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Gender roles and representations in "Thakurmar Jhuli": The role of witches and colorism

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Abstract

"Thakurmar Jhuli," a key part of Bengali folk writings by Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumder, gives a look into the cultural and social habits of early 20th century Bengal. This study looks at the gender roles and images in these tales, focusing on how witches (dainis) are shown and the common practice of colorism. By examining how female characters, especially witches, are depicted and how colorism supports standard beauty ideas, this analysis reveals the hidden messages about gender and looks found in Bengali folklore.

Keywords: Colorism, Thakurmar Jhuli, cultural and social habits, Bengali folklore, Bengali folk writings

Introduction

For many years, "Thakurmar Jhuli" has been a beloved collection, enchanting readers with its gripping stories about brave characters, both human and supernatural. However, these tales also act as cultural artifacts that reflect and maintain existing gender norms and standards. In this essay, we examine how women are portrayed in "Thakurmar Jhuli," focusing on witches and the impact of colorism. By looking closely at this, we can discover the social messages and ongoing effects these stories have on current views of gender and beauty.

Historical and Cultural Context

Colourism in Thakurmar Jhuli: An Historical-Cultural Pretext, Women and Colorism in Lord Thornrose's Storylines In Background In order to capture the full force of gender dynamics and colorist antics in "Thakurmar Jhuli", it is also important that we place these episodes against the historic-social embargo space of Bengal in the early 20th-century. This era was characterized by a grand delexical mix of colonial inheritance, popular traditional ideas and emerging universal ideas. Women were predominantly charged with the care of home and hearth, their activities regulated by prescriptive behaviour. Furthermore, definitions of beauty were highly influenced by colorism, in which light skin often signified attractiveness and decency.

Portrayal of Female Characters

From noble heroines to malicious witches, "Thakurmar Jhuli" portrays all sides of women. However, a theme that ties the male and female narratives together is an emphasis on age-old feminine attributes such as beauty, chastity and docile behaviour. Princesses and heroines usually exhibit these values, often threading their worth to external beauty or the behavior of society.

The Role of Witches in "Thakurmar Jhuli"

In popular iconography, Sakchunni is often represented as a nefarious force and associated with people of marginalised social categories and lower communities. She is represented in an ugly and uncanny physical appearance as dark tone, mistreated hair and a messy look. This tends to further the stereotype of women who are not considered conventionally attractive or oppressively servile. As an example, Sakchunni is being negatively portrayed as a lower caste class person left behind from social fabric of society. Dusky, very ruffled hair, and look thoroughly messed up is how her physical appearances are depicted. This portrayal

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contributes to harmful stereotypes about non-conforming women and caste systems in general.

The relationship of the Sakchunni with underprivileged section of society and marginalized people, continued to emphasize the stratified social order of the time. In other stories, Sakchunni is depicted as a threat to the system and social order — thus indicating how important it is for society to keep caste intact.

1. In the folktales of "Thakurmar Jhuli", the wicked witch is old, ugly and evil. With their dirty dark brown appearance, the messy beautiful locks and quite often naughty demeanor, they differentiate with all the fair-skinned, good-haired noble maidens. This juxtaposition of the witches and heroines underscores the idea that beauty is associated with goodness, while ugliness is associated with evil.

2. In these stories: As standard, lady witches are effective in both enchantment and control. This is a threat to the existing patriarchal structure, and threatened it shall be. The tales invariably feature a strong-willed character who happens to be female, and she is cast in the role of the wicked witch, thereby discouraging women to pursue power and self-governance — inherently suggesting that their only options are domesticity and male subordination.

3. One prominent illustration can be found Fair enough, in the story of Sukhu and Dukhu we do get the conventional witch figure in her cruel stepmother role who unpunished abuse the sweet and innocent Sukhu. Sukhu, who is fair and good-natured, rises above the stepmother's evil actions and dark complexion. This contrast is one that sets good and evil apart at a clear line, while shedding light on the social phenomenon of colorism within these narratives.

Colorism in "Thakumar Jhuli"

We have "colourism" (thakurmar jhuli) as its vermicularcentric idea. This narrative is deeply-rooted in the stories and reinforces cultural standards of beauty and morality.

1. The Ideal of Fair Beauty: There is also no shortage of stories in which the female leads are described as white and always good looking. This fetishization of fairness as a virtue is part and parcel of broader cultural norms that link beauty to light skin in large measure because it stands for both privilege, purity and moral purity. Character Idylls, of princesses with their fair skin as their cardinal physical attribute to highlight features seem automatic and true only in the present story "Lalkamal Neelkamal" where character by itself is alchemized.

