

Women Characters As Portrayed In Folk Narratives Of The Meiteis

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Abstract

Folk narratives are a genre of folk literature that includes myths, legends, folktales, epics and fairytales. As the term recommends, it describes all the narrative forms of folk or orally transmitted stories typically of a particular culture. Folk narratives reflect the culture; in a culture, they function as a guidance and transmission of knowledge, regulating and structuring societal norms and, ethics, and belief systems. Degh (1972) stated that "Folk narratives are subject to such essential changes not only when they adjust to different cultures and epochs but also when they follow internal changes within the same culture." (1972: 59). This article will highlight the main features and characteristics of the Meiteis by analyzing the women characters and their representations in the folk narratives. This discourse will also attempt to bring out the feminist elements, if any, that exist in the folk narratives of the Meiteis, as discussions of women are vague without the features and aspects of feministic perspectives. The observations and discussion of this article will positively create an understanding of how women are represented and portrayed through the characters and plots in the folk narratives and their impact on the activities performed and the position of women in the social and cultural background of the Meiteis.

Keywords: women, folk narratives, Meiteis, character, representation.

1. Introduction

What is folk narrative?

To understand what folk narrative designates, it is a must to know folk and folklore. Dundes (1965) declared the term 'folk' as a group of people that shares common traits and characters, which could be language, religion, or any interests that serves a linking aspect to each other and have their specific ways or tradition. Folklore is understood as the manners, observances, customs, superstitions, proverbs, ballads, etc., of the olden time as defined by William J. Thoms when he coined the term in 1846. Dorson (1972) classified folklore into four broad sectors: folk literature, material culture, social folk custom and folk art. With reference to the terms and concepts, it is imprecisely understood what folk narrative is. Folk narrative is a genre of folk literature; folk literature includes myths, legends, folk tales, fairy tales, proverbs, epics and other oral literature. Degh (1972) writes, "Narration is ageless. The impulse to tell a story and the need to listen to it have made narrative the natural companion of man throughout the history of civilization." (1972: 53). For this discourse, some folk narratives of the Meiteis are suitably selected to provide an insight into the women characters as presented.

Who are Meiteis?

Meiteis are the indigenous ethnic group of Manipur state in Northeast India; they dwell in the valley region of the state. The historical accounts of the Meitei chronicle existed to a complex that dates back approximately 2000 years. The Meiteis are considered to have a rich cultural background with scripted chronicles and sacred texts, which are written in their native script, Meitei Mayek and have an indigenous religion of their own, Sanamahism. As a well-structured culture, they have a vivid range of folklore genres from which a few narratives are undertaken to analyze the prospects and characterization of women.

The study of women in folklore is vital as it directly reflects the position and status of the women in the society. In the folk narratives, such concepts and understanding will be highlighted in precision as mirroring the outlook of the women in that particular society. Most narratives sideline the women characters, as they are undervalued for the central theme of the story; they are induced in the narration to support the part of their male encounters.

Scholars pointed out that the women characters depicted in folktales and fairy tales are particularly based on beauty, goodness, wickedness, passivity and potency. Most of these narrative forms are influenced in a way that the female protagonists are represented by the stereotyped females who are characterized as meek and beautiful, in a situation where they need to be saved and waiting to be rescued by external intervention, whereas the powerful female characters are portrayed as witches and stepmothers who are posed as wicked and cruel. Feminist scholars deny the insignificance attitude shown by society towards women, where they are subsided and subvalued; so, they defy the patriarchal system to re-evaluate the value and roles of women. Therefore, it seemed to be crucial to claim a domain of women-centric narratives where the focal of the narrations is the female characters. Considering the feminist thought, the intent and influence of the following selected narratives of the Meiteis will be examined and reviewed.

2. Story 1: Khongjomnubi

The story of the Pleiades is a common narrative, but the other versions, other than the Greek mythology of the constellation of Pleiades, are less popular and not known to many. The story of Pleiades has been a theme of legendary and mythical narratives recognized under various themes and plots in different cultures around the world. In the descriptions and legendary narratives of the Pleiades in the Native Americans, Hindus, Aborigines, Japanese and other cultures, it is explained as the seven sisters or seven maidens. Nonetheless, it is noticed and recognized that there are only six stars or girls in many cultures. It is stated by some scholars that there are studies written on the narratives related to the Pleiades, as the Pleiades are acknowledged universally and have themes and ideas similar to one another. Many versions of the Pleiades constellation narratives found are based on girls, typically of seven girls or sisters; the storyline continues with one of the girls or the sisters going missing or lost on the way, followed by a group of men and captured or abducted by an older man; some versions of the narrative involves with waterbodies, and it reflects the fertility or instigation led by the girl or girls.

