

SCHOLARLY ARTICLE

‘Wounded-Breast’ Stories: Re-Inking Lactating Woman as an Immutable Abject Self in Select Tribal Folktales

Silpa T Anirudhan and Dr. Dhanesh M.

Abstract

The ‘bodies’ in tribal folktales do not adhere to the value system and the hidden boundaries set by society. Verrier Elwin appreciated the fictional quality of such tales from Central India and anthologised them without attempts to moralize. He incorporated tales on vagina dentata, penis, clitoris, naval, and breast motifs in one of those anthologies. This article re-reads the tribal folktales of lactating women and their breasts through the lens of Julia Kristeva’s abjection. It analyzes the female body, traversing from tamed to abject, non-confirmative self, through a close reading of the texts with the breast motif as a literary device.

There are multifaceted breasts with fluid characters: empathetic caregivers, assaulted, wounded, dead, and living corpses, but all oversized. They appear as abject, challenging the notion of naïve and appealing female bodies. Men in these tales fear the existence of breasts and their potential to engulf masculinity. Men try to make breasts desirable by wounding them and chopping them off mercilessly. The breasts surpass the tortures and continue to carry their ‘fluidity,’ milking sour odours and transforming into creations like pumpkins that quench thirst. They do not limit themselves to a sweet, nourishing breast but refashion a fierce, wounded, bleeding, yet lactating one.

Keywords: Tribal Folktales, Wounded Breast, Women, Motif, Abject, Body.

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Introduction

Musings of the Mutilated Breasts

Many of the grandmothers’ tales are memoirs of mutilated women; some were assaulted, raped, ripped off from their bodies, and they flew away to the sky to be free! The ‘wounded breasts’ in the select tribal folktales are representatives of the violated female body and identity, which re-live her life in another form and space, reclaiming her ripped-off history and agency. They threaten masculine power and surpass the rules and territories that abide her. They actively engage in the formation and progression of the plot, thereby transforming into immutable feminine voices- the milking abject!

Folkloristics opens a broader scope as folktales are dynamic and constantly in flux with the changing sociocultural and political milieu. Folkloristics worldwide evolved through the collection, preservation, and analysis of folklore. India has its multitudinous folktales, which the scholars have studied since immemorial. Studies in India still focus more on the collection and preservation part, especially when it comes to folklore. Anthropological and ethnographical scholars and academicians studied tribal lore for political and academic reasons. They studied tribal customs, culture, ecology, language, and geography to define and categorise the tribes.

Being a curious author who opened himself to multiple genres, Verrier Elwin (1902-1964) looked beyond the anthropological and ethnographical framework with which the other scholars

studied tribal folklore. Elwin lived to advocate and preserve the uniqueness of tribal culture and traditions.

Writer and Historian Ramachandra Guha paints Verrier Elwin's persona as "This Englishman, missionary, Gandhian, social worker, activist, bureaucrat, and Indian was always and pre-eminently a writer, a man whose richness of personal experience illuminates an oeuvre of truly staggering proportion... Elwin worked in a whole range of genres. He wrote and published poetry, religious tracts, polemical pamphlets, novels, anthropological monographs, folklore collections, official reports and manual reviews, editorials, and travelogues" (326).

Elwin believed that folktales are one of the creative expressions of certain tribal communities. Guha remembers him rightly as a "marvelously evocative but undisciplined writer immersed in the world of metaphors, poetics, and polemics, rather than invoking scientific rigor and structural analysis" (331). The marvels of the folktales completely absorbed him and made him anthologize the oral tales of tribal communities from India. He gave prominence to their literary qualities because he accounts for his entry to "anthropology through poetry" (Elwin 143).

This article focuses on one of Elwin's many folk anthologies, *Tribal Myths of Orissa*, collected from the Koraput district, Orissa, published in 1954. During his twenty years of social life among the tribes of Central India, Elwin spent a considerably long tenure in Orissa. He vindicates the tribal folktales as unique to other parts of the country. They do not preach morality even though one of their peculiarities is their homely nature: they are built on everyday occurrences, many of them open with a man and wife and grasp the attention and emotions of the audience. The tales in the volume are associated with the creation of the vegetable world. Every creation tale is composed of motifs that, in many ways, create a plot. As C. G. Jung put it, "The myriad number of creation myths can be understood by concentrating on some of their basic

commonalities that can be defined as “motifs” or universal images that have existed since the remotest times” (3). Many tribal folktales have the same patterns of motifs. These patterns are called tale types. Motifs and Tale types are the basic analytical and classification units in studying folklore.

