



Where is Lakhishree? In Search of the Smart and Strong Women of Bodo Folklore

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Abstract

This paper attempts to bring to light a long-lost process of “writing up” female characters from folklore. Following the ideas and methods of Barbara Babcock, this paper analyses the character of Lakhishree, a stock character of Bodo Folklore from North-East India and proves how a “revisionary enterprise” could be undertaken to alter our “economy of cultural representation.” This process can also show us the presence of a female epistemological tradition which has been pushed to the margins for so long. The paper uses the method of *femme*, a radical idea suggested by Meyer and Schapiro to draw out the character of Lakhishree in the form of a collage by attempting a close reading of Bodo folktales. The *femme* gives us two good pictures of the marginal woman from these folktales—a woman who is strong, smart, collaborative, polylogical, and often plays the role assigned to male heroes in folktales—that of the rescuer. This leads us to two conclusions. First, it shows us why and how women as “knowers” and keepers of knowledge need to be rewritten and reinterpreted (and not rescued) so that we can arrive at a female epistemological tradition. Second, it shows us how a “process centered female aesthetic” can be useful in retelling similar tales from folklore of different cultures so that we can find and celebrate other characters like Lakhishree.

Keywords: *Femme*, Gender, Knowledge, Participatory, Tradition, Writing

Who is Lakhishree?

Everyone should be looking for a person called Lakhishree. There is a good reason behind the search, and some stories. Nearly four

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decades have passed since the Journal of American Folklore Society came out with a special issue on “Folklore and Feminism” as its hundredth volume. In that issue, Barbara Babcock introduced several groundbreaking interventions and methodologies that feminist researchers in folklore could adopt to interpret, analyse and redirect the study of folklore through a paradigm of gender equality. Some of these ideas have been adopted in this paper, however, what necessitated this paper are two concerns identified by Babcock that are seemingly no longer true for both Gender Studies and Folklore Research around the globe. First, Babcock says that one of the problems in talking about folklore and feminist theory is “defining not only feminist theories, but folklore itself” (Babcock 390). This is no longer needed, for both Gender Studies and Folklore Studies have moved on since then. But, have they come together in a practically proactive manner to rewrite female stories in the Indian context? The answer to this question could be contentious. Babcock goes further to say that the feminist scholar of folklore finds herself in a “paradoxically fertile yet barren situation,” since a massive amount of folklore does deal with gender, sex and power – yet, these issues seem to be conspicuously missing from folklore studies (391). This concern has seemingly been addressed in the last four decades—but not as sufficiently as one would have wished for when it comes to folklore studies in India.

Perhaps this paper is necessitated by yet more of Babcock’s intentions from 1987 that have clearly not been as successful in Indian folkloristics as one would have hoped they would have been. Babcock had hoped that the volume on ‘Folklore and Feminism’ would be the beginning of an “important collective revisionary enterprise” (391). She hoped that the future would destabilise dominant discourses by gendering them, and that at some point there would begin a process of “writing women up and into folklore scholarship” (391). She had also hoped that the examples of the three women in folklore that she had used in her paper would show how all three had “engendered significant dislocations in the economy of cultural representations as all manifestations of female power do” (391). Sadly, none of these hopes have come to pass, especially in the Indian context. ‘Collective revisionary enterprise’ has not happened. ‘Revisionary enterprise’ of female folkloristic tradition in India is yet

to be attempted, let alone it being a 'collective.' There is a possibility that it may have been able to destabilise dominant discourses (somewhat), but clearly there have been no attempts at writing women 'up', in any capacity—either that of the storyteller, or the story, or even of major characters in popular folklore. No wonder, the economy of cultural representations in India has been as barren as it was in the early days of both Gender Studies and Folklore Studies.

