

Narrating Gendered Margins: Tribal Women's Voices in Bodo Folktales and Oral Traditions of North-East India

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Tribal oral traditions constitute vital cultural archives through which indigenous communities preserve their histories, values, and knowledge systems. However, the gendered dimensions of these narratives, particularly the voices and experiences of tribal women, remain largely underexplored in mainstream literary and feminist discourses. The present study examines how tribal women are represented and how their narrative agency is articulated in Bodo folktales and oral traditions of North-East India. This study aims to analyze the ways in which these narratives reflect women's roles as custodians of cultural memory, negotiators of social norms, and participants in relational networks involving land, community, and ecological knowledge. Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative approach based on thematic textual analysis of documented Bodo folktales, folklore archives, and existing scholarly literature on Bodo culture and oral traditions. Interpreting these narratives through the theoretical lens of Indigenous Feminism enables a critical understanding of how gender, community, and ecological relationships intersect within indigenous storytelling practices. The study reveals that Bodo oral narratives function as important epistemic spaces where women's voices contribute to the preservation of cultural knowledge and moral values. Female figures in these narratives demonstrate resilience, moral authority, and subtle forms of agency while negotiating patriarchal structures. Furthermore, the narratives highlight the interconnected relationship between women, land, and ecological identity. The Bodo oral traditions challenge dominant literary frameworks and foreground tribal women's narrative agency, contributing to Indigenous feminist scholarship and broader discussions in tribal and South Asian literary studies.

Keywords: Bodo women, folktales, gendered marginality, Indigenous Feminism, North-East India, oral traditions

Introduction

Tribal societies across the world have long preserved their histories, values, and collective memories through oral traditions such as myths, folktales, songs, and ritual narratives. These narrative forms serve not merely as cultural expressions but also as repositories of indigenous knowledge and social philosophy. However, within mainstream literary and feminist discourse, the voices and experiences of tribal women often remain marginalized or inadequately represented. Much of the scholarship on gender has historically centered on urban, literate, and dominant social groups, thereby overlooking the epistemic significance of indigenous oral traditions and the gendered knowledge embedded within them. Consequently, tribal women's narratives have frequently been treated as peripheral to mainstream literary studies, despite their profound role in shaping community identity and cultural continuity.

Within the broader landscape of indigenous cultures in India, the Bodo community of North-East India presents a particularly significant case for examining the relationship between oral narratives and gendered cultural expression. The Bodos are one of the largest indigenous ethnic groups of Assam and the Brahmaputra valley, possessing a distinct language, cosmology, and socio-cultural identity rooted in centuries of interaction with their ecological environment and historical experiences (Ahmed, 2020). Their cultural life is deeply intertwined with oral traditions that include folktales, myths, ritual songs, proverbs, and storytelling practices transmitted across generations. These oral narratives form an essential component of the community's intangible cultural heritage and function as a medium through which social norms, moral values, and collective memories are articulated and preserved (Narzary, 2024). In many cases, these stories encode cultural meanings related to kinship, land, cosmology, and gender relations, thereby offering valuable insights into indigenous epistemologies.

Despite the rich narrative traditions of the Bodo community, scholarly attention to the gendered dimensions of these narratives remains limited. Existing research has largely focused on ethnographic documentation of folklore, cultural festivals, and social practices, often emphasizing descriptive accounts of tradition rather than analytical interpretations of gendered representation. Studies on Bodo society acknowledge that women play a crucial role in sustaining cultural practices and transmitting oral knowledge. Bodo women participate actively in rituals, storytelling, weaving traditions, and community festivals, thereby functioning as important custodians of cultural heritage (Basumatary, 2024; Sarma & Daimary, 2021). Through such roles, they contribute significantly to the preservation of collective memory and the intergenerational transmission of cultural values. Nevertheless, their narrative agency within oral traditions has rarely been examined from a critical gender perspective.

