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# Deconstructing the Marginalized Female: An Appraisal of Gender Roles in Santali Folktales

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## Abstract:

*This study examines the representation and deconstruction of the marginalized female in Santali folktales written by P.O. Bodding, A. Campbell, and C.H. Bompas within the context of a post-colonial nation-state. Santals are one of the largest tribal communities in India, residing primarily in the states of Jharkhand, West Bengal, Odisha, and Bihar. Throughout history, they have faced marginalization, discrimination, and cultural subjugation due to the dominance of majoritarian regimes in the region. Drawing upon post-colonial theory, this study aims to shed light on the lived experiences of Santal women and their struggle for agency and recognition within the larger socio-political landscape. It explores how Santali folktales, as an integral part of their cultural heritage, provide glimpses into the challenges and aspirations of Santal women. By deconstructing the narratives, this research aims to uncover the underlying power structures and societal norms that contribute to the marginalization of women within the Santal community. It seeks to understand how these folktales perpetuate and challenge traditional gender roles and expectations. It underscores the importance of recognizing and challenging oppressive narratives, while also acknowledging the agency and resilience of marginalized female voices within cultural and historical contexts. Ultimately, this study seeks to shed light on the multifaceted dimensions of the marginalized female in Santali folktales. It examines how these characters negotiate their roles within the patriarchal framework while simultaneously subverting and challenging societal expectations. It explores the tensions between tradition and modernity, and how these tensions manifest in the narratives. It emphasizes the importance of recognizing and critically analyzing the representation of marginalized voices in literature to challenge and reshape societal norms and power structures.*

**Keywords:** Marginal Studies, Santal Women, Santali Folktales, Deconstruction.

## 1. Introduction:

*“Deconstructing the Marginalized Female: A Reading of Santali Folktales in Post-Colonial Nation-State”* - delves into the exploration of female characters in Santali folktales. This research article combines elements of folklore, gender studies, postcolonial theory, and cultural anthropology to shed light on the representation of women in the context of social, political, and cultural transformations following the colonial era. The Santals are one of the indigenous tribes of India,



with a significant presence in states like Jharkhand, West Bengal, Odisha, and Assam. Their rich cultural heritage is expressed through their folktales, which have been passed down through generations orally. The folktales of the Santals were collected and translated by P.O. Boddling<sup>1</sup> to give an unadulterated view of the Santal culture in colonial Bengal. Elders would narrate these tales to younger members of the community during gatherings, festivals, and ceremonies, preserving their cultural knowledge and wisdom. Santali folktales serve as a means of preserving Santali culture and identity, helping the community remember and appreciate their roots and values. These folktales serve as a repository of traditional knowledge, encompassing myths, legends, fables, and fairy tales that reflect the beliefs, customs, and values of the Santali community. Within the context of Santali society, gender roles have traditionally been defined along traditional lines, with women often occupying subordinate positions. The representation of female characters in Santali folktales, like in many other cultural narratives worldwide, has been influenced by patriarchal norms, often resulting in the portrayal of women as passive, submissive, and confined to traditional roles as wives, mothers, and caretakers.

## 2. Literature Review:

W. J. Culshaw (1949)<sup>2</sup>, in his *Tribal Heritage: A Study of the Santals*, explores every aspect of Santali culture, from their perception of themselves to the intricacies of their art, both, verbal and visual, and covers their history, etc.

W. G. Archer's (1974)<sup>3</sup> *The Hill of Flutes, Life, Love and Poetry in Tribal India: A Portrait of the Santals* (1974) explores the Santal worldview, including approaches to education, love, sex, and marriage.

J. Troisi (1976)<sup>4</sup>, in his book entitled *The Santals: A Classified and Annotated Bibliography*, has listed all the works relating wholly or partially to the Santals which have been written in English, Santali and Italian.

J. Troisi's (2000)<sup>5</sup> outstanding book *Tribal Religion: Religious Beliefs and Practices among the Santals* examines how the beliefs and practices contribute to the maintenance of Santal society and how religion interacts with other institutions in the Santal social structure.

## 3. Research Objectives:

The objectives of the study are as follows-

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<sup>1</sup> Boddling, P.O. (2007). *Santal Folk Tales*. Gyan Publishing House.

