



Gothic Folklore as a Primordial Stimulation: Understanding of Cultural Inferences of North-East India Prevalent in Bhaskar Hazarika's *Kothanodi*

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Abstract

Gothicism has emerged as one of the gripping points while narrating the stories of Folk culture. The native or the urban legends are often found to be under a garb of mysticism. From the legends to the lullabies, a certain level of eerie atmos is much sought for in these inferences. Bhaskar Hazarika's 2015 film *Kothanodi* (The River of Fables) handpicks a collection of grandma tales intended to rejuvenate the lost stories of Assamese legends and folklore. The four intertwined narratives successfully transfer us to a world of mystery and cynicism. Infused with supernatural elements, these stories try to inculcate a sense of morality within the audiences. In a society dominated by evil forces, four distinct women from different walks of life are seen battling their own demons. A sense of unrestrained trepidation envelops the entire screenplay in a society that has been ruptured by the demons of their inner self. Inspired by the tales of *Burhi Aair Sadhu* (Grandma's Tales), a popular compendium of folk stories by Lakshminath Bezbaroa, *Kothanodi* brings out the traditional indigenous folktales of Assam. This paper intends to shed light upon the layers of induced meaning behind each of the stories told. The gothic and the supernatural intervention and their importance in a compelling storytelling process are to be focused on. The presence of ecology and superstitions in the folk tales is distinctly observed here. Finally, the precedence of good over evil forces comes out as the moralistic preaching of this project.

Keywords: Gothic mysticism, supernatural apparitions, morality, eco-horror, cynic trepidation



Quality Education

Introduction

Folk tales which were in most cases hand-me-down stories by our grandmothers, included a spice of Gothicism with a hint of mystic bearings. These were not just beneficial in running our imagination but also created a sense of understanding towards the traditions and prejudices of one's own culture. Sahityarathi Lakshminath Bezbaroa's *Burhi Aair Sadhu* (Grandma's Tales), consisting of 30 such stories, provides

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us with a scope to introspect the traditional beliefs of the Assamese culture. An adaptation and re-modification of a select of four such stories- 'Tejimola', 'Champawati', 'Ou Kuwori' (The Outenga Maiden) and 'Tawoir Xadhu' (The Story of Tawoi) by Bhaskar Hazarika, the noted filmmaker from Assam, stands out as an attempt to reassert the old drawn folktales with a pinch of modernist interpretation. Lakshminath Bezbaroa is considered the literary Doyen of the Assamese culture, who was conferred with the title of Sahityarathi. Bhaben Barua points out,

Bezbaroa, in his annual secretarial report, declared that it was one of the aims of the Society to discover the lines along which the Assamese mind (*'Asamiya manuhor manasikota'*) had evolved since the ancient times. In a later period, Bezbaroa engaged himself in the pioneering task of the reconstruction of the past of Assam, that is, of an exposition of the three basic elements of Assam's cultural heritage: (1) the folk tradition, (2) the religious tradition (3) the political history. (Barua, 2014, p.32)

To achieve this intention, he collected a set of 70 Assamese folktales publishing them in 1913 under three volumes: *Kaka Deuta Nati Lora*, *Burhi Air Sadhu* and *Junuka* in an attempt to develop Assamese identity and culture. Assamese folktales are called 'sadhukatha', which according to Bezbaroa, is a "moral tale or teaching of saints or virtuous people" (Nath, 2011, p. 216).

Hazarika, for his 2015 film *Kothanodi (The River of Fables)*, handpicked four such stories. The film not only induces a morality factor for his audience but also brings out the different types of motherhood in a crippled society. Hazarika had taken the liberty to modify the stories to suit modern sensibilities despite keeping the essence of the Assamese culture and that of the work of Bezbaroa intact. Under his direction, the stories enjoy a far darker undertone than that of the original ones. Magic realism¹ between the human-nature intermingling finds a defined structure within the narrative. Hazarika emerges not just as a director but as the creative force behind the film. He creates a vision of the world in cinematic images keeping a river and the two adjacent villages at the centre of the setting, assuming the status of an auteur, distinguishing himself with the Best Feature Film Award along with many others.

Gothic and Mysticism as a Prevalent Trope:

"This is my cultural heritage, and I can take liberties with it. I like stories that are dark and macabre, and I changed the endings – for instance, the original elephant apple story is about a king and his seven queens, one of whom gives birth to the fruit. I made the story about common people" (Ramnath, 2015).

