
The Pedagogies of Silence: Constructing Subaltern Girlhood in the Rupkatha Narratives of Thakurmar Jhuli

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Abstract:

Children's literature, outwardly innocent and harmless, conceals a complex structure of ideas underneath operating quietly as a machinery of cultural instruction. Bengali literature, rich in Children's corpus, incorporates popular folktales to entertain the children for the ages. These folktales also act as a medium of micro-learning for the children. Such is the collection of narratives in Thakurmar Jhuli serving over centuries to engage the young audience in a definite space. This paper examines the implicit pedagogical structures that shape the gendered subjectivity within these outwardly simple and amusing narratives of Thakurmar Jhuli .

Drawing upon Feminist Criticism, Cultural Studies, Postcolonial theory, and Narratology, the study demonstrates how the girl child is interpellated into a predefined identity marked by silence, endurance, and relational dependence. Through extended close readings of tales like Kiranmala and Saat Bhai Champa, the paper exhibits how linguistic patterns, symbolic imagery, and narrative repetition naturalise and reproduce a model of passive femininity.

The study further locates these constructions within the nationalist climate of early twentieth-century Bengal where the concept of "ideal girl" emerges simultaneously as a domestic and cultural symbol. A further comparative analysis with Western children's literature foregrounds the idea that girlhood is not universal but a cultural construction. Therefore, the paper investigates these folktales as not merely the reflection of girlhood but actively produce and regulate it.

Keywords: Girlhood, cultural instruction, folktale, micro-learning, Feminist Criticism, Cultural Studies, Postcolonial Theory, Narratology, predefined identity, passive femininity, cultural construction

Introduction

Children's literature is generally framed as innocent—something meant for instruction, entertainment, or moral refinement. But this assumption, though convenient, is partly incorrect because of its deeper layers of meaning. Narratives directed at children are often embedded with ideological functions, moulding their psyche with the cultural constructs even before the child develops the capacity for critical distance (Nodelman, 2008).

In the Bengali context, Thakurmar Jhuli occupies a significant space. Published in 1907, the collection is not just a literary compilation but also a transition of oral storytelling to printed literature. These stories, however, continue to circulate within domestic spaces—particularly through the figure of the grandmother—thus maintaining their oral authority. This narrative tradition features the girl child repeatedly where she does not carry a free individualistic self because she is already a moulded figure by the traditional norms. The girl child contains certain set of a moral and behavioural code prescribed by society making it natural but is, actually constructed.

This paper argues that the female subject in these folktales is narratively pre-configured through repetition, where silence, endurance, and relational identity are not accidental; rather structural requirements in society.

2. Literature Review

The ideological dimensions of children's literature have been widely discussed in recent decades. Nodelman (2008) points out that beneath the apparent simplicity of children's texts, the 'hidden adult' operates subtly, instilling the culture scripts into the child reader. Recent scholarship on folklore has also emphasised the role of narrative repetition in stabilising cultural norms. Jack Zipes (2012) argues that fairy tales function as "cultural scripts" that are internalised through repeated exposure. This repetition, he suggests, produces not only familiarity but also compliance. Similarly, Maria Tatar (1992) notes that traditional tales often encode gender expectations through the system of reward and punishment. Interestingly, virtue in these literary texts is defined in narrowly gendered terms. In such frameworks, female characters are seen rewarded for passivity and devotion to their

male counterparts whereas denunciated and punished even for the slight deviation from prescribed social norms.

In the South Asian context, scholars have increasingly drawn attention to the intersection between folklore and social conditioning. Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) explains that cultural narratives often operate as sites where historical and social anxieties are indirectly expressed. Despite these insights, the specific construction of girlhood within Bengali folktales remains insufficiently theorised as most studies focus either on nationalism or narrative structure, leaving gendered subject formation underexplored. This paper addresses that absence by foregrounding the girl child as a site of ideological formation. In the Indian literary context, Meenakshi Mukherjee (1991) highlights how literary narratives frequently encode social norms under the guise of realism and moral instruction. Sumanta Bandyopadhyay (2007) extends this argument to Bengali children's literature, suggesting that beneath its playful surface lies a structured reinforcement of social hierarchy and discipline.

Still, the specific question of how girlhood is constructed within Bengali folktales remains under-examined. While feminist readings have addressed gender in broader literary contexts, there is limited sustained analysis of how oral narratives shape feminine subjectivity at an early stage. This study attempts to bridge that gap by combining textual analysis with theoretical frameworks that foreground ideology, narrative structure, and cultural reproduction.

3. Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This study adopts qualitative textual analysis, focusing on selected narratives from Thakurmar Jhuli, particularly Kiranmala and Saat Bhai Champa. These texts are not treated as isolated stories but as part of a larger narrative system. The analysis is grounded in Feminist Criticism, which allows for an interrogation of gendered representation. At the same time, Cultural Studies provides the framework to place these representations within broader social and historical contexts.