This gap becomes particularly evident when considering the broader frameworks of feminist scholarship. Conventional feminist theories, particularly those emerging from Western intellectual traditions, often emphasize individual rights, gender equality, and structural patriarchy as primary analytical categories. While these frameworks have contributed substantially to understanding gender oppression, they sometimes fail to capture the relational and community-centered dimensions of gender in indigenous societies. Indigenous feminist scholars have therefore argued for alternative theoretical perspectives that acknowledge the historical experiences of colonization, cultural dispossession, and ecological relationships shaping indigenous communities. Indigenous Feminism foregrounds the voices and experiences of indigenous women while emphasizing their connections to land, community, and cultural continuity (Smith, 2015; Anderson, 2011). Rather than viewing women solely as victims of patriarchal systems, this perspective recognizes them as knowledge holders, cultural transmitters, and agents of social resilience within their communities.

Indigenous feminist discourse also highlights the central role of storytelling and oral knowledge in articulating indigenous women's experiences and worldviews. Narratives are understood not merely as literary forms but as sites where social memory, identity, and resistance are produced and negotiated. Stories often encode relationships between humans, nature, and the spiritual world, reflecting a relational worldview that differs significantly from dominant Western epistemologies (Whyte, 2018). Indigenous narratives become important spaces for recovering marginalized voices and understanding gendered experiences within indigenous contexts. Integrating such theoretical lens to Bodo folklore can therefore provide deeper insight into the ways in which tribal women's identities, agency, and social roles are represented and interpreted within oral traditions.

This study adopts a qualitative approach to examine the representation of tribal women's voices in Bodo folktales and oral traditions. The analysis is based on secondary data sources, including documented collections of Bodo folktales, folklore archives, and existing scholarly studies on Bodo culture, oral literature, and gender

relations in indigenous societies. These materials provide the textual corpus through which narrative patterns and gendered representations are examined. The study employs thematic textual analysis to identify recurring motifs, symbols, and narrative structures that reveal women's roles as cultural memory bearers, agents of negotiation, and participants in relational community life. The analysis is further interpreted through the lens of Indigenous Feminism, which foregrounds the interconnectedness of gender, community, and cultural identity. A key limitation of the study lies in its reliance on translated and documented narratives rather than primary ethnographic fieldwork, which may limit access to variations of oral storytelling practices within contemporary Bodo communities.

The present study seeks to examine how gendered identities and voices of tribal women are articulated in Bodo folktales and oral narratives. By focusing on selected narratives and their thematic representations, the study aims to explore how these stories reflect women's roles as bearers of cultural memory, negotiators of social norms, and participants in relational networks involving land, community, and spirituality. The research addresses the following questions: How are women represented within Bodo folktales and oral narratives? In what ways do these narratives express women's agency and social roles within the community? How can indigenous feminist perspectives help reinterpret these representations within a broader theoretical framework?

This study aims to analyze Bodo oral narratives as cultural texts that reveal gendered experiences and indigenous epistemologies. By employing Indigenous Feminism as an analytical framework, the study seeks to foreground the narrative voices of tribal women that have often been overlooked in mainstream literary discourse. This paper argues that Bodo folktales and oral traditions function as crucial narrative spaces in which tribal women articulate cultural memory, agency, and relational identity, thereby challenging dominant representations of marginality and contributing to a more inclusive understanding of indigenous literary traditions.

Bodo Oral Traditions and Gender

The Bodo community is one of the largest indigenous ethnic groups of North-East India, primarily inhabiting the state of Assam and the broader Brahmaputra valley region. As part of the Tibeto-Burman linguistic family, the Bodos possess a rich cultural heritage characterized by distinct language, customs, ritual practices, and narrative traditions that have evolved through centuries of interaction with the region's ecological landscape and historical transformations (Brahma, 2019). Like many indigenous societies, Bodo cultural identity has historically been sustained through oral modes of knowledge transmission rather than written literary traditions. Folklore, myths, ritual songs, proverbs, and storytelling practices play a central role in shaping collective memory and social values within the community. These oral narratives not only preserve historical experiences but also provide frameworks through which moral norms, cosmological beliefs, and social relations are articulated and interpreted (Narzary, 2024).

