



Genderqueer Identity and Role Reversal of Masculinity and Femininity in the Select Rabha Folktales as Featured in *Queering Tribal Folktales from East and Northeast India* by Kaustav Chakraborty

Rimjim Daimari*

Abstract

This study seeks to provide a critical analysis of the themes of genderqueer identity and role reversing of femininity and masculinity in select Rabha folktales, as discussed in the work, *Queering Tribal Folktales from East and Northeast India* by Kaustav Chakraborty. Genderqueer is a term used to refer to individuals who do not belong to the binary categorisation of gender, such as male or female. They are individuals who violate gender norms, expectations, and stereotypes, moving between genders, who are neither man nor woman, or those who do not want to place themselves within a specific gender, thus blurring the lines between gender identity and sexual orientation. Using a queer theoretical lens, this study explores how the narratives mentioned in the selected folktales question gender norms and sexuality, focusing on the idea of fluidity of gender and the presence of multiple identities provided by different theorists. This paper seeks to explore how the “male female” and “female male” characters in the stories disrupt the idea regarding femininity and masculinity, and analysing these narratives from a queer perspective emphasises the presence of multiple identities within these folktale narratives.

Keywords: Femininity, Fluidity, Genderqueer, Gender Identity, Kaustav Chakraborty, Masculinity.

Introduction

According to Judith Butler, gender is not an inherent trait but rather “a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that

* Research Scholar in the Department of English at Bodoland University, Kokrajhar, Debargaon, Rangalikatha.

congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (*Gender Trouble* 43). Christina Richards, in her book *Genderqueer and Non-Binary Genders*, states that, “genderqueer refers to individuals who challenge the socially constructed binary understanding of gender, presenting a non-binary identity that does not strictly conform to male or female roles” (121). According to Riki Wilchins, genderqueer represents “a refusal to be categorized by the traditional gender norms of male and female, embodying a fluidity in gender expression and identity” (38). This paper examines seven folktales - *The Helpless Kartika*, *The Love Story of Seuji*, *The Lazy Gallant*, *Saving the Man*, *Creation of Liquor*, *Mothers and Daughters*, and *The Manly Woman* from *Queering Tribal Folktales from East and Northeast India* that disrupt the notion of gender roles and sexual norms. The narratives in these folktales reflect how the characters question the heteronormative gender norms, which provide a space for diverse identities and desires. Folktales are basically stories that have been told from generation to generation. Tribal people have a rich, varied folklore of several kinds. These folktales reflect the belief system, customs and traditions, cultures, etc., of a community. The select Rabha tribal folktales are unique in their structure. Generally, folktales encompass diverse topics such as myths and legends, fairy tales, fables, novellas, etc., but the selected folktales in this study focus on gender issues and concerns. Usually, the concept of genderqueer identity is regarded as a western concept, but analysing the selected Rabha folktales depicts how these ideas existed within the culture and community long before such ideas got established in mainstream society. Analysing the select Rabha folktales from a queer perspective gives a new insight into the genderqueer narratives reflecting a range of sexual identities.

The concept of gender has long been restricted only to the binary notion of male and female. However, in the 1990s, with the beginning of queer theory, the concept of queer and genderqueer began to emerge, and with this, the concept and the idea of sex and gender have taken on a new turn. Genderqueer can be defined as “any type of trans identity that is not always male or female. It is also where people feel they are a mixture of male and female” (Monro 13). The individuals who do not fall into the categorisation of gender, or who

neither belong to man nor woman, or who belong in between these binary categorisations of gender are called genderqueers. Genderqueers are those who do not want to remain within the fixed categorisation, and through them there is a reflection of both genders at the same time, termed as “male female” or “female male.” Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity challenges the fixed gender identities, emphasising that gender is a repeated set of actions rather than an innate quality. Gender is something that one does; “it is a ‘doing’ rather than a ‘being’” (*Gender Trouble* 33). A queer analysis of select Rabha folktales highlights how the genderqueer identities are reflected through the characters by blending of feminine qualities in men and masculine qualities in women, reflecting a variety of sexual and gender identities. The narratives in the folktales feature gender fluidity and role reversal by subverting the dominant binary of masculinity and femininity by the portrayal of masculine females and feminine males. According to Rosi Braidotti, “The concept of fluid gender identities reflects the multiplicity and becoming inherent in subjectivity” (35).

