
Reading Tribal Minds on Female Sexuality through Santhal Folktales

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ABSTRACT

Feminist discourses reveal various hidden as well as explicit ways through which patriarchal society tries to suppress, oppress, and marginalise women. Similarly, several notions of Santhal women prevail in the Santhal society and culture, which can be interpreted as oppressive. The representation of women in their folktales has been done in a way that makes them cruel stepmothers, untrustworthy wives, and fooling girls. This paper aims to discuss these issues related to the portrayal of women in their folktales and reveal the hidden ways of oppression in their culture. Besides, it will try to disrupt the stereotypical concepts prevailing in Santhal society regarding women and reconstruct those ideas with modern perceptions and beliefs.

Keywords: Female sexuality, feminism, Santhal folktales, folklore, cultural studies

Introduction

Female sexuality seems to be constructed across cultures as a complex and complicated issue that appears to be a matter of discussion for males in society. Sexuality has been understood by feminists as gender performance which depends on the biological, psychological, and sociocultural construction of a person (Butler 7). In a patriarchal society, women were marginalised, and their emotions, identity, and sexuality were also neglected. The Santhal tribe seems to be a group of people whose minds are also similar, and their thought processes are no different than the prevailing notion about female sexuality. A Santhal woman is suppressed in almost every aspect of life, from the games played in childhood to worshipping a god. She cannot even pass her social, religious, or household judgment. Like other patriarchal societies, before marriage, she is her father's property; after marriage, she is her husband's property, and then, as a widow, she belongs to her son. These ideas can be seen in their culture in various forms, and their folktales are one of the forms which showcase their ideals about women. Thus, the article has sought to discuss the hidden discourse of folktales through which women in the Santhal tribe are oppressed, suppressed, and marginalised.

As folktales are the mirror of society, we perceive the hidden patriarchal ways prevailing in Santhal society through reading their folktales. Tribes tend to separate themselves from mainstream society, so there is little scope to know about their culture, society, and societal norms. Santhals are not exceptional. Folktales are the lens through which we come to know about their clan. No doubt, Santhals are blessed with many folktales, and the portrayal of women characters is tremendously essential. In Santhal culture, there are many folktales where women are oppressed, tortured, and used as objects. Besides, women have been represented as cruel, inhuman beings and witches.

Santhals are one of the largest indigenous tribes in India, spread over the eastern part of India in the states of Bihar, Jharkhand, Orissa, Chhattisgarh, West Bengal, Assam, Tripura, and Meghalaya. The Santhal community still suffers from low literacy, social backwardness, low economic activity, and poor health conditions. Along with all the hardships of the tribe, a Santhal woman is suppressed, oppressed, and marginalised in their society and culture. Reverend Paul Olaf Bodding, a Norwegian who knew the Santhal tribe from its very core, "The original and still often theoretically accepted idea about women among the Santhal seems to be that she is a kind of irresponsible and untrustworthy being, a necessary and useful, but somewhat inferior member of human society" (Traditions and Institutions of The Santals, 221). Santhal women are oppressed mercilessly in their tribal society, and this oppression is hidden from the mainstream culture as the tribe tends to separate themselves. The men in their society have used the innocence or foolishness of Santhal women to exploit them.

Similarly, the representation of women and discourses in their folklore tend to convey such harsh realities that a Santhal woman must endure.

As (Step)Mothers

Women have played various roles in their lives: daughter, wife, mother, stepmother, etc. In every phase of life, they deal with many responsibilities and are judged by society. In the story "A Stepmother", the woman is portrayed as cruel as a monster who wants to kill her stepson just because he annoyed her (Bodding Vol 1 274). In this story, the man married another woman after the first wife's death and had a son. He wanted the second wife to take care of his son. In the beginning, the woman takes care of the son. Still, after a few days, she refuses, saying, "For some reason or other it always irritates me to see this boy" (Bodding Vol.1 277). The woman replied when she asked why she was angry with her husband. She tries to manipulate the husband to kill the boy, "kill the or else take him somewhere and get him out of the way" (Bodding Vol.1 277). The man did not want to kill his son. He denied it every time, and the stepmother made various ways to kill the boy. She suggests, "When you are ploughing, make him lead, and you follow ploughing; cut the beam of the plough you use and give it a point sharp as a needle" (Bodding Vol.1 279). Also, she forces the man to kill the boy by himself, and eventually, the man tries a few times to kill the boy, but every time, he gets emotional and fails to kill the boy. In the end, he realised his mistake and gave a lesson to the woman, "you told me to kill; I did not kill him, and I shall certainly not kill him, whether you, being annoyed at it, will remain here or not. He is my only child; in spite of that you try to make me kill him?" he kicked out the woman (Bodding Vol.1 281). After some days, she came with her father, and after listening to all the mishaps, her father also scolded her. Here, the woman appeared to be an inhuman entity who wanted to kill an innocent child. In most societies, the concept of a stepmother is negative. Stepmothers seem to be the most untrustworthy people in every society. Sometimes, a man gets married after the death of his first wife just because he wants the second wife to take care of his child. Here, the child or children belong to that person's first wife. A stepmother's job appears to be a child's caregiver; when the woman fails to do that, the family or society judges her.