This is why there is a need to search for Lakhishree. Lakhishree is a stock character in Bodo folklore. The Bodo people reside in all districts of Assam, in some districts of West Bengal; but are the prime inhabitants of the Bodoland Territorial Region of North-Eastern India. Bodo is one of the official languages of the state of Assam, and in the recent past Bodo cultural artifacts in the form of literature, dance, cinema, music and theatre (amongst others) have had a very successful upsurge. To get into the present and past context of Bodo culture and cultural artifacts is beyond the scope of this paper. Bodo folklore, like several folk traditions of North-East India, is rooted in nature and has helped shape the culture of the Bodo people. This folk tradition is most visible in Bodo music and attire, which has secured national and global fame in recent times. As for folktales, one finds the usual mix of moral tales, animal tales, tales of human-nature and human-more than human bonhomie, agricultural themes, spiritual themes, tales of heroism, and more importantly a few tales that clearly point towards empowered women who display exceptional knowledge, intelligence, and strength when faced with adversity. All references to the folktales in this paper have been taken from the text *Bodo Kachari Solo* which was published in Assamese and Bodo language in the year 1972 (Mohini Mohan Brahma). All translations in this paper were done by the author.

This brings us back to Lakhishree. As mentioned earlier, Lakhishree is a stock character in Bodo folklore. She appears in several tales in this collection, yet she is not entitled to an exclusive tale of her own. The image and character of Lakhishree has to be pieced together in the form of a collage by accomplishing a close reading of the tales that Lakhishree appears in. Most of the tales that she appears in are dedicated to male heroes or rely on male agency to exist as coherent narratives. One is unable to find a conclusive picture

of Lakhishree in any of the tales, since the conclusion of each narrative is dedicated to the male character, or to a moral lesson(s). As such, Lakhishree comes across as a fragmented character. However, one can piece together some information from each of these tales which point towards a character who is skilled in indigenous knowledge, has the acumen to do the right thing at the right time, has the competence to resolve conflicts, has the foresight to seek help from willing (often non-human) allies, and more often than not, comes to the rescue of the male hero. Lakhishree is not the “usual” stock heroine of folk and fairy tales who needs to be rescued—she can do that all by herself.

This paper, then, is (also) a conscious and intentional attempt to “write up” the character of Lakhishree, and in doing so, serve as a model for formulating a ‘collective revisionary enterprise’ that can write up similar characters from the folklore of different cultures. It attempts to deconstruct “predominantly male cultural paradigms” and reconstruct “a female perspective and experience in an effort to change the tradition that has silenced and marginalised us” (Gayle and Kahn 1-2). It is hoped that this exercise of writing up an active yet denied character will help “defy patrilinear law”, reflect how to focus one’s gaze and a new subject, listen to a new voice, and alter predominant epistemological stances to include new possibilities (Gayle and Kahn 1). The imaginary search for Lakhishree can expand to “create new expectations and encompass new experiences, and a revolution in knowledge results, necessitating shifts in authority and revisions in epistemology” (Stoeltje 143). This paper shall unearth and focus on what Lakhishree does in these tales, the actions she takes, and the knowledge she displays, since, as Catherine Clement would say it, “Reflection on feminist action, therefore, calls into question and into play the transformational powers of language, its capacity to motivate change in both ideology and economy” (Clement 131).

The *Femme* of Lakhishree

The search for Lakhishree must begin at a site which has hitherto been dismissed as trivial and has been marginalised under the facade of ‘women’s talk’. Babcock herself draws attention to these

“illegitimate genres” and “unofficial forms” as she calls for modifications in androcentric concepts and criteria, and focuses more on mediums in which women express themselves. (Babcock 395). The reason this should be undertaken, as Babcock conceptualises it, is because the act of ‘writing up’ a female character, or rewriting her, or reinterpreting her would be meaningless “unless it is accompanied by a revision of our interpretive practices of the structure of dominant discourse in the direction of openness and plurality” (395). At any rate, there is now a growing consensus that feminist analytical categories should be “unstable” as suggested by Sandra Harding (“Introduction” 649). Babcock lends further support to this possibility and suggests that since the ways and means of hitherto undertaken research in folklore may no longer be suitable, one may as well strip them of their authority, and end up “doing something seriously playful regarding, and thereby re-dress(ing) ourselves” (Babcock 395). This creates space for one to move away from the traditional dependence on tales of male heroism (which are in abundance in all folklore traditions) and move closer to “nonlegitimate forms, even though they are as ordered and as rule-governed as the male forms” in the guise of ‘gossip’ or ‘clothline’ (Farrer xiv).