In the Japanese narrative of the Pleiades, Palmer (2010) mentions that the constellation of Pleiades as a

cluster of stars is formed or turned from a woman's internal organs that have been floated up to the sky to turn into the six stars, which are visible now as the Pleiades. Like any other culture, the Meiteis also recognized the Pleiades as a constellation with their own mythical narration which is found in the ancient text of Khongjomnubi Nongarol. This text describes the journey of the seven girls who transformed into the seven stars, the so-called Pleiades. The text Khongjomnubi Nongarol can be translated as the ascending of the seven girls or maidens to heaven. However, according to some scholars, there are six girls and not seven girls. This was explained by some scholars believing that it could be because the Pleiades as a constellation is not visible to the naked eye considering its distance from the earth; so, they believed there are only six stars instead of seven stars. They also mentioned that in the olden days, since there were no telescopes, some skywatchers and scholars firmly believed in the existence of only six stars. But, according to the majority, the myth promptly explains the involvement of seven girls, indicating the Pleiades consists of seven stars. Therefore, in general, besides all the contradictions and odds, the scholars and storytellers regarded the seven stars or seven girls as fact and verified. Hence, the narrative is popularly known as Khongjumnubi Taret, where Khongjomnubi means "maidens" or "girls" of Khongjom, which is a place and taret meaning "seven", as reflected in the theme of the story.

The narrative of Khongjomnubi Taret tells the story of the seven girls of the Luwang clan who transformed into the constellation of Pleiades, the cluster of stars, for they had forbidden relationships with the men; they met and have known for a day on their way to the market. This narrative displays how Meitei women are treated in the field and domain of economic spheres, the freedom they enjoy as traders, retailers, running shops and errands in the market, and not only running errands for domestic chores as a part of their livelihood.

The socio-cultural structure of the Meiteis is displayed in the narrative of Khongjomnubi Taret; the narrative commences with the daily routine lives of seven young girls who belong to the Luwang clan of the Meiteis on their way to the market located by the lake to purchase fish. These seven girls met seven youths or young men who belonged to the Haoku community, who were selling fish in

the market; they were told by the Haoku youths that the fish were all sold out for the day, and they were left with nothing to sell. Lost in the conversation, the seven Luwang girls fell in love with the seven Haoku young men; the young men later requested the girls that they should spend the night with them. The girls declined the suggestion, saying their fathers and brothers would be furious about such acts and punish them for their wrongdoings. However, the young men persisted, and the girls decided to spend the night together with the seven young men. The next day, before parting ways, the Haoku youths assured the seven girls that they would be back in five days and to meet them at Tendogyan, a place far from their village. As the girls returned home the following day, they were criticized and outcasted for their behaviour by their families and clan from the village. Such acts are considered immoral and societal misconduct and are not tolerated in the Meitei society. No unmarried girls are allowed to spend nights outside their parental house without the consent of their fathers and brothers.

For the unacceptable act, the seven Luwang girls had to follow the sentence without any pity and leave their family and clan in the village. They started their journey towards the mountain range of Meru, with the expectation to meet the Haoku youths. But as they promised, they were not able to meet as they reached the place earlier than the time estimated. The girls realized they had forgotten their weaving implements and repented; however, it was not feasible to return and fetch their implements from their homes. They continue their journey up the mountains towards the sky. On their way to the sky, one of the Luwang girls delivered a cicada instead of a human child. The girls decided to leave the cicada behind and promised that the mother would visit every year. They walked the mountains towards the sky without any aim or reason, but they had a hope that if they happened to meet Soraren, the one who reigns over the kingdom of the sky, they would ask for help. As they ascended the mountain, they saw Soraren and requested to help them and give them shelter in the sky or the so-called heaven. As per the given situation, Soraren acknowledged their appeal and took them to heaven to reside, for which they had to be transformed into seven stars because mortals were restricted from living in heaven.

The girls are portrayed and regarded as industrious and independent economically, as they regret not carrying their weaving gears on their journey, even though they are shown to follow the construct that they are socially dependent and reliant on their fathers and brothers for their protection. Meitei women are traditionally resourceful; they can board on endeavours and trade their products to shelter their livelihoods in community spaces. They can partake in the trading domain, not bounded from the community-based sphere. In the commencement, the description of the girls and the setting reveals the market life where they freely run errands as part of the traditional practice and are communally acceptable to interact with outsiders. Nevertheless, there is a boundary to socialization, and women were allowed to entertain on communal platforms and not in isolation. When one of the girls delivered a cicada, it was a deliberate reflection of an alleged sentence for violating societal customs. This story bears an indication or warning that conformity should be retained and unmarried women are prohibited from staying out of the parental house at night or sleeping outside the parental house without permission or without any family members with them; a woman's virtue is considered an asset and the prestige of the family or clan. It also labels the child born out of wedlock or from an illicit relationship as having no societal position, and they are rejected; it clearly portrays that the child is identified through his or her father's name and not the mother who delivered the child as in any other patrilineal society. According to Caesar (2022), ancient Meitei used heavenly objects to impart knowledge about the ethics of the societal construct; this narrative demonstrates the outcome of dishonest people and gratifies a persistent prompt to those who anticipate or commit adultery. There are two ways to see the position of women in the Meitei society: one, economically, they are independent, and secondly, socio-culturally, they are expected to be dependent on the male members of the family.

