

## Kokborok Literature: Gender and Social Narratives

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### ABSTRACT

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Kokborok literature delves into intricate themes of gender and social dynamics, highlighting its vital role in preserving the cultural identity of the Borok people of Tripura. Rooted in a matrilineal tradition, Kokborok folktales and modern narratives often portray women as central figures, emphasizing qualities such as resilience, wisdom, and agency. These stories reflect the unique structure of Tripuri society, where gender roles complement rather than compete, fostering balance and harmony. The traditions of Tripuri communities are deeply tied to their matriarchal roots, where women have historically been held in high regard. In ancient times, men were required to prove their capability through a period of hard labour lasting six months to a year in the bride's household. This practice, referred to as *chamari ompa* in Kokborok, served as a test to determine whether the groom could manage a household. If he failed during this period, he had to return home and forfeit the opportunity to marry the woman. Such customs highlight the emphasis placed on responsibility, respect, and partnership in Borok society. Kokborok literature also serves as a lens for examining broader social issues such as justice, environmental stewardship, migration, and identity. Traditional stories, often recited during festivals like *Mamita*, *Garia Puja*, and *Ker*, reinforce communal values and the interdependence between humans and nature. Modern Kokborok literature extends these themes, addressing challenges posed by modernization, displacement, and cultural shifts. In the early 19th

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century, Borok society began to experience changes in its traditional practices, including marriage customs. Some wealthy families of the bride's side continued to uphold older traditions, but by the early 20th century, these customs had started to evolve. For example, in some cases, the groom's family was expected to provide gold ornaments for the bride. Today, Borok culture and traditions are increasingly interwoven with influences from other cultures, leading to significant transformations. In modern times, changes in gender roles and societal expectations have introduced new challenges, including gender inequality. These issues underscore the need for corrective measures, with growing demands for gender equality and mutual respect. Borok society, like the rest of the world, continues to strive for a balance where cultural preservation and progressive values coexist harmoniously. By examining the evolution of gender norms, the role of storytelling in rituals, and the comparison of Kokborok narratives with other indigenous literatures, this volume sheds light on the enduring relevance of Kokborok literature in both preserving cultural heritage and addressing contemporary issues. It highlights the need to document and adapt these narratives to ensure their survival in an evolving world.

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## 1. Introduction

Kokborok literature offers profound insight into the cultural, social, and gender narratives of the Borok people of Tripura. Rooted in oral traditions, it reflects the values, beliefs, and practices of a society where storytelling serves both as a means of cultural preservation and as a way to transmit moral and social lessons. Over time, the transition from oral to written literature has preserved the essence of Kokborok culture while allowing it to adapt to contemporary changes.

Historically, the Tripuri community followed a matriarchal societal structure where women were highly respected and held significant roles. In ancient times, a man's ability to marry was contingent upon proving his capability to manage a household. This was done through a practice known as *chamari ompa* in Kokborok, which required men to work in the bride's household for six months to a year. This

trial period tested whether the groom could fulfill the responsibilities of running a household. If the man failed, he would return home and forfeit the chance to marry the woman, demonstrating the emphasis placed on diligence, responsibility, and mutual respect in Tripuri society.

Gender dynamics are a recurring theme in Kokborok narratives. Women often play central roles in traditional stories, embodying qualities such as wisdom, resilience, and resourcefulness. These tales highlight the significance of women in a society that has long upheld matrilineal traditions.

One notable historical figure, Queen Sengthuma, exemplifies the valor and leadership attributed to women in Tripuri society. She was a queen of the Tripuri dynasty, remembered for her energy and warrior spirit. According to historical accounts, when the king and his warriors hesitated to go to war against the Nawab of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), Queen Sengthuma took command. Leading her warriors into battle, she successfully defeated the Nawab, cementing her legacy as a pivotal figure in Tripuri history. Her story is not folklore but a testament to the courage and influence of women in shaping the history of the Tripuri dynasty.

Male characters, often depicted as warriors, leaders, or mythical heroes, complement these narratives, creating a balanced portrayal of gender roles that underscores mutual respect and interdependence.