The folktale, *The Helpless Kartika* is the adaptation of the original myth of Kartika, who is a strong and powerful deity having multiple wives, highlighting his masculinity and power. However, in this adaptation, Kartika is portrayed as a weak and fragile character who defies traditional masculine behaviour. The narrative reveals Kartika, a character who exemplifies genderqueer identity by possessing a feminine quality. Kartika’s behavior is marked by feminine sensibility; he is not willing to conform to the dominant masculine traits. Despite being the son of Shiva, a deity who symbolises strength and command, Kartika possesses a feminine quality, which is seen when he closes his eyes and covers his ears after his mother, Parvati, expresses her desire for him: “Kartika closed his eyes and covered his ears with his hands” (Chakraborty 135). He reflects a non-binary and fluid response as he withdraws both physically and emotionally instead of confronting the situation. Kartika’s actions highlight his internal struggle, resisting acting in a traditional way as expected from men who do not align with the fixed categorisation of gender norms. Kartika’s inability to resist his mother’s demand showcases his departure from masculine traits of strength and dominance. He is seen as being subjugated under his

mother when he submits himself and promises to do everything that makes her happy: “I promise in the name of my father that I will undertake whatever you ask me to do in order to make you happy” (Chakraborty 135). Usually, a fully masculine man is not seen as remaining subjugated to anything beyond his own desires and wishes. His rejection and withdrawal of traditional roles reflect a more nuanced and fluid approach to gender which does not want to align with a fixed identity. However, Kartika too performs ‘maleness’ when he declares that he cannot keep his promise and finds an alternative way to come out of the situation, which he is not willing to do. This reflects a genderqueer individual who does not strictly align with or oppose the binary structure and who can walk both sides of the gender, thus suggesting role reversal of femininity and masculinity by these individuals who blur the line between binary and non-binary. The mother, Parvati’s wish to fulfill carnal desires, is indicative of how she depicts womanhood, which might showcase a desire that is not considered normal in mainstream society. Despite being a mother, Parvati wishes to satiate her carnal desire through her son, even when it is regarded as a sinful act: “I want you to satisfy my carnal yearning” (Chakraborty 135). The expression of the explicit carnal desire of a mother for her son is least expected from a woman, and therefore, this reflects a manly behaviour that defies gender norms of the society. Through Parvati, the idea of having diverse sexual identities and desires is symbolised. And this also challenges the idea of associating femininity with morality.

In the story, *Love Story of Seuji*, Anteswar’s character reflects a departure from masculinity and Seuji’s character from femininity. Seuji does not conform to the societal expectations of women to remain in widowhood for long and she mourned only for a few months. However, she longs for companionship, which indicates her desire for autonomy, and therefore, having an affair with a man, after which she becomes pregnant: “She got involved in a clandestine affair with a man and became pregnant” (Chakraborty 137). The elderly woman, as the guardian of Anteswar wishes for him to get married, symbolizing a diverse desire deviating from the norms of society. Through Seuji, the narrative explores how the person who deviates from societal expectations and norms faces rejection and isolation, thereby facing consequences as reflected in the story when

she was denied marriage by her second man. Seuji is a person who does not want to confine herself to the traditional gender roles that are expected of a woman. On the other hand, Anteswar, who is initially portrayed as a brave figure, reveals a fragility that challenges traditional masculine notions. He does not possess a strong masculine character, as he is unable to fight the elderly women for the love of his life; instead, he resorts to escape, as seen when he climbs the tree out of fear: “Anteswar became scared, so he climbed up a tree” (Chakraborty 137). He is unable to confront his actions, especially the murder of his wife, which illustrates the breakdown of masculine strength and dominance. This emphasises the idea that masculinity and femininity are socially constructed concepts rather than inherent traits, as Butler states, “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (*Gender Trouble* 25). Through her knowledge of witchcraft and manipulation, the elderly woman who plays a pivotal role as Anteswar’s wife embodies a duality of gender roles. She does not conform to the expectations of an elderly woman and a married wife but was able to take a strong role in the patriarchal society. She depicts a masculine trait through her ability to control and fulfill her desires and by marrying Anteswar by using witchcraft: “On the day of marriage, she, having good knowledge of witchcraft, took the shape of a bride and got married to Anteswar” (Chakraborty 136). The second man in Seuji’s life also fails to embody traditional masculine traits, which further emphasise the theme of genderqueer identity. When confronted with the consequences of marrying Seuji, he is not able to take responsibility for his actions, and out of fear of social backlash, he withdraws and jumps in the river, which shows his lack of bravery and rejection of masculine ideals: “In utter disgrace, the man jumped into the river” (Chakraborty 137). Through the complexity of Seuji’s and Anteswar’s experiences, the fluidity and diversity of gender identities can be seen. According to Kate Bornstein: “The thing is, when you look at gender, it’s really more like a buffet than a set menu. You can pick and choose what you want to identify with, and you can have multiple identities at once” (13).

