

## Women As Portraited in Folktales

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### Abstract

Folktales are an important genre of folklore. Folktales are the stories passed down through generations, mainly by telling. Folktales are imaginary in structure but they reflect the different aspects of life. These tales are the creation of the society. So they honestly represent the life of a society. Women play very important role in folktales. One can ascertain the position of women in these stories. The present study will focus on the position of women in past society through the light of folktales.

**Key words:** Folktales, reflection, women, society.

**Introduction:** In folk tales, the belief tradition, custom and human nature are reflected. Folk tales, like other branches of folk literature were in oral form and passed from generation to generation. Folk tales are adapted with the changing condition of the society. Folktales give the portrait of ancient society.

*"A folktale is a story which has been handed down through word of mouth and thus belongs to a particular culture rather than an individual. ....Because the folk tales are created by the people, they give us many insights into the culture from which they spring. The themes in folktales are universal and timeless."*<sup>i</sup>

They are the important sources for studying the different aspects of a past society. One can get the position of women of the past period through the eyes of folk tales though they are imaginary in nature. For this study, we take two stories, one from Santhal Pargana, and another from Bengal.

### In the narrative of stories:

The first story '*The Cruel Stepmother*' from 'Folktales of Santhal Pargana' by Cecil Henry Bompas<sup>ii</sup>. The story narrates such:

The queen died leaving a boy baby. The king didn't marry again because the stepmother wouldn't love the child. At last the king married a young widow who promised to take care of the child as her own child. The step mother loved the child and took its care as her own child. The problem started when the step mother gave the birth of a boy child. The queen became jealous of her step son. One day she injured herself with her step son's cat and blamed the boy. She pressed the king to kill the boy by her own hand. The king didn't agree. The queen came out of the palace with her son. The king agreed to kill the boy and the queen returned home. On the fixed day, the king told the boy to be ready to go to his uncle's home. When the king and his son came out of the home, a dog followed them. When they reached the forest, the king told the boy to wait under a tree. The king killed the dog and smeared its blood on his axe and returned home leaving the child in the jungle. When the king didn't return, the boy began to cry. Hearing his cry, the Thakur (God) came down. He took the form of an old woman who lifted him in her arm and left him on the outskirts of the village. In the morning a rich Brahmin found him and took him home. He

brought him up and made him his goat-herd. He gave him the name of Lela. Lela's fortune made him the king of another kingdom. After many years, he returned to his native land to meet his father. The king lost his eye sight by losing his son. Dewan (Prime Minister/ Chief treasury Officer) and the queen were ruling the kingdom. Hearing the news of Lela's arrival, Dewan fled away. Lela sent word to his father to come to him. When the king reached Lela's camp, he had quite recovered his eyesight. When they met, father and son embraced and wept over each other. Lela ordered a feast to be prepared and while this was being done, a maidservant came running to say that the wicked queen had hanged herself. They went and burned the body. They returned and enjoyed the feast. Then the Raja resigned his kingdom to Lela and the ryots (subjects) begged to stay and rule over them. So Lela and lived happily ever after.

The second story named 'Life's Secret' has been taken from 'Folktales of Bengal' by Lal Bihari Dey.<sup>iii</sup> The story goes such:

The king had two queens, Duo Rani and Suo Rani.<sup>iv</sup> Duo means not loved and Suo means loved. The elder one is Duo and the younger one is Suo. Both were childless. One day a Faquir (mendicant) came to the palace gate to ask for alms. The Suo Queen offered him handful of rice but the faquir didn't take it as the hands of a barren woman is ceremonially unclean. He offered her a drug for removing her barrenness. He gave her the following direction: "Take this nostrum, Swallow it with juice of pomegranate flower; if you do this you will have a son in due time. The son will be exceedingly handsome and his complexion will be of the colour of the pomegranate flower and you shall call him Dalim Kumar (dalim means pomegranate and kumar means prince). As the enemies will try to take away the life of your son, I may as well tell you that life of the boy will be bound in the life of a boalfish (a South Asian species of catfish) which is in your tank in front of the palace. In the heart of the fish is a small box of wood, in the box is a necklace of gold, that necklace is the life of your son. Farewell."

The queen gave the birth of a boy child of extra ordinary beauty. The Duo queen hated Dalim, as the king neglected her more than ever since the birth of Dalim and idolized the fortunate mother of Dalim. She extorted the secret of the life of Dalim from him. The Duo queen on learning the secret of Dalim Kumar's life lost no time in using it for the prosecution of her malicious design. She pretended to be seriously ill. The king sent his best physician for her treatment. With that physician, the queen was in collusion. The physician said to the king that for the queen's complaint there was but one remedy, which consisted in the outward application of something to be found inside a large boal fish which was in the tank before the palace. Duo was succeeded to occupy the large boal fish. The moment Duo wore the necklace, that very moment Dalim died in his mother's room. The king was plunged in the ocean of grief. He would not allow the dead body to be buried or burnt. He couldn't realize the fact of his son's death. He ordered the dead body to be removed to one of his garden house in the suburbs of the city and to be laid there in state. He ordered that all sorts of provisions should be stored in that house as if the young prince needed them for refection. Orders were issued that the house should be kept locked up day and night, and that no one should go into it except Dalim's most intimate friend, the prime minister's son, who was entrusted with the key of the house, and who obtained the privilege of entering it once in twenty four hours.