Hence, if Lakhishree is talking to a bird, or an animal and getting the news of her husband in trouble in a land far away—it is supposed to be an analytical signpost. Similarly, if she is seen giving an animal a strand of her hair with clear instructions as to the charm that shall revive her husband—that too is an analytical signpost. The fact that these two examples appear in two different stories give support to the method of creating a *collage* of Lakhishree. Miriam Schapiro and Melissa Meyer have provided a suitable tool to analyse such instances of female agency. In the aptly titled essay “Waste not Want not: An inquiry into What Women Saved and Assembled” (1978), they coin the term *femmage*. A *femmage* is a compound term that subsumes the various meaning of the word “collage (in its standard and associated definitions and usages with words, paintings, photographs, glue, gum, sticking, scrapbook), assemblage (in its standard meaning of collection, combination of art forms, attitudes, ideas, *Découpage* (cutting of pictures and redecorating with cutouts), and photo montage (making of a composite picture by combining

different photographs together)” (Schapiro and Meyer 66). Though Schapiro and Meyer primarily apply their new term in association with female art creators, the concept of *femmage* can also be applied to female characters in folktales.

Babcock thinks of this model of *femmage* as being multivocal, polylogical, collaborative, piercing discourse, a unity of multiplicities, and a continuity of discontinuities. Lakhishree of Bodo folklore is to be found in all these categories, and perhaps more. Two arguments will be presented in the following paragraphs that corroborate this hypothesis. First, consider the story of *Gombira Bir* (Gombira, the Great). This, of course, is the story of the heroics of a male character. It begins in the usual way; of a son being born to ageing parents, but destined to go on a journey, undertake adventurous tasks, get into combat with demons, marry the fair maiden(s), and finally live happily ever after, having achieved greatness. But not everything is as crystal clear as it appears. There are ruptures in the story—in both the true and theoretical sense of the word. After a closer look, a reader can conclude that this is probably not the story of Gombira the Great after all. It is the story of the ten women he marries in the course of his journey, and more so, of the first woman he marries—Lakhishree. If at all this is the tale of Gombira the Great, it is a tale of great and unchecked promiscuity. But writing up a character does not necessarily mean writing down another. When Gombira visits Fulmuthi, the third woman after marrying Lakhishree (fourth overall), he gets into a terrible fight with an undying demon. Unable to defeat him, Gombira writes to Lakhishree, seeking help. Lakhishree takes a strand from her hair and the help of the Bird-King to subdue the demon. When Gombira visits Makhushree, the fifth woman overall, he loses his life at the hands of a trap at the gates of Makhushree’s house. The Bird-King sends word to Lakhishree. And now, Lakhishree takes the help of another knowledgeable king, who takes a *liegang* leaf and revives Gombira the Great. Gombira then proceeds to fight Makhushree (who fights back) and subdues and marries her.

One would think that would do it. But no, that is not to be. Gombira the Great proceeds to meet the seventh woman, Uwashree. He kills Uwashree’s livestock and gets into a terrible fight with the

woman – a fight terrible enough for Uwashree to kill him. The Bird-King again sends word to Lakhishree, who seeks the help of the Tia-King again – who revives Gombira the Great. The Great hero then proceeds to get into another fight with Uwashree, this time subduing her and then an evil sorcerer (interestingly, the gender of the evil sorcerer is not specified in the tale) turns Uwashree into a goat. The Bird-King informs Lakhishree again. Lakhishree comes to the rescue and with the help of her gold ring and some charms, manages to subdue the power of the sorcerer and rescues Uwashree. Gombira the Great, manages to marry two more women, in the meanwhile. Interestingly, it happens twice that another demon and a group of young men attempt to ‘steal’ the several wives of Gombira the Great and the husband and the wives fight together to save themselves. And yes, Gombira the Great manages to marry one more woman before coming back home to Lakhishree.