Stith Thompson defines a motif by saying, “A narrative motif sometimes consists of very simple concepts which continually find its place in traditional tales. These may be unusual creatures like fairies, witches, dragons, ogres, cruel stepmothers, talking animals, or birds...A motif may also be essentially a short and simple story in itself, an occurrence that is sufficiently striking or amusing to appeal... (753). The article tries to generate a table with the names of the selected tales, the recurrent body images, and the creations formed out of them to enable a close reading and facilitate easy comprehension.

The table is given below:

Body Motifs

Sl. no	Title of the Tale	Body Motifs found	Creation
1	Gadaba	Breasts Navel Elephant Feet	Jackfruit tree

2	Hill Saora	Breasts	Jackfruit tree
3	Didayi	Breasts	Pumpkin
4	Kond	Breasts	Sago palm

The selected text's close reading brings forth the recurrent presence of the female body in four tales, namely, the *Gadaba*, *Hill Saora*, *Didayi*, and *Kond*. The tales are named after the tribe from whom Elwin collected the specific tale variant. The stories unfold the creation of the vegetable world, precisely, jackfruit, pumpkin, and sago palm from female bodies, especially breasts. The images of nursing women in literature and folktales portray the breast as a nurturing body part. Unlike them, the breasts are symbolic representations of the wounded female body, torn apart from the self and carried away. Even after the mutilation, they transform into vegetation, reclaiming the woman's agency. The blood and milk dripping presence of the breasts in the progression of the tales make it abject, which revolts against the patriarchal norms and structures. This unusual aspect, other than a body part with nurturing quality, makes it a motif.

This paper analyses the select tribal folktales through the lens of abjection, a concept of Julia Kristeva. The wounded breast motif forms an abject thing, protruding from the systemic structures of patriarchal society, and it aids the feminine in exerting agency. The selected tribal

folktales become an abject narrative in themselves as they traverse the conventions of folk narratives and provoke the audience to contemplate the disconcerted.

ANALYSIS

“The abject has only one quality of the object, and that is being opposed to ‘I’ (Kristeva, Julia 1982)

In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Kristeva discusses the pervasive nature of abject. She states: “The abject is perverse because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule or law: but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them” (Kristeva, Julia 15). Her theory concerns with the figures that tend to transgress or transform. Confronting the abject provokes the subject to recall the pre-signification state. Abject threatens the subject, that it must be separated away, forcefully to the other side.

Therefore, the abject is excluded from the order and located in a liminal state on the margin. Even though the subject tries to cancel the abject, it persists to exist. Kristeva’s theory of abjection underpins the argument of this article as follows:

1. Identifying and Exposition to the Abject Body

The select tribal folktales narrate the identification and exposition of the abject body throughout the course of the stories. The research recognizes the patriarchal society's fear when exposed to unexpected feminine bodies followed by their violent attempts to cancel the women, self-identification of women as existing within the grotesque frame or imperfect bodies, the reader’s

or audience's realization that they follow a folktale which deconstructs the conventions of a folktale. The movement of these themes is explicated as follows:

b. **Horror! The Patriarch Yells, Wound her, and Tame Her!**

The tribal community limits the human body in the territories of social norms and values that spring from inherent structures like caste, class, and gender. Elwin draws our attention to the village hierarchy, which plays a vital role in the folklore. Every village has its chief, the official priest, a shaman, and a village watchman. These tribesmen are patrilineal. As per the select tales, one of the community's primary concerns is the woman's physique. A girl's first menstruation and the monthly bath are prominent when she is believed to be specifically subject to actual or miraculous impregnation (Elwin, Verrier 24). It is evident from the tales that the parents take immense trouble to marry off their children. They believe the bodies should be desirable in visually appealing, delicate forms.