3. Story 2: The Trails of Panthoibi or Panthoibi Khongul

The Meitei mythical-legendary account of the divinity Panthoibi is known as Panthoibi Khongul. The correct translation of Panthoibi Khongul is "Panthoibi's Trails", a description of Panthoibi's route and travels. According to the Meitei belief, Panthoibi is the most powerful of all

female deities; she is linked to valour, fertility, craftsmanship, war, and victory. Some academics claim that it is portrayed as a divine love story between Panthoibi, the human embodiment of the Goddess Nongthang Leima, and Nongpok Ningthou, who is also the reincarnation of Ashiba, one of the most potent deities in the Meitei pantheon. Nevertheless, Panthoibi herself is the main character of the story. Panthoibi is the most remarkable Goddess, according to Rita (2000). In modern-day Manipur, she is revered as the Goddess of War. She is the type of woman who is independent and active.

Panthoibi was also the only daughter of Taoroinao and Lairemma Namungbi's among the seven sons. Many deserving men from the local territory came requesting her hand as she attended the appropriate age for marriage. Shapaiba, the king of the west kingdom, was the first potential suitor, but Panthoibi turned him down because he could not win her heart as he was not proven worthy according to her wishes. When asked to construct a bridge on the river between Panthoibi's house and Shapaiba's, Shapaiba responds by choosing bamboo and wood to build the bridge, to which Panthoibi find it unworthy to accept him as her husband.

The Khaba king Sokchronba and his wife Manu Teknga approach Panthoibi's parents for her hand in marriage for their son Taram Khoinucha. This time, the suitor offered to create a bridge out of iron poles and gold rods in a spectacular and lavish proposal. The elder brothers and parents of Panthoibi agreed to the marital alliance proposition. The ceremony was lavishly arranged, and Panthoibi was brought to the groom's home, where she was greeted by a large crowd of family members and visitors. There was a commotion when she arrived at the groom's house, alleging that the wedding guests were not adequately fed and her father-in-law's reputation was jeopardized. Her father-in-law was spared from disgrace and embarrassment when she offered the basket of cooked rice, the pot of cooked meat, and the pitcher of wine she had brought from her father's home. To everyone's surprise, the containers apparently had enough food to feed all the guests.

Days passed, and Panthoibi found it challenging to settle into her new life as a married woman since she is

independent-minded, active, and free-spirited. She and her husband never had a formal marriage ceremony, and she hasn't developed any sexual or emotional connection with him. According to Singh (2016), Panthoibi's lack of interest in her husband must be because she is the human embodiment of the divinity Nongthang Leima and was only meant to be paired with someone who had her supernatural and divine qualities.

Panthoibi enjoys spending her time in nature, away from the confines of the home, in the fields, meadows, lakes, and streams. One day, she encountered the youthful king of the eastern hills, Angouba Kainou Chingsomba, also known as Nongpok Ningthou, in one of her outings. They fell in love as soon as they met, as though there had been a heavenly attraction between them. Panthoibi suggested eloping so they may begin their new life as a couple. However, Panthoibi persuaded him that the time was not yet appropriate and assured him they would carry out their proposal to elope shortly. Because leaving her husband's home would embarrass her father, brothers, and in-laws, she had to organize a thoughtful elopement. She began acting weirdly around the in-laws to project an illogical image of herself and to make it simpler for her to leave them. The in-laws began to accuse her of crime as her frequent travels to see the lover increased. The Khaba family planned an act to influence her conduct and behaviour. When Panthoibi arrived home, her father-in-law was dead, and her mother-in-law accused her of contributing to his demise by neglecting him. Panthoibi discovered the ruse and was enraged by the mean conduct they had inserted. She seized the opportunity and fled with Nongpok Ningthou. The Khaba family pursued them, but they managed to escape by changing into other creatures with their ability to incarnate and change shapes. Later, the Khabas realized they were not typical people and gave up looking. After the elopement, Panthoibi and Nongpok Ningthou resided and settled on the Liangmai hills, where they celebrated their holy marriage. The gods honoured the two divine lovers' reunion gatherings with dancing and singing as a cause for great joy.

Being born into a noble family, she is expected to be peaceful and graceful, anchored by the laws of her father and the brothers. However, it appears that Panthoibi was a ferocious and fearless woman of a kind who rides on tigers

and gorgeous horses. The Meitei society, patriarchal in nature, expects all women to abide by the regulations established by the male family members; yet, Panthoibi despises anything that mocks her preferences and accepts and tolerates nothing against her will. Her persona is portrayed as independent, brave, and assertive; authoritative, courageous, stubbornly integrated and free-spiritedness.