In the folktale "The Boy and his Stepmother", the stepmother is presented as a cruel person who does not give food to her stepson, acts ill, and wants to get the cow killed to feed the boy. The stepmother wished to do this only to please herself. Two other folktales around Stepmother go similarly. In "The Cruel Stepmother", the stepmother of a prince loved the boy at first until she bore her son. After that, she got jealous of the boy and manipulated the king to kill his elder son, which he agreed to after some resistance. Eventually, the boy gets all his father's fortune after some time, and the stepmother dies, after which the king and the boy feast in happiness. Similarly, in "The Jealous Stepmother", the stepmother wanted her stepson to be killed unless she would not live with her husband. The father of the boy tries to kill him only to realise that he is like the first crop, which is already grown and can support him at later stages. The stepmother gets beatings and scolding in return for her jealousy.

As Wives and daughters

In "The King and his inquisitive queen," the king gets a boon that will enable him to understand the language of the animals and insects. One day, the king laughed while eating with her queen because he heard an ant, and the queen inquired about the laughter. The king cannot talk about the boon to anyone unless he will die. So, to keep it a secret, he took his queen to a riverside and beheaded her, after which the king reigned prosperously. This folktale showcases the vulnerability of Santhal women in their society and culture.

In "The Girl Who Always Found Helpers", the girl is treated badly by her sisters-in-law when her brothers are not in the house. Here, the sisters-in-law behave like patriarchal agents and oppress the innocent girl. Another folklore that showcases the vulnerability of the Santhal woman is "The Pious Woman," in which a lady gets a boon so that she can see the afterlives of people. One day, when her father-in-law died, she was able to see "four sipahis armed with iron shed staves and of fierce countenance come to the house" to take her father-in-law by his neck and thrust him (Bompass, 38). The lady laughed at this sight, which infuriated her husband and relatives. This led them to hold a council against her where her laughter is questioned. If she could not have satisfied the council, they could have considered that she had killed her father-in-law by witchcraft. But at last, she told them about the boon, and they believed her, after which she lost her power as she had to keep this a secret.

The folklore "The Two Wives" tells us about two wives. Where the first wife is of a prince who murders her husband only to be rejected by her lover because of her cruelty and heartlessness. On the other hand, the wife of a Dewan's son, who is the friend of the prince, is a worshipper of Mahadeb and has earned a boon from the god. The Dewan's son and his wife decided to restore the prince's life; thus, the two wives have been portrayed in contrast. "The Wife Who Could Not Keep a Secret" is another folklore where the wife is portrayed as a fool and tested by her husband to see if she can keep a secret. The story ends with a moral that "however friendly you are with a man do not tell him what is in your heart, and never tell your wife the real truth, for one she will lose her temper and let the matter out" (Bompass 236-237)

Similarly, in the folktale "The Silly Women," Santhal women are shown as foolish and perform silly things. Santhal men directed their wives to wait till their return from a trip and asked them not to sacrifice the female cow to Bonga. However, the women do not wait for their husband's return and try to sacrifice the cow.

They try to cut the tail first, thinking that it is the soul of the cow and that it will die immediately. They continuously strike the cow on its tail when it escapes from them. In search of the cow, they ate cotton soaked in blood, thinking of it as cow fat. When their husbands return home, they sacrifice the cow by striking at the right place, and when they get to know about their wives' foolish acts, they laugh at it and never allow women to sacrifice any cow after that.