However, there are some women in the tales with enormous breasts, sometimes dripping with stinking milk or blood, and elephant feet, which evoke fear and disgust in the perceiver.

In the *Gadaba* tale, the feet of the goddess Sarbosattijhola are like those of an elephant. She broke the floor while she walked and was lazy, so she slept at the same place where she had dined. She knows no man but impregnated and delivered twelve piglets. In the *Hill Saora* tale, Sarku Saora's wife delivered their third child. When six months passed, she got a sore on her breast, and the milk went sour. The milk began to drip continuously from the wound, for which they found no cure. In the *Didayi* tale, the eldest daughter of a Didayi out of his five daughters could not find a groom because of her very long, two-cubits long breasts. He was ashamed of this. He offered to marry her without even taking the bride price, but everyone went away afraid. In

the *Kond* story, a god's daughter was in her menstrual period; she was unmarried and never had a child. However, suddenly, milk came from her breasts and fell onto the ground.

The female bodies become undesirable and, therefore, remain unmarried. The fear of a woman being single evokes questions in society. She should not stay in the house forever; she is inviting shame and disgust to the household. The family grows anxious about her body and is vigilant about her chastity. The men are not ready to share the family property with her illegitimate, non-human heir or lose the social sanction by protecting the undutiful female. They perceive her as an abject figure, a tangible threat potentially corrupting the social order. They are exposed to the threats posed by the abject- her!

1.1.1. Intensification of the Abject

The 'breast stories' from Orissa reflect instances where the female body is perceived as potentially abject and hence violated to cancel, tame, or make her more desirable. Domesticating women becomes vital to reassert the power position of men in society. The position of the woman, the nature of her body, and the desires and opinions she holds contribute to the violation she faces. She, like every 'body' in the tribal folktales, adheres to the unwritten rules and restrictions unless violated.

Mutilation of the body to win over, punish, or defeat a woman is evident even in epics like the Ramayana. In India, breasts are symbols of female power, so cutting them is chopping the woman off her power and devaluing her. Ramayana, for instance, depicts Surpanakha's mutilation by Rama. Surpanakha finds her sexual desire to be normal, and she approaches Ram and Laxman to seek their consent. They mock her for her 'impure' desire and appearance and decide to mime her abject rakshasa body by violating it. In many of Ramayana's retellings, Laxman chops off Surpanakha's nose and ears; in other versions, it is her breasts, nose, ears, and even hair. She is a

rakshasa woman who voices her desire. She owns her body. She is dreaded as impure and immoral. The men want to strip her of dignity by mutilating her even though killing her will not be a sin.

This reappears in the select tribal folktales as well. Sarbosattijhola's seven brothers, from the *Gadaba* tale, believed that killing their sister is a sin, whereas violating her body is necessary to tame her. They find her devoid of dignified demeanors and unattractive. They could not find a groom for her. All of them were married with children. Fearing the repercussions of having an unmarried woman at home who creates a nuisance, they drove her away from home.

Then she lived by a stream, knew no man, conceived on her own, and delivered twelve little pigs. While suckling, they used to enquire about their father and family. After learning about the injustices she faced, the piglets decided to ruin their uncles' crops. The brothers caught two of them and decided to grow them at home, only to kill them later for flesh. To avoid more children, they went on to cut her breasts and seal her organ with a wooden nail, stating that killing her would be a sin.

In the tale collected from the Hill Saora tribe in Koraput District, the woman owns no name or identity other than that of Saora's wife and his children's mother. She developed a large wound on her breast at the time of her third delivery. A shaman was called, and every medicine was tried but useless. She is present in the tale in her absence. The only mark she leaves is that of her stinky, dripping breast milk. The tale of Didayi from the Koraput district narrates the disgusted father's decision to cut off his daughter's giant breasts, hoping to make her attractive. He took her to the forest clearing and, cut off her breasts, threw them away.