It has been stated that Panthoibi Khongul is a depiction of Panthoibi and Nongpok Ningthou's divine love story. It emphasized that Panthoibi is characteristically the focal point of the narrative. As the story develops, it becomes clear that Nongpok Ningthou is acting per the directives of Panthoibi. Nongpok Ningthou is represented as a dominant male; however, when it comes to Panthoibi, he is favourably considerate while making choices because she is the one who determines the timing of events and handles the situations. When he suggested they should go right away, Panthoibi declined, explaining that it was not the right time. She had excellent vision and could see the effects of the hasty choices. She cared about the principles that tied the social system, even if she had decided to leave her husband's family behind. Their pursuit was successful because of her strong and assertive personality.

The persona of Panthoibi demonstrates the flip side of the meek, fragile, scared, and trusting temperament that society expects of an ideal girl. It also illustrates a woman's ability to be fearless and take decisive action to support her values and passions while defying cultural standards and physical impediments. She was fearless, determined, and harsh, and her persona is revered as the most potent female divinity in the Meitei pantheon because of these qualities.

4. Story 3: Keibu Keioiba and Thabaton

The theme of the narrative involves two main characters, Keibu Keioiba and Thabaton; from most viewpoints, Keibu Keioiba's role is unfavourably portrayed, while Thabaton is portrayed as the protagonist. The tale opens with a maiba, a shaman named Kabui Salangba Maiba, a shaman and master in enchantments and witchcraft. One day, he decided to try an experiment to see how well his knowledge and talents would hold up since he was highly ambitious and power-hungry. Kabui Salangba Maiba announced to his wife his new challenge and his intention to change into a

hybrid of a tiger and a human. He promised his wife that after stripping off and leaving the confines of the house, he would emerge as a hybrid of a human and a tiger. He instructed her that when he returned to the house, she should give him the clothes to cover him so he could regain his human shape. The maiba's enthusiastic attempts to prove his might and ongoing quest for superiority reveal his masculine ego and the power-hungry traits of men.

As the evening grew darker, the maiba put his clothes aside and headed for the thick grove in front of his house, where his wife was waiting for the demonstration. After some time, a terrifying-looking creature approached the courtyard. When the wife saw this, she shrieked in terror, fled inside, and locked the door behind her. The scene she witnessed astounded her. All she could hear was the thunder as her husband tried to get her to unlock the door and give him his clothes. She did not remember what her husband had told her before the transformation. The husband could not resurrect his human form again because the sun had already risen when she realized it. He had to leave his village as he could not return to his old self, so he left his wife and went on a journey to live alone in the forest. Here, the wife's scared feelings and shallow thinking at the appropriate time overwhelmed her sane reasoning and ultimately determined her husband's fate. It illustrates how hysterical and impulsive emotional reactions make women unreliable in urgent situations.

Days passed as Kabui Salangba Maiba, now known as Keibu or Kabui Keioiba, walked around looking for food. He could eat raw meat because he was half tiger, but preparing his own meals was tough. He successfully adapted to life in the wild by adopting several animalistic behaviours and habits. He searched for food one late night and knocked on the door of the first house he came across in the settlement close to the woodland he was living in. An elderly widow who lived alone owned the home. He cried out for the door to be opened so he could eat her. The elderly widow reacted in a convincing tone after hearing his brazen and rumbling voice, saying that he would not be pleased because she was very old, shrunken, wrinkled, not plump, and would not be as tasty as her neighbour. The elderly widow spoke naughty, witty, and spontaneous, yet she knew what was on her mind. The old widow tempts the beast with the physical description of the young neighbour

girl, illustrating objectification and jealousy. The old widow asexualized her body and exchanged the young, attractive neighbour instead of herself. It also demonstrates how older people were stigmatized as being asexual.

Thabaton, the youngest of the seven brothers and a beautiful young girl was the neighbour the elderly widow described. She resided in the home adjacent to the old woman with her brothers. The older brothers adored her and deeply worried about her welfare because she was their pride and honour. While her brothers went out to work and trade, she frequently stayed home alone. The brothers devised a plan and a strategy for Thabaton's safety because they had to leave her alone most of the time. To keep her safe, they arranged for her to remain inside the house, which would be secured with seven locks from the inside. Only when her brothers shout her name using the recitation "sana o naril o," "chen ga pella," "ebung gi ebema Thabaton," "nabung lakle," and "thong hanglo," she opens the door. It reads, "Oh Gold, Oh Silver, open the lock bar, your brothers have come, open the door." The elderly lady was aware of the recital since her home was close to Thabaton's house, who were the only people who knew the secret code. However, the sounds of her brothers were instantly recognizable to Thabaton, so there was no chance of a mistake. This clever arrangement highlights the significance of safety for the young, single girl who lived alone in the house with no male family members despite being advantageous and desired from a variety of perspectives. In addition to their admiration for her as the youngest siblings, her brothers' status and dignity in society also hinged on her well-being and virtue. She was viewed as weak and naive; her brothers' reputation, which needed to be preserved as pristinely as it was vulnerable to society, was based on her. The idea of male guardianship is a patriarchal concept in the story, showing how defenceless the female characters are without their male protectors. It was proven positively that male guardianship was responsible for the well-being of the women, and it also served to emphasize their supremacy.

