



Folk Narrative as Ethical Discourse: A Literary Analysis of Folktales of Manipur

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Abstract

This paper examines the folk narrative of Manipur as a sophisticated form of ethical discourse embedded within indigenous narrative traditions. Moving beyond a descriptive reading of folklore as mere entertainment, the study approaches these tales as culturally coded texts that articulate communal values and social norms. Despite their significance, few studies have examined Manipuri folktales through the lens of moral philosophy, leaving their internal structures underexplored. Employing a qualitative literary-analytical framework, the research focuses on thematic patterns and the functional roles of animal and human figures as carriers of moral agency. The analysis reveals that ethical meaning is conveyed not through abstract moralization but through narrative consequence and symbolic action. By reading these stories as a coherent corpus, the study highlights how oral tradition preserves and transmits ethical knowledge across generations while negotiating survival and social harmony. Ultimately, the paper argues that these narratives function as a grounded ethical system, offering insight into indigenous worldviews that remain underrepresented in mainstream literary studies.

Keywords: Folk Narrative, Ethical Discourse, Folklore, Oral Tradition, Manipuri Folktales

Introduction

Folklore is an important area of study within literary scholarship, it tends to be under appreciated due to its historical examination through the perspectives of anthropology or ethnography. Folktales have often been regarded as merely a source of amusement, a moral teaching tool, or an object of ethnographic study. This methodology, despite its importance, lacks an adequate understanding of the sophisticated ways that folk narratives create, establish and convey ethical meanings within the parameters of a particular cultural context. Recent trends in the literature have begun to demonstrate an increasing recognition within the field of folklore as a viable literary genre as a means of investigating and developing complex worldviews, norms, and ethical systems. As part of this re-evaluation of folklore, the folktales and myths of Manipur may be among the most richly unexplored areas of scholarship. To situate this study within the broader framework of folklore theory, it draws upon key conceptualizations of narrative structure, social function, and ethical engagement. In a structural and narrative sense, Vladimir Propp conceptualizes that function is understood as an act of a character, defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of the action (Propp 21). Propp's morphological approach to folktales emphasizes the internal logic of narrative progression, focusing on how characters' actions propel the plot and generate meaning through sequence and repetition. Bascom observes that the extent to which folklore is a mirror of culture has been mainly the concern of anthropologists, but when stated conversely it becomes the concern of all folklorists: the folklore

of a people can be fully understood only through a thorough knowledge of their culture (Bascom 285). About the purpose or utility of folklore in society, Bascom posits four functions of folklore that is, entertainment, validation of culture, education, and social control; each demonstrating how narratives operate as mechanisms of cultural continuity and moral reinforcement. While Propp emphasizes narrative architecture, Bascom underscores social utility, framing folklore as both a cultural mirror and a mode of social regulation. The persistence of such forms and functions depends on memory as the medium through which culture is carried across generations. As Jan Vansina reminds us, Ancient things are today. Yes, oral traditions are documents of the present, because they are told in the present. Yet they also embody a message from the past, so they are expressions of the past at the same time. They are the representation of the past in the present (Vansina xii).

Folklore thus becomes both a record and a re-enactment of cultural memory, reproducing ethical and social values through repetition, performance, and collective remembering. By approaching Manipuri folktales as ethical discourse, this study moves beyond narrow moralizing to examine what Wayne C. Booth calls the ‘collection of habitual characteristics’ or ethos. As Booth notes, from ancient Greece to the present, the word “ethos” has meant something like “character” or “collection of habitual characteristics”: whatever in a person or a society could be counted on to persist from situation to situation. I express my ethos, my character, by my habits of choice in every domain of my life, and a society expresses its ethos by what it chooses to be. Ethical criticism attempts to describe the encounters of a story-teller’s ethos with that of the reader or listener (Booth 8). Narrative ethics is the study of the moral and ethical dimensions of storytelling, representation, and interpretation in literature. It emphasizes the responsibilities and risks involved in narrating and interpreting lives, focusing on the ethical relationships between storytellers, listeners, and readers. Newton observes, the ethical consequences of narrating story and fictionalizing person, and the reciprocal claims binding teller, listener, witness, and reader in that process (Newton 11). These perspectives emphasize the dialogic and relational dimensions of storytelling, where ethical meaning arises not from prescriptive moral lessons but from the interpretive engagement between narrative and audience. While this framework highlights the formative mechanisms of storytelling, the Folktales of Manipur emerge as ethically charged narratives that encode and transmit communal wisdom through symbolic action and narrative consequence. Rooted in oral traditions and shaped by indigenous cosmologies, these stories reflect a moral universe governed less by abstract principles than by lived experience where ethical understanding arises through acts of trickery, justice, compassion, or restraint. Rather than merely teaching morals, the tales perform ethics through their structures of conflict and resolution. This paper reads Manipuri folktales as culturally grounded ethical systems that construct moral knowledge through narrative form, character function, and the social dynamics of storytelling. By situating these oral narratives within the broader discourse of literary ethics, the study foregrounds the indigenous moral reasoning embedded in Manipuri storytelling and contributes to the growing recognition of oral traditions as sophisticated modes of moral and philosophical expression.