A girl seemed to be the property of her parents, and her parents could do everything to the girl without her consent. In "The Tiger's Bride", a woman goes to the forest to collect grass, and after finishing her work, she finds that the bundle is too heavy to lift (Bompas 154). So she cries for help, but nobody comes; then "she called and called and called and at last began to promise that she would give her daughter in marriage to anyone who would help her" (Bompas 154). The woman appeared as a businessperson exchanging their product for another product; here, the woman presented the daughter as an object that she could sell or trade. A tiger heard the woman's call and agreed to help her, and the woman also promised to give her daughter. "Two or three days after, the tiger presented himself at her house and was duly married to the daughter. After the wedding, the couple started for the tiger's home; all the way, the unhappy bride wept and sang— how far off is our home, big head?" (Bompas 154). The girl was so helpless that she had to marry a tiger and went with the animal without knowing the place. When they reached where the tiger used to live, the tiger told the girl to cook food for him and his friend. However, the girl went away and climbed a tree, and she wanted to go to her mother's house and live there forever.

Santhals have mourning songs; when a mother dies, they mourn in a specific way. The song of mourning for her husband's death is different. If a husband dies, they mourn like this: "Alas, alas, my shading umbrella, My shading umbrella, O mother, is blown away. Going in which direction Might I catch sight of the form of my shading umbrella? Alas, alas my pigeon mate, My pigeon-mate and I, our pair is broken. Going which direction Might I catch of the form of my pigeon-mate" (*Traditions and Institutions of the Santals* 175-176). Here, the husband is compared with the "umbrella"; after marriage, the girls come to the husband's house and stay with her husband and in-laws. After the loss of her husband, the woman finds difficulty with her in-laws and becomes helpless and homeless. "When people among us die, our women cry awfully; they cry alas, alas; they wail, they beat their breast, they knock their forehead against the ground; they sing mourning songs, mentioning various matters" (*Traditions and institutions of the Santals* 175). Shedding tears is the job of women; we can find it in every situation of life, and it is stereotyped that men do not cry. Instead, they are not allowed to express their emotions. It is specified by "our women cry awfully", and it is believed that women are emotionally weak (*Traditions and Institutions of the Santals* 175).

Widowhood

The state of widowhood for a Santhal woman is often perceived as a curse, leading to significant hardships following her husband's death. Although the Santhal community professes to uphold egalitarian principles, patriarchal dominance remains a pervasive reality. Marriage is considered a fundamental institution for every Santhal girl; those who do not marry by a certain age are frequently viewed as having mental or physical deficiencies. Marriage is the primary aspiration for every Santhal girl, and those who remain unmarried are seen as lacking in some way. The husband typically acts as the family's main breadwinner, and his passing can be likened to a sudden and devastating storm that disrupts the household. In many cultures, women are socialized to see their husbands as their primary source of security, fostering the belief that they first belong to their fathers, then to their husbands, and ultimately to their sons. As a result, women often lack independence and autonomy, feeling like property—initially tied to their fathers or primary male relatives, then to their husbands or their families, and, after becoming widows, reliant on their sons. Without someone to advocate for her ownership rights, a widow may be compelled to return to her original 'owning' family or, practically speaking, find herself marginalized. Within the Santhal community, women similarly experience deep feelings of helplessness upon entering widowhood.

In "The Story of an Orphan Boy", the story revolves around a woman, her husband, and their son dealing with the theme of the helpless condition of a woman. There lived a couple who had a daughter, and the woman got pregnant, but when she was two months pregnant, her husband died. The woman started wailing, and it continued for a long. She felt more trouble because she had a girl, not a boy. A boy is a sign of power; after the death of her husband, it was evident that she now belongs to her son. It is believed that the son can support the family, not the girl. "O Chando bonga, thou tookst my husband away; instead of my husband do give me a boy" (Bodding, Vol.1, 139). Apart from that, as a widow, she felt immense consequences; her in-laws did not believe that the baby in her womb was her husband's:

"This mother of so and so must be living with somebody, who knows who. Remember, when the father of so and so was living, she was well. Now he is dead, so who has made her pregnant? Surely, this woman is living with somebody who knows who; therefore, she herself has eaten her husband; she is the cause of his death. Dash it we shall take all the goods and property away from her; the girl we also take keep with us" (Bodding, Vol.1 139).

In one of the footnotes of this book, Bodding discussed that if a person died, leaving his minor child, the brother

of that person took the child and his property. Take its hold until the baby grown up fully. If a widow gets pregnant, she becomes slut. Not only that, if she expressed her feelings or wanted to marry someone else, everyone was ready to judge her and believed that she would become a “bad woman”. Widow marriage is not common in Santhals, but, commonly, a man can quickly get married after his wife’s death. Santhal people think that women are not responsible for any work and see them as “she is a kind of irresponsible and untrustworthy beings, a necessary and useful, but somewhat inferior member of human society” (Bodding Vol.1 221).

