



Women Against Women-Rereading Select Tales Portraying Metamorphosis in Lakshminath Bezbaroa's *Grandmother's Tales*

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ABSTRACT

Folktales serve as a cultural reflection, evolving through contributions from many storytellers. Transmitted orally across generations in diverse iterations, they encapsulate the traditional values, ideological frameworks, and fundamental essence of the society from which they emerge. The folktales of Assam offer a vivid portrayal of the region's rich cultural heritage, social structures, and way of life, while simultaneously serving as a source of moral instruction and entertainment. These narratives, often compiled and edited into anthologies for younger audiences, such as Lakshminath Bezbaroa's *Burhi Aair Sadhu* (Grandmother's Tales), draw from the popular stories passed down through Assamese oral traditions. While primarily aimed at children, these tales also engage adult readers, stimulating critical reflection and deeper analysis of their thematic content. This paper seeks to examine the tales "Tejimola," "Toola Aru Teza," and "Champawati" from *Grandmother's Tales* with a focus on the victimization of women by female perpetrators, as embedded in the select narratives of metamorphosis and shapeshifting. These narratives, imbued with magical elements, underscore the dynamics of female-on-female oppression, wherein women manipulate and harm each other to preserve power and influence within a patriarchal system. In this

framework, forced metamorphosis emerges not only as a tool for the scheming women to further their clandestine aims but also as a vehicle for the oppressed women to regain agency and reestablish their identities.

Introduction

Traditionally folk tales were “used by the learned people to give moral lessons and good advice to their children in olden times in Assam: that is why, it was named ‘Sadhu-Katha’ i.e tales told by sadhus”. (Borooah & Kalita, 2023, p. 34) These diverse folktales also “widely shows the Assamese culture, the lifestyle of Assamese people and also its typical society”. (Talukdar & Gogoi, 2021, p. 5667) Moreover, “Folktales with their marvelous characters with magical actions and wonderful attributes, transports the listener or the reader to a dream world”. (Borooah & Kalita, 2023, p. 7). This combination of moral lessons with fantasy and socio-cultural reality in folktales. The authentic representation of life and society establishes a robust basis for comprehensive analysis, encouraging a more profound critical exploration of their dynamics. These folktales engage younger audiences while shaping their moral understanding through vivid and engaging narratives. This reinforces the inherent binary of good versus evil, with the triumph of virtue over vice serving as a central theme. The consistent pattern of rewarding the honest and punishing the villains forms the structural core of these stories, highlighting their didactic function within the moral framework of the culture. Along with the entertainment of the young they provide scope for in depth analysis by presenting realistic issues lying below the magic on the surface.

In the selected tales beneath the magic wonder lies some cruel realities of women’s plight. In the conflict between good and evil, women find themselves positioned against one another, ensnared in a competitive struggle imposed by patriarchal norms. This adversarial dynamic compels them to resort to harming their fellow women as a means of survival, creating a brutal environment characterized by a relentless race to dominate or wait to be dominated. Within this framework, a woman's privileged status is inextricably linked to her ability to curry favour with the powerful men depicted in these narratives, to whom their destinies are irrevocably bound. This situation not only highlights the detrimental effects of patriarchal structures but also raises critical questions about the societal forces that pit women against each other, undermining the potential for solidarity and collective empowerment. This study is an attempt to analyse the interlinked nature of desire to survival and the villainous roles in which the

women find themselves in. The imposed disadvantageous system creates a graded dominance system where manipulation of women under patriarchy compels women to manipulate, vanquish and compete with other women, while ignoring the notion of sisterhood.

Objectives of the Study

- To examine occurrences of violence among women as a manifestation of competitive struggle characterized by an unyielding contest for dominance.
- To study the detrimental effects of patriarchal structures in positioning women against each other, undermining the potential for solidarity and collective empowerment.
- To explore the concept of transfiguration as a bifurcated force empowering women to exercise control and simultaneously seek self-affirmation.

Methodology

This paper is grounded in a comprehensive textual study and analysis of selected narratives from Lakshminath Bezbaruah's *Grandmother's Tales*, specifically focusing on the tales "Tejimola," "Toola Aru Teza," and "Champavati," which serve as the primary texts for this investigation. The research draws from both online and offline scholarly sources to gather pertinent data. This analysis not only contributes to a deeper understanding of Bezbaruah's work but also situates these folktales within contemporary discussions of gender, power, and identity in literature.