2. The Stigmatization of Dark Skin: Conversely, people with darker skin are usually shown in a negative light, associated with bad traits, lower status, and moral decline. In "Thakurmar Jhuli," the witches are often depicted as having dark skin, which reinforces their connection to evil. This kind of portrayal only reinforces harmful stereotypes and perpetuates the negative link between dark skin and unwanted traits.

3. The Intersection of Gender and Colorism The infusion of gender and colorism in "Thakurmar Jhuli" points to the additional bias that women are exposed to because of their gender and skin tone. Female characters with fair skin are usually depicted as being favored, loved, admired and rewarded with positive consequences while dark-skinned

female characters are often penalized or marginalized. This twin prejudice embodies how women are expected to adhere to both societal expectations about their gender that restricts them to certain roles and norms as well as apply an idealized standard of beauty.

Implications for Contemporary Gender and Beauty Standards

The implications of the gender norms and colour preferences depicted in "Thakurmar Jhuli" last till today, when we talk of Gender Equality and Beauty Standards. They were made in those times but shape what societies expect even now and desire.

1. Perpetuation of Stereotypes: Depictions of witches, and emphasis on fair beauty in "Thakurmar Jhuli" reinforces stereotypes that continue to affect women today. Narratives that suggest female power is inherently dangerous, and beauty is directly proportional to fairness; contribute to the oppression of those who don't conform.

2. The Need for Reinterpretation: However, if we approach these stories in a contemporary way, using modern storytelling techniques and contemporary societal attitudes, what could — and should — be done to challenge this model of 'fairness'? By depicting witches as complex individuals with their own motivations, and beauty that encompasses more than the Disney-ified versions we are so often exposed to, surely modern retellings of fairy tales should push for a fairer world.

3. Promoting Inclusivity and Diversity: Looking at the issues of gender and color bias in "Thakurmar Jhuli" gives us an opportunity to make writing more inclusive and diverse. We can change mindsets by highlighting the beauty of different skin tones and respecting the strength and independence of our female heroes."

1. The Ideal Woman: Beauty and Virtue: In stories such as "Lalkamal Neelkamal," the princesses are idealized as an embodiment of beauty and virtue. Their physical beauty is repeatedly described in long passages, which implies that it has contributed to the formation of their character. These figures are also submissive and self-sacrificing—qualities traditionally associated with women.

2. The Villainous Woman: Witches and Step-mothers C In addition to the virtuous female heroines, there are also evil female characters who are usually depicted as witches or wicked stepmothers such as in "Sukhu and Dukhu". These women have characteristics like jealousy, untruthfulness and vengefulness. In this way, the story reinforces a binary opposition between the obedient 'good' woman and the recalcitrant 'bad' woman, continuing societal demands for women.

Dynamics Between Genders

The interconnections of male and female characters in the fairy tales of Thakurmar Jhuli also mirror the gender power dynamics that prevailed during that period. Men such as kings, princes, and heroes are represented as protectors and leaders most of the time while women were shown as passive receivers of their deeds.

1. Male as Protector and Provider: Many tales show men as heroes who rescue powerless women, this supports the notion of male bravery and female dependence. An example is in "The Prince and the Fakir," where the prince's boldness

and quick thinking stand out as he rescues the princess, which reinforces social views on men and women's roles.

2. Female Passivity and Obedience: In many stories, women often appear as passive and obedient, looking to men for rescue or direction. This is clear in narratives with princesses who are limited to their duties in the royal household or dominated by men in authority.

Implications for Contemporary Gender Discourse

"Thakurmar Jhuli" shows the gender norms of its time, but its stories can help us think about Taking another look at these conventional stories provides an opportunity to analyze the beliefs and principles they promote. By delving into the background and depiction of gender roles in "Thakurmar Jhuli," contemporary audiences can gain a deeper understanding of the development of societal expectations and push for fairer depictions in literature.

1. Re-examining Traditional Narratives: Looking again at these old stories makes a chance to examine the ideas and values they support. By exploring the history and portrayal of gender roles in "Thakurmar Jhuli," today's audiences can better grasp how social expectations have evolved and advocate for more equal representations in literature.

2. Inspiring Change Through Literature: Literature can change things because it asks questions about old prejudices and shows different perspectives. Modern adaptations of "Thakurmar Jhuli" can support new gender roles, acting as models for both boys and girls to challenge traditional boundaries.

Conclusion

In terms of importance, "Thakurmar Jhuli" occupies the high pedestal in the Bengali literature for the engaging stories that reflect the culture and social norms of the time period. These accounts especially focus on the stereotypes and representations of the men and women, as well as their respective working spheres during the Bengal of the early 1900s. However, a close reading of these stories, especially those in a controversial narrational mode, could help a lot in reconstructing the context of gender interaction and improve live discussions tackling the issues of gender in literature. However, story-telling is bound to change with population growth, hence with time influencing the new areas and different levels of each gender.

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