The old woman reveals Thabaton's conditions to Keibu Keioiba. Keibu Keioiba attempted to imitate Thabaton's brothers' voice, as taught by the neighbour but failed. Thabaton was a bright young lady who could easily recognize her brothers' voices. Through the door, she

replied that the voice was not like her brothers' and that she could not open the door. Keibu Keioiba furiously returned to the neighbour's home to inform her that her method had failed. The old woman, who used to look after the youngest brother when he was a child, now knew what she had to do since she could imitate his voice. Because she could mimic the younger brother's voice, she promised Keibu Keioiba that Thabaton would open the door this time. The old woman indeed imitated the tone and language of the brothers. Since it had the same tone as his brother's, Thabaton opened all seven layers of locks without hesitation this time. Keibu Keioiba seized the moment when she opened the door, quickly grabbed her wrist, and kidnapped her. He was immediately enchanted by Thabaton's beauty and decided to wed her rather than consume her. She appeared to be Keibu Keioiba's desire at first sight, so he kidnapped and kept her as his wife to gratify his sensual fantasies. His objectification of Thabaton under the influence of his male gaze shifted from being a gratifying meal to filling his lust and yearning.

Days passed, and by that point, Thabaton had been residing in a hut Keibu Keioiba had built in the middle of the jungle. She faithfully performed the part of Keibu Keioiba's wife since she knew it was challenging to leave Keibu Keioiba without a plan. She embraced her now but rejected her future. She was continually planning for an almost unfathomable chance to escape and was full of hope.

On the other side, when the brothers arrived back in Thabaton's village after their business trips, they learned from the locals that Keibu Keioiba had kidnapped Thabaton. This revelation infuriated them, and they immediately began searching for her while armed. They searched for months without discovering anything. The younger brother once overheard a familiar voice singing while they were walking through a forest, and the brothers decided to follow the sound's source to find Thabaton. Surprisingly, they discovered Thabaton singing and husking paddy while carrying a toddler on her back. The brothers dashed in her direction, and they finally reunited. Thabaton described the entire episode of her kidnapping to the brothers, outlining a strategy for escaping the beast. She ordered the brothers to hide in the bushes far from the house because it was about time for Keibu Keioiba to return from his daily food hunt quest. Keibu Keioiba was surprised and unable to

recognize the deception, but he was overjoyed and satisfied when Thabaton spoke to him differently than he would have any other day. The woman's allure uses emotional manipulation, mockery, and cunning to lead the careless lover to her goal. Most of the time, these gentler male emotions are misinterpreted in favour of more manly, rugged, and severe feelings—or even no emotions. As society degrades males' softer emotions as not macho, the highlights of masculine emotions are covered mainly up by wrath.

Later, as Keibu Keioiba was making dinner, Thabaton gave her a utong, a bamboo pipe, and asked her to collect water from the adjacent creek. He attempted to fill the utong from the stream, unaware that the bamboo pipe was hollow; nevertheless, it was empty each time he carried water up the pipe. He tried several times in vain. On the opposite side, Thabaton kept her infant imprisoned inside before using her brothers to assist in burning down the hut. Despite being characterized as weak and innocent, Thabaton became cunning given time and circumstances; she organized and planned the escape. She had no physical capacity to carry out the plot herself before, as Keibu Keioiba was tremendously strong for her.

Keibu Keioiba was still attempting to fill the water when a crow cawed, "hey! Keibu Keioiba, as hollow as your bamboo pipe, your wife is gone, and your child inside your hut is on fire". He lost all sense of reasoning since he was so charmed by Thabaton's charming demeanour. Instead, the crow's random, persistent pestering infuriated him. He heard the crow's repeated cawing of the same lines, then raced to his hut after feeling the crow's words. When he arrived, his wife fled, and his hut and child were reduced to ashes.

It could be unsettling to see Thabaton burn her child without any regret. However, her feelings can be explained by her loathing of the beast that has devoured so much of her emotion and essence of being alive. Because of her ferocious hatred and hostility, she could not feel the mother's love for the child. She anticipated to start over, free of the burdens of her past with Keibu Keioiba. She was aware that leaving the child behind would be problematic. Since the child was born without her will, she did not consider it her own. However, in some versions of the story,

the burning of her child inside the hut is not mentioned. As a half-tiger, Keibu Keioiba had a keen sense of smell and could not hold on to what he had seen, so he went after Thabaton and her siblings. They were ready to kill him since they knew he would follow them. The seven brothers engaged in combat and killed Keibu Keioiba.