The theme of genderqueer, with its fluidity and disruption of traditional gender roles, also emerges in the story, *The Lazy Gallant*.

The youngest son in the story is referred to as a lazy gallant who defies conventional masculinity through his denial of laborious work like woodcutting and cattle rearing. Instead, he engages in slumbering, small bird catching, and playing *dotara*: “He would sleep all through the day. In the evening, idly he would roam around playing his *dotara* . . .” (Chakraborty 141), thereby resisting the normative performance of masculinity by engaging in works that are considered non-masculine. According to Connell and Messerschmidt, “Many men consciously resist traditional masculinity, choosing not to conform to the demands of hegemonic ideals, recognizing them as limiting and oppressive” (“Hegemonic Masculinity” 836). The five elder brothers were annoyed with the sluggishness of the younger brother, as they expected him to also work and help them in the field. However, the youngest brother does not conform to their expectations, and therefore, the elder brothers decide to kill him. This emphasises the fact that those who do not conform to the expectations and norms of gender are not considered and are not given equal place in society, as Connell states, “Masculinity is a social construct that enforces rigid behaviors, roles, and norms. Those who do not conform to these prescribed ideals often face social exclusion, ridicule, or are deemed as ‘lesser men’” (*Masculinities* 77). The elder brothers’ plan to kill their youngest brother depicts how the society disregards those who do not belong to the conventional norms of the society by rejecting, isolating, and not giving them an equal place in the society, which shows the expectations of the mainstream society. Society constructs the norms of masculinity and femininity, and those who do not conform to these norms are questioned. The lazy gallant’s dependence on women, especially on his wife and sister-in-law, “The lazy gallant asked his wife to visit his eldest sister-in-law for help” (Chakraborty 141), both for physical and emotional support, suggests his failure to conform to the standard gender norms, which in turn reveals a genderqueer expression. This suggests a fluidity in his gender, thereby questioning the expectations placed on men. By highlighting this, the narrative—as per Butler—demonstrates how “gender norms function not only to produce intelligible identities but also to maintain a certain social order” (*Undoing Gender* 178). In contrast to the lazy gallant, the eldest sister-in-law and the wife portray masculinity in their actions. The elder sister-in-law’s courage to reveal the plans of her husband

and brother-in-law to the lazy gallant and her advice to hide him reveal a genderqueer individual who is able to perform both masculinity and femininity at the same time, blurring the line between binary and non-binary. On the one hand, she is able to take care of everyone by doing the household chores, which is expected of women, and on the other, she also takes responsibility as a decision-maker in the house, which reflects a masculine trait. The wife of the lazy gallant, who was initially a princess fleeing her stepmother, also defies the conventional norm by proposing marriage to the lazy gallant: “She proposed the lazy gallant to marry her” (Chakraborty 141). She reflects a manly female character by providing support to her husband physically and emotionally, especially by going to their house in order to seek help from the sister-in-law. The youngest brother’s wife, who works alongside her husband in agricultural work, reflects a fluidity in gender that collapses binaries through her engagement in activities that cross the boundary of expected female labour. This highlights a gender fluidity where gender roles are not rigid and role reversals of femininity and masculinity can be seen. Halberstam argues that “gender ambiguity offers possibilities for forms of embodiment that are less constrained by social norms,” (18) a concept that is reflected in a wife’s active participation in household activities.