This statement made by the director is imperative to our understanding of his approach toward the cinematography of a set of bedtime stories that converts into horror folktales. It follows several images and actions that are dark, gruesome, and uncanny. For instance, in 'The Outenga Maiden,' he shifts his setting from the palaces of a high order to that of common village folk to cater a better appeal to his audiences. Here the mother, Ketaki, is banished from her domain after reproducing a fruit, Outenga, instead of an heir to the family. Here we find an eerie image of the Outenga

(Elephant Apple), thrown away by its biological father, finding its way to cling to the mother. The images of a revolving fruit that follows Ketaki no matter where she goes come as a shocking state of affairs, so much so that the village kids tend to perceive her as a witch, amounting to endless harassment and ludicrous comments. Finally, when the child comes out of her shell in the final scenes of the movie, the anatomical projection of the daughter, accompanied by the flickering of lights barely coming from a lamp is enough to bring chills down the bones. First, the limbs appear out of the basket of fruits; next comes the feet, followed by the peeping head of the de-shelled girl. The consequent burning of the shell by Devinath, the merchant, to keep the kid from resuming her closet condition, paralleled with the tremendous shrieking of the child, brings out the mysticism of the entire scene.

A question of tone and emphasis acts as a pivotal medium while dealing with stories having mystical gothic elements. No matter how tragic the implications are, the core intent of the fables remains to reveal the power of morality and redemption. Here, the virtue may not always be invariably successful; as we see in the case of patricide in 'The Story of Tawoi,' but the conclusion is always triumphant, as the couple realizes the sanctity of the old Tawoi. The concept of villain-hero² is indeed an invention of the gothic form. Throughout the film, we find the bereaved mother, Malati, who had to forego the loss of her three toddlers who were buried alive at the advice of her husband's uncle. Just like Malati, we sense a devious motive of Tawoi until the revelation at the end where our presumed villain attains the position of a savior and a hero. On the advice of Tawoi, when the couple visits the same jungle of their homicidal setting, they find the supernatural apparitions of the dead children emerging out of the land to reveal their cruel intention of killing their father if they were allowed to live. This premonition on the part of Tawoi attains a Shamanistic³ quality to the story. Sankhayan Ghosh affirms the statement by saying, "In the story about the married couple who have been sacrificing their newborns, when it is revealed that the uncle is not an evil man after all and has been their protector all along, it affirms the shamanistic practice that had led to the sacrifice of newborns." (Ghosh, 2020) Hazarika here complicates the ethical question of filicide, blurring the borders between good and evil, where the horrid act of infanticide turns out to be a shamanistic ritual.

The major symbols and meanings in a Gothic depend on the awareness of some sort of spiritual isolation of an individual in a society. These characters often project a fear of solitude. In the tale 'Tejimola', we find the household matriarch, Senehi, suffering from a similar state of loneliness. Her isolation is psychological as she finds out all her dreams and ambitions of marrying rich was transformed into a position of a mere caregiver of her stepdaughter. The love and care between the father-daughter duo create a vacuum within Senehi so much so that she fabricates a demonic lover for herself, descending into hysteria and plotting the death of her stepdaughter, Tejimola. On the other hand, the irrational greed of Dhoneshwari to acquire abundant gold jewelry by marrying her daughter to a python emerges not just as a ridiculous thought but a terrible misjudgment of actions. Both the burial of Tejimola after her murder leading to the sprouting of a plant at the same place and the discovery of Bonolitika

wearing her silver bangle from the swallowed remains of the python talk of the dangerous depictions of overpowering hysteria.

Considering the model offered by Todorov⁴, each tale in the film starts at a 'disruption', be it the burying of the child, the planning of a union between a girl and a python, the witch-hunting for an attached phantasmagorical fruit, or, the gruesome treatment of a step-mother towards the ward of the house. This pattern runs parallel with all four folktales chosen by Hazarika and somehow gets intertwined with each other. The music and the heightening of sounds consisting of local dialect in the film add up to the grim storytelling and get so well-infused within the fabric of *Kothanodi* that it results in a folk horror narrative. The uncanny way of narrating the story has such an impact that it familiarizes even the unfamiliar objects. One is led to believe in the presence of a mystic python or a fruit-bearing toddler being so engulfed by the movie experience. Here it can be observed that the "natures include non-human animal perception along with a human one, all of them sharing a common perspective or affinity" (Bravo, 2013). As soon as we attune ourselves expecting innocent bedtime stories, the director acts upon us to seize the situation and create horror in the simple everyday realities of the village life. He tricks our emotions in response to the images of the uncanny and horror. The lack of rational behaviour among the characters of the film causes the metamorphosis of the victims, which are presented through the scenes of gory representation of gothic mysticism.