Beyond gender, Kokborok literature serves as a mirror to social values and challenges. Themes such as justice, environmental consciousness, and identity resonate deeply in these narratives, connecting the past to contemporary issues. Story telling is integral to religious festivals like, *Mamita*, *Lampra*, *Mwtai Kotor*, *Haichuma*, *Garia Puja* and *Ker etc*, where narratives reinforce cultural values, intergenerational bonds, and the sacred relationship between humans and nature.

Exploring the roles of gender and the societal themes embedded in Kokborok literature sheds light on its continued importance as a medium of cultural expression and reflection in an evolving world.

## **2. Gender Representation in Kokborok Literature**

### **2.1 Women as Protagonists in Folktales**

Kokborok folktales often position women as central characters, showcasing their resilience, wisdom, and resourcefulness. This reflects the matrilineal heritage of the Borok people, where women traditionally held significant roles within families and communities. Tales such as *Raima Bai Saima*,

*Bibi Bai Hanok Thaichumu Khaklaimani, Khumpui Barrwrwk, Eng Eng Kukai, Bukhuksni and Sipingtwi bai Mairumtwi*, feature women who face societal challenges and emerge victorious through cleverness and perseverance. These narratives highlight the intrinsic strength and agency of women, portraying them as protectors, nurturers, and problem-solvers.

## 2.2 Male-Centric Narratives

While women often take centre stage in many Kokborok tales, male-centric narratives, such as *Kuaidaya, Rangiya bai Butua, Sinjo Oglā, Chakbaiyama* and *Jamislong*, focus on themes like bravery, leadership, and heroism. These stories, frequently involving warriors, mythical figures, and community leaders, complement the gender dynamics by emphasizing male contributions to societal defence and governance. The interplay between male and female roles in these narratives demonstrates a balanced portrayal of genders, underlining their interdependence in Borok society.

## 2.3 Gender Roles and Societal Values in Tripuri Literature.

The representation of gender in Kokborok literature is deeply rooted in societal norms and values. Since ancient times, oral literature, including folktales, folklore, and proverbs, has enriched Kokborok literature and reflected the cultural fabric of Borok society. However, in modern times, male writers have increasingly emerged as prominent contributors, while female writers remain less represented in the literary domain.

Female characters in Kokborok literature often embody emotional strength, nurturing qualities, and moral authority. In contrast, male characters are typically portrayed as symbols of physical strength, courage, and decision-making. These complementary roles underscore the harmony between genders, emphasizing the communal unity and shared responsibilities that define Borok society.

Moreover, Kokborok narratives subtly challenge rigid gender norms, offering nuanced perspectives on the evolving roles of men and women within the community. By balancing traditional depictions with modern interpretations, these stories provide a rich exploration of gender dynamics, reinforcing the importance of mutual respect and collaboration.

## 2.4 Modern Interpretations of Gender in Kokborok Literature

Contemporary Kokborok writers have expanded on traditional gender narratives, exploring the evolving roles of men and women in a changing society. Issues like gender equality, empowerment, and the impact of modernization are increasingly reflected in modern Kokborok literature. By blending traditional themes with contemporary concerns, these works offer fresh perspectives while preserving the cultural essence of the Kokborok language.

## 3. Social Issues Reflected in Kokborok Folktales and Modern Literature

### 3.1 Justice and Community Responsibility Borok Peoples

Kokborok folktales often emphasize justice and collective responsibility, reflecting the communal values of Tripuri society. These narratives portray communities resolving disputes through fairness and collaboration, reinforcing the importance of social harmony. Stories addressing conflicts over resources or family disagreements highlight the Borok people's belief in prioritizing community welfare over individual interests.

For example, the folktale of *Chethuang* illustrates the importance of moral and social boundaries in Tripuri society. According to the tale, a brother insisted on marrying his sister despite societal and parental disapproval, as such unions were considered morally and socially unacceptable. When the family and community reluctantly agreed to the marriage, the sister prayed to the *Chethuang*, a sacred tree, to save her from the union. In response, the tree began to grow taller and taller, ultimately preventing the marriage and upholding the moral code of the community. This story reflects the values of justice, communal responsibility, and the role of nature in safeguarding societal norms.

