

The Archetypal Cruel Stepmother in the Mao Folktales

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Abstract

The tale of a cruel stepmother is common in almost all cultures across the world (Williams 255; Thompson 127) whereas, the tale of a cruel stepfather is uncommon. In the persecuted heroine tales like Cinderella (ATU 709) or Snow White (ATU 709) the stepmother is the cause of all suffering. The study aims to explore how women are projected as inherently evil through narratives that are often patriarchal. In the folktales of most cultures, women are depicted as temptresses or cruel stepmothers who lure presumably 'ignorant' men into their own doom. The paper focuses upon the cruel stepmother trope in Mao Folktales and how the tales are indicative of society's biased notion of women and motherhood. The narratives seem to caution its members against the danger of women in positions of power.

Keywords: Folktales; Mao; Motherhood; Patriarchy; Stepmother

Introduction

Folktales are short narratives in prose form, most of which are from unknown authorship and have been handed down orally. They are stories from events of the distant past to educate the social group with values that are meant to be upheld. The folktales include genres like myths, fables, and fairy tales. The fairy tale type is found either in the same or similar versions across the continents (Abrams and Harpham 139).

The paper examines the tales of four stepmothers in the Mao Naga folktales which have been collected and published by N. Saleo in the first volume of *Edemeiko Bvii* (Folk Stories in Mao). The Mao Naga society is known for its rich oral tradition.

The Folktale is called *Edemeiko* (story of ancient people) or *Opfopeko* (story of the ancestors) in *Maola* (Mao language). The literal meaning would mean the life of the ancestors. Since the tales are about themselves, their lives, and their activities, they are reflective of the people's worldview. Tales are mostly fluid and therefore different versions of the same story are a common characteristic (Thou 2). With the basic content remaining the same, there are 345 versions of Cinderella according to Smith (Dainton 93) while Thompson identifies not less than five hundred versions in Europe alone (Thompson 127). While non-western classifications of tale-types across cultures may differ from that of western classification, it may be proposed that the Cinderella tale-type of a cruel stepmother and persecuted heroine (ATU 510A) is a global theme. That the archetypal character of the cruel stepmother is found in the tales of almost all cultures is indicative of patriarchy's notion of women and motherhood. Most societies in the world being patriarchal by nature, a stepmother represents the subverted image of womanhood.

The four stepmother tales in the Mao narratives are "Kateini Ko" "Kholiru Ko" "Choro Ko" and "Kholia Ko". In contrast to the characters of stepmothers who are projected as cruel and wicked, the fathers are meek and compassionate. As in the 'Cinderella' stories, all the four tales centre on a heroine (or hero in the case of Choro) who is made to suffer by a cruel stepmother. Apart from this basic

motif, the Mao stories under discussion vary from the Cinderella stories in certain aspects like the absence of a magical guardian who helps the heroine triumph in the end or the absence of an epiphany that reveals her true worth. What is quite significant in the Mao tales is the closure. Unlike the Cinderella story of Charles Perrault (which is the most popular version of Cinderella story), all the four Mao tales end in retribution or punishment.

The following are the abstracts of the four Mao tales selected for the present study:

Tale No. 1: Kateini

Kateini's father takes a second wife after the death of Kateini's mother. Kateini is made to work very hard. Her step-mother ill treats her but her step-sister Kajiini is loving towards her. At the *saleni* (post-plantation festival), Kateini wins a competition much to the displeasure of her stepmother. Kateini could win because her father had helped her without the knowledge of the stepmother. More cruelty is meted out to Kateini which makes her flee to her aunt at Viswema. There she gets married to a wealthy man who later holds an *ozhoso* (feast of merit) to which Kateini's father is invited. Kateini's father, as instructed by Kateini, asks for the best cow from Kateini's husband. Although the cow brings better fortune to Kateini's father, it becomes the cause of the stepmother's death when she slips on the cow dung and dies.

Tale No.2: Kholia Ko

Left without a mother, Kholia is looked after by her father. Later the father decides to get married to a woman who gives him the condition that he must part with his daughter Kholia if they are to wed. Acting upon the advice of this woman, Kholia's father takes his young daughter deep into the forest and abandons her. She is rescued by a wealthy old man who later marries her to his only son. One day, Kholia advised her husband to hold *Aso Koto* (a feast of friendship) between their village and her father's village. She gets to have her father as her guest. After feeding him the choicest food, she reveals her true identity to her father and reminds him how he had left her to be eaten up by wild animals in the forest. He is filled with remorse and guilt. As soon as he reaches home, he dies.

Tale No. 3: Choro Ko

Choro is a boy who lost his mother at an early age. His father gets married to a woman, from whom two daughters named Charani and Kapeini are born. Choro's stepmother proves to be a wicked person who starves him and makes him work hard. Choro spends most of his time in the field and his stepmother brings him lunch that would be mixed with hen's droppings. One day, his stepsisters, who share much affection for him, insist on visiting Choro with delicious food they had specially cooked for him. Choro makes wings and tail out of the dresses of his sisters and turns into an *oro* bird. He flies away but tells them that he would pay them a visit on the third day. So on the third day, he drops good feathers on his father and step-sisters but on his stepmother, he drops his *obu* (droppings) and blinds her.