Review of Literature

This study will be situated in the dialogic exchange that exists between the several different disciplines involved in the discussion of folklore theory, narrative structure and ethics as a framework for understanding the way in which we read Manipuri folktales. This section will examine three major themes within folkloristics: structural narrative analysis, historical validity of oral traditions, and ethical/political implications of storytelling. By reviewing seven foundational texts, this section traces how narrative structure influences cultural identity and moral development. The theoretical underpinnings of the discipline are built upon the structuralist and interdisciplinary approaches of Alan Dundes and Vladimir Propp. The proposal to shift the focus from the Surface Narrative and Fantasy Elements in Folklore to the underlying functions that all folktales Share, contained within their respective formal structures, as suggested by Vladimir Propp’s *Morphology of the Folktale* (1968) has altered our perspective regarding folktale analysis. Through his work, Propp was able to present a set of functions that describe all of the universal aspects of every fairy tale, thereby establishing a method of analysis for studying those fairy tales. In addition to Propp’s systematized means of analysis, Alan Dundes, in *The Study of Folklore* (1965), has expanded upon this systems approach to include both psychology and anthropology in a multidisciplinary approach to studying folklore. Within this multidisciplinary approach, it can be concluded that folklore contains elements from our historic past but continues to exist today on a global scale and is essential for our understanding of the very nature of being human, irrespective of culture. Jan Vansina and A. K. Ramanujan have made contributions to literature and research in the area of oral history. Jan Vansina

established a methodology for using oral history as a source of information for writing about the past, especially in societies that do not have written records, through his work, *Oral Tradition as History* (1985). Through the use of the memory of individuals and their environment, his methodology constructs a framework for reconstructing history and individuals based on the spoken word. Thus, his contributions will allow researchers, historians and others interested in history to explore history in a way that traditional historical methods cannot. Jan Vansina's methodology enables researchers and historians interested in oral tradition to reconstruct the past using oral tradition and to understand its relevance in our modern world. A. K. Ramanujan has also written an important contribution regarding the function of oral tradition in the lives of people. Through his work, *Folktales from India* (1991), he provides numerous examples of oral tradition and folklore, including examples of twenty-two different languages, and demonstrates how oral tradition maintains cultural nuances and social complexity for a diverse and complex society. Ramanujan's investigation allows researchers to study the impact that oral tradition and folklore have on contemporary cultures and to examine how oral tradition has been transmitted throughout history. The influence that writings have on humanity is examined in the works of Wayne C. Booth and Adam Zachary Newton. In *The Company We Keep* published in 1988 by Wayne C. Booth, he posits that literature exists to communicate to its readers and form a relationship. It will thus define how a given reader will act and think in relation to morality. Adam Zachary Newton in 1995 published *Narrative Ethics* based on an interpretation of Emmanuel Levinas's work in order to support and expand upon Booth's conceptualization of morally charged narratives. Through *Narrative Ethics* Newton conceptualized the act of narrating stories both as a constituent process and as performative action. He examines how these narratives can compel individuals to act morally towards others by enabling them to view their human identities, by viewing their faces through the lens of culture; of which race and politics are extremely important. Lastly, in his work *Decolonising the Mind* (1986) Ngugi wa Thiong'o uses the medium (ie Language) that was used to communicate the narratives would itself also represent another possible location for conflict. He states that recovering indigenous languages is a very important part of decolonization because these languages represent each culture's historicity and values. But only a few studies have applied these theoretical concepts to the folktales from Northeast India, especially from Manipur which most of the oral narratives are considered to be under-utilized from an ethical standpoint. The various above-mentioned studies suggest that not only do folklore and narrative have significance as artistic forms; they also serve an important role in creating opportunities for constructing historical accounts, developing moral and ethical frameworks and liberating cultural oppression.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative literary approach to examine the folktales of Manipur as a cohesive system of ethical reasoning. The objective of this study was not to simply view the tales as stand-alone moral lessons, but to build a searchable corpus of tales that would allow us to perform comparative analysis on themes within them. By combining theme and narrative analysis, the study identified recurring ethical themes found in multiple tales, such as intelligence and restraint, and justice. Therefore, the study interprets the moral component of the folktale not as an instruction to be followed, but as a result of experience shown through various plot developments, symbolic interactions and narrative consequences such as the rewards and punishments received by characters based on their moral choices. The moral agency and functional roles of human and animal characters have been examined with an emphasis on the function of trickster characters as agents of testing the ethical status of individuals. The analysis of the text has been approached with close examination of the story and with consideration given to the collective, Indigenous perspective of the people of Manipur. Consequently, the study asserts that basic ethical foundations are embedded in the narrative structure of the folktales; therefore, they may be perceived as ethical systems, even though they evolve in form over time with the changing cultural context.