Keibu Keioiba, considering his features and character, is presented as a beast and is placed at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Thabaton came home guilt-free but free. The scene in which Thabaton returns to her brothers displays that a woman who was coerced into a relationship and forced to live with a man, in this case, a beast against her will, is as insignificant as unmarried.

5. Story 4: Laodraobi

To compare the tale of Keibu Keioiba with the story of Laodraobi, a study linking gender formation and representation is conducted. Unknown mythical monster Laodraobi is frequently compared to a slow loris, but this resemblance is unfeasible given the description. Laodraobi's appearance is thought to resemble that of an ape, yet it is human-sized. It is frequently compared to an ape with long nails, a spiky tongue, and feet facing the other way. Laodraobi was viewed as a hideous female ape who chased men to seduce and hold them as her mates for carnal purposes.

Once, eight guys embarked on an adventure and spent days travelling across various environments, including forests and seas; one of the eight was a young man named Khambaton, a conscious traveller. He watched the group when everyone relaxed and dozed off because he was alert and a light sleeper. One night, a powerful storm arrived when they stopped in a forest. They all tried to stay in a group together, but the storm was so intense that they lost sight of one another. They each sought safety in separate locations. Khambaton climbed onto a large rock and decided to spend the night there. Due to the terrible animal noises, he could only hear as it became later, he could not fall asleep. Meanwhile, he could see in the distance that a dark shadow was approaching him. He could tell it was a bear as it drew nearer. He only carried some packaged rice and utensils; he had no weapons. But as he tried to recall the method for chasing the bear away, he felt numb. Suddenly, a creature leapt before him and barked loudly at

the bear. The bear escaped from the scene after sensing the threat. Khambaton could feel the creature following him, so he tried to concentrate on it to identify it. Since the creature protected him from the man-eater, he settled it was a Godsend. He could make out the terrible creature's silhouette, which seemed like an ape because it was just before morning. He felt at ease after ascertaining that it was an ape, not a man-eater. He left to look for his group because the sun had come up. The creature immediately moved toward him and drew nearer; when he look intensely into the creature, he realized it was a woman.

Khambaton recognized Laodraobi for her characteristics and knew he needed to go before she could find him and enslave him. He attempted to whack her with a stick, but she was more powerful. She forced him to the ground and used her long, sharp nails to graze his feet. Khambaton was in agonizing pain and immobile; he knew there was no way he could escape by walking or running. Khambaton was placed on Laodraobi's shoulder and taken to her den. The character of Laodraobi implies that a woman must have attractive physical characteristics to attract a mate. Men are not sexually attracted to unattractive, masculine women. Laodraobi used her physical power to seize men because she could not entice and trap them with charm. The seven companions were unsuccessfully looking for Khambaton on the other side of the jungle. They tried their best to find him but were unable, so they left.

Laodraobi took Khambaton into a constrained passageway made of rocks that went to Laodraobi's den, a cave where she confined him. He could even stand up in the den because it was so spacious. Khambaton sobbed as he realized there was no way out once the cave's entrance was closed, and he would be forced to remain within as a caged animal. Khambaton was approached by Laodraobi, who handed him the wild fruits she had picked to eat. She then licked his scratched, bleeding feet to prevent him from fleeing. He tried to go to sleep as night fell but was dreadfully restless. It worsened when he detected warmth and realized Laodraobi was dozing next to him. He spent a restless night, and as the morning peaked through the cave's openings, he desperately tried to get out but could hardly stand. Laodraobi licked Khambaton's feet to make sure he didn't leave the den before she left for her daily food

quest. Laodraobi's gesture of licking Khambaton's feet may alternatively be interpreted as an animalistic indication of seduction and intimacy. She then securely positioned an enormous boulder at the cave's entrance. It was routine business. They have had their fair share of time together. Months were spent by Loadraobi enticing Khambaton to become her mate, but he refused.

Khambaton could not leave Laodraobi's den physically; therefore, days or months went by. They eventually figured out how to talk to one another. Laodraobi successfully persuaded Khambaton to become her mate, and the two soon gave birth to a child. The child squeaked and looked like Laodraobi, but Khambaton was closer in physical make-up. After going through various stages of motherhood, Laodraobi began to have faith in Khambaton. Therefore, she feels at ease and does not lick Khambaton's feet or close the doorway any longer when she walks outside to find food for her brood daily. His feet began to mend, and Khambaton gradually learned to crawl and walk while scouting out possible escape routes and becoming accustomed to his surroundings. Laodraobi and her child were his only targets of interest in his search. He scuttled outside and found a large rock, which made him think he could use it to end his suffering. He kept his plan concealed within the den to carry it out at night. Khambaton considered hitting Laodraobi and her infant with the rock later that night while they were both sound asleep. He attempted to hold the rock over them but lacked the guts to continue and gave up. Khambaton had grown to care about Laodraobi, but he could not act on his feelings due to his fatherly responsibility to the child and his love for them.