The concept of interpellation, as articulated by Louis Althusser (1971), is central here in the sense that the girl child is slowly shaped into a social role through repeated narrative cues. She fashions herself in accordance with the structure even before she realises it. Judith Butler's theory of performativity (1990) further clarifies how repetition produces identity. The girl in these stories performs codes of femininity over and over again until it appears natural. Narratology adds another

dimension to the analysis. The repetitive, cyclical structure of folktales ensures that these patterns are not accidental—they are structurally reinforced. The same kind of story, told again and again, produces the same kind of 'ideal girl'

4. Close Reading: Kiranmala and the Language of Endurance

A close reading of Kiranmala reveals that passivity is not merely thematic—it is linguistic. The heroine is consistently described through verbs, indicative of endurance: অপেক্ষা করা (to wait), সহ্য করা (to endure), নীরব থাকা (to remain silent). These repeated verbs shape not only the character but also the reader's expectation of appropriate behaviour. At one point, Kiranmala faces prolonged hardship, yet the narrative does not allow her to challenge the situation. But this stillness is considered as her virtue, rather weakness. The longer she endures, the more she is perceived morally elevated.

Significantly, in these folktales, action is not rewarded, resistance is not encouraged but surprisingly, passivity is treated as the site of moral validation. Further, imagery strengthens this pattern. Kiranmala is often associated with natural elements—flowers, trees, flowing water denoting beauty and calmness and also immobility. The narrative makes her a part of passive landscape. This association is reinforced through moments where she is instructed to remain still and endure, as reflected in lines such as:

‘ সে চুপ করে বসে রইলো, সমস্ত দুঃখ নীরবে সহ্য করলো ’ (she sat silently, enduring all suffering without protest).

Thus, the narrative Kiranmala aligns femininity with stillness, where movement is displaced and agency is systematically suspended.

A further layer emerges when one examines the time of the narrative. Kiranmala's journey is marked not by decisive action but by prolonged waiting. Time itself becomes a test of endurance. The narrative stretches moments of suffering, elongating them to emphasise her capacity to remain unchanged. This temporal expansion is crucial suggesting that virtue is not located in transformation but in stability. The girl does not evolve through experience; rather, she proves her worth by remaining constant. Even when magical elements intervene, they do not empower her directly. Instead, they serve to validate her pre-existing virtue. The narrative thus avoids granting her agency, ensuring that change comes from external forces rather than internal decision-making. In this sense, Kiranmala's character becomes less an individual and more a moral template—a figure through which idealised femininity is repeatedly performed and reinforced.

5. Close Reading: Saat Bhai Champa and the Metaphor of Nurture

In Saat Bhai Champa, the construction of girlhood takes a slightly different form but leads to a similar conclusion. Here, the sister figure is central, but her centrality is emotional, not active. She sustains relationships holding together what is broken but the visibility of her labour is almost absent though it contributes a lot

In the story, the metaphor of burial is particularly important. The transformation of the brothers into flowers, and the sister's role in sustaining their presence, suggests a form of nurturing that extends into the natural world. But this nurturing is also a form of containment as the girl is tied to the act of care, not moving outward into the world; she remains within a space of preservation. This becomes a subtle naturalisation of domestic confinement. Here care becomes the destiny of the protagonist girl character. The act of tending to transformed bodies—flowers, remnants, or symbolic traces—can also be read through the lens of spatial confinement. The girl's movement is restricted to a limited environment, often tied to the domestic or natural space.

This spatial limitation mirrors the social positioning of women within traditional frameworks. As reflected in the narrative moment where the sister remains bound to the garden space:

‘ সে প্রতিদিন সেই ফুলগুলোর যত্ন নিত, বাগানের বাইরে তার যাওয়া ছিলো না ’ (she tended the flowers every day , never stepping beyond the garden)

The outside world remains inaccessible, while the interior—whether home or garden—becomes the primary site of action. Importantly, this confinement is not presented as restriction but interestingly aestheticized, even sanctified. Care becomes beauty and stillness becomes virtue.

Thus, the narrative disguises limitation as moral excellence, making the structure of confinement difficult to perceive, let alone question.

6. Binary Femininity and Narrative Discipline

These folktales operate through a rigid binary structure ---the “good” girl is silent, obedient, and self-sacrificing whereas the active, expressive are termed as ‘bad woman’ , further displaying them as dangerous. This opposition is not neutral here as it functions as a disciplinary mechanism. Agency, when exercised by female characters, is framed negatively. Expression becomes threat and desire becomes deviation. Thus, the narrative encodes a clear message: restraint is safe; expression is risky.

7. The Grandmother Figure and Internalised Ideology

The figure of the grandmother—the “Thakurma”—adds a layer of complexity as she is simultaneously a figure of warmth and care, and also a subtle mechanism through which patriarchal ideals of girlhood are inadvertently transmitted in the younger generation. Though the storytelling space appears intimate and almost apolitical, it carries the hidden ideological work. A female voice becomes the vehicle of patriarchal norms which is not imposed from outside but reproduced from within. This can be understood as internalised patriarchy (Walby, 1990). Here the grandmother does not necessarily intend to discipline the child. Yet the stories she tells perform that function. In this way, storytelling becomes a site of ideological reproduction—quiet, repetitive, and deeply effective.