<sup>2</sup> Culshaw, W.J. (1949). *The Tribal Heritage: A Study of the Santals*. Gyan Publishing House.

<sup>3</sup> Archer, W. G. (1974). *The Hill of Flutes: Life, Love, and Poetry in Tribal India: A Portrait of the Santals*. University of Pittsburgh Press.

<sup>4</sup> Troisi, J. (1976). *The Santals: A Classified and Annotated Bibliography*. Manohar.

<sup>5</sup> Troisi, J. (2000). *Tribal Religion: Religious Beliefs and Practices among the Santals*. Manohar.



- (i) To critically analyze the representation and portrayal of marginalized female characters in Santali folktales.
- (ii) To examine the historical and cultural factors that have shaped the construction of marginalized female identities in Santali folktales.
- (iii) To investigate the role of gender dynamics and power structures within Santali folktales and how they reflect or challenge the prevailing societal norms.
- (iv) To assess the agency and resilience demonstrated by marginalized female characters in Santali folktales and their potential as symbols of resistance and empowerment.
- (v) To compare and contrast the representation of marginalized female characters in Santali folktales with other indigenous or mainstream folktales from different regions or cultures.

#### **4. Research Methodology:**

The Research methodology of the present Study will include analyses and interpretations of the primary sources chosen for the study. There will also be a psychological as well as socio-cultural re-interpretation of the issues highlighted in some folktales of P.O. Boddling.

In terms of literary theory, feminist theory can be applied to analyze the gender roles and power dynamics present in Santali folktales. This theoretical framework focuses on how patriarchy and gender inequality are perpetuated through literature and other cultural forms. Feminist literary analysis can help to highlight how Santali folktales reinforce gender norms and stereotypes, and how these narratives contribute to the marginalization and oppression of women in Santali society. The changing roles of Santal women can be examined through the lens of gender studies theory. Gender studies theory focuses on the social, cultural, and political constructions of gender and how these constructions shape people's experiences and relationships.

The theory of cultural studies offers a useful framework for understanding the changing roles of Santal women and the portrayal of gender roles in Santali folktales. This theory emphasizes the importance of studying cultural practices, beliefs, and values within their social and historical contexts.

#### **5. Discussion:**

Traditional Santali society had its own gender roles and power dynamics. The influence of colonialism and external influences led to changes in these dynamics. Patriarchal structures were reinforced, often undermining the traditional roles and authority that Santali women held within communities. Economic changes brought about by colonialism affected gender roles, as men and women were assigned different responsibilities based on their perceived strengths and abilities. Women's economic roles, which were significant in traditional Santali society, might have been



altered due to changes in labour patterns and economic systems introduced during colonial rule. Access to education was limited during the colonial era, and this further perpetuated gender disparities. However, in the post-colonial period, there have been efforts to improve education and empowerment opportunities for Santali girls and women. Colonialism disrupted the pre-existing balance of gender roles within the Santal community. As the Santal society changed due to colonial policies and missionary activities, traditional gender roles and responsibilities were sometimes altered.

Traditionally, Santali society had a division of labour along gender lines, where men were primarily responsible for agricultural activities and hunting, while women took care of household chores and childcare. There was a clear demarcation of roles based on gender. With the introduction of colonial education, there were changes in the perception of gender roles. Western education brought new ideas about gender equality, which had both positive and negative effects on traditional Santali gender roles. Colonial education provided some Santali women with opportunities to access formal education, which empowered them to challenge traditional gender norms and advocate for their rights. Some Santali women became active in social and political spheres. Despite these changes, traditional patriarchal values persisted in some parts of Santali society, leading to discrimination and restrictions on women's freedom. Women's decision-making power remained limited in many aspects of social and economic life. After gaining independence, Santali society continued to grapple with issues of development, land rights, and cultural preservation. Economic and political marginalization affected both men and women, but women often faced additional challenges due to prevailing gender biases.