One day, after Laodraobi left the den, Khambaton decided to take action and began preparing for the escape. He ran out of the cave after leaving the youngster within. Laodraobi had a quick and strong animalistic sense of smell, yet he was physically frail and had trouble walking; therefore, he knew she would follow him. A log helped him cross the river as he laboriously made his way to the river's edge, and he floated to the other side before Laodraobi caught him. He had already crossed the river when she got to the bank. Standing on the opposite side, Laodraobi and her son watched him leave. The boy started crying with loud squeaks and jumped into the river when he saw his father trying to reach out to him from the other side. Laodraobi

attempted to retrieve her child, but it was too late; the river flow had already taken him. Khambaton considered jumping into the river but decided against it because the child was already drowning in the stream, and he knew what would happen if he started the same thing. He ran from the bank to the other side because he could not stand to see it. Laodraobi slams her chest while sobbing in agony over the death of her child and her husband's departure. After his escape, Khambaton realized he could not live an ordinary life and decided to give up worldly pleasures and leisure in favour of a monastic lifestyle. Khambaton's decision to give up on society indicates that he still harboured fatherly care for his lost child.

6. Story 5: Hiyainu or Uchek Langmeidong

In the story Uchek Langmeidong, a girl named Hiyainu transforms into a hornbill, uchek langmeidong to escape the mistreatment she receives from her stepmother. The story starts with the protagonist, Hiyainu's father, marrying a cruel woman after her birthmother dies, like in other stepmother tales. A few months after the marriage, the stepmother gave birth to a boy, and Hiyainu, her father, and the stepmother lived together as a family. The stepmother gave Hiyainu good care and claimed to like her in front of her father, but as soon as her father was out of sight, she revealed her true self. Hiyainu never mentioned her stepmother's behaviour to her father since she was subservient, well-behaved, and accommodating. Being a trader, the father spent days travelling to far-off locations. He promises Hiyainu that her stepmother will take good care of her before he leaves on the trading trips and that she should obey her stepmother and stay content with her half-brother until he returns.

After the father departs, the stepmother assigns her to gather wild vegetables from the fields and wetlands and go fishing in the neighbourhood lake. Afterwards, the stepmother would go to the market and sell the produce while Hiyainu cared for her young half-brother and did housework. She tried her best to keep her stepmother happy because she did not want any trouble, but the stepmother always sought ways to criticize her. She was forbidden from visiting her friends outside. She had to labour nonstop, but the stepmother was unsatisfied; she would reprimand and degrade her using the name of her

deceased mother. By restricting Hiyainu's freedom and imposing womanly obligations and domestic tasks on her, the stepmother's character represents the patriarchal regulations to the girls in the household. While her son was free to behave as a man despite being a youngster, Hiyainu was assigned domestic duties, vegetable collection, and fishing. Hiyainu was motherless and defenceless in her father's absence, and the stepmother oppressed her through her gender and hierarchal oppression. The fact that the stepmother assumed the job of family head while her father was abroad demonstrates how the family hierarchal structure functions when the male head is absent and how the wife fills this role.

The stepmother reprimanding Hiyainu was an everyday conduct; however, she could not tolerate the stepmother insulting her dead mother's name. One day, she confronted the evil stepmother that she could beat her but not mention her mother's name again. Hiyainu was brutally slapped and abused by the stepmother when the argument enraged her. The ruthless stepmother violently thrashed her before locking her up without food. She cried the entire night, calling for her mother. Later, she was worn out and fell asleep when she saw her mother in a dream. Hiyainu's mother advised her to transform into *uchek langmeidong*, the hornbill and fly away as she could not watch her suffer as a human. Her mother advised Hiyainu to beg the majestic hornbills for assistance in escaping. Like the fairy tales, Hiyainu's mother played the part of the fairy godmother, acting as a hopeful aid and giving her hope through her pain. Hiyainu went from being a "damsel in distress" to a "damsel in hope" due to the impetus, which assisted in saving herself.

The following day, the stepmother sent Hiyainu to gather wild vegetables in the field. She was deeply preoccupied with her dream from the night before when she abruptly heard hornbills. She noticed a group of hornbills flying over the fields when she looked up. She sprinted after the flock, pleading for them to take her with them and save her from her stepmother's abusive behaviour. Her pathetic state moved the hornbills and shed a few feathers. She would return to the exact location in the field for days, watching for hornbills and gathering their feathers until she had enough to take flight. She would sew the feathers she had gathered into a cloth serving as her

flight gear every night while the stepmother and the younger brother slept. Days passed, and she was equipped with her flight gear and waiting for a chance to escape her sufferings as a human. It was a typical day for the stepmother; she and her son went to the market as scheduled, and while they were gone, she instructed Hiyainu to gather firewood from the forest and make supper. She heard the hornbills soaring over her house as she was preparing dinner. She hurried to the courtyard, grabbed her feathered flight gear, and yelled for the flock to take her with them. The hornbills questioned her about her willingness to give up, give up her human ways, and accept a life as a hornbill because there was no turning back. She persuaded them that she had no doubts whatsoever about following the flock. She took off with the hornbills after removing her clothing and donning the feathery attire she had made. Hiyainu had already gone by the time the stepmother and the brother arrived in the courtyard.