Second, relates to the *Tale of the Stork-King*. This is a tale, unlike what the title suggests, of the heroic struggles of an orphan boy, Maura, who fights his fate and marries the daughter of the Stork-King, after going through the rigmarole of the usual adventures. His primary adversary is his father-in-law—the Stork-King. Maura and the Stork-King have already fought two rounds of the battle—both of which the Stork-King lost, before Lakhishree makes her entry. From there on, there is another rupture, just like the previous tale—though Maura is not as promiscuous as Gombira the ‘not so’ Great. Even before the first fight between Maura and the Stork-King, Lakhishree advises her father not to antagonise Maura. She attempts to resolve a conflict even before there is one. But of course, without a fight, there can be no display of heroism. Lakhishree is pawned into marriage to Maura after the Stork-King loses the second fight. The Stork-King, however, cannot forget his humiliation and comes after his son-in-law. Maura is now advised by Lakhishree, who has knowledge of her father’s tricks and Maura is smart enough to listen to his wife, and escapes the onslaught. Soon after the first attack post marriage, the second attack comes in the form of the mother of the Stork-King, who drugs her grandson-son-law and kidnaps Lakhishree. A thing to note here is the trope of the ‘evil old woman’ or the ‘ugly old evil witch’, a common trope that has vilified female characters in the system and tradition of biased representation, who appears only for a moment in

the tale. This provides the scope to focus more on positive characters rather than continue to produce academic ‘material’ on evil female characters, as has happened hitherto.

In captivity now, Lakhishree is about to be married to another man, but Lakhishree displays her intelligence and manages to re-marry Maura, who is disguised as a leper. Soon through, Maura is tricked to madness and Lakhishree has to use her skills to turn Maura back to sanity. She then goes away to dance, and sensing her absence, the Stork-King uses another charm to turn Maura into a monkey. Lakhishree returns and using her skills turns her husband back to a man. The grandmother proceeds to bury Maura alive in a pit, a scene witnessed by a dog who promptly informs Lakhishree. Lakhishree has to rescue her husband again, only to find out that Maura has died in the meantime. Instead of being distraught, Lakhishree seeks the help of birds and animals to revive her husband. Troubles are not over for Maura though. The Stork-King now proceeds to burn Maura alive. Distraught yet brave, a crying Lakhishree seeks help from the Tia-King, who uses a *laigang* leaf and revives Maura. Eventually, the Stork-King realises that as long as Maura has the protection and shadow of Lakhishree over him, this cycle of violence, death and revival would continue. He decides to bury the hatchet once and for all and the story ends with bonhomie and togetherness.

Several other stories in the collection can be read in a similar light without much effort to understand where the rupture lies, but for the sake of this paper, the discussion will be limited to the two tales cited above. There are several things to note in the previous paragraphs. Strength, smartness, presence of mind, and perseverance of the fragmented female character need not be discussed—they are obviously vested in the character. Nevertheless, the women in these tales display characteristics that have been denied in conventional retelling or analysis of such tales. Conventional tales would have had the heroine pray for years and undergo penance of the highest order, displaying perseverance yet subjugation, in order to revive the husbands. Lakhishree has intelligence—she uses knowledge to do what she does. She does not hesitate to call for help, when calling for help would be the smartest thing to do. She communicates across species to get to her goals, which would have been the fastest thing

to do. Instead of displaying the lone, denied woman, she teams up with other women to defend what is theirs. Her knowledge of indigenous plants and practices is exceptional. She is not content and confined with having and remembering that knowledge alone, she utilises that knowledge when the time comes. She has a little bit of magic in her, and unlike the association of magic and sorcery with female characters in the guise of the 'evil witch' trope, she uses the same magic for good.