Oral storytelling occupies a particularly significant place in Bodo social life. Traditionally, stories are narrated in domestic spaces, community gatherings, and seasonal festivals, where elders and storytellers transmit narratives across generations. Such storytelling practices function as informal pedagogical systems that educate younger members of the community about cultural ethics, environmental knowledge, and social responsibilities. Scholars of folklore have emphasized that oral traditions in indigenous societies serve as living archives that encode collective experiences and indigenous epistemologies (Dorson, 1972; Dundes, 1980). In the context of Bodo, oral narratives therefore operate not merely as entertainment but as cultural institutions that preserve social memory and sustain community identity. Through storytelling, communities reaffirm shared values related to

kinship, land, spirituality, and moral conduct. Bodo oral traditions encompass diverse narrative forms, including folktales, myths, legends, ritual songs, and proverbs. Folktales often depict encounters between humans, animals, and supernatural beings, reflecting indigenous cosmologies that emphasize interconnected relationships between nature and society. Myths and ritual narratives frequently explain the origins of social practices, agricultural cycles, and spiritual beliefs associated with ancestral deities. Songs and lyrical traditions, especially those performed during festivals such as Bwisagu, express collective emotions related to fertility, harvest, and communal solidarity (Brahma, 2009). These narrative forms create a rich symbolic landscape in which cultural meanings are encoded and transmitted.

Within this narrative tradition, women occupy a crucial yet often underexplored role. Bodo women have historically functioned as important custodians of cultural knowledge, participating actively in storytelling, ritual performances, and the transmission of folklore within domestic and communal spaces. Their participation in oral storytelling practices contributes significantly to the preservation of cultural memory and intergenerational knowledge transfer. Studies on Bodo society have highlighted that women's everyday practices including weaving, song traditions, and storytelling serve as important vehicles through which cultural narratives are sustained and reproduced (Basumatary, 2024). Through such practices, women not only transmit inherited traditions but also reinterpret them within changing social contexts.

The symbolic representation of women in Bodo folklore further reveals complex cultural meanings associated with gender roles and social identity. Female characters in folktales often appear as figures embodying wisdom, resilience, moral guidance, and relational harmony within the community. Certain narratives portray women negotiating social expectations related to family, kinship, and community responsibility. These representations reflect broader indigenous worldviews in which gender roles are understood within relational frameworks rather than purely hierarchical structures. In many narratives, women are depicted as mediators between the domestic sphere and the wider moral order of the community, reinforcing ethical values and social cohesion. Such portrayals challenge simplistic portrayals of tribal women as passive figures and instead reveal nuanced representations of agency and cultural authority embedded within narrative traditions.

Oral narratives within Bodo society function as epistemic spaces where indigenous knowledge systems and gendered experiences are preserved and articulated. Storytelling practices allow communities to encode historical memory, ecological knowledge, and social ethics in narrative form, thereby sustaining cultural continuity across generations. For women in particular, these oral traditions provide meaningful spaces through which experiences of community life, relational identity, and cultural responsibility can be expressed and interpreted. When viewed through this perspective, Bodo folktales become more than cultural artifacts. They serve as dynamic narrative sites where gendered identities and indigenous epistemologies are continually negotiated and reaffirmed. Understanding these narratives as epistemic spaces therefore provides an important foundation for analyzing how tribal women's voices are embedded within the broader cultural imagination of Bodo society.

Gendered Voices in Bodo Oral Narratives

Bodo oral traditions contain a rich narrative archive through which gender roles, cultural values, and social relationships are articulated and transmitted across generations. These narratives are not merely imaginative stories but cultural texts that encode indigenous epistemologies and collective memory. When examined through the framework of Indigenous Feminism, Bodo folktales reveal the complex ways in which women participate in shaping cultural knowledge, negotiating social norms, and maintaining relational ties with land and community.

Rather than portraying women solely as passive subjects within patriarchal structures, many narratives highlight their agency, resilience, and moral authority.

Women as Cultural Memory and Moral Authority

Within Bodo oral traditions, women frequently emerge as important custodians of cultural memory and moral authority. Oral storytelling in Bodo society functions as a crucial medium through which cultural knowledge, ethical norms, and collective history are transmitted across generations. In many indigenous communities, oral narratives serve not merely as entertainment but as repositories of social values and lived experiences that sustain communal identity. The Bodo community, one of the largest indigenous groups in the Brahmaputra valley, has historically relied on such narrative traditions including folktales, myths, ritual songs, and legends to preserve its cultural heritage and social worldview (Brahma, 2009). Within these traditions, women often occupy central roles as storytellers, cultural transmitters, and symbolic figures who embody wisdom and ethical guidance. Through rituals, storytelling, and social gatherings, Bodo women act as key agents in preserving intangible cultural heritage and transmitting cultural practices across generations (Basumatary, 2024).

