

CRITICAL ANALYSIS ON DOMINANT IDEOLOGIES IN MIZO TRIBAL FOLKTALE: MAURUANGI

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Abstract: Mauruangi is a legendary mizo folktale which depicts the suffering of a girl under a stereotypical wicked stepmother and a jealous step sister Bingtaii. In spite of the sufferings, the protagonist grew up to become a lovely, virtuous woman, ended up marrying a 'vai lalpa' (a foreign Lord) thus living happily ever after. But the story is not that simple. In this paper, we will critically analyse the intricacies pertaining to the dominant ideologies through the sociological lens. In addition to this, we will also explore the way this text has been put across to the audience such that it appeals to their likeness and gives a sense of connection to the Mizo culture.

Keywords: folktale, tribal, ideology, patriarchy.

I. INTRODUCTION

Folktale represents the non material aspect of a culture which is usually transmitted through oral tradition. The ways in which these texts are represented signifies a certain understanding or portrayal of a particular image of the world. Hence all texts are political and they often operate on the foundation of certain ideologies. The story of Mauruangi, which is a tribal folktale, contains underlying ideologies which has been represented in a subtle manner. Similar to many other folktale and fairytale from different cultures, the story narrates the suffering that has been endured by the protagonist Mauruangi under the never ending scheme of her stepmother.

II. BINARY OPPOSITIONS

In the story, we can see the theme of juxtaposed binary oppositions when it comes to the birth mother and the step mother; Mauruangi and Bingtaii; Mauruangi's mother and her stepmother; and humans and animals. While the birth mother looks after Mauruangi with love and care even after her death, the step mother is portrayed as an evil and cruel woman, wanting to get rid of Mauruangi. The birth mother feeds Mauruangi even after turning into a giant catfish and a phunchawng tree while the step mother feeds her rice husks and poured boiling water over her.

Similar to this, Bingtaii was described as a lazy person who goes on as she pleases. The exact description goes on like – '*awmhmunah a awm a, a nui huat huat a, a duh leh a mu a, a duh leh a thu a, a duh leh a leng a, a duh duhin a awm thin a ni.*' This means that she is someone who laughs loudly, sleeps when she pleases, sits when she pleases, and goes out when she pleases. It goes on to say that she lives just the way she pleases. This contradicts to the way Mauruangi has been portrayed. She was portrayed as a virtuous woman who was filled with patience, perseverance, humility, beauty, hospitality and skills in weaving. When the *vai lal's* servants came to Mauruangi's house to take her back from her visit, the step mother had a conniving plan of replacing Mauruangi with Bingtaii since she had killed Mauruangi. When the servants saw Bingtaii, their remark was-

'Hei chu kan pi a va ni lo em. A hmai te chu a bial in, a van hlai ta hleihluai ve. A mitmeng te chu a bui ta lek luk in a va zim ta em! A dul te chu a va kiar ta ve, a chawn te chu a va lian ta her thur em ve le. A biang te chu a tawlh per pur mai alawm le.' This could translate to 'This does not look like our mistress. Her face is round and really wide. Her eyes have become swollen and small. Her belly has become so big and her ankles have become so huge. Her cheeks are so big that they are dripping.'

This means that a woman who does whatever she pleases is not a complete woman. The way in which the stepsister has been described in contrast to the protagonist pit women against one another wherein the characteristics of the 'ideal woman' oppose that of the 'unwoman'. Hence the understanding of the concept of a 'woman' has been tagged into what a beautiful, hardworking women in contrast to ugly, lazy women. Similarly, Mauruangi's birth mother was very nurturing while her stepmother was portrayed as someone who was out to get her. The concept of motherhood again becomes defined into that of an evil stepmother versus the nurturing birthmother. The story being a tribal folktale, the nature of humans and animals has been defined in opposition to one another. While animals provide a nurturing environment for the protagonist in the form of providing food and shelter for Mauruangi, ever bad deed was done out of spite by humans. The origin of evil and suffering was attributed to humans- the stepmother to be precise.

III. THE POSITION OF WOMEN

From the above, we can understand how women have been compartmentalised into boxes. First, let us look at the concept of widowhood. In the early mizo society, widows had a low position and faced lots of discrimination. Even in terms of the spaces they occupy physically in villages, their houses were usually located at the lower ends. So in the story, when Mauruangi asked for embers for starting fire to the widow who lived nearby, she told her that she would give it to her only if her father promised that she married her. She was portrayed as a manipulating woman who took her chance to marry a widower when she first saw the chance.

She was a widow who cleverly tried to mobilise her way up the social ladder. According to John Storey women and men are offered cultural definitions of themselves from popular culture. For instance, in the story of Mauruangi, we can clearly see the negative consequences of what marrying a widow would be like. Throughout the narrative, we can understand that the family dynamics is drastically changing and the bond between a father and a daughter has been broken with the emergence new mother figure who is a widow. It reinforces the idea that marrying widows is a curse to the family. (Storey, 2009)

Assessing this from Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony, we can say that this folktale is trying to maintain the status quo of the position of widows in mizo society and how they have been understood. The portrayal of widows in such popular folktales has made it possible for the mass to normalise such forms of misunderstanding towards the deprived section of society. The message is put across so subtly that we often tend to overlook it. What we often focus on is her identity as a wicked step mother and not her identity as a widow. (Gramsci, 1971)

When we look at the story, we can see a fight amongst and between women. The fact that the 'evil' woman would always be jealous of the 'virtuous' woman and plans to fight her even after death portrays how women have been pitted against one another. The story's main focus was on women- as though there were no men in the patriarchal Mizo society. Even though Mauruangi's father murdered her birth mother and married the 'evil' widow, focus was never on the role of the father. Similar to this, the *vai lal* (foreign lord) provided the best and sharpest weapons to Mauruangi while he gave blunt ones to Biangtaii during the combat; the focus was never on the husband. It was always on women against each other.

