

ABDUCTION, WOMEN AND NATURE: AN ECOFEMINIST READING OF TWO GARO FOLKTALES

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Abstract: Garo folktales contain many instances of the representation of the relationship between human beings and the physical environment. They also present social relationships, particularly those between men and women. The paper examines two Garo folktales, “Dombi Wari” and “Mareng Adil Sikram”, with an ecofeminist perspective with particular attention to the abduction of women. The study is based on Karen J. Warren's concept of the logic of domination and Val Plumwood's discussion of the domination of nature. In both these tales, women are abducted and controlled by men. The elements of the physical environment are also shown to be under the control of men and are used for their purposes. The river is closely connected with Dombi's abduction and confinement, while in the other tale, the Mari budu, a creeper, is used by the men to escape after abducting the maiden and is later destroyed. The paper does not say that the tales were written with modern ecofeminist ideas, neither does it equate women with nature. Instead, it shows how the treatment of both reveals similar attitudes of possession, control, and use. Reading these two tales adds a gender dimension to the study of the human-environment relationship in Garo folktales.

Keywords: Garo folktales, folktales, ecofeminism, women, nature, domination

Introduction

Folktales tell us a lot about communities- their beliefs, customs, experiences, and values. They mirror people's understanding of the world around them. Garo folktales have many references to nature, such as rivers, streams, hills, forests, plants, rocks, animals, birds, and supernatural beings. Nature provides for the people, but more than that, there is a close communion between them. For this reason, Garo folktales can be studied from an ecocritical perspective.

Besides these representations, Garo folktales also contain depictions of the relationship between men and women. In some stories, women are given freedom and importance, while in others, they are shown to be under the control of men. The abduction of women is important in this regard. Men use physical force and are the ones who decide their choices regarding whom they live with and where they go. The connection between gender and the physical environment becomes noticeable in “Dombi Wari,” taken from *The Folktales of the Garos* by Dewan Rongmuthu, and “Mareng Adil Sikram,” taken from *Pagitchamni Ku'bisring* by Mihir N. Sangma. Both tales contain the abduction of women by male characters. Both stories involve the physical environment. Thus, this raises the question: can these tales be examined through the idea of domination based on both the treatment of women and the treatment of the physical environment?

Ecofeminism

Ecofeminism helps us to consider this question. Karen J. Warren argues that there are important connections between the domination of women and the domination of nonhuman nature (125). She uses the term “logic of domination” to describe a structure of argumentation that justifies subordination (128), while Plumwood examines the connection between the domination of women and the domination of nature (17–18) and also questions the treatment of nature as something separate from humans and as a limitless provider for human use (21). The paper uses these ideas to examine “Dombi Wari” and “Mareng Adil Sikram”. It does not claim that the tales are ecofeminist, nor does it equate women with nature. Instead, it looks at how men try to possess, control, and use women as well as the physical environment in similar ways.

Plumwood's work also questions the idea of human mastery over nature. She points out that nature has often been treated as something separate from human beings and available for human use (21). Her argument is useful in examining stories where natural elements are treated mainly according to their usefulness to people. These ideas are relevant to the two tales selected because the men try to take control of the women as well as the physical environment.

Dombi Wari

In “Dombi Wari”, Dombi, a mother of two, is the female character who attracts the attention of men. Her husband, Joreng, repeatedly praises her beauty, and a water -wight or a merman eventually overhears his boastful words about her and becomes interested in her. The merman instantly falls in love with her and Dombi is abducted while bathing in the river and taken into the underwater world. The abduction is important in the sense that Dombi does not have any control over whatever happens to her. Everything is determined by the male characters. She never chooses to leave her home, her family, and the familiar surroundings and enter the underwater world of the merman. She is treated as an object whose fate is decided by the male characters. The river also plays an important role in the abduction of Dombi. She is taken while she is bathing in the river, and the river becomes connected to the merman's world and her life there. It becomes a medium through which Dombi's movement is controlled. Then again, the river can be associated with motherhood and care. Dombi loves her children and when her older daughter calls out to her saying, “Mother, come back, baby is crying. Come,

give her suck,” Dombi returns to the river to breastfeed her baby, and it helps her to connect with her children. Her relationship with the river thus becomes complicated.