### 3.2 Environmental Awareness and Harmony with Nature and Its Effect in Borok Peoples.

The relationship between humans and nature is a central theme in Kokborok literature, with many stories portraying nature as a sacred and living entity deeply integrated into the spiritual and cultural beliefs of the Borok people. These tales often illustrate the rewards of respecting natural ecosystems and the consequences of exploiting them, aiming to foster an appreciation of environmental sustainability and balance. Since time immemorial, the Borok people have been warriors and explorers, skilled in hunting and devoted to nature worship. They believe in natural deities such as *Bolong Mwtai* (deep jungle) and

*Twima* (river). Before clearing land for *jhum* (huk) cultivation, they performed rituals dedicated to *Bolong Mwtai* to seek approval, ensuring the jungle was suitable for their family. Similarly, during harvest time, a ritual known as *Bala Kamani* was conducted, led by the *ochai* (priest), to give thanks for the yield. However, they avoided cultivating the same jungle in consecutive years, opting to find new land for cultivation to maintain ecological harmony and balance.

For instance, stories surrounding the deity *Garia* emphasize the interdependence between humans and the natural world. The blessings of fertile land and abundant harvests are presented as rewards for maintaining ecological harmony, reinforcing the need for sustainable practices.

### **3.3 Migration, Identity, and Conflict in Borok peoples.**

Themes of migration and identity frequently emerge in modern Kokborok literature, reflecting the historical and contemporary struggles faced by the Borok people. Displacement due to economic, political, or social pressures is a recurring subject in contemporary works, as these narratives explore the challenges of preserving cultural identity amidst external influences and adapting to new environments. Since time immemorial, the Borok people have been warriors and explorers, skilled in hunting and devoted to nature worship while searching for suitable habitats. They explored unexplored regions, confronting wild animals such as lions, tigers, elephants, and jaguars to make these areas habitable. This process involved clearing jungles, constructing *Gairing* (Machang House/Tong Ghar) to protect themselves from wildlife, and practicing *jhum* (huk) cultivation for survival. The Borok people were led by their rulers, and 184 kings governed their society under what is known as the "Manikya Dynasty."

### **3.4 Gender and Social Structures and Kokborok Literature.**

Through poetry and prose, modern writers explore the resilience of the Borok people in maintaining their traditions and language while navigating the complexities of a globalized world. Such works often highlight the tension between preserving indigenous practices and embracing modernization. As mentioned in previous volumes, without the preservation of written literature, Kokborok literature cannot survive. Kokborok's pioneering writers, from Md. Daulot Ahmed to contemporary female writers like Pabitra Bakti Jamatia, Shefali Debbarma, Ajita Tripura, Dipali Debbarma, and Chandra Bala Debbarma, have contributed significantly to both poetry and prose, enriching the body of Kokborok literature.

The matrilineal traditions of Tripuri society are intricately woven into Kokborok literature. Women are portrayed as custodians of culture and heritage, balancing societal roles with familial responsibilities. Traditional stories celebrate the influential roles of women, while modern narratives expand on these themes by addressing contemporary issues like gender equality and changing gender dynamics.

This evolution of gender representation reflects the adaptability of Tripuri society and its willingness to engage with progressive ideas while honouring its traditional roots.

#### **4. Evolution of Gender Norms in Tripuri Society Through Literature**

##### **4.1 Matrilineal Traditions in Folklore: Empowerment and Challenges in Tripuri Society.**

The matrilineal structure of Tripuri society is a recurring theme in Kokborok literature, particularly in its folktales. Women are often portrayed as decision-makers and cultural custodians, reflecting their central role in family and community life. Folktales like *Raima Bai Saima*, *Chethuang*, *Nuai*, and *Eng Eng Kukai etc*, depict women as strong, resourceful, and capable of overcoming challenges, reinforcing their importance in maintaining societal balance.