Another story also deals with a widow and her plight. In “The Poor Widow”, a widow and two children lived in a village; the woman earned her living by doing various work. She did not get to work one day, so she worried a lot because her children were hungry. When searching for work, a wealthy lady offered a job where she would give her rice if she removed her lice. The poor widow started removing her lice, and when she finished the work, the woman gave her rice. However, she suddenly scratched her head and got a large louse, scolded the widow and took all the rice she gave. The woman returned empty-handed; her children were crying, so she searched for something edible. In the meantime, she met a person who gave her herbs and told her to put them in pots. The lady did the same, which the unknown person told her. After a few moments, she found that all the herbs had become rice, so she cooked it for her children and sold the remaining rice. Selling the rice, she got money and bought goats and pigs; after that, they lived happily.

Positive Portrayal of Women

In another tale, the woman's character emerges as a wise individual who rescues her son from a jackal. In "Anuwa and his Mother," a woman and her son find themselves in trouble due to a jackal. One day, while Anuwa was occupied with his work, his mother brought him food. However, a jackal managed to eat most of the food, leaving only a small portion for Anuwa. Upon learning about the jackal from his mother, Anuwa devised a plan to confront the creature. The following day, he disguised himself as his mother. When the jackal attempted to eat the food again, Anuwa sprang into action, delivering a beating to the jackal, who then fled while cursing Anuwa. After that, Anuwa's mother made a plan, “so the next day Anuwa pretended to be dead, and his mother went about crying; she took her away to the jungle, and there she met the jackal, and she told him that Anuwa had died in consequence of his curse and invited him to the funeral feast saying that he used to eat the rice which she had cooked and he had become like a son to her” (Bompass 21). In the evening the jackal came to Anuwa's house with other jackals, and the mother of Anuwa had started crying for her son. But the jackal told her, “stop crying, grannie, you cannot get back the dead: let us get on to the feast” (Bompass 21). The mother instructed her children to wait for a brief period while she prepared some cakes. Prior to this, she directed the jackal to secure both himself and the other jackals to prevent any disputes over food. The jackal complied with her request. Subsequently, Anuwa approached with a stick and began to strike the jackals, causing them to flee in distress. However, the jackal was unable to escape and suffered repeated blows from Anuwa until he was rendered senseless. This narrative presents the woman solely as a mother, with no reference to her name. This highlights a potential identity crisis, as a woman's identity often shifts: she is first identified as a daughter, then as a wife after marriage, and ultimately as a mother upon the death of her husband. Consequently, the absence of her name underscores the perception of women as unimportant and easily forgettable within societal narratives.

In “The Wise Daughter-in-law”, a woman is considered wiser than the other family members (Bompass 39). Here, a wealthy man lost all his wealth after the death of his wife, and he had seven sons, and the eldest daughter-in-law came to the man and asked to make her head of the family. He offers: “I have a proposal to make: do you choose one of us to be head of the family whom all shall obey; we can not be our masters as at present” (Bompass 39). The man appointed his daughter-in-law and son as the heads of the family, instructing everyone to obey them. The daughter-in-law then asked everyone to bring home anything they found. One day, the older man discovered human excrement and gave it to his daughter-in-law. She wrapped it in a packet and stored it at the back of the house. On another occasion, he found a snake's slough and his daughter-in-law directed him to tie it to the roof of their home. Years later, the king of the land fell ill, and the ojha proposed that a twelve-year-old human excrement could cure the king. Consequently, the king announced a reward of two hundred rupees for anyone who could provide it. Hearing this, the daughter-in-law presented the human excrement and was rewarded. Soon after, the king's son lost his belt, which was then carried off by a kite and dropped onto the roof of the older man's house, along with the snake's skin. When the king declared another reward, the daughter-in-law offered them the belt and received a prize of one thousand rupees. With this newfound wealth, the family became prosperous once more and lived happily ever after.