IV. PATRIARCHY IN FOLKTALE

The negative connotation of the description of Biangtaii in contrast to Mauruangi's seemingly good natured virtue clearly shows societal standard of how and what a woman should be or not be. Patriarchal ideologies are most often the guiding forces behind story lines and plots. Through oral traditions, the ideologies get exemplified since it is believed to be part of culture.

The description of Biangtaii's physical features depicts the beauty standard of women in society. Biangtaii is never portrayed as someone beautiful in the narratives. She is chubby, has a big belly, her cheeks and ankles are huge and she has small eyes. Moreover, she is lazy, which is something a woman should 'never be'. What we can understand from this is that women can attain a state of perfection only when they fulfil societal standard of not just being virtuous but also attaining physical beauty. We can trace these standards back to the patriarchal ideology and their strict code of conduct for women and their bodies. Further, even though it is clearly shown that Mauruangi's father had murdered his wife, he is never condemned. The story rather focuses on the 'wicked' step mother and the jealous step sister. It was as though men did not exist in the society, when as a matter of fact, they have the loudest voice in the patriarchal Mizo society.

The story also showed the consequences of being a 'thai bawih'. In Mizo society, husbands who do not dominate their wives are called 'thai bawih'. In its literal sense, 'thai' means someone who is married and 'bawih' means a slave. It is a term used only on men. He is someone who cannot 'control' his woman. In the house of a thai bawih, the wife has a voice and does not blindly obey the husband. Thai bawih are often subject of ridicule in mizo society by both men and women. The silence of Mauruangi's husband may also indicate that he is a thai bawih. So this shows that if women are too powerful in the family and if they have a voice, it will lead to the downfall of the institution of the family.

V. CONSUMPTION BY THE AUDIENCE

An important aspect that comes into play is the ideology of imperialism being internalised in the text. The *vai lal* is portrayed as a saviour who ended the suffering of the poor tribal girl. He came with promises of a material possession and a better life compared to her dejected current state. Additionally, the greed of the tribals being persuaded by material things can clearly be seen. Mauruangi was persuaded by the servants with material things such as finer cloths, food, etc.

When these narratives are consumed by the mass, women and their bodies gets compartmentalised into what is desirable and what is not. When it comes to women themselves, putting it in Foucauldian terms, women conduct their own bodies based on this particular beauty standard. This art of governing oneself, i.e. governmentality takes a form within and the superstructure no longer takes precedence in the process. As would Gramsci put it, there is domination through consent where the hegemonic ideologies are swiftly put into place. Here, it is not limited to just a capitalist society. Even in a tribal society, such narratives can make hegemonic ideologies concrete. (Foucault, 1978)

Like many other fairytales which stereotype step mothers as cruel and wicked, Mauruangi's story also does the same. The story reinforces the ideology of the step mother caricature as being evil, cruel, selfish, and jealous to the extent that they torture the lives of their poor, innocent stepdaughters and conspire behind their backs to kill them.

There is always the misconception that ideologies are inherently negative. This is not true. The folktale we are looking at here is a tribal folktale. The message of tribals being in close connection with nature and animals is clearly shown in this folktale. Mauruangi's mother turning into a giant catfish and the chawnpui tree, feeding her, shows the nurturing essence of nature. Additionally, when Mauruangi's step mother poured boiling water over her which eventually lead to her death, a serow revived her and took her under his care. The text shows tribals being in close association with the land and animals in the land.

The folktale has been passed down orally from generation to generation. Even though its inception is unknown, the fact that it has been transmitted orally gives people a sense of being in connection to the structural factors of their culture. What makes the text so popular is that it acts as something that bonds generations through oral transmission. The ideologies underlying the narrative have been put out so subtly that it has become normalised through generations.

The folktale of Mauruangi is so popular within the community that it is often considered odd to be a mizo who does not know this story. This shows the extent to which it is popular among the mass. Many of responses in the comment section of the narrative on YouTube showed signs of racism and intolerance. The word 'vai' denotes someone of Dravidian or Aryan feature. So this means that Mauruangi married outside her community. In Mizo society, people usually practise endogamy. Hence even though it is fictional, many condemn her for marrying a *vai lalpa*. Despite this, it still remains popular among the mass. (Hras, 2019)

VI. CONCLUSION

When we read folktales or stories, underlying meanings and unconscious connotation pertaining to different ideologies will be present. This holds true even in this tribal folktale. Through this, certain ideologies get normalised to the mass. In the contemporary world, the education system acts as an Ideological State Apparatus since the folktale of Mauruangi has been included in the school syllabus. This makes it easily accessible to the public and it spreads faster. Knowledge is thus reproduced through such system. Thus hegemonic ideologies become dominant. (Althusser, 1971)

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