Discussion

Magical elements in folktales such as shapeshifting and metamorphosis captivate the imaginations of readers and listeners alike, transforming the ordinary narrative into a space where the fantastical becomes plausible. These supernatural occurrences, though beyond the realm of reality, are seamlessly integrated into the real world, blurring the line between the possible and the impossible. The wonder evoked by such transformations not only entertains but also engages deeper layers of imagination, encouraging audiences to explore the symbolic and thematic dimensions of magic within the story. The women in these tales navigate a rigid social structure in which their existence is dictated by predetermined norms that shape their roles and conditions. Their worth is measured by their servitude, unquestioning subordination, obedience, loyalty, and capacity to endure hardship, all of which determine their favourability with the dominant male figures who control their destinies. Consequently, women with strong resolve take matters into their own hands, acting to secure their own happiness and rights by

eliminating rival women. To retain relevance and authority, they must abandon the traditional feminine traits of affection, sacrifice and empathy to adopt the role of the oppressor in a system that perpetuates patriarchal dominance. Each villain in the select tales is driven by a deep-rooted need to preserve something valuable to them, illustrating that their actions are not purely malicious but arise from a desire to protect their own interests. In “Tejimola” Tejimola’s stepmother, for instance, sought to secure the inheritance for her biological family, prioritizing her own bloodline over her stepdaughter. The thought of Tejimola taking away her most preserved assets as dowry created bitterness that culminated into the pre-planned torture and murder of Tejimola. Similarly, in "Toola Aru Teza", Teza’s stepmother felt compelled to safeguard the welfare of both herself and her daughter Tula, ensuring their survival and security in a precarious domestic environment of rivalry. So, she tried to remove Teza’s mother, her co-wife by turning her into a tortoise using magical incantations to ensure her primacy as the husband’s favourite wife when she saw her husband favouring the cold rice and boiled fish at the broken hut of the older wife rather than the hot rice and curry cooked by her. She skillfully killed the tortoise as well because it had been nourishing Teza and Kanai with *paramanna*¹, from the water god, which made them appear healthier than her own daughter, Toola. Later she schemed to remove Teza and replace her with her own daughter Tula as the prince’s wife to ensure better prospects of her own daughter at the cost of Teza’s life and happiness. Teza’s co-wife, consumed by jealousy and emotional devastation, was unwilling to share her husband’s affection, thus sought to preserve her exclusive claim to his love by deeming Teza as inauspicious lady whose touch breaks things. The clash between co-wives is present in Champavati as well. The elder favourite wife out of jealousy and desire for self-preservation manipulates the husband to remove her rival from the household to live in the backyard in a small hut. To dispose Champavati, she also pleaded her husband to marry away Champavati to the python and later decided to kill the mother and daughter as Champavati was well and thriving but her own daughter was swallowed by her python husband. The Ogress mother-in-law of Champavati tried to separate her from her husband to devour her because her son went against her will to marry Champavati and she feared being displaced in her son's affections by his new wife, reflecting a fear of neglect and marginalization.

These antagonists, much like their victims, are caught in the same fraught social space characterized by fear, insecurity, and a constant struggle for identity and relevance. They operate within a patriarchal system that conditions them to compete for limited resources, including affection, attention, and material security, thus complicating the moral binaries of good and evil. Rather than being mere embodiments of

¹ a sweet dish made of rice

cruelty, these women act out of a need to assert their agency and protect their precarious social positions, highlighting the pervasive uncertainty and identity crises they face in a male-dominated world. Their villainy, therefore, can be seen as a response to the oppressive structures that shape their existence, illustrating the complex interplay between power, survival, and identity in these tales.

The patriarchal structures within which the women in these tales exist have detrimental effects in positioning women against each other, undermining the potential for solidarity and collective empowerment. The collective coordination, coexistence and sisterhood among women can form a support system to endure social preconditions. The rivalry limits such opportunities for women and possible friendships are neglected in favour of competition. Women on women violence emerge from this space and turns women into scheming malevolence who find pleasure in harming the rivals. While her father was away, the stepmother cunningly devises a plan to eliminate Tejimola, motivated by jealousy over her childlessness and the potential loss of property meant for Tejimola's dowry. Feeling insecure, she deceitfully hides a mouse and pieces of amber in the silk cloth Tejimola is to wear at her friend's wedding. When the outfit is burned, the stepmother wrongfully accuses Tejimola, subjecting her to brutal physical punishment. Her cruelty escalates as she crushes Tejimola's hands, feet, and head in a *dheki*², ultimately killing her and burying her near the *dhekishal*³. Throughout the tale, the stepmother consistently thwarts Tejimola's efforts to reveal her plight while concealing her own crimes by destroying the pumpkin plant and shaddock tree, which were metamorphosed forms of Tejimola, thereby trying to maintain her power and avoiding accountability.