It is noted that *Sengthuma*, the queen of a Tripuri king, was a highly energetic and skilled warrior. During a time when the king and his warriors were hesitant to go to war with the Nawab of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), Queen Sengthuma, along with her warriors, led the charge and successfully defeated the Nawab. This story is not just a folktale, but a significant part of Tripuri history, showcasing the strength and leadership of women in the Tripuri dynasty.

However, these narratives also highlight the challenges women face within their matrilineal roles, such as balancing family responsibilities with personal aspirations. Stories occasionally delve into the tensions between tradition and change, offering a nuanced view of women's experiences in Tripuri society.

##### **4.2 Modern Interpretations of Gender in Kokborok Literature**

Contemporary Kokborok literature explores evolving gender roles as society transitions from traditional structures to more modern frameworks. Writers address issues such as gender equality, education, and



the impact of globalization on traditional gender dynamics. Women in modern Kokborok literature are often depicted as agents of change, challenging societal norms while preserving cultural heritage.

These narratives also examine the role of men in adapting to shifting gender expectations. By portraying men as supportive allies in the pursuit of equality, Kokborok literature advocates for a balanced and inclusive approach to gender roles.

### **4.3 The Role of Education in Shaping Gender Narratives in Kokborok Literature.**

Education is a key factor in the evolution of gender norms, as reflected in Kokborok literature. Stories highlight how access to education empowers women to contribute to society in new ways, breaking traditional barriers while maintaining their cultural identity.

In Kokborok literature, it is noted that women are the primary preservers of the Kokborok language, traditions, and culture, playing a crucial role in shaping the educational landscape.

Similarly, men's education is depicted as essential for fostering understanding and collaboration in the pursuit of a more equitable society.

By weaving themes of education into gender narratives, Kokborok literature underscores its transformative power in shaping a progressive and inclusive future.

## **5. The Role of Festivals and Rituals in Gender Narratives in Kokborok Literature.**

### **5.1 Festivals as a Platform for Story telling**

Festivals in Tripuri society serve as vibrant platforms for preserving and sharing Kokborok narratives, with many stories emphasizing cultural values and gender roles. Celebrations like *Garia Puja*, *Mamita*, *Ker*, *Mwtai Kotor*, *Lampra*, and *Kharchi* provide opportunities for storytelling, where elders recount traditional folktales and rituals. These stories often highlight the contributions of both men and women, reflecting the balanced dynamics within Tripuri society. During the *Garia Puja*, the *Ochai* (priest) performs all rituals, and in addition, the *Barua* (assistant to the *Ochai*) plays a key role. Women, on the other hand, participate actively by singing and dancing, reinforcing their important cultural roles in these community celebrations.



Women are frequently portrayed as nurturers and protectors, integral to the success of the festivals, while men take on roles as organizers or performers of rituals. These festivals underscore the importance of communal efforts, showcasing how both genders contribute to cultural continuity.

## 5.2 Gender-Specific Roles in Rituals in Kokborok literature

Kokborok literature often reflects the specific roles assigned to men and women during religious ceremonies and festivals. For instance, women are traditionally tasked with preparing offerings and maintaining the sanctity of rituals, symbolizing their role as preservers of purity and tradition. Men, on the other hand, often act as intermediaries with deities, performing ritualistic dances or chants to seek blessings. During *Garia Puja* and other religious ceremonies, the *Ochai* (priest) performs all the rituals, while male participants such as the *Barua* (assistant to the *Ochai*), *Chontai*, and *Galems* (those who sacrifice animals) play key roles in the proceedings. Women, although not involved in the performance of rituals, participate actively by singing, dancing, and supporting the rituals, reinforcing the gendered division of labor and the complementary roles that men and women play in Tripuri religious and cultural practices.

These roles, while rooted in tradition, also highlight the interdependence between genders in sustaining cultural practices. Modern interpretations of these roles in literature emphasize their evolving nature, with increasing acknowledgment of gender equality within these sacred spaces.

## 5.3 Narratives Embedded in Rituals

The stories and chants recited during festivals are deeply symbolic, carrying themes of fertility, prosperity, and harmony. For example, during *Garia Puja*, tales about the deity *Garia* often focus on the blessings of nature and the rewards of living in harmony with the environment. Such narratives not only reinforce cultural values but also provide a space for reflecting on gender dynamics within the community.