Nature and Myth Innate to the Folk Life:

Human beings and nature always appear in harmony in reference to the roots and heritage of any culture. Human as natural beings gets increasingly emphasized as a cultural ethos while reading the fantastical texts of their ancestors. Myth, which is the primary ground for all our traditions and beliefs, is often represented in sync with the folklore of the respective areas. Episodes and snippets of certain fables and mythical representations are seen to impact our reading and understanding of folk cultures. An introspection of the four narratives in this context traces back to these modalities of rudimentary beliefs.

Locating the Use of Myth

Verrier Elwin, in his *Myths of the North-East Frontier of India*, refers to Tagins, a primitive tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, who were believers of 'Doino-Pollo' or the Sun-moon God, who reigns supreme in Heaven. Elwin quotes, "He watches everything; he is the witness of truth; he shows men the way to go; he protects them; he treats them with mercy" (Elwin, 2017, p.211). This benevolent characteristic of this mythical being is replicated through the projection of Tawoi Sadhu. Once a bedridden uncle, Tawoi advised his nephew, Poonai, to adorn the profession of a fisherman, which would encourage bountiful luck and wealth. The guiding force of Doino-Pollo is envisioned when Tawoi Sadhu not only gives insights about the fortune-incurring deeds but protects the family from the evils of supernatural forces that have encaptivated the first three born of Poonai and Malati. In a state of mysterious demand, he advises

Poonai to bury his newborn child in the jungles without providing any proper explanation. It is only after the birth of the fourth child that he approves of her, naming her Bhagyawati, someone who would bring luck to the family. In the story, Tawoi is conferred with the title of Sadhu, emphasizing his ability to see beyond the capacity of ordinary beings.

Through the acceptance of Bhagyawati, we are revealed the actual motive of the previous infanticides. On re-visiting the burial grounds, the parents discover the evil spirits that those children inculcated, when they confessed, they would have been the reason of untimely tragic death of the father if they were not buried at birth. The emergence of skulls from the ground, where the bodies were buried and revealing their true evil identity and intentions to their parents in a dark, sinister voice brings out cynic trepidations within the audience. However, the appearance of the egg-shaped skull reminds us of a Bodo Legend from one of the Assamese tribes where Bhagwan Aham Guru forbade two chickens to hatch their eggs when there was no sign of chicks from their first one. Just like Tawoi, Aham Guru asks to scatter the shells among the soil, which later cultivated evil spirits and worms. It is only after thousands of years from the remaining two eggs that were born human beings, similarly marking the wait for the birth of Bhagyawati worthwhile for the Poonai family.

The story of Satapatha Brahmana talks about the birth of Brahma, "At the beginning there existed nothing but water ... then a golden egg originated from them; Prajapati arose out of that egg ... so Prajapati, trying to speak, uttered bhuh and the word became the earth ..." (Das, 2011, p. 24). The absurdity of Prajapati emerging out of a golden egg parallels that of a young girl coming out of the fruit, Outenga. The creation of the earth is the symbolic representation of the world that was made a better place to live in for her mother, Ketaki after she sheds the fruit shell. Ketaki was abandoned for not being able to reproduce a child. She did not just have to leave behind her village but face the continuous humiliation of having a rolling fruit wherever she treads. Living the solitary life of ignominy, it was only with the appearance of the child from its shell that she was seen to have a newfound purpose in life, a reason to live with dignity.

The very first lines of Sri Sankardeva's *Kirtana*, the holiest book of the Assamese Vaishnavas, sum up the idea of creation among the Assamese villagers. Das reiterates "... From the navel-lotus of yours was born Brahma... The first form of your Avataras was the Fish" (Das, 201, p.25). This resonates with the different allusions made by Devinath to help Ketaki understand the absurdity of the Outenga. He refers to such other stories:

In Maibong, they say a woman once gave birth to a kitten. On the far banks of Bhoroli River, I once met a woman who was raised by a kite. And in the village to the east of Sadiya, a duck's egg cracked one winter morning and a girl hatched out of it. (*Kothanodi*, 0:36:24- 0:36:38)

These apparent fantastical incidents can find their tracks back to the different myths and beliefs of the land.