Ethical Structures in Manipuri Folktales

The folk narratives of Manipur, traditionally referred to as funga-wari, function as a sophisticated and foundational medium for the transmission of communal history, cultural values, and indigenous traditions. Within the Meitei household, these stories are more than mere entertainment; they are essential pedagogical tools used to expose children to a moral universe where wisdom is inherited and social norms are reinforced. Singh noted, "Folk tales were often employed to share a common history, to reinforce cultural values or highlight important traditions. Meitei children are exposed to the tradition of the funga-wari or folk tales" (Singh 341). Western Philosophical traditions typically appeal to abstract moralising or theoretical ethics, Manipuri folktales on the otherhand express ethical narratives via rigid narrative frameworks. Morality is

inherent in each folktale, as they all feature a morality theme and every action produces results that are observable, physically evident and socially comprehensible. Sharma asserts, “Folktales are also good sources of wisdom. More often than not, a moral lesson is given at the end of a tale. Moral lessons given to the children with the help of a folktale are more effective and easier to remember for a longer period than a simple moral lesson” (Sharma 9). The structural ethical systems of this approach have developed a very reliable system of reward and punishment, where the way ethical values are derived comes from the actual lives of the characters as opposed to abstract ethical principles. This ethical system is characterised by the fact that consistently, the character traits that are favoured by this ethical system are intelligence, restraint, and foresight over the greedy, hasty, and abusive use of power. This principle is perhaps most vividly exemplified in the iconic tale of *Sandrembi Chaisra*, which raises critical questions related to the definition of “beauty,” “personality,” “virtues,” and most predominantly, the old saying about good winning over the evil undertakings in life is holed up beautifully by this story (Thounaojam). The narrative trajectory of the story from the stepmother’s initial cruelty to her eventual, gruesome retribution demonstrates a moral finality that is built into the architecture of the plot itself. Rather than simply conveying to the audience the concept that intentionally inflicting pain is wrong, the work, as expressed through vivid imagery in addition to its written form, conveys to the spectator the truth of the relationship between human action and its effect (morally or physically) on others. Through observing the inevitable punishment of the antagonist, the audience learns that the ethical principle of “cause and effect” governs human interactions in social and spiritual relationships, whereby the ultimate way the social order and spiritual order maintain balance is through the punishment of/making right any wrongful act committed by an individual.