Santali folktales feature a wide range of female characters, each with distinct qualities and roles. While some tales portray strong, brave, and resourceful female protagonists, others might showcase more nurturing and wise women. Women in Santali folktales often serve as guardians of their families and communities. They are depicted as caring mothers, devoted wives, and responsible caretakers of children. Some Santali folktales feature female characters who embark on adventurous journeys and exhibit independence, breaking traditional gender norms. These characters challenge societal expectations and prove their capabilities outside conventional roles. Women are also represented as wise figures, providing spiritual guidance and offering valuable advice to the community. They may be depicted as spiritual leaders, healers, or mediators in times of conflict. Like male characters, Santali women in folktales encounter challenges and adversities. They demonstrate resilience, intelligence, and creativity to overcome obstacles and achieve their goals. Santali folktales often emphasize the interconnectedness of humans with nature. Female characters may be associated with nature spirits or personifications of natural elements, highlighting their reverence for the environment. Some folktales also highlight the societal norms and taboos faced by women. They may address issues such as



gender inequality, dowry, and forced marriages, shedding light on the challenges women encounter within their cultural context.

It is important to note that the representation of women in Santali folktales can vary from one story to another, and not all tales adhere to the same patterns. Additionally, as these stories are part of an oral tradition, they might evolve over time and adapt to contemporary cultural changes. One of the most noticeable changes in the roles of Santali women is their increasing agency and autonomy. In many traditional Santali folktales, women were portrayed as passive and dependent on men. However, in more recent folktales, women are depicted as active and capable of making their own decisions. For example, in [“The Story of Some Women”](#)<sup>6</sup>, some Santali women in the absence of their husbands are seen to sacrifice an ox in honour of their ancestors. They decide to become priests and perform the sacrifice. The story shows their decision-making power, and how independent they are to pursue their wishes. Another important change in the roles of Santali women is their increasing participation in public life. In traditional Santali society, women were largely confined to the domestic sphere, but in more recent times, women have become involved in various aspects of public life, including education, politics, and social activism. This is reflected in Santali folktales as well, where women are often portrayed as leaders and decision-makers.

Santali society needs to recognize and address how gender stereotypes and cultural norms contribute to gender-based violence and discrimination. Efforts should be made to promote positive portrayals of women in Santali folklore and to celebrate the contributions and achievements of Santali women. In [“The Story of a Mahra Boy”](#)<sup>7</sup>, we see that a boy becomes a donkey immediately after touching her newly wedded wife because he was cursed by a cow. The cow also blessed him that only his wife could transform him into a human being again. When he became a donkey, the parents of the girl did not want her to go with that donkey. But she was a very kind, pious, intelligent, honest and loyal girl. She decided to stay with her husband only. Later in the story, we see that she ultimately turned her husband into a man again by telling the truth. Here it proves the truthfulness of a wife and her love for her husband. In the story entitled [“A Stepmother”](#)<sup>8</sup>, we see a cruel stepmother wanted to kill her stepson. Which reflects the brutal and barbaric image of Santal women. The story entitled [“The Silly Women”](#)<sup>9</sup> shows the foolishness of women. It portrays some Santal women as stupid and brainless. They are not capable of doing anything perfectly without any complaints.

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<sup>6</sup> Bodding, P.O., ‘The Story of Some Women’, in *Santal Folk Tales*, Gyan Publishing House, New Delhi, Vol.1, p.237.

<sup>7</sup> Bodding, P.O., ‘The Story of a Mahra Boy’, in *Santal Folk Tales*, Gyan Publishing House, New Delhi, Vol.1, p.343.

<sup>8</sup> Bodding, P.O., ‘A Stepmother’, in *Santal Folk Tales*, Gyan Publishing House, New Delhi, Vol.1, p.275.

<sup>9</sup> Bodding, P.O., ‘The Silly Women’, in *Santal Folk Tales*, Gyan Publishing House, New Delhi, Vol.1, p.228.



In “Nothing Must Be Told to Women”<sup>10</sup> we can observe the negative portrayal of women characters. A husband told a secret to his wife and asked her not to share it with anyone. When the two were quarrelling over something, she could not keep it a secret and told the village head. And later he was punished unnecessarily by the police. Additionally, it proves that if anyone tells any secret to a woman, it is sure to be made public. These negative portrayals of Santali women in folktales can contribute to the marginalization and oppression of women in Santali society. It is important to recognize these harmful stereotypes and work towards promoting more positive and empowering representations of Santali women in literature and media.