These points are exemplary, and pointing them out is but scratching the surface. In the model that Babcock suggests, the *femme* of Lakhishree can take a concrete shape in the concept of the collage. Lakhishree is multivocal—she speaks; others listen. She is polylogical—she does not have to depend on 'conventional' rationality; her indigenous rationality is enough. She is collaborative—she expands the horizons of inter-species communication and collaboration. Her discourse can be pieced together, bit by larger bit—only two tales provide enough information to be confidently argumentative. Hers is a story of continuity and discontinuity—the very act of attempting this *femme* which has given a workable collage of an empowered female character should inform that there is more to the story that awaits 'writing up', and analysis. There is a multiplicity to her character—she steps out with different characteristics in different situations. In short, she completes the *femme*.

Of the Many Lakhishrees

What this investigation, *femme*, rereading, rewriting and 'writing up' proves, is perhaps more important than Lakhishree herself. The first concluding remark concerns the concept of who is a 'knower', what must a person undergo in order to be considered as a 'knower', and what position does that person attain in social and cultural systems after that person has been designated as a 'knower'. As the analysis above would suggest, one female character from one folk tradition of India can easily attain this 'status' of being a knower (and a 'doer'—as Lakhishree proves). Interestingly, unlike the stock male characters of folk traditions, she does not have to undergo long journeys, epiphanic experiences, long penance, or the intervention of

knowledgeable saints to qualify as a 'knower'. She appears to be 'inherently' knowledgeable—she does not need to undergo much to seek knowledge, though she has to undergo much to apply that knowledge. As for the question of what position that female 'knower' attains in our social and cultural systems—one can only speculate about what it must have been like in antiquity. For most of our contemporary times, there is a better answer—that female 'knower' has been pushed out of the margins (and academic discourse), and someone has to make a deliberate attempt to write up that 'knower'. Sandra Harding has the following to say about this kind of an epistemological matrix:

Feminists have argued that traditional epistemologies, whether intentionally or unintentionally, systematically exclude the possibility that women could be "knowers" or agents of knowledge; . . . They have proposed alternative theories of knowledge that legitimate women as knowers. ("Introduction" 3)

The search for Lakhishree and the arguments presented above has been an exercise to that end, proving that alternate methods of analysing discourse can legitimise women as knowers in the fields that have hitherto denied them. Writing up Lakhishree is also writing up a 'knower', and such examples are abundant in the Indian oral and written heritage. This seems to confirm the weaving metaphor of the feminist practice of writing that Helen Cixous thought would always "surpass the discourse that regulates the phallogocentric system". Such a feminist tradition, Cixous would have us believe:

...does and will take place in areas other than those subordinated to philosophico-theoretical domination. It will be conceived of only by subjects who are breakers of automatisms, by peripheral figures that no authority can ever subjugate. (Cixous 883)

This is one good reason why everyone should be looking for (a) Lakhishree. One must just be proactive enough to undertake similar revisionary enterprises—collectively or otherwise. Only then can we create spaces in the economy of cultural representation.

Second, it is evident that the image of Lakhishree presented in this paper is far from being clear. That was neither the intention of this paper, nor is it possible to attain a mathematically accurate picture of anyone. The best one can hope for is a collage, hence, the emphasis on the *femme* of Lakhishree. This is what Barbara Babcock meant when she proposed the concept of a “process-centered female aesthetic” (Babcock 392). In this concept, the process of undertaking a task is far more important than the finished “product” itself (392). This also requires that the reader of this paper too indulges in a similar task in a different context, and from different folklore (or any narrative for that matter). To conclude, this is a participatory exercise, if not all collective. One simple suggestion would be to attempt a close reading of popular and local tales to find similar or related characters, and examine how these characters and stories suggest an alternate paradigm that hints at empowered (and empowering) female characters and stories that may have been pushed to the margins. One is sure to find many Lakhishrees.

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