A primary pillar of the Manipuri ethical framework is the valorization of cleverness over brute force. In a world where characters often face overwhelming physical or social dominance, intelligence is framed as a vital survival strategy for the marginalized and the vulnerable. This theme is central to narratives such as *Keibu Keioiba* (The Tiger-Man) and *The Clever Frog*, where the plot dramatizes a sharp power inversion. Semantically, Kabui is a kin tribe to the Meitei tribe, and keioiba is a compound word of kei and oiba, which means being a tiger. Simply, Kabui Keioiba refers to a kabui who knows the spell to transform into a tiger, while keibu means coffin in the Manipuri language (Hijam 86). In these instances, wit and strategic thinking allow the protagonist to outmaneuver opponents who possess superior strength or social status. Within these tales, animal figures act as “actants” that serve to test the moral boundaries of the universe. Importantly, the ethics of deception are not assessed in isolation but are evaluated based on situational factors. When people of lesser power utilize deception as a survival technique, as in the *Thumkhel* story, it is considered ethically acceptable; however, when the same cleverness is employed for exploitative, dishonest, or greedy reasons, as in the *Monkey and the Bread* cautionary tale, then it is considered ethically unacceptable. This distinction illustrates that the morality of an act is frequently connected to its social function and the nature of the power relationship governing it. Furthermore, the ethical teachings of Manipur emphasize the importance of social relationships and community over individualism, with social harmony being prioritized over individual desire. The communal ethics are reflected in several core thematic elements used to guide behaviour with respect to others within the community. The foremost of these is the honour and respect due to one’s elders and authorities. Wisdom is portrayed, in this ethical system, not as an individual accomplishment, but as a community-wide resource. In The *Obstinate Orphan*, the grandfather’s guidance is portrayed as a pivotal force that shapes the characters’ moral destiny. This reinforces the indigenous belief that individual success is inextricably rooted in ancestral wisdom and the guidance of those who came before. The second node is the Unity and the Sacrosanctity of Family Bonds. The strength of the family unit is consistently prioritized over the desires of the individual, with tales like *The Seven Brothers Who Went Hunting* and *Lenchanghoi* emphasizing that the survival of the collective depends entirely on the sacrifices made by its members. Within this framework, the betrayal of the family or the group is framed as the ultimate ethical failure, leading to a total collapse of the character’s social and moral standing. Finally, the concept of Justice and Spiritual Equilibrium plays a vital role in maintaining the moral order. Justice is rarely a purely legalistic matter; instead, it is delivered through a combination of social retribution and spiritual intervention. Narratives such as *The Devil Without Jaws* and *The Step Mother* reinforce the absolute certainty of punishment for those who disrupt the social order. This sense of justice is frequently tied to a deep reverence for nature, where the environment itself acts as a moral witness. Disrupting divine blessings or the natural balance, as seen in the story of *Lukhrabi Yumpham*, carries immediate ethical and physical consequences, suggesting that human morality is part of a larger ecological and spiritual system.

The narrative form of the funga-wari is specifically designed to facilitate the transmission of these values. Characterized by simplicity of plot, the use of repetition, and patterned dialogue, the structure of the folktale

enhances the memorability of the ethical lessons, ensuring they can be passed down accurately across generations. Oral tradition, or oral lore, is a form of human communication in which knowledge, art, beliefs, ideas and culture are received, preserved, and transmitted orally from one generation to another ("Oral Tradition"). Cultural ethical memory can be instantiated by the use and development of oral tradition, which encapsulates complex concepts about how we think about ourselves and others through the stories we tell. Oral tradition provides a way for people to preserve culture/identity against the influences of modernisation and/or colonisation. Oral tradition contains stories that provide insight into ethical issues, as well as being a source of information on Indigenous knowledge; these stories are not only a means of preserving Indigenous knowledge but also offer opportunities for resistance against the undermining of Indigenous life, through the story itself, by the process of creating the story. Folklore is the body of expressive culture shared by a particular group of people, culture or subculture. This includes oral traditions such as tales, legends, proverbs, poems, jokes, and other oral traditions ("Folklore"). Put differently, Manipuri folklore represents both a continuum of social values and an underlying ethical framework. The relation between storyteller and audience produces an intersubjective negotiated definition of living a "good" life in the specific cultural environment of Manipur, and therefore produces a shared notion of how to achieve this. By looking at these stories as ethical frameworks, we begin to understand the indigenous worldview in which these values are appreciated as forms of social control, collective harmony, and the means of dealing with challenges in life.

Conclusion

Funga-Wari, the traditional folktales of Manipur, represent a highly developed ethical discourse that arises from and reflects the traditional indigenous narrative expression of Manipur. These folktales are not just stories that a child would enjoy reading; rather, they contain culturally defined codes that impart essential communal values and social norms. This research has moved away from an abstract moralism toward a systemic view of ethics, which is supported by the findings that a person's sense of morality in the Manipuri perspective is established through experience via narrative consequence, and through the individual acting symbolically. The ethical construct is based on the interaction of the agency of the characters with the inevitable result of their actions. In addition to emphasizing the importance of community members' respect for elders, as well as family unity, this study has examined how the valorization of cleverness as a means of survival amongst the oppressed is presented throughout the folktales; thus, the preservation of social harmony is prioritized over the satisfying of individual desires. The way that the consistent application of justice and spiritual balance is interdependent with their inherent respect for the natural world is the way that moral order can be maintained through social and spiritual retribution. The main argument of this research project is that the folktales of Manipur are a coherent, and culturally based, system of ethics. Through the use of narrative simplicity, repetitive structures and highly organised dialogues, the oral tradition of Manipur continues to support and convey ethical knowledge over generations. As a form of cultural memory, these tales are a means of resisting the destruction of Indigenous World views and they also provide an insight into moral reasoning that places a premium on social order, collective cohesiveness, and strategic interpretations of the difficulties of the world.

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