“Kumar and the Raja's Daughter” is a love story between Raja's daughter and a merchant boy (Bompass 63). In this story, the woman is portrayed as a commendable character, and the daughter of the Raja falls in love with a merchant boy, considered an unsuitable match for her. Their union faces opposition due to the merchant's lower social status compared to that of the Raja, along with their differing castes. Although the Raja attempted to keep his daughter confined within the palace, she ultimately eloped with the merchant boy. As they travelled together, hunger overtook them, prompting them to seek shelter in a nearby house, where they asked an elderly woman for help in preparing a meal. Unbeknownst to them, the old woman was the mother of seven robbers. Sensing an opportunity upon seeing the beautiful princess, she devised a plan and called for her sons. After

finishing their meal, Kuwar, the merchant boy, and the princess continued with their journey. In the middle of their way, the seven robbers came; after learning this, the princess asked Kuwar, “Our enemies are upon us; do you sit in front and let me sit behind you? Then they will kill us both together. If I am in front they may kill you alone and carry me off alive” (Bompas 65). The girl was prepared to die, unwilling to live without her beloved. She attempted to sacrifice her life for love, which seemed to mean everything to her. The seven robbers had killed Kuwar, leaving the princess without her horse or provisions. Overcome with sorrow, she wept deeply as Chando sent two spirits to investigate the situation. The spirits approached the princess and urged her to return home, but their pleas fell on deaf ears. Moved by her plight, the spirits restored Kuwar’s life before departing. A few days later, they arrived in a neighbouring kingdom, where they were deceived by its king, who plotted to have Kuwar killed. After Kuwar’s tragic death, the princess resolved to follow him into the afterlife. While many folk tales depict women as cruel and treacherous, this story presents the princess as a loving and compassionate figure, willing to sacrifice everything for her beloved.

Similarly, in another folktale, the ending is happy, representing the power of a woman who brings back her lover’s life. In “The Merchant’s Son and the Raja’s Daughter”, the Raja’s wife and the merchant’s wife were friends. When they became pregnant, they decided that if they had girls, they would raise them to be friends (Bompas 106). If one had a girl and the other had a boy, they would arrange to marry them. The wife of the Raja gave birth to a girl, and the merchant’s wife gave birth to a boy. After growing up, the girl and the boy learned about their mother’s agreement and decided to elope. When the day came, the two eloped and got into trouble with an old lady and her sons. One of the sons was “Damagurguria”, who killed the merchant boy. The Raja’s daughter started crying and managed to bring back the life of the merchant’s boy; therefore, they lived happily ever after. In this regard, the story is quite like the famous Hindu story of “Savitri and Satyavan”, where Savitri, a princess, marries a punished prince, Satyavan and saves the prince’s life.

In “The Wife Who Would Not Be Beaten”, a woman is presented as a protector of his husband and an eye-opener, saving her dignity and making her husband a good human being (Bompas 113). In this story, Raja’s son wanted to marry a woman who would allow him to beat. Everyone started looking for a woman who would agree to be beaten, and after a few days, they found a girl who agreed with this condition. So, the marriage was held at the beginning, and the Raja’s son hesitated to beat his wife. But after a few days, he took a stick and went to his wife to beat her; seeing this, the wife told:

“There is one thing I want to point out to you before you beat me. It is only on the strength of your father’s position that you play the fine gentleman like this: your wealth is your father’s and it is on his wealth that you are relying. When you have earned something for yourself and made a position for yourself, then I am willing that you should beat me not before” (Bompas 114).

So, Raja’s son went away for trading, and during this period, he fell into trouble. Somehow, his wife came to know about his situation and saved him. The Raja’s son realised his mistake and did not beat his wife. The condition that Raja’s boy gave to marry a girl seemed to be disrespectful to a woman. No one should be beaten; the woman cleverly restored her self-respect here.

Conclusion

Santhal folktales discussed in the article showcase how Santhals think about their women. It reveals their mindset that Santhal women are fools, silly, and worth almost nothing. Their roles as stepmothers, wives, and daughters seem unimportant and are portrayed negatively. Thus, this paper tries to reveal the mindset of Santhals regarding their women by reading folktales. Their thought process seems primitive and needs to be reshaped with modern ideologies. In the 21st century, tribal women can be seen in leading positions, from leading the nation to rearing children and leading the clan on educational and cultural fronts. It can be argued that the tribal mindset, especially Santhal culture, needs to be reshaped and rewritten as the prevalent notions seem to be unfit and may lead to gender discrimination. These types of portrayals of Santhal women are very limiting and generalising. But they play an essential role alongside their male counterparts and sometimes exceed them in spheres like – rearing a child, education, and leading a clan. Thus, this paper aims to foster a deeper understanding and appreciation of the tribal, particularly Santhal, society and culture, advocating for a shift in perception that highlights their rich contributions and values.

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