In domestic and community settings, storytelling traditionally occurs in intimate spaces such as family courtyards or communal gatherings where elders narrate stories to younger members of the community. Women particularly mothers and grandmothers play a significant role in this process by narrating folktales, teaching songs, and transmitting proverbs that encapsulate moral and cultural lessons. These practices transform storytelling into an informal pedagogical system through which children learn about social ethics, kinship relations, and community responsibilities. Such narrative transmission reflects the broader indigenous understanding of knowledge as relational and experiential rather than strictly textual (Dundes, 1980). In this context, women's participation in oral traditions reinforces their position as custodians of collective memory who maintain continuity between past traditions and contemporary social life.

Beyond their role as storytellers, women in Bodo narratives are frequently depicted as embodiments of moral authority. Folktales often portray female characters who guide others through wisdom, patience, and ethical insight. These representations suggest that women occupy a symbolic position within the moral imagination of the community, functioning as mediators between social order and individual conduct. Traditional legends recount the stories of heroic women such as Gambari Sikhla and Birgwshri Sikhla, whose courage and leadership are celebrated within Bodo folklore. These figures are remembered for their bravery and service to their people, demonstrating that women's roles within Bodo narrative traditions extend beyond domestic spaces to include positions of social influence and communal protection (Owary, 2021).

The representation of such figures challenges simplistic assumptions about tribal women as passive or marginal actors within traditional societies. Instead, Bodo oral narratives reveal a more nuanced understanding of gender roles in which women contribute significantly to social cohesion and moral governance. Through storytelling, women transmit ethical principles related to honesty, resilience, compassion, and communal responsibility. These narrative patterns emphasize relational forms of authority grounded in experience and cultural knowledge rather than hierarchical power structures. In this sense, the authority of women within Bodo folklore is embedded in their ability to preserve and interpret cultural values that guide community life.

From the perspective of Indigenous Feminism, these narrative representations illustrate how women's agency operates within relational networks of family, community, and cultural tradition. Indigenous feminist

scholars argue that women in indigenous societies often exercise influence through roles that sustain cultural continuity rather than through individualistic forms of authority emphasized in mainstream feminist frameworks (Anderson, 2011). Within Bodo oral traditions, women's authority is therefore closely linked to their responsibilities as caregivers, storytellers, and cultural mediators who maintain connections between ancestral knowledge and contemporary community life.

Furthermore, women's participation in artistic and cultural practices reinforces their role in shaping collective memory. Activities such as weaving, song traditions, and ritual performances are often intertwined with narrative storytelling, creating a broader cultural system through which women contribute to the preservation of heritage. Various scholars of Bodo folklore have highlighted the interconnected relationship between women's craft traditions particularly weaving and oral narratives, noting that these practices together form a cultural archive that reflects the historical experiences and creative expressions of the community (Basumatary & Khawzawl, 2024). Such practices demonstrate that storytelling is not an isolated literary activity but part of a larger cultural ecosystem through which knowledge, identity, and social values are reproduced.

Importantly, these narrative traditions function as epistemic spaces in which women's voices contribute to shaping the cultural worldview of the community. Preserving stories that recount ancestral experiences, heroic figures, and moral lessons, women actively participate in constructing the collective memory of Bodo society. Their role in transmitting narratives ensures that cultural knowledge remains dynamic and relevant in changing social contexts. Through this process, oral traditions become sites where gendered experiences are articulated and remembered.

Thus, examining Bodo folktales through a gendered lens reveals that women are not merely characters within narratives but active participants in sustaining the narrative traditions themselves. Their role as storytellers, cultural transmitters, and symbolic figures of wisdom underscores the importance of women in maintaining the moral and cultural fabric of the community. By recognizing women as custodians of cultural memory and moral authority, Bodo oral traditions challenge dominant narratives that marginalize tribal women's voices and instead highlight their central role in shaping indigenous knowledge systems and community identity.