Teza's stepmother transforms her co-wife into a tortoise by pushing her into a big pond with a magical incantation. Upon realizing her failure to eliminate her co-wife who is alive and still taking care of Teja and Kanai, she persists in her efforts. Driven by a determination to secure her position within tensions of competition and survival in a patriarchal system she feigns sickness and successfully deceives both her husband and the villagers into believing that the tortoise's meat is the only cure for her condition. Despite previous setbacks, she continues to devise new strategies, reflecting the relentless nature of her pursuit and the underlying tensions of competition and survival in a patriarchal system. Subsequently, Teza was transformed into a bird by striking with an iron pin on the head while reciting an incantation. The malevolent stepmother, not content with having eliminated her co-wife, derived pleasure from

² a traditional instrument used for pounding rice.

³ the shed where the *dheki* is kept.

inflicting harm upon Teja as well. She substitutes Toola for Teza as the prince's wife. However, the prince uncovered the scheme, killed Toola, and forced her parents to consume her flesh. Consequently, she became an adversary to her own daughter. This persistence in harming her rivals underscores her desperation and the lengths to which she is willing to go to protect her interests, further illustrating the complex dynamics of rivalry and power struggles among women in such narratives. Cruelty of woman on woman is also enacted by the co-wife of Teja. She tries to prove Teza as a "women of ill omen" (Borooah & Kalita, 2023, p. 105) in order to get her banished. She tries incessantly to defame her by actions like placing the banana plants by the gate loosely, breaking the leg of the chair and the bedstead and also unhinging the door so that with slight touch they would topple down.

Depending on the wielder transfiguration serves dual purposes within these narratives. It is exploited by antagonists as a tool for manipulation and suppression of their victims. This same transformative power is harnessed by the vanquished, allowing them to articulate their untold stories and reclaim the identities that have been stripped from them. In this sense, transfiguration operates as both an instrument of domination and a means of resistance. It becomes a mechanism through which suffering is inflicted, yet simultaneously offers a path to liberation, empowering the oppressed to regain their autonomy and voice within the constraints of the narrative. This dual functionality highlights the complexity of metamorphosis as not merely a fantastical element but as a symbol of both subjugation and self-empowerment. In the tale of "Toola Aru Teza" transfiguration is imposed on Teja's mother by the stepmother and cruelly takes away the mother from the children "Teja and Kanai" because of her jealousy. She again forces her to reemerge in the new forms of a shaddock tree and a china rose tree after destroying the tortoise form. Teza was also silenced by transforming her into a bird. In "Tejimola" too the stepmother imposes metamorphosis on her by killing her. She continuously destroys Tejimola's new forms, to force her to metamorphose continuously till her father discovers her.

Disregarding the evil machinations of the malevolent women, the vanquished use the metamorphosis as a means of self-expression. Teja's mother came back as a tortoise to take care of her children, and then became a shaddock and a china rose tree to give them shade. Like her mother Teza also refused silence and exposed the plotting of her stepmother by iterating to the prince her plight. Sitting on the Royal Terrace she sang to the prince-
"Why art thou O Prince forgetful so?"

That to play with wife's elder sister you go.”

Later her true form and identity was restored after the prince took out the pin from her head. Tejimola too rejects suppression and continued to come back in the forms of a pumpkin plant, a shaddock tree,

water lily, and *salika* until she revealed the injustice she suffered. As a pumpkin plant she sings to the

beggar trying to pluck a pumpkin as—

“Stretch not thy hands nor pluck a pumpkin-thou strange beggar woman, my stepmother did crush me

for the silk clothes, and it is I Tejimola”.

In different forms she took, she kept singing her story till she flew to her father as a *salika*. At her father's request, she came back in her human form. Her different incarnations signify Tejimola's struggle against atrocities through a strong will power that encourages against accepting oblivion. She persevered to regain her identity.

Conclusion

The tales of transfiguration in Lakshminath Bezbaruah's *Grandmother's Tales* acts like a maze to trap women and manifest their innermost fears into evil actions. In the select tales women stands as enemy of woman in favour of achieving their own interest and rejects all possibilities of female solidarity. The suffering of good women under the actions of magically armed evil women drives the story forward making the enmity between women vital to the structure of the tale. In a society governed by patriarchal norms, man appear as spectators, and punishers. The male authority punishes the evil doers after they are exposed. In a struggle between the manipulation of transfiguration for oppression and emancipation the role of the men as the source of chaos get camouflaged. As competitors women appear as natural enemies playing the pre-decided roles. The honest, gullible sufferer is placed against the resolute women protecting herself.

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