Many Santali folktales subtly challenge and subvert traditional gender norms, depicting strong, empowered female characters and questioning the stereotypes surrounding masculinity and femininity. Santali folktales often feature women as protagonists who display courage, intelligence, and resilience. These female characters are not confined to traditional roles as homemakers but take on active roles in decision-making, leadership, and problem-solving. Some folktales involve instances of characters disguising themselves as the opposite gender to achieve their goals or escape from difficult situations. These narratives explore the fluidity of gender roles and challenge the rigidity of societal expectations. Santali folktales frequently present women as protectors of their communities and guardians of their culture. In certain folktales, women challenge the authority of male figures, including oppressive husbands or authoritative elders. They assert their autonomy and voice, breaking free from the norms of male dominance. Some Santali folktales emphasize the importance of gender equality and cooperation between men and women in various tasks and challenges. These stories promote a more inclusive and balanced society. For instance, in the folktale entitled “The Jackal and Husband and Wife”<sup>11</sup> we see that the husband and wife are returning home from the wife’s mother’s home. On the way, a bhut (ghost) encountered them. Both her husband and the bhut start quarrelling over the possession of the wife. While arguing both started pulling her hands in opposite directions. Then the wife courageously started shouting for help. She handled this situation very bravely. This folktale is marked by the Santali wife’s intelligence and resourcefulness.

The Postcolonial context has had significant impacts on Santali culture and gender roles. During the colonial period, the British and other colonial powers imposed their cultural norms and values on the indigenous communities. This led to the erosion of traditional Santali customs,

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<sup>10</sup>Bodding, P.O., ‘Nothing Must Be Told to Women’, in *Santal Folk Tales*, Gyan Publishing House, New Delhi, Vol.1, p.245.

<sup>11</sup>Bodding, P.O., ‘The Jackal and Husband and Wife’, in *Santal Folk Tales*, Gyan Publishing House, New Delhi, Vol.1, p.2.



practices, and knowledge. Many aspects of Santali culture, such as traditional music, dance, rituals, and storytelling, faced challenges as they were often discouraged or deemed inferior by the colonizers. Colonial powers imposed their languages as the medium of education and administration, leading to the marginalization and suppression of the Santali language. This further weakened the preservation and transmission of cultural knowledge and indigenous wisdom. The colonial era also witnessed the exploitation of natural resources and land grabbing from indigenous communities, including the Santali people. This disrupted their traditional ways of life and their close relationship with the land, resulting in the loss of cultural identity and practices tied to their environment. With the spread of Christianity during colonial rule, some Santali communities converted to Christianity, leading to changes in their religious practices and spiritual beliefs.

## 7. Conclusion:

As Santal communities encounter modern influences, the portrayal of characters and themes in folktales might also evolve to reflect contemporary values. While exploring Santali folktales or any cultural narratives, it is crucial to approach them with appreciation and respect for the cultural context they originate from. Avoiding stereotypes and recognizing the diverse aspects of the culture can lead to a more nuanced understanding of the Santali people and their storytelling traditions.

Santali folktales, like many other indigenous narratives, might have changed during colonial times to fit into the colonial narrative. Female characters can embody wisdom, leadership, and spiritual knowledge in the reinterpretation. They could be shamans, healers, or custodians of ancient wisdom, showing that women can be respected authorities in their communities. By breaking away from rigid gender norms, Santali folktales can emphasize the importance of equality, understanding, and respect between genders. Men can be depicted as nurturing and compassionate, while women can be portrayed as strong and resourceful, breaking away from stereotypes that limit their roles. Women from the Santali community have not received the same level of critical recognition as those from mainstream society. The scholarly perspectives have been dominated by the idea that Santal women participate and contribute less to Santali culture. In the post-colonial era, this perception underwent transformations, and Santal women have found a voice through their portrayal in Santali folktales. This is by no means a comprehensive picture and many areas remain untouched. Though this study has covered only a few aspects of gender and characterization in Santali folktales, one can have some idea about the complex projection of gender in our folklore.



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