Negotiating Patriarchy: Agency, Resistance, and Silence

Bodo oral narratives reveal a complex interplay between patriarchal social structures and women's subtle forms of agency and resistance. Like many indigenous societies of South Asia, the Bodo community historically exhibits a patriarchal social framework, where lineage, inheritance, and public authority are often associated with male dominance. However, this patriarchal structure does not entirely silence women's voices; rather, it creates a cultural context within which women negotiate power, exercise agency, and articulate resistance through everyday practices and narrative representation. Folktales and myths, therefore, become important sites where gender relations are symbolically negotiated and where women's experiences within patriarchal systems are encoded in narrative form (Owary, 2021; Bhattacharya, 2007).

Although Bodo society is largely patriarchal, women play a crucial role in socio-cultural and economic life, often contributing significantly to household decision-making and community activities (Sarma & Daimary, 2021). In oral narratives, this dual position being situated within patriarchal structures yet possessing forms of social influence is reflected through female characters who demonstrate resilience, intelligence, and strategic agency. Such narratives complicate simplistic assumptions about tribal women as passive subjects and instead portray them as active participants in shaping social outcomes.

One of the most illustrative examples appears in the well-known Bodo folktale “Belmuthi Gabharu”, where the female protagonist undergoes multiple transformations after being betrayed and replaced by a false bride. Despite facing deception and displacement, the narrative ultimately restores her rightful position, highlighting themes of endurance and moral justice (Narzary, 2024). The cyclical transformation of the heroine symbolizes the persistence of feminine agency even in situations of marginalization. Rather than presenting women merely as victims, such narratives portray them as figures capable of reclaiming identity and social recognition.

Similarly, several Bodo legends recount the stories of women such as Gambari Sikhla and Birgwshti Sikhla, who are remembered for their bravery and leadership in defending their communities. These narratives challenge patriarchal assumptions by presenting women as warriors and protectors who actively participated in the political and social life of the community. The presence of such figures within folklore suggests that women’s agency in Bodo society is not confined to domestic roles but extends to broader spheres of communal responsibility and historical memory.

At the same time, the negotiation of patriarchy in Bodo narratives often operates through more subtle narrative strategies. In many folktales, women appear as supportive characters mothers, wives, or sisters who assist male protagonists in achieving success. While such portrayals may initially appear to reinforce traditional gender roles, a closer reading reveals that these characters frequently possess crucial knowledge or moral insight that guides the narrative resolution. Their contributions may be understated but remain essential to the unfolding of the story (Narzary, 2024). Through these narrative structures, women exercise indirect agency, shaping events while operating within socially accepted roles.

The theme of silence also plays a significant role in the representation of gendered experience. Silence in oral narratives should not be interpreted solely as absence or suppression; rather, it often functions as a culturally embedded form of communication and resilience. Indigenous feminist scholars argue that silence may represent a strategic response to structural constraints, allowing women to maintain dignity and moral authority even in situations where direct confrontation is not possible. In Bodo folktales, moments of silence such as the endurance of suffering or the quiet persistence of female characters frequently precede narrative transformation and justice. These narrative patterns reflect the ways in which marginalized voices navigate social hierarchies without necessarily disrupting communal harmony.

From the perspective of Indigenous Feminism, such representations highlight relational forms of power embedded within community networks rather than individualistic expressions of resistance. Indigenous feminist frameworks emphasize that agency in indigenous societies often emerges through collective responsibility, cultural continuity, and relational ethics rather than through overt confrontation with patriarchal authority. In the Bodo context, women’s agency is therefore closely linked to their roles as cultural transmitters, caregivers, and community organizers who sustain the social fabric of the community (Basumatary, 2024).

Furthermore, everyday cultural practices such as weaving, storytelling, and participation in festivals have historically provided spaces where Bodo women assert cultural identity and autonomy. These practices function not only as economic activities but also as symbolic expressions of resistance against cultural marginalization. By preserving traditional crafts and cultural motifs, women actively protect indigenous identity and challenge processes of cultural erosion in contemporary society (Mistry, 2023).