The myth of U Thlen concerns a man-eating serpent regarded as the snake God by the Khasi Tribe. Apparently, it used to receive human sacrifices. Just like the evil serpent in the *Bible*, this malevolent serpent, too, feasted upon the innocence of some unaware travellers and resided in the wilderness of modern-day Sohra or, Cherrapunji. To control the devouring nature of U Thlen, U-Suitnoh, the king of the hills used to feed him goat meat. This episode from the pages of Indian legends immediately rivets us to the story of "Champawati", where Dhoneswari plans to wed her daughter to a python after hearing the news of Champawati receiving gold ornaments as a gift from her husband, who happens to be another mysterious python. Dhoneswari, in her irrational madness of greed, procures an ordinary python from the jungle and feeds it the meat of a duck to satiate its hunger, replicating the behaviour of the Suitnoh. However, with the approach of the climax, we find our worst fears coming true when the daughter, Bonolotika, works as bait for human sacrifice. During the wedding night, the serpent wraps her body, suffocating her to death. In the myth, the serpent finds its end when one day U Thlen swallows a lump of burning coal, and here the tragedy falls with the complete swallowing of Bonolotika following the demise of both.

Living in close proximity to all sorts of natural phenomena and believing in various sorts of unexplained superstitions is a common occurrence in average Assamese village life. To them, every ancient tree is inhabited by spirits, as Tejimola re-emerges as a plant in the same place where she was buried to the horrors of Senehi. Similarly, every water body is dominated by water nymphs introspecting within the lives of the people coming near the waters. Senehi too is found to be lured by one such nymph and listens and works as opined by this mysterious being, the reality of whom is kept in shadows throughout the film.

Nature as a Dominant Factor

Man, from the earliest times, must have been indebted to trees and plants for food, shelter, fuel, and clothing. Folktales talk about a specific "Tree of Sorrow", who when dejected by her lover, kills herself, and from the place of her cremation, sprouts a tree with beautiful blossoms, having sweet fragrance. In the original story of "Tejimola" by Bezbaroa, we find her transformed into a plum tree after her death. Eventually, even the plum tree is thrown away in the river, transforming her into a lotus and singing a sad song of her reality to her merchant father, Devinath. The father then asks her to transform into a sparrow to keep the bird with him safe from the evils of the world.

Taking help from nature to convey one's sorrow to voicing out the sorrow of nature itself, such animalistic beliefs often find their place in these rural tales. Aubrey points out in his *Remains of Gentilism and Judaisme* that, before an oak tree falls, it shrieks and groans as if it were the genius of the oak lamenting. The Outenga, when it was not made a part of the discussion between its mother, Ketaki, and Devinath, was so affected that it was compelled to roll away from its mother. At that point, we hear its lamentations about the dejection of her mother's love, the same fear of circumstances that forced her to cloister herself within the fruit.

It was believed that the fate of the Rajas of Gonda was bound up with a Chilbil Tree, which like many sacred trees of India was said to have sprouted from a tooth twig of a saint. The fate of Ketaki also gets intertwined with this natural aspect of a rolling fruit. Though the problems that befell her are because of the fruit, it is the same fruit that later becomes the cause of her survival and ultimately the only reason for her living after the girl child emerges from it. Each village has certain notions about the elderly spirits, that when a man dies, the spirit goes into the trees, as in the case of Tejimola. Again, if a woman wants a child, she must sacrifice a dear object, where Malati had to bear the murder of her three boys before she could have a girl, Bhagyawati, to keep to herself. Glimpses of eco-horror⁵ thus find their way through the storytelling of the various cultural inferences in the movie.

The same idea of interdependency and manifestation of life as found in the folklore of plants, underlines much about the folklore of animals. In many of the tribal folk tales, most characters are animals that speak and act like human beings. Champawati, while playing in the forest, comes across a python who wishes to marry her; on failure to do so, troubles would have descended upon their family wealth. In fear of losing business, the young Champawati gets married to the python, but after the wedding night, the python vanishes leaving behind a gold-clad Champawati. This brings out the exogamous nature of such tales, where matting outside one's social group or species is seen very frequently.

It is to be said that the theological beliefs of the native folks do not adhere to the primary vision of the Supreme Creator spirit. The Gods of the heathen are more often personified natural objects like animals, trees, or simply a man possessing unseen powers. This man is often referred to as the guardian deity. They consist of elemental human forces and their power transcends those of the ordinary men. This ethereal force finds its place in the description of Tawoi Sadhu, who despite being blind is gifted with the power to see the future and mark the path for the people, his nephew in particular; acting as a guardian angel to the family.

Psychodynamics of Motherhood:

Hazarika specifically selected those stories for his film which had a bond of strong motherly instincts. However, the greatness of his screenplay lies in the display of a distorted form of motherhood that has been presented throughout the running times of the movie. Coming out of the conventional stereotypes of all-sacrificing mothers, Hazarika brings out the different types of relations that can sprout from this mother-daughter relation graph. The psychological paralysis of the mothers bringing about the reversal of fate for their daughters forms the basic theme of these four stories.