In the select tribal folktales, men from the community find the women with 'unconventional bodies' as threats to their reputation and social sanction. They fear the horrors

the abject pose, that of death, decay, pregnant body, bodily waste, illegitimate or nonhuman offspring, and perversion. They could not unsee the abject female body from their vicinity, which remains as dangerously powerful. The patriarchs find the need to exclude and place them away from their proximity. (Creed, Barbera 65). They assure themselves that chopping off the breasts will apparently tame the woman or make her desirable. But, to their astonishment and horror, the mutilated breasts cease to be docile but transform into vegetation and continue to thrive in society.

The Poking, Milking Breasts

“Abjection is the result of recognizing that the body is more than, in excess of, ‘the clean and proper’”– Elizabeth Grosz.

The women in the select tribal folktales are exposed to continuous violence and social denial until they reach a point of acknowledgment that they occupy abject bodies. The moment of self-identification as abject take quite a long time for them, until then they identified themselves as obedient inhabitants of a patriarchal society. They live hesitantly in the corners of their houses without even marking their footprints in the household. They succumb to their social roles and responsibilities and believe they are ardent followers of them.

However, the masculine society marks the women for their grotesque bodily appearances and cannot unsee the enormous, wounded, or fluid-emitting horrors of the supposedly beautiful feminine physique. The men paint the image of a ‘disorderly woman,’ the one with irregular or dysfunctional bodies who hesitate to exist in traditional feminine roles. Instead, they adorn their grotesque image and stand unique for their stark individualism. This threatens society so that they begin to mock, loathe, and erase her body with all its equipment.

1.1 The female identifies her body as abject

Cixous argues, "Woman must put herself into the text- as into the world and into the history- by her own movement." Likewise, the tribal woman re-inks her violated body and history, poking the needle of the breasts to the folk pamphlets. While the violence and expulsion continued, her sexed body with an unusual appearance transgresses the boundaries set by society. Thus, she accepts herself as abject and initiates revolts against the masculine social order to gain voice, existence, and state of being.

In the *Gadaba* tale, the woman was conceived already, even though her brothers ventured to ensure her impotence by sealing her organs and cutting off her breasts. Her belly breaks off, and through her navel comes a jackfruit tree. The little pigs in her womb changed into jackfruits. She dies in the delivery. Nevertheless, sprouts to sustain herself forever in the same space from where they tried to erase her, reminding them of her existence.

A tale variant on the creation of the jackfruit tree from Hill Saora narrates the death of the mother caused by a wound on her breast. The relatives buried the milk dripping from the wound behind the house, where a jackfruit tree grew. In one year, it bore a fruit. The tale ends with the homecoming of the mother's ghost to instruct her husband, Sarku Saora: "Feed my baby on the milk of this tree" (Elwin, Verrier 135).

In the *Gadaba* tale, the jackfruit is associated with a sow (female pig), whereas the Hill Saora associates the breast motif with the milk oozing from the jackfruit tree. According to Elwin, the association may be due to the shape and size of the fruits, which might resemble the suckling. The unpleasant smell and the oozing of white milk when cut may have equally contributed to the meaning-making (Elwin, Verrier 133) The breasts cut off from the body of Didayi's daughter

became a pumpkin. The tale ends by stating, “This is why when you eat pumpkin, your thirst as well as your hunger is satisfied (159).

The Kond story unfolds the woman who commands her breast milk to become a sago plant. From its horn will come down the milk as it came from her. “You will first have your period, and then clear milk will come from the horn, and men will drink it” (Elwin, Verrier 192). Nature obeys her command. When men first cut the palm, the juice was like blood, and it stank. After eight days, it became clear that men caught it in a cup and gave it to a tiger-breasted mother with abundant milk. Ever since she drank it first, the sago plant has given a plentiful supply of sap.

In the select tales from the Koraput district, vegetation is made from the female body, especially her breasts and navel. Interestingly, the creation made from the female body has nourishment and vitalizing qualities. As Reichel-Dolmatoff says, “The man creates various beings in such a way that they would represent him” (Reichel, D Dolmatoff 23). The breasts are torn out of her body yet retain their presence by sprouting or transforming into jackfruit, pumpkin, and sago palm. These creations symbolize their creator herself and her body. She commands the vegetation, which is an extension of her wounded breasts, to break the restrictions of the patriarchs and their thirst to discard her.