Consequently, Bodo oral narratives reveal that patriarchal structures are neither monolithic nor uncontested. Instead, they are continually negotiated through cultural practices, narrative imagination, and everyday forms of resistance. Folktales and myths capture these negotiations by portraying women who endure marginalization

while simultaneously asserting agency through resilience, moral authority, and relational knowledge. Through these narrative representations, Bodo folklore not only reflects the realities of gender relations within the community but also provides a space where alternative possibilities of empowerment and social justice can be imagined.

Land, Ecology, and Relational Identity

In Bodo oral narratives, the relationship between women, land, and ecological knowledge forms an important dimension of cultural identity and social meaning. Indigenous communities across North-East India have historically developed intimate relationships with their natural environment, and this ecological worldview is deeply embedded within oral traditions, rituals, and everyday cultural practices. For the Bodo community, the landscapes of the Brahmaputra valley its rivers, forests, fields, and seasonal cycles are not merely physical surroundings but integral elements of social organization, cosmology, and identity formation (Ahmed, 2020; Gogoi, 2025). These ecological relationships are frequently articulated through oral narratives that connect human life with the rhythms of nature, reflecting a worldview grounded in relational coexistence between people and the environment.

Within this ecological framework, women occupy a particularly significant role as mediators between community life and natural resources. Bodo women have traditionally participated in agricultural practices such as sowing, harvesting, seed preservation, and household food production, activities that cultivate a deep familiarity with local ecosystems and seasonal cycles. Their knowledge of plants, seeds, and environmental rhythms is transmitted through everyday practices and reinforced through oral narratives, songs, and ritual performances (Dass, 2026). Such practices illustrate how ecological knowledge is embedded within cultural traditions and passed down through generations, ensuring the continuity of indigenous environmental wisdom.

Oral narratives frequently reflect this ecological orientation by portraying female figures as closely associated with natural elements such as rivers, forests, and seasonal transformations. A notable example can be found in the folklore surrounding Bardwi Sikhla, a legendary fairy associated with wind, storms, and seasonal renewal. According to Bodo folklore, Bardwi Sikhla arrives with the spring winds and rejuvenates the natural environment, symbolizing the renewal of life and fertility in the landscape (Chakrabarti, 2021). The representation of a female spirit governing the forces of nature highlights the symbolic association between femininity and ecological regeneration within Bodo cosmology. Such narratives demonstrate how environmental processes are culturally interpreted through gendered imagery that emphasizes harmony, renewal, and interconnectedness.

These symbolic representations resonate strongly with the theoretical insights of Indigenous Feminism, which emphasizes the interconnected relationship between gender, land, and community. Indigenous feminist scholars argue that women in indigenous societies often maintain a unique relationship with land because their cultural roles involve sustaining community life, preserving traditional knowledge, and maintaining ecological balance. Rather than conceptualizing land as a resource to be exploited, indigenous epistemologies frequently understand it as a living entity with which humans maintain reciprocal relationships. Within Bodo cultural traditions, this relational understanding is reflected in rituals, agricultural practices, and oral narratives that portray nature as a dynamic participant in social life (Gogoi, 2025).

Furthermore, material cultural practices such as weaving also reveal the ecological foundations of Bodo identity. Traditional textiles woven by Bodo women often incorporate motifs derived from plants, flowers,

animals, and natural patterns found in the surrounding environment. These motifs are not merely decorative elements but symbolic representations of ecological memory and cultural belonging. Scholars studying Bodo folklore and craft traditions note that weaving practices form a cultural archive through which women express community history, environmental knowledge, and aesthetic traditions (Basumatary & Khawzawl, 2024). The act of weaving itself thus becomes an expression of relational identity, linking women, land, and cultural continuity through creative practice.

The ecological dimension of Bodo culture is also evident in religious beliefs such as Bathouism, the traditional faith of the Bodo people. Central to Bathou worship is the Sijou plant (*Euphorbia*), which symbolizes spiritual purity and the connection between human life and natural forces. The ritual care of the Sijou plant within household courtyards reflects the sacred status of nature within Bodo cosmology and reinforces the idea that land and environment are integral to spiritual and social life (Ahmed, 2020). Women often participate actively in these ritual practices, further strengthening the connection between gender, spirituality, and ecological stewardship.