8. Postcolonial Context: Nationalism and Gender

The publication of *Thakurmar Jhuli* in 1907 coincides with the Swadeshi movement in 1905, a moment of intense nationalist consciousness in Bengal. During this period, cultural identity became a site of resistance and the domestic sphere, particularly the figure of the woman, was perceived as the bearer of tradition (Chatterjee, 1993). In this context, the ‘ideal girl’ in these folktales can be understood as a nationalist construct. Her obedience, purity, and endurance reflect not only domestic expectations but also cultural preservation.

This is how, gender construction intersects with the nationalist ideology in which the girl emerges both as a familial subject as well as a symbolic figure.

8.1 The Aesthetics of the Domestic: Swadeshi and the ‘Good’ Bengali Daughter

The construction of girlhood in *Thakurmar Jhuli* cannot be divorced from the simmering nationalist fervor of 1907 Bengal. During the Swadeshi movement, the domestic sphere was reimagined as the "inner domain" of sovereignty—a space untouched by the corrupting influence of the British Raj (Chatterjee, 1993). In this cultural project, the Bengali girl was positioned as the primary symbol of "untainted" tradition.

The "Pedagogy of Silence" identified in Kiranmala’s character serves a dual purpose here. First, it distinguishes the "ideal" Bengali daughter from the Westernized Memsahib, who was often satirized in colonial literature for her "loquacity" and "lack of restraint." By emphasizing Kiranmala’s silence and endurance, the narrative constructs a femininity that is inherently "Eastern"—defined by a spiritual superiority that transcends the material world of the colonizer.

Furthermore, the aestheticization of the girl's suffering—transforming her pain into a "beautiful" endurance—functions as a nationalist allegory. The girl becomes a surrogate for the "Motherland" (Bharat Mata), who must suffer in silence until her "sons" (the brothers in Saat Bhai Champa) are restored. Consequently, the girl child is interpellated not just as a family member, but as a cultural repository. Her lack of agency is not seen as a weakness but as a "sacred" preservation of Bengali values. This historical positioning explains why these stories have remained so resistant to change; to "modernize" Kiranmala or make her "agentive" would be, in a nationalist sense, to "Westernize" the very soul of the Bengali home.

9. Narratology: Repetition and the Fixing of Gender

The structure of these folktales is inherently repetitive --similar narrative arcs, similar character traits and, moreover, similar resolutions. This repetition is not accidental; rather is a reinforcement as each retelling stabilises the same model of femininity. Over time, this model appears natural and inevitable as well. Narratively, deviation is rare, but when it occurs, it is corrected. Hence, the structure itself becomes ideological where form and content connect together.

9.1 Narratology and Repetition as Ideological Form

The structure of the rupkatha itself plays a significant role in the construction of gender. Unlike modern narratives that prioritise character development, folktales rely on repetition. Similar plots, similar resolutions, similar moral outcomes recur across stories. This repetition is not merely aesthetic. It is ideological. Each retelling reinforces the same behavioural model, making it appear natural and inevitable. From a narratological perspective, the lack of deviation is particularly significant. The narrative resists disruption. When variation occurs, it is quickly corrected, restoring the original pattern. For the girl child, this means that alternative forms of behaviour are rarely visible. The narrative does not offer multiple possibilities; it offers one dominant model. Over time, this repetition produces a form of narrative conditioning. The listener does not simply understand the story; she internalises its structure. Consequently, the narratology becomes inseparable from ideology. Form itself becomes a tool of cultural reproduction.

10. Comparative Perspective: Reason vs Endurance

A comparison with Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Matilda reveals a clear contrast. Alice questions authority. She challenges logic, disrupts order, refuses passive acceptance. Her confusion leads to inquiry, not submission. Matilda goes further. She uses knowledge actively. She resists institutional control. Her intelligence becomes a tool. In contrast, Kiranmala restores order through endurance. She does

not question. She does not disrupt. This contrast reveals that girlhood is not universal. It is shaped differently across cultural contexts.

It is also important to note that the difference between these narrative traditions is not merely thematic but structural. In Western texts such as Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, narrative progression is driven by curiosity and disruption. The protagonist moves through spaces, encounters contradictions, and responds through inquiry. In contrast, the Bengali folktale restricts movement. The narrative space is contained, and progression is achieved through endurance rather than exploration. This difference reflects broader epistemological orientations. While Western narratives often privilege individual reasoning, the folktale emphasises relational stability and emotional continuity.

Consequently, the construction of girlhood becomes a reflection of cultural priorities rather than a universal developmental model.

11. Conclusion

This study has shown that Thakurmar Jhuli-type narratives construct girlhood through a controlled, repetitive structure. The girl does not act freely with her choice but her actions are shaped, guided and limited by the external forces. Her identity is not open-ended; it is already structured in advance. These folktales, therefore, cannot be read not as neutral cultural artefacts but as active participants in the production of gendered subjectivity. Their influence continues—quietly, persistently, almost invisibly – especially with the Indian context. Even today, this pattern survives as the girls who attempt to assert their voice or act on their own terms often face social resistance through silencing and moral judgment. What appears as tradition thus continues to regulate behaviour in subtle but potent ways.

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