The story, *Saving the Man* reveals a unique reversal of traditional gender stereotypes. The husband and wife in the story are seen to be reversing gender roles. Throughout the story, the wife is depicted as having qualities that are traditionally attributed to men in patriarchal society, like courage, decisive actions, and protective instinct. The wife portrays genderqueer behaviour, which is reflected through her protection of her husband from various situations where the ‘act’ of protection is itself associated with the traditional gender stereotype. The wife, through her actions, subverts the traditional ideal where strength, rationality, and protection are traditionally associated with masculinity. The authority of the wife over the husband, which is depicted by the physical act of slapping and punching her husband to save his life, aligns with the idea of taking charge, which is often viewed as masculine: “Almost immediately the husband seemed to have choked while the wife slapped him hard, and the rice and fish bone came out of his mouth” (Chakraborty 147). Connell’s theory of

hegemonic masculinity states that “masculinity is not a fixed biological essence but a product of social relations” (*Masculinities* 81). The wife embodies what Connell would consider “hegemonic masculinity,” as she does not conform to passive femininity; however, she holds power in the relationship and takes the lead in the husband’s safety. On the other hand, the husband reflects traditional feminine traits and does not confront the various situations; instead, he is characterised by fragility and embarrassment: “The new son-in-law felt humiliated on being smacked by his wife in front of his mother-in-law” (Chakraborty 147). Thus, the wife and the husband are seen reversing gender roles, which resonates with Halberstam’s idea of gender fluidity, where “female masculinity” is not a mimicry of male behavior but a distinct way of being masculine (268). The wife’s masculine traits do not make her “unfeminine,” nor do the husband’s feminine traits make him “unmasculine.”

The *Mothers and Daughters* is a folktale that revolves around two sisters and their daughters who reflect genderqueer identity. The two sisters having the power to captivate the sage with enchantment, thereby getting pregnant, depicts a genderqueer character transcending the mainstream patriarchal setup of the society. The two sisters reflect power and ability, and the sage reflects fragility and subjugation as he was not able to resist the temptation of the two sisters: “The saint, knowing that it was a sacrilege, could not resist the temptation” (Chakraborty 143). Following the boldness of their mothers, the daughters too decide on their own to marry the two brothers. The transformation of the two daughters into earthen pots to enchant the two brothers demonstrates a rejection of biological determinism, where identity is not tied to fixed physical forms. The daughters’ transformation into earthen pots reflects the potential of the bodies to transcend traditional gender binaries, thus, blurring the lines. The traditional role reversal can be seen through the younger brother’s dependency on his wife, as she repeatedly saves him using her magical power and proficiency: “The girl, with her magic, came to know about the elder brother’s evil plan and immediately sent her pet dog, which set the younger brother free . . .” (Chakraborty 144). The younger brother depicts a feminine male quality where he is unable to save himself from the evil doings of his elder brother because in society men are considered to be bold and strong, which

is in sharp contrast to his personality. The portrayal of the younger daughter's ability and proficiency as a protector is in sharp contrast with the husband's fragility, highlighting a genderqueer identity that combines traditionally feminine and masculine attributes, and it also further highlights the reversal of traditional power relations. The two mothers taking revenge for their daughters' loss reflects a genderqueer femininity where they take the responsibility and take care of their child and also have masculine traits of protection. The mothers showcase their power by taking revenge on the elder brother: "With his death the mothers succeeded in avenging the daughters' loss" (Chakraborty 144), which in turn subverts the traditional patriarchal setup of the society where a man is defeated by women. The mothers and daughters showcase how the concept of femininity can also be associated with having power and bravery. The characters of mothers and daughters show that women can also have control and power over men, which does not align with the norms or rules of the society. Thus, the characters in *Mothers and Daughters* exhibit a genderqueer identity that portrays the role reversal, thereby suggesting fluidity of gender and its constructed nature. The dynamic nature of gender is profoundly depicted in this folktale, where the fixed roles in the society are disregarded.

The Manly Woman is a story that reflects a character named Maaykawn who defies the predefined boundaries of oppositional gender construction by being a woman and daring like a man. She depicts genderqueer identity with her macho characteristics, dressing like a man and seemingly lives alone without any relation with other men and women. Her attire and attribution exemplify gender fluidity and 'performativity' of gender. Through her, the genderqueer identity is highlighted as she is engaged in work that is traditionally attributed to males, like that of cutting wood: "Like a man, she could cut wood with an axe" (Chakraborty 145) and engage in jhum cultivation, thereby being called by villagers as "manly woman." Maaykawn lives and acts like a man, which alienates her from getting any affection from male counterparts: "Due to her macho attire and attitude, she was almost past her youth and yet unmarried. The men were afraid to mingle with her" (Chakraborty 145). Maaykawn is socially marginalised, though she resembles strength and courage, and the women mock her as an "ox-like virile women" (Chakraborty