From the perspective of Indigenous Feminism, these cultural practices highlight the relational foundations of identity within indigenous societies. Rather than viewing identity solely through individual or political categories, indigenous epistemologies emphasize relationships between humans and nature, between generations, and between cultural traditions and contemporary life. In Bodo oral narratives, women frequently embody this relational identity through their roles as cultivators, storytellers, weavers, and guardians of cultural knowledge. Their experiences illustrate how gendered identities are intertwined with ecological knowledge systems and community relationships.

Consequently, examining Bodo oral narratives through an ecological lens reveals that these traditions function as important epistemic spaces where relationships between gender, land, and cultural identity are articulated and preserved. The narratives do not simply recount mythical or historical events; they encode environmental ethics, collective memory, and indigenous knowledge systems that sustain community life. The interconnected roles of women and the natural environment, Bodo folklore challenges dominant narratives that separate gender from ecological knowledge and instead emphasizes a holistic understanding of identity grounded in relational coexistence.

Re-reading Marginality: Towards Narrative Justice

The examination of Bodo folktales and oral traditions through the lens of gender and Indigenous Feminism reveals important theoretical implications for literary studies. Traditionally, mainstream literary frameworks have often marginalized or overlooked indigenous narrative traditions by privileging written texts, canonical authors, and Western epistemological frameworks. Such approaches have historically treated oral traditions as peripheral cultural artifacts rather than as complex systems of knowledge and meaning. Consequently, the voices of tribal women embedded in oral storytelling traditions remain underrepresented within dominant literary discourse. Re-reading these narratives through an Indigenous feminist perspective enables a re-evaluation of literary hierarchies and highlights the epistemic value of indigenous storytelling practices (Dulfano, 2015; Barker, 2015).

Within dominant literary frameworks, narratives are frequently evaluated through textual conventions derived from Western literary traditions, which tend to prioritize written authorship and individual expression. However, indigenous storytelling operates through collective memory, relational knowledge, and community-based transmission. Oral narratives function not only as literary expressions but also as cultural archives that preserve historical experiences, ethical principles, and ecological knowledge. Indigenous feminist scholarship

emphasizes that storytelling plays a crucial role in sustaining community identity and resisting cultural erasure. Through storytelling, indigenous women articulate lived experiences, transmit ancestral knowledge, and assert their presence within cultural memory (Suzack, Huhndorf, Perreault, & Barman, 2011; Barker, Hamilton, & Anderson, 2018).

The Bodo narratives discussed in this study demonstrate that tribal women's voices are embedded within storytelling traditions that shape the moral and cultural imagination of the community. Female characters in these narratives embody cultural memory, ecological knowledge, and relational authority. When interpreted through Indigenous feminist frameworks, these narrative patterns reveal how women participate in shaping collective identity and social values. Such interpretations challenge conventional literary paradigms that portray indigenous women as passive subjects within patriarchal traditions. Instead, they highlight women's active role in sustaining knowledge systems and preserving cultural continuity.

Mainstream feminist interpretations often struggle to fully capture the complexities of indigenous women's experiences. Many feminist theories developed in Western contexts emphasize individual autonomy and resistance to patriarchy as central analytical categories. While these frameworks have contributed significantly to gender studies, they may overlook the relational and community-oriented dimensions of indigenous societies. Indigenous feminist scholars argue that gender relations within indigenous contexts cannot be understood solely through universal feminist categories because they are shaped by colonial histories, cultural traditions, and community responsibilities (Moreton-Robinson, 2020; Barker, 2015).

Indigenous Feminism therefore offers an alternative analytical framework that centers the sovereignty, cultural identity, and lived experiences of indigenous women. Rather than focusing exclusively on gender oppression, Indigenous feminist scholarship emphasizes decolonization, cultural continuity, and relational responsibility within community life. This perspective recognizes that indigenous women often exercise agency through roles that sustain collective well-being and cultural survival (Suzack et al., 2011).

