own wife, who, through his wife's intercession, might be prevailed upon to give life to the dead child. Adjoining that house there was a garden where upon a tree he hung the dead child wrapped up in a towel. His wife was overjoyed to see her husband after so long a time; but to her surprise she found that he was very melancholy, that he spoke very little, and that he was brooding over something in his mind. She asked the reason of his melancholy, but he kept quiet. One night while they were lying together in bed, the wife got up and opening the door went out. She went to a temple of the goddess Kali, worshipped the goddess and prayed to deliver her out of all her troubles.

In the story 'The Indigent Brahman' There was a Brahman who had a wife and four children. He was very poor. With no resources in the world, he lived chiefly on the benefactions of the rich. His gains were considerable when marriages were celebrated or funeral ceremonies were performed; but these weren't every day occasions. He found it difficult to make the two ends meet. His children often went about naked and hungry. His wife often rebuked him for his inability to give her adequate support.

'The Story of the Rakshasas' (Rakshasa means ogress) was about a poor half-witted Brahman who had a wife but no children. It was only with difficulty he could supply the wants of himself and his wife. And the worst of it was that he was rather lazily inclined. He was averse to taking long journey; otherwise, he might always have had enough, in the shape of presents from rich men, to enable him and his wife to live comfortably. There was at that time a king

in a neighboring country who was celebrating the funeral obsequies of his mother with great pomp. Brahmans and beggars were going from different parts with the expectation of receiving rich presents. Our Brahman was requested by his wife to seize this opportunity and get a little money; but his constitutional indolence stood in the way. The woman, however, gave her husband no rest till she extorted from him the promise that he would go. The good woman, accordingly, cut down a plantain tree and burnt it to ashes, with which ashes she cleaned the clothes of her husband, and made them as white as any fuller could make them. She did this because her husband was going to the palace of a great king, who could not be approached by men clothed in dirty rags; besides, as a Brahman, he was bound to appear neat and clean. The Brahman at last one morning left his house for the palace of the great King.

In '*The Story of Swet-Basanta*', the merchant had two sons, Swet and Basanta. The Swet was the elder and Basanta was the younger. Swet was married in due time. Some times after Swet's marriage, the merchant's wife died. The widower merchant left no time to marry again. The merchant married a young lady who was younger than Swet's wife. Merchant's wife had boundless influence over him. One day the two brothers had a quarrel with their stepmother. The stepmother cursed and swore, and said that she will make the merchant to shed the blood of both Swet and Basanta. Swet, his wife and Basanta had ran away.

**Sister:** In the story '*Kiranmala*', in Thakurmar Jhuli, Arun and Barun, the two brothers had a sister named Kiranmala. They were the children of a king but their fortune made them to be grown up by a Brahman. Kiranmala was very affectionate to her brother. She did all household chores. She was very sincere about her brothers' need. This is the portrayal of traditional Indian sister character. Arun and Barun fell in danger at *maya pahar* (maya means illusion and pahar means hill. So maya pahar means hill of illusion). Seeing the sign that Arun and Barun had fallen in danger, she didn't cry or fear. She herself went out to go to maya pahar and rescued her brothers facing all the danger. This type of brave female characters is rare in folktales of Bengal. In the '*Story of Prince Sabur*' in Lalbehari's collection, the merchant had seven daughters. The youngest daughter became very rich and was married to the prince named Sabur. The six daughters of the merchant, envying the happy lot of their youngest sister, had determined to put an end to the life of her newly-wedded husband. They scattered glass powder profusely on the bed. The prince, suspecting no danger, laid himself down in the bed; but he had scarcely been there two minutes, he felt acute pain through his whole system, for the fine powder had gone through every pore of his body. In the story '*Kiranmala*' queen's two elder were jealous of her fortune. They kept her three new born babies in earthen jars and floated in the river.

**Fellow Wife:**

In the story '*Life's Secret*', the king had two queens, Suo Rani and Duo Rani. Suo Rani was loved by the king but Duo Rani was not loved. So Duo hated Suo. Her aim was to harm Suo. So she harmed Suo's son Dalim Kumar. In the story '*Princess Kalabati*' in Thakurmar Jhuli, the king had seven queens. All of them were childless. One day a *Sanyasi*(mendicant) gave them root of plant and told them to eat by grating it. He told that each of them will be blessed

with a son like moon. He told that the five of the queens ate it but didn't keep for the fourth and the seventh queen. The fourth queen took the left over in the bowl and seventh queen washed the grinding rock and took washed water. The five queens mocked them and said among themselves that fourth and the seventh queen would have bear monkeys not human beings. In the story 'Sukhu and Dukhu'TJ, the weaver had two wives. The elder wife's daughter is Sukhu and the younger wife's daughter is Dukhu. The weaver loved the elder wife and Sukhu but not the younger wife and Dukhu. Dukhu and her mother used to do all the household chores. Sukhu and her mother did no household chores. After the death of the weaver, the elder wife embezzled all the valuables and separated Dukhu and her mother. The elder wife and her daughter lived in luxury whereas the younger wife and her daughter somehow could manage their needs.

In the earlier mentioned story *Life's Secret Duo Queen* hated *Suo Queen* out of jealousy of her good fortune. So she tried to harm *Dalim Kumar*, son of *Suo* and at last became successful. In the story, *Princess Kalabati*, the five princesses deprived two queens of the herb root. The root was given by the mendicant eating which each queen would have been blessed with a son like full moon. We may mention another story *Sheet Basanta* from *Thakurmar Jhuli*. The king had two queens, *Suo* and *Duo*. *Suo* was quarrelsome woman and hated *Duo*. *Suo* was jealous of *Duo*. One day *Suo* put a herb tablet on *Duo's* head. *Duo* became a parrot of gold and fled away. In the story '*Champa, the Seven Brothers*' in *Thakurmar Jhuli*, the king had seven queens. The elder six queens were barren. The youngest queen was going to be mother. The elder six queens were jealous of the youngest queens. The youngest queen delivered seven sons and a daughter. The six queens put the infants in jars and buried in ashes. They told the queen that she had given the birth of some rats and crabs. They produced some rats and crabs to the king. The king became very angry at the youngest queen. He expelled her from the palace.

**Conclusion:**

We see that roles played by women had no special characteristics. Images of the wives are the creations of the patriarchal society. They are not conscious about their rights and positions. Especially the queens are submissive in character. They have no voice at all. On the other hand the wives of the lower strata sometimes raise their voices. It is seen that the woman who has fellow wife or the woman who has step children, tries to harm the fellow wife or step children. In such cases husband is the medium through whom the evil design can be completed. This type of incident is happened in fairytales. Fairytales are the creations of the women. To share ones husband with another woman is a nightmare to a woman. So the portrayal of woman as fellow wife or step mother is monstrous. Mother characters are full of affection. Their wishes are bound with the happiness of their children. Most of the sister characters are full of affection to their brother. In some stories it is seen that sisters harm their fortunate sister out of jealousy. It is because of the attitude of the society towards the women that a woman is jealous of the good fortune of other woman who may even be a close relative like sister.

**References:**

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