The schizophrenic second wife of Devinath is found to construct a split personality, as her repressed desires consume her after he leaves behind his daughter, Tejimola, at her behest. This starts a series of actions where her rational mind takes a back seat and she plots ways to torture her stepdaughter. Be it by forcefully feeding her earthworms, hitting her on the kitchen floor, harassing her mentally by destroying her own mother's apparel with a rat and blaming it upon the girl, or the final act of crushing her limbs

and head one after another under the wooden grinder. We find the presence of a mysterious lover, who constantly incites her how to torture Tejimola, but it is only in the final scenes of the movie that we realize that the lover is just a fabrication of her own mind, a release agency for all the harmful deeds she always wanted to perform upon Tejimola.

Women are pitted against women when the arrival of the second wife Dhoneswari subsequently endangered the position of the first wife, Roopeswari in the household. As a result, she along with her daughter is banished to a small outhouse. The 'id'⁶ of the mother creeps in on seeing the fortunes of Champawati received from the King of Forests. In want of better and more gold jewellery, she too decides to marry her daughter, but to a common python. Her hubris had so overpowered her that she was unable to capture the logical differentiation between the events, even after repeated warnings both by the first wife and the family priest. Her desperation and arrogance superseded her rationality to the extent that she cut short the rituals and the mantras to expedite the coitus of her daughter with the python in the hope of receiving the gold faster. The importance of the performance of rites and rituals was in total disregard in this entire scenario concerning us with constant bad omens that is to follow.

Tawoi Sadhu emerges out as the authoritative symbol of the household, who manages and controls every action of the family. Malati is placed helpless and a victim of constant reproduction, with the failure to secure her child's life each time. Tawoi emerges out as a strong phallic symbol of the family whose words and wishes cannot be disregarded, especially by Poonai, the husband. Malati's perception of the ill intention of Tawoi, henceforth murdering him kicks in her psychology in a desperate attempt to save her fourth child, a daughter whom she wants to name Bhagyawati. This same name is suggested by Tawoi as he proclaims her to be the firstborn in the family. Though she refrains from murdering him ultimately, we can understand her motherly instincts take the high ground in a desperate attempt to protect her daughter.

Lastly, Ketaki after being banished from her house faces the same anxiety and fear that her daughter was facing resulting in trapping herself within a fruit shell. The mother-daughter duo was tied to the same cord of dejection from society. It is only after the hearty meal prepared by the mother, could the daughter understand the warmth and love her mother is ready to provide her. We finally find her de-shelling herself. The psychological unanimity and the slow-growing bond of love and understanding between the two form the highlight of the movie.

Conclusion

Perhaps the most common criterion to define folklore is the way in which folklore is transmitted. To discuss about folk and folklore in a society so advanced in science might seem paradoxical at first. Folk cultures are in constant comparison with rational modernist cultures. However, a deep study of both would bring out the implications that the development of modern society has its roots in these cultural folktales itself.

Bhaskar Hazarika had tried to bridge this very gap of perception through *Kothanodi*. Taking us back to our childhood memories of *Thakumar Jhuli*⁷, he had captured, reinterpreted and modernized a few cultural heritages of Assam keeping it in the backdrop of a river. The theory of the existence of only water in the beginning has found its place in the minds of many primitive cultures. The river over here acts both as a dividing factor between the villages, as well as the connecting part among the different characters in the movie, thus weaving his fables circling around the symbolic presence of a river is aptly signified.

Notes

¹Matthew Stretcher described Magic Realism as, "What happens when a highly detailed, realistic setting is invaded something too strange to believe" in his 1999 essay Magic Realism and the Search for identity in the Fiction of Murakami Haruki. It is the portrayal of fantastical events in otherwise realistic tone.

²Clarence Boyer in *The Villain as Hero in Elizabethan Tragedy* regards villain-hero as a complex character who might appear to be a villain on a superficial level, but turns out to be a hero at last.

³Originated from Tungus word Šaman, Shaman refers to a person having access in the world of good and evil spirits. In Hinduism he is a priest, called to solve family disputes, ranging from illness to failure of crops.

⁴Bulgarian-French historian Tzvetan Todorov discusses the five stages that a character goes through in a narrative, namely: Equilibrium, Disruption, Recognition, Repair the Damage and Equilibrium Again.

⁵Ecological horror depicts evil as the result of our own fractured relation with the environment. Eco-Horror is heavily influenced by cultural creation and destruction of myths.

⁶Freud's theory of personality considered a tripartite structure of psyche- id, ego, super-ego. Here, 'id' is the source of all psychic energies, the part of human impulses that's committed to instincts.

⁷*Thakumar Jhuli* (Grandmother's Bag of Tales) is a collection of Bengali folk tales by Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumder.

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