Tale No. 4 Kholiru Ko

Kholiru is also known as Asha from Saranamei village. She has a cruel stepmother who makes her work so hard that she never has the time to socialise with her peers. While trying to pluck *olo* (plant-its skin is used to make dress in olden days), she drops her bangles into the lake. Her stepmother accuses her of giving her bangles to her lover and Kholiru is deeply hurt. She tries to prove her innocence by taking her father to the lake and there, she prays to the god of the lake. She asks him to return the bangles and offers herself in exchange. The bangles were thrown out of the lake and Kholiru jumps into the lake. She tells her father to return home immediately and to give the bangles to his wife. She also tells him that before he hands over the bangles to the stepmother, he shall see Kholiru's reflection in the bangles. So when the father reaches home, he throws the bangles at his wife which hit her on the knee. The stepmother dies of the wound caused by the bangles.

Analysis of the Tales:

The Mao Naga society has a patriarchal social structure in which the ultimate power and authority are vested in men. If a couple failed to have male issues, the property is inherited by the nearest male kin of the father and not by the daughters. In this

way, the properties of the forefathers are passed on to the younger generations through the male children in the family (Singh and Maheo 126; Ashikho). Since such a structure is taken as the natural order, it goes unchallenged and accepted by members of the society, including women. In some cases, women themselves are preservers of patriarchy because they have been groomed into accepting the norm. Society's repeated projection of women as inherently evil necessarily conditions the subject into accepting her position as inferior or evil. Human society is a story-making society and stories play a significant role as instructor.

The stepmother is the archetypal wicked woman who does not possess a shred of kindness (Dainton 94; Williams 255). The stepmother in the four Mao tales is projected to be all wickedness and cruelty. In the Mao stepmother folktales, the settings are familiar locales like the forest, paddy field, lake, or village. This sense of familiarity lends authenticity to the tales. When stories are set in familiar locales, the stories tend to have more credence to the listeners (Vatuk and Vatuk 26). The feast of *Aso Koto* (Peace Treaty) and *ozhoso* (The Feast of Merit), which are events mentioned in the first and second tales respectively used to be part and parcel of the community's way of life. The remnants of these feasts are found around the present habitat of the Maos in Manipur today, though these feasts are longer held by the Maos. The actions involved in the stories are normal activities that are expected from both genders and are more or less practised to this day. The community celebration of Saleni (post plantation Feast usually in July) in the tales is being celebrated even to this day. Viswema in "Kateini Ko" is a village in Nagaland bordering the state of Manipur. It is the geographical and cultural familiarity which lends that element of truth that invigorates the tales with life, making them more potent to instruct.

The Mao society assigns unwritten roles to both genders. Women's roles are limited to the homestead and do not have important roles to play in the political arena, which is dominated by men. Women, as a rule, have not been encouraged to articulate their thoughts because the power of articulation rests with men. This

is because women themselves have not considered themselves entitled to tell their side of the story. Thus articulations of their desires, their needs and concerns are silenced. According to recent feminist views (see MacKinnon, 1989; Cixous, 1976), the language of prevailing discourse is essentially 'male' and therefore the masculine is the norm by which the world is viewed. The power of articulation belongs to men and even in the case of oral narratives, the stories are told by men from a male perspective. It is therefore not very surprising that stepfather tales are uncommon, for in the patriarchal worldview men can do no wrong whereas women are the cause of all evil. In this way, the tales highlight only the faults of women so that they continue to be dominated and discriminated against. Although there are many real instances of drunken men who perpetrate violence against their wives and children, tales about the cruelty of men in the Mao folk narratives are remarkably absent. Drinking has always been part and parcel of Mao culture just as any other culture in the world. In many folk tales including in 'Kateini Ko' and 'Kholia Ko', there is mention of drinking but what ensues after the drinking is conveniently left out.

The position of the stepmother is the most undesirable in most societies. Since womanhood is always seen in connection to reproduction, the womb is seen as a signifier of womanhood. Therefore, motherhood cannot be conceived of in isolation from the womb. A woman who plays the role of a mother for a child she has not given birth to is seen with suspicion and animosity. This is so because patriarchy conceives womanhood only in two ways- as a womb that produces children for man and as an object of man's pleasure. As such, it becomes problematic when that identity is subverted by a woman assuming a mother's role for a child she has not given birth to.

Conclusion

Women in the select tales did not have a visible role to play in society. It is only their projected cruelty towards the stepchildren that are given visibility in the narratives. Otherwise, their presence in the narratives is usually silenced until they slowly fade from the scene. Kholia's stepmother does not appear again in

the story after tempting her husband to abandon Kholia. Choro's stepmother is blinded by Choro in revenge at the end of the story, thus making her insignificance complete. Kateini and Kholiru's stepmothers had tragic ends in their lives. They became the 'invisible man' of Ralph Ellison because others failed to see goodness in them. Had their good deeds been highlighted, the tales would have different endings. All the stories ended on a sad note for the stepmothers. In fact, as Williams opines, the Grimms increased the violence in their tales to make them more instructive and educative (259). Similarly, the cruelty of stepmothers in the tales under study is exaggerated to the point that they are stripped of all human compassion. By magnifying the cruelty of the stepmothers, the narratives act as tools to caution against the power women can wield, if uncontrolled.

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