After his return from his trip a few days later, Hiyainu's father summoned his daughter as soon as he stepped into the courtyard. Unlike earlier times, it was unusual that his daughter was not present to greet him. The stepmother lied when he inquired about Hiyainu because she knew how her husband would respond. However, the incident was revealed when the son told her father how his mother had treated her. He held his wife responsible for Hiyainu's abandonment because he could not forgive her mistreatment of his daughter while he was away. Since then, the father has spent every day waiting outside while gazing up at the sky, hoping to see his daughter and bring her back. A group of hornbills crossed the courtyard before dawn; the father ran after them while crying and calling Hiyainu's name. Hiyainu, who was by chance in the flock, flew down to her father's side when he was grieving. Hiyainu refused his request for her to head back home. She promised that she would treat him as well as his daughter in her next life. It was time for Hiyainu to leave with the flock after the emotional reunion with her father. The father bid goodbye to his daughter, disappointedly crying as she left with the flock.

7. Conclusion

From the above discussions, story 1 shows that Meiteis women are industrious and economically independent, even though they are socially instructed to rely on and dependent on their fathers and brothers. They are culturally enterprising and have the right to embark on endeavours and engage in trades in community spaces to secure their livelihoods. However, there were limitations to socialization for women; they could mingle with strangers in community spaces and not in private. In the narrative of Khongjomnubi, it is clearly described that women are forbidden from certain activities; they are not allowed to stay outside the parental premises at night and have illicit relationships with people outside the community.

Story 3 and story 4 can be compared and analyzed to produce the unanticipated acts of the characters, especially Thabaton, who was a mother alleged to be stereotyped to have "unconditional love" for her child, and the reaction of Khambaton, a father in a similar situation. After escaping from Laodraobi, Khambaton could not lead a normal life and showed his repentance for his actions when he lost his child. In contrast, Thabaton, after she burned her child in the fire and escaped from Keibu Keioiba, unhesitantly lived a happy ending. It is a universally accepted perception that there is no love like a mother's love; however, these narratives employed and depicted the variations of the parents' love and affection towards their children. In the instance of Thabaton's character, a mother sacrifices her child for her freedom, and on the other hand, Khambaton was intensely disturbed by the accidental lost of his child. The character of Laodraobi is presented as a nurturing and loving mother and dutiful partner providing her best for Khambaton. However, her portrayal is projected as a negative character because of her beastly appearance and for the reason that she imprisoned a human as a captive.

In story 5, Hiyainu does not delay her escape, waiting to be rescued by her father, a male character representing the authority, but she devises the plot and empowers herself to break through the oppressive role of the stepmother. Hiyainu's character symbolizes the female intervention in changing women's victimhood into self-independence and self-expression. The meaning of feminism in folktales is described as a shift from being a passive, subservient, and victimized self to an autonomous,

perseverant, and liberated individuality, breaking all barriers to self-expression and raising a bold personality.

We discussed feminine victimization in story 1, story 3 and story 5, where the female characters are represented as victims of societal stigmatization for moral misconduct and not following restricted norms, victimized because of weak physicality and domestic abuse, respectively. The male victimization of story 4 is neglected as men are not socially expected to be a victim of social norms, misconduct, being the weaker ones or prey for domestic abuse. It can be reasoned that such notions of victimization are overlooked as their manhood is proven humiliating in society. These narratives imply that women's victimizations are considered a part of society's unvarying notion, whereas men's victimization is a societal discomfort that demeans maleness.

In story 2, story 3 and story 5, the elements of feminism significantly exist in these narratives in the roles of these women characters; Panthoibi is remarkably a feminist character whose actions are free-spirited and even create societal havoc but are celebrated; Thabaton returns home without any guilt and liberated as a free woman who expresses her strong and spirited personality; and Hiyainu's courage to escape the oppressor all adds as the representation and characterization of the feminist women. The discussions also bring various understandings of the Meitei, the societal and cultural norms, and the economic status of the women that impacted the characters of the Meitei women.

From the above discussions, as observed, it can be concluded that in the Meitei folk narratives, the women characters are posed in such plots and settings that they have their voice and presentation in the main story despite being a patriarchal structured society where men hegemony controls the societal norms enjoy the perks of male supremacy. Despite the differences and odds, there are certain stereotyped concepts of female characters as compared to male characters universally; gender inequality in the distribution of plots differs. However, in women-centric narratives and discourses, female characters and their actions are established and presented in such a way that the emphasized point lies and leads to the female characters.

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