145). This aligns with the idea that the man and woman division is culturally constructed in the society, and these are maintained through norms that assign specific roles to men and women in the society, and the ones who do not align with these norms are considered abnormal. As Pierre Bourdieu argues: “The division between the sexes appears to be ‘in the order of things,’ as people sometimes say to refer to what is normal, natural, to the point of being inevitable” (8). The socially and culturally constructed norms advocate conformity, which is reflected through Maaykawn’s alienation and isolation as she was not conforming to the fixed rules set up by society. Society associates the idea of masculinity with self-sufficiency, power, and domination and femininity with subjugation, sacrifice, and dependency. Maaykawn’s living alone (coinciding masculinity) showcases her willingness to have power and position in the society, which will ultimately protect her from harm. However, Maaykawn’s encounter with the woman who is possibly a witch in the forest reveals how a single, independent woman can be disparaged. This aligns with Michael Foucault’s concept of ‘governmentality’, where the society uses a subtle form of control to enforce social norms: “The soul is the prison of the body. It is the effect and instrument of a political anatomy; the soul is the prison of the body” (30).

The Rabha folktale *Creation of Liquor* is a story about seven Rabha headmen that criticises the gender roles and expectations. This folktale depicts the character of headmen despising gender roles and expectations by not adhering to the norms of the society. The Rabha headman refuses to conform to the normative masculinity that is highlighted through the depiction of headmen’s rejection of the pathway to success, however, accepting a carefree lifestyle of pleasure and community. The Rabha headmen disrupt the heteronormative notion by defying gender rules, which can be seen when they deny power, wealth, position, and dominance by first selling elephants, then horses, and at last disregarding money, which holds power and position in the society. They rejected the conventional path to material wealth, unlike the Tibetan, Bengalee, and Marwari men who want to accumulate power and success with economic control by the use of animals and money. Their embrace of leisure, emotional contentment, and communal enjoyment over

wealth and power is reflected through their preference for the sage's final gift, a pot of liquor: "The more they drank, the more they desired and finally they fell asleep. Waking up, they found a profound sense of tranquility in their mind" (Chakraborty 139). According to R W Connell, hegemonic masculinity represents "the configuration of gender practice that embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy" (*Masculinities* 77). The seven Rabha headmen depict how they do not want to confine themselves to the fixed expectations of masculinity in the society, which in turn depicts fluidity of identity. The Rabha headman challenges the idea that masculinity must be defined by power, position, and dominance.

Conclusion

The selected Rabha folktales analysed in this paper question the rigid heteronormative gender roles by portraying genderqueer characters whose identities fall outside of or between male and female identities. The narratives of the folktales also offer a unique insight into the fluidity of masculinity and femininity and act as a resistance to binary conformity, shedding light on the varieties of gender identities and expressions. The characters discussed in the stories do not adhere to a strict binary gender system, which aligns with the idea that gender is not innate but rather performed. And anyone can perform gender; it is not rigid. The male individual may not align with masculinity but, however, may possess feminine traits, and vice versa. Thus, the queering of these select Rabha folktales provides a spectrum for the exploration of diverse identities, emphasising the fact that gender is not a rigid binary.

Works Cited

- Bornstein, Kate. *Gender Outlaws: The Next Generation*. Seal P, 2010.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Masculine Domination*. Translated by Richard Nice, Stanford UP, 2001.
- Braidotti, Rosi. *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming*. Polity P, 2002.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1990.
- . *Undoing Gender*. Routledge, 2004.

- Chakraborty, Kaustav. *Queering Tribal Folktales from East and Northeast India*. Routledge, 2021.
- Connell, R.W. *Masculinities*. 2nd ed., U of California P, 2005.
- Connell, R.W., and James W. Messerschmidt. "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept." *Gender and Society*, vol. 19, no. 6, 2005, pp. 829–59. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/27640853.
- Foucault, Michael. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan, Vintage Books, 1995.
- Halberstam, Jack. *Female Masculinity*. Duke UP, 1998.
- Monro, Surya. *Gender Politics: Citizenship, Activism, and Sexual Diversity*. Pluto P, 2005.
- Richards, Christina. *Genderqueer and Non-Binary Genders*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.
- Wilchins, Riki. *Queer Theory, Gender Theory: An Instant Primer*. Alyson Books, 2004.