When Dombi is freed from the merman, her movement becomes controlled again, now by her husband, Joreng. He takes her far away from the river and builds her a treehouse on top of a peepul tree where they start living. This action seems like an attempt to protect her. However, Joreng is once again controlling her movement and deciding where she should live. The merman wants her in his world, while Joreng tries to keep her away from him. In both situations, we find that Dombi's choice is missing.

The attempt to provide a safe place also involves an attempt to control the environment. The treehouse is constructed to keep Dombi away from the river and the danger associated with it. However, the physical environment does not remain under human control. The rain, the river, the tree on which they built their house, and the landscape influence what happens thereafter. During heavy rains, the tree gives away and gets submerged under water. In its place a lake forms which is now called Dombi Wari. This can be related to Plumwood's criticism of the idea of mastery over nature (21). Nature cannot be controlled or arranged according to the wishes of humans. Despite attempts by Joreng to control the surroundings, the forces of nature continue to affect them and eventually swallows them up.

Mareng Adil Sikram

The connection between gender and the physical environment is also seen in “Mareng Adil Sikram”. Three young men abduct a maiden and take her away against her will. The villagers chase them and in order to escape them, they climb up a huge rock with the help of *mari budu*, a creeper. Then they destroy the creeper to stop the villagers from following them up to the rock. However, without it, they could not climb down and all four of them, including the maiden end up dying there. As in “Dombi Wari”, the woman's movement is determined by men rather than by herself.

The way the creeper is treated shows a utilitarian attitude. The *Mari budu* is valuable when they need it, but once it has served its purpose, they do not consider its value and destroy it. However, the consequences prove fatal. It eventually leads to the men's downfall. Due to their actions, the very thing that helps them escape becomes connected with their death. This shows how the treatment of the environment by humans can have consequences. This part of the tale is strongly ecocritical, but it also becomes relevant to an ecofeminist reading when the abduction of the maiden is considered alongside it. The men take the woman for their own purposes and use the creeper for their own purposes. The woman and the creeper, though not the same, are subjected to the men's desire to take and use. The logic of domination helps explain this. The men abduct the woman and assume that they can determine her fate and also use the creeper and destroy it as they please. The closeness of these actions within the narrative makes the comparison possible. The dependence of the men upon nature becomes clear. Their destruction of the creeper weakens their position of power and shows how their use of nature does not give them complete control over it.

Reading the Two Tales Together

The strongest part of the ecofeminist reading comes from considering the two tales together. Both “Dombi Wari” and “Mareng Adil Sikram” contain the abduction of a woman. In both cases, male characters are the ones who decide where the woman will go and thus remove her from her existing surroundings. The women therefore have no control over their own movement. The idea of appropriation can be used to understand the connection between the two tales. Dombi is taken by the merman, and the maiden in “Mareng Adil Sikram” is also taken by three men. They also destroy the creeper and make use of it only for their own benefit. In both tales, the male characters behave as though they have the power to use or locate something that is not theirs to begin with, nor theirs to control. The female characters are treated as objects to be possessed, while the physical environment is treated as something to be exploited. Though this treatment does not equate women and nature, the attitudes of control and possession towards both are similar.

A very important difference between the two tales also exists. In “Mareng Adil Sikram”, there is a clear warning that the destruction of the environment can bring about disastrous consequences. Destroying the *Mari budu* brings about the men's downfall. On the other hand, in “Dombi Wari”, the relationship between a woman's movement and her placement receives more attention. Taken together, however, the tales show how control and domination are not always successful. Men may use the environment for their own benefit and control women according to their wishes, but these are temporary, and both cannot be reduced to mere objects to be exploited by male power.

Conclusion

Both tales cannot be called ecofeminist in a straightforward sense. However, similar attitudes of men towards women and nature make an ecofeminist reading possible, while still acknowledging the difference between the two. This becomes an added dimension to the study of Garo folktales. It shows how questions of gender and environmental relationships can be considered together. Possession and control of both have limits. Thus, they provide an important basis for examining the relationship between gender, power, and the physical environment.

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