An Abject Text Sprouts:

The patriarchs and the women in the tribal folktales identify and confront the abject exposed before or within them. The narrative is too sharp and direct, holding protruding, horrendous imagery of violence, murders, mutilations, blood, milk-dripping wounded breasts, and grotesque bodies. Bewilderingly, the audience is exposed to the folktales only to discover their provocative nature.

Here, the abject transgresses the imaginary border between the reader and the text, exposing itself to the realm of the audience. The text starts deconstructing the readers' expectations of a folktale and manipulating the folk conventions. The reader begins to identify the text as abject.

They find certain conventions of the folktales in the tribal folktales as well. One such theme found in several creation folktales is that significant components of the universe are made of the bodily substance of the primordial being or creator (Garry, Jane 25). Feeding others while starving or killing oneself is a recurring theme.

In the select tribal tales, the vegetable world is created out of the female body. The stories penetrate the audience when they know that the men from the tribal community chopped off the breasts, apparently to tame the woman or to make her desirable. Nonetheless, to the reader's astonishment, the mutilated breasts transform into vegetables and continue to thrive in society. The feminine has been removed violently from her body and the written texts. But then, she provides nourishment by individuating her voices into vegetation. She oozes beyond the boundaries set by the society, body, and the structure of the folk text.

The tribal folktales contradict the notion of creation stories "as sacred narratives concerning the origin of the world as conceptually constructed by a particular community or a group of people." They wound the audience with their penetrating imagery and language. They shake the author with the multitudinous possibilities a folk text can offer beyond the conventional narration. The tribal folktale thus engages with the startled reader and persists as a non-deniable text of origins, violence, denial, rebellion, and persistence.

Conclusion

The tribal folktales from Orissa are rich and unique in their rendition. The tribal folktales combined with creation myths contribute to the existence and individuation of the feminine self. The article employs Kristeva's notion of abjection to study the breast motif in select tribal folktales. The wounded breasts surpass the restrictions of sensuality that the breasts conventionally hold. Instead, they hold on to their nurturing aspect and actively engage with their identity.

Scholars like Jawaharlal Handoo, Leela Handoo, and A.K. Ramanujan focus on the 'gender as genre' in oral folktales. They state that masculine and feminine narratives differ in using motifs and meaning-making processes. The wounded-breast folktales penetrate the audience as an abject text that inks the impossible narratives of the female self.

The patriarchal society in the tales is exposed to the realm of taboos and horrors of the grotesque female body. The encounters with the female body threaten their social validation; they cannot unsee the provocations she poses, and they fear that she might deny, corrupt, transgress the rules abiding her, and finally deny the masculine power. Society violently pushes her away to the margins by mutilating her body. They try to domesticate her by cutting off her breasts and sealing her organs to ensure her impotence. When the violence intensifies and reaches a breaking point, the woman herself is pushed to be exposed to her abject body and starts transgressing the boundaries- social, physical, and textual. The women surpass the violence and refashion their bodies into something that they own. She transforms into vegetation, into a jackfruit tree, pumpkin, and sago palm, and continues to assert her identity. In the selected tales, breastfeeding makes her weak and powerful at the same time. She feeds the children her truth and makes them revolt; she comes back from death to nurture her kid. She commands nature to be like her, to

menstruate like her, and to milk like her. She paves a path of freedom for the tiger-breasted women to exist and express themselves in a male-dominated society.

The tribal folk milk threatens and manipulates the systemic violence and compels the reader to deconstruct the notions of the female body, her identity, and her- 'story.' She becomes an immutable abject breast- wounded yet revolting!

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About the Authors

Silpa T Anirudhan is a Research Scholar in the Department of English and Cultural Studies at CHRIST (Deemed to be university), Bangalore, India. She is an ICSSR Full-term awardee; her ICSSR file no is ICSSR/RFD/2023-24/22.

ORCID ID: [0009-0008-9713-2531](https://orcid.org/0009-0008-9713-2531)

Email id: silpa.anirudhan@res.christuniversity.in

Dr. Dhanesh M. is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English and Cultural Studies at CHRIST (Deemed to be university), Bangalore, India.

ORCID ID: [0000-0001-7122-5432](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7122-5432)

Email id: dhanesh.m@christuniversity.in