In the context of Bodo oral traditions, this framework enables a reinterpretation of marginality itself. Instead of viewing tribal women as merely marginalized figures within cultural narratives, it becomes possible to recognize how these narratives function as spaces of narrative agency. Through storytelling, women transmit moral values, preserve ecological knowledge, and articulate community histories. These narrative practices create alternative forms of authority that operate outside formal institutions yet remain central to the cultural life of the community. Such interpretations contribute significantly to Indigenous feminist scholarship by demonstrating how local storytelling traditions embody gendered epistemologies rooted in indigenous cultural contexts. They also enrich tribal literary studies by foregrounding oral narratives as legitimate literary forms that deserve serious scholarly attention. Furthermore, by situating Bodo narratives within broader theoretical debates about storytelling, gender, and indigeneity, this study contributes to South Asian literary discourse, which has historically focused more heavily on written literature produced in dominant languages.

Recognizing the narrative agency of tribal women requires expanding literary methodologies to include oral traditions, community knowledge systems, and indigenous epistemologies. Re-reading marginality through Indigenous feminist frameworks reveals that tribal women are not merely subjects of representation but active narrators and custodians of cultural memory. Their stories challenge dominant literary paradigms and call for a more inclusive understanding of literature one that acknowledges storytelling as a powerful medium through which marginalized communities articulate identity, resilience, and cultural continuity.

Conclusion

This study examined the representation of women's voices in Bodo folktales and oral traditions in order to understand how indigenous narratives articulate gendered experiences, cultural memory, and relational identities within tribal societies of North-East India. By analyzing selected Bodo narratives through the lens of Indigenous Feminism, the paper has demonstrated that oral traditions function not merely as cultural expressions but as significant epistemic spaces where women's agency, knowledge, and social roles are embedded and preserved. These narratives reveal that women are not peripheral figures within indigenous storytelling but central participants in shaping moral values, community memory, and ecological consciousness. The analysis highlighted three key dimensions of women's representation within Bodo oral narratives. First, women appear as custodians of cultural memory and moral authority, actively transmitting ethical knowledge and social values through storytelling and everyday cultural practices. Their role as storytellers and cultural mediators underscores the importance of oral traditions in sustaining community identity across generations. Second, the narratives reveal the complex negotiation of patriarchal structures, where female characters demonstrate resilience, intelligence, and strategic agency even within socially constrained environments. Rather than presenting women solely as victims of patriarchal norms, these stories depict subtle forms of resistance and negotiation that allow women to assert influence within relational community structures. Third, the analysis emphasized the interconnected relationship between women, land, and ecological knowledge, illustrating how indigenous cosmologies link gender identity with environmental stewardship and cultural continuity.

These findings challenge dominant literary frameworks that have historically marginalized tribal oral traditions and overlooked the epistemic value of indigenous storytelling. By foregrounding Bodo folktales as sites of gendered knowledge production, this study contributes to expanding the scope of literary scholarship beyond written texts to include oral narrative traditions as legitimate sources of cultural and theoretical insight. Furthermore, the study demonstrates the analytical potential of Indigenous Feminism in interpreting tribal narratives, as this framework allows for a more nuanced understanding of women's agency that is rooted in relational ethics, community responsibility, and cultural continuity.

The paper also contributes to broader debates within tribal literary studies and South Asian literary discourse by highlighting how indigenous storytelling traditions provide alternative perspectives on gender, identity, and power. Recognizing the narrative agency of tribal women requires moving beyond universalized feminist frameworks and engaging with indigenous epistemologies that foreground collective knowledge systems and ecological relationships. In this sense, Bodo oral traditions offer valuable insights into how marginalized communities articulate their histories, values, and cultural resilience through storytelling.

The study argues that Bodo oral narratives should be understood as dynamic cultural archives where women's voices play a crucial role in preserving community knowledge and shaping collective identity. Future research may further expand this inquiry by incorporating ethnographic fieldwork, comparative analyses of other tribal communities in North-East India, and deeper engagement with contemporary indigenous literary productions. Such research would contribute to a more inclusive and pluralistic understanding of literature one that recognizes the significance of indigenous storytelling traditions and the narrative agency of tribal women within them.

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