*Mamita* is a festival of feasting that takes place after the harvesting of *jhum* crops such as rice, fruits, yam, cotton, vegetables, etc., usually in the months of September or October. The festival is celebrated on a day deemed suitable by the family after all the preparations are made. It lasts from morning until late evening and includes a variety of activities. The first step in the celebration is a prayer conducted by

the *Ochai* (priest). This is followed by cooking, drinking, singing, dancing, eating, and merry-making, creating a festive and joyful atmosphere.

For example, a traditional *Mamita* song in Kokborok is as follows:

*"Da kwtal twiwi ri kwtal kanwi  
Sariphang Ochai hinwi  
Nokhla pharwi nokhla sibwi  
Bisini khali khalini  
Kangal Mamita rio."*

Modern adaptations of these narratives, as seen in contemporary Kokborok literature, retain their cultural essence while addressing current societal challenges, such as gender inclusion and the balance between tradition and progress.

## 6. Global Comparisons of Gender Representation in Indigenous Literature

### 6.1 Similarities with Other Indigenous Cultures

Kokborok literature shares commonalities with the oral traditions of other indigenous cultures worldwide, particularly in its depiction of gender dynamics. In many indigenous literatures, such as those from African or Native American communities, women are portrayed as custodians of cultural and spiritual knowledge. Similarly, Kokborok folktales emphasize the pivotal roles of women in nurturing, problem-solving, and preserving societal values.

For example, in the Kokborok folktale "The Horn Bill," the story describes how Sampari worked diligently throughout the day in the *jhum* fields while also handling all household chores, whereas Kwchakrai, by contrast, was lazy and spent his time drinking the local brew. This narrative highlights the contrast between the industrious woman and the idle man, underscoring women's crucial roles in maintaining the community's day-to-day functioning and societal harmony.

These narratives often feature themes of resilience and resourcefulness, with female protagonists leading their communities through challenges. Male characters, much like in Kokborok tales, are depicted as protectors and warriors, emphasizing balance and interdependence between genders. These parallels

highlight the universal nature of gender roles in traditional societies, where each gender contributes to the community's survival and growth.

## 6.2 Unique Aspects of Kokborok Gender Narratives

While Kokborok literature aligns with many global traditions, it also exhibits unique features rooted in the matrilineal structure of Tripuri society. This emphasis on women as decision-makers and central figures is less common in patriarchal indigenous cultures, making Kokborok narratives distinct.

Additionally, Kokborok tales often integrate local customs, spiritual beliefs, and ecological concerns, creating a blend of gender and environmental themes that reflect the Borok people's unique world view. Modern Kokborok literature further distinguishes itself by exploring contemporary issues like gender equality and social change, providing a nuanced perspective on traditional gender roles in an evolving society.

## 7. Conclusion

Kokborok literature serves as a profound repository of the cultural, social, and gendered experiences of the Borok people. Rooted in a rich oral tradition, it reflects the societal structures, values, and beliefs of a community that has historically balanced gender roles through a matrilineal framework. Women are celebrated as custodians of tradition and agents of resilience, while men are portrayed as protectors and leaders, emphasizing harmony and interdependence within the community.

Through its narratives, Kokborok literature not only preserves the cultural identity of the Borok people but also addresses broader social issues such as justice, environmental stewardship, and migration. Its integration into festivals and rituals further underscores its role as a living cultural tradition, bridging generations and adapting to the evolving needs of society.

In a global context, Kokborok literature shares thematic parallels with other indigenous literatures, highlighting universal values like resilience, community, and respect for nature. However, its distinct focus on matrilineal traditions and the nuanced portrayal of gender roles set it apart, offering unique insights into the Borok worldview.

As modernization and globalization continue to reshape societal norms, Kokborok literature has begun to reflect contemporary issues like gender equality and cultural preservation. Its adaptability ensures that it remains relevant, serving as both a tool for understanding the past and a guide for navigating the future. By documenting, studying, and promoting Kokborok narratives, efforts can ensure that this invaluable cultural heritage thrives in the face of change.

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