As owing to her great loss, the Suo queen lived in retirement, the king gave up his nights entirely to Duo. Dalim revived every night as Duo put away the necklace every night to

allay suspicion and died again the next morning when the queen put it on. When Dalim reanimated, he ate whatever food he liked, for of such there was a plentiful stock in the garden house and walked about on the premises. Dalim's friend visited him during day, found him always lying a lifeless corpse. He noticed that there was no symptom of corruption in the body of Dalim. It was apparently quite fresh. He determined to visit sometimes also at night. The first night that he paid his visit, he found that his dead friend sauntering about in the garden. Dalim related to his friend all the circumstances connected with his death. As the life of the prince depended on the necklace, the two friends laid their heads together to devise if possible some plans by which they get might get possession of it. Night after night they consulted together, but they could not think of any feasible scheme.

As per the destiny, the niece of the Bidhata Purusha (a god who writes the fortune and date of death of a new born baby on its forehead) was married to Dalim according to gandharvacereemony (This was one of the eight classical Hindu marriage system which was based on consensual sex between a couple with no rituals, witnesses or family participation). Amid the alteration of life and death, the prince and the lady spent some seven or eight years, during which time the princess presented her husband with two lovely boys who were the exact image of their father. It is superfluous to say that the king, the two queens and other members of the royal household did not know that Dalim kumar was living at any rate. They all thought that he was long ago dead and his corpse burnt. Dalim's wife conceived a plan by which she might be able to have sight of her mother-in-law and also be able to get hold of the duo queen's necklace on which her husband's life was dependent. She disguised herself as a female barber and entered the king's palace with her two boys. The duo queen was quite taken up with the two little boys, who, she declared, strongly reminded her of her darling Dalim Kumar. She told the supposed barber that she did not require her services. She added that she would be glad now and then to see her and her two fine boys. The Duo queen was so pleased with her skill and the sweetness of her disposition that she ordered her to wait her periodically. The princess took the opportunity to possess the treasure on which the life of her husband depended. After the necklace was recovered, the couple and their children presented themselves to the king and the Duo queen. It is needless to say that Dalim's parents' joy was intense. Hearing the cause of Dalim's death, the king inflamed with rage, ordered duo queen into his presence. She was buried alive

### **Discussion:**

In the first story, it is seen that the stepmother i. e. woman is perverted. She persuaded the king for evil deed. The king left his son in the forest. Though the king didn't kill his son but leaving a small boy alone in the jungle is not less than killing. The king loses his eye sight for the grief of his son. He didn't have the moral courage to protest the queen and protect his own son. He left his own son to the mouth of death. The society does not mind it because he did it under the pressure of queen. The society considers a woman in such a position that the boy whom she cared and loved not less than his own mother wants to be killed only for jealousy. Society considers her such an ugly villain.

In the second story, the king loved the younger queen Suo ignoring the elder queen Duo. The king was not impartial amongst two queens. After the birth of Dalim, Suo became the

mother of the heir of the throne. Her position became far higher to the king than earlier whereas Duo's position degraded than earlier. It was natural for Duo that she would be jealous of Duo's fate. It was the king who was liable for Duo's jealousy. The society does not mind of the partiality among the wives. It was impossible for Duo to charge the king for his partial behavior. Duo was the soft target. It is thought that a woman can do any crime. So Duo was depicted such that she didn't hesitate to kill her step son.

The society accuses a woman for being barren but not a man. A woman is deprived many ceremonial activity for not having child. When the Duo queen offered handful of rice to the Faquir, he rejected her offer because hands of a barren woman are ceremonially unclean.

It is narrated in the story that as owing to her great loss, the Duo queen lived in retirement. The king gave up his nights entirely to Duo. It was the king who neglected the Duo queen even before Duo was blessed by the faquir. Favouring Duo queen after Dalim's death is not the sign of mourning. Duo needed king's company at that time. It is the king who finally punished the Duo queen by burying her alive.

### Conclusion:

It is seen that society considers a woman capable of doing a crime like killing the step son only for jealousy. In the first story, the king was also liable for crime. But the male dominated society ignores it. Society explains this act as the result of the queen's persuasion. In the second story, Dalim's death shocked the king that he became almost abnormal. He didn't allow to bury or cremate Dalim's dead body. The Duo queen was so shocked that she lived in retirement. It was the duty of the king to give time to Duo. But he gave up his nights entirely to Duo. The society considers the act as natural. The stories taken from two regions reflect the attitude of the society towards women.

### References:

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<sup>i</sup>Hamilton, Martha and Weiss, Mitch, *Children Tell Stories*, Richard C. Owen Publishers Inc., New York, 1990, p. 39.

<sup>ii</sup>Bompas, Cecil Henry '*Folktales of Santhal Pargana*' <http://gutenberg.org>

<sup>iii</sup>Dey, Lal Bihari: *Folktales of Bengal*, <http://gutenberg.org>

<sup>iv</sup>In Bengali tales the king has invariably two queens, Duo Rani and Duo Rani. Duo Rani is loved by the king whereas Duo Rani is not loved.